

Chapter One: “Histories Consisting of Mingled Truth and Fiction”

I. Preliminaries

*Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know of no speck so troublesome as self.*¹

*Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.*²

*Is it due to the method that we feel neither jovial nor magnanimous, but centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond?*³

My project examines the construction of a new concept of selfishness in literary texts of late nineteenth-century England, and it shows that George Eliot advocated for an improved understanding of the problems of selfishness and the ways to work through them. I examine late nineteenth-century England’s failure to recognize its anxiety under the post-Adam Smith regime of “enlightened self-interest.” I focus on the various discourses revolving around the term “selfish” as a way of getting at a number of vexed relationships between authors working from outsider positions and addressing their own, sometimes undesired, distance. I suggest a broader understanding of the ways that artists like Eliot function as critics of their society while simultaneously serving as screens for the projection of those same social

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed., Rosemary Ashton (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1994) 419.

² Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” *De Profundis and Other Writings*, ed. Hesketh Pearson (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 49.

³ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed., Andrew McNeillie, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984) 151.

anxieties which they allow us to theorize. And I explain that selfishness, as such, is broadly misunderstood both because it covers so much theoretical territory and because interpretations of it have been too reductive. The title of this project comes from a letter George Eliot wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe on October 29, 1876. Eliot was defending *Daniel Deronda*'s novelistic project by urging her readers to look beyond their immediate situations to the shared concerns of other human beings. Eliot argues against reducing our understanding of the world and of other people to simple prejudice or facile interpretations.⁴ She saw her fiction working toward a "vision of human claims" that encouraged both self-development and mutual understanding. For her, attention to oneself, following the Delphic injunction to "Know Thyself," was the only path to understanding one another—despite the fact that this intense focus on selfhood looked like selfishness to people who did not participate in self scrutiny.

Victorian studies tends to flatten its analyses into a number of controlling terms like sexuality, economics, feminism, sentimentalism, and secularism. Although these terms are useful and of interest to this study, each of them falls too readily into a binary. Raymond Williams describes economics with capitalist and Marxist forces at war with one another. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that feminine imaginations exist apart from masculine ones, but while endeavoring to undo patriarchy, they sanction the essential divide between the sexes. Eve Sedgwick critiques the split between homosexuality and heterosexuality by positing "queer" as a contested middle ground. When I assert selfishness as a new critical field of investigation, I hope to approach George Eliot's texts with fresh insights and to

⁴ George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols., ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954-78) VI.301. I will return to this letter in Chapter Four when I discuss *Daniel Deronda*, which provoked it. Throughout this dissertation, references to *The George Eliot Letters* are cited with the abbreviation *Letters*, followed by the volume and page number. Where important, days and correspondents are also noted.

render more complex the older theoretical frameworks. Selfishness resists any convenient binary reduction. After all, what is the opposite of “selfish?” The answer must be polysemic, including “selfless” and “sympathetic” and “charitable” and so on.

Building upon the century of work that has been done on Eliot as a canonical figure, my critical approach takes into account both her biography (in its relation to her writings) and aspects of her cultural impact. I discuss these extra-novelistic realities using her letters and essays as a guide for interpretation. This approach has been popular in Eliot scholarship from the beginning, taking her second husband and literary executor John W. Cross’s *George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (1885-1886) as a precedent. Although Gordon Haight edited Eliot’s letters from the 1950s to the 1970s and wrote the authoritative biography in 1968 (again with the letters, essays, and journals as a guideline), Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s 1994 *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* reveals that there is more critical work to be done, both in interpreting Eliot’s life and in linking that life to the literature. Although I rarely have cause to refer directly to the Bodenheimer, I use it as my prime example for how to proceed with Eliot’s biography. Instead of using a purely biographical approach, I work mostly through Eliot’s fiction not only because it is her greatest literary production, but also because the fictional and novelistic forms gave her the greatest freedom to showcase embattled selfhood in an unforgiving and unsympathetic world. I choose the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, “The Lifted Veil,” *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Daniel Deronda* as my specific texts for two reasons. First, there is the chronological/biographical impulse. The short stories were her first attempts at fiction; *The Mill on the Floss* was an early and admittedly autobiographical work; and *Daniel Deronda* was her last novel and her last chance to address a large reading public directly. Second,

there is the thematic impulse. The short stories all pit lone figures against crowds who do not understand them; *The Mill on the Floss* enriches the theme by developing Maggie Tulliver as a tragic heroine who dreams of escaping the destiny of “egoism,” and *Daniel Deronda* shows how dedication to the right cause or person can move someone from self-preoccupation to something greater.⁵

At all points, I maintain a dedication to the term “selfish” as a way of understanding the misappropriations of Eliot and as a way of revealing Eliot’s goals in trying to answer why the *status quo* was insufficient. Her relationship with the already-married George Henry Lewes lasted for twenty-four years and caused her ostracism from her own family and from polite society in general. However, she saw herself as Lewes’s wife and was able to survive the social exile because of her belief in the rightness of her unconventional marriage. Her complaint with the world around her arose from a set of concerns that had been with her even back to her adolescence. She had gone from being an Evangelical Christian to a Christian in name only; she had read widely in philosophy and history; she had translated Feuerbach and Strauss; she had traveled; and she had endured failed relationships. Her experiences made her aware of a want of sympathy and a surplus of “egoism” in the world, so she spent most of her literary career attempting to solve the problems of relations between individuals and the societies or families that reject them. Essentially, she tried to answer the question of why innocent people were sometimes stigmatized as selfish, egoistic, or vain and how these discourses masked a truer society-wide selfishness of which they had become the victims.

⁵ Readers of this long project on George Eliot may be inclined to ask why I did not choose to work on *Middlemarch*. After all, Dorothea Brooke must learn what true charity is, Rosamond Vincy is punished for her greed and vanity, and Tertius Lydgate discovers that noble motives are not sufficient to withstand social misunderstanding. I answer this question with one cribbed from the beginning of Chapter 29. “Why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one . . .” (278)? Although *Middlemarch* is a masterpiece, the works I have chosen are more precisely concerned with the destiny of selfishness. Nevertheless, I assume enough familiarity with *Middlemarch* to cite it with some frequency.

By re-examining a secondary characteristic of the term “selfish” and looking at the way it is “self-ish” (literally preoccupied with selfhood), the dissertation takes on the large epistemological question of self-knowledge. Who has access to the deepest meanings of self? Eliot’s first solution is to create privileged outsiders who are both part of the system and critics of it, but she discovers that these lonely individuals—usually artists—are too suspicious to her reading public. Indeed, critics have insisted on interpreting Eliot’s artists as autobiographical insertions. Eliot eventually moved on to characters more thoroughly embedded in community relations. Her later novels are larger in scope and show men and women tied by bonds of marriage and by social responsibility to the welfare of groups larger than the nuclear families which preoccupy her through the beginning of her career. These later characters do not abandon the early family plots or the outsider status of her first heroes. They incorporate all of the elements, but as a result, many readers find the late novels too busy, too multiple in plotlines, and too alienating. My reading of all the novels is nonstandard because I am so intensely linked to the one theme of selfishness,—whether it is called egoism, selfishness, vanity, or individualism—and as a result, I have a strong attachment to all of the novels.⁶ Some readers use Eliot’s biography or their own feelings for insight into the novels. Other readers examine them through a theoretical lens like feminism, psychoanalysis, historicism, or narratology. My readings occasionally adopt those theoretical tools, too, but my readings are, above all, rigorously thematic. My nonstandard readings and the way that they reclaim a disenfranchised history of loner figures have larger implications outside of their texts. My final argument synthesizing Eliot, Wilde, Woolf, and their contemporaries provides a framework for interpretation beyond the Victorian period.

⁶ This universal statement is intended to include *Adam Bede*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, *the Radical*, and *Middlemarch*. I see the thematic approach as a way to connect to all of the novels.

II. A Brief and Selfish History

*The only origin is an act of interpretation, that is, an act of the will to power imposed on a prior "text," which may be the world itself seen as a text, a set of signs. Such signs are not inert.*⁷

My decision to study selfishness through Eliot came about as a product of anxiety and attachment. At first, I thought I would study Dickens because he so explicitly treats selfish characters. If I had followed a different tack, this dissertation could have been about Fagin, Scrooge, Skimpole, Bounderby, Pip, and Jasper. So many of Dickens's characters are greedy or vain that he seems an obvious target for me. My first campaign with this subject dealt explicitly with Pip and my anxiety over his lack of gratitude, but this anxiety did not lead subsequently to attachment. With a few exceptions like Pip, Dickens's selfish characters do not generate any anxiety in me at all, let alone attachment. His selfish men and women are invariably villains, foils, or caricatured supporting players. In short, his selfish people really are selfish. There is no mistake, and I feel no need to protect them. The characters to whom readers attach themselves are kind or humorous or outrageous. The famous anecdote of Americans waiting for the boat to deliver copies of *The Old Curiosity Shop* to find out the fate of Little Nell really cannot be reconciled to theorizing selfishness. It is melodrama.⁸ Other authors are near matches but not quite right. The Brontës are too much like a tragic opera. Collins is wrong for most of the same reasons as Dickens, but I would still like a crack at Count Fosco. Trollope is too glib. Thackeray is too caught up in the picaresque.

⁷ J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative and History," *ELH* 41.3 (1974) 468.

⁸ Eliot did not escape fully from what Peter Brooks calls the legacy of the "melodramatic imagination," but she did not indulge it as fully as Dickens. I am using Brooks's definition of "melodrama" as a sort of shorthand: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety." Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 11-12. While Eliot inherits melodrama's "extreme states of being," there is no guarantee that virtue will be rewarded or that the aspect of "overt villainy" will be accepted as truth. Moral states are always more equivocal in Eliot's writing.

Gaskell is the nearest miss because she is both interested in social misunderstanding and in real misery. Ultimately, I find Eliot the most compelling because I am anxious for her characters and want to protect them from what society and Eliot have in store for them. Eliot's idiosyncratic gift is to make her characters figures of attachment without extreme irony getting in the way or overt sentimentalism requiring emotional interpolation.

Anxiety is a dangerous critical category to admit.⁹ It conjures up the “anxiety of influence” and fears of either unoriginality or pathology. Looking at anxiety hints that readers should psychoanalyze the authors and that occasionally they should engage in some sort of confessional version of reader-response. I mean anxiety to call up these shades, certainly, and how could I not, when this project is about such a highly personalized and morally dubious subject as selfishness? I want especially to use social anxiety as a way to explain why selfishness might have been read differently in the Victorian period than it had been before and to help clarify how our modern understanding of the term is indebted to the Victorians. Before 1850 (to choose a fairly arbitrary marker), the word itself had many more meanings than it does today. Or rather, its meaning was not as thoroughly fixed, and it was less often used. The etymological shift I am describing shows a rich critical category collapsing.¹⁰ Today, if I use the word “selfish” in a sentence, the cognitive cluster that lights up in my auditor's head is relatively impoverished. It probably includes “greedy” and “self-

⁹ I escape John McGowan's attack on anxiety criticism by acknowledging it as a self-aware category. “Any criticism that talks of ‘shared anxieties’ or, even more globally, of ‘conditions of intelligibility’ that are beyond human conscious awareness is not likely to recognize unrelated spheres of human endeavor, except across the gulf that separates one era or one culture from another.” John McGowan, “Modernity and Culture the Victorians and Cultural Studies,” *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 7. My “shared anxiety” with Eliot is fully recognized and is at least partially a product of the self-reflective work she asks of her readers.

¹⁰ This approach owes a great deal to Eve Sedgwick's work on the word queer in *The Epistemology of the Closet*. She, in turn, works with Nietzsche, Foucault, Barthes, and a longer history of literary-historical exegesis.

preoccupied.” I suspect the latter meaning would show up more rarely. George Eliot meant far more when she wrote “selfish.” She occasionally used synonyms or near synonyms like “egoism,” “egotism,” and “monomania.” When she depicts Janet Dempster crying in her room, “sobbing out her griefs with selfish passion, and wildly wishing herself dead,” she must mean something different than we mean by selfishness today.¹¹ This scene is a central point of my argument in the next chapter. At this point, Janet’s “selfish passion” means something like “inward-turning focus” rather than greed. The sentence practically fails to mean anything in contemporary usage unless we switch in the almost-forgotten word “egoistic” for “selfish.” Clearly, other meanings were available to Eliot, and when she switched from using the word “egoistic” to using the word “selfish” halfway through *Daniel Deronda*, she was quietly registering a change in the language.

Specific meanings for words dealing with emotional qualities and personality characteristics are difficult to lock down because they are based in subjective judgments. George Eliot described something like this problem in her 1856 essay “The Natural History of German Life” (on two books by Willhelm Heinrich von Riehl). “It is an interesting branch of psychological observation to note the images that are habitually associated with abstract or collective terms—what may be called the picture-writing of the mind, which it carries on concurrently with the more subtle symbolism of language.”¹² The ambiguity of symbolic representation for collective nouns—she uses “railways” as an example—is still less than the ambiguity of “the more subtle symbolism of language” in general. Most dictionaries can do no better than provide snapshots, and even the ones which show a word’s

¹¹ George Eliot, “Janet’s Repentance,” *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998) 235.

¹² George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 267. She goes on in this essay to contrast various terms based on their “fixity or variety.”

evolution only have room for a short definition and a spare etymology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* briefly records the changing history of the word “selfish.” It is worth noting that the 1863 entry is dedicated to Eliot’s novel *Romola*.

1. a. Devoted to or concerned with one’s own advantage or welfare to the exclusion of regard for others.

1640 W. BRIDGE *True Souldiers* C. 74 A carnal selfe-ish spirit is very loathsome in what is spirituall. 1645 T. HILL *Olive Branch* (1648) 27 When you are so selfish in your designs and undertakings, and so far prefer your self-ends before the Publique. 1656 JEANES *Mixt. Schol. Div.* 14 It is a selvish fear, proceeding from an..adulterous love of ourselves. 1753 JOHNSON *Advent.* No. 62 5 Want makes almost every man selfish. 1775 SHERIDAN *Duenna* I. iv, Anywhere to avoid the selfish violence of my mother-in-law. 1838 DICKENS *Nich. Nick.* xiv, ‘Well, but what’s to become of me?’ urged the selfish man. 1863 GEO. ELIOT *Romola* xxv, The subjection of selfish interests to the general good. 1870 MOZLEY *Univ. Serm.* iii. (1877) 65 He necessarily wishes his own good; the wish is no more selfish in him than it is selfish in him to be himself. *Comb.* 1666 BP. S. PARKER *Free & Impart. Censure* (1667) 139 We cannot imagine him so selfish-spirited as to effect it. 1863 HAWKER in Byles *Life* (1905) 462 A downlooking lying selfish-hearted throng.

b. Used (by adversaries) as a designation of those ethical theories which regard self-love as the real motive of all human action.

[1663 W. LUCY *Observ. Hobbes* 178 To use the Phrase of the time, this Gent. [Hobbes] is very selfish.] 1847 *London Univ. Cal.* (1848) 157 The different systems to which the term ‘selfish’ has been applied. 1868 BAIN *Ment. & Mor. Sci.* 638 The Epicurean, or Selfish, System.

c. *Genetics.* Of a gene or genetic material: tending to be perpetuated or to spread although of no effect on the phenotype.

1976 R. DAWKINS *Selfish Gene* i. 3 Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs. 1979 *Human Genetics* (Ciba Symp.) 41 It seems to me that repetitive DNA is the only true selfish gene. 1981 *Nature* 13 Aug. 648/1 Selfish DNA, which contains no genetic information but which is perpetuated in eukaryote genomes, has attracted a lot of attention recently.

2. By etymological re-analysis used for ‘pertaining to or connected with oneself’.

1835-6 *Todd’s Cycl. Anat.* I. 72/2 The sensation excited on the skin is less *selfish*, if we may use the term in this sense. 1899 *Westm. Gaz.* 3 May 3/2 To pursue this self-ish ideal.¹³

Although at the denotative level, the word “selfish” has essentially meant the same thing since 1640, its usage has changed. The first references are in some way richer than the later ones because they create more interest in the word “self.” This fact is not simply a result of the hyphen’s disappearance out of “self-ish.” The usage shift between Sheridan and Dickens is striking. The change seems to go along with a switch from adjectival use to substantive, from “selfish interests” to “selfishness” proper. What could “selfish violence” mean in the

¹³ “Selfish,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989.

reduced set of meanings suggested by the word today? Already with Dickens in 1838 (but beginning as early as Johnson in 1753), “greed” and “narcissistic” are taking over the definitional cluster around “selfish.” Eliot shifts repeatedly between “egoistic,” “egotistic,” and “selfish” to keep all these meanings alive. As the language becomes more standardized, the energetic word “selfish” acts like other metaphors when they die: it loses its evocative power. Eliot was attentive to this process when she described intellectual inheritance in her article on Robert William Mackay’s *The Progress of the Intellect*. “We are in bondage to terms and conceptions which, having had their root in conditions of thought no longer existing, have ceased to possess any vitality, and are for us as spells which have lost their virtue.”¹⁴ In the modern case, the deadening force of rigidity suppresses the quality of selfhood within the word “selfish.” Raymond Williams’s classic text *Keywords* provides another framework for dealing with selfishness as a “particular formation of meaning.”¹⁵ Just as for Williams, the word which has occupied so much of my attention “virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss.”¹⁶ Selfishness becomes a strategy for naming and for resistance at the same time.

¹⁴ George Eliot, “On The Progress of the Intellect,” *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 28.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 13.

¹⁶ Williams 13. If I attempt an etymology of “selfishness”—rather than tracking its effects—I will have to follow Williams

to the historical dictionaries, and to essays in historical and contemporary semantics, [putting me] quite beyond the range of the ‘proper meaning’. We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. (15)

I am perhaps granting language itself too much agency by writing it into a developmental model, but I am tempted to push the conceit a little further in a direction forecast by Dorrit Cohn in her book *Transparent Minds*. She takes the work of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky to explain the “semantic enrichment” of “inner speech,” and although their specific referent is the language of children, I think it is an interesting way of looking at both the changes in the English language and in the novel’s power to represent interiority.

In inner speech words don’t just stand for the common (dictionary) meaning they have in spoken language, but they siphon up additional meaning—he speaks of an ‘influx of sense’—from the thought-context in which they stand. Consequently words mix and match far more freely and creatively than in ordinary speech, forming heterodox clusters, neologisms, and agglutinations.¹⁷

George Eliot and other psychological realists, in paying attention to the “inner speech” of characters like Maggie Tulliver and Gwendolen Harleth, have a chance to re-energize the metaphors which had become deadened in “spoken language” because the metaphors could retain or regain some sort of idiosyncratic value. The novel itself became a technology for relating this interiority long before James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner made so much use of stream of consciousness. George Eliot kept alive multiple meanings of selfishness in her work.

The problem of selfishness is more than a rhetorical and theoretical puzzle since it is a vice that causes trouble in the world, but everyone is selfish to some degree. Selfishness is sometimes necessary for self-protection. Without it, there is no fight for survival. The practicality of selfish aims leads to philosophical cynicism over the existence of real altruism

The recently released successor to Williams’s book gives histories of the words “self” and “individual.” These histories are useful insofar as they provide brief overviews, but neither entry really goes far enough for this project. Tony Bennet, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹⁷ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978) 96-97.

and calls into question charity as a form of social capital or—more disturbingly—spiritual capital.¹⁸ Fear of selfish motives is what ennobles pure Marxism over practical capitalism. In other words, how can “enlightened self-interest” exist in the real world? An obvious corollary to these questions is the problem of interpretation that plagues readers. We are blind to our faults due to self-partiality, and we over-scrutinize it in others. Each discipline is suspicious of the other, the characters in a novel fear one another, and neighbors distrust neighbors.

Why is the Victorian period so important in studying selfishness? Why George Eliot? And how can novel reading fight against the pessimism of believing in selfishness? England between 1837, when Victoria ascended the throne, and 1901, when she died,—the least equivocal limits for the Victorian Era—was the grandest period of the British Empire, and it was the first blush of industrial capitalism.¹⁹ It was the high point of British accumulation, and the British citizens were famously subject to a repressive ideology.²⁰ The flippant reason for studying Eliot is that her unofficial marriage to George Henry Lewes cast her as a disreputable woman; therefore, polite society was nervous about her motives. Also, her family distrusted her religious views, her intellectual aspirations, and her marital status. While the culture was anxious about her, Eliot lived as part of it and she was therefore just as anxious about society as it was about her. Eventually, she became a literary celebrity, and the resulting backlash, read alternately as indignation, jealousy, or valid criticism, is

¹⁸ Modern evolutionary biology flirts with the cynical reality of selfishness. Consider, for example, Richard Dawkins’s book *The Selfish Gene*, cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reference above.

¹⁹ This history is endlessly discussed by everyone who has followed Karl Marx. Most pertinent to my argument are Raymond Williams’s and Terry Eagleton’s versions of this story.

²⁰ Whether or not this “repressive hypothesis” is actually true is a matter of some debate. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that it is not, or at least, that it is misunderstood.

interesting in its own right. These brief answers to my first two questions—Why Victorian England, and why Eliot?—are too pat and nearly overdetermined. I will elaborate on the first two questions, but I will let my next four chapters speak to my third question: how novels can help us get past selfishness.

III. Victorian Selfishness and the Novel of Ideas

*To characterize Victorian ideology is always ham-handed—and generates both endless revisionist histories that contest previous generalizations by way of citing specific counterinstances and repeated efforts to stake out ever wider conceptualizations of the fundamental conditions so that everything will be caught in their net. Such generalizations become more vacuous, less perspicacious, the wider they become.*²¹

Rather than accepting Victorianism as some reified and simplistic field of study, I interpret George Eliot's fiction as one of the elements that helped to form it and to critique it at the same time. George Levine and others have made this attention to internal consistency and critical distance into a necessary aspect of Victorian studies. "This is to say that there is no way to criticize a culture, its explicit or implicit motives, without assuming an epistemological stance that presumes the possibility of knowing that culture—perhaps better than the culture knew itself."²² John McGowan positions Eliot in a constellation of intellectual-artists who "aimed to intervene in their society by explaining the age to itself."²³ Eliot saw many of her contemporaries as selfish egoists who manifested all the wrong forms of self-preoccupation. She endorsed attention to oneself and to one's motives, but she

²¹ McGowan "Modernity and Culture" 6.

²² George Levine, "Daniel Deronda: A New Epistemology," *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzy Anger (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 55. He continues, "Such critique, inevitably driven more or less by explicit moral urgency, may find, as did the Victorians themselves, a deep and necessary contradiction in its work" (55).

²³ McGowan "Modernity and Culture" 3.

harshly condemned the greed, narcissism, vanity, and self-righteousness that she saw around her. In “explaining the age to itself,” she left a record, not only of the social failings of Victorian England but also to a way beyond some of these problems. Like McGowan, I hope to particularize Eliot’s experience since “[t]he spirit of any era cannot be described unless the plurality of actions, motives, and beliefs of human beings is organized according to a rubric that identifies the dominant, the truly determinative.”²⁴ My tight focus on Eliot is an attempt to say something about a larger society without eliding the importance of individual experience. I do not mean to imply that her biography or her novels were in any way merely symptomatic of Victorian experience. Instead, I want to argue that they helped to shape it and have influenced our understanding of it today, and I want to insist that her reactions to the pressures in her own life are some of the best and most successful indicators we have as to what those pressures might have been like, and in fact, what they still are like. As a result, George Eliot’s fiction becomes a moral compass for twenty-first century readers as much as the Victorians.

Most critics working on Victorian subjects over the last century have had to acknowledge the internal irregularities within the period. Many have divided it into three subperiods (early, middle, and late). Others have worked with binary pairs or with clusters of ideas to try to get to the messy irreducibility of such a long and active span of time. As early as 1951, Jerome Hamilton Buckley saw it necessary to theorize the lack of fixity in the term “Victorian.” “While the social historian of the Victorian age who is able to withhold opinion is forever aware of intrinsic complexities, the critic intent upon cultural evaluation is constantly betrayed into premature judgment. And it is the aggregate of these judgments that

²⁴ McGowan “Modernity and Culture” 4.

obscures definition.”²⁵ Buckley’s reference to an “aggregate of judgments” is a point well taken because everyone seems to have a concept of what “Victorian” means. Then again, everyone has a concept of what “selfish” means, too. I intend to muster counterexamples against both securities. Part of the problem in treating Victorianism as a whole is that it was never “static,” and it was a self-critical age. “Violent and vituperative as it frequently was, Victorian self-criticism found direction in the implicit sense that faults it assailed were remediable by individual and collective reform.”²⁶ Although Eliot’s wavering faith in God may have deprived her of one form of salvation, she was with the other progressive critics who believed in amelioration of the human condition by individual human action.²⁷

Terry Eagleton characterizes England during Queen Victoria’s reign as a nation in flux: “Victorian England was awash with new ideas which had yet to be ‘naturalized’, absorbed into the bloodstream of the culture to become a kind of spontaneous wisdom. Knowledge was rapidly outstripping customary habits of feeling. Ideas were changing, but patterns of symbolization and emotional response were still caught in a previous age.”²⁸ Selfishness is just a piece of this larger—and messy—whole. As I argued above, there was never any one virtue which could successfully oppose it. The most common Victorian solution was in sympathy, but Walter E. Houghton makes it difficult to accept the Victorian phrasing of sympathy because he reveals it to have been a form of false consciousness. “A

²⁵ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969) 3.

²⁶ Buckley 5.

²⁷ Buckley refers to this reforming spirit in Eliot as her “thirst for righteousness” (9). He depicts the emergent middle class as a group eager for intellectual guidance. “Confronted with the unprecedented developments of nineteenth-century culture, an emerging middle class with the meagerest intellectual traditions behind it strove desperately to achieve standards of judgment” (Buckley 10). Writers like Matthew Arnold and George Eliot were happy to provide this guidance.

²⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 166.

business society dedicated to the political principle of laissez-faire and the economic principle that there must be no interference with the iron laws of supply and demand needed to feel that in spite of appearances its heart was tender. If it was doing little to relieve the suffering of the poor, at any rate it was feeling very sympathetic.”²⁹ It therefore took special attention to social hypocrisy to break through this merely sentimentalized form of sympathy. In setting the background for this study, I would like to elaborate briefly on several of the “unnaturalized” ideas that “were still caught” in Romantic, Enlightenment, and even older forms. In particular, I should like to consider the economic, religious, moral/psychological, and literary qualities of England between 1837 and 1901.

Economic Qualities

*He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. . . . he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.*³⁰

A cynical reading of Adam Smith’s 1776 *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* suggests that greed and self-interest are the most useful human behaviors. Smith’s hugely influential book explains that we should never behave as if we expect “benevolence” from others: “We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.”³¹ However, Smith was already the author of the 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which elaborated

²⁹ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957) 277.

³⁰ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991) 351-2.

³¹ Smith *Wealth of Nations* 20.

a concept of “enlightened self-interest” that found a basis in sympathy. The book begins “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.”³² In both books, the “invisible hand” and the “enlightened” person assume a religious or moral influence. The Christian justification is frequently ignored by the capitalist apologists who use Smith’s writings as a basis for economic philosophy, but Smith himself made God the arbiter of the systems which otherwise seemed subject only to natural laws.

The sense of propriety too is here well supported by the strongest motives of self-interest. The idea that, however we may escape the observation of man, or be placed above the reach of human punishment, yet we are always acting under the eye, and exposed to the punishment of God, the great avenger of injustice, is a motive capable of restraining the most headstrong passions, with those at least who, by constant reflection, have rendered it familiar to them.³³

For Smith then, selfishness and self-interestedness were opposed to one another because of the silent judgment of sinfulness that sticks to selfishness but not to self-interest. Crime and true selfishness—as opposed again to “enlightened self-interest”—would be less and less common because they would eventually be unprofitable when things were completely “left to be settled by the market,” and even if they were not, then God, who owned the invisible hand, after all, would resolve the situation.³⁴

Smith’s work is rife with opportunities for the merely selfish to take advantage of the ease with which a lack of religious faith removes any penalty for rampant greed. The most

³² Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1984) 9.

³³ Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* 170. Houghton views the interest in “the moral value of sympathy and the virtue of benevolence” as a reaction against the pessimistic philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (273).

³⁴ Smith *Wealth of Nations* 46.

dispassionate version of this trend resulted in Benthamism and the calculable world parodied in Dickens's Thomas Gradgrind and more pitifully embodied in John Stuart Mill's despair at finding himself turned into a "reasoning machine." George Eliot—as well as many others in her day and many, many more since—was fearful of this economized version of the world. Eliot addressed the rage for certainty and quantification in "The Natural History of German Life" by expressing her belief that theory without observation and sympathy leads to bad policy-making. "The tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbors may be settled by algebraic equations . . . [cannot] co-exist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives."³⁵ She was afraid that the "splendid conquests of modern generalization" would lead at best to a misplaced certainty about the status of human conditions and at worst to selfish exploitation. Walter E. Houghton puts it bluntly. "Social sympathy, indeed, was hardly compatible with the commercial spirit. The cutthroat competition of the time bred a hard and ruthless selfishness that was arraigned by the Victorian moralists."³⁶ Eliot was one of these "moralists" who preached against blind faith in the "creed of success."³⁷

Although selfishness is not one of the usual terms that critics discuss as a Victorian keyword, it subtends a great deal of the literature.³⁸ There are too many misers, vain

³⁵ George Eliot "The Natural History of German Life" 272.

³⁶ Houghton 192. Houghton goes on to list examples from Ruskin, Clough, and others to support his case.

³⁷ Houghton 194.

³⁸ I mean to suggest Raymond Williams's influence on my work here by using the term "keyword." In this case, I tie individualism to accumulation in an avowedly Marxist critical way. Richard D. Altick describes the way that property served as the criterion of citizenship in his chapter "Laissez-Faire and Property." Although the Reform Bills extended the franchise and (slightly) democratized the process, voting remained tied to property ownership. Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973) 128-39.

coquettes, and self-deluded narcissists in Victorian fiction for the case to be otherwise. Readers have just missed the importance of this new critical category. John Kucich puts George Eliot on a short list (with George Meredith and Thomas Hardy) of novelists who wrote “intellectual fiction” that violated the separation that held “the domestic novel apart from intellectual concerns.”³⁹ Other authors tended to leave the debates “beneath the surface of domestic fiction, in matters of form and method, or in the intrusion of non-literary discourses, or in novelists’ ambivalent fascination with the figure of the intellectual.”⁴⁰ Eliot is a special case, then, because her intellectual preoccupations were both overt—she staged her characters in philosophical debates—and hidden—her novels manifested all of the subliminal forms Kucich names.

Religious Qualities

*I was considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence.*⁴¹

Histories of the Victorian period tend to present it as an atheist, secular, and humanist age, but this demythologized world is an obvious oversimplification and may be a rejection of the prevailing norm of spirituality that similar studies project over the Romantic period. Historians cite changes in the religious ideology of both Parliament and the university system to back up their claims. The most important—or at least most heavily theorized—impetus to religious doubt was the theory of evolution and the growth of Social Darwinism. However, these causes and influences did not completely wipe away religious ideology so completely,

³⁹ John Kucich, “Intellectual debate in the Victorian novel: religion, science, and the professional,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 212.

⁴⁰ Kucich “Intellectual debate” 212.

⁴¹ George Eliot was writing to her Evangelical friend Maria Lewis on March 30, 1840. *Letters* I:145.

and the Anglican, Catholic, Dissenting, and even Jewish religious establishments maintained sway over most people's moral temper. "Although religious doubt is a common theme of histories of the Victorian period, it has, perhaps, been overstated. Church attendance held steady over the course of the century Still, religious doubt was both widespread and vocal in a way it had not previously been in England, and it was particularly pronounced among the intellectual classes."⁴² Religiosity and secularism were held in tension; secularism did not sweep away everything that came before it. Certainly, in the work of George Eliot, Darwin's theories and her own opinions on the divine inspiration of the Bible were influences on and not replacements of her worldview.

John Kucich also refers to "the secularization of traditional religious values" and emphasizes the religious connotations that they continued to maintain: "Victorian fiction was a deeply moralistic genre, and the moral principles it espoused—self-sacrifice, humility, honesty—were clearly Christian in origin."⁴³ These were Christian virtues transfigured into secular values. If God were no longer standing in judgment of human action, then He had to be replaced by some similarly powerful overseer. The authority of the State to judge criminal behavior reflected back some of this power. The authority of society as a generalized and hazy version of the State on the local level therefore reflected back even more of this power but in a similarly hazy way. Society's province was over social behavior, of course, but it picked up some authority over the things that previously might have been called religious concerns. The ambiguity of individualism (whether newly formed as a

⁴² Kucich "Intellectual debate" 213. Critics like Richard D. Altick present this narrative too simplistically. "The only human certainties were that everything, in ethics, religion, history, experience, was relative, and that absolutes, if they did exist, were beyond man's grasp; and that since evolution was the basic law of life, all was flux" (233). Rather than accepting evolutionism as "the basic law of life," intellectuals looked for ways to adapt older ways of seeing the world to the new scientific discoveries.

⁴³ Kucich "Intellectual debate" 216.

political or private entity) empowered the even less clearly defined “society” to pass judgment on the secular sins which opposed the core Victorian values of “self-sacrifice, humility, honesty,” and so on. The most pernicious of these secular sins was selfishness because it was perceived as a denial of social authority. By insisting on one’s own privileges, one was judged selfish. That some forms of selfishness were acceptable—a factory owner’s exploitation of his workers, a mother’s rejection of her son’s girlfriend, a child’s right to his family’s inheritance—became the subject for debate for those with the power to speak out against them. And who better than the novelists?

Moral and Psychological Qualities

*We must, here, as in all other cases, view ourselves not so much according to that light in which we may naturally appear to ourselves, as according to that in which we naturally appear to others.*⁴⁴

I will have cause to discuss the moral and psychological qualities of Victorian England repeatedly in this dissertation, so I will use this section not to list them—the critical literature has done that constantly—but to explain my theoretical approach to the Victorian character.⁴⁵ I find Mary Poovey’s and John Kucich’s work most helpful, especially in the way they destabilize the normalizing power of defining Victorianism as a concrete field of study. I see my criticism in a relationship with Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* in the way she addresses false binaries within Victorian culture. “I call the issues I focus on here ‘border cases’ because each of them had the potential to expose the artificiality of the binary

⁴⁴ Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* 83.

⁴⁵ The grand classics on this subject are Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s *The Victorian Temper* and Walter E. Houghton’s *The Victorian Frame of Mind*.

logic that governed the Victorian symbolic economy.”⁴⁶ This technique is extremely useful to my approach because it helps me to identify the selfish/selfless binary as a troublesome node within a sort of “symbolic economy” like the ones Poovey recognizes.

However, the issue at work here is even messier than Poovey’s binaries because selfishness is more a nexus of anxiety than half of a productive binary. While “selfishness” itself may be (at least temporarily) stable, “selfless” does not really do justice to the discourse of opposite virtues which grew up around rejecting selfishness. Using “selfish” as a fixed term allowed the Victorians to generate an entire range of qualities which they might use to differentiate themselves against it: selfless, unselfish, charitable, altruistic, and sympathetic. Of course, the supposed fixed term was just as slippery since it so easily shifted towards egotism, greed, or narcissism as the cultural critics needed it. My “border case,” to adopt Poovey’s term, is Eliot’s life and fiction. Not only did she render more complex a received notion of what selfishness looked like, she partially rehabilitated it by saying that one of its most effective counterstrategies, sympathy, requires a paradoxical admission of selfishness insofar as everyone is entitled to look after him or herself while recognizing both the similarity and difference of other people’s claims. I also take to heart Poovey’s warning “that causation is never unidirectional; as a consequence, the kind of linear narrative that many literary critics and historians employ necessarily obscures the critical complexity of social relations.”⁴⁷ It is partially for this reason that I never settle on an unqualified definition of the word “selfishness” in this project: it never makes it past the “working definition” stage.

⁴⁶ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1988) 12.

⁴⁷ Poovey 18.

I have a similar response to John Kucich's adaptation of Poovey's "border cases" as both an enactment and defiance of the convenient binaries that many critics develop. He says that he finds "the breakdown of these boundaries more interesting than the boundaries themselves [but has] resisted the common tendency to interpret such breakdowns as symptoms of conceptual crisis."⁴⁸ It is for this same reason that I am not obsessed with either locking down a definition of selfishness or turning narrative instances of it into a form of selfish/anti-selfish panic. Instead, I want to show how it was important, how it was culturally formed, how it was novelistically represented, and how attention to it is useful. Kucich's topic is the rhetoric of honesty in Victorian culture, but I think my analysis works in a similar way. "I am more interested in how the transgression of conceptual boundaries is socially and symbolically productive."⁴⁹ Later, he develops this point to elaborate what he calls "the productivity of lying": "In a culture so preoccupied with truth-telling, an affirmation of lying—or a blurring of this ethical distinction—could be a powerful symbolic gesture."⁵⁰ In the same way, questioning the legitimacy of the typical selfish/sympathetic split becomes a productive way of revealing the uneasy tension between its constituent terms.

I want to stop and note that my reading of George Eliot's fiction does not intentionally avoid the Victorian problematics of sexuality. In fact, I firmly believe Jeff Nunokawa's assertion that "Sexual desires are everywhere in the Victorian novel, either as an

⁴⁸ John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 1.

⁴⁹ Kucich *The Power of Lies* 1. In adapting Kucich's words to my own purpose, I am, in fact, working in a manner his text authorizes: "I confess that working in this way forces me to develop my own model of transgression parasitically, by teasing it out of very differently oriented work" (16).

⁵⁰ Kucich *The Power of Lies* 15.

explicit topic or as a subterranean force close enough to the surface that it may as well be.”⁵¹ I directly treat sexuality in relationship to vanity, partner choice, and repression, but I do not pursue these arguments to their ultimate ends. Doing so by addressing sexual selfishness is worth an entire book-length project in itself. For this dissertation, I focus mainly on the simpler manifestations of these difficult issues. I like Nunokawa’s drive-determined analogy for these forces when he writes that he wants “to suggest the dense network of cultural cause and effect that surround the formation of desires that often feel as simple as the pangs of hunger.”⁵² While acknowledging that causes are never so simple and occasionally hinting at the depths beneath desire, I must limit myself here to the immediate results of these “pangs” for the sake of brevity.

Literary Qualities

*Part of the work that texts perform is the reproduction of ideology; texts give the values and structures of values that constitute ideology’s body—that is, they embody them for and in the subjects who read. In this sense, reading—or more precisely, interpretation—is a historically and culturally specific institution.*⁵³

All of these concerns about economics, religion, and character come filtered through the artifacts of culture. For me, and for many people, Victorianism is nearly synonymous with its forms of literary production. If we acknowledge that our conception of Victorian identity is informed by its literature, the assertion that its literature was at least partially responsible for creating identity at all should be somewhat less shocking than it is. Nancy

⁵¹ Jeff Nunokawa, “Sexuality in the Victorian Novel,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 126.

⁵² Nunokawa 126.

⁵³ Poovey 17.

Armstrong radically asserts that “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same.”⁵⁴ Printing presses, circular libraries, and the rise of the middle class all contributed to making England a culture of readers, but it is not immediately apparent that this widespread literacy was responsible for the formation of individualism *per se*. Armstrong views “novels as a series of displacements driven not by the individual’s restless energy so much as by an imperative to close the gap between self and social position without disturbing what appears to be a dangerously fragile social order. The result is a radical reformulation of the individual as a subject layered by successive displacements.”⁵⁵

Her argument follows Foucault in both critics’ insistence on a sort of “institutionality.”⁵⁶ In this case, the ideology of subjecthood itself becomes the hidden message. Also like Foucault, Armstrong is suspicious of the hidden effects of what otherwise seems like a positive development in literary and social history. She develops a concept of “bourgeois morality,” which shows the power of “modern secular morality” in a developmental framework that “comes from and authorizes those works of fiction where morality appears to emanate from the very core of an individual, as that individual confronts and opposes socially inculcated systems of value.”⁵⁷ Her study recognizes the perversity of making individualism a result of literary production rather than the other way around, but the argument itself is convincing.

⁵⁴ Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) 3.

⁵⁵ Armstrong 8.

⁵⁶ She acknowledges her debt to Foucault and other poststructuralists. “The assumption that the modern subject is the product rather than the source of fiction is of course a version of the signature move of all the major strains of poststructuralism” (Armstrong 29).

⁵⁷ Armstrong 27.

Armstrong is correct in calling attention to the formation of subjecthood in the nineteenth century. Although Foucault had done similar work previously, Armstrong's version requires us to see the novel and the reader working in dialogue with one another. By focusing so intently on the psychological state of one character—a hero or heroine—the reader both identifies with the character and internalizes the narrative's logic. The reader then sees his or her life as something not just lived through but as something with a story: a story like a novel. J. Hillis Miller begins his "Narrative and History" with a related discussion, adapted from Nietzsche and Hegel.

Every story must have an aim, hence also the history of a people and the history of the world. That means: because there is "world history" there must also be some aim in the world process. That means: we demand stories only with aims. But we do not all demand stories about the world process, for we consider it a swindle to talk about it. That my life has no aim is evident even from the accidental nature of its origin; that I can posit an aim for myself is another matter.⁵⁸

This process of remaking the world novelistically and remaking one's self-conception is anxiety-inducing.

Other theorists have worked on the troubled—at least to a twenty-first century reader—relationship between Victorian authors and their reading public. Mid-twentieth century scholarship was less critical. Ian Watt's 1957 *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* casts female authors as minor artists working with gendered advantages and disadvantages. "In Jane Austen, Fanny Burney and George Eliot the advantages of the feminine point of view outweigh the restrictions of social horizon which have until recently been associated with it. . . . [T]he dominance of women readers in the public for the novel is connected with the characteristic weakness and unreality to which the

⁵⁸ I excerpt this long passage from the introduction of J. Hillis Miller's "Narrative and History" using Walter Kaufmann's translation of Nietzsche and Hegel (455).

form is liable . . .”⁵⁹ For Watt, the limitations have to do with a restricted field and an “arbitrary selection of human situations,” despite the remarkable breadth and pertinence of the observations generated by the very women he names.⁶⁰ Later critics like Kate Flint, Elaine Showalter, and Nancy Armstrong make simplistic assumptions about both the British reading public and these authors impossible. Flint, in particular, problematizes the role of a female readership and the purposes of reading as a social act.

Authors like George Eliot eventually became icons in a cult of celebrity. What happens to these authors when they are called selfish, untalented, dry, boring, pedantic, derivative, or are otherwise denigrated? Their acolytes argue back, and the apostates rebut them. The variations of public opinion generate a reception history for the authors and eventually lead to canonicity by dint of the size of the variorium or otherwise lead to common neglect under the weight of critical debris.⁶¹ George Eliot’s status as part of the canon is secure by now, but her acceptance is often tinged with a snobbish preference for some of her novels over others. F. R. Leavis is bold enough to state with certainty that “[t]he great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad,” but most of his Eliot discussion in *The Great Tradition* attempts to reduce Eliot’s importance to a weaker version of Austen and a plot writer for James.⁶² Leavis’s book was important in establishing Eliot’s canonicity, but at the same time, it neglects the importance of her early work except as part of a developmental narrative. When he says that “the body of her work

⁵⁹ Watt 299.

⁶⁰ Watt 299.

⁶¹ Authors like Walter Scott, Fanny Burney, and George Meredith are waiting for popularity to resurrect them.

⁶² F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher Inc., 1937) 1.

exhibits within itself striking differences not merely of kind, but between the more and the less satisfactory,” he relegates several of her novels to a sort of outer critical darkness.⁶³

This teleological script has been popular, but unlike Leavis, most readers have been able to forego the pleasures of *Felix Holt*, *the Radical* and *Daniel Deronda* because of the same “less satisfactory” elements that he theorizes. Instead of accepting Leavis’s evaluation, I study the early short stories, *The Mill on the Floss*, and the half of *Daniel Deronda* that he despised to show a consistent arc and emergent argument for getting beyond the anxiety over selfishness that Eliot treated in her entire career. Her argument developed with her art and improved with her ability to argue her opinions. That it also highlighted the tensions which I have just enumerated in Victorian culture shows its vitality as a concern for Eliot’s readership and helps to explain her popularity.

IV. Was George Eliot Selfish?

*To read George Eliot attentively is to become aware how little one knows about her. It is also to become aware of the credulity, not very creditable to one’s insight, with which, half consciously and partly maliciously, one had accepted the late Victorian version of a deluded woman who held phantom sway over subjects even more deluded than herself.*⁶⁴

In her 1919 Essay “George Eliot,” Virginia Woolf proposed two versions of the author. In one, Eliot was a fallen saint, an icon of Victorianism who was prey to delusions of grandeur. In the second, she was a great moral teacher and formal innovator who expanded the boundaries of fiction. These two interpretations have characterized the reactions to Eliot in the more than one hundred and twenty years since she died. A major trend in

⁶³ Leavis 28.

⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, “George Eliot,” *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed., Andrew McNeillie, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984) 162.

Modernism's and Postmodernism's rejection of Eliot is tied to her Realist project. "Realism was, in most instances, a complex, highly self-conscious attempt to produce knowledge of the real world" that sneered at "the poetic, the ideal, or the metaphysical" by way of emphasizing metaphor and "correspondence" theory.⁶⁵ John McGowan has also worked on Eliot's self-conception as a realist. "George Eliot was well aware that the work of art is not reality itself, and yet she still believed that something which she called realism was not only possible but was the proper task of the novelist."⁶⁶ However much Eliot was a realist, she never really abandoned idealism or poetry. If she abandoned metaphysics at all, it was really only one religious form of it: she was always looking towards a sort of "religion of humanity," to use a positivist phrase. So the Modernists, in their vogue for cynicism, and the Postmodernists, in their passion for problematizing simplistic narratives, never really got Eliot right. All along, there have been readers who have seen the value of Eliot's fiction, and the recent critical interest in her work shows that the pendulum has finally swung back to her side.⁶⁷ The developmental model for interpreting literary worth is naïve whether its results are positive—Eliot is better than later psychological realists because she was such an innovator—or negative—Eliot is not as good as modern practitioners of psychological realism because she had fewer techniques at her disposal. Attention to biographical details and to certain thematic trends across her career help me to base my analysis in something

⁶⁵ Kucich "Intellectual debate" 218.

⁶⁶ John McGowan, "The Turn of George Eliot's Realism," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.2 (1980) 172. McGowan places realism in the path of the post-Enlightenment desire for interiority developed in Foucault's *The Order of Things*. "Foucault sees Saussure's division of the sign into the signifier . . . and the signified . . . as another example of reality's movement away from the surface in the modern era. Realism can be understood as a response to this new complexity" (McGowan 175).

⁶⁷ J. Russell Perkin's 1990 book *A Reception History of George Eliot's Fiction* is an invaluable resource in tracking the changing appreciation of the author over the years.

closer to concrete fact than in the fads of critical re-evaluation.⁶⁸ Even Woolf, who argued for the double reading of Eliot's legacy, believed in the positive results of Eliot's fiction: "Triumphant was the issue for her, whatever it may have been for her creations, and as we recollect all that she dared and achieved . . . we must lay upon her grave whatever we have it in our power to bestow of laurel or rose."⁶⁹ Most criticism in the last ninety years since Woolf's essay has tended to be positive, too, even when critical on specific points.

Several major biographies have attempted to narrate George Eliot's life. The three most significant are John W. Cross's hagiographic *George Eliot's Life as related in her letters and journals* (1885), Gordon S. Haight's correspondence-based *George Eliot: A Biography* (1968), and Rosemarie Bodenheimer's critical *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (1994).⁷⁰ Of these, the Haight is the most authoritative and serves as my general guide to Eliot's life, but I use the Bodenheimer as a corrective because Haight's scholarship needs some updating to make it more useful. Bodenheimer is especially good as a critical piece and derives terms similar to those used in this study. Cross's biography is most interesting in what it omits rather than in what it

⁶⁸ Reading Eliot through and in her cultural context is useful because it allows me access to an insightful and somewhat representative account of social pressures, but it puts me in danger of obscuring the lives of people who lived differently. Laurie Langbauer poses a similar problem in relation to the current critical interest in Queen Victoria. "Critics might worry that, even if scholars can provide us with a fuller and more detailed picture of Victoria's role as a woman, and her relation to the definition of women at the time doesn't that simply continue a story of privilege that ultimately prevents the recovery of any other story, that precludes difference?" Laurie Langbauer, "Queen Victoria and Me," *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 212. Substitute Eliot in for Victoria, and you have my question exactly. The answer comes in never letting the critical reappraisal become certain, in always questioning my motives. In this case, I work with Eliot because she is useful and lucid and pertinent. Other cases would certainly call for other forms of particularity.

⁶⁹ Woolf "George Eliot" 172.

⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf deplores Cross's biography's use of only the most morose and serious letters and essays. "The stages are painful as she reveals them in the sad soliloquy in which Mr. Cross condemned her to tell the story of her life" (Woolf "George Eliot" 164). The other important biographies were written by Gillian Beer, Jennifer Uglow, and Rosemary Ashton.

includes.⁷¹ Cross was Eliot's second husband but her first legal one, and he was interested in preserving her reputation at least as much as he was interested in providing an accurate account of her life.⁷² Any study which hopes for accuracy in studying Eliot must acknowledge its debt to Gordon Haight's most major contribution—his editing and collection of Eliot's letters and journals. This work is more vitally important even than his overtly biographical work.

Even before considering her fiction, the facts of George Eliot's biography reflect her engagement in the iconic Victorian debates. The key terms I identified above for understanding the shapes of Victorian selfishness all emerge in this attention to biography. Economics: She was not a woman of leisure. She and George Henry Lewes wrote for their livelihood, and the biographies are filled with her negotiations with John Blackwood and with her family lawyers. Religion: As an adolescent, she was a devout Evangelical Christian, and all of her early letters and most of her later writing, too, is influenced by the language of the Bible, but she also experienced a conversion away from puritanical Christianity, and she rejected her father's religion. Much of the rest of her career was concerned with recuperating the ideas behind the doctrine which had previously guided her and with developing a language for morality and salvation without a divine basis. Morality and Psychology: She wrote articles for the *Westminster Review* and the *Leader* called "The Morality of Wilhelm

⁷¹ Henry James approves of Cross's censorship and likens him to a dramatist making judicious decisions in staging. "We look at the drama from the point of view usually allotted to the public, and the curtain is lowered whenever it suits the biographer." Henry James, "The Life of George Eliot," *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1919) 37. James believes that Eliot put a great deal of herself and her nature into her fictional production ("she distilled her very substance into the things she gave the world") despite, in his opinion, how little her life had in common with her characters' lives (41).

⁷² Although his biography was not as ultimately damaging as William Godwin's more salacious biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, both husbands suppressed material they should have revealed and wrote candidly of material that fans were not prepared to have come to light. The large number of Eliot biographies that immediately followed Cross's were flawed attempts to set his work aright.

Meister,” “The Future of German Philosophy,” “The Antigone and Its Moral,” and “The Influence of Rationalism.” She was attacked for her decision to live with Lewes, and the salon culture which surrounded her at the Priory (her most famous house with Lewes) was filled with moral philosophers. In terms of psychology, she was attentive to the states of the human mind, and she was familiar with all of the prehistory of what we now call psychoanalysis, frequently referring in her writings directly to the principles of psychology as they were currently understood. Literature: She was a woman of letters and a famous bluestocking. She voraciously read essays, novels, and poetry long before she ever composed her own.

All of these identities can be reduced to the language of selfishness by unsympathetic readers. Writing is a selfish endeavor since it is solitary and generates no wealth for the nation. Secularism is a spiritual poverty since it rejects divinity and denies the communal nature of worship. Moralizing is a selfish tendency since it bases interpretation of others’ actions on personal judgment. Psychoanalysis in its modern form is often characterized as a puerile quest for validation, and its Victorian prehistory privileges introspection at the cost of wholesome engagement with the wider world. Finally, what could be more suspect than reading? Unless the book is read aloud, there is no more solitary pastime than reading. It is individualized effort at the expense of true productivity and with no possibility for transmission to another person. Of these biographical realities, her relationship with her reading public and her depiction of religious thought are the most immediately important.

George Eliot’s Relationship with Her Audience

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal

*lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People.*⁷³

George Eliot was morbidly sensitive to criticism. One of the central themes of the Gordon Haight biography is Eliot's need "for someone to lean on." Her letters and Lewes's suggest that her sensitivity could only be alleviated by finding someone to sympathize with her and who could protect her from unfavorable criticism. Lewes generally shielded Eliot from bad reviews, and he maintained as much control as he could over John Blackwood's editorial suggestions.⁷⁴ I read the confessional relationship between many of Eliot's central characters—Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda, for example—as a fictional retelling of this tendency. Whether I am prepared to accept Haight's insistence on Eliot as an emotionally weak woman—and I am disinclined to accept it without a little more convincing—she did portray many characters in just such a situation. Her writing reveals a yearning for sympathetic identification as a way to overcome both accusations of selfishness and nagging self-doubt. She was also afraid that her novels would be thought "silly," a term she had applied to many other "Lady Novelists" publishing just then. In the essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," she had identified a "*mind-and-millinery* species" of book that she was determined not to produce herself.⁷⁵ These "mind-and-millinery" books were "consecrated by tears," but even they were not as bad as the "*oracular* species—novels intended to expound the writer's religious, philosophical, or moral theories."⁷⁶ Eliot had

⁷³ Eliot "The Natural History of German Life" 271.

⁷⁴ Blackwood's hesitations about certain scenes in "Janet's Repentance" and the public's lack of enthusiasm for it resulted in Eliot refusing to continue to write more Scenes of Clerical Life, despite earlier promises to produce them for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

⁷⁵ George Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 301.

⁷⁶ Eliot "Silly Novels" 303, 310.

given herself very little room to maneuver once she herself became a novelist, and she tended to vacillate between exactly these two sorts of tendencies in her own fiction, though hopefully never in so degraded a form. She was always fearful lest her own work devolve into either shallow type.

James D. Benson uses aesthetic qualities to theorize Eliot's reaction to negative criticism. "Her painful touchiness and even petulance toward critics are real enough, but behind it all lies a fundamental disagreement with them about the principles of criticism as well as a deep emotional ambivalence about those principles, rather than a moral or psychological failing."⁷⁷ Benson's article provides a detailed account of Eliot's reactions to the reviews during her lifetime. He emphasizes her frustration, not just with the critics who "fragment the unity of her fiction" but also with their "lack of critical categories" necessary to understand her novels—although she was more sympathetic to this lack than to critics unwilling to try to fill it.⁷⁸ The fragmentation compartmentalized their comments into criticisms of "morality, style, plot, and character" in too arbitrary a manner.⁷⁹ Benson points to Eliot's response to some of the reviews of *Adam Bede*: "Praise is so much less sweet than comprehension and sympathy."⁸⁰ In general, she avoided reading the reviews (according to both Benson and Haight), preferring to let Lewes filter the worst comments out and to pass the best along to her.⁸¹

⁷⁷ James D. Benson. "'Sympathetic' Criticism: George Eliot's Response to Contemporary Reviewing." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 29:4 (1975) 428.

⁷⁸ Benson 429.

⁷⁹ Benson 432.

⁸⁰ September 1859, *Letters* III.148.

⁸¹ Henry James both respected Lewes's protection of Eliot and believed that it narrowed her field of experience. He called Lewes "the most devoted of caretakers, the most jealous of ministers, a companion through whom all business was transacted" (58).

George Eliot's Changing Religious Views

I regard these writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness.⁸²

In January and February of 1842, George Eliot announced her intention to stop going to church, rejecting a childhood and adolescence of Evangelical piety. This decision greatly distressed her father, who refused to speak to her until she consented to return to services with him. From that point on, the two never spoke of her beliefs, as long as she maintained at least a willingness to go through the motions of worship. This sharp break both in religious attitude and filial attentiveness was the consequence of the intensely repressive quality of Eliot's early religiosity, a series of disappointments, a strong desire for change, and an awakening intellectual curiosity. This moment of rebellion was what she called her "Holy War" in her letters.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer characterizes Eliot's decision as a consequence not just of religious/philosophical unhappiness but also as a result of the changes in her domestic situation when her father Robert Evans was displaced from Griff, her childhood home, to Foleshill, where he moved them to make room for his son Isaac to take over the old house. With this move to Coventry, Eliot came into contact with a group of freethinkers centering around Charles and Caroline Bray, along with Caroline's sister Sarah Sophia Hennell. Among other influences, the Hennell women's brother Charles Christian Hennell's *Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity* figures prominently. It "concluded that the life of Christ was

⁸² This excerpt comes from the famous "Holy War" letter Marian Evans (the young George Eliot) to her father on 28 February, 1842. *Letters* I.128.

in no way miraculous and that Christianity was not a divine revelation but a natural religion.”⁸³ Bodenheimer follows Ruby Redinger in interpreting the Holy War “as an unconscious act of aggression against Robert Evans.”⁸⁴ The two critics agree that Eliot’s return to church was a version of the plots her later heroines lived out when “aggressive egotism” is subdued into a “commitment to tolerance.”⁸⁵ Eliot translated David Friedrich Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu (The Life of Jesus)* in 1846 and Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)* in 1854, so it is clear that she did not abandon her Christian religion so much as adapt it.⁸⁶ Eliot has become a symbol of this sort of adaptation. Arthur Pollard uses Eliot’s translation of Feuerbach as a way of explaining how Victorians dealt with religiosity in a time of declining faith that still needed a ground for morality. “It might even be maintained, as by George Eliot, following Feuerbach, that the feelings were the original stuff of religious experience, and the doctrines, including belief in God, had followed from the feelings. In this way Christianity was as completely true in one sense as it was untrue in another.”⁸⁷ This reading of Eliot’s work almost obscures a subtle

⁸³ Bodenheimer 61.

⁸⁴ Bodenheimer 63.

⁸⁵ Bodenheimer 66. “Here we are reading the story of a George Eliot heroine at the paradoxical turning point of maturity, when interior freedom becomes linked with apparent submission to others’ minds. There is a biographical truth in this story; yet this heroine is also stripped, as George Eliot heroines are, of precisely the intellectual ferocity that created and sustained the conflict of the Holy War” (Bodenheimer 66).

⁸⁶ In reference to the influence of Strauss, Richard D. Altick writes,

For although it was the negative, destructive side of the German critic’s argument that claimed the most attention and caused the most distress, he himself concluded that the abiding value and authority of the Bible resided not in its ‘facts,’ which could be all too easily discredited, but in its character as a body of symbol and myth—concrete expressions, current among certain peoples at a specific place and time, of universal and timeless elements in the aspirations, fears, and experience of mankind at large. Stripped of its vulnerable historicity, Scripture retained its spiritual and ethical significance. (Altick 221)

These are the same terms in which George Eliot couched her decision not to go to church with her father, and her attachment to these ideas led to her to begin her translation of Strauss just two years later.

⁸⁷ Arthur Pollard, ed., *The Victorians* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 46.

point that hides behind her wavering faith. Rather than totally divesting religious sentiment of its power, she reinscribed that power into a moral force that helped make the will of community and humanitarianism into an aspect of divine humanity (without a need for an origin myth). As promised in her letter to her father, Eliot continued to believe that Jesus was a great moral leader, but she, like Strauss, denied most of the divine qualities of Jesus's life. No clear statement of Eliot's later belief exists, but the record in her novels is suggestive. She adopted the language of Christianity and many of its central concerns but was able to avoid dogmatic fixation on its inherent truth claims. As a result, her treatment of priestly characters, her adaptations of spiritual material, and her approach to morality were subject to rational ethical principles and serious debate.

Timothy Pace links Eliot's novel-writing to the changes in her faith. "Recent criticism has, of course, tended to locate the imaginative origins of the nineteenth-century novel in the secularization of Protestant spiritual autobiography."⁸⁸ He focuses on Eliot's tendency towards confessional narratives, but I am more interested in the specific account he suggests—that of Eliot's move away from devout Christianity. Eliot is also linked to Auguste Comte's version of positivism, which John Kucich depicts as "a highly developed set of beliefs that promised to substitute humanity for God as an object of worship."⁸⁹ Eliot was not a full convert to this "religion of humanity," but she used its ethical stance as a basis for her own attack on egoism, or, more broadly, selfishness. "The principal moral opposition in positivism was that of egoism to altruism, and its principal moral goal the demonstration

⁸⁸ Timothy Pace. "'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton': George Eliot and Displaced Religious Confession." *Style* 20:1 (1986) 81.

⁸⁹ Kucich "Intellectual debate" 220.

that altruism conformed more properly to natural order.”⁹⁰ I do not believe that altruism is the highest virtue in Eliot’s catechism, but it is close. She was more precisely working towards a generalized sympathy. Rather than self-sacrifice—the threat that haunts so many of Eliot’s characters—she searched for a sort of right order which would unify her heroes with the societies which had previously misunderstood them. In this unnatural (because it is only arrived at by hard labor) state, people will recognize their importance in a larger continuum of sentiment, and they will simultaneously recognize the importance of others’ claims on them.⁹¹ In any case, egoism becomes a sin, evacuated of its religious power and reinvested with humanistic emphasis.

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth begins her article on “George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy” with the secure claim “For George Eliot sympathy lies near the heart of moral life.”⁹² She troubles the simplicity of that statement by saying that we are unlikely to know exactly what Eliot meant by sympathy without closer study. For Ermarth, Eliot’s sympathy is based on a state of double consciousness, “two conflicting views [existing] simultaneously.”⁹³ Her understanding of this simultaneity takes its basis in Eliot’s translation of Feuerbach. The mechanism of prayer, wherein the conversation with God

⁹⁰ Kucich “Intellectual debate” 220.

⁹¹ Kucich sees Eliot’s formation in similar terms. “Eliot’s work, throughout her career, dwelt on the breakdown of traditional moral values, and on the quest for an alternative personal and social order—an order that she idealized as perfecting the interdependence of individual and community” (Kucich “Intellectual debate” 221). Although the end result is the same, Kucich’s interpretation relies on a disintegrating force that he slightly overstates. The novels usually support his reading because they introduce tensions and conflict, but some of the most important developments in the novels are prepared for by long and continuous repetition of effort. Does Hetty need to kill her baby for Adam to reevaluate Dinah? Where is there a “breakdown” for Dorothea before Casaubon’s death? Harold Transome and Felix Holt are both working for progress when they encounter one another. Eliot’s lesson to her readers does not rely on rupture or gross decay of traditionalism, especially when traditionalism is itself the force with which they must contend.

⁹² Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth. “George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40:1 (1985) 23.

⁹³ Ermarth 23.

happens internally with oneself is mirrored by the division between divinity and all of humanity. As a result, the novels require “any constructive action [to] be preceded by the recognition of difference: between oneself and another, or between the differing impulses of one’s own complex motivation.”⁹⁴ Ermarth’s argument requires attention to Eliot’s 1863 novel *Romola*. “The ability to accommodate views different from her own gives Romola her strength and it is in distinction from those views, in dialogue with those alter egos, that she finds her own view and her own voice.”⁹⁵ Her identification of an “ability to accommodate views different from” one’s own is precisely the moral-intellectual development that Eliot requires in all of her successful characters.

Ermarth’s interpretation of Eliot’s concept of sympathy is revealing, but it is more limited than the sort of sympathy that I elaborate in the next chapters. I see Eliot engaged in a project, not just to use sympathy to overcome personal limitations but also in a more traditional way to move her characters’ centers out of themselves. Societies are asked to understand those people they have refused to accept, and, importantly, individuals are asked to sympathize with the feelings of entire communities. Throughout this project, I return again and again to this dynamic. A character encounters difference, becomes aware of personal failings and the suffering of others, sympathizes with that difference, and finds his or her own situation consequently improved. This final elevated state is unfortunately sometimes consequent with the characters’ deaths, but according to Eliot’s ethos, death is sometimes preferable to a life of suffering. Sympathy is therefore both particularly idiosyncratic in its dialogic/confessional quality (as Ermath defines it) and especially

⁹⁴ Ermarth 25.

⁹⁵ Ermarth 31.

conventional in the mechanism of displacement and identification. At the same time, many readers have thought they recognized another double consciousness at work in Eliot's fiction. Does Eliot placidly accept the nonconventionality of her fictional women? Are they, as John Kucich asserts, "heroic martyrs" who fight against "the quietistic virtues of domestic service"?⁹⁶ Or does Eliot condemn them for their non-conformity? It would be hard to argue the latter case with authority these days since Eliot has been almost completely rehabilitated as a pre-modern feminist, but it is worth noting the streak of conservatism that she frequently manifested.⁹⁷ Her sympathy with her characters was far from complete.

The most sustained discussion of sympathy in Eliot's fiction is Mary Ellen Doyle's *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric*. "Since all novels arouse 'expectations' and some emotions in readers, it follows that all novels are, in some degree, rhetorical . . . Eliot's novels differ only in that rhetorical intent and methodology are manifested in a high degree and in that internal evidence is backed up by her explicit statements of desire to influence real readers' responses."⁹⁸ Doyle's critical dedication is to rhetorical analysis and to the language of sympathy, and she pays far less attention to the

⁹⁶ Kucich "Intellectual debate" 216.

⁹⁷ Sarah Gates discusses Eliot's feminism in the "intersections of gender, literary form, and realistic technique" in a useful way by contrasting feminine qualities in male characters and masculine qualities in female ones. "'A Difference of Native Language': Gender, Genre, and Realism in *Daniel Deronda*," *ELH* 68.3 (2001) 700. She refers to the long and troublesome history of feminists working with Eliot's fiction when she describes the "simultaneous presence of feminist analysis and retrogressive plots with which feminists have been struggling for decades" (721). She goes on,

It seems to me that the analysis of genre provides the key to this apparent paradox, for it shows us unequivocally that the feminist analysis really *inheres in* the plots, that the constriction of feminine potential is intentionally played out there . . . that it was only in masculine scripts that they could find a venue for their potential, and the requirements of Victorian gender arrangements, enacted in the plots and re-gendering regimes that work to produce the traditional domestic closures of realistic fiction, required an elision of that scope. (721)

⁹⁸ Mary Ellen Doyle, *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1981) 3.

novels' likely real world effects. For her, *Daniel Deronda* is as much of a failure as it was for Leavis. I see its effects somewhat differently because I consider it not just an occasionally clunky and occasionally beautifully lucid piece of art. I read it as an argument that strives desperately to improve human conditions. Even *The Mill on the Floss*, which Doyle judges a masterpiece, is muddied for her because she valorizes rhetorical language over practical effects.

When Maggie's story clearly 'means' that a gifted and emotional Victorian girl is liable to be so repressed by her society that she becomes even self-defeating, then the represented facts and the theme cohere. But when the rhetoric tries to make the story mean that this repressed girl is to be honored for her compulsions as if she had achieved willing self-conquest and self-fulfillment, then that rhetoric cannot be convincing.⁹⁹

Doyle conjures up the ghost of repressive Victorianism to account for Eliot's subservience to rhetoric, but Eliot was really more of a mistress of her craft than Doyle allows. While it is intriguing that Maggie cannot succeed where Eliot herself did, Eliot was never so simplistic in dismissing her characters or in vaunting them, either. Maggie was always both a failure and a success, and Eliot wrote her that way. Where Maggie fails to convince her family, she succeeds in convincing those who could read her thoughts.¹⁰⁰ In other words, Eliot's audience. Whereas it is appropriate to imagine all the worst qualities of Victorian ideology reinforcing the cultural stereotypes within the novel, it is not fair or appropriate to imagine those opinions controlling either the novel's readers or—more importantly—Eliot herself.

⁹⁹ Doyle 88-89.

¹⁰⁰ The substitution of reading public for telepathic awareness is a form of wish fulfillment I treat in detail in my third chapter but in relation to "The Lifted Veil," rather than *The Mill on the Floss*, as I represent it here.

V. Types of Selfishness and What Became of Them

*Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference . . . is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . .*¹⁰¹

The accusation of selfishness works on many levels, and its various definitions are mutually reinforcing because “selfishness” itself can never be reduced to any one of them. It comes in many forms in Eliot’s fiction: moral self-righteousness, economic greed, sexual pleasure-seeking, moral obtuseness, egotistical self-regard, and an inability to imagine the world from any viewpoint other than one’s own. I find Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the stereotype useful here. Although his subject is colonial discourse and the process of othering, his development of “productive ambivalence” is a helpful way of looking at stereotypes in general, because the “ambivalent” fluctuations of the meaning of selfishness help to “produce” the varied possibilities inherent in the accusation.¹⁰² Moral self-righteousness and egotistical self-regard are mutually reinforcing. Sexual pleasure-seeking might be a form of moral obtuseness on one day and a disregard for others’ feelings on another. Never having to define specifically in what ways characters like Amos Barton or Mr. Tryan might really be selfish helps their oppressors keep anxiety over them at a high pitch.¹⁰³ In fact, when Janet Dempster stops to consider in what ways Tryan might really be selfish (and she focuses on a supposed smug superiority), the stereotype collapses under the revealed weight of its falsehood. This collapse can only happen when the accusation goes

¹⁰¹ Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question,” *Screen* 24.6 (1983) 18.

¹⁰² Bhabha 19.

¹⁰³ These situations from “The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton” and “Janet’s Repentance” are explained in the next chapter.

from a general and stereotyped form to a specific and analyzable one. Eliot performs this logical strategy over and over with her characters.

Bhabha's theory "suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse."¹⁰⁴

Throughout my dissertation, I engage both "points of intervention" to specify the positive and negative interpretations of stereotyped selfishness, as well as the power structures that these accusations encode. Bhabha argues that the stereotype needs constant reiteration to help it strive towards the fixity that it can never fully achieve. This constant repetition contains within itself an acknowledgement of doubt. If Tom Tulliver must continually tell his sister Maggie that she acts exclusively from selfish impulses, his dogmatism must contain a suspicion that what he says might not be true. He is, in effect, trying to convince himself that she is the selfish one and not he. If first Robert Evans and then his son Isaac acted in the same way towards the young George Eliot, we must recognize their draconian behavior—refusal to accept explanations or to respond at all—as ineffective coping strategies that cut off any recourse on Eliot's part.¹⁰⁵ The stereotyped individual is robbed of power because any attempt to argue against selfishness, for example, becomes a product of the supposed stereotypical behavior. This *huis clos* becomes Eliot's fictional world.

The positive aims of selfishness that Eliot identifies are more accurately reinterpretations or re-evaluations of self-awareness than they are of selfishness as such. However, they function at a surface level in homologous ways to selfishness. The initial

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha 18.

¹⁰⁵ I am thinking specifically of Robert Evans's refusal to speak to his daughter after she announced her decision not to go to church anymore and of Isaac Evans's silence of nearly twenty-five years while his sister lived with George Henry Lewes.

developments of this analysis carve out a set of positive traits that I call “necessary selfishness.” They include both focused self-examination and attention to the ways that social knowledge is manipulated. The first point can stand on its own for a moment, but the second point is especially tricky and needs clarification. The way that societies misunderstand or misinterpret innocent or, at least, not guilty characters requires those characters to develop defensive strategies. A person like Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch* needs to develop some power to resist the gossip (understood here as malicious narration of his personal history) if he is going to succeed.¹⁰⁶ Lydgate’s failure to manipulate public opinion and his inability to protect himself amounts to a lack of necessary selfishness. Eliot insists that the blistering treatment that characters like Lydgate suffer in the course of her novels is extremely unfair but also realistic to actual practice. The unfairness comes in the simultaneous false accusation of real selfishness (defined according to the array of negative qualities already identified) and the failed attempt at self-protection.

It is not startling to learn that self-awareness and self-protection are likely to be misunderstood by ungenerous viewers, but I remain attached to Eliot’s idiosyncratic characters—those most vulnerable to the criticism. As a result, I am frustrated at the misidentification of what are demonstrably *selfless* motives. Eliot can hardly hope to solve definitively the problem of people who selfishly misinterpret selflessness or sympathy, but she does do an excellent job of raising the problem, and she makes several steps towards finding a practical solution.¹⁰⁷ It is a difficult subject and worth examining because even in

¹⁰⁶ Lydgate becomes a victim of gossip’s social power to create community at the expense of a sacrificial outsider. Patricia Meyer Spacks theorizes gossip’s ability to “solidify a group’s sense of itself by heightening consciousness of ‘outside’ (inhabited by those talked about) and ‘inside’ (the temporarily secure territory of the talkers).” *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 5.

¹⁰⁷ I am far from being the first person to discuss Eliot’s use of sympathy as a way past selfishness. “Critics have long noted Eliot’s concern with the theme of growth in her central characters from egoism and/or self-

its inchoate—which is not to say unarticulated—form, the experience of self-awareness happens at multiple levels. To return to the example of *Middlemarch*, it is clear that Rosamond Vincy does not do the work of becoming self-aware, except in a very limited way, and Dorothea Brooke only comes by degrees to the awareness I have named. Dorothea is critical of her own motives, but she is not aware of all of their implications. She improves according to this specialized form of maturity, but she is not fully developed until late in the book.

Eliot's novels have been endlessly studied as much for their engagement with religion, philosophy, science, the role of women, and other real-world problems as for their three-dimensional characters.¹⁰⁸ Terry Eagleton, for example, has this to say about Eliot's peculiarities: "Given her supple, coolly rational prose style, we are not surprised to find that she rejects absolute moral judgments of the kind that Dickens goes in for. Nobody in Eliot's fiction is either transcendently good or wicked beyond redemption. The besetting sin of her

delusion to self-knowledge and a capacity for sympathy." Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone, *The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* (New York: New York UP, 1994) 1. However, these critics have tended to miss the way that she undoes the language of selfishness itself, asserting both that society tends to mis-identify it and that some degree of it is necessary to survival.

¹⁰⁸ For Eliot's treatment of religion, see Felicia Bonaparte's *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*, Brian Spittles's *George Eliot: Godless Woman*, and Joseph Wiesenfarth's *George Eliot's Mythmaking*. For Eliot's use of philosophy and politics, see Rosemary Ashton's *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860*, U.C. Knoepfelmacher's *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism*, Anthony McCobb's *George Eliot's Knowledge of German Life and Letters*, John Rignall's *George Eliot and Europe*, and Andrew Thompson's *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento*. For Eliot and scientific thought, see Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narratives in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* and Sally Shuttleworth's *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*. For Eliot and women, see Dorothea Barrett's *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, and William Myers's *The Teaching of George Eliot*. For Eliot and other real-world issues, see Alicia Carroll's *Dark Desires: Race and Desire in George Eliot*, Daniel Cottom's *Social Figures: Eliot, Social History, and Literary Representation*, Valentine Cunningham's *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, Philip Fisher's *Making Up Society: The Novels of George Eliot*, Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form*, Susan Graver's *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Literary Form*, Bernard J. Paris's *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values*, Bernard Semmel's *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance*, and Hugh Witemeyer's *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*.

characters is egoism, which is hardly the most heinous of offenses.”¹⁰⁹ Fair enough, but this formulation of the problem is too narrow and bases Eliot’s skills too much in a comparative framework to reveal the depth of her contribution. Eagleton’s summation does not allow for the ways in which characters in Eliot’s fiction fight against either their societies’ mistaken identification of their egoism or, more interestingly, her real audience’s misreading of the same. This misreading can happen at various levels: during the reader’s initial encounter with the text, when the reader notices the split between ironic tone and deeper morals, and after the reader fails to grasp the depths of complex motives. All of these potential mistakes become apparent in the novels since they treat the aspects of selfishness so clearly in their guises as narcissism, conceitedness, greediness, vanity, and so on. Eagleton gets to the heart of what I am arguing here when he continues, “Besides, egoism is a fault which can be repaired. What can repair it is the imagination, which allows us to rise above our own interests and feel our way sympathetically into the lives of others. And the supreme form of this imaginative sympathy is known as the novel.”¹¹⁰ Eagleton eventually comes to contradict Eliot’s belief that “to know all is to forgive all.”¹¹¹ He calls this a “typically liberal mistake,” but Eliot is neither fully liberal nor fully convinced that her work will be a success.¹¹² She is not sure it is possible to educate an unsympathetic crowd, but I intend to show the ways she tried anyway. Ultimately, this project is an attempt to trace the

¹⁰⁹ Eagleton, *The English Novel* 163.

¹¹⁰ Eagleton, *The English Novel* 163.

¹¹¹ Although he does not cite her specifically, Eagleton is alluding to Eliot’s affection for the French maxim “tout comprendre est tout pardonner” (“to know all is to forgive all”) in reference to “The Lifted Veil” (*Letters* IX.220). I will address this maxim in detail in the next chapter.

¹¹² Eagleton, *The English Novel* 165. It must be noted that Eagleton uses contestable terms. To be “liberal” in the twenty-first century is not at all the same thing as it was in nineteenth-century England, and George Eliot had many conservative tendencies by either century’s definition. Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* unpacks some of this confusing history.

development of “imaginative sympathy” as a solution to the trap of egoism through Eliot’s fiction.

Although readers typically begin with Eliot’s novels, she deals with egoism and sympathy in her short fiction and tries out a few initial phrasings of the questions that will occupy her for the rest of her career. The next two chapters address the problems of an oversimplified identification of selfishness in the light of Eliot’s somewhat hidden but locatable theory of necessary selfishness. Attention to her four major short stories will allow me to articulate clearly the problems that will occupy me during the following two chapters on Eliot’s life and novels.¹¹³ My second chapter addresses her first three stories, published collectively as *Scenes of Clerical Life*. In the third chapter, I continue working through Eliot’s short fiction by looking at “The Lifted Veil” as a precursor to *The Mill on the Floss*—her most autobiographical novel—before addressing her difficulties when she was exposed to public criticism and the way that *The Mill on the Floss* answered both artistic and personal demands. My fourth chapter takes up the problems of the early fiction in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda* and shows that she had become aware of the limits of sympathy as a resolution to these problems. In the fifth and final chapter, I address the technical apparatus for describing and defending selves in conflict by looking to its influence on later authors. Taken collectively, these readings attempt to track, through Eliot’s work, the shifting meaning of a term that has haunted the formation of modern subjectivity.

¹¹³ George Eliot also produced two other short stories. “Edward Neville” is an incomplete piece of juvenilia in a school notebook and was probably composed in 1834. It is included in the appendix of the Gordon Haight biography. “Brother Jacob” is Eliot’s fifth complete short story, published in July of 1864 in *The Cornhill Magazine*. This last story is concerned almost exclusively with selfishness as it relates to avarice. While the emphasis on selfishness’s similarity to or reduction into simple greed is a phenomenon that I will explain as an especially modern formulation, the story itself is rather limited and caricatural compared to Eliot’s other work. Since its first publication as a piece in the *Cornhill*, it has usually been published as a pair with “The Lifted Veil” although the tones of the two are strikingly different.

Chapter Two: Troubling the “Exquisite Self”: Undoing Selfishness in *Scenes of Clerical Life*

I. Introduction

*I am unable to alter anything in relation to the delineation or development of character, as my stories always grow out of my psychological conception of the dramatis personae . . . My artistic bent is not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy. And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character.*¹

*[W]e have all our secret sins; and if we knew ourselves, we should not judge each other harshly. (186)*²

George Eliot’s fiction questions naïve assumptions about selfishness. Too many other people had collapsed it into a simple, baggy discursive category that encompassed multiple negative accusations. This concatenation linked greedy, conceited, vain, solipsistic, and egotistical motives under the same, productively vague, accusation. The present study of Eliot’s work seeks to reveal that her conception of selfishness is considerably more problematic and interesting than the received notion and that it develops over time. Eliot begins, in her short fiction, to study the various claims of selfishness, not by simply eliding them as most people had done, but by taking them in turn. She goes on to reveal that the negative discourse of selfishness sometimes obscures positive, related concepts. She examines the ways in which these better possibilities get misunderstood and too easily

¹ George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954-78) II.299. George Eliot was writing to John Blackwood to reject his suggested changes to “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story.”

² This reference, and all future parenthetical citations in this chapter, refer to George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998). This passage is found in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” which will be discussed as the second story.

collapsed back into the simple qualifier “selfish.” Eliot’s work does not go so far as to fully reclaim all of selfishness’s positive and negative qualities in a stubbornly optimistic reevaluation—as Wilde and some of the Decadents later in the century might be said to attempt. But Eliot actively works to re-situate selfishness’s constitutive elements. Her goals are not themselves entirely disinterested because she was also suffering from the same accusations that she was trying to redefine.

Eliot’s first short story “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton” introduces the general ground I want to address. It specifically names an accusation of selfishness and then sets it in relation to a generally occurring problem of social knowledge. The failed manipulation of this knowledge and the ways in which the manipulation is trumped by sympathetic identification create a precedent for Eliot’s later work. The second piece, “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” contrasts an unselfish and self-aware man with two other people who fail in important ways. One of these foils is a narcissistic, unaware cad, and the other is a selfless woman who fails to protect herself. All three are watched by a selfish, unaware man who, intriguingly enough, is still a good person. The third story, “Janet’s Repentance,” combines some of the insights of the first two stories to emphasize that social knowledge of individual worth needs constant evaluation. The story also takes up the thread of selflessness from “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” and explains that selflessness is not wholly good. It too must be modulated, or it becomes an unhealthy self-abnegation. Eliot’s fourth story, “The Lifted Veil” allows a transition into Eliot’s longer fiction because it makes radical claims about what it means to narrate individual experience. More than any other piece by Eliot, “The Lifted Veil” is tied to its narrator, but it is also paradoxically the most obsessed with the internal worlds of characters other than its narrator. The story attacks greed, vanity, and

morbid self-preoccupation and raises the danger of the extreme forms of both isolationism and sympathy. Its attention to the role of the artist suggests that we need to look at the way Eliot's own experience influences her critical and emotional dedications. However, that argument must wait until the next chapter, specifically because of its transitional nature.

II. George Eliot Emerges from a "Vague Dream"

*Your letter has greatly restored the shaken confidence of my friend, who is unusually sensitive, and unlike most writers is more anxious about excellence than about appearing in print—as his waiting so long before taking the venture proved. He is consequently afraid of failure though not afraid of obscurity; and by failure he would understand that which I suspect most writers would be apt to consider as success—so high is his ambition.*³

As George Eliot explains in her journal entry of December 6, 1857, she wrote her early short stories as practice for writing longer fiction. Novel writing "had always been a vague dream" which had never resolved itself into a subject.⁴ She sat down to try after George Henry Lewes, impressed by her success in the periodical press, encouraged her. He said, "It may be a failure—it may be that you are unable to write fiction. Or perhaps, it may be just good enough to warrant your trying again . . . You may write a chef-d'oeuvre at once—there's no telling."⁵ Eliot did try, and she met with fairly immediate success, enough to 'warrant trying again' in a longer form. First, she produced "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," "Mr Gilfil's Love Story," and "Janet's Repentance" which were

³ "George Henry Lewes writing to John Blackwood," *Letters* II.276-7.

⁴ Quoted in Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1985) 206.

⁵ Quoted in Haight 206. The *Scenes* have been variously praised and insulted. One of the first modern critical treatments of the three together finds them especially disappointing in contrast to Eliot's longer work. "But today, especially as we consider the stories in relationship to the novels which were soon to follow, the *Scenes* are generally (but not uniformly) disappointing: sometimes sentimental, melodramatic, unbalanced, starkly simple, and marred by the particularly intrusive voice of the author." Daniel Pierre Deneau, "Imagery in the *Scenes of Clerical Life*." *Victorians Newsletter* 28 (1965) 18.

published together as the *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1858. The collection was originally intended to include more stories, but Eliot was frustrated by Blackwood's lukewarm response to "Janet's Repentance." By her own admission, these three stories were practice for longer work. I see them as explorations in theme as well as technique and trace through them a growing preoccupation with the issues of self-presentation. The questions "Who knows individuals at their deepest levels?" and "How can a person protect himself or herself from societal misunderstanding?" lie just below the surface of most of Eliot's work. In her short fiction, she elaborates on these deeply theoretical problems. The stories are the first place where she raises these questions and starts trying to answer them. I will work through the first four of the short stories before returning to her biography and moving on into her novels. These stories already begin Eliot's critique of what is and is not selfish. In particular, I will look at how public knowledge interacts with self-representation and how these interactions can be woven together or torn apart.

The *Scenes* are also the first place where the critic must begin asking himself or herself how realistic—philosophically, autobiographically, and theoretically—Eliot's fiction is. The autobiographical links are sometimes overt, and Eliot directly addressed the mixture of historical recounting and fabrication in a letter to John Blackwood on May 28, 1858. She wrote that "Amos Barton" was "spun out of the subtlest web of minute observation and inward experience, from my first childish recollections up to recent years. So it is with all the other stories."⁶ Although Eliot means the three *Scenes* when she writes "all," willfully misreading her comment and proleptically extending it onto her later fiction is not thematically inappropriate. While she resists the notion that her novels and stories enjoyed a

⁶ *Letters* II.460

simple one to one correspondence to the real world, she never—or rarely, anyway—denies that her fiction is partly autobiographical in its sources. She does, however, refuse to allow it to be worked through as a *roman a clef* (literally, a novel with a key).

[I]t is invariably the case that when people discover certain points of coincidence in a fiction with facts that happen to have come to their knowledge, they believe themselves able to furnish a key to the whole. That is amusing enough to the author, who knows from what widely sundered portions of experience—from what a combination of subtle shadowy suggestions with certain actual object and events, his story has been formed.”⁷

Indeed, it is specifically this compulsion to find a key that readers must resist. Keys are objects of suspicion in Eliot’s fiction everywhere we encounter them. As we learn in *Middlemarch*, there is no key to all mythologies, and here there is no key to interpretation. The interpretations of selfishness as a trope are similarly tricky because there is no exact correspondence, and Eliot was not entirely consistent in her usage. While we must look at the events in her life as potential sources for her opinions on selfishness, we must avoid treating the sources as actual explanations. Instead, throughout this project, I look precisely at what Eliot wrote and attempt to understand what she said in its proper milieu: in the texts.

Addressing the *Scenes* raises certain unavoidable issues for Eliot scholars. The period when she was writing them (1856 and 1857) saw her creating the alias of George Eliot and moving away from her established credentials as an essayist. She hid her new life as a novelist from the Brays and the rest of her Coventry circle, thereby inviting eventual criticism from the only people who had stood by her through her transition from her father’s house to London.⁸ The other major issue is inherent in the subject matter of the stories.

Having taken preachers and priests as her subject, she was treating the themes which she had

⁷ *Letters* II.459

⁸ I address her old friends’ feelings about Mary Ann Evans hiding behind George Eliot in the next chapter when I come to the “withdrawing of the incognito.”

fourteen years before so strongly rejected. Despite the claims that she made to her father during her personal “Holy War,” it is not surprising that she decided to return to the scenes which she knew from her evangelical youth. In other words, she had to process her feelings about religion before she could get down to longer works of fiction.⁹ Although it may seem that religion itself is a vexed category in the *Scenes*, the social aspect is already the most important component to religion in the stories. Eliot never analyzes any character’s individual religious belief.¹⁰ She instead deals with the social elements of religious life by discussing the romantic entanglements and prejudices of certain clerical figures. As a result of the general topic, though, selfishness first appears as a religiously-coded sin. By the end of her career, it will be almost exclusively a secular and social sin.¹¹ The three stories become increasingly more strident in their call for individualism—here figured as “necessary selfishness”—and sympathy to protect Eliot’s characters from various forms of selfish misunderstanding that plague the small towns of Shepperton and Milby.

⁹ Gordon Haight implicitly links Eliot’s intense self-scrutiny to her sensitivity for her audience. “Her old feeling of hostility towards organized religion had evaporated since she began to write the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and though her agnosticism remained, she never again spoke contemptuously of any sincerely held faith.” Haight 256. Writing the *Scenes* was expiatory for her.

¹⁰ Having become more comfortable with her authorial voice and having found an interested audience, she moved onto more personalized treatment of individual religious experience in *Adam Bede* but never with any indication of what is right or true—only what those individuals believe.

¹¹ Brian Spittles walks a fine line in his (provocatively titled) book *George Eliot: Godless Woman*. He depicts Eliot as someone who “understood loss of faith” and tried to help heal “Victorian confidence” in “pain” with a “scrupulous” attention to the way belief works for individuals. Brian Spittles, *George Eliot: Godless Woman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993) 72. His larger project is to recuperate Eliot’s feminist aims to her ambiguous social context.

III. The Limits of Social Knowledge in “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton”

*Nice distinctions are troublesome. It is so much easier to say that a thing is black, than to discriminate the particular shade of brown, blue, or green, to which it really belongs. It is so much easier to make up your mind that your neighbour is good for nothing, than to enter into all the circumstances that would oblige you to modify that opinion. (39)*¹²

“The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton” is set in the early 1830s, about twenty-five years before its publication. It begins with the strong authorial voice that will address the reader again in *The Mill on the Floss* describing “one February afternoon many years ago.”¹³ However, unlike in her later work, “Amos Barton’s” narrator’s presence is limiting. By insisting so firmly on the narrator’s having known Barton personally, Eliot’s ability to create sympathy and immediacy is reduced; whereas, when she stands looking at the River Floss, she manages to disappear into her remembrances.¹⁴ “Amos Barton”’s action is definitively set before “the New Police, the Tithe Commutation Act, the penny-post,” and so on, but the narrator confesses a “sigh for the departed shades of vulgar errors” (7). I will address the importance of this nostalgic move in the next chapter. Eliot introduces the readers to her cast of characters for all three stories in the collection by linking Mr. Gilfil of the second piece to Mr. Barton of the first in a sort of apostolic procession as early as the third page. The stories develop in an increasingly backward-glancing fashion since the second story begins five years before the first and the third several years before that.

¹² Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to George Eliot, “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998) 5-76.

¹³ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A.S. Byatt (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1979) 55.

¹⁴ Alexandra M. Norton discusses this issue and points out that the narrator “in each of the *Scenes* . . . rather unaccountably drops out as the story gets told” in “The Seeds of Fiction: George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life*,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 19.2 (1989) 218.

Attention to the details of social knowledge—who knows what about whom and when—allows the questions of selfishness to be addressed critically. At the simplest level, the selfish individual is not always who the town of Shepperton expects.

“Amos Barton” is a brief story, and most of the action is internal to the characters. Amos Barton is curate in Shepperton Church living almost out of his means on £80 per year. He and his wife Milly have six children and expect a seventh. Although Milly is expert at reusing and patching clothes, their resources are stretched thin, and they live on credit. Barton is a talentless but sincere preacher who tends to alienate all of his parishioners by speaking pompously. The couple has few friends, and they are frequently the topic of gossip in their small town. At the beginning of the story, the reader meets the “epigrammatic” Mrs. Hackit and several rural authorities on religion, propriety, and tradition (10). The narrative focus darts around from kitchen to kitchen as the narrative moves from one private space to another—spaces that Amos Barton either enters or in which he is discussed. Eventually, the reader learns that Milly’s health is failing and that she overextends herself; Amos has offended several neighbors; and the Countess Caroline Czerslaki (widow of a Polish dance instructor) has befriended the Bartons. When the Countess’s half-brother elopes with her maid, Caroline comes to stay with the poor Bartons for two weeks. Once there, she refuses to leave while she waits months for an apology from her half-brother. The Bartons become poorer and poorer to keep the Countess in luxury, and the opinion of the town turns further against them when everyone assumes that Amos and the Countess are conducting an affair. Finally, the Bartons’ nanny becomes so angry that she yells at the Countess and accuses her of ruining the family. The Countess suddenly realizes what she has done and takes her leave, but not before having overtaxed Milly’s health. Milly dies six weeks later after giving birth

to a premature child, and the town's sympathies return to Amos in his grief (led by Mrs. Hackit and the kindly preacher Mr. Cleve from a nearby town). Unfortunately, just when it looks as if he has found acceptance and a permanent home, Barton is turned out of the curacy by the vicar, and he and his family are forced to go to a northern manufacturing town. Years later, Amos visits Milly's grave with their oldest daughter Patty, who has replaced Milly as the family's maternal figure and domestic angel.

Eliot undercuts the story's sentimental tendencies by mixing her set pieces with intensely realistic descriptions. Her sympathetic commitments are apparent in the narrator's voice when she apologizes to her readers for presenting "an utterly uninteresting character" and then castigating any bored members of the audience for wanting someone out of the ordinary (43).¹⁵ Is it not better to have someone like "eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-Britons" than some unfamiliar stranger with 'heroic virtues' or an "undetected crime within his breast?" (43). Is it not better to see the way that real life works and to understand real persecution? This realist project elevates the commonplace through the reader's identification with it—the prosaic is more believable than the poetic. Eliot asks us "is there not a pathos in their very insignificance,—in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share?" (44). Of course, there is pathos in the way 'their' lives are made "dim and narrow" by other people

¹⁵ It is precisely this authorial attention to the difference between Eliot's narratorial assumptions about her audience and her purported goals that makes the subject of one of the best and most nuanced studies of the *Scenes*. Timothy Pace argues that "Eliot imagines unresponsive readers who need to be coaxed into sympathy for her commonplace provincial characters. In contrast, Eliot's earlier essays for the Westminster Review, as well as authorial statements in . . . *Scenes of Clerical Life*, establish a different rhetorical ideal for her art. Eliot envisions that the very nature of realism creates the possibility of addressing her readers in a straightforward tone of shared moral sympathy for all human experience." "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton": George Eliot and Displaced Religious Confession," *Style* 20.1 (1986) 75-89. Pace insists that Eliot distrusts her own assertion that "an innate capacity for spontaneous sympathy exists in all individuals" when her rhetoric repeatedly "depicts human nature as needing to be prodded and tricked into sympathy" (86).

who kept them from some greater destiny. The audience is free to read itself into the narrative of possibilities foreclosed by the pressing crowds.

This attempt at verisimilitude in the realistic approach is clunkier than Eliot's later work and is too directly a fictional translation of the principles she set out in her essays "The Natural History of German Life" and "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." The narrator is over-present when ingratiating herself by calling attention to the plainness of the story: "Heaven forbid! For not having a fertile imagination, as you perceive, and being unable to invent thrilling incidents for your amusement, my only merit must lie in the faithfulness with which I represent to you the humble experience of an ordinary fellow-mortal" (59).¹⁶ While there is little enough humor in this story, Eliot's narrator is as wry as she will become in her later novels, but here the self-congratulation is more abrasive. The narrator's privileged viewpoint reveals that Barton is an everyman and the town's condemnation is a mistake, but she is simultaneously constrained by attempting to limit her exposure to what she might actually overhear as a character within the story's action.¹⁷ Eliot's plea to her readers asks them to move quickly in aligning themselves with the narrator's perspective of Barton's quiet

¹⁶ I follow a critical tradition in Eliot studies by identifying the narrator as female. The practice is not without its limitations, especially in reading "Janet's Repentance," where the narrator claims a masculine gender or in "The Lifted Veil," in which the masculine narrator is clearly identified. However, in its very attention to the gender, the choice not to use "himself/herself" avoids erasing the questions of gender identification which will come under analysis later in this dissertation. The feminine narrator is nowadays practically assumed, and critics pay more attention to the effects of narrative presence, rather than its gender.

¹⁷ "The narrator consistently and very self-consciously leads the reader into the homes of Amos's various parishioners, who give superficial and externalized, as well as simply inaccurate, information about their curate. Her method serves the interests of realism—the reader only sees what he would have seen, had he in fact known Amos Barton—but it leaves Eliot dependent on the exhortations of her narrator to gain any sympathy for her character" (Norton 219). This issue has been addressed frequently in the scholarly literature on Eliot. As early as 1969, Barbara Hardy was willing to claim that the disturbance over the awkwardness of authorial presence had been put to rest in favor of more productive criticism of its power. "There was a time, not so long ago, when it was necessary to explain and justify the insistent presence and commentary of the omniscient author in the novels of George Eliot, but more recent criticism has shown the mobility, the varying function, and the dramatization of the author's presence, both in language and imagery." Barbara Hardy, "Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot," *The Victorians*, The Penguin History of Literature Ser. 6, Arthur Pollard, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 190.

heroism. The commonness of her characters arises directly from certain essayistic principles she had already set out. In “The Natural History of German Life,” she asserted, “We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness.”¹⁸ In “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” she moved her gaze from artisans and peasants to the clergy. “The real drama of Evangelicalism—and it has abundance of fine drama for any one who has genius enough to discern and reproduce it—lies among the middle and lower classes; and are not Evangelical opinions understood to give an especial interest in the weak things of the earth, rather than the mighty?”¹⁹ Eliot took up the challenge of proving that she “had the genius” for the task and set about giving the meek their inheritance.

“Amos Barton” is a clear indication of things to come. It begins a long series of individualized characters held apart from society who either succeed or fail based on the whims of a rural jury of local citizens. We see this theme played out again and again in *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, and *Middlemarch*.²⁰ Essentially, the question is whether or not perceived selfishness is justified. Are the characters better or worse than society understands them to be? Looking at Amos and the Countess Czerlaski will help to clarify the possible answers to this driving question.

The principal character is Amos Barton himself, and he is also the sympathetic center, even as the angelic Milly suffers and dies. Eliot sets Amos up as a sort of accidental fool.

¹⁸ George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 271.

¹⁹ George Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 318. Part of Eliot’s goal was to prevent her audience from mistaking her work for another “silly novel” because, she said, those books dealt almost exclusively with “very lofty and fashionable society” (“Silly Novels” 303).

²⁰ The story contains curious echoes of Eliot’s life with Lewes: people misinterpret propriety because they project their own vices and perceptions of sin onto innocent outsiders in both fiction and real life.

Poorly educated and unintentionally abstruse, he is also completely sincere. His selfish tendencies are very mild. “Now, the Rev. Amos Barton was one of those men who have a decided will and opinion of their own; he held himself bolt upright, and had no self-distrust” (31). His faith in himself and his morality put him at odds with his neighbors later in the story when he is too proud to disabuse them of their mistake regarding the supposed affair. The narrative supports his scrupulous morality but condemns his decision to take it so far, even to the cost of his wife’s reputation. Amos fears confrontation and flees from it whenever he sees it coming except in smaller matters on which he is unreasonably obstinate. As often happens in fiction and in real life, defying traditions brings public disapproval. In this story, Amos repeatedly stirs up ill will by making changes like pulling down the old church and reorganizing the choir. He tells the Countess at one point that “I had given orders that they should not sing the wedding psalm, as they call it, again, to make a new-married couple look ridiculous, and they sang it in defiance of me” (33). The traditionalists are not just defiant; they are angry at the changes. They see Amos’s ideas as caprice and not as improvement. Another character, Mr. Farquhar, who has a strong lisp, complains of Amos saying, “Barton’th well-meaning enough, but *tho* contheited” (38). Fahrquhar continues by revealing his high opinion of himself in saying “I’ve left off giving him my advithe” (38). Although Fahrquhar is ridiculous, his position matches the town’s, both in their affronted silence and self-complacency. They will not stoop to correct Amos—even though they are sure of themselves. It is also worth noting how Fahrquhar introduces conceitedness as yet another form of selfishness. It will come under the form of vanity in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” and “The Lifted Veil” and commonly will show up as a negative trait in Eliot’s antagonists (Godfrey Cass, Edward Casaubon, and Malingier Grandcourt) and as a moral

crucible in her morally ambivalent protagonists (Tito Melema, Harold Transome, and Gwendolen Harleth).

However, a few characters see that Amos is more misunderstood than ill-meaning. Mrs. Hackit tells a group of farmers that they are mistaken when they complain that all of Barton's changes are for the worse. "And there's that Track Society as Mr. Barton has begun—I've seen more o' the poor people with going tracking, than all the time I've lived in the parish before" (15). She is interested in charity, here presented as tract distribution, and Barton's work with the poor appeals to her. Still, even Mrs. Hackit has her doubts about his humility: "I often say, when he preaches about meekness, he gives himself a slap in the face" (13). Although Amos has a reputation for being "contheited," he does not take all disagreements as attacks on his honor. The narrator tells us that he "had a way of laughing at criticisms that other people thought damaging" (21). Some of this amusement is because his conceit insulates him, and some of it is because he knows that griping is frequently just griping.

Amos Barton is a curious mix since he is both strong and weak at the same time. "For though Amos thought himself strong, he did not *feel* himself strong. Nature had given him the opinion, but not the sensation" (25). The breach between thinking and feeling becomes important.²¹ While Amos is weak enough to feel disappointment and pain when he

²¹ The difference between sensation and appearance is one of the most important patterns in the story. It recurs practically every time Amos and the Countess are discussed. However, the developing themes are easy to miss if the reader is in a hurry to treat "Amos Barton" simply as a first attempt by a fledgling author. Daniel P. Deneau claims that it "contains no meaningful image patterns or even truly rewarding incidental images; the relatively few images that do appear are at their worst awkward and overly ingenious figures and at their best colorful little decorations." "Imagery in the *Scenes of Clerical Life*," *Victorians Newsletter* 28 (1965) 19. I disagree and think that my analysis here brings out more depth in the story than it is often given credit for having. Deneau's criticism mainly rests in the imagistic failures of the *Scenes*, and as a result, he is more charitable to "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" and "Janet's Repentance." I find those two stories slightly more labored than "Amos Barton" but also worth a closer look as both steps in Eliot's development and in their own right.

is out of favor, he is strong enough to stick to his rational and moral principles. This strength holds him until Milly's death erodes his emotional center. His newly sympathetic parishioners then supply the want in emotional support. So, Amos comes across as an average person who may have put himself too far forward in the public eye by becoming a preacher. Eliot writes that "A tallow dip...is an excellent thing in the kitchen candlestick...it is only when you stick it in the silver candlestick, and introduce it into the drawing-room, that it seems plebeian, dim, and ineffectual. Alas for the worthy man who, like that candle gets himself in the wrong place!" (25).²² Everyone's difficulty with Amos comes down to the basic problem that he seems to be just another person like them, and they need him to be someone more elevated if they are going to respect him. Then, when they think that they have identified a way in which he is morally beneath them and not merely equal, they attack. As far as they are concerned, he has gotten "himself in the wrong place," but the ability to identify him as a plain "tallow dip" like everyone else also allows the crowd to recognize what he has in common with them. At the end of the story, his common humanity works towards his religious goals of edifying Shepperton. The sympathetic narrator explains that "Amos failed to touch the spring of goodness by his sermons, but he touched it effectually by his sorrows; and there was now a real bond between him and his flock" (74). The community forgives Amos for his lack of talent when they come to recognize him as a normal man—a man who suffers like them.

The transition between alienation because of a perceived selfishness and sympathy because of a perceived sorrow is crucial because it sketches the only path to understanding in

²² The class structure of this story affects my reading of it. I could compare the roles of Amos (common man put into the middle class) and the Countess (common woman put into the upper class). Their castigation may have something to do with their mobility. The townsfolk see them as "getting above themselves." Since "Janet's Repentance" presents a subtler and more layered case of class bias, I will save the discussion of class consciousness until I analyze that story.

these stories. Eliot's characters are either born with the ability to recognize a common humanity, or they come to that recognition through shared pain. Sympathy never comes in moments of euphoria or epiphany in Eliot's fiction. In this way, she is quite different from Wordsworth and Coleridge and their sublime moments of universal humanity. Her characters are not like Austen's heroines, who embrace new viewpoints as they come to love heroic men, nor are they like Gaskell's in actively confronting social injustice. Although Eliot's fiction is far from being pessimistic about the possibility of romantic love, and we do not see her characters as doomed,—claims that might asserted in regard to Dickens or Hardy—love, suffering, and identification are certainly wrapped up in one another for Amos Barton and his peers.

Before the community-endorsing end, Shepperton is mostly a flat, gossiping mass. One of the exceptions is the saintly Rev. Cleves. Eliot introduces him as one of the discontented priests at a dinner party. "To a superficial glance, Mr. Cleves is the plainest and least clerical-looking of the party; yet, strange to say, *there* is the true parish priest, the pastor beloved, consulted, relied on by his flock . . . the surest helper under a difficulty" (55). He is the first clergyman to come to Amos's aid on Milly's death, even helping to pay the funeral expenses, and he is the first to defend Amos's honor amongst the clergy themselves when they start gossiping about the Countess's long stay with the Bartons. "'Depend upon it,' said Mr. Cleves, 'there is some simple explanation of the whole affair, if we only happened to know it. Barton has always impressed me as a right-minded man, who has the knack of doing himself injustice by his manner'" (57). His voice is the closest diegetic voice to the narrator's, and his comment suggests an early formulation of what I want to call "unselfish understanding." The hypothetical case of "if we only happened to know it" suggests the

possibility of alternative readings which escape the too-easy flattening of Barton's motives and actions. Here, Cleves is both selfless and correct in his intervention.²³ As a result, he shares the narrator's privileged understanding and the reader's viewpoint. He counsels that people should reserve judgment until understanding is complete. Ultimately, judging without full knowledge becomes the problem of Eliot's fiction. That these judgments always seem to presuppose selfish motives is what intrigues me.

The Countess Caroline Czeraski is another exception to the general undifferentiation of Shepperton. The explicit term "selfish" appears three times in the story, and the Countess uses it first in relation to herself.²⁴ She plays it off, but her self-accusation is true: "I am really ashamed of my selfishness in asking my friends to come and see me in this frightful weather" (32). She then tells Amos about her plans to see him in a better living in a richer parish, saying "I have a plot to prevent you from martyrizing yourself" (32). She attempts to create a playful narrative of herself as apologetic hostess and then foreshadows the way in which Barton really will martyr himself as a result of her interference.²⁵ She is so self-absorbed that she never notices when she hurts feelings—when she tells Milly that she is obviously "so indifferent to dress" that she will not mind having her gown ruined by a clumsy man-servant—or when other people are inconvenienced by her presence (35). Eliot pulls back from making the Countess a completely awful character by revealing that none of the scandal around her past is true. The Countess generally has good, but self-centered,

²³ Cleves, too, has his analogues in the longer fiction. Every one of Eliot's novels features at least one minister or priest in a subordinate/confessor role: Parson Irwine (*Adam Bede*), Dr. Kenn (*The Mill on the Floss*), Mr. Crackenthorp (*Silas Marner*), Savonarola (*Romola*), Rufus Lyon (*Felix Holt, the Radical*), Mr. Farebrother (*Middlemarch*), and Mr. Gascoigne (*Daniel Deronda*).

²⁴ The other major terms of this study (egoism, egotism, and individualism) have not yet occurred at all.

²⁵ The theme of martyrdom will become more important for me as a poor repayment for selflessness later in this chapter.

motives. However, the town of Shepperton needs a scapegoat so that they do not have to examine their own problems too closely. Anyone out of the ordinary and from whom they feel themselves different is a natural candidate for this office.²⁶ Eliot jumps ahead and introduces a character who will become more significant in “Janet’s Repentance” to lodge a complaint against the Countess: “Miss Phipps was conscious that if the Countess was not a disreputable person, she, Miss Phipps, had no compensating superiority in virtue to set against the other lady’s manifest superiority in personal charms” (40). The Miss Phippses of the world are made uncomfortable by people like the Countess. When they cannot find ways in which they themselves are superior to these troubling people, they intuit corresponding negative qualities in the accidental offenders. This process of displaced anxiety is largely unconscious and is a technique Eliot frequently employs in her analysis of rural societies like Shepperton.²⁷

A little self-absorption is not damning unless it becomes the fundamental truth of a character’s personality. In “Amos Barton,” Eliot writes “There was nothing here so very detestable. It is true, the Countess was a little vain, a little ambitious, a little selfish, a little shallow and frivolous, a little given to white lies” (42). So is Gwendolen Harleth in Eliot’s

²⁶ Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963) is useful for creating a taxonomy of differences that might mark a person as different. “Three grossly different types of stigma may be mentioned. First there are the abominations of the body—the various physical deformities. Next there are the blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty . . . Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (Goffman 4). Amos Barton and most of Eliot’s misunderstood characters will fit into the second category.

²⁷ The way this anxiety develops into a self-policing force is one of the central concerns of D.A. Miller’s analysis, but even more important for this study is the way that this force picks up social agency in the mechanism of gossip. Patricia Meyer Spacks writes about the way that “gossip impels plots” and serves “instrumental purposes” to reveal tensions that otherwise remain quiet within social groups. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 7. Gossip also becomes a tool of social formation through the process of differentiation. “The literary importance of such gossip depends on its symbolic function as voice of ‘the world’—the amorphous social organization that enforces its own standards and disciplines those who go astray” (Spacks 7). Gossip therefore becomes a tool for inscribing insider and outsider positions.

later novel *Daniel Deronda*, but Gwendolen is at least partially redeemed. Vanity drops away from being one of Eliot's greatest concerns because she eventually dismisses it as trivial in relation to more pernicious forms of selfishness.²⁸ Opinion of the Countess does not, perhaps, recuperate as firmly at the end of this story, but she does at least withdraw with tact. And the narrator assures the reader that these superficial forms of selfishness are not so bad as they are sometimes made out to be, calling them instead "slight blemishes" and "moral pimples" (42). The most important thing to notice here is the mechanism of displacement. The narrator tells us that the characters pick an exceptional scapegoat who is in some way different from them.²⁹ Instead of attacking the center of that difference (here it might be class), they name a problem that they claim vexes them more:

Indeed, the severest ladies in Milby would have been perfectly aware that these characteristics [of vanity, ambition, selfishness, shallowness, frivolity, and prevarication] would have created no wide distinction between the Countess Czerlaski and themselves; and since it was clear that there *was* a wide distinction—why, it must lie in the possession of some vices from which they were undeniably free (42).

By ignoring their own similar guilt, they elide the difference between all these egotistical characteristics, synthesizing them into a worse thing which acts as a cover for something even worse still. What that might be, the "severest ladies" do not know, but leaving the sin undefined makes it polyvalent and powerful. In this story, every adult but the Rev. Cleves,

²⁸ This change marks just one of the major shifts in Eliot's preoccupations between 1856 when she composed the first of her *Scenes* and 1874 when she researched and wrote *Daniel Deronda*. This project tracks several of these changes from her first to her last fiction. It is as if Eliot gained a deeper appreciation of which forms were more pernicious as she kept writing. She also came to trust her audience more. Timothy Pace tracks her "Amos Barton" narrator's suspicion of the audience when he discusses the way she tricks the readers into sympathetic identification: ". . . she manipulates us into recognizing the tardiness of our own moral sympathy by creating a delayed identification with a lack of genuine sympathy in the secondary characters of the story" (78). This form of trickery becomes less necessary as she comes to know her audience and to stop fearing their disapproval.

²⁹ Goffman's *Stigma* is again useful. "We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. . . . We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one . . ." (Goffman 5).

Mrs. Hackit, Amos Barton, Milly Barton, and the Bartons' maid is guilty of this overly simplistic collapsing of possible negative qualities and their contingent self-aggrandizing. The need for self-affirmation helps to hide a self-doubt which lurks underneath. Uncomfortable observers can make the hidden sins of which they, pointedly, are not guilty whatever they want them to be. Here, the unknown element acquires a sexual connotation, and it turns out that this choice is a fairly common one in scapegoating.³⁰ When the Countess is linked to Amos, he comes to share in all the various, productively vague intimations of guilt: "I used to think Barton a fool," observes one parishioner, continuing "But that's impossible now" because now everyone thinks much worse of him (52).³¹

The reader is left to derive an understanding of selfishness for him or herself since the narrator is never explicit in drawing these ends out of the argument. Here are the variables at work in "Amos Barton": selfishness, selflessness, correctness, and incorrectness. These variables can be combined in four ways: (1) Selfishness is correctly identified. (2) Selfishness is incorrectly identified. (3) Selflessness is correctly identified. (4) Selflessness is incorrectly identified. (1) When society is correct that someone is selfish, then justice is served. Countess Czerlaski hurts other people with her attentions to herself, and she eventually runs away in embarrassment when she realizes what society thinks it knows about Amos Barton. Her punishment is not bad because her errors are fairly innocent "moral pimples." (2) When society incorrectly identifies the type of selfishness, then damage

³⁰ Spacks analyzes gossip's tendency towards "erotic titillation": "Gossip, even when it avoids the sexual, bears about it a faint flavor of the erotic. (Of course, sexual activities and emotions supply the most familiar staple of gossip—as of the Western realistic novel.) The atmosphere of erotic titillation suggests gossip's implicit voyeurism. Surely everyone feels—although some suppress—the same prurient interest in others' privacies, what goes on behind closed doors" (Spacks 11). Even if Barton and the Countess were not living so close together, the gossip about them probably would have picked up a sexual connotation, simply because that is what gossip does.

³¹ Although Barton is innocent, it has become impossible to believe it because of an accretion of circumstantial evidence. Gossip "acquires authenticity" as it circulates (Spacks 7).

compounds. Amos's sins run more in the direction of pride and obstinacy than towards the louche. As long as the townsfolk go no further than to call him arrogant, there is no real harm. It is only once they falsely identify another type of sin—adultery or complicity with the Countess—that real trouble develops. Amos himself is somewhat foolish and shortsighted, but he is essentially innocent of the claims against him. Although he craves notice and believes that he deserves better than he gets, he is also honest and principled and is sincere in his devotion to both family and parish. His punishment in the court of public opinion is unwarranted and unfair since he is not guilty of adultery. He can stand up to slander, but his wife suffers, and his family's accounts suffer. The narrator pithily asserts that "Slander may be defeated by equanimity; but courageous thoughts will not pay your baker's bill, and fortitude is nowhere considered legal tender for beef" (60). Eliot makes it clear that the consequences of misinterpretation are greater than just emotional turmoil. Misinterpretation also has a social and monetary impact.

The remaining two cases—that society can be correct or incorrect that someone is selfless—are simpler in "Amos Barton." (3) Everyone thinks that Milly is a wonderful mother and a caring wife. They and she are validated in the honor given her at her death and in the way that Barton's grief for her evaporates the claims against him. The narrator explains that Amos "was consecrated anew by his great sorrow, and [his parishioners] looked at him with respectful pity" (70). Amos confesses to himself that he had been "selfish" with his "very love" for her once he can no longer "atone...for the light answers [he] returned to [her] complaints and pleadings," as mild as those had been (71). Because the misunderstanding is resolved, the social consequences of his supposed adultery disappear, and really, the

parishioners give him even more credit now than he was due because they are sorry for having misunderstood him in the first place.

The last possibility is simple in the way it plays out here, but it is thorny in and of itself. (4) Society is incorrect in thinking that Mrs. Hackit is entirely selfless in her attentions to the Bartons. She alternates between approval and disapproval, kindness and stinginess on the whims of public opinion and accidental insights into the domestic scene. She withholds her kindness when it is needed most and gives it when it is needed least. Aunt Glegg of *The Mill on the Floss* and Savonarola in *Romola* are more developed characters of this type. The question of who is not really selfless despite what people may think is tricky because it turns on the definition of selflessness. What is it? Is it really the opposite of “selfishness?” Perhaps antithesis to selfishness is more accurately encoded in “unselfish,” but that word is essentially empty. What can it mean if, in fact, “selfish” is a cover term for egotism, individualism, vanity, and greed. Is “being unselfish” really the opposite of all these things? I would argue that selflessness is most particularly an inversion of egotism. Solutions to these problems are not readily apparent, but then, Eliot has only had one story to put forth her own interpretation. In all four of the cases in “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” the reader is left to ask why the characters did not bother to explain themselves. Surely, if they had been a little more assertive, they could have corrected public misunderstandings of them? Eliot’s second story, “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” begins to answer that proposition.

IV. Willpower, Narration, and Necessary Selfishness in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story”

Our thoughts are often worse than we are, just as they are often better than we are. And God sees us as we are altogether, not in separate feelings or

*actions, as our fellow-men see us. We are always doing each other injustice, and thinking better or worse of each other than we deserve, because we only hear and see separate words and actions. We don't see each other's whole nature. But God sees that you could not have committed that crime. (185)*³²

In “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” “selfish” begins to take on a new meaning and to suggest that it might be a necessary trait. It no longer relates specifically to accumulation or vanity or any other easily attackable vice. Instead, its positive and negative coding is offset by a preoccupation with willpower and self-narration. This new development, which is evolving into something like “necessary selfishness,” is more concerned with the development of selves in conflict or isolation. The rhetoric of selfishness also means an attention to the self, whether for good or evil. This development is helpful to explain the way that Eliot’s characters stand apart from the societies that judge them. The attention to this complex web of ideas also helps to deal with a narrative’s tendency to focus on one character at a time, even when the larger aims of the story are encyclopedic.³³ This story introduces a limited omniscient narrator who is fully aware but only of one mind at a time. In the case of “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” this shifting attention works as a shortcut to allow the reader to accept the narrator’s tendency to invoke the various spots of time which matter in Gilfil’s story and to address the thoughts of multiple characters.³⁴ Selfishness can spin out in the

³² Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to George Eliot, “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998) 77-194.

³³ Dorrit Cohn’s attention to the relationship between limited and omniscient narrators is helpful in explaining this point. “If the real world becomes fiction only by revealing the hidden side of the human beings who inhabit it, the reverse is equally true: the most real, the ‘roudest’ characters of fiction are those we know most intimately, precisely in ways we could never know people in real life.” Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978) 5.

³⁴ I intend for the Wordsworthian resonance to stick to the story because Eliot manipulates the chronology of “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” in a nonsequential fashion as each segment relates to the history of whichever character is being discussed. Although this shifting is not quite the “egotistical sublime” *per se*, it is linked to individual psychologies more than to convenient storytelling. Eliot’s plots eventually become more parallel and sequential in nature. She moves from one character to another to relate what happens to them at similar time periods. The predominantly forward motion of her novels is occasionally interrupted by a flashback, but when

direction of necessary selfishness. The two possibilities will eventually overlap, but this story is more concerned with the greater and lesser degrees to which people can protect themselves from one another. This self-protection is more physically coded than in “Amos Barton,” where social knowledge was such a driving force, because here the group is much smaller. In the size of its cast, Mr. Gilfil’s story gives a foretaste of how Eliot’s family fiction will play out.

“Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” occurs primarily in two time periods. The novelistic present is situated “thirty years ago,” so it is about five years before “Amos Barton” (79). The background of the story takes place some thirty years before that middle period. For once, Eliot gives a great deal of specificity by naming it “the summer of 1788” (105). She always chooses her reminiscent time periods carefully and with reference to the historical details, bringing emotional content to bear.³⁵ Here, the story invokes the French Revolution as a kind of displaced emotional echo of the inner turmoil of its characters. Eliot writes “in that summer, we know, the great nation of France was agitated by conflicting thoughts and passions, which were but the beginning of sorrows. And in our Caterina’s little breast, too, there were terrible struggles” (105). Readers have a clue, then, that they should interpret the characters’ struggles as passionate and emotional. I also hasten to add that class conflict is written into this script. Even more importantly, though, I want to insist on the personalizing impulse at work in the story. Matters of international importance subtend or reflect the

these reversions occur, they are much briefer in relation to the longer text than is the case in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story.”

³⁵ In other cases, her referents include the Reform Bills, the Italian Renaissance, Catholic Emancipation, the Enclosure Acts, and so on. These historical moments and the way they get personalized as part of the realist project is the concern of Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999).

psychology of individual characters.³⁶ After this qualified opening, the narrative briefly reverts ten years even further back to a trip to Italy.

The story's events unfold chronologically out of order, but the summary is quick when the events are realigned. Many years ago, Sir Christopher and Lady Henrietta Cheverel went to Italy where they adopted an orphan as their ward. This Italian-featured girl, called Caterina or Tina, proved to have a great musical talent which won her the better affections of her adoptive family. Meanwhile, Sir Christopher undertook the improvement of his house by redoing it in the Gothic style. In what becomes the present time for most of the story, Caterina is in a crisis because she loves her adoptive family's nephew and heir, the callow Captain Anthony Wybrow. Anthony suffers from a heart disorder and uses it as an excuse to escape all emotional difficulties. Simultaneously, the Reverend Maynard Gilfil lives with the family and falls in love with Caterina. This love triangle configures the reader's sympathies. The plot, however, creates a secondary love triangle when Sir Christopher, who is unaware of his various wards' real affections and who is eager to secure the safety of his estate for his heir Anthony, arranges for Anthony to court Beatrice Assher. Miss Assher and her mother come to Cheverel Manor, where Caterina is tortured by the capricious Anthony, who pays attentions to both Caterina and Beatrice. Maynard watches all of the emotional difficulties evolve and tries to soothe any trouble he sees, even at the expense of his own romantic interests.

Eventually, the anxieties of having a jealous fiancée and an unhappy childhood friend encourage Anthony to propose a match between Maynard and Caterina. She is intensely unhappy, and Maynard is sympathetic. Anthony goes to the garden to meet Caterina

³⁶ The influence of grand historical forces on individual lives will be one of my central concerns in analyzing *Daniel Deronda* in Chapter Four.

privately, but Beatrice confronts her jealous rival first. Caterina reacts with anger and goes to find a dagger to kill Anthony in the garden, but when she finds him, he has just died of a heart attack. She repents and comes into the house for help. She faints; Maynard tends her and subsequently finds the dagger. Upon regaining consciousness, Caterina flees the house to find refuge with her childhood nurse. Anthony is buried, and Maynard fears that Caterina has killed herself. He eventually finds her alive but catatonic. His sympathy brings her back to herself, and she falls in love with him. They enjoy a brief period of happiness before she dies in childbirth. Years later, Maynard is Shepperton Church's vicar. He is well loved and respected, but he is an emotionally damaged man. He dies, and the community mourns him without ever knowing his history or his depth of feeling.

The plot's complexity threatens to obscure the clear thrust of Eliot's argument about self-representation. That argument is best expressed in Sir Anthony's adage that "A strong will is the only magic" (165). The will's aim depends on the character. For the Cheverels, the story is about the transmission of prestige. When Sir Christopher spends ten years renovating his manor, his male neighbors deride his artistic ambitions, and his female neighbors feel pity for Lady Cheverel, whom they assume must feel put-upon. The women are wrong, and "[t]heir pity was quite gratuitous, as the most plentiful pity always is; for though Lady Cheverel did not share her husband's architectural enthusiasm, she had too rigorous a view of a wife's duties, and too profound a deference for Sir Christopher, to regard submission as a grievance" (115). The narrator's sympathies remain, as usual, with the misunderstood and impugned, saying "But I, who have seen Cheverel Manor as he bequeathed it to his heirs, rather attribute that unswerving architectural purpose of his . . . to something of the fervor of genius, as well as inflexibility of will . . ." (115-116). This "fervor

of genius” is the result of Sir Christopher’s powerful personality and driving willpower. Given the historical positioning of the story, the relevant class discussion is fairly obvious. The French Revolution saw aristocracies tumble and the ruins of great works turned to new purpose. At the end of the story, Sir Christopher embraces an unacknowledged nephew and makes him the heir to the remodeled house. The artistic adaptation configures both social change and a look backwards.

The artistic motif helps guide the reader to a set of symbolic representations which predict the fates of the main characters. Maynard, Caterina, Anthony, and Sir Christopher all receive this symbolic treatment. Maynard is a tree: at the end of the story, he is the “wood-ashes” or a “poor lopped oak” after having been full of “sap” and “bursting buds” (87, 194). Caterina is a small animal: she is always a “marmoset” or “a kitten,” a “little monkey,” a “little unobtrusive singing-bird,” or “a poor wounded leveret” (107, 124, 130, 139).³⁷ Anthony is a graven image: “a fine cameo” and “a delicate piece of work” (104, 120). Sir Christopher is a force of a nature: he is always metonymically represented by his “strong will and bright hopefulness,” and before his, every body else’s feelings are “whims and follies” (147, 161).³⁸ Eliot’s imagistic technique is a little more heavy-handed than it will be in the novels. Daniel P. Deneau credits them as an improvement over “Amos Barton,” but finds

³⁷ In her psychoanalytic reading, Norton discusses how Caterina’s birdlike nature gives her “the unreflective thoughtlessness of an animal” and mentions how Caterina displaces the other family pets in the story (221).

³⁸ Andrew Lynn acerbically suggests “that several of the characters in this story are ‘unrealistic,’ simply because they are simply crude philosophical vehicles, rather than fully realized characters” in “‘Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story’ and the Critique of Kantianism,” *Victorian Newsletter* 95 (1999) 25. Lynn then goes on to specify each character’s relation to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Sir Christopher represents “the Kantian formulation of the autonomous will”; Anthony “who also has a strong will (and a weak heart), is a grotesque caricature of [the] Kantian concept of duty”; and Miss Assher embodies the aesthetic’s “detachment from purposiveness and sympathy” (25-26). Lynn’s approach is useful in its unearthing of Eliot’s philosophical sympathies and in drawing them partially from her earlier essays (notably “The Natural History of German Life” and, curiously, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”), but it is reductive in its oversimplification of thematic parallels and in its dismissal of the story’s strong claims to psychological realism. Most tempting for me is Lynn’s insight into Sir Christopher’s will, but unfortunately, he does not extend his claims very far.

them generally lacking. “[S]ome of the principal images function in a very unfortunate way. The fairly numerous flower, plant, and bird images, which are more decorative than illuminating (decorations that suggest smallness, fragility, and naturalness), tend to carry the story into bathetic depths...”³⁹ I agree that “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” lacks subtlety, but its triangulations of desire are, nevertheless, effective. The images become for me shorthand for types of selfhood.

Each of the sets of characteristics gives way in my analysis to the method by which the solitary images hit against one another. For example, Eliot never makes the point explicitly, but a tree can shade a small animal, and the small animal can damage the tree but not destroy it. The small animal can break the graven image, but it cannot affect it in any lesser way. The strong will can destroy any of them without acknowledging that it is harming them. I shuttle these symbols back away from literal representation to analyze the way that each character embodies some central type of self. So Maynard becomes a porous self who can see and overshadow and protect the others. Caterina is a weak and ephemeral self who needs this protection, and Anthony is an unmalleable, aloof, and hence, brittle self. In Anthony’s case, Eliot draws the comparison explicitly. She writes, “as if to save such a delicate piece of work from any risk of being shattered, [Nature] had guarded [Anthony] from the liability to a strong emotion” (120). The rough emotion does “shatter” him in the end. It becomes clear that the “strong will” at work here is beyond Sir Christopher’s ability. He can build the house, but he cannot command the heir to occupy it. Sir Cheverel’s story—the story of transmission of prestige—fails before the corresponding force of a willful child. It also fails before the force of narrative and, consequently, what is effectively the will of the

³⁹ Deneau 19. This article treats the themes of birds in nests and poisonings in much greater detail.

narrator. This will is godlike in its strength. The characters lack any force to protect themselves from one another or from this strongest force. What might a shield look like that could protect a character in fiction from his or her narrator? The only answers possible are historical truth or corresponding wills of the characters' own. Even if a character cannot fight against the story, he or she can fight against other characters' attempts to narrate them. This resistance must take the form of a necessary selfishness or a willful self-presentation that defies others' attempts to do it for them.

To get to the final point of seeing the full power of the narrator, each of the three most important characters should be examined in turn. Maynard, Anthony, and Caterina all represent different possibilities for understanding the way the self develops in reaction to or in the absence of other selves. Again, this relationship is more physical than in Eliot's other short stories. With the tighter frame—on the family only and not on a town—each self looms larger. The narrator and Maynard are closely aligned, and since Maynard understands everyone's motives correctly, the reader is less concerned with representation—coded as accurate or flawed social knowledge—and more with how individual selves protect themselves from one another. Eliot makes a case here for necessary selfishness that will recur in tandem with the theme of social knowledge in her later work.

Maynard Gilfil frames the plot (which begins and ends with his old age), and he is the most resilient character. He is privileged to be both an educated clergyman and from a good family. Since he is neither extremely wealthy nor extremely poor, he is able to deal well with both groups. His porosity allows him to adjust himself to his surroundings. When he is with the lower classes, he becomes more like them: "it was [Maynard's] habit to approximate his accent and mode of speech to theirs" (84). As he ages, he becomes "more and more

‘close-fisted,’ though the growing propensity showed itself rather in the parsimony of his personal habits, than in withholding help from the needy” (87). He becomes more vulnerable and brittle, and although he has some trouble with a few of his neighbors in his old age, he is dynamic and sensitive as a young man. For example, when Maynard comes to advise Caterina about how to handle Anthony, he is intensely aware that she may misinterpret his actions. This sensitivity makes Maynard a precursor to later protagonists like Maggie Tulliver and Daniel Deronda.

At this point in the story, Maynard knows that Caterina’s judgment is flawed and that she has little awareness of other people’s emotions. Still, he worries that she will think that his advice to quit Anthony will come across as an attempt to win her for himself. He begs, “You will not believe that I have any mean, selfish motive in mentioning things that are painful to you?” (143). This scene is only one of two occasions in the story when Eliot uses the word “selfish.” Her attention this time is turned away from vanity and towards the inward-turning concerns of characters in pain. Caterina’s response to Maynard shows her instinctive awareness of right, even though her deductive powers are poor. She responds naturally, “No; I know you are very good” (143). However, shortly afterwards, Eliot returns to the old theme by rendering Maynard’s single bitterly vocalized complaint against Anthony. When Caterina interprets Anthony’s cruelty to her as her own fault, Maynard responds “O to be sure! I know it is only from the most virtuous motives that he does what is convenient to himself” (144). Although he lashes out, Maynard is correct in his assessment. His position is the interpretive center of the story. He stands with the narrator, and, at least at this point, he can modulate himself and the way he presents himself to accommodate others.

Maynard becomes more brittle and less resilient as the story progresses. After Caterina's death, his complete self subdivides, and he shuts off pieces of himself, refusing to share his story with any of his neighbors. They never know anything about his "love story." As a result, he develops a secret self. Since Eliot frequently represents him as a tree, this hidden portion of him is like a hollow space in his "misshapen trunk" (193). Or more notoriously, his secret self is like the room in the rectory that he had set aside for Caterina. It "was the locked up chamber in Mr Gilfil's house: a sort of visible symbol of the secret chamber in his heart, where he had long turned the key on early hopes and early sorrows, shutting up for ever all the passion and the poetry of his life" (89).⁴⁰ The Shepperton congregation barely even knows the room exists, and being unobservant, they cannot know that it hides a secret depth of feeling.

Maynard provides the story's most important lesson very near the end. He says that "we have all our secret sins; and if we knew ourselves, we should not judge each other harshly" (186). Eliot's suggestion is subtle and almost counterintuitive. The path to understanding and to escaping overly selfish interpretations of other people's motives is by an action that is likely to be judged as narcissistic. Her injunction is the one that Socrates calls the most important in philosophy. The Delphic Oracle states it directly: "Know thyself." An individual can correctly understand someone else only after this kind of reflection. In other words, attention to oneself and to one's motives is the only possible course for full understanding. An individual will never be able to completely absorb all of

⁴⁰ This powerful image of repression acts in the manner Freud predicts by continually returning, but it is more interesting to look at John Kucich's version of Victorian repression. For Kucich, repression becomes a precondition for interiority. According to this sort of reading, Eliot's attention to Gilfil's psychological states, monologues, and commitments becomes almost a talking cure for her. She continually enacts the tension between desire and repression by recreating interiority and closed spaces. John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

the lived reality of any other person, and if he or she does not perform this operation of self-reflection, then he or she will never have this depth of knowledge at all. And someone who skips this required step will never be in a position to interpret the motives of anyone—others or themselves included. Maynard’s lesson to Caterina reflects his assertion that only “God sees us as we are altogether, not in separate feelings or actions, as our fellow-men see us” (185). Clearly, it is impossible to attain a godlike perspective on either oneself or anyone else, but the attempt is what matters. Eliot articulates the problem, but she can hardly be asked to solve it. It is more important to note the ways that this attempt at full understanding functions in the story than to try to answer the philosophical problems of intersubjectivity. The plea for understanding will recur in various permutations throughout Eliot’s career, and it is not certain that even Eliot’s narrators can achieve the fully realized, God-like power that is apparently needed here. She sometimes seems unable to stop her characters from causing the horrible things that happen to them. The power to resist this narration would be extremely helpful because when society fails in its task of criticism; characters are likely to be hurt unless they can somehow influence the criticism favorably. This task is extremely difficult. For example, in “Amos Barton,” the forced reinterpretation only becomes possible at the moment of Milly’s death.⁴¹

Captain Anthony Wybrow is a more traditional example of the simplified discourse of selfishness. Eliot suggests that collapsing all forms of selfishness into a reductive identification of narcissism is dangerously misleading. This process of flattening accidentally convinces people that attention to the self is exclusively solipsistic and not the

⁴¹ I recognize Milly’s death as the beginning of a trend in Eliot’s fiction. Sacrificial death forces reinterpretation in the case of Maggie Tulliver, too. Deaths change interpretation for the worse just as often, though: Hetty Sorrel, Baldassare, Felix Holt’s constable, Raffles, and Grandcourt all die in ways that implicate the heroes of their books.

necessary phase in the maturation of sympathetic individuality that it really is. Anthony is intended as a counter-example. He is simply narcissistic. He is cordoned off from the more complex characters who also get called selfish. With him, the accusation is correct because narcissism defined as such is one of selfishness's properly identified negative attributes.

Anthony is also a useful foil to the porous, flexible Maynard. Anthony is the more handsome of the two and is apparently unflappable. "Impossible to say that this face was not eminently handsome; yet, for the majority both of men and women, it was destitute of charm. Women disliked eyes that seemed to be indolently accepting admiration instead of rendering it . . ."

(94). Eliot goes on to say that men want to hit him without really knowing why. Anthony is energetic only in maintaining his convenience. Like Countess Czeraski in "Amos Barton," Anthony is only dimly aware of the feelings of others; however, he is all the crueller for it. He avoids most indiscretions and bad habits because he is afraid of the inconvenience that they would entail if found out. But this bland, accidental sort of morality makes him into a hypocrite. He leaves Caterina to woo Beatrice according to what he claims is his responsibility to his uncle. He says, "You know I have duties—we both have duties—before which feeling must be sacrificed" (103). He does not worry about these duties later when he courts both women at the same time. His self-absorption makes him turn completely inward. Anthony becomes a caution against misunderstanding Eliot's general suggestion: people should look inward, but they should not become self-obsessed. When competing claims pull Anthony in two directions at once—both women demand respect—he literally ruptures. His heart fails, and the brittle cameo-like self fractures.

Anthony is a passive character from the start. He can never quite work himself up to loving anyone but himself, even though he knows that fulfilling this social duty would make

his life easier. He considers Caterina and thinks that “He really felt very kindly towards her, and would very likely have loved her—if he had been able to love any one. But nature had not endowed him with that capability” (120). Instead, he has “a large amount of serene self-satisfaction” (120). At another point, Beatrice derides him, saying, “You don’t seem to take much interest in my likes and dislikes,” and he responds, “I’m too much possessed by the happy thought that you like me” (126). Anthony is content to have all movement directed inward, towards himself, and so all of his private moments are spent in front of a mirror. The glass emphasizes both his beauty and his inflexibility. At one point, he looks into it and worries about his health. “The reflection there presented of his exquisite self was certainly paler and more worn than usual, and might excuse the anxiety with which he first felt his pulse, and then laid his hand on his heart” (145). The reader is likely to regard Anthony’s constant attentions to his palpitations as a bizarre affectation and simply as a defense mechanism. Anthony certainly uses his constitutional weakness to escape every awkward situation in the story. However, the mistake becomes the reader’s, and mine, too, on the first reading, when Anthony dies of a sudden heart attack in his mid-twenties. His fragility was real and more than metaphorical all along.⁴² The “exquisite self” is dangerously vulnerable if all of its exquisiteness is only at the surface.

Anthony’s constitutional weakness does not excuse his self-preoccupation, but it does partially explain why it developed. Instead of ever acknowledging his own guilt, Anthony

⁴² U.C. Knoepfelmacher sees Anthony’s unexpected death as the center of Eliot’s realist project in the story. “Suddenly, we come to realize that we have been deliberately deluded. The romance which George Eliot has pretended to build up to this climax is nonexistent, itself but an empty dream. Like the lady readers who were warned by the author, we have been misled into falsifying experience. The ladies’ genteel bias prevented them from seeing that romance could exist amidst the aspects of ordinary life; our own expectations have blinded us to the ordinary life existing beneath the veneer of romance.” In “George Eliot’s Anti-Romantic Romance: ‘Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,’” *Victorian Newsletter* 31 (1967) 13. I take my own duping in reading the story then as a credit to Eliot’s realism and as a further claim for the story’s merit.

always displaces the fault onto the women he manipulates. Anthony's self-preoccupation does not answer Maynard's call for self-awareness because he misrecognizes his selfish motives as more altruistic than they are. For example, he is narcissistic in the classical sense of gazing into a mirror and in the psychological sense of unawareness to others' subjectivity, but he believes differently. He complains, "Here am I, doing nothing to please myself, trying to do the best thing for everybody else, and all the comfort I get is to have fire shot at me from women's eyes, and venom spirted at me from women's tongues" (146). He is a shallow self—no thicker than the depth of the plaster he is symbolically carved from or the layers of paint which cover him. He sees everyone else's emotions as an intrusion, and he repels them rather than ever let them change him. As a result, Anthony misunderstands the depth of his peers' emotions. He tells his fiancée Beatrice that Caterina's love for him is a simple infatuation, and he seems to believe the lie. Amazingly, he tells Caterina to her face that "Girls' fancies are easily diverted from one object to another" and then reverts back to talking about himself, complaining "By Jove, what a rate my heart is galloping at. These confounded palpitations get worse instead of better" (154). Anthony's attentions to his rapidly beating heart turn him further and further inward but not in any way that helps to create understanding.

Caterina, on the other hand, is always moving outward. When she becomes ill, her body manifests the symptoms. Likewise, when she is unhappy, her body manifests the symptoms. With her receptivity and sensitive nature, she *becomes* the symptom for everyone else's anxiety. She is afraid of any critical eye and typically does everything she can to escape attention. Eliot writes that "Caterina, like the rest of us, turned away from sympathy which she suspected to be mingled with criticism" (99). As a result, she turns away from

every kind of sympathy. The narrator's assertion of universal motives in Caterina's withdrawal suggests Eliot's opinion that individuals need to resist criticism when it is incorrect and adapt to it when it is valid. The result of not performing these kinds of maintenance is otherwise weakness in Caterina or in anyone else. The wild but fragile Italian songbird is neither a flexible tree like Maynard, who is able to accept and offer sympathy, love, and advice; nor is she a brittle sculpture like Anthony, who is turned inwards and offers nothing to anyone else.

Eliot tells her readers that Caterina's "loving sensitive nature was too likely, under such nurture, to have its susceptibility heightened into unfitness for an encounter with any harder experience; all the more, because there were gleams of fierce resistance to any discipline that had a harsh or unloving aspect" (114). Eliot gives the reader four opportunities to see Caterina lashing out with something other than love. These destructive episodes all result from some form of criticism, and Caterina expends all of her energy in them. The first two are childhood temper tantrums, and the last two relate to Anthony's betrayal. When Beatrice unjustly accuses Caterina of trying to tie Anthony down and relates Anthony's lie that he never provoked the intimacy between them, Caterina goes to murder him with a dagger. When she recovers herself and fears that everyone will find out that she had wanted to kill Anthony and that she had been jealous of Beatrice, she reacts to the potential criticism by fleeing.

At every other point in the story, Caterina's energy flows out of her like the songs she sings: in love. Her depth of feeling is beyond the shallow "air of mingled graciousness and self-confidence" of Beatrice (125). She is powerful when she is singing, but she is otherwise uncomfortably aware of her emotional fragility as she vacillates between activity and torpor.

At one moment she is “in one of those moods of self-possession and indifference which come as the ebb-tide between the struggles of passion” (124). She only propels herself to great activity when she steals the dagger and goes after Anthony. When she finds him dead, she returns first to her timidity, and then she sinks into complete passivity. The ebb-tide arrives, and Caterina is left beached. Maynard explains Caterina’s weakness to her as a symptom of bodily fragility, and indeed, he senses her life running out. By expending all of her energy on other people and none on protecting herself, she burns herself out too quickly. In one notable instance Eliot compares Caterina’s pitiful exertions and uncontrollable emotions to a bird again in danger of being killed by a storm.

What were our little Tina and her trouble in this mighty torrent, rushing from one awful unknown to another? Lighter than the smallest centre of quivering life in the water-drop, hidden and uncared for as the pulse of anguish in the breast of the tiniest bird that has fluttered down to its nest with the long-sought food, and has found the nest torn and empty. (132)

These examples of native susceptibility abound. The gardener, who always thinks in terms of small plants, wonders about poor Caterina, asking, “I shouldn’t wonder if she fades away, laike them cyclamens as I transplanted. She puts me i’ maind on ‘em somehow, hanging’ on their little thin stalks, so whaite an’ tinder” (139). The reader knows from the beginning (at the end of the chronology) that Caterina will eventually marry Maynard and that she will not live long afterwards. The “quivering life in the water-drop” extinguishes, and Maynard is left alone.

When Maynard finds Caterina after she flees from Anthony’s death, she is nearly catatonic. Maynard’s presence revives her, but he is afraid of the damage to her fragile system. “The thought *would* urge itself upon him that her mind and body might never recover from the strain that had been put upon them—that her delicate thread of life had

already nearly spun itself out” (182). He is right; the ephemeral cloud of Caterina’s self was almost fully dissolved by her period of intense activity. Still, her thoughts go outward in this scene to the people she is afraid of having hurt. She is worried that Maynard and the others know her secret sin since she believes herself responsible for Anthony’s heart attack, and she is afraid that everyone knows she was planning to stab him. Maynard explains to her that there is a difference between intention and deed and that no other earthly person knows about the dagger and her intention but the two of them. Even if other people had known, she would be innocent because of the goodness of her whole life added together. Maynard’s words speak to the anxiety of every outcast in Eliot’s fiction: “Tina, my loved one, you would never have done it. God saw your whole heart; he knows you would never harm a living thing. He watches over His children, and will not let them do things they would pray with their whole hearts not to do. It was the angry thought of a moment, and he forgives you” (185). It is hard to say whether or not Maynard is clearly reflecting Eliot’s religious views. His claim is dubious at best because, as Alexandra M. Norton points out, “it is not clear to the reader that Catarina [sic] was incapable of stabbing Wybrow,” especially since the narrator repeatedly suggests Caterina’s “precociousness” in being vindictive.⁴³ I will return to this question in the next chapter when I more pointedly address both her biography and the knotty questions of sin and retribution. But according to Maynard at least, even guilty characters can take comfort in the godly power that sees into their deepest selves. Whether they commit murder

⁴³ Norton 221. Norton goes on to incorporate the distinction between the narrative and what Eliot presumably felt as a piece of her larger argument about the preoedipal dependence of the stories: “The tension between the narrator’s assertion and Gilfil’s reassuring words to Tina . . . manifests the discomfort Eliot feels about the moral ambiguity of a psychological stage which she recognizes as the source of sympathetic attachment but also of uncontrolled jealousy and murderous rage. In later versions of this preoedipal, undeveloped character . . . Eliot never again so fully represents the amoral nature of this stage, because she never portrays it as so completely lacking in self-consciousness and reflectiveness of thought. Reflection immediately renders the impulsive emotions of this phase morally valuable or reprehensible” (221-22).

or merely sin in their hearts, the godly power looks into them and finds them innocent and justified. The godly power, however, may not be the Christian God: it may be Eliot the Storyteller. I will consider later what this absolute power must be like in a world without the God of Eliot's childhood. For now, it will need to be enough to equate this absolving power, this binding and loosing, with the absolute authority of the narrative voice who tells the story. This overmastering knowledge contains a physical power to warp reality, or at least the narrative.

At one point before her crisis in the garden, Caterina cries out alone in her room. "I wish I could be very ill and die" (149). Later, she wants to abase herself, and she must return to the language of confession and sin to do it. "She would like to confess how wicked she had been, that they might punish her; she would like to humble herself to the dust before every one" (170). She goes on and hopes that "by-and-by they will forget me" (171). The sense of history and social memory are equal to preservation in a story like this one. To be forgotten would be the same thing as never to have existed. With that erasure comes a negation of pain and suffering. Without preservation in a story or in shared memory, the self ceases to exist. If the group who has been wronged, as Caterina here conceives of her adoptive family, forgets the culprit, then that culprit has been more than forgiven. He or she has been erased. Eliot's plots throughout the *Scenes of Clerical Life* (and to some degree, in all her books) revolve around the power of this social memory. Who and what do they preserve? At the end of "Mr Gilfil's Love Story," no one but Maynard Gilfil himself preserves Caterina's memory. When he dies, all that other people remember is the man himself. His own personal memories do not get transmitted except by the power of the godlike narrator.

After “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” the reader is left with a sense of an emerging pattern. History and tradition matter. Eliot explains the strongest force acting on Maynard and Caterina, writing “The earliest and the longest has still the mastery over us . . .” (169). This view of the force of history and of shared experience is one that will develop powerfully in *The Mill on the Floss*. The point seems forced in this early story since it is otherwise so preoccupied with individual responsibility. Now, there are several threads to follow. Social knowledge is a power. Individual selves have power to resist or modify social knowledge and each other. And there is a third category developing which includes a few overpowering forces like God, the narrator, and history, which are all so much above social knowledge and individual selves that they can yank them easily in any direction they pull. I will return to these indomitable forces in the next chapter when I consider the interactions of Maggie Tulliver with the controlling forces of nature and history.

V. The Dangers of Selflessness in “Janet’s Repentance”

[A]t Milby, in those distant days, as in all other times and places where the mental atmosphere is changing, and men are inhaling the stimulus of new ideas, folly often mistook itself for wisdom, ignorance gave itself airs of knowledge, and selfishness, turning its eyes upward, called itself religion. (264)⁴⁴

In the last—and longest—of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot takes the tangled threads of knowledge and selfishness and twists them again.⁴⁵ She does not quite resolve the issues, but she gives them their clearest statement yet. In “Janet’s Repentance,” Eliot manipulates the problems of social knowledge discussed in “Amos Barton” with the newly

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to George Eliot, “Janet’s Repentance,” *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998) 195-350.

⁴⁵ The length of “Janet’s Repentance” makes it appropriate to call it either a novella or a short story.

developed insights regarding the necessary forms of selfishness developed in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story.” “Janet’s Repentance” is more explicitly about religion’s place in reforming individual lives. Eliot emphasizes Janet Dempster’s turn away from cynicism and alcoholism and the way the turn is motivated by an encounter with a religious man. However, the story is simultaneously both pessimistic (two main characters die) and optimistic about the possibilities of sympathy. Although Janet repents, and the story invokes all of the Christian trappings of “repentance,” her rescue comes about more as a result of shared and recognized pain than from faith in God. When Eliot writes that “selfishness . . . called itself religion,” she alerts readers that Milby is more concerned with maintaining its traditional values than engaging seriously with new theology. “Janet’s Repentance” therefore subverts the language of religion to make its point. My argument about changing notions of selfishness develops in the same contested space where righteousness becomes self-righteousness.

The story takes readers back a few more years in the same parish of the first two *Scenes*, and it pits multifarious Dissent against a monolithic Anglicanism. Robert Dempster acts as the hypocritical herald of the Anglican Church. He denounces the new preacher, Mr. Tryan, by accusing him of theological positions ranging from predestination to salvation by faith alone to the superior value of extempore sermons. Dempster confuses all forms of Dissent into one polyvalent and threatening Other.⁴⁶ He sets himself up as the leader of the

⁴⁶ Dempster’s confusion is not exactly a rare phenomenon. A.O.J. Cockshut provides a useful taxonomy of nineteenth-century denominations in the Victorian contribution to The Penguin History of Literature series, and he explains that high church Anglicanism and Dissent were separated more by class and emotionality than dogma. “There was often a considerable difference in education, social class and accent between an Anglican Evangelical rector and a Dissenting minister, but very little in doctrine. . . . The coherence of all this was much more emotional than it was intellectual. Intellectually it was riddled with difficulties, which for a long time were seldom considered.” A.O.J. Cockshut, “Faith and Doubt in the Victorian Age,” *The Victorians*, The Penguin History of Literature Ser. 6, ed. Arthur Pollard (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 29.

people and browbeats them with his own superior morality before returning home at night in a foul, alcohol-induced temper. Once there, he beats his wife in a less metaphorical fashion. Janet Dempster is a good, charitable woman who has begun to start drinking for its analgesic effect.⁴⁷ She is still clever, and Dempster enlists her help in insulting and discrediting Mr. Tryan. Janet feels a little guilt, and the feeling increases when she overhears Tryan at a sick woman's bed, sharing with her that he is dying of consumption. Janet's heart goes out to him, and she starts to feel that Tryan's doctrine might be excusable since his sympathy goes so deep. Later, Tryan confesses some of his weakness to a trustworthy parishioner named Mr. Jerome, who tries to get Tryan to take better care of himself.

Soon after Janet meets Mr. Tryan in the sick woman's house, she suffers a break with her husband. They quarrel, and he locks her out in nothing but her nightgown on a freezing night. Janet seeks refuge with an elderly neighbor—a convert of Tryan's. Janet then asks to meet Tryan, who comes immediately. While she confesses all her sins and accuses herself of terrible selfishness, Dempster goes out drunkenly driving his carriage. He has a horrible crash resulting in grave injuries. Janet learns of the accident and comes home to tend her ailing and increasingly mad husband. While tending him, she overcomes most of the difficulties of alcoholic withdrawal. Dempster eventually dies, and Janet is tempted again when she finds liquor hidden behind some of the estate papers. She resists temptation and seeks Tryan's council again. The evangelical preacher confesses to her that his extreme piety is an attempt to atone for past sins. Tryan overtaxes himself and aggravates his tuberculosis. Janet comes to know him in the late stages of the disease and does all she can to comfort him.

⁴⁷ Lisa Surridge contextualizes the story against the background of the debate over the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. "The original readers . . . encountered the text in a highly politicized climate, at a time when coverture, wife assault, and marital cruelty were national issues." *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2005) 106. Surridge argues that Eliot's text represented domestic violence as a typical middle class concern and thereby worked to undermine the cult of domesticity.

By the time Tryan dies, she has absorbed a great deal of his asceticism, and she has fully repented of her earlier sins.

This story of vice and repentance provides a lesson to Janet. She learns to navigate between the extremes of her husband's wanton selfishness and Tryan's self-flagellatory asceticism. Essentially, she learns the ways in which a small degree of selfishness is necessary to protect her from the demands of other people. This necessary selfishness is an evolution from the traditional kind that people in Milby and elsewhere know how to recognize easily. The new kind and other forms which reject selfishness as such are more difficult to pick out. Since selfishness lacks a single opposite, Tryan represents unselfishness as well as asceticism. Both forms of unselfishness are suspect in the town of Milby. Social knowledge of Tryan's goodness comes too late to help him, and he rejects the necessary selfishness that would keep him alive to help others. Janet's continuation and improved lot in life are supposed to be the recompense for Tryan's destruction, but the trade is unfair. If readers accept the ethical stance of the story, then they want to see both suffering characters made happy. If they become too invested, then they will be as frustrated as readers of *Middlemarch* are that Dorothea and Lydgate never see their potential realized or as frustrated as readers of *Daniel Deronda* when they realize that Gwendolen and Daniel will never be together. In general, Eliot's problems in appeasing readerly expectations increase in the novels. She frequently engenders sympathy for characters who she, for one reason or another, will not reward at the story's end.

Four characters in "Janet's Repentance" become archetypes for the positive and negative possibilities of each of its major themes: social knowledge and necessary selfishness. (1) Robert Dempster represents failed social knowledge; (2) Mr. Jerome

represents successful social knowledge; (3) Janet Dempster represents the positive side of necessary selfishness; and (4) Mr. Tryan represents the negative side of necessary selfishness. This dense statement requires a great deal of unpacking. First, a flawed dedication to class and tradition lead Robert Dempster to a faulty understanding of Mr. Tryan. Second, a friendly neglect of the same issues leads Mr. Jerome toward a more correct interpretation of Tryan. Social knowledge of these characters themselves also develops across the story. Third, Janet emerges as a figure for necessary selfishness. Janet learns that she must both protect herself and avoid self-abnegation; whereas, fourth, Tryan fails to accept the importance of self-protection and so dies. The problems of knowledge and selfishness were present in “Amos Barton” and “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” but they are clearer here. “Janet’s Repentance” does not propose a way out of all this trouble, but it comes nearer to doing so. “The Lifted Veil” will come one step closer, but a character with sufficient development to manage all of these problems for him or herself will not emerge until the novels. The relationship between social knowledge and necessary selfishness will become clearer by attending to each of the four characters (Dempster, Jerome, Janet, and Tryan) in turn.

Robert Dempster is a lawyer obsessed with his position in the community. A religious hypocrite, he excuses his class-based criticisms as righteous opposition to heresy.⁴⁸ However, the veneer of religious propriety barely masks his class contempt at the beginning of the story and completely fails to mask it at the end. Early on, Dempster calls himself “a man known through the county, entrusted with the affairs of half a score parishes” and insults

⁴⁸ Dempster’s attack on Mr. Tryan relies on a confusion between the muddled religious differences between the two men—which are, in fact, debatable—and their classes differences—which are not. John Kucich points out that mixing symbolic registers is common. “It is easy to forget that people with opposed social interests often claim the same kinds of symbolic legitimacy for themselves.” John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 283.

a man who disagrees with him by asserting that he is “ignored by the very fleas that infest the miserable alley in which [he was] bred” (198). Dempster’s insistence on his own position as a man of business is subverted by the narrator’s analysis of his undignified ranting and drinking.⁴⁹ Eliot’s narrator encourages reading the class narrative as overdetermined.⁵⁰ The preoccupation with rank is all the more intense because its degrees are so barely distinguishable from the outside.⁵¹ She writes, “If you had passed through Milby on the coach at that time, you would have had no idea what important people lived there, and how very high a sense of rank was prevalent among them” (203). Eliot’s ironic tone simultaneously compliments the Milby entourage for being more elevated than a passerby might expect while insulting Milby for overestimating its own importance.⁵² Milby is insular, and although it claims to consider its (particularly religious) difficulties in reference to national debates, it is more concerned with maintaining its own *status quo* than with local types of reform which might upset it.

Indeed, the church itself is more notable in its traditionalism than in its religious mission. One character argues that “we must have ranks and dignities [in the Church] as well

⁴⁹ Dempster’s crassness was likely to offend some readers, and so Blackwell asked Eliot to attenuate it. She responded, “If I were to undertake to alter Dempster’s language or character, I should be attempting to represent some vague conception of what may possibly exist in other people’s minds, but has no existence in my own” (*Letters* II.348). These selves that Eliot created seemed to take on lives of their own.

⁵⁰ My continued reference to a female narrator in this story is technically incorrect since the narrator self-identifies as male. Since the narrator’s gender is irrelevant to this story, I will keep the feminine gender for the sake of consistency. Critics have been divided on this issue. In his article’s close attention to linguistic manipulation, Fenves claims that the masculine gender is “sufficiently jarring” to require a “thorough investigation of Eliot’s entire career” (422).

⁵¹ A class-based reading of the story is most useful in differentiating between Crewe, the old rector, and Tryan, the Dissenting minister. Typically, a high-church Anglican like Crewe would be higher born than a Dissenter, but Tryan happens to have been born wealthy. The religious differences between the two branches were generally smaller than the class coding of their adherents.

⁵² Fenves convincingly argues that the ironic tone is an attempt to shift away from the “exigencies of the encyclopedia” (428). By “explaining Milby’s progress through the last twenty-five years,” Eliot is “emphasizing how little progress has taken place” (428).

as everywhere else,” telling the reader that the order of the bishopric, the vicarage, and the curacy comforts the town with its recognizable form, echoing the baronetcy, the lordship, and the town gentleman (240). When one of the ladies asks her mother “That is the best Gospel that makes everybody happy and comfortable, isn’t it, mother?” Eliot emphasizes Milby’s need for complacency (236). This complacency can allow for small theological differences, and even large ones, provided that they do not radically change the accepted relationship between money, rank, and privilege. When Dempster accuses a townsman of being “an insolvent atheist,” the criticism is more loaded with the adjective “insolvent” than the noun “atheist” (199). In this case, Dempster is doubly wrong, but the impugned Mr. Byles had sided with Tryan in an argument and was therefore suspect of these paired forms of guilt.⁵³

Dempster’s disgust with Tryan is based on the latter’s position as a class traitor. Tryan was raised a gentleman and now lives in poverty. This asceticism upsets Dempster’s ideas of propriety since high-born Tryan was raised with what the man of business has striven for, but has rejected it. Dempster himself “had become callous in worldliness, fevered by sensuality, enslaved by chance impulses” (245). By revealing the structure of rank and nobility to be less important than spiritual wealth, Tryan unintentionally offends

⁵³ Fenves reads this scene somewhat differently. He explains that Dempster takes issue with Byles’s use of “Presbyterian,” rather than with Byles himself. Fenves compliments Dempster, saying that he “displays brilliant forensic skills, and in his most audacious demonstration of linguistic power, he takes control over the word ‘Presbyterian’ by appropriating the word’s origin and history. After he asserts his power over the production of words, he expels the person who proposes another origin and another history for the same word, thereby eliminating him from the organization that he intends to form” (419). I am more inclined to read Dempster as a traditional bore rather than a brilliant litigator. However, I am interested in Fenves’s comments regarding Dempster’s death scene. “Dempster falls victim to a force he cannot control; he pays, it seems for his attempt to manipulate language. And his debt is cancelled when he babbles his final orders, unable even to articulate a single coherent sentence. His incapacity demonstrates that he is sacrificed to a Will operating outside of human manipulation. That Will has at least two names: Nemesis and the narrator” (438). Fenves is more intrigued by the concept of “Nemesis,” that character so thoroughly discussed by Leavis in *The Great Tradition*, but I am more inclined to concern myself with the joining of willpower and narration that comes so closely in line with my analysis of Sir Cheverel and his ultimate failure before the power of narration in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story.”

Dempster, who interests himself in the now devalued system. But Dempster's frustration hides itself in the anger of affronted religious morality. He sits in the bar, drawing up petitions against Tryan, yelling that the evangelical preacher "preaches against good works; says good works are not necessary to salvation—a sectarian, antinomian, anabaptist doctrine. Tell a man he is not to be saved by his works, and you open the floodgates of all immorality" (200). Dempster also calls Tryan "a fanatical, sectarian, double-faced Jesuitical interloper!" (229). Tryan could not possibly be both anabaptist and a Jesuit without meeting more serious contradictions along the way.⁵⁴ He is an ordained priest, and his crimes are more along the lines of upsetting tradition than in his conversion mission.⁵⁵ Dempster describes Tryan's attempt to start a series of evening lectures at the larger local church as a moral pestilence.

⁵⁴ The ecclesiastical background is complex during Eliot's time. K. Theodore Hoppen lists the Christian denominations in England in his chapter "Godly People," *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 427-71. He starts with an assumption that contradicts conventional accounts of Victorian secularism. "Never was Britain more religious than in the Victorian age . . . Certainly the number of distinct denominations was large" (427). He splits them into four major categories: "Anglicanism, old Dissent dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, and so on), new Dissent (predominantly Methodist), and Roman Catholicism" (427). In "Janet's Repentance," Dempster is an Anglican, and Tryan is essentially a Methodist. As a result, Dempster is actually much closer to Catholicism and "Jesuitical" leanings than Tryan is despite his accusations to the contrary. The various insults lobbed at Tryan in the course of the story show how little understanding the dominant religion (the Church of England) had of the emerging Dissent. Richard D. Altick works more specifically on the confusion of terms surrounding Evangelicalism, writing "the word 'Evangelical' has two applications. The narrower designates only the Anglican, or Church, Evangelicals. The wider use embraces the whole spectrum of Protestantism from the Anglican Evangelical party (the 'Low Church,' as it came to be called in Victorian times, reviving a term previously applied to Latitudinarianism) to the variety of Dissenting sects presided over by the Wesleyans." Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973). In this grouping, Tryan's Dissent is lumped in with all of the other Evangelical movements. Eliot herself considered herself one of these Evangelicals in her childhood. Brian Spittles provides one last taxonomy. "The other main response to the crises of an ineffectual Anglican Church, and a moving away from faith, was into Nonconformity, or Dissent—the two concepts are not strictly synonymous, but have become almost so in usage. The terms generally mean those Protestants who are outside, and even against, the Church of England, and without question in complete opposition to the Church of Rome" (Spittles 73-74). Whatever else these non-Anglicans were, they were emphatically not Catholic.

⁵⁵ The contrast with and development from Amos Barton are striking. Although both men earn disapproval by upsetting tradition, Tryan is well-educated and an effective preacher. They also occupy opposing places in the class structure. Barton is low born but finds himself above his station. Tryan is high born but chooses a place below his station. More of Eliot's clerical figures will be well-educated from here on out. Perhaps she was more comfortable putting her own erudition into the mouths of people who would be believable repositories for it.

He screams in defiance that “We are not to have our young people demoralized and corrupted by the temptations to vice, notoriously connected with Sunday evening lectures!” (229). The “notorious” evening lectures are not “corrupting”; they merely invade the sovereign territory of Mr. Crewe, the old curate. Dempster embraces the viewpoint expressed in the passage with which I began this section: “selfishness, turning its eyes upward, called itself religion” (264). Selfishness is his religion, and he uses the terms embedded in religiosity to declare himself elect and everyone he dislikes damned.⁵⁶

The narrator makes it clear that this vision of endangered virtue is an irrational *idée fixe* of Dempster’s: “The standard of morality at Milby, you perceive, was not inconveniently high in those good old times, and an ingenious vice or two was what every man expected of his neighbour. Old Mr. Crewe, the curate, for example, was allowed to enjoy his avarice in comfort, without fear of sarcastic parish demagogues...” (207). Dempster’s protectiveness of Crewe works on the grounds of tradition rather than the morality that he claims for the old man. Apparently, avarice is an acceptable form of selfishness in a clerical figure. Crewe remains the traditional alternative to the new asceticism of Tryan. The two priests rarely have anything to say about one another, but their followers’ enthusiastic clamoring more than fills the clerical silence. The traditionalists support the older Crewe, and they claim a moral superiority, despite Crewe’s “avarice.” In fact, Dempster’s screed against Tryan comes to rest on this very point: “We are not to be poisoned with doctrines which damp every innocent enjoyment, and pick a poor man’s pocket of the sixpence with which he might buy himself a cheerful glass after a hard day’s work” (229). Sensual pleasure and hard-earned money are acceptable virtues in the religion of selfishness. Dempster’s argument proposes the

⁵⁶ Religion therefore functions as a sort of master trope in Eliot’s fiction, dictating what is and is not possible to be uttered and also inflecting other metaphors with the language of sin and salvation.

traditional logic, but it hides itself in a difficult-to-justify religious ethos. According to both the man and this logic, Tryan is dangerous to the social order because he will upset tradition and will introduce the heresy of selflessness. The narrator eventually reveals that the crowd's knowledge of Tryan is incomplete. Mr. Jerome understands the insufficiency of public perception and so becomes the second figure in this story of how knowledge works in Milby.

Mr. Jerome is the contrasting figure to Robert Dempster.⁵⁷ Jerome is a sympathetic supporter of Tryan's form of Dissent. Although he is known to be tight-fisted in his own house, he is generous with the poor and is kind to Tryan himself. Jerome's maid thinks him "as mean as anythink," but the narrator counters that "he had as kindly a warmth as the morning sunlight, and, like the sunlight, his goodness shone on all that came in his way" (256). The relationship between personal economy and public generosity is an inversion of Dempster's personal sensual excess and public asperity.⁵⁸ Jerome is not well educated, but he has land and is the head of a multigenerational family. As a result, he is again the silent contrast of the childless, unproductive, new-moned Dempster. "Deep was the fountain of pity in the good old man's heart!" (256). He participates in Tryan's defiant march into the Milby church in the face of Dempster's noisy protest. Jerome gives up his material goods in

⁵⁷ David Carroll suggests some of these oppositional pairs in his article "'Janet's Repentance' and the Myth of the Organic," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.3 (1980) 331-48. However, Carroll always subordinates the opposites to his discussion of organicism and decay: "George Eliot describes the organic process running down, [and] she moves away from the inseparability of form and content, of internal and external conditions. These can become separated, can even be in conflict: to the idea of organic growth is added the idea of dialectical tension or reconciliation of opposites. Opposites define and give reality to each other and should be in a continual state of vital interaction" (334). Apart from the intriguing pull towards Eliot's organic metaphors, I am skeptical about the dialectic process as a simple addition to natural process. The move towards synthesis, especially as I read it in relation to Janet's eventual education by Dempster and Tryan, seems intrinsic to the story.

⁵⁸ It also reiterates the later phase in Mr. Gilfil's life when he became privately frugal and publicly generous. The development of this type into a realist portrayal of simultaneous thrift and expenditure causes problems in the Lyons' domestic situation in *Felix Holt the Radical*.

answer to his deeper faith in spiritual riches. Eliot writes that “He often ate his dinner stintingly, oppressed by the thought that there were men, women, and children, with no dinner to sit down to . . . That any living being should want, was his chief sorrow; that any rational being should waste, was the next” (256). Among all the characters in the story, Mr. Jerome is most like Mr. Tryan. However, Jerome is of the town and part of its natural structure, and he lives to see a happy ending, unlike Tryan. Because he supports the new preacher (and eventually Janet, too) in the face of public misapprehension, Jerome is aligned with the narrator’s position.

Jerome and Dempster embody the forms that public knowledge of selfishness can take. The narrative rewards Mr. Jerome, who really is good, even if he is known to be a little “mean” at home, and it punishes Mr. Dempster, who really is as bad as people secretly suspect. The omniscient narrator’s privileged knowledge precedes public knowledge, but both forms are in agreement by the end of the story. This adaptation occurs over and over in Eliot’s fiction. The standard formula is already taking shape this early in her career. In it, public knowledge lags behind private knowledge, which is usually shared ahead of time with the reader according to the narrator’s endorsement. Eventually, private goodness or private guilt is revealed to the family, town, or county, and public opinion comes into line with the prophetic narrator.⁵⁹ Good characters suffer while the story holds the two forms of

⁵⁹ Peter Brooks casts this totalizing move as the end result of melodrama. The tensions that play out in a novel like this one result from the demand that “moral consciousness must be an adventure, its recognition must be the stuff of a heightened drama.” Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 6. This interplay requires Eliot to stage the crowd’s coming into knowledge as a consequence of dramatic action. Although Eliot cannot be said to work in the melodramatic mode in the same way that Dickens can, she uses its technique of aligning the audience’s sympathies to great effect. Brooks leaps from a general discussion of melodrama to a startling claim (that D.A. Miller would later contest in *The Novel and the Police*) that “[w]e may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era” (15).

knowledge apart. Of course, the Robert Dempsters and Anthony Wybrows try to maintain the split. They do so selfishly and at the cost of the Mr. Tryans and Caterinas. So narrative tension—and our involvement as readers—grows according to the plot’s developments of the villains’ self-interested machinations and with the heroes’ fight to protect themselves from those machinations. This engagement with forms of public knowledge and understanding is bound up with issues of self-representation. How a character represents himself or herself and how he/she is represented by others greatly affects public knowledge. As a result, the necessity of a certain form of selfishness becomes more distinct: a character’s need to understand himself/herself and to represent that understanding for a larger community of sympathetic individuals emerges as an important coping mechanism. There is an even greater difficulty inherent in the individual recognition. He or she must find an appropriate form for that representation—one that will be effective.

The second thematic innovation, that of necessary selfishness, resolves itself in Janet Dempster and Mr. Tryan. This necessary selfishness is different from the entire spectrum of wrongful selfishness: from small vanities and household stinginess all the way to egoistic monomania or the greed that robs other people. Necessary selfishness is a new critical category, but it is epistemologically similar to the more familiar forms. Janet is the figure for a traditional (one might say Milbyish) understanding of selfishness. Mr. Tryan is the opposite. To understand necessary selfishness as a useful category, a reader should look at the way that Janet moves from a traditional position to something more aligned with Tryan and then look to the way that she moves beyond him.⁶⁰ In the story’s prehistory, Janet had

⁶⁰ Eliot discussed her plan for sympathetic identification with Blackwood in a letter on June 11, 1857. “I thought I had made it apparent in my sketch of Milby feelings on the advent of Mr. Tryan that the conflict lay between immorality and morality—irreligion and religion. Mr. Tryan will carry the reader’s sympathy. It is through him that Janet is brought to repentance” (*Letters* II.347).

been a well-respected, beautiful, and intelligent woman. Nevertheless, another lady complains that she had been “a little too much lifted up, perhaps, by her superior education, and too much given to satire” (221). Janet was from a middle-class family with no fortune and so “had nothing to look to but being a governess” (221). Avoiding this morally respectable but financially dubious destiny, she had married Robert Dempster, the promising lawyer. At that point, she was the most eligible bachelorette in town. In fact, one of the ladies says of the current crop of women in the marriage market that “[t]here is no young woman in Milby now who can be compared with what Janet was when she was married, either in mind or person” (221). When Dempster became abusive, the town started to pity Janet. When she began to drink, the town started to doubt her morality and began to shift the blame in the relationship over to her. Only Janet’s continued work with the poor and her persisting beauty keep the better opinion of her alive. As far as the town knows, her alcoholism is only a rumor, but she is in a double bind and cannot escape.⁶¹ She is guilty by association with her husband, whose popularity and influence in town have begun to wane after his attempt to discredit Tryan. She would be guiltier still if she were to leave Dempster because then she would be a failed wife.

As a result of her ill-use, Janet starts pitying herself. Doubting that anyone else cares for her, she begins to grasp greedily at any sign of sympathy from other people. “[W]hen the sun had sunk, and the twilight was deepening, Janet might be sitting there, heated, maddened,

⁶¹ Lisa Surridge interprets Janet’s alcoholism as an inversion of standard gender roles. “First, it reverses commonly held Victorian views on cause and effect where alcohol and violence were concerned, suggesting that abuse has caused Janet’s drinking, rather than vice versa. Secondly, it challenges the sentimentalization of the passive wife, since Eliot portrays Janet’s passivity as caused by a drunken stupor rather than by elevated feelings of marital loyalty” (Surridge 110). Eliot’s decision to have both Dempsters as alcoholics makes sympathetic identification more difficult and trains readers to exercise judgment in moral considerations.

sobbing out her griefs with selfish passion, and wildly wishing herself dead” (237).⁶² This “selfish passion” is already a significant development of the over-simplified discourse that would otherwise only suggest accumulation and narcissism. Compare it to the selfishness of which Caroline Czerlaski accused herself in “Amos Barton.” Eliot has returned to an older meaning of the word by emphasizing self-concern rather than the more and more popular denotation of the word as “greedy” or “vain.” Janet’s selfishness is more like intense self-awareness. Janet’s activity in understanding herself has made her into a sympathetic individual, and now she knows that she deserves better than she receives in emotional support. Denied consideration from other people, her thoughts have turned inward. This attention to herself is a healthy response to abuse because it amounts to self-protection, but in her case, she has overdone the self-attention, and it has become morbid. Janet accuses her mother “You are cruel, like the rest; every one is cruel in this world. Nothing but blame—blame—blame; never any pity” (281). Janet’s alcoholism becomes the symbol of her “selfish passion.” The liquor stands in for the pity and sympathy that she craves from external sources.

In numbing herself to Dempster’s abuse, Janet artificially produces the effects of sympathy, but the dependence on drink as both painkiller and defensive shield leads her to the depressive aspect of alcohol. Janet “had no strength to sustain her in a course of self-defence and independence: there was a darker shadow over life than the dread of her

⁶² Deneau elaborates on a pattern of images circulating around Janet, noting that more than just sobbing, Janet lives in a world that is permeated by moisture: clouds, rain, tears, seas, bottles of liquor, and springs. She is simultaneously threatened by drowning and dying of thirst. “And the very number of the images suggests that George Eliot struggled to make the story, on its personal level, something more than a sordid drama of wife-beating and a neat story of conversion. She seems to have striven to give an elemental force to the personal story of Janet Dempster: the ‘way’ which Janet travels is from the torturing enclosure, from the raging sea and burning sand” (Deneau 20-21). In my reading, these same tropes emphasize Janet’s isolation (in prison, under water, in the desert), and I focus on her need to be rescued.

husband—it was the shadow of self-despair” (292).⁶³ This doubly qualified sentence (with both colon and dash) asserts the moralizing tone. Alcoholism is almost synonymous with despair. Since this story strongly invokes Christian doctrine, it is worth noting that despair is a sin against the spirit because it takes on its full meaning of doubting God’s grace. Janet’s pain stops, not because she shares it with someone else, but because she finds oblivion in a bottle. To her, the need for this escape is unfair since she thinks other people should see into her heart and know her pain, even though she will not show it on the surface. She needs approbation very badly. She even needs acceptance from herself, but she refuses to see herself worthy of it. Janet needs something like self-reliance or self-defense, or (she is afraid) she will become the kind of alcoholic that Dempster is: drunk every night, vituperative, and without salvation. Dempster’s alcoholism is more than just a rumor around Milby, and Eliot explains that the town doctors expect him to manifest *delirium tremens* very soon. Janet must escape the “demon” of her selfish and self-destructive alcoholic tendencies, and she needs to find a better way of solving her emotional problems (299). She has to look elsewhere for a better sort of self-denial before she can start rebuilding her damaged sense of self.

Eliot emphasizes the paradox of Janet’s situation. She is a sympathetic individual who deserves love, but no one will give it to her until she can find the self-denial that Tryan embodies. “Janet felt she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, had understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins with that deep-sighted sympathy which is wiser than all blame, more potent than all reproof—such sympathy as had swelled her own heart for many a sufferer” (287). To escape Dempster’s doom, Janet needs

⁶³ Self-despair is the negative form of necessary selfishness. It is what develops when the character looks at selfishness and rejects it because of its negative coding without seeing its power to reclaim identity.

someone psychically gifted, a master sympathist who can feel her pain without being told since she refuses to verify the town's suspicions about what really goes on in her house. Without a better mechanism for self-protection, she allows public knowledge to misunderstand her private reality in much the same way as Amos Barton, Maggie Tulliver, Tertius Lydgate, Silas Marner, and Romola in their stories. The narrator of "Janet's Repentance" hints to the reader that Janet needs some sort of external influence to break her cycle of unwanted oblivion-seeking. Janet wants to give up alcohol and will be able to do so if she can find another—external—source of pity. She also needs someone to love and respect other than herself or the abusive Dempster. This person is, of course, Tryan. "The first condition of human goodness is something to love; the second, something to reverence. And this latter precious gift was brought to Milby by Mr. Tryan and Evangelicalism" (265).⁶⁴ If Dempster (and Janet with him at the beginning of the story) represent one thesis for what selfishness might be, Tryan is the antithesis. His way will not be perfect for Janet, either. She will have to synthesize selfishness and selflessness to create necessary selfishness.

Janet's own sympathy "for many a sufferer" puts her in an ideal position to receive help from the preacher because they are likely to bump into one another on charitable visits and are likely to understand one another. At one point, she says that "I feel I must be doing something for some one" (320). A reader's comprehension that Janet's activity on behalf of

⁶⁴ Gordon Haight asserts that "Mr. Tryan, [Eliot's] hero, is an idealized portrait of Mr. Jones, the Evangelical curate at Nuneaton" (227). Eliot herself disputed this rumor when it was discussed in front of her in her own lifetime. "Mr. Tryan is not a portrait of any clergyman, living or dead. He is an ideal character, but I hope probable enough to resemble more than one evangelical clergyman of his day" (*Letters* II.375). This was one of many instances where she attempted to combat the reductive assumption of a merely autobiographical (rather than imaginative) source for her fiction. At the same time, she frequently acknowledged that her stories did have some relation to her experience. She told Blackwood that there had been a real Milby. "The real town was more vicious than my Milby; the real Dempster was far more disgusting than mine; the real Janet! alas had a far sadder end than mine, who will melt away from the reader's sight in purity, happiness and beauty" (*Letters* II.347). Her interest in "purity, happiness and beauty" gives the best justification for suppressing knowledge of her stories' real world antecedents. Leaving Tryan in the realm of fiction keeps him both plausible and iconic as the central figure in a parable.

others aligns her with Mr. Jerome and Mr. Tryan develops as Janet comes to understand it herself. If she can repent of Dempster's class-motivated prejudice against Tryan, Tryan will give her the sympathy she needs. The class preoccupation is not difficult to overcome since it is a false ideal for Janet, who moves in out of the houses of the rich and poor quite comfortably. However, she has accepted her husband's theological reproaches as valid attacks on the Dissenting minister. When she overhears Tryan at the sick woman's bedside sharing his own pain with her, she recognizes that he is a kindred spirit. They see each other in the entryway; "The fullest exposition of Mr. Tryan's doctrine might not have sufficed to convince Janet that he had not an odious self-complacency in believing himself a peculiar child of God; but one direct, pathetic look of his had dissociated him with that conception for ever" (275).⁶⁵ It appears that Janet's disdain for Tryan had been centered around an assumption that his spiritual difference rested in a smug religious selfishness—that God might favor Tryan's practice more than another's. She presupposes that he will manifest the "self-satisfied unction of the teacher" (275). Finding that she was wrong allows her to overthrow all of the accumulated debris of public opinion. The ambiguous accusation of selfishness collapses under the pressure of fixity. Janet's and Tryan's doctrinal differences are moot. She moves from her husband's position, which is still held by the majority of town, to that of Tryan's parishioners, which represents a growing minority. Janet moves from public knowledge to the private knowledge shared by the narrator and thus successfully performs the task of re-evaluating the forms of knowledge that constitute half of the positive rhetoric of selfishness. To complete this action, it only remains for her to discover that

⁶⁵ Norton identifies this glance as part of a pattern of visual, and hence, pre-linguistic forms of communication in the story. "Because she recognizes the paradoxical nature of linguistic acts as both separating and connecting, Eliot portrays much of the communication between Janet and Tryan as non-verbal" (229). This point serves my theory as well because it emphasizes the sympathy that the two characters share as an instinctive, rather than rational, quality.

Tryan's rejection of selfishness has gone too far. Part of Janet's more immediate dilemma is to reconcile her past identity with her present self by asserting her consistent virtue. She can only accomplish this willed enforcement (to adapt Sir Cheverel's mantra from "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story") by first, abasing herself to Tryan's virtue, second, rejecting his absolute self-denial, and third, recreating her new self-understanding at the public level of having the town accept her essential virtue. Janet's progression through these stages represents the town's shifting moral stance from recognition to correction to re-evaluation.

By the time Janet and Tryan get to know each other, Eliot has already revealed that the town of Milby is ready to receive a positive influence. "And so it was with the human life there, which at first seemed a dismal mixture of griping wordliness, vanity, ostrich feathers, and the fumes of brandy: looking closer, you found some purity, gentleness, and unselfishness" (211). Milby needs someone other than the superannuated Mr. Crewe to help them awaken their better sensibilities. The language of selfishness and unselfishness becomes explicit when the narrator discusses Mr. Tryan. Dissent—or evangelicalism or Mr. Tryan himself—can manipulate selfishness as a motive force if it only knows how to turn the energy into the right course. Eliot explains that "Miss Eliza Pratt, listening in rapt attention to Mr. Tryan's evening lecture, no doubt found evangelical channels for vanity and egoism" (265). She and Miss Linnet are two of Tryan's most ardent followers, and Eliot frequently mentions what a good influence Tryan has on their lives. Miss Linnet explains to the preacher "Not that I can accuse myself of having ever had a self-righteous spirit, but my humility was rather instinctive than based on a firm ground of doctrinal knowledge, such as you so admirably impart to us" (226). A personalized faith therefore has two possible good outcomes. It can divert selfish energy into better channels, and it can go on to encourage

humility. As a result, selfishness is transformed into a sort of displaced selfishness for other people. Tryan comes to embody the town's better nature. By denying his own needs, he can more forcefully protect the rights of others. However, he goes too far. He accepts the following creed, but he does so too fully: "No man can begin to mould himself on a faith or an idea without rising to a higher order of experience: a principle of subordination, of self mastery, has been introduced into his nature; he is no longer a mere bundle of impressions, desires, and impulses" (265). Tryan rises "to a higher order of experience" and practices "self mastery" to such a degree that he begins to deny basic bodily necessity. In becoming the ultimate sympathist that Janet and others crave, he ignores his own needs.

Selfless individuals like Tryan seem to rise so far into that "higher order of experience" that they become too pure for the real world. Their purity makes them evaporate out of stories. Or if not, they become so purified that all of their impurities distil into bodily trouble. Tryan develops consumption, and the narrator comments that "the theory for [a personal heaven] consisted in purity of heart, in Christ-like compassion, in the subduing of selfish desires" (265). This "purity of heart" is called into question because it too closely approximates simple asceticism. Apparently Tryan considers riding a horse instead of walking many miles in bad weather or living in a clean house away from the fumes of factories as unforgivable luxuries. Janet notes that Tryan's suffering intensifies his goodness when she looks in his eyes. In them "was all the sincerity, all the sadness, all the deep pity in them her memory had told her of; more than it had told her, for in proportion as his face had become thinner and more worn, his eyes appeared to have gathered intensity" (297). Tryan becomes more deeply himself when he gives up more of that self to his parishioners. His motives also become clearer and clearer to his sympathetic listeners since his body and

actions become essentially transparent to them. He lives out a (self-chosen) scapegoat function, but he insists that he is merely practicing what he preaches. He tells Mr. Jerome

I like to be among the people. I've no face to go and preach resignation to those poor things in their smoky air and comfortless homes, when I come straight from luxury myself. There are many things quite lawful for other men, which a clergyman must forego if he would do any good in a manufacturing population like this. (251)

Tryan's approach to preaching to the poor is significantly different from what Amos Barton's was in his story. Although the people he helps appreciate Tryan, his methods are not the quickest way to public validation, and they prove too personally costly. Copying him is dangerous. After all, there are very few saints in Eliot's fiction, and those who exist are either martyrs or in danger of becoming so.

Janet and others must take their lesson from Tryan and benefit from his displaced acceptance of their troubles, but they must move forward with a degree of the selfishness that he rejects. Nevertheless, Eliot explains that Tryan has natural feelings of self-protection, and it is his vocation and feelings of guilt that drive him to his extremity. For example, he rejects martyrdom. Eliot gives the example of that selfish form of self-destruction: "Opposition may become sweet to a man when he has christened it persecution: a self-obtrusive, over-hasty reformer complacently disclaiming all merit, while his friends call him a martyr, has not in reality a career the most arduous to the fleshly mind. But Mr. Tryan was not cast in the mould of the gratuitous martyr" (254). Tryan does what he thinks is asked of him, and he is very much a suffering being. Eliot goes on to explain that "He had often been thankful to an old woman for saying 'God bless you;' to a little child for smiling at him; to a dog for submitting to be patted by him" (255). This pathetic neediness is counterbalanced by what Tryan sees as divine will. He tells Mr. Jerome that "if my heart were less rebellious, and if I

were less liable to temptation, I should not need that sort of self-denial” (271). At one point, he tells Janet that his “youth was spent in thoughtless self-indulgence, and [his] hopes were of a vain worldly kind” (300). He spends the rest of his life turning away from the worldly in hopes of atoning for his early sins.

Tryan’s self-denial is suspicious to such a town as Milby. Although it is really a form of asceticism, the townspeople confuse its religious basis with counter-intuitive self-absorbed goals. One of asceticism’s dangers is that it can look exactly like egotistical piety. The townspeople echo Robert Dempster’s distrust of the preacher when they confuse the two motives. The narrator relates their assertions that “[t]he Evangelical curate’s selfishness was clearly of too bad a kind to exhibit itself after the ordinary manner of a sound, respectable selfishness. ‘He wants the reputation of a saint,’ said one; ‘He’s eaten up with spiritual pride,’ said another; ‘He’s got his eye on some fine living, and wants to creep up the bishop’s sleeve,’ said a third” (267). Here then, are three possible misreadings of Tryan’s selflessness: as selfishness transformed, as “spiritual pride,” and as an unctuous ploy for a better position. These three ideas work precisely as crystallized forms of what I am arguing in this study. A radically defined self, whether artist or bellwether of individualism or marginalized religious figure or exiled family member, leads a motley crew of followers (and readers) towards a better understanding of what it means to reject the standard roles that society has picked out, and he or she is punished for it. The punishment comes back all the more unfairly in the same language as the rejection. Mr. Tryan is not selfish in any normal way, and failing to understand him, Milby asserts all the more forcefully that he must be selfish anyway.

In brief, the argument looks like this: an absence of a quality becomes obvious, but missing the piece altogether is incomprehensible, and so the crowd who notices that absence fails to understand what it means and therefore believes that it is present, but amplified beyond easy comprehension. This mechanism of intensification is in a similar pattern as the mechanism of scapegoating discussed in “Amos Barton.” Eliot instructs readers that all of these positions are painfully wrong, but she underscores that by completely neglecting his own needs, Tryan has gone too far to the other side. Mr. Jerome understands Tryan’s self-denial saying that “He wants to mek himself their brother, like; can’t abide to preach to the fastin’ on a full stomach. Ah! he’s better nor we are, that’s it—he’s a deal better nor we are” (268). But he and the narrator both know that this goodness comes at too great a personal cost. Being better than one’s peers is not necessarily the best thing to be. Jerome begs Tryan to take care of himself, asking him to

Consider what a valyable life youn is. You’ve begun a great work i’ Milby, an’ so might carry’t on, if you’d your health and strength. The more care you tek o’ yourself, the longer you’ll live, belike, God willing, to do good to your fellow-creturs . . . I’m no scholar, Mr. Tryan, an’ I’m not a-goin’ to dictate to you—but isn’t it a’most a-killin’ o’ yourself, to go on a’ that way beyond your strength? We mustn’t fling wer lives away. (270)

Public and private forms of knowledge each have an understanding of selfishness. The public believes that Tryan is selfish according to some perversion of “a sound, respectable selfishness,” which should manifest instead as something like Mr. Crewe’s avarice (267).⁶⁶

Economic accumulation makes more sense to these class-obsessed citizens, and it seems more forgivable than what they imagine to be a sort of grasping at greater piety. The private

⁶⁶ David Carroll makes a related point, indicating that the displacement of interiority is symptomatic of a common disorder in Milby. He claims that “the leading citizens of the town of Milby have externalized everything that is inward, emotional, and spiritual into objects, rituals, and money. A man’s principles must be validated by his property, his education by his cash” (336). Although I agree, I think that this statement of the problem is an oversimplification and somewhat vulgar in its continued assertion that “[m]aterial value is the final court of appeal in the town . . .” (336).

knowledge of Mr. Jerome, the narrator, and eventually Janet (who sets up a pleasant country home for Tryan) discerns that Tryan's selflessness is too complete. Janet and other characters in Eliot's fiction all need some sort of unified approach which ties together some strong machinery for self-realization and self-presentation with the constantly twisting threads of public and private knowledge.

VI. Initial Observations

More than simply revealing that self-protection is necessary in the stories, Eliot seemed to be discovering it. In this way, the writing of the stories became a tool for the dialectical process. A simplification of this process might be stated in the following formula: Thesis: Amos Barton realizes that faulty social knowledge is the greatest danger to an individual's happiness. Antithesis: Maynard Gilfil believes that sacrificing his own happiness will ensure the happiness of others. Synthesis: Janet Dempster learns from her selfish husband and from her selfless friend that there is a way to live which will protect her from public scorn and from martyrdom at the same time. This formula is reductive, but it shows a developmental-thematic model for reading the stories (as opposed to a simpler developmental-technical model). It also enables me to establish "necessary selfishness" as a critical category before I deal with Latimer and Maggie in their stories, one of whom has too much of it and one of whom has too little. My formula also points out a new set of humanistic criteria for morality. Lisa Surridge notes that those "who surmised that the tales had been written by a clergyman failed to notice that, despite their detailed rendering of

clerical life, the stories emphasize human sympathy rather than Christian faith.”⁶⁷ Individual judgment and acceptance have replaced spiritual *a priori*s.

Critics have traditionally misread these stories by extending the Amos Barton thesis. For them, fuller sympathy and more social understanding is the essential lesson of Eliot’s fiction.⁶⁸ Despite Eliot’s insistence on the importance of these things, this interpretation is not sufficient to explain her larger goals. Sympathy is important, and it would certainly be helpful if towns like Milby and Shepperton had more of it for the individuals in their midst. Eliot shows the readers of all of her books that towns are amazingly resistant to change. She is suspicious about the possibility for sympathy except on the individual level, and even then, it is a cursed gift, likely to destroy the person who suffers on behalf of the people around him or her. The two examples in the next chapter, Latimer, who has complete sympathy (if not empathy) for the people around him and Maggie, who is so full of sympathy and so desperate for a return of it that she dies to earn it, should help to reveal the danger of sympathetic identification. No, what these characters need—and what Eliot’s readers need—is a recognition of the differences between simple selfishness and the type of necessary selfishness that becomes an active form of self-defense.

⁶⁷ Surridge 127.

⁶⁸ For example, Timothy Pace argues convincingly that Eliot

claims the power to teach her reader to see the trials of ordinary life—to make available an accurate picture of such trials—and thus to expand her readers’ sphere of activity for sympathy. She does not, however, claim the power to expand the faculty of sympathy itself. . . [S]he envisions the primary moral power of her art to rest in its ability to effect an unmediated, spontaneous tapping of an imaginative capacity that already exists in human beings and that can be directly ‘stirred’ by any true picture of human experience. (76)

He is right that Eliot would like her readers to be sympathetic individuals, but she also fears that they are not and that they cannot be convinced to be any more than her fictional towns can. Her fiction always seems to both assume the best and the worst about its readers. Eliot therefore assumes complicity with us and chastises us at the same time.

Chapter Three: Artistic Sensitivity and the “Gift of Sorrow” in “The Lifted Veil” and *The Mill on the Floss*

I. Introduction

*Art must be real and concrete, or ideal and eclectic. Both are good and true in their way, but my stories are of the former kind. I undertake to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are, seen through such a medium as my own nature gives me. The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly . . .*¹

In this chapter, I will focus on aspects of self-definition and representation in relationship to two of Eliot’s stories and her evolving language for selfishness. I begin with Eliot’s 1859 novella “The Lifted Veil” to dramatize the dangers of writing and the way it grants the artist a disturbing gift for prophecy as well as opens up his or her character to speculation. I continue by discussing George Eliot’s personal life up through the period when she is revealed to the public as Marian Evans in 1859. The lifting of that particular veil occurred after the publication of her short story but before she finished *The Mill on the Floss* (also in 1859), which Eliot acknowledged as her most autobiographical novel and which she had interrupted to write “The Lifted Veil.” Attention to the beginning of her novelistic career reveals the evolution of the self-protective and self-projecting trends I notice in her short stories. I will evaluate the trajectory of Eliot’s fiction when I look in the next chapter at *Daniel Deronda* and the boundaries of sympathetic identification in the context of a larger world. However, for now, the focus must be on Eliot’s techniques for presenting selfhood.

¹ 12 July 1857, *Letters* II.362.

One of the greatest paradoxes of Eliot's career is that her characters seem to be trapped in a conventionality that she herself managed—although at great cost—to avoid. Attention to the way Eliot chose to represent herself and the ways in which her fiction served as a testament to her troubles all help to explain the tensions that most readers have failed to reconcile. In “The Lifted Veil” and *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot shows the consequences for individuals who, like her, fight against being normalized.

II. “All That Was Personal in Me”: “The Lifted Veil” and the Failure of Sympathy

*Are you unable to give me your sympathy—you who read this? Are you unable to imagine this double consciousness at work within me, flowing on like two parallel streams which never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue? (21)*²

At the end of the first chapter of George Eliot's 1859 novella “The Lifted Veil,” her artist-protagonist addresses the reading public with a question that breaks the fourth wall. He is aware of our holding his journal in our hands, and he wonders whether or not we will be able to understand him and to interpret his experience correctly. Latimer's reference to a “double consciousness” describes his experience as a telepath who can hear both his own thoughts and those of the people around him. He is unsure whether readers without his gift will be able to identify with what he is telling them, but he is desperate to find a sympathetic audience, so he risks exposing himself. However, the reference can be read in another way. If taken in the context of self-conscious story, one aware of its own creation, Latimer

² Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to George Eliot, “The Lifted Veil,” *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001) 1-42. This horror story does not fit in easily with the rest of George Eliot's corpus. It was the fourth short piece that she had written for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, composed after the run in the same magazine of the three stories republished as *Scenes of Clerical Life*. It also came after the appearance of the immensely popular *Adam Bede*. Eliot wrote the new story while also composing *The Mill on the Floss*. Blackwood was at first reluctant to publish such a gruesome and odd piece of fiction from an author who was otherwise known for her highly moral and colorful tales of rural people.

becomes a stand-in for the author, and his imagined readers become Eliot's real readers, those outside the frame of imagination.³ The narrative puts us temporarily in the place of Latimer since we also get full disclosure without the opportunity to respond. Latimer hopes that we are kinder to him than he would be to us. He cannot recognize other people's right to be selfish because he has a simplistic view that it is just a vice and therefore cannot use his impressive knowledge to generate sympathy. Eliot hopes for better from her readers.

Eliot described "The Lifted Veil" to John Blackwood as "a slight story of an outré kind—not a *jeu d'esprit*, but a *jeu de melancolie*," continuing "I think nothing of it, but my private critic says it is very striking and original."⁴ Despite her modesty, it is clear that she had some hope for its popularity. Fourteen years later, she updated her opinion by saying that she "care[d] for the idea which it embodies and which justifies its painfulness. . . . There are many things in it which I would willingly say over again, and I shall never put them in any other form."⁵ Reading with sympathy becomes a process for identification, not just with the character of Latimer, but with the author herself. The danger for both artists is exposure to an unsympathetic audience. The task for the reader is to go from the "egoism" Eliot so

³ The scarcity of critical attention to "The Lifted Veil" surprises me, but it has recently enjoyed a new popularity. The first lengthy study is Elliott Rubenstein's attempt to rescue the story from obscurity "A Forgotten Tale by George Eliot," *NCF* 17 (1962) 157-83. Gillian Beer, Terry Eagleton, Kate Flint, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, U.C. Knoepfelmacher, and Ruby Redinger have all contributed their own complete readings of the tale more recently. My observations are most directly in conversation with Thomas Albrecht's discussion of sympathy and ethics and with Charles Swann's work on the story's experimental nature, in which he identifies the duties of the reader more fully than anyone else had done. In Thomas Albrecht, "Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil,'" *ELH* 73.2 (2006) 437-63 and Charles Swann, "Déjà vu, Déjà lu: 'The Lifted Veil' as an Experiment in Art," *Literature and History: A New Journal for the Humanities* 5 (1979) 40-57. Albrecht comes the closest to my point when he writes that Eliot's theory of ethics "insists that art should give a reader or viewer access to the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of a great variety of different characters. Eliot proposes that our insights into the minds and experiences of these characters 'extend' our sympathy for other people and for humanity in general, thereby producing an ethical response in us" (437-38). However, most of Albrecht's attention is devoted to Latimer's position as a failed reader and to his "equivocal" sympathy.

⁴ *Letters* III.41.

⁵ *Letters* V.380.

frequently describes in the subjects of her longer fiction to the adequate self-knowledge which Latimer fails to obtain, thereby modeling the failure he fears in his audience. This unobtained self-knowledge would enable the reader to be properly sympathetic. George Henry Lewes once wrote that “the moral [of the ‘The Lifted Veil’] is plain enough . . . the one-sided knowing of things in relation to the self—not whole knowledge because ‘tout comprendre est tout pardonner,’” or “to know all is to forgive all” (translation mine).⁶

It is not necessary to go deeply into the author’s biography, even though this was an active period in her life. That ground has been adequately covered by J.W. Cross, Gordon Haight, and Rosemarie Bodenheimer, among others.⁷ Nor is it strictly necessary to rehearse the ways in which Eliot is mirrored by Latimer because the evidence which is not self-evident in a close reading of the tale has already been unearthed by others. Jill Galvan contends, “A common critical approach to ‘The Lifted Veil’ . . . is to read it as an allegorical investigation of the workings of fictional narrative itself. As this argument goes, Latimer’s magical access to others’ minds mimics authorial omniscience and in this respect, as some

⁶ *Letters* IX.220. I am indebted to Carroll Viera for making the link between Lewes’s comments and this story explicit.

⁷ The story’s thematic innovations reveal an anxiety that Eliot must have felt deeply. She, who was concerned with egotism and vanity, was emerging publicly as an artist by the time of the story’s publication in June 1859. The horror story trappings of “The Lifted Veil” allowed her to explore quite explicitly the themes of alienation and endangered selfhood that she developed much more smoothly in her longer fiction. As usual, though, her characters are caught between a public world of semi-privation and a rich internal world where urges towards sympathy and charity struggle against selfishness and a fear that others will abuse the sympathy extended to them. Ruby Redinger is explicit in her reference to the story as an “allegorical autobiography,” which she then goes on to read symptomatically based on the dates and details of the plot. In Ruby Redinger, *George Eliot: The Emergent Self*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1975) 401. U.C. Knoepfelmacher had already linked the composition of the story to its production when he analyzed the similarities between Latimer’s milieu and Eliot’s trips to the Continent, as well as the depression she felt on her sister Chrissey’s death and its resonance with the story. Looking at the effects of the story, though, creates a more tenable position than searching for “its exact origins in George Eliot’s personal life.” In U.C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot’s Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 138. The best sustained reading of the parallels between the author and the character is in Gilbert and Gubar’s chapter “Captivity and Consciousness in George Eliot’s Fiction.” In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 445-77.

accounts further argue, allows for Eliot's interrogation of her own artistic practice."⁸ Galvan overstates the universality of the critical acceptance situating Latimer as a transparent representation of Eliot, but she is correct that some slippage between the biography and the story underwrites all of the most well-known readings (and she lists Beer, Swann, Eagleton, Garrett, et al. as support). Whether everyone is or is not willing to accept Latimer as Eliot—a notion which is at best contentious—criticism has tended to neglect the external reference. Latimer addresses an audience directly. The current need is to identify the sort of ideal reader who might have met either artist's (Latimer's or Eliot's) plea for sympathy and to interpret the echoes of authorship in Latimer's situation according to that quest for understanding. "The Lifted Veil" stages the struggle of someone wrestling with the issues of self-knowledge, weighed down by what he views as the essential selfishness of those around him. Of course, there is solipsism—maybe even narcissism—predicating his claims, and of course, readers can and should be suspicious of what he says. But as Terry Eagleton argues, "We can't believe it and yet we must, for this is a 'realist' tale, and within those conventions what Latimer as observer says goes."⁹ I am reading Eagleton somewhat against his own eventual argument by taking his statement as axiomatic. Realism is realism is realism, and Eliot is a realist author—even if this story stretches the bounds of reality. It is more interesting to attend to Eagleton's opinions on the epistemological trap of the omniscient

⁸ Jill Galvan, "The Narrator as Medium in George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil,'" *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Social, Political, and Cultural Studies* 48.2 (2006) 240.

⁹ Eagleton goes on to problematize this reading, and his work is compelling and convincing that a psychoanalytic interpretation, paying attention to the disappearance of Latimer's idealized mother and to the bad faith of many of his observations, reveals the therapeutic work that Latimer fails to perform. Terry Eagleton, "Power and Knowledge in 'The Lifted Veil,'" *Literature and History* 9.1 (1983) 58. However, Eagleton's point stands as stated: "The Lifted Veil" is essentially realist fiction from an author who worked primarily in that mode. We are within our bounds to interpret it as realist—at least within its own diegesis. This simplification works especially well if readers accept William Hyde's assertion that "Realism is the basis, not the whole, of George Eliot's aim in fiction" (161).

narrator in the voice of a man who is, or at least believes himself to be, also omniscient: “Nobody can gainsay Latimer just as nobody can gainsay Eliot, and this is the curse of omniscience, the epistemological circle of a bourgeois science which threatens to swallow the whole of Nature down its ravenous maw and so ends up knowing only its own innards. Fiction is a form of paranoia.”¹⁰ Here, the paranoid fantasy is manifest in the fear that ‘we will be unable to give Latimer our sympathy—we who read his story.’ Paranoia invokes a system of total relevance. Therefore, if we are willing to accept the realist claims of “The Lifted Veil” at all, we are interpellated into the fantasy and must read ourselves as potentially dangerous because we might fail Latimer and further injure him by our failure.

The narrative of “The Lifted Veil” provides an answer to the problems of social interpretation and of necessary selfishness—that active power which would protect someone from Latimer’s telepathy or which would protect that same someone from malicious gossip or any other form of out-of-control interpretation. Critics have tended to miss certain things about Latimer’s experience. They mostly loathe him and try to avoid staying in his head for very long.¹¹ As a result, they focus on one of two points: philosophical readings obsess over Latimer’s intermittent prophetic power, and historical ones go after the revivification experiment through blood transfusion at the end of the plot. However, Latimer’s most consistent gift is the power to hear the thoughts of other people, but since he has not first performed the necessary work of self-knowing, he is precisely the sort of unsympathetic

¹⁰ Eagleton, “Power and Knowledge” 60.

¹¹ Eagleton clearly dislikes Latimer, and Charles Swann suggests that Eliot feared him as she wrote him. One notable exception is Millie M. Kidd, who bucks the common trend of deriding Latimer by asserting, enthusiastically even, that readers love him. “At no point do we survey him from an intellectually or morally superior position; at no time is there an indication that he is at fault or deluded about his situation.” In Millie M. Kidd, “In Defense of Latimer: A Study of Narrative Technique in George Eliot’s ‘The Lifted Veil,’” *Victorian Newsletter* 79 (1991) 28. I, unfortunately, cannot agree with this warmth towards a character so loaded with negative qualities, but I do think that most readers fall somewhere between the poles and so will avoid any polemical stance.

listener he fears.¹² His attempts at self-protection therefore take the negative forms of withdrawing from others and of refusing to examine himself. Latimer describes his unwanted clairvoyance as an “obtrusion on my mind of the mental process going forward in first one person, and then another” (13). His gift more rarely manifests as a series of premonitions, like the one that informs him that the beautiful Bertha one day both will be his wife and that she will detest him. Eliot takes the undercurrent of resentment that occasionally surrounds the figure of the artist and literalizes it. The people around him see Latimer as selfish and egotistical, in that he is frail and demanding of them. He sees himself as increasingly self-less. The more his clairvoyance manifests, the more his own psyche is over-written by other people’s thoughts and feelings. He is available for suspicion in many ways: for other characters, for himself, for the reader, and as a screen for Eliot herself.¹³ All of these suspicions address the epistemological question of who can have access to the deepest understanding of the self and of what the consequences of such access are. Latimer is afraid of the insight he has into the minds of those around him, but his fear masks an

¹² Critics have under-studied Latimer’s telepathy in their rush to describe his prophetic vision, and most particularly his vision of Prague. For example, Swann mistakenly inverts the frequency of Latimer’s two gifts when he states that he “doesn’t only possess foresight . . . ; he also has an intermittent telepathic insight into the minds of others” (40). Swan’s focus is exactly backwards since Latimer only receives a few visions of the future but has at least two multi-year periods of nearly constant telepathic channeling. In another common move, Beryl Gray describes Eliot’s use of the climactic blood transfusion as a result of her personal knowledge of Dr. William Gregory’s experiments, and Kate Flint expands upon the importance of the transfusion scene, adding in the sexual charge of transfusing a man’s blood into a woman’s body. In Beryl M Gray, “Pseudoscience and George Eliot’s ‘The Lifted Veil,’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 36.4 (1982) 407-23 and Kate Flint, “Blood, Bodies, and ‘The Lifted Veil,’” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51.4 (1997) 455-73. Gray also discusses the prevalence of the pseudosciences of phrenology (which is explicit in the story) and mesmerism (which remains implicit). The strongest reading of the latter is Malcolm Bull’s explanation of the ways that Bertha magnetizes Latimer. He provides an alternate reading of Latimer’s “double consciousness” as a condition of his “enslavement” to Bertha rather than a doubling of his own mind with those which he reads. Malcolm Bull, “Mastery and Slavery in ‘The Lifted Veil,’” *Essays in Criticism* 48 (1998) 244-61.

¹³ Swann makes one of the most compelling arguments for linking Eliot’s biography to this story when he writes, “It is significant that Eliot interrupted her work on *The Mill on the Floss* (which drew so heavily on her childhood memories) to write ‘The Lifted Veil’: she interrupted her autobiography in the form of fiction to write a fiction in the form of autobiography” (43). The only other fictional autobiography she will ever write will be *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* nineteen years later, and that book’s narrator is only like Eliot insofar as he is a mouthpiece for Eliot’s arguments, and he is a writer.

anxiety that the gaze might be returned.¹⁴ What if his readers judge him harshly?

Latimer is far from being the only major artist figure in George Eliot's fiction. The *Scenes of Clerical Life* have Caterina Sarti, the singer; *The Mill on the Floss* has Philip Wakem, the painter; *Middlemarch* has Will Ladislaw (as well the murderer-actress Laure), who also paints; and *Daniel Deronda* has a singer (Mirah Lapidoth), a failed singer (Gwendolen Harleth), an actress (the Princess Alcharisi), and yet another painter (Hans Meyrick). Many of her non-artists show artistic sensibilities: Adam Bede is an expert craftsman, Maggie Tulliver sews and is as sensitive as any artist, Tito Melema is a con artist and "spin doctor," and Esther Lyon has artistic sensibilities. In "The Lifted Veil," though, the artist is the main character, and the story deals explicitly with the ways in which knowledge and selfishness interact. It is worth specifically noting that Latimer is the only first-person narrator in all of Eliot's fiction who is also an artist (discounting Theophrastus Such, who is a failed author).

"The Lifted Veil" may be the work in which Eliot most clearly ventriloquizes her own thoughts on the artistic process, something she does to a lesser degree in many other works. As Carroll Viera argues,

George Eliot undoubtedly, consciously or subconsciously, was attempting to resolve ambivalent feelings about her own role as an artist. Perhaps because her attempt was largely unsuccessful, in her subsequent fiction she avoided contradictory statements about art in her own voice but instead relied upon the commentary of characters with artistic temperaments to displace her narrative intrusions.¹⁵

Along with *Scenes of Clerical Life* (and to a lesser degree, "Brother Jacob"), "The Lifted

¹⁴ Kate Flint suggestively states, "The horrors of looking, voluntarily, or involuntarily, 'behind the veil' inform the novella" (456). She goes on to trouble gaze theory's place in the story by invoking Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*: "The task of the medical clinic . . . was no longer . . . simply to read the visible; it has to discover its secrets" (quoted in Flint 457).

¹⁵ Carroll Viera, "'The Lifted Veil' and George Eliot's Aesthetic," *SEL* 24.4 (1984) 764.

Veil” allows Eliot the freedom to develop the techniques and themes which will interest her in the novels. The most important of these is the omniscient narrator who provides a bedrock of real understanding in a world where accurate knowledge is hard to come by. The epistemological question is answered with certainty—Latimer truly knows what everyone around him thinks and accurately forecasts his own death.

Questions of ontology and ethics go unresolved since the reader is never told the origin of Latimer’s powers, and indeed, Eliot studiously avoids the predestinarian dilemma of total clairvoyance by focusing on the interpersonal ramifications of the same. Although Latimer tells us that he was “completely swayed by the sense that [he] was in the grasp of unknown forces,” the “forces” seem biological rather than supernatural when the story ends with an experiment in galvanization and reanimation (33). Ethical questions are moot since Latimer believes everyone around him to be completely self-absorbed and excuses his morbid self-preoccupation on grounds of this universality. He merely bemoans the others’ selfishness and the way that they press against him while failing to recognize that his self-preoccupation and desire to protect himself amount to another type of the selfishness he criticizes in them.

Take, for example, Latimer’s early claim that he had “never been encouraged to trust much in the sympathy of [his] fellow-men” (4). He explains that he was good to other people, but that his sensitivity informed him of other people’s essential selfishness. The narrative begins as Latimer writes through the night before the hour he has predicted for his own death. He thinks that he has been treated unfairly by life and by the people around him. “It is only the story of my life that will perhaps win a little more sympathy from strangers when I am dead, than I ever believed it would obtain from my friends while I was living” (4).

The life review, then, is a self-aware attempt to win sympathy. It reveals the potential power of narrative activity and gives an explanation for the common need to tell stories. If the world cannot understand, or at least has not yet understood us, why then, we simply need to tell the world how it should have “read” us the first time around. The action of narration becomes wish fulfillment since it can tell people just how badly they wrong others whose own opinions of themselves differ from what the public knows. Storytelling is therefore a forgivable narcissism because it allows a privileged glance through the author’s “inner eye” into an internal reality which is recognizably different from the external one of other people’s perceptions. Storytelling in this case allows the telepath to reveal himself to those he observes.

III. The Artist Unbound and the Fear of the Reader: Latimer

There comes an apocalyptic moment in “The Lifted Veil” when Latimer’s artistic “inner eye” of imaginative creation and his “inner ear” of powerful receptivity supernaturally transform into active powers of psychic projection and empathy, but they ironically undermine rather than enhance his artistic aspirations. At first, he is overjoyed because he misunderstands what is happening and thinks that he is becoming rapidly more capable of imagining unseen places and things. He asks if it were “the poet’s nature in [him], hitherto only a troubled yearning sensibility, now manifesting itself suddenly as spontaneous creation?” (10). He quickly learns that his new abilities are less generative than he would like. Instead of seeing his own imagination more clearly, he picks up the ability to see into other people’s imaginations. These imaginations reveal themselves as selfish versions of the external reality which he has already pushed away. And once realizing his newfound power,

he comes to detest it, especially since he cannot choose to ignore it or to turn it off. The trouble for Latimer is partially that people are so much worse than he had imagined them to be. It is as if the power he now has—that of the artist amplified—and the weakness of his body combine to wrack him.¹⁶ He is unable to control his visions, and he has already revealed his physical frailty, writing: “I thoroughly disliked my own *physique*, and nothing but the belief that it was a condition of poetic genius reconciled me to it,” but this new magnification of his empathic abilities overwhelms him (14).

Although frustrated in achieving the creative work of an artist, Latimer comes to embody some of the alienating attributes that made the artist stand apart from society. What he despises in himself are the same qualities that make the public condescending to the artist: he is essentially effete.¹⁷ Latimer is almost hyperbolically passive and inert because he develops into little more than a stage for other people’s stupidly dull tragedies to play out. He whines that he “had begun to taste something of the horror that belongs to the lot of a human being whose nature is not adjusted to simple human conditions” (12). These “simple human conditions” might be either the callousness of society and its discomfort with anyone who does not fit in, or they might be the conditions of society lying about that same callousness in order to maintain a veneer of civility. In either case, Latimer is too perceptive to be happy and so feels displaced.

Latimer is prey to a number of fears generated by his endangered selfhood. As a narrator, he is scared to realize that even his wished-for sympathetic audience might not

¹⁶ Redinger argues that Latimer’s greatest failure is as an artist because of “the underlying psychic paralysis which robs him of the power of artistic creation that alone could have salvaged his life” (403). Eliot is the stronger artist for having worked through such doubts on multiple occasions.

¹⁷ The language of difference and discomfort introduced here suggests a queer reading of Latimer’s situation that is partially resolved in Bertha’s later reactions to him. Read this way, Latimer’s dream of finding acceptance becomes a quest for an imagined community.

understand what it means to be cut out for something other than “simple human conditions.” Latimer has more immediate fears, too, and these work on multiple levels. He is afraid of losing himself in the projection of other people’s minds into his, and he is nauseated by his inability to stop himself from looking/hearing. “My self-consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation, and we begin to weep, less under the sense of our suffering than at the thought of it” (24). He is afraid that he will not be able to hear his own voice or that he will not be able to keep from acting on his secret knowledge. These are two conflicting issues, but they are bound together. In the first case, Latimer fears a loss of self. In the second, he fears an unbounded magnification of self. At one point, he hears a question in someone else’s head, and he answers it aloud. He becomes terrified that someone will notice his intrusion into the other person’s mind. “But I magnified, as usual, the impression any word or deed of mine could produce on others; for no one gave any sign of having noticed my interruption as more than a rudeness, to be forgiven me on the score of my feeble nervous condition” (18). Being sensitive, he momentarily forgets that other people are not as paranoid or pathologically aware of their interactions as he is. Here, and elsewhere, Latimer’s ability is coded as a perversion that must be hidden from view. His fearful protection of the secret gets mixed with his protection of his artistic identity and his “feeble nervous condition.”

Latimer’s abilities cause him to withdraw from other people and to wait for a time when either the ability will fade or he will find some wished-for sympathetic listener. He writes that “The horror I had of again breaking in on the privacy of another soul, made me, by an irrational instinct, draw the shroud of concealment more closely around my own, as we

automatically perform the gesture we feel to be wanting in another” (38). It is as if he sees everyone around him to be mentally naked, and he wishes that they would cover themselves. The only clothed people are those whom he has not yet met: to wit, the readers. His reflexive action foretells a growing tendency not just to dissembling but to a foreclosure of the action of self-knowing. The greater part of Latimer’s frustration is exercised against the dullness of knowing that everyone (notwithstanding him, apparently) is selfish and vain. Social order is a comfortable lie told to gloss over the chaotic jumble of individual desires and pettinesses:

But this superadded consciousness, wearying and annoying enough when it urged on me the trivial experience of indifferent people, became an intense pain and grief when it seemed to be opening to me the souls of those who were in a close relation to me—when the rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds, which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as if thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap. (14)

The “microscopic vision” which he has and which he abhors becomes an abominable danger to his readers. If Latimer can look into the skulls of other characters, why not assume that he can look out of the page at the reader with his microscope eyes?¹⁸ This paranoid fantasy of dangerous reading may seem extreme until the reader worries just how far Latimer has seen into the future. Did he see me holding the book? Did he know my mind? Of course, the story is speculative fiction, but having accepted its claims to realism, I am temporarily drawn into its world. Even when he is reduced to his properly fictional status, Latimer remains a figure for the discomfort generated by people with overdeveloped intuition. An artist might

¹⁸ Eliot was certainly familiar with Wordsworth’s poem “The Tables Turned,” and Latimer’s mind’s startling acuity suggests the lines from the poem: “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;/ Our meddling intellect/ Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—/ We murder to dissect.” The reader fears being similarly pinned and studied.

paint me or write about me at any time. An essayist might expose me, or in some other unforeseen way, I might become subject to “microscopic vision,” and so I distrust the artists around me.

Poor Latimer’s “superadded consciousness” energizes the problems of omniscience and predestination. He cannot not see a lie—and he probably knew it was coming before it was uttered. His frustration, his “intense pain and grief,” emerges most pointedly in the contrast between the artificially imposed social duties of family, friend, and husband with his painful awareness of the “suppressed egoism” that they fail to hide. Latimer looks at his father who “was very careful in fulfilling what he regarded as a parent’s duties,” and he sees the father doing his “duties” so that society will continue to think well of him. In other words, the father’s motives are impure since he does what he has to do to maintain a social reputation and not out of any paternal affection (5). The social contract is pitifully flimsy to a man gifted with the power to read between its lines. He sees courtesy as just a “leaflet” trying vainly to hide the “fermenting heap” of reality.

Latimer views identity as a potentially fluid category. In his early days as an artist, before his mind tuned into other people’s constant internal chatter, he enjoyed interacting with others. He reminisces that he had been “hungry for human deeds and human emotions” (6). Even then, he was sensitive to different types of people and castigated his father for being “one of those people who are always like themselves from day to day, who are uninfluenced by the weather, and neither know melancholy nor high spirits” (5). Predictability is dull. So Latimer’s later depression comes in realizing that all individuals are essentially alike. His psychic abilities reveal that there is no variety. As an artist, he is profoundly alienated because he had always before listened for an echo of his own feelings.

“A poet pours forth his song and *believes* in the listening ear and answering soul, to which his song will be floated sooner or later” (7). He learns that there is no echo because he is the only person in the world who is capable of feeling what he feels. In fact, he underscores his isolation with that early question “Are you unable to imagine this double consciousness?” (21). His doubt at the probable answer is quite reasonable. At the same time, Latimer needs his belief in a sympathetic reader to allow him to continue. Gillian Beer comes close to this point when she writes, “The reader is the living variable within the fictive world. That warm and urgent tone of the narrator addressing us in George Eliot’s novels is a kind of wooing of the real world beyond; our involvement is necessary not only to educate *us* but to sustain the writer ontologically.”¹⁹ Latimer’s dependency on his readers therefore reflects the normative mentality of any narrator. Nevertheless, he comes across as bizarre to a reader familiar with George Eliot’s work since he is so unlike her other heroes. One explanation is suggested by U.C. Knoepfelmacher: “Although Latimer acts out a nihilism which George Eliot at her most pessimistic obviously shared, he also becomes the vehicle for the moralism always present in her fiction.”²⁰ Readers are unaccustomed to seeing Eliot’s moralism come entirely from the point of view of an unpleasant—or at least depressed—character. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar believe that Latimer “is so disagreeable that it is difficult to determine his relationship to the author,” despite other attempts to clarify it.²¹

The hunt for an opaque mind, for a potentially new type of person, one who might truly be an individual and have an unplummable depth of feeling, brings Latimer to Bertha.

¹⁹ Gillian Beer, “Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and ‘The Lifted Veil,’” *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch*, ed. Adam Ian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975) 97.

²⁰ Knoepfelmacher *The Limits of Realism* 152.

²¹ Gilbert and Gubar 446.

His hope that she can somehow remain human in spite of his inhumanizing power is just as likely to be disappointed as any other hope which is predicated uniquely on the longevity of a mystery. Unfortunately for his current wishes, Bertha is Latimer's older brother's fiancée. The reader quickly learns that brother Alfred is the worst sort of dullard imaginable. For Latimer, this imagination must necessarily include the brother's essential and blithe conceitedness. Addressing him mentally, Latimer says, "It is to such as you that the good of this world falls: ready dullness, healthy selfishness, good-tempered conceit—these are the keys to happiness" (25). Practiced, sophisticated readers are certain that Latimer will prevail, projecting forward before themselves the sympathetic victims of Hindley Earnshaw, Bute Crawley, Mrs. Joe Gargery, and so many others. This time around, as usual, the sibling *cum* impediment is eliminated—he falls off a horse and dies—and the younger brother inherits his fortune and, somehow, his fiancée. Eliot has a surprise, though. She knows the tradition, too, and she manipulates the over-plotted "erasure of the older sibling" theme to reveal the dirty ambition of a narrator who symbolically does away with his rival in his own story.²²

Latimer thinks of his brother and says, "The quick thought came, that my selfishness was even stronger than his—it was only a suffering selfishness instead of an enjoying

²² This overplotted theme is the central point in Carol Christ, "Aggression and Providential Death in George Eliot's Fiction," *Novel* 9.2 (1976) 130-140. Her summary of the phenomenon is worth quoting at length for both its pithy exactitude and its completeness.

People die conveniently in George Eliot's novels. Grandcourt falls off a boat and drowns at the moment when Gwendolyn [sic] finds her murderous fantasies unbearable. In "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" Anthony collapses immediately before Caterina comes to the Rookery with the intention of killing him. Casaubon dies immediately before Dorothea comes to the garden to promise against her will to obey her husband's wishes after his death. By dying at the right moment, Robert Dempster saves Janet, and Tito saves Romola from their decisions to rededicate their lives to their marital duties. By falling in a brook, Thias Bede saves his sons from the burden of a drunken father; and Maggie Tulliver saves herself from a life of pain and privation and finds reconciliation with her brother in their deaths in the flood. Few of these deaths are improbable or merely accidental. . . . It is not so much the deaths themselves that strike us as strange as the fact that they occur at such propitious moments." (130)

Latimer's brother's death strikes the reader as more than "propitious": we might almost say premeditated.

one” (25). Latimer backs away from this self-knowledge and refuses to acknowledge his complicity. He rejects the call to self-awareness issued by so many of Eliot’s less personalized narrators and therefore shows himself to be inadequate to interpret properly all the deep data available to him from other people’s minds.²³ He is also unwilling to realize fully the importance of his masochistic desire to suffer artistically. Whereas he claims that he “went dumbly through that stage of the poet’s suffering, in which he feels the delicious pang of utterance, and makes an image of his sorrows,” he fails to recognize his pleasure in suffering and in making that suffering visible to other people (25).²⁴ Latimer then says

My insight into the minds of those around me was becoming dimmer and more fitful, and the ideas that crowded my double consciousness became less and less dependent on any personal contact. All that was personal in me seemed to be suffering a gradual death, so that I was losing the organ through which the personal agitations and projects of others could affect me. (35)

His failure to understand himself dramatizes the failure to understand he expects from his readers. If they do not perform the work of self understanding, then they will be inadequate to perform the work of sympathy that he needs.²⁵ By turning away from understanding himself, he is able to silence his active power of telepathy.

The inverse possibility is tantalizing: if we attempt to know ourselves better, then we

²³ Eliot’s novel *Felix Holt: The Radical* explores the difficulty of living a truly self-reflective life: as an insult to phrenology, Mr. Lyon warns, “It is, I fear, but a vain show of fulfilling the heathen precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and too often leads to a self-estimate which will subsist in the absence of that fruit by which alone the quality of the tree is made evident” (67).

²⁴ This distortion of desire is remarked by Eagleton, and he links it to the death of desire itself. “Foreseeing your own death is a striking figure of the tale’s allegorical purposes, for there could be no sharper disjoining of knowledge and power. The more your knowledge veers into determinism, the more it will negate historical desire and thus yield you a purely Schopenhaurian form of mastery, reduce you like the later Latimer to the opposite of the hysteric, who has ceased even to desire desire” (“Power and Knowledge” 56-57).

²⁵ The plot of improvement and healing through sympathetic identification was modeled in “Janet’s Repentance” and *Adam Bede*, and it will be repeated frequently. The most striking parallels to the two cases already named are in *The Mill on the Floss* and in *Daniel Deronda* although all of Eliot’s works take up the motif in one way or another.

will be better at interpreting the actions of others. Clearly, supernatural telepathy is not likely, but Latimer's failure and eventual "success" (although that term grants him more happiness than he is likely ever to have) provide a path to sympathetic identification as a social duty for Eliot's readers. Latimer's power of perception fades away completely before eventually returning in earnest. At that point he mentions his fear, calling it "terror at the approach of my old insight" (42). Is it just his insight into other people that scares him, or is he also afraid of looking too closely at himself? If his ability fades when he loses awareness of himself, then it makes sense that it becomes clearer as his awareness of himself returns. Perhaps he is aware that he would not be the sympathetic reader who he hopes will pick up his tale. Eliot dramatizes the ultimate amplification of awareness in a famous passage from *Middlemarch*: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity."²⁶ Edward Hurley points to this same passage, asserting that "Latimer had been deafened by the 'roar of sound' in the triviality and frivolity that his insight made him conscious of . . . He shows what happens when stupidity is replaced by a penetrating mind."²⁷ Latimer's fear of his psychic power makes him afraid of his normal human powers of interpretation and attention. He then further 'wads himself with stupidity' to avoid taking any more notice.

Latimer's gift should be a boon to one of Eliot's characters engaged in the process of sympathetic identification that she so frequently urges. After all, Latimer is not limited in the

²⁶ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1994) 194.

²⁷ Edward Hurley, "'The Lifted Veil': George Eliot as Anti-Intellectual," *Studies in Short Fiction* 5 (1968) 257-62.

way that normal people are. John McGowan makes a relevant claim in regard to our limitations: “The first obstacle to knowledge lies in the limited perspective of the self, a perspective further hampered by the tendency of desire to lead perception.”²⁸ Latimer is miraculously freed from the first difficulty, but he is completely under the control of his desire not to recognize in himself the faults which he projects onto others. The problem of the aware self, one who is more fully individuated than average, is that it is in danger of becoming aware of its own shortcomings, but this danger is unavoidable in developing the ability to interpret other people correctly. Latimer’s real problem is that the process happens backwards for him. He does not get to know himself before being granted unlimited access to other people’s thoughts. As a result, he knows that other people are flawed and lacking in sympathy, but he refuses to notice that he is deeply flawed in the same manner. He resists this knowledge by hinting at his selfish desires and then moving quickly away from them. Latimer records other people’s traces in a passive, empathic way like a still pool or a tympanum picking up vibrations, but he is supremely complacent in his inactivity. His foreknowledge of events and the fact that readers know that the story is circular together put readers into a strange narrative predicament. Charles Swann posits that Latimer is “comparable to . . . a reader and re-reader of a story. When we re-read, we have memories of what is to come, and we don’t (as Latimer doesn’t) imagine trying to change the end of a book.”²⁹ Therefore, Eliot’s audience is put into a strange place of knowing and not knowing. The unsettling force compels them to expend their energy in other tasks of comprehension.

Latimer tries to absolve and explain himself by saying that his attentions are or should

²⁸ John McGowan, “The Turn of George Eliot’s Realism,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.2 (1980) 186.

²⁹ Swann 53.

have been entirely altruistic: “We try to believe that the egoism within us would easily have been melted” if “we” only knew how to act on another’s behalf (22).³⁰ Latimer thinks that this idealization of sympathetic abilities is just another lie people tell to function socially. By confessing his sin of inaction he thinks he is expiating it, but to the reader, it comes across more like a projection onto the world of his own self-absorption. Latimer’s certitude of his epistemologically privileged view allows him to think the projection is justified because he sees other people’s secret motivations. The question is whether to trust his judgment.

Whether he is reliable or not, Latimer accurately reflects the criticism of artists and prophets. If they are so sensitive to the condition of the world and to changes in currents of thought, why can they not always warn everyone else of upcoming dangers? Why will they not act on their knowledge instead of simply writing about it? The answer is the twofold answer to Latimer’s dilemma: either he is wrong, and his abilities are called into question, or he is right but too selfish to be bothered with someone else’s suffering. He finds the second answer more convincing and reproaches himself for his brother’s accident. It is not clear whether he thinks that he willed the horse to buck and brought it about by some psychic fiat or whether he simply thinks he could have prevented the disaster by warning his brother.³¹

³⁰ The supernatural caveat here—“if only I had approached things differently, everything would have turned out for the best, and you would all have loved me”—is echoed thirty years later in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. “Had I approached my discovery in a more noble spirit, had I risked the experiment while under the empire of generous or pious aspirations, all must have been otherwise, and from these agonies of death and birth, I had come forth an angel instead of a fiend.” Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Other Tales of Terror* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 2003) 59. The mechanisms of stories that introduce supernatural effects to the actions of characters with suspicious motives allow those characters to lie to themselves about the causes of action. Although they may lie to themselves, readers’ intuition alerts them to the sophistry of the characters. What happens in the stories happens because the monsters are who the characters really are. Their “innocent” alter egos are what the speculative fiction has allowed the author to strip away.

³¹ Carol Christ makes “The Lifted Veil” the endpoint in her exhaustive account of providential deaths in Eliot’s fiction. Latimer’s story is useful to her as the answer to her claim that “the death in every case occurs as the magical fulfillment of a wish in much the same way as a child desires and fears that wishing someone dead will in fact kill him. . . . Indeed, Eliot uses that magical connection as a means of prohibiting aggression in many of

He promises himself that he will be more active in the future; he will prove that his sympathy has value. But then again, “Our tenderness and self-renunciation seem strong when our egoism has had its day—when, after our mean striving for a triumph that is to be another’s loss, the triumph comes suddenly, and we shudder at it, because it is held out by the chill hand of death” (22). The price of knowledge is very high, and it is often linked to death. Latimer knows the hour of his own death; he knows the eventual hatred his wife will have for him; and here he knows that he might have saved his brother. His abilities are bought too dearly since they must eventually cost him either an emotional death through a willed self-ignorance or depressed fatalism in constant awareness of others’ shallowness. This latter possibility is linked to an irrepressible death drive.

Latimer will be punished for his Cain and Abel fantasy. He gets to have Bertha, but his peace with her does not last long. Before the fatal moment of transfer from one brother to the other, Latimer foresees that Bertha will marry him and that she will come to hate him. He sells his future complacency for the momentary happiness of love with the unpredictable Bertha, just as he exposes himself to the probable disdain of his audience in exchange for the momentary relief of confession.³² Eliot develops the theme of love turning to hatred in tandem with the sensitive, suffering soul who is too perceptive for his own happiness. The

her characters;” leading them to use their fear “to conquer aggression and to lead a life more heedful of the needs and sufferings of others than of their own desires” (131). Latimer provides an interesting limit case to Carol Christ because “The Lifted Veil” is the only place where the “magical connection” is specifically empowered by the fantastical possibilities of the diegesis. Her conclusions rest with the pessimistic evaluation that “Lattimer’s [sic] powers of extra-sensory perception reveal that love rests upon the ignorance of its object; that full knowledge of our fellow men only brings full contempt. Death offers the only protection both from hating and from being hated” (139). Although essentially true, this interpretation ignores the story’s potential to act as a cautionary tale.

³² There is more work to be done here on the confessional nature of the story. Given that Freud’s “talking cure” was not yet familiar as a trope for exploiting, the religious expiatory interpretation provides a strong alternative reading for the text. After all, Eliot had just written three short stories detailing the lives of rural clergy and a novel focusing on a branch of evangelical Christians. Reading “The Lifted Veil” as a sinner speaking to God or to a confessor is a logical next step.

hatred is literalized here and eventually ends with poison and attempted murder. But the “lifting of the veil” in the story’s title happens by degrees. Latimer does not see at the beginning that Bertha has a “barren selfish soul” like everyone else (21). Eventually, he will learn that she embodies the worst possibilities of his potential audience. Both Bertha and the reader are obscure to Latimer’s second sight, but what if the readers turn out as badly as she does? Latimer says at first that “Through all these crowded excited months, Bertha’s inward self remained shrouded from me” (31). The fall from this condition of naïve ignorance provides Latimer with a heuristic for future interactions. In other words, his hopes are probably in vain when he meets new people.

The revelation of Bertha’s shallowness is the real horror of the story because it is just as inevitable as the monster or demon foreshadowed in the grislier tales of the horror tradition. “I saw all round the narrow room of this woman’s soul . . . saw the light floating vanities of the girl defining themselves into the systematic coquetry, the scheming selfishness, of the woman—saw repulsion and antipathy harden into cruel hatred, giving pain only for the sake of wreaking itself” (32). Even while Eliot describes Latimer’s gradual realization of Bertha’s transparency, she provides a clue to the redemption of future characters like Rosamond Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth. Vanity is frivolous, but selfishness is much worse. As long as she is just vain, Latimer and, by extension, the reader can forgive Bertha. Vanity is “floating” and vaporous, capable of touching and coloring a character. Selfishness is the crystalline form which reduces characters to a stereotype. Latimer is frustrated by this latter form, and he wishes that people had more of a power of distinctiveness, that is, the power to resist his knowledge of them. The language of necessary selfishness is awkward since Latimer so badly detests all the familiar forms of selfishness,

but it is really what he is wishing for. He wants people to be able to control the way that he reads them, but they cannot. Latimer becomes an emblem of people who think they can control a master narrative or can use a single critical tool to understand the motives of everyone around them. This mistaken belief in privilege suggests an unwillingness to examine the tools or experience that generates the simplistic and dualistic either/or reading. It reduces the particularity of others' experience to a generalizable mass and is almost absolute in its single-minded obtuseness. This mechanism of oversimplification is at work in many other reductive interpretive strategies, and the broad set of techniques I use here could be applied fruitfully elsewhere.

Latimer's horror of himself and his inability to shut out other voices gets externalized in his visceral disgust at his wife's "odious finish of bold, self-confident coquetry" (35). Her artificiality reflects the shallowness of society's "coquetry," pretending that it is deeper and less self-occupied than it really is, but his revulsion with her can only mask his revulsion with himself for a short while. When Latimer's powers return, the reader suddenly realizes what he has meant all along. "And then the curse of insight—of my double consciousness, came again, and has never left me" (42). The "double consciousness" is less dangerous as a way of developing a sympathetic understanding of others' shallowness than it is in revealing Latimer's own selfishness. "I know all their narrow thoughts, their feeble regard, their half-wearied pity" (42). "They" have become "he." His ultimate fear is coming into clearer focus: his audience will turn out just as bad, not as the people he has already judged, but as bad as he himself is.

IV. The Anxiety of Readership

Although we as readers may not share his gift, we are familiar with Latimer's problem. We are afraid to see ourselves mirrored too accurately in what we read. This fear displaces onto the artist him or herself and contributes to the popular affection for lighter reading. Swann is convincing when he describes the oddity of reading "The Lifted Veil." The narrative anticipates "the reader's expectations of the way the story might go, by making that elimination of expectation and suspense into a subject of the story. The normal questions that a reader 'asks' a story (such as 'What will happen next?') are, with one or two exceptions, answered almost before they can be asked."³³ If Eliot's readers are not busy with the usual tasks of active reading, then she must expect them to invest their efforts elsewhere. Latimer explains, "When people are well known to each other, they talk rather of what befalls them externally, leaving their feelings and sentiments to be inferred" (30). Although Eliot's fans might like to see this reasoning as a valid argument for the newsy sorts of epilogues at the end of her novels, the unhappier flipside is that shallower characters make readers more comfortable. The better artists and the ones with too much acuity perhaps tell readers too much about what 'befalls them internally.' Like Latimer, they may feel a "horror [of] breaking in on the privacy of another soul." Or they may feel the discomfort that Bertha feels late in "The Lifted Veil" when she realizes that her artistic husband is looking at her and that in some horrible and perverted way, he knows too much. This point is a tricky one because it reveals that knowing too much about a person can be just as perilous as knowing too little. Pairing this hyper-awareness to internal causes is exactly contradictory to what

³³ Swann 45.

Maynard Gilfil tells Caterina when he says that “We don’t see each other’s whole nature.”³⁴

In that story, only God has the power that Latimer has in this one, but God is also an impossibly well-integrated Subject with full self-knowledge and full omniscience. The wished-for understanding is worse than ignorance if there is no sympathy behind it. Latimer is a failure because of his inability to reconcile his own selfishness with what he sees in other people. Thomas Albrecht typifies the development of sympathy as a successful encounter with difference that looks optimistically for the similarities within the different object. “Insofar as sympathy is based on an assumed similarity between the other and oneself, it effectively collapses the distinction between itself and egotism.”³⁵ Latimer’s unmediated access and his unwillingness to look for similarity destroy any chance for him to develop sympathy and leave him in the position of the merely egotistical.

If Latimer fails by not recognizing his essential selfishness reflected back at him, and if he therefore does not come to know himself, can the reader hope to do any better? It is one of the curious traits of nineteenth-century fiction, whether sentimental, fantastical, or otherwise, that the authors believed in the audience’s earnest desire to be and do good. Ultimately, “The Lifted Veil” is a cautionary tale with at least four important lessons about realism. (1) True omniscience, the grail of the realist author, would undermine art. (2) Omniscience eliminates creation and imagination. It also creates a paranoid and self-policing subject, afraid of self revelation. (3) Reality is both potentially tedious and potentially dangerous. (4) Literary omniscience remains a figure for something actually very different from true omniscience. Being “good” readers—hopefully more sympathetic than

³⁴ Eliot “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” 185.

³⁵ Albrecht 454.

Latimer, anyway—we can move forward with our imperfect knowledge and with our illusions intact. Our inability to read one another perfectly sends us on a quest inward, into the only subjects we can know fully. If our difficult quest is successful, then we can move beyond mere egotism and past the dangers of self-denial into a healthier selfhood that will embrace both similarity and difference because they are forever new to us.

V. Virtue Unrewarded: George Eliot, Maggie Tulliver, and *The Mill on the Floss*

*A novel is in various ways a chain of displacements—displacement of its author into the invented role of the narrator, further displacement into the lives of imaginary characters whose thoughts and feelings are presented in that odd kind of ventriloquism called “indirect discourse,” displacement of the “origin” of the story (in historical events or in the life experience of the author) into the fictitious events of the narrative.*³⁶

Latimer’s claim that no one understands him is seductive until the point where it becomes so repetitive that readers recognize it as an adolescent complaint. Eventually, Latimer is revealed in a double bind. He hopes that readers will understand him, but he hopes that their understanding will come with a sympathy that he does not himself possess. He never had found anyone like this wished-for reader because he consistently refused to believe that anyone else’s self-attention was meaningful. Only his own was. Latimer is a reductionist because although motives are always multiple, he collapses them into singularities. Eliot herself is not a reductionist in her texts, and she resists simple interpretation. She allows most of her characters a degree of privacy, and she accepts that her readers do not want the critical apparatus exercised on them to its ultimate ends. Latimer’s story reveals that we require some mystery to retain our humanity. To introduce a religious trope that will come alive in *The Mill on the Floss*, too much knowledge leads to an

³⁶ J. Hillis Miller, “Narrative and History,” *ELH* 41.3 (1974) 456.

expulsion from the Garden. The knowledge of Good and Evil—or at least, of joy and sadness—forecloses absolute happiness because it reveals its limitations. In the terms of both “The Lifted Veil” and *The Mill on the Floss*, knowledge leads to death. What do the fates of her author-biographer Latimer and her sympathetic sufferer Maggie say about what Eliot thought of her own life?

Eliot shows characters who fail at things she does well. She relies on omniscient narrators to provide a complete worldview that was unavailable to her in her own life. Her narrators’ impossible knowledge seems to create anxiety for Eliot, and this anxiety dooms her characters to unhappiness. Because the narrator who sees all will see misery as often as joy, Eliot seems compelled to bring out all of the worst things that would happen in front of such a watcher’s eyes. To resist telling happy stories then becomes to successfully avoid abusing omniscience. “The Lifted Veil” is a cautionary tale in many ways. Latimer is not just a privileged narrator, he is also an artist, and at least in that way, he becomes a stand-in for Eliot herself. The anxiety that readers feel in his presence enacts the precariousness of Eliot’s position as an artist herself. After all, artists are destructive to their intimates. They reveal too much about their own lives, and they reveal too much about the people they know. Is all art tainted? If so, Eliot is guilty, too. The examples of Caterina, Latimer, Ladislav, and Gwendolen show that she was worried about the perceived selfishness in artist figures.³⁷ Their personalized labor and their intense dedication to a craft come at the expense of more socially validated work.³⁸

³⁷ If, as I believe, radically conceived individuals should be lumped in with the artist figures in this analysis, then several more characters (Dinah, Tito, Daniel, etc.) should be included in this list.

³⁸ Mary Poovey argues for a particular conception of Victorian artists as figures exempted from capitalism. “[B]ecause of received (and recently elaborated) associations between writing and the expression of wisdom or even ‘genius,’ the literary man seemed immune to market relations; telling universal truths, he was—or should have been—superior to fluctuations in taste or price. The literary man—and the representation of writing, in

These anxieties are potential answers for why Eliot's characters fail where she herself succeeded. Readers get privileged access to characters' minds in the way that God is said to in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story." However, society can only judge characters and people by their actions. If they have too much success, society ignores what might be private anxieties and tragedies because it can only see externals. Preventing jealousy by showing private tragedy then is avoidance on George Eliot's part. The stories enact suffering to inoculate the author herself against future suffering.³⁹ Even this interpretation follows the dialectic established in the previous chapter. It acknowledges social understanding as a potent force, recognizes that self-sacrifice might be helpful, and resolves that some measure of self-attention is the only protection against a lack of sympathy in others.

Because societies mobilize knowledge to categorize individuals,—and because knowledge is power, individuals are vulnerable to it—people have reasons why they might lie both to the people around them and to themselves. Eliot is interested in the way that

particular—therefore became the site at which the alienation endemic to all kinds of labor under capitalism simultaneously surfaced and was erased." Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1988) 13.

³⁹ My version of this story, in which Eliot puts up a defense against future suffering by going through some of its pain in the present is in line with—but also a development of—traditional criticism. Barbara Hardy provides the typical reading.

Finally [Maggie] is forced to discard all the illusions, after a crisis of moral choice and a thoroughly miserable and motivated renunciation which seems to reverse George Eliot's own moral choice in going to live with Lewes, while bringing out plainly the nature of her personal ethic. Maggie refuses to break an unofficial engagement, George Eliot committed adultery; Maggie renounces Stephen on the grounds of feeling and duty, to people not laws, George Eliot committed herself to Lewes for similar reasons. In the most subtle way the novel disguises, socializes, but also defends George Eliot's own social deviation. In another subtle way Maggie's extreme conversion to religious self-denial and subsequent partial return to her 'habitual self' reverses but uses George Eliot's own conversion from Christianity. The novel is a thoroughly externalized but very personal story.

Barbara Hardy, "Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot," *The Victorians*, The Penguin History of Literature Ser. 6, Arthur Pollard, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 193. More than simply representing her life in a modified, acceptable, fictional form, I believe that Eliot was working through these issues in the character of Maggie, and she was arguing for the appropriateness of her own choice in a context that was rather different from St. Ogg's.

people do this lying, and of course, I am similarly curious to imagine when and where Eliot might have lied to herself in fiction. Specifically, she tries to explain the way that people might lie to themselves in claiming that their motives are disinterested when they are really selfish. The best way to make this subtle point clear is to look at Maggie Tulliver in relationship with her family and the town of St. Ogg's. Since Maggie refuses to lie to herself, she becomes vulnerable to the people who would in order to preserve innocence as to their own motives. They show the way that inaccurate self-knowledge forecloses the possibility of accurate social knowledge. The problem is exacerbated where real barriers—like miscommunication, secrets, or bad luck—provide barriers that can only be circumvented with care and sympathy.

The themes of selfishness and self-representation which Eliot introduced in her first fictional works and in her essays become clearer in *The Mill on the Floss*. I recognize three main channels of thought to follow from here. The first is an individual's power to represent him or herself. The second is a society's power to interpret individual action. The third is the narrator's ability to trump all other considerations by explicitly telling the reader what to think and the way that this trumping is reflected by various narrative techniques. Self-representation is a potential trap because Eliot's characters have a habit of accepting their cultures' ideologies. Therefore, her willful characters, and especially her women, tend either towards failure or martyrdom to larger causes. These possibilities become inevitabilities when the characters try to interact meaningfully with larger social forces of interpretation. Although a victim herself, Hetty Sorrel cannot recover from her reputation as an infanticide. Maggie Tulliver drowns to prove her innocence to her brother. Silas Marner's epilepsy dooms him to excommunication and many years as a hermit. Romola de' Bardi sacrifices

her happiness to a rakish husband and ends up caring for his bastard children. Felix Holt is found guilty of manslaughter in the same trial in which he reveals himself as an agent of social order when he tried to protect his town from a drunken mob. Tertius Lydgate tries to appease his conscience and his spendthrift wife but ends up under suspicion of medical misconduct. Gwendolen Harleth marries unwisely and pines for a morality which has always eluded her. Some of these stories end happily but never without a great deal of suffering along the way. George Eliot's life follows a similar pattern, but she escapes the worst.

I have already discussed Eliot's early life as Mary Ann Evans and her creating the alias George Eliot.⁴⁰ The period between 1857 and 1859 saw Eliot's "incognito" destroyed. In 1857, she began to contradict the rumors that appeared during the publications of the *Scenes* that Joseph Liggins was George Eliot. After Rev. James Quirk, Charles Holte Bracebridge, and others became involved in the Liggins affair, some of the people in on the secret (perhaps a jealous Herbert Spencer) let it slip, and the true story made the rounds that the literary woman living with George Henry Lewes had written the *Scenes* and *Adam Bede*. Eliot decided to tell her friends so that they would not be more hurt from hearing the story secondhand.⁴¹ The most official statement on the end of the incognito came in a letter from Lewes to Charles Bray on June 30, 1859. "We have resolved to keep the secret no longer. . . . it is hopeless for us to do anything now. So you may tell any one you please that it is no longer a secret at all; but *avowed*."⁴² When she told her closest friends, she noted

⁴⁰ Although I have rehearsed some of this information in Chapters One and Two, I strongly recommend Bodenheimer's chapter "Mary Ann Evans's Holy War" for a discussion of her formative years. I likewise recommend her chapter "The Outing of George Eliot" for its sophisticated treatment of the years and months I am discussing in this chapter.

⁴¹ The detailed version of the "withdrawal of the incognito," as Eliot always called it, is related in letters and anecdotes in Haight 281-91 and *passim*.

⁴² *Letters* VIII.237.

their surprise, and commented in her journal that the “experience has enlightened me a good deal as to the ignorance in which we all live of each other.”⁴³ Her fiction seems dedicated to addressing this ignorance.

Her “outing,” to use Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s apt metaphor, exposed Eliot to even more scrutiny because it drew public attention to her decision to live with George Henry Lewes. She wrote to her friend Charles Bray just after she went to be with Lewes as his wife, and she admitted that her decision was going to cause her personal pain. “The most painful consequence will, I know, be loss of friends.”⁴⁴ She hoped that Bray would share the news with his wife Caroline and her sister Sarah Sophia Hennell. Eliot hoped that he would explain the difficulty of the situation to them, but she would have been better to write all of them at once. Caroline eventually sent her back an unhappy letter and wondered whether Eliot had wanted to end their friendship because of doubts over “Mr. Lewes’s real character and the course of his actions,” but Eliot was insistent that she did not want her relationship with Lewes to be the end of her social life. “Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do *not* act as I have done—they obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner.”⁴⁵ Eliot’s unwillingness to falsify her relations with Lewes reveals her desire to have their relationship recognized as legitimate. She did not like discussing her personal problems explicitly, and she wished that she could legally marry Lewes and adopt his children. Upon the publication

⁴³ Quoted in Haight 288. Haight also points to this passage’s significance to the author (288).

⁴⁴ “to Charles Bray,” 23 October 1854, *Letters* II.179.

⁴⁵ “to Caroline Bray, 4 September 1855, *Letters* II.214. As Haight notes, Cross omits the portion after the dash. She goes on, “I should like never to write about myself again—it is not healthy to dwell on one’s own feelings and conduct . . .” (*Letters* II.215). I argue that some of the comments she wished she could make about her own situation get displaced into her fiction.

of Cross's biography of Eliot, Henry James described "her false position" as limiting her sphere of social access, writing that it "produced upon George Eliot's life a certain effect of sequestration which was not favourable to social freedom, or to freedom of observation, and which excited on the part of her companion a protecting, sheltering, fostering, precautionary attitude—the assumption that they lived in special, in abnormal conditions."⁴⁶ Objectively speaking, living with Lewes both created literary and philosophical possibilities for her, but in practical reality, it shut down many social relationships.

Becoming an ersatz Mrs. Lewes meant that her brother Isaac cut all family ties with her, and it created some trouble with her father's inheritance. She tried to dispel some of the scandal around her decision in a June 13, 1857 letter to the Isaac's lawyer Vincent Holbech. "Our marriage is not a legal one, though it is regarded by us both as a sacred bond. . . . You will perceive, therefore, that in my conduct towards my own family I have not been guided by any motives of self-interest, since I have been neither in the reception nor the expectation of the slightest favor from them."⁴⁷ Isaac was not convinced, and he never communicated with Eliot again until 1880, the year of her death. Society ladies made a similar decision. Despite her strongly moral stance and the wholesomeness of her writing, many people refused ever to admit her to polite company again.

No one whom I have heard speak, speaks in other than terms of respect of Mrs. Lewes, but the common feeling is that it will not do for society to condone so flagrant a breach as hers of a convention and a sentiment (to use no stronger terms) on which morality greatly relies for support. . . . I do not believe that many people think Mrs. Lewes violated her own moral sense, or is other than a good woman in her present life, but they think her example pernicious, and that she cut herself off by her own act from the society of the women who feel themselves responsible for the tone of social morals in

⁴⁶ Henry James, "The Life of George Eliot," *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1919) 46.

⁴⁷ *Letters II*. 349

England.⁴⁸

She cared more about the separation from her family than she did about not going to dinner parties. In the end, a lively salon culture grew up in the houses where she and Lewes lived together until his death in 1878. Polite men were not forbidden in the way that ladies were, and many ladies were willing to buck society's taboos by visiting the "fallen" Eliot, anyway. It is natural to read Eliot's stress over these troubled years into her fictional corpus.

But why even introduce the author's biography? In Eliot's case, the similarity between her life and the characters strongly recommends it. For example, Gordon Haight points out that Maggie and Tom were born in the same years as George Eliot and her brother Isaac, and his entire text is filled with comparisons of Eliot and her characters.⁴⁹ He even goes so far as to identify Eliot's mother's sisters explicitly "as the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss*: Mary (Aunt Glegg) . . . Ann (Aunt Deane) . . . and Elizabeth (Aunt Pullet)."⁵⁰ Most other critics have made similar biographical comparisons.⁵¹ F. R. Leavis takes the similarity as a given. "That Maggie Tulliver is essentially identical with the young Mary Ann Evans we all know."⁵² Leavis sometimes seems to want to offend his readers with his most direct

⁴⁸ Charles Eliot Norton, writing to G.W. Curtis on 29 January 1869, cited in Haight 409.

⁴⁹ Haight 5. Even Terry Eagleton Eliot-izes Maggie. "Tom and the Dodsons are admired rather in the way that Adam Bede is: they practice the stout petty-bourgeois virtues of thrift, honesty, loyalty, industriousness and obligations to kinsfolk. But they could never have written the novel, as one suspects Maggie could have done" (*The English Novel* 175).

⁵⁰ Haight 2. He even goes so far as to compare Eliot's relationship with Lewes to Maggie's with Stephen. "Like Maggie and Stephen Guest aboard the Dutch vessel, Marian paced up and down the deck, leaning on George's arm" (148).

⁵¹ Claude T. Bissell is one of many critics who work through Eliot's biography as a way of getting at her themes. "What, I think, enables George Eliot to avoid the quality of the documentary in most of her novels is the fact that her material is bound to her by actual experience or by personal association and is transformed by memory and reflection." Claude T. Bissell, "Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot," *ELH* 18.3 (1951) 224. Bissell's observations are more charitable than those which follow.

⁵² Leavis 39.

observations. In his words, the biggest difference between Maggie and Eliot is that “Maggie is beautiful”; whereas, Eliot never was.⁵³ His grounds for making the unpleasant physical comparison are to establish another critical sticking point for his excoriation of the novel. “The criticism sharpens itself when we say that with the self-idealization there goes an element of self-pity.”⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Leavis found the autobiographical impulse the most compelling reason to read the novel, even while he attacked the way Eliot presented her life’s material. “But of course the most striking quality of *The Mill on the Floss* is that which goes with the strong autobiographical element. It strikes us as an emotional tone. We feel an urgency, a resonance, a personal vibration, adverting us of the poignantly immediate presence of the author.”⁵⁵ I agree that Eliot’s “closeness” to the issues helps to enliven them, but I disagree that these are the novel’s essential points, and I would argue against Leavis’s assertion that they encourage Eliot to create a flawed product, containing what he calls “limitations that the critic cannot ignore, since they are in turn inseparable from disastrous weaknesses in George Eliot’s handling of her themes.”⁵⁶ Dorothea Barrett’s influential book *Vocation and Desire* engages specifically with F. R. Leavis in dismissing the autobiographical method of reading the novel.

The central difference between Maggie and her author is not beauty, purity of intention, or any of the minor variations that seem to be accounted for by Leavis’s rather condescending analysis: it is a fundamental difference of life decision. George Eliot, as the woman who decided differently and thereby

⁵³ Leavis 39.

⁵⁴ Leavis 42.

⁵⁵ Leavis 39.

⁵⁶ Leavis 39.

gained the fulfillment of her life both in terms of work and love, must necessarily be critical of Maggie.⁵⁷

In the upcoming discussion of *The Mill on the Floss*, I will not go so far as to make Maggie a stand-in for Eliot, but I do believe that Eliot was working through or explaining the problems she recognized in the real world with this book even more directly than in her others.⁵⁸ This move is avowedly psychoanalytic in its intimations of therapeutic work, but it is also simply explanatory.⁵⁹ Eliot was an accomplished psychological realist, and if she introduced autobiographical elements into her fiction, then more than just revealing the interior lives of characters, she was simultaneously addressing her own inner life. The passage from the letters that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates Eliot's belief in the link between the real world and the worlds of her books. "I only try to exhibit

⁵⁷ Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 53.

⁵⁸ Neil Hertz uses elements from Eliot's letters to "suggest that she thought of her own writing as essentially the acquittal of a debt that is usually figured in an enigmatic relation to a death." *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) 63. Although Hertz means that she responds to deaths in her real life by mourning in fiction, the characters' deaths are also wrapped up in this working-through. Elsewhere, he writes "A sacrificial trade-off—a life for a text—structures "The Lifted Veil" as it will *The Mill on the Floss*, whose final drownings Eliot seems to have had in mind from the first" (69).

⁵⁹ It would be difficult to avoid psychoanalysis completely in a project treating selfishness in its narcissistic valence, and I have no inclination to do so. My attention to repression in the past chapter and "anxiety" earlier in this chapter should make some of my theoretical commitments clear. I would like, however, to resist turning my energies over completely to a hunt for symptoms. As a result, I will employ what seems useful in psychoanalytic theory without employing it exclusively. Doing so would, I feel, take too much effort away from my Marxist, feminist, queer, deconstructive, poststructuralist, and other aims. A more thoroughly psychoanalytic reading is available in Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone, *The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* (New York: New York UP, 1994). In Johnstone's chapter "Narcissistic Rage in *The Mill on the Floss*," she deals with "Maggie's unresolved childhood rage, which results from her sense that she is devalued by her family and society, is transformed into her adult misuse of sexual power in her relationships with the male characters, Philip, Stephen, and Dr. Kenn" (43). This treatment of Maggie is a piece of Johnstone's theory that Eliot was manifesting her own neurotic tendencies in the novel. Although she cites psychoanalytic work by Laura Comer Emery, Melanie Klein, and Heinz Kohut, I remain unconvinced that a strictly psychological reading of the book is productive. Such readings reduce Maggie's activities to mere pathology. However, I do think that limited recourse to the language of narcissism, which is a topic that clearly engages Eliot's attention, is useful, just so long as it does not become something like Johnstone's clinical diagnosis that "Infatuation is a condensation of the narcissistic wish for the infant's blissful sense of union with the mother and the oedipal wish to marry the parent of the opposite sex; it thus provides for a female a means of being united in fantasy with both parents at the same time" (56). Maggie's attraction to Stephen and Philip is not usefully reduced in this way.

some things as they have been or are, seen through such a medium as my own nature gives me.”⁶⁰ This attention to her “nature” is justification enough for introducing a discussion of Eliot herself into the analysis of the stories. The more interesting—and less contestable point—comes in her following claim: “The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly”⁶¹ This “effect” is entirely the point. What “effect” do the stories have, and perhaps just as markedly, what “moral effect” does her “power” over them have?

Similarly, the J. Hillis Miller quotation with which I began this section speaks of a “chain of displacements,” and I find it a useful way to think of Eliot’s figural presence in the novel. She did not live on the river, nor was she actually the same person as the narrator standing on the bridge, nor was she Maggie disappointing her family by dallying with Philip and Stephen. But in some ways, all of them were parts of her: at the very least, they were products of her particular imagination. Imagination is a capacious power here since it allows the forbidden omniscience; since it allows a world in which motives might be explained; and since social and familial ostracism can be ended by willful action. In short, although it might be telling herself a lie, writing a story like *The Mill on the Floss* is a necessarily selfish act for George Eliot.

VI. Moral Situation and Nostalgic Vision

It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love, this hunger of the heart: as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the

⁶⁰ 12 July 1857, *Letters* II.362.

⁶¹ *Letters* II.362.

yoke, and change the face of the world. (91)⁶²

The Mill on the Floss is an essentially nostalgic, and hence inward-turning, book. It looks backwards towards both a shared historical past and a private, individual past that each character maintains in his or her memory. The historical past reinforces a rural ideal which is in the process of fading away. As a consequence, its nostalgic obsession is also heavily invested in a simplified moral code.⁶³ The opening scene with its dozing narrator addresses the main current of emotion with exclamatory comments, dreamy ellipses, and ecstatic language.⁶⁴ This remote past is extremely bright, and if it is somewhat simplistic as an agrarian ideal, then it is also free from the taint of modernity. In such a moral climate, promises and land and family are more real than contracts and laws and progress. Eliot's narrator is sardonic in her evaluation of the present when she refers to "our present advanced stage of morality" (77). At the same time, her cutting remarks allow her to assert paradoxically that the past both was better because it was untroubled and was worse because it lacked modern advances. "All this, you remember, happened in those dark ages when there were no Schools of Design, before schoolmasters were invariably men of scrupulous integrity, and before the clergy were all men of enlarged minds and varied culture" (241).

⁶² Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A.S. Byatt (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1979).

⁶³ Bissell situates *The Mill on the Floss* with *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* in the middle of Eliot's three major periods of interest. The first period includes *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* in the less industrial, more religiously and socially united turn of the century England of her parents. The middle period is Eliot's childhood with the Reform Bill, Catholic Emancipation, and religious and industrial sectarianism. The final period is contemporary to her writing and is mostly contained in *Daniel Deronda*.

⁶⁴ The narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* is typically read as an improvement over Eliot's earlier attempts, and its weaknesses are read as merely a question of degree. "The characteristic flaw of the narrator of *The Mill* is not, as in *Adam Bede*, a fluctuating, antagonistic, or unwarranted relation to the reader, or of a jerking about of his sympathetic distance from the characters, but rather a kind of uneasy confusion about who in the novel is really sympathetic, when, why, and to what degree." In Mary Ellen Doyle, *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1981) 88. It is worth noting that Doyle's critical object, sympathy, becomes the quality which I see developing and changing across Eliot's career.

This remark is intended ironically. The implication is that progress for progress's sake—or even simply change for change's sake—is not an effective replacement for the innocence of a simpler time which has been lost, even if that lost time is only a shared fiction. Although it is dangerous to see Eliot simply as a sentimentalist, *The Mill on the Floss* does yearn for a shared rural past.⁶⁵

The personal past is even more complex. George Eliot wrote in a March 27, 1858 letter, “It is impossible ever to revive the past . . . But that doesn't hinder the past from being sacred and belonging to our religion.”⁶⁶ Eliot maintains that early experiences make a deep and lasting impression. As a result, she dwells on childhood and the intensity of emotion that her characters experience there. Maggie and Tom's relationship is molded and set in the first half of the first volume, called “Boy and Girl.” Similarly, Mr. Tulliver continually refers to his childhood affection for his sister Mrs. Moss to explain his generosity to her. The theme enlarges to include the personal pasts of certain coteries, like farmers and mill owners on the Floss, Tom's schoolfellows, or, more famously, Mrs. Tulliver's sisters and their Dodson relatives.⁶⁷ The nostalgic structure which dictates the way that the historical past gets narrated and in which it achieves its symbolic significance operates in an analogous manner on the personal past. The attention to childhood in particular reveals that it is both more intense and more dangerously chaotic than adulthood. Over-dedication to old rules, such as hatred for the Wakems or a belief that the way things have always been should be the way

⁶⁵ Her reference specifically names “the praiseworthy past of Pitt and high prices” (365).

⁶⁶ This letter is not included in the standard collection because its copyright belongs to the *Coventry Herald*. It is cited in Haight 254.

⁶⁷ Although the characters in the book never question the authority of these community formations, Eliot's readers are forced to do so. As Mary Ellen Doyle notes, “Readers seem to experience an inverse correlation between the Dodsons' credibility and their humor. If we believe in them, it is hard to be amused” (Doyle 64). Therefore, if we are amused, it is hard to believe in them. The narrative asks us to maintain a belief in the *characters'* belief while simultaneously entertaining doubts of our own.

things always are, can cause great damage. The clear-cut divisions and opinions of childhood (derived as a set of guiding principles through otherwise chaotic impulses) are difficult to maintain in the wider world of adulthood.

Both the historical past and the personal past are infused with mythological and psychological significance. At the simplest level, they represent comfort. “There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality: we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own sense of existence and our own limbs” (222). In this dream of a self too large for one body to contain, the narrator sets up a condition of primary narcissism for Maggie. Alexandra M. Norton’s analysis of the preoedipal partially convinces me that I should widen the scope of psychoanalytic study that I introduced in Latimer’s narcissism. Her argument is worth quoting at length because it is an adequate summary of a difficult concept.

Psychoanalysts call the early developmental period to which Eliot consistently returns the preoedipal; it occurs before the child develops an ego strong enough to protect the self against incursions by the other and precedes the child’s entrance into the symbolic realm—the step with which he firmly asserts his position within systems of difference. In his earliest, unseparated state, he recognizes no distinction between self and other. The possibility for sympathy inheres, not in the history of that period—what actually happens to the individual child—but in the shared though unconscious recollection in adults that such an experience of undifferentiated oneness is possible. . . . This preoedipal experience is not itself morally valuable because it precludes by definition the kinds of symbolic distinctions upon which moral values are based. But as the ego develops, the individual necessarily separates himself from others, and the recollected sense of connection and of the struggle to separate help to determine adult moral structures.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Norton 218.

Norton also links Eliot's presentation of this preoedipal experience to Wordsworth's treatment of the same, especially in the *Intimations Ode*.

There is, as yet, no psychic fracture; the child is not individuated, and all of the immediate world becomes contingent on the child's consciousness. This state is, of course, a false approximation and a mythologized one. Only young children, solipsists, and artists can afford to indulge it, but that purity of self-preoccupation is precisely what is so attractive within narration. The dream of total belonging and original comfort becomes available again through the process of storytelling (personally or novelistically). But the ideal system's impossibility is recognized by a sophisticated reader, so it is available only in its very boundedness. It is intrinsically an artifact of the past. A too-compulsive return to the old ways speaks to a deep-seated narcissistic bent, and characters who narrate this same story for themselves—Mrs. Tulliver and her crying over the linens, Mr. Tulliver and his obsession to keep the mill in the family—embody a morbid and selfish impulse.⁶⁹ This self-preserving tendency has paradoxically self-destructive results because it enforces stagnation. The move backwards is also a move inwards since the real and outer world has moved beyond the possibility of idealized comfort. To insist too firmly on the reality of this old world is selfish at all levels.

⁶⁹ David Carroll posits the Dodson-Tulliver opposition as a central dialectic in the novel, and it is tantalizing to follow him. "But, of course, tragedy and martyrdom are only the most extreme forms of conflict which occur when dialectic breaks down. Through suffering of a lesser kind, laws and tendencies can reestablish a relationship by which the organism, social or individual, can continue its true development. It can, however, never return to its innocent oneness where form and feeling had not been separated." David Carroll, "'Janet's Repentance' and the Myth of the Organic," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.3 (1980) 336. I say "tantalizing" because Carroll has the suffering here set to the wrong degree. I would argue that rather than "a lesser kind," the anguish that these characters feel, and most particularly for Maggie,—trapped in the breakdown of the dialectic—is intense after "form and feeling" have been separated. Ultimately, for Carroll, the idyll of pre-individuation becomes more literally pre-lapsarian than even I choose to read it. He sees the characters attempting to return to an "original state of innocence" (340). That formulation is too close to interpreting all of the sins, sexual and otherwise, in the novel as analogs of an overdetermined "original sin."

At the same time that a fixation on childhood invokes the hazy bliss of a world before responsibility, it also allows the narrator to discuss the intensity of childhood experience. Tom's world before he goes to Mr. Stelling's school is dully satisfied and complete; whereas, Maggie's throbbing sensitivity keeps her alive to every problem she encounters. Tom is a complacent, self-absorbed child, and Maggie is an anxious, empathic child. Because any danger manifests itself as an immediate threat to and attack on the self, childhood's traumas feel more monumental than adulthood's. "Childhood has no forebodings; but then, it is soothed by no memories of outlived sorrow" (145). Troubles in the world are more traumatic to individual identity since that identity still lives in a world where everything is a part of it. Children react in various ways to the invasion of external stressors on their private worlds. Strangely, and as the events of the novel unfold, the reader learns that everyone around Maggie sees her as the selfish Tulliver and Tom as the sacrificing one.⁷⁰ The truth is considerably more complicated. Still, both Tulliver children live out a fate written for them as a fall from grace, or out of childhood. The interpretation of childhood as a prelapsarian paradise is underscored by the chapter title which ends the first volume—"The Golden Gates Are Passed."⁷¹

By returning to a moment in rural England's history, and by centering on everyman types like the Tullivers, Eliot emphasizes the believability of her work. The justification for telling this story is almost the exact same as it was in "Amos Barton": "The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road

⁷⁰ I have already drawn attention to the split between who the reader and who the story's community identify as selfish or unselfish in the dynamics of Shepperton in "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton."

⁷¹ The narcissistic return always looks for childhood, and in this case, the older, pre-Industrial world is a symbol of English national childhood. "Like its heroine, *The Mill on the Floss* is homesick for a rural ideal which it recognizes scarcely exists. The true idyll is childhood, not the English countryside" (Eagleton, *The English Novel* 177).

every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record” (275). The “it” of a miller’s tragedy may not usually leave a written record, but it does leave behind an accretion of stories and collective experience. The emphasis on insignificance suggests that the reader has a troublesome moral superiority that needs to be questioned. This urging is the reflexive action that Eliot desires when she asks her characters to examine themselves: their readers should examine themselves too. The idea that these characters leave no record is clearly false since they leave behind memories and traditions, and Eliot herself is preserving both of these in her text. So the authorial intent is here distinguishable from the narrative voice. The rather suspicious narrator puts words in the mouth of her hypothetically snobbish reader, saying “It is a sordid life, you say, this of the Tullivers and Dodsons—irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith . . . their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom” (362). She will go on to argue that, in fact, “sublime principles” and “self-renouncing faith” are the guiding motives of Maggie and Philip, and the adherence to “hereditary custom” is the clue to Tom’s greatest prejudice. Eliot’s primary characters manifest different motives and dedications which place them across the continuum between perceived selfishness and real selfishness.

VII. St. Ogg’s and Misunderstood Motives

[T]he lines and lights of the human countenance are like other symbols—not always easy to read without a key. (334)

The desire to find a key to Eliot’s symbolism is impossible to satisfy. Her books are not Gnostic. There is no “key to all mythologies” in *Middlemarch* or to direct biography in the *Scenes*, and there is no key to Eliot’s personal mythology to be found here in *The Mill on*

the Floss. The book is too complex, and the characters' motivations are too psychologically realistic. Simple attention to the dialogue in the novel shows that the characters explain themselves to one another fairly well; therefore, the problem is not one of exegesis. Instead, a reader must understand the characters' habitual impulses rather than their immediate stimuli, and the attempt must account for the variety of the characters' experiences without oversimplifying them into a fixed point or key. To predict Maggie correctly, as Tom realizes he cannot do, one needs to understand her deepest dedications and her philosophical commitments. This interpretive act is inherently irrational in the purest sense because it cannot be arrived at by reason. Maggie can accurately explain all of the impulses which act on her at any given time, and she has a talent for articulating even her deepest set of motivations. Unfortunately, explanation is too weak to overcome prejudice or other people's dedications. In other words, the characters are either linked sympathetically and philosophically, or they are not. If they are not so linked, then no amount of verbal explanation can bridge the sympathetic gap. This formulation dramatizes the relationship between knowing and understanding, and it naturally suggests an important corollary. Readers are either sympathetically aligned with Eliot's suffering heroine, or they are not. Eliot depends on this identification, and because Maggie is in many ways a stand-in for George Eliot, the reader then naturally becomes sympathetic to the author. This twisty move is even more complex because the sympathy could only exist at the level of theory—the author was still hiding behind her “incognito.”

In the last chapter, I addressed a problem of social knowledge (which is an accumulation of viewpoints, information, and assumptions about one character in the mind of a larger community). Here, I want to examine the way in which that knowledge is disjointed

from real understanding. Each individual's perception of another is largely determined by his or her positioning on a continuum of knowledge and understanding. Because the motives which can correctly explain the actions of someone like Maggie are hidden from view to people not sympathetic to her, they interpret her attempts to explain herself as selfish rationalizations. Her motivations are invisible to them, and her expiations are therefore interpreted as evidence of bad faith.

Although the strongest current of interpretation must flow with Maggie, the town of St. Ogg's provides the background and must be analyzed first. Just as in the *Scenes of Clerical Life* (and as in *Adam Bede*, which came immediately before *The Mill on the Floss*), the community is vitally important as an inflexible and almost overdetermined interpreter of individual action. I am inclined towards a Bakhtinian interpretation of St. Ogg's's monologic voice and the pressure it exerts in reading Maggie's character.⁷² St. Ogg's is a component of the bright, simplified vision of a shared nostalgic past. Maggie is too well-developed a character to fit well within the town's overpowering narrow-mindedness. As a flattened entity, the town is incapable of doing the work of self-reflection that Eliot demands of her individualized characters. As a result, it is complacent about its own motives and content to allow any person in the town to act with selfish intention if the actions fit the social definition of the acceptable. "The ladies of St. Ogg's were not beguiled by any wide

⁷² My reading of monologism is informed by Mikhail M Bakhtin, "from *Discourse in the Novel*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. William E Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan, and Jeffrey J. Williams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) 1190-1219. Bakhtin's emphasis is on the ideology-shaping power of discourse. "These forces are *the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world*. . . . We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of life" (Bakhtin 1198, emphasis his). The consequences of introducing Bakhtin's insights are many. St. Ogg's comes to have an official language that denies heteroglossia, the Dodsons have a unitary voice, and Maggie's efforts become even more heroic as acts of resistance.

speculative conceptions; but they had their favourite abstraction, called society, which served to make their consciences perfectly easy in doing what satisfied their own egoism” (637).⁷³

So the town allows ego-centric motives as long as the resulting actions fit in with the monologic voice of socially-sponsored actions.⁷⁴

St. Ogg’s does not perceive itself so coarsely, though. It manages the false consciousness of sponsoring a nostalgic vision of selflessness as a way of settling on a simplistic definition of what selfishness might look like, ignoring (and misunderstanding) the deeper motivations and commitments that might create novel types of selflessness. This nostalgia is, of course, the myth of St. Ogg, and it too is located back in an even more idealized past. It motivates another biblical paradigm: instead of a prelapsarian idyll of childhood, St. Ogg is a Noah-like non-sinner in an antedelluvian world. A woman and her child need passage across the river during a horrible flood, and only one person is willing to risk his own safety for theirs, especially since they cannot pay. He says, “I will ferry thee across: it is enough that thy heart needs it” (182). On the other side, the woman reveals herself as the Virgin Mary and blesses him. “Ogg, the son of Beorl, thou art blessed, in that thou didst not question and wrangle with the heart’s need but was smitten with pity and didst

⁷³ Eliot also writes, “Public opinion, in these cases, is always of the feminine gender—not the world, but the world’s wife” (619). Patricia Meyer Spacks echoes Eliot’s reference to the “world’s wife” when she calls gossip “the world’s talk” and pits the community’s interests against individualism. *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 227. “Communal self-interest distorts in ways different from individual self-interest, but perhaps no more intensely” (Spacks 198). This reading of “self-interest” suggests the way that societies (St. Ogg’s “favorite abstraction”), taken collectively, can have their own selfish ends. Here, the women of St. Ogg’s have their egos in line with community identity in agon with Maggie’s.

⁷⁴ The novel itself gives Maggie a chance to respond and to enter into dialogue with St. Ogg’s. Dorrit Cohn reads novelistic interiority as a way of effectively silencing the monologic voice: “The silencing of the monologic voice goes hand in hand with a change in the rhythm of quoted monologue in the novels of Dostoevsky and other late Realist writers.” Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978) 61. This fully interior voice has not yet developed in Eliot’s fiction. Her characters’ thoughts are instead “restricted to isolated moments explicitly set aside for extended contemplation or inner debate” and are therefore subject to greater monologic pressure (Cohn 61).

straightaway relieve the same” (182). The impossibly sanctified nature of the myth makes it both an ideal for St. Ogg’s and obviously unattainable as a model for future action. Since there is no key to simple interpretation, the townsfolk are allowed to fail to see beyond the monetary message of charitable giving, which they do embrace, to the true message of endangering oneself for the good of others and to recognizing the “heart’s need,” neither of which can they comprehend. Across the rest of the book, images of the River Floss, suggestions of flood and drowning, and questions of which role Maggie will fill in the myth surge up repeatedly. Will Maggie be St. Ogg? Will she be the Virgin? Or will she be an uncharitable boater or unnamed victim? In all cases, the river itself has the disruptive power either to destroy any resistance or to catalyze a change in interpretation. Maggie becomes all of the mythical characters by the book’s end. She is the ferryman rescuing Tom; she is the virgin who was scorned as she passed by; and she is a sinner who rides a boat too far and a victim who drowns in the flood.⁷⁵ In these ways, the river itself is a figure for the interpretive force of the town of St. Ogg’s which sits by it. It forces Maggie to reveal her goodness and destroys her in the same process. Both the river and the town interrupt the juvenile fantasy of belonging by showing that each individual is unique in motivations and capabilities and by introducing crisis into the narcissistic world where the uncontrollable forces might otherwise have been controlled.

⁷⁵ The wished-for charity represented by the myth of St. Ogg and the perhaps fictional nature of the same story help to underscore a tension in the text that mirrors Eliot’s endorsement of Maggie, who is nevertheless the story’s victim. The failure to obtain sympathy shows Eliot’s own anxiety. Timothy Pace argues in his work on “Amos Barton” that “the earnestness with which Eliot’s voice in ‘Amos Barton’ and her subsequent fiction advocates sympathy can be viewed as an anxious insistence that arises not so much from an understanding of the frequent tardiness of human sympathy as from a deeply felt fear that a natural capacity for sympathy might not actually exist as a fundamental of human nature” (86).

VIII. Maggie Tulliver's Selfish Sympathy

I see one thing quite clearly—that I must not, cannot seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. (571)

I would like to begin my analysis of Maggie with a contentious assertion. Maggie Tulliver is not a complex character. She is three-dimensional, well-realized, and intriguing, but she is not complex. The tools Eliot uses to create her and to get the reader to understand her are sophisticated, but Maggie herself is straightforward and simple to predict. This assertion circumvents most of the novel's reception history, but I find Maggie much easier to comprehend than some of the flatter characters in the book who have less developed traits.⁷⁶ Why do I bother with this claim? I think it is because I am the novel's reader, and Eliot depended on the reader's sympathetic identification with her heroine. I reread other critics' approaches to Maggie as analyses of Eliot's mechanical abilities and narrative sophistication. Understanding Maggie requires the reader to align him or herself with her in a way that St. Ogg's in general does not, and this alignment requires accepting Maggie's attractive worldview. Simply put, the reader must accept Maggie's claims to goodness and selflessness. Eliot's insistence that Maggie will never willingly sacrifice someone else's happiness to her own and that Maggie wants to love and be loved more than anything else comes up so often in the novel that all of my further comments on her will center on analyzing the truth of these simple facts.

⁷⁶ The standard readings of the novel tend to reduce Maggie by describing the way she fails rather than the ways she succeeds. Mary Ellen Doyle writes that the book "is essentially the story of Maggie Tulliver's tragic failure to become a whole and fulfilled woman, despite great intellectual and emotional potential. The failure is due to her inability either to adapt freely to her society's mores and win its approval or to reject those mores and choose her own path out of her own inner freedom and security" (58). My assertion that Maggie is not complex paradoxically stands against Doyle's reductive reading. While it is tempting to simplify Maggie's plot into autobiographical elements, she is more than an Eliot analogue. She is simultaneously a well-written fictional character and an argument for selflessness embodied in one person.

Maggie is also occasionally selfish. She is not selfish in the way that St. Ogg's and Tom think she is since she really does not want material or spiritual benefit in any way that would deprive anyone else. Instead, she just wants to be loved. At the critical level, and according to the terms which I derived last chapter, Maggie manifests necessary selfishness but not in such a way as to help her find a happy ending. St. Ogg's's failure to interpret Maggie's motives and dedications clearly enough is a result of that continuum of knowledge and understanding already discussed. Maggie explains herself and her impulses very frequently, and doing so solves the question of knowledge, but she is incapable of enforcing a sympathetic understanding no matter how clearly she articulates why she does what she does. Simply put, people like Tom will never believe that Maggie is acting selflessly until she is willing to die to prove herself, trumping all claims to the contrary.

Eliot insists on Maggie's emotional qualities. She identifies "the need of being loved, the strongest need in poor Maggie's nature" (89). This "need" is selfish in that it requires something from those around her, but it is qualitatively unlike the selfishness and arrogance that Tom accuses her of when he predicts that she will become "a nasty conceited thing" and tells her that "Everybody'll hate you" (216). This craving for love teaches Maggie to be sensitive to other people's needs. She wants to make herself lovable, but doing so requires her to be attuned to what her family and friends want. Unfortunately, this attention to the suffering and disappointments of others frequently depresses her. She is the one who feels her father's loss the most keenly after his stroke; whereas, Tom interprets the crisis as a blight on the family, and Mrs. Tulliver interprets it as a personal judgment, asking "O dear, what *have* I done to deserve worse than other women?" (343). Only Maggie is capable of removing herself from the situation and focusing on her father's suffering. She is "gifted

with [a] superior power of misery” that makes her feel pain more deeply than other people do (100). Elsewhere this attribute is called “the gift of sorrow—that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship” (269). This “gift of sorrow” arrives as an ability to share others’ suffering compassionately and to take on other people’s troubles as her own. These qualities are clear in Maggie after Tom injures his foot, during her father’s illness, and when Lucy has been deceived.

Tom is Maggie’s most effective contrast in the novel because he is conventional, unreflective, and unsympathetic. The narrator explains that “Maggie was strangely old for her years in everything except in her entire want of that prudence and self-command which were the qualities that made Tom manly in the midst of his intellectual boyishness” (367). Maggie is intelligent, impulsive, and kind. Her simplicity of spirit is bound to lead to injury when butting up against the emotional oafishness of her brother. However, Tom is a good representative of the town of St. Ogg’s. He manifests the “conspicuous quality in the Dodson character” of “genuineness: its vices and virtues alike were phases of a proud, honest egoism” (365).⁷⁷ Maggie is genuine, too, but she is not in sympathetic alignment with either the town or her mother’s family, and she lacks “egoism” altogether. She attacks it whenever she finds any signs of it in her character. In contrast, “A proud sense of family respectability was part of the very air Tom had been born and brought up in” (267). I must pause to explain why Maggie does not share the “proud sense of family respectability” even though she was just as much “born and brought up in” it as Tom. Eliot has put the two Tulliver children on opposite sides of the spectrum of understanding. Tom is unwilling to try to

⁷⁷ Eliot’s opposition to “egoism” is well documented in the letters. She is relentless in identifying it in herself and apologizing whenever she detects it. As early as 1838, she was blaming her egotism both for her frequent letter-writing and for her failure to write promptly. Her obsession with the topic resulted in awkward apologies that portrayed her supposed egotism as a forgivable character quirk. After all, she wrote to Maria Lewis, “If egotism be at any time excusable it is in writing to a friend . . .” (*Letters* I.12).

bridge the distance between Maggie and himself. He is unwilling to perform this action with anyone else, either. In fact, when he confronts Philip, his ultimatum to get him to abandon courting Maggie occurs explicitly in the terms of this debate. "I should be very sorry to understand your feelings . . . What I wish is that you should understand *me*" (448). Everyone must be made to understand Tom since he is not even willing to try to understand or to mitigate his purified conception of himself. He sees himself as the representative of family principles and history. To him, his way is the only way, and everyone else should be browbeaten into acceptance of it. Eliot writes that "Tom was not given to inquire subtly into his own motives, any more than into other matters of an intangible kind" (446). So he disobeys the injunction to know himself, and refuses to acknowledge his sister's struggles to adjust her behavior to mollify him. It is late in the novel before Maggie is self-reflexive enough to become aware of the gulf of understanding between her and her brother, but she finally manages to tell him that "sometimes when I have done wrong, it has been because I have feelings that you would be the better for if you had them" (450). It is not difficult for me to identify with Maggie, and so I think her motives and character are transparent. She becomes more complex in her relationships with opaque figures like Tom.

Maggie's sympathetic powers intensify her ability to know the world around her and to understand why people feel the way they do. She is familiar with the whole spectrum between knowledge and understanding. As a result, she sees the damage that she is capable of doing when she acts impulsively, and she sees the necessity of controlling herself.

"Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination" (121). She eventually learns to

restrain herself, but doing so requires stifling her natural instincts towards expressivity. Her “active imagination” reveals itself artistically: telling stories as a child, reading as a young adult, and sewing beautifully as a woman.⁷⁸ In contrast, Tom does not have any of these powers. Philip Wakem is the only other character who is gifted in the ways that Maggie is. For him, the “gift of sorrow” comes from his painful awareness of difference due to deformity. Maggie and Philip are both outsiders with a privileged view of the more complacent, less self-reflective people around them. They are both made into sympathetic individuals because they engage fully in the task of self-knowledge and self-understanding. Each receives benefits from this work. Philip is a talented dilettante in several arts, and he is a kind, supportive friend. Maggie becomes more beautiful and intriguing as a result of her pensive introspection and unconscious grace. She also becomes an astute judge of character and learns discretion almost by accident. For example, she instinctively knows, even as a little girl, not to mention Philip’s deformed back. Her “keen sensitiveness and experience under family criticism sufficed to teach her [that mentioning Philip’s deformity was inappropriate], as well as if she had been directed by the most finished breeding” (260).⁷⁹ At the high point of her career, these accidental graces impress the town of St. Ogg’s. But for sympathetic characters like Philip and the friendly priest Dr. Kenn, they also reveal Maggie’s passionate and unhappy soulfulness. In the end, all of these talents benefit Maggie in one way or another, but they come at a commensurate cost.

⁷⁸ These were also Eliot’s occupations throughout her narrowly constrained childhood.

⁷⁹ The instinctual nature of Maggie’s “gift of suffering” helps to make the criticism of civilized, systematized callousness much more trenchant. Bakhtin writes that “naiveté itself, under authentic novelistic conditions, takes on the nature of an internal polemic and is consequently dialogized” (1203). Maggie does not have to be critical or reflective of the unfair conditions around her because Eliot is in dialogue with the unitary voice of St. Ogg’s and can do the heavy lifting for her.

Sadly for her, Maggie's receptivity simultaneously makes her vulnerable. She is hyper-sensitive to criticism and disappointment, and she is painfully aware of her own shortcomings. She "had little more power of concealing impressions made upon her than if she had been constructed of musical strings" (525). Here is the Romantic notion of the wind harp. External forces act on Maggie as if they were sentient agents, actively looking for a response. She cannot help but respond in kind. If someone cries near her, she cries. If Tom insults her, even unintentionally, she hides and contemplates starvation. If Lucy is proud of her, she glows in pride. If Stephen or Philip treats her with kindness, she responds with love. But her sensitivity also makes her extremely sensitive to her own motivations. She is almost obsessive in rooting out all of her own flaws, and she particularly abhors any traces of selfishness that she finds there because they justify Tom's prejudices against her. As an act of self-mortification, she tells Philip, "I was never satisfied with a *little* of anything" (428). Maggie underestimates both her worthiness and her needs here. She is speaking particularly of Tom's love for her, and she has gotten less of that than she deserves. In fact, most of her forms of self-reproach, like her admission that she wanted more love than she got, are based on a depressed acceptance of what she has been wrongfully told is appropriate for her. For example, she tells Philip that in novels "I always care the most about the unhappy people" (433). She seems to reproach herself for this admission, but if identification with victims were indeed an unreasonable mode of relating to fictional characters, there would be no place for Heathcliff, Little Nell, or Tess Durbeyfield anywhere. Even while she apologizes, she reveals her instinctual recognition of what is right: "I've never any pity for conceited people, because I think they carry their comfort about with them" (434). This principle of judgment does not castigate conceitedness for any traditional reason. Instead, it recognizes that

conceited people do not need pity since conceitedness is a form of happiness, and it is therefore a manifestation of a natural, as opposed to constructed, morality. Maggie derives this natural principle without external help. The town of St. Ogg's might have made a similar claim about disliking conceitedness, but it would have done so on the grounds of conventional morality. And by now it should be clear to the reader that convention is more often mistaken than the sympathetic evaluations of a good person like Maggie. By the end of the novel, after Maggie's unwanted complicity with Stephen, Eliot makes clearer the real grounds of morality as opposed to conventional morality. Instead of looking at the effect that one's actions have on him or herself, real morality is derived in the effect that actions have on someone else. Eliot writes that Maggie's "sense of others' claims . . . was the moral basis of her resistance" (592). This "sense" is, in fact, the same thing as her sympathetic, sorrowful gift. Too few people in this book have it for Maggie to be generally accepted because too few of them understand her. An interesting corollary follows upon acknowledging that morality lies more in affecting other people than in a set of rules to follow for oneself. This corollary is that static, predigested notions of morality are selfish because they require self-preoccupation without external referents. Maggie's more dynamic sense of morality is forgiving of difference in a way that the traditional morality of a place like St. Ogg's—represented in the novel by the town's failure to grasp the importance of the myth of St. Ogg—is not.

IX. Self-Restraint and the Worship of Sorrow

*The one deep strong love I have ever known has now its highest exercise and fullest reward—the worship of sorrow is the worship for mortals. (284)*⁸⁰

Maggie grows up, and she learns to control the impulses which most directly lead to suffering in her life. In other words, she learns the type of selfishness that is expected of her: by refusing always to act as a sensitive child, she learns the social forms which will ensure her equanimity. Eliot explains this process as a practical adaptation: “We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarreled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases” (91). The “well-bred phrases” are a social polish over unpleasantness. In this way, they are also partially falsehoods, as Latimer discovered in “The Lifted Veil.” Maggie is conscious of the doubleness of private feelings and self-censoring public expression. Tom offers a striking contrast to this depth of understanding. The narrative constantly returns to Maggie’s childhood to explain her impulsiveness, and it returns to that part of the story to explain Tom’s motivations. However, Maggie learns lessons from that childhood, but Tom, Mrs. Tulliver, and others want really to return to it. Maggie knows that this nostalgic dream is an impossibility, no matter how tempting it is to interpret present experience through old prejudices and preoccupations. As a result, she becomes aware of the split between inner life and outer in a way unavailable to her family. Tom can keep secrets, Mr. Tulliver can repress feelings, and Mrs. Tulliver can try to manipulate Mr. Wakem, but Maggie understands the relationship between inner and outer more fully. Maggie “added that early experience of struggle, of conflict between the inward impulse and outward fact which is the lot of every imaginative and passionate nature” (367). Whereas Mr. Tulliver’s repression of his anger

⁸⁰ Eliot was writing to Charles Bray in May 1849 about her father’s death. She had already learned Maggie’s lesson, and she shared Maggie’s “gift of sorrow.” The view, asserted in “Amos Barton” that selfishness called itself religion, is further shown to be bankrupt in comparison to the worship of sorrow.

leads to the explosive horsewhipping scene, Maggie knows that her inner and outer lives exist in a delicate balance. The emphasis here on “every imaginative and passionate nature” suggests again the specialness of artists. They know what is really going on in a way that others around them do not because only they have experienced the necessary kind of “conflict.”

At first, Maggie suffers because her life becomes narrower and less intellectual after her father’s stroke, but she perseveres by working through Tom’s old school books. This study is an attempt to feed “her soul’s hunger and her illusions of self-flattery,” but she does not find any practical advice to use (380). Then Bob Jakin gives her *Tomas à Kempis’s* book, and she responds to it by trying to copy à Kempis’s asceticism in her own life. The first bit of advice that she latches onto is the primary danger of Eliot’s characters repeated as a religious epigram: “Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world” (383). Similarly, à Kempis suggests that his reader should “lay the axe to the root; that thou mayst pluck up and destroy that hidden inordinate inclination to thyself, and unto all private and earthly good. . . . Thou oughtest therefore to call to mind the more heavy sufferings of others, that thou mayst the easier bear thy little adversities” (382-83). She accepts these maxims as literal truths because they greatly resemble the discoveries she has already made in her own life, but she takes them as practical, instead of spiritual, advice. “It flashed through her . . . that all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure” (384). Eliot explains that the resulting practice of complete asceticism is too harsh for Maggie.

Maggie’s adolescent asceticism echoes Eliot’s own experience. In rejecting Maggie’s new dour religiosity as too extreme, Eliot rejects the early version of her own asceticism as a

kind of selfishness, too. Nevertheless, Maggie's new asceticism provides her with a way to dull her pain by taking on a conscious discipline. At first, "renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain" (384). The "renunciation" is selfish because it is a capitulation to temptation. Maggie accepts an easy way out of her troubles by ignoring the differences between pleasure and pain and making a virtue of the rejection of difference. She is unaware of Tryan's lesson in "Janet's Repentance": ignoring her own needs makes Maggie unfit to help others because she reduces her ability to feel their pleasures and pains sympathetically. And after all, Eliot has already called sorrow Maggie's "gift." My modern psychological reading of Maggie's asceticism clearly marks the episode as repression. The return of suffering, and also of sexual interest in Philip and Stephen, will cause the repressed emotions to explode more forcefully later. Philip tells her, "You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite" (429). His prophecy foreshadows Maggie's relationship with Stephen Guest, and it acts as a general example of the self-defeating ends of unwarranted self-denial.

Philip later calls this episode in Maggie's life a "long suicide" and eventually a "negative peace" (429, 495). The narrator speaks directly to the reader to show how even asceticism can be the object of pride. "From what you know of her, you will not be surprised that she threw some exaggeration and willfulness, some pride and impetuosity even into her self-renunciation" (386). Eliot also asserts that this path is a naïve and typical one. "That is the path we all take when we set out on our abandonment of egoism—the path of martyrdom and endurance, where the palm-branches grow, rather than the steep highway of tolerance, just allowance, and self-blame, where there are no leafy honours to be gathered and worn"

(387). Eliot grants generous motives to her audience. The assumption that “we all” attempt an “abandonment of egoism” identifies a developmental model that Eliot expects her readers to share with her heroine. The project of self-improvement by way of self-examination is becoming a sort of personal ideology. Maggie wants to be a martyr here because it ennoble her suffering, but she is ignoring the better part of her nature which acknowledges “self-blame.” By ignoring the various happinesses that life still holds in store for her, Maggie strives for an eroding moral high ground (or “steep highway”) and reconfigures her eventual return to normal life and temptations as a moral failure.

At the ascetic stage of Maggie’s life, she equates vanity with selfishness, and she sees religiosity as a way past them both. She is becoming beautiful, but she chooses to ignore her own beauty because it might distract her. When Philip rides up to the house, “Maggie glanced towards the square looking glass which was condemned to hang with its face towards the wall . . . but she checked herself [from reaching for it] and snatched up her work, trying to repress the rising wishes by forcing her memory to recall snatches of hymns” (392). Her decision to hide the mirror shows that she is afraid of being vain—not just of being thought vain. In both this scene and in a reference to her “new inward life,” Eliot shows that overdone asceticism is in some ways a more intense and less excusable form of self-preoccupation than simple vanity (387). Nancy Armstrong asserts “Victorian readers would have known that her forms of self-renunciation come straight from that culture’s most limited notion of femininity, a limitation Eliot herself conspicuously refused to observe.”⁸¹

Armstrong’s picture of Maggie as a screen for the projection of Victorian anxieties serves my argument that Maggie is well-developed but easy to understand. However, it simultaneously

⁸¹ Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) 92.

does violence to the difficulty of Maggie's situation and ignores Eliot's own role in projecting the anxieties. Did she really "conspicuously refuse" to follow convention so thoroughly? If she was such a stalwart feminist, why was she so preoccupied with making Maggie beautiful and desirable, and why was she obsessed with showing Maggie's emotions in the crucible into which Victorian ideology forced her?⁸²

X. Impossible Love Objects: Philip and Stephen

All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance—it is the partial sleep of thought—it is the submergence of our own personality by another. (592)

As she enters adulthood, Maggie confronts the issues of selfishness more directly. Convention tells her that she should seek love, but she is aware that her first choice (Philip) is denied her for unfair but powerful family reasons, and her second choice (Stephen) is denied her for reasonable but controvertible personal reasons.⁸³ The relationships between Maggie and Philip and Stephen are rendered more complex by the sympathetic impulses of Philip and the selfish impulses of Stephen. Other readers have noted that the narrative privileges Philip's spiritually attractive qualities at the expense of Stephen's merely physical beauty. Claude T. Bissell dismisses Stephen as "George Eliot's schoolgirlish sketches of masculine charm," and I am unlikely to disagree.⁸⁴ He never comes across as interesting, and his

⁸² Although I am frustrated by Armstrong's oversimplification of Maggie's agency, I find myself agreeing completely with her treatment of Maggie's effect in the novel. She compares Maggie to the Lacanian version of Poe's "Purloined Letter" wherein both Maggie and the letter warp the subject relations of all who come into contact with them.

⁸³ Armstrong casts the impossibility of Maggie's love life as a form of class conflict. "Try as she might to be loyal to her father and brother, Maggie Tulliver is inexorably drawn into a sexual relationship with their competitors, historically later versions of ruling-class man" (91). Her argument develops Maggie as a double heroine: both the bad and good subjects that were traditionally split by other novelists into multiple characters.

⁸⁴ Bissell, 233-4.

physical beauty is a given, rather than something actually described. At the same time, Philip's deformity seems like an excuse for Maggie. It is unclear that she would be attracted to him if he were not hunchbacked and if he were not forbidden to her by family animosity. Her heart goes out to him partly because of his unavailability.

Maggie's relationship with Philip follows along the same current as Janet and Tryan in "Janet's Repentance" and Gwendolen and Daniel in *Daniel Deronda*. Because he is in many ways an impossible love object, he achieves a close but detached position that allows him to be the same kind of "master sympathist" that Tryan had been for Janet. Both men rescue women from self-despair by showing them a way back to being their better selves. And Philip is like Daniel Deronda with Gwendolen when he embarrasses Maggie into realizing what she is losing by continuing as she has done. He becomes for Maggie "a sort of outward conscience to her, that she might fly to rescue and strength" (525). This "outward conscience" is a reflection of her better sympathetic self. He is alive to all the repercussions of their friendship. In some ways, Philip is kept in a perpetual childhood by his father, and this childhood both has its selfish tendencies (thinking that he can have Maggie despite the difficulties of the situation) and its sensitivity to others (being aware of Maggie's interpretation of their relationship at all points). In his sensitive mode, he is most like what Maggie has been, and so she comes to him to bolster her own right feelings. He tells her that in emerging from emotional seclusion, she is "reviving into [her] real self" (435). It is easy to read into this plot a defense of George Eliot's own decisions during the time of the Holy War.⁸⁵ Virginia Woolf read Eliot's heroines as representations of the author, and she saw the characters who criticize these heroines as targets for the novelist's anger. "Those who fall

⁸⁵ In the famous letter to her father Robert Evans on February 28, 1842, she claims that religious dogma is "most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness" (*Letters* I.128).

foul of George Eliot do so, we incline to think, on account of her heroines; and with good reason; for there is no doubt that they bring out the worst of her, lead her into difficult places, make her self-conscious, didactic, and occasionally vulgar.”⁸⁶ Philip’s judgment of Maggie’s asceticism comes across as an authorial intrusion, with Eliot chastising her younger self.

Maggie’s relationship with Philip is fraught with confusion. She uses him primarily as a way of drawing herself out of contemplation because she does not know whether he can ever be available to her as a lover. He gives her books to read, and she begins the slow work of processing all of the information she has gained about herself from years of self-observation. But even more than all of these, Philip becomes her first real link to a world outside of her family. Each of these aspects of their relationship deserves attention for the ways in which they reveal different aspects of Maggie. At the moment when she emerges from her self-imposed exile from the world, her simplicity of character and Philip’s sympathetic identification with her work to reveal Maggie’s personality more clearly than they are revealed anywhere else in the book except for the narrator’s straightforward (and almost elementarily expository) introduction of her. For example, Maggie tells Philip, “I do always think too much of my own feelings, and not enough of others” (529). She is encouraging Philip to correct her and to tell her to stop obsessing over herself and her own motivations. Philip always encourages her to leave off the morbid self-examination, but he is in line with Eliot’s narrator in suggesting that monitoring her feelings is a worthwhile activity as long as it is not a morbid and obsessive impulse.

⁸⁶ Virginia Woolf, “George Eliot,” *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed., Andrew McNeillie, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984) 168. Woolf continues, “In accounting for her failure, in so far as it was a failure, one recollects that she never wrote a story until she was thirty-seven, and that by the time she was thirty-seven she had come to think of herself with a mixture of pain and something like resentment” (169).

Philip is well situated for the role of confidant and spiritual guide since his status as love object is so ambivalent. In some ways, he is a masculine version of Maggie. The identification is underscored by the way his hunchback both infantilizes (in the way his father coddles him) and feminizes him (in the way Tom refuses to hit him). He has similar gifts of sympathy to Maggie's. He was "made polite by his own extreme sensitiveness as well as by his desire to conciliate" (235). Philip's identification with Maggie pairs the awareness that sympathy is a question of alignment and understanding with an intellectual ability to articulate the continuum between knowledge and understanding. As such, Philip's explanation to Maggie is a claim against interpretation: "I don't think any of the strongest effects our natures are susceptible of can ever be explained. We can neither detect the process by which they are arrived at nor the mode in which they act on us" (400). He inhabits both the narrator's position, telling Maggie that he and Maggie are essentially alike, and the reader's position, interpreting Maggie's failure to explain herself to everyone else.

Even if asceticism was a dulling of the spirits for Maggie, it kept her from having to make the difficult decisions which differentiate the necessary selfishness of looking out for her basic emotional needs and the guiltier selfishness of fulfilling her desires. At one point, she contradicts Philip, insisting that when she had religious motivation to abase herself, her "selfish desires were benumbed" (436). The language of repression helps to elucidate Maggie's betrayal of Lucy and her near-elopement with Stephen. Philip is deformed and unavailable for certain prejudicial reasons, but Stephen is handsome and unavailable for more tempting and legitimate reasons since he is engaged to her cousin. Perhaps the narrator is being coy when she cajoles her reader into believing that Stephen's mistake is an honest one. "It is clear to you, I hope, that Stephen was not a hypocrite—capable of deliberate

doubleness for a selfish end” (552). Interpretation must run counter to the narrator’s assurances because the reader suspects that Stephen’s conceitedness overrides his morality. And the reader discovers for certain that hypocritical “doubleness” is certainly in his power when he tricks Maggie during their boat trip.

For his part, Stephen is unconscious of violating Maggie’s better nature. He is not only handsome, he is stereotypically narcissistic in believing that he is the only one who can feel pain. He writes a letter pleading “Maggie! whose pain can have been like mine? Whose injury is like mine?” (647). Stephen is like a child who never left the world where everything would bend to his wishes if he could but rearrange one tiny detail. In this case, that detail is Maggie’s resistance to him. He persists afterwards in thinking that all would have been well if Maggie had run away with him. He feels guilt for hurting Lucy, but he fails to see how fundamentally their mistake has destroyed both Maggie’s credibility and her happiness. But can a reader forgive Maggie, who does know better? Eliot writes that “there was an unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her” (592). This selflessness becomes a corrupted form of selfishness for Maggie because it includes both an abdication of responsibility and a dependence on having Stephen do everything for her.⁸⁷ Maggie quickly becomes aware that she has made a mistake. “The feeling of a few short weeks had hurried her into the sins her nature had most recoiled from—breach of faith and cruel selfishness” (597). Eliot unambiguously identifies Maggie’s greatest fears here as “breach of faith and cruel selfishness.” The horror and the parallelism of that statement make

⁸⁷ J.W. Cross and Gordon Haight insist that George Eliot needed this sort of protection herself and was always tempted to give agency to the men in her life. Haight repeatedly quotes Cross’s assertion of Eliot’s “absolute need of some one person who should be all in all to her, and to whom she should be all in all,” using her brother Isaac, Dr. Brabant, John Chapman, Lewes, and Cross himself as examples (5). Bodenheimer’s rereading of the same evidence provides a more generous and feminist interpretation of these facts.

selfishness as bad as faithlessness when most people would certainly have ranked faithlessness as the greater sin.

Her temporary capitulation to Stephen leads Maggie to a deeper understanding of what she has lost. She realizes what real self-denial is and that asceticism is a very narrow version of it. She thinks, “Philip had been right when he told her that she knew nothing of renunciation: she had thought it was quiet ecstasy; she saw it face to face now—that sad patient living strength which holds the clue of life, and saw that the thorns were for ever pressing on its brow” (597). It is odd that Eliot invokes the christic imagery of the crown of thorns because she is otherwise arriving at an entirely humanistic (as opposed to divine) qualification for morality. Just as when Maggie derived that conceitedness is morally wrong because it ensures happiness for people who do not necessarily deserve it, her awareness of error in cheating Lucy out of happiness is a new discovery and not something which has been forced on her (434).

Maggie continues by explaining to Stephen that “We can only choose whether we will indulge ourselves in the present moment or whether we will renounce that for the sake of obeying the divine voice within us—for the sake of being true to all the motives that sanctify our lives” (604). This voice is an aspect of the positivistic religion of humanity and is therefore the voice of the soul, rather than the God speaking to a Christian mystic. Maggie has, after all, recently given up following Thomas à Kempis. The scene on the boat when she awakens ashamed and aware of her error is a painful one because the reader is asked to feel the shame with Maggie. She is practically wailing when she says “I feel no excuse for myself—none—I should never . . . have been weak and selfish and hard” (602). The language has returned overtly to a discussion of selfishness. The principal evil in the world

is selfishness which takes happiness from someone else. After this moment, Maggie will also renounce all the chances that self-protectiveness might urge: explaining the mistake, eloping with Stephen, blaming him, or anything else that a weaker or more defensive character might have done. But these non-decisions are also a complete renunciation of the necessary selfishness which would protect Maggie from the doom waiting for her at the end of the novel. She is too focused on the harm she has done to her friends and family. Her sympathetic identification with them makes her too aware of their suffering. She asks, “O god is there any happiness in love that could make me forget *their* pain” (635). The answer is obvious. For someone like Maggie, nothing but death can make her forget the way she has injured other people, and nothing but death can redeem her from it.⁸⁸ These realities are enforced by the biblical-scale flood at the end of the book and the amazing final chapter.

XI. The Critical Flood

So deeply inherent is it in this life of ours that men have to suffer for each other's sins, so inevitably diffusive is human suffering, that even justice makes its victims, and we can conceive no retribution that does not spread beyond its mark in pulsations of unmerited pain. (329)

Before the flood, though, comes a letter from Philip. The letter shows Maggie that one other person in the world has felt as she has felt and has achieved a sympathetic power like her own. It begins significantly with the sentence “Maggie,—I believe in you” (633). It continues in a similar tone and confesses love and respect for her.

⁸⁸ Eagleton points out the simultaneously affirming and condemning nature of the flood, and he reads it as I do, as a release of dammed narrative power. “The extraordinary ending of *The Mill on the Floss* allows Maggie to be reunited with her brother, and with the way of life he symbolizes, but to obliterate him at the same time. It is as though the full force of the novel’s pent-up desire is unleashed, like the river Floss itself, threatening to sweep away the very world for which this dutiful young woman has laid down her personal happiness” (Eagleton, *The English Novel* 176). But it is not the novel’s desire; it is Eliot’s revenge on the world that hemmed Maggie in.

The new life I have found in caring for your joy and sorrow more than for what is directly my own, has transformed the spirit of rebellious murmuring into that willing endurance which is the birth of strong sympathy. I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others; for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness. I even think sometimes that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may be a new power to me. (634)

Like Latimer in “The Lifted Veil,” Philip thinks that he has a new gift for understanding that no one else has ever had. He is wrong because Maggie has had it all along in modified form. The letter is redemptive for Maggie, and it helps her acknowledge the “gift of sorrow” which she has always possessed. She believes that she can redeem her gift now by turning her “passionate error into a new force of unselfish human love” (646). Indeed she does so by giving up her life for her brother when she attempts to rescue him in the great flood.

Both casual readers and critics alike are frustrated by this ending.⁸⁹ For one, they disbelieve that Maggie would ever capitulate to Stephen at all. For another, they chafe at the punishment meted out to her.⁹⁰ And finally, some find it poorly written. Bissell claims that Maggie “resolves on a course that can bring no approval from the community and only a troubled peace to her own conscience. The dilemma is too great for Maggie Tulliver and, one suspects, for George Eliot. The flood waters of the Floss provide a convenient

⁸⁹ Allegations of *deus ex machina* and inorganic form have been thrown at the novel since its publication. In an unsigned review in *The Guardian* on April 25, 1860, the reviewer takes issue with the abruptness of the change in the novel’s structure and argues that perhaps realism is not the best goal for art: “Nobody who reads it can, we should think, avoid the feeling that in the last volume he passes into a new book. There is a clear dislocation in the story between Maggie’s girlhood and Maggie’s great temptation. It is perfectly true that it may be the same in real life. . . . But the course of human things is not necessarily the pattern for a work of art. . . .” *The Critical Response to George Eliot*, Ser. 11, ed. Karen L. Pangallo (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 69.

⁹⁰ At the same time, the flood is inevitable. Death by drowning is a recurring trope throughout the novel, and it is hard to imagine Maggie finding a happy life in St. Ogg’s. Some critics read the inevitability as a consequence of irreconcilable tensions within the story. It “can only end tragically, split between its insistence that the nostalgic referent exists but cannot be regained and its unacknowledged understanding that the image of a perfect childhood is only a creation of Maggie’s desires” (McGowan “George Eliot’s Realism” 182).

solution.”⁹¹ Carol Christ also couches her statements in the language of narrative convenience: “The flood creates a reconciliation in death between brother and sister that the novel has made evident could not be attained in life. The discomfort that so many readers feel with the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* stems in large part from its convenience.”⁹² She elaborates her point: “Eliot attains Tom’s and Maggie’s reconciliation only by placing them in a situation in which they do not need to confront the hatred between them, and she saves Maggie from the necessity to test her final self-abnegation.”⁹³ More than just “a convenient solution,” I find the last chapters of the book beautifully written and entirely satisfactory, if sad.⁹⁴ Maggie repeatedly proves her ability to stick, for years on end, to uncomfortably limiting decisions. The convenience of the plot, if it can be called such, really comes in the forced change in Tom, who has been shown at all other times to be impossibly recalcitrant. “There were no impulses in Tom that led him to expect what did not present itself to him as a right to be demanded” (308). Within the world of the novel, Tom’s position

⁹¹ Bissell 234. Dorothea Barrett understands the disappointment that readers, especially feminists, feel in Maggie’s supposed failure, but she provides a rereading that helps to reclaim Maggie’s fate as an idealist’s triumph. “When we see the novel as a tale of resistance against male coercion, it becomes apparent that Maggie does not fail as a feminist: she achieves a hard-won, though admittedly fruitless, victory” (Barrett 56). I am inclined to agree. After all, Maggie is willing to die to prove herself, unfair as that is. Barrett fashions the struggle between Maggie and St. Ogg’s as a battle between idealism and pragmatism. Her cause may be a losing one, but it is worth fighting because the fight is what matters. She calls it “a passionate idealism, fundamentally radical in its demands for excellence—but which, by reason of its volatile intensity, inevitably results in failure—is more admirable than an inherently conservative pragmatism, which desires to do the least evil and which, by reason of the mediocrity of its aspiration, attains its goal and supersedes the good achieved by the passionate idealist” (Barrett 74).

⁹² Christ 136.

⁹³ Christ 136.

⁹⁴ F. R. Leavis disagrees with me completely because he detests the flood as a “daydream indulgence we are all familiar with [that] could not have imposed itself on the novelist as the right ending if her mature intelligence had been fully engaged, giving her full self-knowledge.” His rough treatment continues. “The flooded river has no symbolic or metaphorical value. It is only the dreamed-of perfect accident . . .” (45-46).

is fully validated. To the reader, he has to be judged much more harshly.⁹⁵ Whereas the people of St. Ogg's see Tom as a steady, moral man, the reader cannot help but see him as inflexible and unsympathetic. Eliot was not just on the side of the underdog, she hoped to reveal hidden depths to the sort of inflexible people that Tom represents.

The flood provides an apotheosis for Maggie. Individuals in Eliot's fiction can occasionally martyr themselves to larger causes and deeper currents and thereby gain greater significance on a social stage than they can in life. Peter Fenves describes something similar in his article on "Janet's Repentance." In relation to that story—but equally as applicable here—he writes, "The individual comes into relief at the scene of death. Without such a scene . . . we, as readers, could never recognize the process that resulted in the generalities of natural history."⁹⁶ The flood acts as the great dissolver of sentiment. It allows Maggie to be subsumed and to become part of the myth of St. Ogg's. This sort of apotheosis is practically impossible without some sort of massive change. "[W]hat quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other can subsist in the presence of a great calamity when all the artificial vesture of our life is gone, and we are all one with each other in primitive mortal needs?" (652). The only way to redress the spreading "pulsations of unmerited pain" is by acknowledging the suffering of others (329).

For Eliot's novelistic project to be successful, her readership must be educable. They must learn from Latimer's obstinacy; they must learn to protect themselves in a way that Maggie does not. The education depends on individual experience and upon a willingness to

⁹⁵ Reading Tom as a success within the novel and a failure outside it is a popular critical move. For example, Doyle states that "Like Maggie, we feel at the end of Book 5 that Tom is good, despite all; but unlike her, we are not convinced that his faults are redeemed" (Doyle 68). I am willing to acknowledge more of the influence of Eliot's biography than usual here inasmuch as Maggie's willingness to forgive Tom echoes Eliot's desire for approval from her brother Isaac.

⁹⁶ Fenves 432.

play along, or as I said before, to accept Maggie's claims to goodness as facts. Terry Eagleton believes in this same good faith effort when he writes about the novel's moral function: "The novel is a model of morality because it can feel its way sensitively into a whole galaxy of human lives . . . If traditional morality works by universal principles, the novelist-as-author can go one further by bringing these principles to bear on uniquely particular situations, which for Eliot is the only true basis for moral judgment."⁹⁷

The *Scenes of Clerical Life* showed that people living within communities should not presume that social understanding will be kind to them. Instead, they must exercise their will in acts of self-presentation that will influence the community towards greater generosity of spirit. They must also be careful not to lose themselves in the process. "The Lifted Veil" showed the dangers for the artist who would hope to act as a leader in this process of social change. He or she could become a pariah just as easily as an inspiration, and this possibility is made more likely if the artist does not come to the project with a willingness to acknowledge his or her own failings. Eliot herself was able to confess her faults, and she made herself vulnerable to the world's criticism, by acknowledging that she was Marian Evans, by living publicly with George Henry Lewes, and by writing so much of her own story in her fiction. *The Mill on the Floss* provided Eliot with a platform to address an unfair system and allowed her to perform a detailed analysis of what unsupportable pressure can do to a human ego. Maggie's death is simultaneously the depressed acceptance of social reality and the triumph over misunderstanding. Eliot would ultimately work towards happier outcomes for her characters because as she continued to write, she recognized the power of narrative. This power emerges in a dialogic relationship with her readers—together they can

⁹⁷ Eagleton, *The English Novel* 164.

read about a world they wish to create.⁹⁸ With *Daniel Deronda*, I will show that, rather than letting her personal history control her plot, she moved towards greater agency in her storytelling. Gwendolen Harleth may be a sinner, but she knows her sins. Daniel Deronda may be raised in one system, but he can choose another.

⁹⁸ “Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (Bakhtin 1206).

Chapter Four: “The Transmutation of Self”: The Limits of Sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*

I. Introduction

*Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history. The astronomer threads the darkness with strict deduction, accounting so for every visible arc in the wanderer’s orbit; and the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action, and to those moments of intense suffering which take the quality of action—like the cry of Prometheus, whose chained anguish seems a greater energy than the sea and sky he invokes and the deity he defies. (164)*¹

*One may not live adequately with a self-asserting self; but one cannot live at all without it.*²

George Eliot worked on *Daniel Deronda* intermittently from 1873 to 1876. It was her last novel, and it was extremely difficult for her to produce. Although it is not as intensely (over)researched as *Romola*, her letters and George Henry Lewes’s record the problems she encountered in finishing it. On January 17, 1874, Lewes wrote to Blackwood asking him for help in encouraging Eliot. “I am hard at work and wish she were; but she simmers and simmers, despairs and despairs, believes she can never do anything again worth doing etc. etc. A word from you may give her momentary confidence. Once let her *begin* and on she will go of her own impulse.”³ She traveled to synagogues in Frankfurt. She researched Judaism. She asked legal friends for details of the law. She refused to share the

¹ Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1995).

² George Levine, “*Daniel Deronda*: A New Epistemology,” *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzy Anger (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 57.

³ *Letters* VI.11.

title. She even asked Lewes's son Stephen for details on life at Cambridge.⁴ Nevertheless, she needed Lewes and Blackwood to tell her over and over that the "scope and merits" of the book were "wonderful" before she could make herself finish it because she was afraid that her creative abilities had begun to fade—as she later put it, "that I have exhibited my faculties in a state of decay."⁵ The two men were up to the task, and their encouragement was strong. Blackwood wrote Eliot immediately after publication began to tell her that she was "writing one of the most remarkable Books that ever was produced by man or woman. I know nothing like it."⁶ In this last discussion of her life and works, I will address Eliot's literary goals as they were achieved through Gwendolen and Grandcourt's domestic plot as well as Daniel and Mordecai's philosophical plot.

Although this phase of George Eliot's life saw her become a more public figure than she had been previously, her fiction turned inwards again. Social arrangements were refigured into small scenes and family dynamics, just as they had been in her early fiction, but this time those small groups became microcosms of the larger world. Maggie had been a minor figure in *St. Ogg's* and a major figure in the Tulliver family, but in the intervening years, Eliot had moved on to characters like Romola de' Bardi, Felix Holt, and Tertius Lydgate, who lived in encyclopedically larger communities and affected the greater world more directly, creating what Claude T. Bissell calls a "catholicity of vision."⁷ In some ways,

⁴ All of these anecdotes are recounted in Volume VI of the *Letters*.

⁵ "John Blackwood to George Eliot," 18 October 1875, *Letters* VI.178 and "to John Blackwood," 3 November 1876, *Letters* VI.304.

⁶ 30 November 1875, *Letters* VI.195.

⁷ Bissell, 227. Even the wider world of her later novels represent a projection of interiority onto the outside world. Bissell urges the reader to "[n]otice how George Eliot, by the strength of her personality and the happy alliance of circumstances, was never closely identified for any length of time with any one social group or any one class" (226). Although Bissell and I agree that Eliot experienced a great deal of movement and was therefore equipped to give a broad view of life, we disagree over the anxiety that her movement produced. "She

Gwendolen and Daniel in *Daniel Deronda* represent a desire to retreat from public life for their diffident author. By emphasizing very private lives and reducing the size of her cast of characters, Eliot completed the nostalgic turn that began with the historical situations of her books' settings. The path between her first stories and this, her last, novel had meandered, but it returned to a familiar spot. *Daniel Deronda* also returns to the theme of sympathy as a path out of the trap of egoism which had occupied her since her earliest writing. However, it is pessimistic in its resolution since it emphasizes sympathy's limitations more than its strengths.

Daniel Deronda begins as Eliot's other books usually do—set back in the past. However, this time around, the past she chooses is very recent, and by the end of the book, she has almost reached her own present. She writes, "I like to mark the time, and connect the course of individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers. This was the period when the broadening gauge in crinolines seemed to demand an agitation for the general enlargement of churches, ballrooms, and vehicles" (87-88). The insistence on "marking the time" shows her consciousness of the continual move towards chronology to situate diegetic action with reference to the real world.⁸ It is also significant that she relates "individual lives" to "the historic stream." This relationship both locates the particular to the universal in a useful way and simultaneously provides a justification for representing the particular at all. Eliot does not say that she will "chart" or "parallel" her characters to a

is, as it were, removed from the world of petty aspirations and petty conflicts that dog the author whose social status is a cause for personal concern" (226). Her "social status" was far from secure.

⁸ "The staged past both calls us to a quaint life less hectic, less comfortable, less complex than our own *and* reassures us of our own modernity. We get to be proud of being modern (at least, more modern than they) while also indulging in the fantasy of sloughing off the burden of modernity." McGowan, "Modernity and Culture, the Victorians and Cultural Studies," *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 11.

larger chronology. Instead, she will “connect” their “courses.” The cause and effect relationship seems to go both ways—as if the characters can become islands in the “historic stream” and change its course. Her reliance on the details of fashion allows her to ground her observations in material culture because otherwise she is likely to become too metaphysical. Here, “all classes of thinkers” fit into a world of excess and lavish display because, apparently, the width of their dresses requires it. Once again, cause and effect are confused, but this time, Eliot means the confusion for comic effect. She is skilled at shifting registers. In these two sentences, she moves from vast philosophical questions to a wag’s observations on sartorial matters. She uses the same technique to move from the broad questions in the novel and into her characters’ intimate thoughts.

The historical moment Eliot chooses is similar to ones she has invoked in several other stories because it has the blurred edges of easy nostalgic identification with ancient agricultural traditions, but it includes hints at alarming modern problems. She underscores continuity with the past when she writes “The road lay through a bit of country where the dairy-farms looked much as they did in the days of our forefathers—where peace and permanence seemed to find a home away from the busy change that sent the railway train flying in the distance” (131). This description of Gwendolen’s neighborhood asks the reader to join in a yearning for the unvarnished past. Just as with *The Mill on the Floss*, this past may have had its problems, but since it is gone, it can be idealized, and at least it occurred before the current trouble—whatever “the busy change” might be this time around. Gwendolen therefore lives in a “home” infused with “peace and permanence” and partakes in authorial complicity as part of the land of “our forefathers.” Daniel Deronda is more urban than Gwendolen at this point in the novel, but his historical location is more exact.

“Deronda’s undergraduateship occurred fifteen years ago, when the perfection of our university methods was not yet indisputable” (180). Eliot had made a similar claim in *The Mill on the Floss*. Claims like this one, about the “perfection of our university methods” cannot be accepted at face value. For Eliot to assert that this claim is now “indisputable” means that it is anything but. Clearly, something has happened to stir up some trouble, but direct references are fleeting that might explain what has interrupted the pleasantly archaic school system and the Edenic rural England that Gwendolen and Daniel knew in their childhoods.

While Eliot invokes the referential framework of antiquated fashion, *Daniel Deronda* is also definitively—but briefly—placed in a political past. The book was published in 1876, and since Daniel was a student “fifteen years ago,” the story takes place during the early 1860s (and it ends in about 1866). Chapter 9 begins with rumors of Mr. Henleigh Grandcourt’s return to his ancestral estate, and it is compared to “the results of the American [Civil] war” (90). Eliot never gives details of the conflict, nor does she specify the British response, but the Civil War’s qualities of anger and division bleed over naturally into the antagonistic tone of the novel. As usual, matters of international importance and matters of local aristocratic privilege weigh most as they are interpreted by a rural jury: “the corn-factors, the brewers, the horse-dealers, and saddlers, all held [Grandcourt’s return] a laudable thing, and one which was to be rejoiced in on abstract grounds, as showing the value of an aristocracy in a free country like England” (90). In other words, England’s constitutional monarchy is healthier than the diseased American representative democracy. Perhaps the flippant statement about England’s political happiness had some truth to it, but Eliot is also cynical of “the value of an aristocracy” clearly linked to abuse and exploitation in the way

that Grandcourt relates to those under him. Grandcourt's name does not even need translation from French to reveal how much it is a critique of "big aristocracy" the way that "big business" is the scapegoat of liberal ideology in the twenty-first century. Though the symbolic link to the American Civil War is quickly established, it remains strong throughout the novel. Gwendolen's struggle for autonomy, Grandcourt's abuse of her, and Daniel's desire to emigrate have an allegorical valence that is worth study elsewhere. I am reminded of the cynicism of Felicia Dorothea Hemans's "The Homes of England" when I read phrases in Eliot like "days of our forefathers" and "free country like England."

The historical context serves as a reminder of the boundedness of Eliot's fictions. In this book, she acknowledges the limits of individual experience by discussing the ways that characters ought really to look outside themselves. This movement is a development in her fiction insofar as she had previously asked societies to be considerate of individuals, and here she asks individuals to be considerate of societies. For example, when Gwendolen "no more thought" of Daniel's private entanglements with the Lapidoths "as likely to make a difference in her destiny, than of the fermenting political and social leaven which was making a difference in the history of the world," she was ignoring a sort of social duty (772). Eliot explicitly takes up the theme of duty, and I will return to it at the end of this chapter. In this instance, Gwendolen is clearly at fault for not considering the world outside of her own experience. Set against this larger stage of the people and the world around Gwendolen and Daniel, Eliot's novel urges individuals to look out and to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. "There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives . . ."

(803). This declaration is, perhaps, odd in a novel that is not explicitly about a British war or any national crisis or even about the expansion of the railroads, which in some ways *Middlemarch* is. Instead, it is about a more generalized need to acknowledge more diffuse realities. *Daniel Deronda*'s characters are only marginally aware of the American Civil War, and they do not interact with any major historical events other than the bizarre Zionist plot at the novel's end. Instead, the book responds to all sorts of ambient concerns about kindness and marriage and sympathy.⁹ It achieves a cosmic tone of relevance when Eliot asserts that "Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history" (164). If "the narrator of human actions," as she identifies herself, must account for the visible and invisible arcs of both men and planets, then she is making a claim that links both those trajectories in the same constellation of relevance (164). *Daniel Deronda*'s complexity comes from its narration of these normally invisible arcs and paths and Eliot's attempts to render visible what is normally hidden.¹⁰

The concept of universal relevance in the particular instance is not a deviation from the argument I have presented thus far. Instead, it is the argument's ultimate boundary. In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, social knowledge had to be resisted by necessary selfishness. In "The Lifted Veil," the struggle between artist and subject hinged on general conceptions of

⁹ This reflection of ambient anxiety shows a change from her earlier work like *The Mill on the Floss* because it shows the impact of outside influences. Bissell reads that novel as "dealing with a relatively simple and undifferentiated society, one, moreover, that is innocent of ideas and is quarantined from the larger world outside" (235). *Daniel Deronda* is, however, similar to that earlier work because of its focus on just a few families and its neglect of the outside world. The difference—and the greater sophistication—lies in the way that that hidden, undiscussed outside world impinges anyway and gets repressed.

¹⁰ Many readers have been put off by the novel's abstract qualities. Critics have been torn between admiring Eliot's changed tone, especially in reference to the Zionist plot, and being frustrated by it. Eagleton summarizes the varied response. "*Deronda* is an extraordinarily original, risk-taking work, a finale which is also an audacious new beginning, a sudden leap into what for most contemporary readers was a disturbingly unfamiliar world of ethnicity, arcane symbolism, cosmopolitan culture, mysticism, mythology and aesthetics" (*The English Novel* 184).

selfhood and the way that they failed in a specific instance. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the three themes of self representation, social knowledge, and narrative fiat all identified or touched on this same nexus of social imbrication. Recognizing the author's biography as a piece of the story of interpretive acts and rhetorical self-justifications is encouraged in *Daniel Deronda* by the cosmic lesson that obscure motives link the individual man and the movement of the planets in "hidden pathways of feeling and thought" (164). These heretofore "hidden pathways" deserve tracing. The process of sympathetic identification that Eliot developed throughout her writing is made much clearer in this novel, but its potential is more explicitly curtailed as a result. In the other stories, most of her heroes—and especially her heroines—were too nearly perfect for easy narrative suture, despite Eliot's attempts to the contrary.¹¹ When she writes in *Daniel Deronda* that "[i]n many of our neighbours' lives, there is much not only of error and lapse, but of a certain exquisite goodness which can never be written or even spoken—only divined by each of us, according to the inward instruction of our own privacy," her attempt is more believable because she is talking about the deeply flawed Gwendolen Harleth and the incompletely actualized Daniel Deronda (179). To find the "exquisite goodness" in those around us becomes the goal of sympathetic identification. Because it "can never be written or even spoken" without an external narrator, sympathetic identification on a very deep level—the kind that Janet and Tryan had achieved, that Maggie and Philip had achieved, and that Gwendolen and Daniel achieve—is the only way that people can ever learn goodness from one another.¹² Luckily for the reader, the "can never be written" only pertains in lived experience. Characters in novels can be read fully, and their

¹¹ My interpretation of narrative suture is influenced by Laura Mulvey, *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988).

¹² Plots involving sympathy between the genders usually end in marriage, but I will explain later in this chapter why Eliot avoided marital closure.

“exquisite goodness” can be articulated. Eliot’s belief in the power of fiction depends on this fact.

II. From Self-Indulgence to Social Awareness: Gwendolen Harleth

Perhaps it would have been rash to say that she was at all exceptional inwardly, or that the unusual in her was more than her rare grace of movement and bearing, and a certain daring which gave piquancy to a very common egoistic ambition, such as exists under many clumsy exteriors and is taken no notice of. For I suppose that the set of the head does not really determine the hunger of the inner self for supremacy. (53)

When I asserted in the previous chapter that Maggie Tulliver is far simpler to understand than she is usually believed to be, I was likely to upset some of Eliot’s disciples. Calling Gwendolen Harleth unexceptional is likely to disturb far fewer people, but my goal is to trouble simple readings of selfishness and egotism. I said that Maggie was easy to understand because many readers try to separate Maggie’s few vanities from her core of goodness, and I think that doing so is a mistake. Things like selfishness and sympathy exist in tension with one another, and everyone needs at least a little of both qualities. If they lack selfishness entirely, then they are just as likely to fail because they will not protect themselves from the demands of others. I do not intend to be perverse or obstinate by making a counter-claim to the narrator here, but I think I must argue that Gwendolen Harleth was, after all, “exceptional inwardly” (53). Gwendolen starts at the far end of the selfish-sympathetic spectrum from Maggie and moves towards sympathy from a point of intense self-preoccupation. She is much more complex than most readers are likely to acknowledge unless they have previously concerned themselves with Eliot’s evolving technology for individual interpretation. Although in many obvious ways, Gwendolen is the anti-Maggie, they share several important traits. They are both catalyzed by financial change, both win

kindness from a sensitive man but choose to associate themselves with a more callous and aggressive man, and both are aware of their beauty but feel a detachment from it.

My analysis of *Daniel Deronda* requires that I look beyond the title character first and then return to him. Although I am usually at odds with F. R. Leavis's analysis in *The Great Tradition*, I agree that the half of the novel dealing with Gwendolen Harleth is superior to the half that deals with Daniel Deronda. However, there is a question of degree in this superiority. Whereas Leavis states that "In no other of [Eliot's] works is the association of the strength with the weakness so remarkable or so unfortunate as in *Daniel Deronda*," I have a great deal of respect for even the Deronda half.¹³ Not so, Leavis; he largely chooses to ignore Daniel's plot. "As things are, there is, lost under that damning title, an actual great novel to be extricated. And to extricate it for separate publication as *Gwendolen Harleth* seems to me the most likely way of getting recognition for it. *Gwendolen Harleth* would have some rough edges, but it would be a self-sufficient and very substantial whole . . ."¹⁴ This discussion predates Leavis, however. Henry James wrote a humorous essay called "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation" with three characters standing in for various contemporary responses to the novel. Theodora always agrees with Eliot's philosophical themes, Pulcheria can only tolerate her romantic themes, and Constantius—a stand-in for James as a critic—seeks a balance between the two. Constantius forecasts James's judgment

¹³ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher Inc., 1937) 79. For more on the competing halves of the novel, see the classic studies by David R. Carroll, "The Unity of *Daniel Deronda*," *Essays in Criticism* 9 (1959) 369-80 and Jerome Beaty, "Daniel Deronda and the Question of Unity in Fiction," *Victorian Newsletter* 15 (1959) 16-20. More recently, studies like H.M. Daleski, "Owning and Disowning: The Unity of *Daniel Deronda*," *Daniel Deronda: A Centenary Symposium*, ed. Alic Shalvi (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1976); Herbert Levine, "The Marriage of Allegory and Realism in *Daniel Deronda*," *Genre* 15 (1982) 421-46; and Nancy Pell, "The Father's Daughters in *Daniel Deronda*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 36 (1981) 424-51 have argued for synthetic readings of the double plots.

¹⁴ Leavis 122.

bluntly: “Speaking brutally, I consider *Daniel Deronda* the weakest of [Eliot’s] books.”¹⁵

His harsh opinion depends on the same distinction later made by Leavis, but unlike Leavis, for James, even George Eliot’s weakest writing is better than most other writers’ best. “All the Jewish part is at bottom cold; that is my only objection. I have enjoyed it because my fancy often warms cold things; but beside Gwendolen’s history it is like the empty half of the lunar disk beside the full one. It is admirably studied, it is imagined, it is understood, but it is not embodied.”¹⁶ So despite the Jewish plot’s coldness, Gwendolen’s story redeems it. I find myself agreeing with Constantius/James, and his “warming fancy” for Daniel foreshadows my own willingness to grant that plot a little more forgiveness. Constantius continues, “I give up *Deronda* and *Mirah* to the objector, but *Grandcourt* and *Gwendolen* seem to have a kind of superior reality; to be, in a high degree, what one demands of a figure in a novel, planted on their legs and complete.”¹⁷ *Gwendolen* and *Grandcourt* are fascinating even if *Daniel* is a little boring.

Eliot was familiar with the sound of critics who only wanted to hear about *Gwendolen*, but she insisted on the unity of her work. In a letter to Eugène Bodichon, she complained about “readers who cut the book into scraps and talk of nothing in it but

¹⁵ Henry James, “*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*,” *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1919) 72. One of the more subtle modern readings belongs to Dorothea Barrett’s *Vocation and Desire*. Barrett supports the traditional split between the halves of the novel, but she sees both as flawed, not just the Daniel plot. “*Daniel Deronda* crosses more boundaries, and is therefore more strained than any other George Eliot novel. The English part of the novel is an England only recently familiar to George Eliot, the aristocratic world. She, like Balzac, paints drawing rooms into which she was never invited until the height of her success. The Jewish part is book learned, and it strains, like *Romola* to seem lived.” Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot’s Heroines* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 154. Although I agree that *Deronda* is not as lively as *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* (or *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*, for that matter), its emotional depth and its erudition are impressive as alternate virtues.

¹⁶ James “*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*” 84-85.

¹⁷ James “*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*” 52.

Gwendolen. I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there.”¹⁸ Her frustration is understandable, and it reflects both her desire to see Daniel’s character a success and her sympathy for and similarity to him. By and large, readers view *Daniel Deronda* as an anticlimax after Eliot’s earlier triumphs. “*Middlemarch* is almost universally acknowledged as the pinnacle of George Eliot’s artistic achievement. But she did not stop there, and her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, must be considered in some measure, especially in any study of her rhetoric.”¹⁹ Mary Ellen Doyle’s begrudging use of the word “must” is startling, given how very good the novel actually is. That, in her study of Eliot’s use of sympathy, she misses most of Eliot’s achievement in undoing selfishness is therefore somewhat less surprising.

The critical response to the novel has followed two trends. (1) Most critics recognize the depth of sentiment in Gwendolen’s plight, and they link her to Eliot’s earlier heroines. These critics are frustrated with the half of the novel dealing with Daniel, and they, like Leavis, believe that Eliot should have written the two stories separately—when they bother to acknowledge that the Daniel plot has merit at all.²⁰ (2) The other major trend includes a great deal more cultural studies and postcolonial work. Critics working under this rubric deal more specifically with the Daniel, Mirah, and Mordecai plot and its treatment of both

¹⁸ 2 October 1876, *Letters* VI.290.

¹⁹ Mary Ellen Doyle, *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot’s Fictional Rhetoric* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1981) 159.

²⁰ Claude T. Bissell argues that the Daniel plot is flawed because of its concern with politics rather than psychology, but the Gwendolen plot is excellent. “Set aside the ‘Daniel Deronda’ section, and the novel is George Eliot at her strongest and best, working a social setting that she thoroughly understands and exploring a complicated network of motives with assurance and precision” (Bissell 221). If we do not set aside the Daniel section, Bissell thinks that our opinion of Eliot is likely to be much worse. “The political section of the novel provides a catalogue of almost all the vices to which the novelist can succumb: the prose is wooden, with much reliance on abstractions and heavy, over-stuffed phrases; the characters are puppets in a dull charade, unfortunately endowed by their manipulator with the gift of endless speech” (222).

traditional and racial Judaism.²¹ I hope to create a synthetic argument that pays attention to both strands of criticism. Daniel's eponymy and his relationship specifically with Mordecai are preconditions for Gwendolen's situation. Even though her destiny is really the more interesting of the two halves of the novel, and the reader's concern for her plight is justifiable, I find Daniel's presence necessary to counterbalance the story. To explain why, I will need to show just what sort of persons Gwendolen and Daniel are. While the novel was still being published, Blackwood wrote to Eliot about his fascination for Gwendolen. "That wicked witch Gwendolen is perfectly irresistible, new and yet so true to nature, like all the other characters."²² He echoes both the sentiments of characters in the novel, who cannot resist her, and Eliot's readers, who find her both wicked and realistic.²³ I shall return to Daniel later, so that I can give the "witch" her due.

²¹ Although critics have dealt with the Zionist plot all along, it has recently become more popular as cultural studies and postcolonialism became major trends in academia. The first major point of postcolonial contact with the novel is Edward Said's 1979 *The Question of Palestine*. More recently, Bernard Semmel's 1993 *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* has dealt with Eliot's imperial assumptions. But even the first responses felt the need to address the Jewish part of the book. However, back then they were unsure what to make of it. Here is a piece of R.H. Hutton's July 29, 1876 review for the *Spectator* called "The Strong Side of *Daniel Deronda*." "The most inadequate part of the book has been the part in which Mordecai has canvassed his politico-religious enterprise, and tried to demonstrate that the Jewish nation might still have a national work to do in the world in interpreting to the East the wisdom of the West, as modified by the higher conceptions of the Jewish faith. But the greatest fault of the book has been very close, at least, to its greatest secret of power." *The Critical Response to George Eliot*, Ser. 11, ed. Karen L. Pangallo (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 189. Hutton goes on to argue that Eliot has "transgressed the bounds of what [she] can accomplish in fiction" (189). So the book is important and useful as a political event but a failure as a novel. More recent criticism has argued that Eliot's novelistic and political ambitions were joined more successfully. The most useful and thorough of these recent postcolonial treatments is Alicia Carroll, *Dark Smiles: Race and Desire in George Eliot*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2003. Carroll argues that Eliot draws from sources like *The Arabian Nights* and Shakespeare's *Othello* (and other texts "that would have been recognizable as either erotic or sensational to the Victorian reader") to create a cast of exotic Others familiar to her audience so that she can then refashion them into something more useful and interesting (108). "Arab or Jewish, exotic Orientalism is traditionally used to contrast with the cool chastity and sexual virtue of white heroines and heroes . . . It is these ideals that Eliot resists, disrupts, and subverts in the novel, which blends characteristics of Englishness and Otherness into one character and engages the Victorian controversy over 'Jewish traditionalism' and 'modernity's universalizing assimilationism'" (108-9).

²² 10 November 1875, *Letters* VI.182.

²³ Henry James admires Gwendolen's psychological realism. "Gwendolen's whole history is vividly told. And see how the girl is known, inside out, how thoroughly she is felt and understood. It is the most *intelligent* thing in all George Eliot's writing, and that is saying much." "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation" 87.

Gwendolen Harleth begins life as an extremely self-absorbed girl. She grows into a willful woman but eventually becomes earnest in her attentions to the people around her. Her essential selfishness obscures a desire to be kind. Within the world of the novel, there are three ways of understanding or approaching Gwendolen. (1) The first one is the general response: everyone but Daniel and Gwendolen herself sees her beauty as her most important attribute, (2) but Daniel is privileged to see her avarice and narcissism first, and (3) Gwendolen is sure that her own most important characteristics are her boredom and her unwillingness to have her future determined for her. The reader's relationship to Gwendolen is made complex by the convergence of these three different approaches. Her physical beauty is a given. Daniel's suspicion is more dubious, though, and Eliot never states directly that Gwendolen actually was greedy or terribly vain. Instead, Eliot interrupts her narrator's account with many of Gwendolen's internal monologues to build sympathy with the character.²⁴ The various insults that the novel throws at Gwendolen all come filtered through her own experience or as somewhat justifiable reactions to various frustrations. Therefore, the reader is closest to the supposedly selfish perspective of Gwendolen herself.

People are struck by Gwendolen's beauty at all points in the novel. Their awareness is sometimes tempered but more often heightened by a realization that something obstinate in her character resists this external beauty. Eliot writes, "However, she had the charm, and those who feared her were also fond of her; the fear and the fondness being perhaps both heightened by what may be called the iridescence of her character—the play of various, nay,

²⁴ Doyle and I are in agreement here. "Because she is a more complete egoist than Esther Lyon and Mrs. Transome and can change more than Hetty Sorrel or Rosamond Vincy, she is more a challenge than any of them. The egoism must be revealed so that the reader will comprehend her and maintain sympathy; the change must be credibly accounted for" (166). Eliot's attention to detail makes Gwendolen both exciting and painful to watch as she emerges from "egoism" to sympathy.

contrary tendencies” (42).²⁵ The language of fear seems difficult to reconcile with an appealing beauty, but Gwendolen manifests an “awful majesty” that attracts people to her (80). Her “contrary tendencies” help put her beauty into relief. If she were too perfect, then she would be boring.²⁶ She is self-aware enough to realize that part of her allure is her ability to repulse while she attracts. She asks her mother, “How can you help what I am? Besides, I am very charming” (96). Most people around her respond to the “iridescence of her character” without understanding the particular mixture of characteristics which determine her course.

Daniel and Gwendolen share a more nuanced understanding of her character. Throughout the novel, Daniel is troubled by Gwendolen’s duality, and he wants to help her avoid her darker and more selfish traits. At times, he wonders whether it is possible for her to improve. At one point, he despairs that he “can’t do anything to help her—nobody can. . . . She was clearly an ill-educated, worldly girl: perhaps she is a coquette” (413). She is not a coquette, or at least, she is not a sexual coquette. She does not want real conquests, and she actually craves stability. At the same time, she fears it because she is afraid that stability might lead to stagnation, and she thinks the greatest torment in the world is boredom. The novel addresses the disillusionment that frees a person from primary narcissism, but Gwendolen is oddly positioned because before that moment, she is already self-reflective, and even after it, she frequently returns to her infantile fantasies of grand

²⁵ The reference to “contrary tendencies” works similarly to the notion of “productive ambivalence” that I borrowed from Homi K. Bhabha in my introduction. Because Gwendolen’s oddities and aspects of selfishness are frequently accompanied by normal beauty and incidental kindnesses, she remains irreducible. It is never possible to dismiss her simply as just a beautiful egoist.

²⁶ The technique of throwing beauty into relief by contrasting irregular, even ugly, elements was theorized by William Gilpin in response to Edmund Burke’s work on the sublime and the beautiful. This development led to the “picturesque” movement in the arts, and Eliot seems to be borrowing from it to characterize Gwendolen.

importance. For example, Gwendolen is aware of others' misapprehension of her. Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone diagnoses Gwendolen more specifically (and anachronistically) with "narcissistic personality disorder."²⁷ She accurately predicts Daniel's assessment when she worries that "he probably thought of her as a selfish creature who only cared about possessing things in her own person" (422). However, he is wrong in thinking her so "worldly" or vain. She does not want to possess anyone or anything in particular. She is far more concerned with not being possessed by anyone else.

Gwendolen's self-conception is inflected with a sense of ennui that would seem much more likely in a world-weary character thirty years after her time. She complains that she is "always bored," and her decision to accept Grandcourt's proposal comes more from a desire for change than any other overt motive (14). She also says that her distaste is stronger than her affection. "I think I dislike what I don't like more than I like what I like" (304). Her negativity inverts the optimism of most of Eliot's heroines, but Gwendolen is being prepared for a more thorough conversion than most of them, too. Gwendolen's selfish desires mask a goodness of which she is barely aware and which Eliot reveals to her readers very slowly. The best reason for Gwendolen to marry Grandcourt is really the comfort that economic security will bring to her family—especially her mother—but Gwendolen must hide this truth from herself until the end of the novel when Daniel makes her motives explicit to her. In the book's early chapters, Gwendolen feels a child's sense of invulnerability. She "felt as secure

²⁷ As Johnstone points out, this diagnosis was not recognized until 1980 with the publication of the DMS-III. Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone, *The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* (New York: New York UP, 1994) 162. Johnstone goes on to list the five criteria that Gwendolen fulfills: "her exaggerated sense of her own importance," her "fantasies of unlimited success, power, and beauty," "her need for constant attention and admiration," her "feelings of rage, inferiority, humiliation, or emptiness in response to criticism or defeat," and "her sense of entitlement and lack of empathy" (162-3). According to this psychoanalytic approach, Gwendolen's transformation across the novel is the result of Daniel's therapeutic intervention, and I will suggest something like this shortly when I discuss Eliot's use of a "sickbed of selfishness" metaphor.

as an immortal goddess, having, if she had thought of risk, a core of confidence that no ill luck would happen to her” (72). Her family’s sudden bankruptcy provides an impetus for change.²⁸ She tells herself that she wants to use her beauty to secure a good future for herself, but she also wants to protect her family. Her decision to marry Grandcourt hides behind her insistence that her “life is [her] own affair” (235). If all the courses in the novel are connected, then her life is also everyone else’s business, just as theirs is hers. Her reliance on superficiality prevents her from acknowledging this major impulse in her own story for a long time.

Gwendolen stops to consider her beauty at several points in the story, but she engages with it as an abstract quality and as a material advantage, not as an end in itself. These scenes help to show how self-reflection (via mirror reflection in these cases) is a natural part of Gwendolen’s character. “The self-delight with which she had kissed her image in the glass had faded before the sense of futility in being anything whatever—charming, clever, resolute—what was the good of it all?” (229). Like Janet Tryan in “Janet’s Repentance,” she is in danger of giving herself up to despair in consequence of her husband’s brutal treatment. As “self-delight” evaporates, she begins to think that she deserves something better. Gwendolen is only a small distance from sympathizing with other people: her despair leads to suffering, and suffering leads to an awareness that other people suffer, too. However, a full trip along the continuum of self-preoccupation to friendly awareness of other people is halted again and again by the attention that other characters pay her for her appearance and

²⁸ Gwendolen’s changed circumstances closely mirror the Tulliver bankruptcy in *The Mill on the Floss*. K. Theodore Hoppen treats sudden monetary change (and the general fascination with money) as a recurring trope in Victorian fiction in his chapter “The Business of Culture” in *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 372-426. Hoppen shows that Eliot was well-paid in her later career (a judgment supported by Eliot’s comments in the letters) but that money was an uncertain enough commodity that it was a source of anxiety for her throughout all of her fiction. As she put it, “We are not greedy, though we are far from being indifferent to money” (*Letters* VI.303).

her lively personality. Physically, at least, she is more like an eighteenth-century heroine than any of Eliot's other central female characters.²⁹ Still, her beauty is an objective quality and very nearly a frustration for her. It is as if things have come too easily to Gwendolen, and she needs some stimulation to make her active. "Seeing her image slowly advancing, she thought, 'I *am* beautiful'—not exultingly, but with grave decision" (251). Gwendolen becomes bored with the constant attention to her external presentation, and she begins to desire more of an inner life. Her self-concern makes an effective beginning place for a journey of self-discovery. Like Maggie and the little world around the mill, Gwendolen's deeper awareness of the world around her is nurtured by immediate experience. "The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one's own homestead" (22). This primer in astronomy introduces Gwendolen to the world of interpretations and secret motivations that underpin the quote that begins this chapter. The easier, slower path to self-discovery is interrupted when she leaves her family to marry Grandcourt and encounters real trouble in his house.

Eliot works to keep her readers from getting too comfortable with Gwendolen and her conversion story. While most of the narrative assessments of Gwendolen's character either come directly from Gwendolen's mind and are at worst ambivalent or come by way of free indirect discourse from characters who love her or hate her, Eliot-as-narrator occasionally intervenes directly. At one point, she explains that "Gwendolen was apt to think rather of those who saw her than of those whom she could not see . . ." (72). Therefore, Gwendolen's

²⁹ Sarah Gates makes similar claims about Gwendolen's beauty. "'A Difference of Native Language': Gender, Genre, and Realism in *Daniel Deronda*," *ELH* 68.3 (2001) 699-724. Other critics trouble a simplistic reading of even Gwendolen's physical presentation. See, for example, Roslyn Belkin, "What George Eliot Knew: Women and Power in *Daniel Deronda*," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 4 (1981) 472-63 and Christine Sutphen, "Feminine Passivity and Rebellion in Four Novels by George Eliot," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 29 (1987) 342-63.

interactions with Daniel and her trajectory towards enlightenment require her to make a series of intuitive leaps beyond her immediate experience. Her frequently flattered vanity makes it difficult for her to break free of her self-complacency, and only an introduction to suffering and repeated encounters with Daniel's disapproval make her development at all possible. She is more than just a bored heroine, though. Her discomfort with Grandcourt's emotional abuse of her, although quite reasonable according to her experience, is exacerbated by feelings of guilt over her own suppressed cruelty and caprice.

Eliot sometimes directly addresses Gwendolen's internal conflict. At the beginning of the story, she is almost completely unreflective. Eliot writes, "It is possible to have a strong self-love without any self-satisfaction, rather with a self-discontent which is the more intense because one's own little core of egoistic sensibility is a supreme care; but Gwendolyn knew nothing of such inward strife" (18). The near paradox described here, awareness of selfhood makes a person prone to dissatisfaction, is apparently impossible for Gwendolen to conceive, and obliviousness to the *cogito* keeps her, at least at this point, away from awareness that suffering is a universal quality. By the end of the novel, she will be very familiar with exactly this nuanced form of "inward strife." Eliot explains that Gwendolen's progress towards sympathy and enlightenment are staggered not just by other people's willingness to go out of their way to make her happy but also by her anxieties over certain suppressed tendencies.

"[Gwendolen] naturally found it difficult to think her own pleasure less important than others made it . . . Though never even as a child thoughtlessly cruel, nay, delighting to rescue drowning insects and watch their recovery, there was a disagreeable silent remembrance of her having strangled her sister's canary-bird in a final fit of exasperation at its shrill singing which had again and again jarringly interrupted her own. (25)

This sociopathic bit of cruelty shows that Gwendolen has a natural tendency to lash out at those who would deny her the spotlight. It is not inconsequential that the bird angered her by singing when she wanted attention to her own singing. Her tantrum comes across as cruel, no matter what the narrator says about it being merely “disagreeable,” and it is easy to imagine Gwendolen letting the “drowning insects” languish just a little bit longer so that her watery rescues would be just that little bit more heroic. When Grandcourt dies at the end of the novel, she will have so completely accepted her probable guilt in these scenarios that his own drowning will fill her with remorse in a way foreshadowed by her feelings over her sister’s murdered canary.³⁰ In her simple egotistical state—when she is a child, anyway—she is able to smooth over her crime by replacing the bird. “She had taken pains to buy a white mouse for her sister in retribution, and though inwardly excusing herself on the ground of a peculiar sensitiveness which was a mark of her general superiority, the thought of that infelicious murder had always made her wince” (25). I read Gwendolen’s awareness of her “peculiar sensitiveness” as an inversion of Maggie’s “keen sensitiveness” (Floss 260). While Gwendolen must come to see herself as less special—as a less important particular in the greater picture of universal suffering—Maggie had to learn to see herself as entitled to at least some consideration. Gwendolen thinks she has a “general superiority,” but she is still aware enough of wrongdoing to feel guilt. In this instance of cruelty, she is better equipped to repent than similar narcissists in Eliot’s fiction.

³⁰ Despite Gwendolen’s more callous tendencies, readers are meant to sympathize with her and to urge her on silently to become better. Doing so requires them to watch Gwendolen engage in some horrific displays. “The George Eliot method embodies one extreme possibility, purifying the stuff of scandal in its articulation. . . . The narrator’s high-minded tone subordinates subject to ethical purpose and denies any element of prurience in reader’s response or writer’s motivation. The reader (to say nothing of the writer) thus has it both ways, free to contemplate the kind of behavior one whispers about, while remaining superior to mere scandal.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 204. Gwendolen’s awful behavior—drowning insects, riding a horse to death, marrying for money, and watching her husband die—are therefore meant to generate concern rather than horror.

Although readers must feel some discomfort with a canary murderer, Gwendolen is more aware of her guilt than, for example, Capt. Anthony Wybrow in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story.” The comparison is implicit in their similar responses to guilt. He had avoided sinning because being found out was such a bother, and similarly, her “nature was not remorseless, but she liked to make her penances easy, and now that she was twenty and more, some of her native force had turned into a self-control by which she guarded herself from penitential humiliation” (25). The crucial difference here, and the one which makes it possible to redeem Gwendolen, is Eliot’s assertion that her “nature was not remorseless.” In fact, she already possesses the deeper understanding which empowers her with Maggie’s gift of sympathy. Her identification with others is at first very limited, as when she tries to make her mother feel better after hurting her feelings: “the next day Gwendolen was keenly conscious of what must be in her mamma’s mind, and tried to make amends by caresses which cost her no effort” (24-25). This consciousness must grow strong enough that it becomes a point of identification before she will be willing to cost herself some effort. At the end of the novel, she is ready to suffer for others by taking on a life of charity and frugality.

III. Conflict Gives Rise to “A New Soul”

If she chose to take this husband, she would have him know that she was not going to renounce her freedom, or according to her favourite formula, “not going to do as other women did.” (132)

Gwendolen’s courtship by Grandcourt is staged as the conflict between her desire to please herself and her refusal to acknowledge the claims of others on her. She states her maxim: “My plan is to do what pleases me” (69). The narrator elaborates, saying, “She had

no gratuitously ill-natured feeling, or egoistic pleasure in making men miserable. She only had an intense objection to their making her miserable” (271). Gwendolen is confident that she has the power to determine the course of her own life without acknowledging the “hidden pathways of feeling and thought” that determine her relationships with others (164). Her marriage to Grandcourt prepares her to see her error, but only her friendship with Deronda will show her the way out of it. The path to accepting her error happens in several stages. In the first, she is unreflective or at least completely misled about what marriage will mean for her. She shares her naïve theory of self-mastery with her mother. “Mamma, I see now why girls are glad to be married—to escape being expected to please everybody but themselves” (97). It is important to recognize one kernel of decency in her original lack of sympathy—her misunderstanding does not grow out of selfishness. Read quickly, it may sound as if she is fundamentally awful, wanting to please herself constantly. However, Gwendolen is slightly better since she is more guided by a fear of having to please everyone else. Her naïveté leads her to misjudge her relationship with Grandcourt from the outset. “True, he was not to have the slightest power over her (for Gwendolen had not considered that the desire to conquer is itself a sort of subjection); she had made up her mind that he was to be one of those complimentary and assiduously admiring men . . .” (106). Her mistake here is not an attempt to control him but rather a misapprehension as to how he will treat her. Grandcourt reveals himself as a sadist who, rather than beating his wife, denies her agency, which to her is on a par with physical abuse.

Eliot is verbose about Gwendolen’s mistake to the point of redundancy, elaborating on Gwendolen’s “reassuring thought that marriage would be the gate into a larger freedom” (146). Rather than a “larger freedom,” it is a personal hell. The narrative enforces a reading

of Gwendolen's error so that readers move along the path towards the truth ahead of her. "Gwendolen had about as accurate a conception of marriage . . . as she had of magnetic currents and the law of storms" (298). Readers are prepared to wince at her misfortune because they see it ahead of her and know some of the pain she has coming. They also see Gwendolen as a child who refuses to recognize evidence already put in front of her. She has dismissed the possibility that marriage might become damnation if she chooses the wrong husband. "This subjection to a possible self, a self not to be absolutely predicted about, caused her some astonishment and terror: her favourite key of life—doing as she liked—seemed to fail her, and she could not foresee what at a given moment she might like to do" (136). Because she is always more fully aware of what she does not want than what she does, this fear appears as a sort of existential dread. So, she dismisses the fear by making a resolute choice, but she chooses badly. Her false belief that "she seemed to be getting a sort of empire over her own life" generates a feeling of pity in those who know what is coming to her (292). The second stage in Gwendolen's recognition of her mistake comes when she realizes what sort of man she has engaged to marry. The break happens after she meets Lydia Glasher—Grandcourt's mistress and the mother of his children. Mrs. Glasher says, "You are very attractive, Miss Harleth. But when he first knew me, I too was young" (152). Gwendolen "felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, 'I am a woman's life'" (152). Her subsequent feelings manifest as the early failures of an awakening conscience.

. . . she felt a sort of numbness and could set about nothing; the least urgency, even that she should take her meals, was an irritation to her . . . It was not in her nature to busy herself with the fancies of suicide to which disappointed young people are prone: what occupied and exasperated her was the sense that there was nothing for her but to live in a way she hated. (273)

At this point, Gwendolen's recognition is a depressed one, and it will take some work before she moves to a more active renunciation of her selfish fantasies. The dulling of desire that comes upon her again makes her seem ahead of her time and emphasizes the interiority which Eliot so skillfully conjures up in her writing, but the fear of Mrs. Glasher as the emblem of "a woman's life" probably felt very timely, given the legal destiny of fallen women (152).

The third stage in Gwendolen's journey towards self-awareness comes in her decision to marry Grandcourt despite having confronted Mrs. Glasher. She marries Grandcourt in full awareness of her probable error, and her knowledge of the mistake leads her to self-reflection concerning her motives. As she comes into more understanding of herself, she becomes more beautiful. She follows the path of intensification laid out by Mr. Tryan and Maggie before her. She is becoming more "self-ish," more fully herself.

Gwendolen seemed more decidedly attractive than before, and certainly there had been changes going on within her since that time at Leubronn: the struggle of mind attending a conscious error had wakened something like a new soul, which had better, but also worse, possibilities than her former poise of crude self-confidence: among the forces she had come to dread was something within her that troubled satisfaction. (332)

Her "new soul" grows out of self-awareness. She has fully acknowledged her error, but she will need some sort of external guide to show her how to make her error profitable. As a more fully actualized person, she is more dangerous than she had been. Knowing that she has sinned or—more specifically—knowing that she is about to sin and then doing it anyway is a large step forward from her earlier naïve ignorance. It sets before her "better, but also worse, possibilities" (332).³¹ Looking at her sin for what it is, admitting its power, and then

³¹ Eliot was aware that Gwendolen's acceptance of Grandcourt's proposal had upset readers. She took their engagement as a compliment while being frustrated at being beholden to their expectations. "People in their eagerness about my characters are quite angry, it appears, when their own expectations are not fulfilled—angry,

committing it anyway differentiates her from all of Eliot's other heroes. Latimer never acknowledged that he shared the egoism he detested in others. Maggie was tempted and refused to be swayed by Stephen Guest. In contrast, Gwendolen knows that she is marrying an adulterer but does it anyway.³² Her remorse over Mrs. Glasher's plight and the suffering that she undergoes awaken her to ways in which her life would have been better and ways in which it might still be recoverable. The path forward is extremely difficult, and Gwendolen temporarily hides her epiphany from herself. "That intoxication of youthful egoism out of which she had been shaken by trouble, humiliation, and a new sense of culpability, had returned upon her under the newly-fed strength of the old fumes" (355). However, "she had been shaken," and her first sight of the better path returns to her later in the novel after she has faced many more difficulties. But what about her marriage to Grandcourt itself? What does it say that married life is the central trial of the novel? Similar revelations happened to Latimer when he married Bertha and to Romola de' Bardi when she married Tito Melema. Marriage is set up as the positive outcome of the comic novel, so what does it mean when it becomes the punishment in a drama? The first answer is that the happy outcome requires a marriage of equals—Adam Bede and Dinah Morris, Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw, and Felix Holt and Esther Lyon-Bycliff. The second answer is that marriage itself is perilous. This theme will reappear, oddly enough, in relationship to Deronda and Mordecai.

for example that Gwendolen accepts Grandcourt etc. etc. . . . Such are the reproaches to which I make myself liable" ("to John Blackwood," 18 April 1876, *Letters* VI.241).

³² Although George Henry Lewes and George Eliot's relationship was only legally (not essentially) adultery, there are a number of parallels to Gwendolen's experience. This reality has not escaped critical attention. Gilbert and Gubar are almost coy in their approach to the subject. "Both Romola and Gwendolen are especially aware that their husbands' selfishness has victimized other women: as the legal wives of men whose mistresses have borne children invisible because illegitimate, both Romola and Gwendolen identify with the dispossessed women, as if Eliot were obsessively considering her own ambiguous 'wifeness'" (495). The displacement at work here is difficult to reconcile since Lewes's children were a mix of his legitimate offspring and his legal wife's illegitimate ones.

Eliot frequently punctures stereotypically sentimental techniques, especially in her ambivalence towards companionate marriage. Gwendolen's rector uncle advises her to marry Grandcourt, essentially as a marriage of convenience and comfort. He is startled to hear her answer to those same qualifications which he thinks he has successfully couched in sentimental language. "He wished that in her mind his advice should be taken in an infusion of sentiments proper to a girl, and such as are presupposed in the advice of a clergyman, although he may not consider them always appropriate to be put forward" (143). He wants to hide his more selfish motivations from her, but she is alert to the promptings of greed and false civility. "He wished his niece parks, carriages, a title—everything that would make this world a pleasant abode; but he wished her not to be cynical—to be on the contrary, religiously dutiful, and have warm domestic affections" (143). The cult of domesticity's reliance on "proper sentiments" and "the advice of a clergyman" contrasts directly with the truer ideology of wealth and creature comforts that he hopes his niece to have and himself to share in reputation. Eliot's arch tone, acerbically mentioning "everything that would make this world a pleasant abode," shows her opinion that some less quantifiable things than social status and money are more important than what Gwendolen's uncle wishes for her. Unfortunately for him and the world of the novel, Gwendolen is far too astute to accept completely his following statement that "Marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman" (143). Eliot writes that Gwendolen "wanted to waive those higher considerations" (143). Both author and character refuse the pleasant fiction by counteracting the doctrine of separate spheres. However, while taking on the "woman question" and the doctrine of the spheres, Eliot was expected to yoke her political aims to artistic success. Alison Booth explains that Eliot's task was made more difficult by the revelation of her own identity.

Yet while she was expected to teach, she was still expected to dazzle; overt preaching was taboo in the Victorian almost as much as the modern aesthetic code. Further, her now public womanhood burdened her; the suspicion cast on any woman not minding her domestic business could poison a political novel by a woman, not to mention a novel recklessly broaching the “woman question.”³³

This is not to say that Eliot was “reckless” at all. It is to say that she had a difficult task with Gwendolen because Gwendolen is poisonous in her own right, especially since Eliot moved so fluidly between the public and private spheres in her fiction.

Part of what makes Gwendolen dangerous is her assumption of masculine privilege. She refuses domination, and she treats marriage contractually. Eliot uses Gwendolen to show what would happen if the traditional gender roles in courtship were reversed.³⁴ “The desirability of marriage for [Gwendolen] had always seemed due to other feelings than love; and to be enamoured was the part of the man, on whom the advances depended” (298). It is interesting that agency is linked to desire because while she has always craved agency, she has lacked desire. This refiguring of both libido and power onto the same body evacuates the space that Gwendolen might have been expected to inhabit. If she does not have the power to make “advances,” and she is not even “enamoured,” then, what position does she leave available to herself? Her rejection of the standard love plot and even of its opposite (in which she might be the pursuer, Grandcourt the pursued) leaves her essentially powerless. Her difference from the supposed ideal is remarkable by the time she actually marries Grandcourt: “She did not in the least present the ideal of the tearful, tremulous bride” (355).

³³ Alison Booth, “Not All Men are Selfish and Cruel: *Felix Holt* as a Feminist Novel,” *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, eds. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1992) 143.

³⁴ Sarah Gates works under a similar assumption when she contrasts the masculinized Gwendolen to Eliot’s earlier heroines. For more on the standard reading of gender in Eliot’s fiction, see Margaret Homans, “Dinah’s Blush, Maggie’s Arm: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in George Eliot’s Early Novels,” *Victorian Studies* 36 (1993) 155-78.

Gwendolen is hardly the tearful sort. The way she is masculinized becomes part of what makes her relationship with Deronda so odd: I will soon show the ways in which he is concomitantly feminized.

Eliot undoes the standard language of marriage and courtship in several other ways, but two more examples will suffice. She problematizes the standard metaphorical comparison between women and flowers, and she reveals that women are much less self-sacrificing than sentimental literature has reduced them into being.³⁵ Gwendolen explains that too much beauty and too much control can have counterproductive ends. “We must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. That is my notion about the plants: they are often bored, and that is the reason why some of them have got poisonous” (135). Her warning that women become dangerous when they become bored is instructive because it reveals a potential Gwendolen fears within herself. Later in the novel, Mordecai and Mirah provide a gloss on the nature of women and their roles as self-sacrificing. Mordecai states that “women are specially framed for the love which feels possession in renouncing” and goes on to tell the story of a Jewish woman’s sacrifice for a Christian man (735). The Jewish woman replaces the woman the Christian man loves in prison and dies in her stead. Mordecai asserts the lesson of the story as “the surpassing love, that loses self in the object of love” (735). Mirah remains constant to Eliot’s reconstitution of sentimentality in the novel by insisting that Mordecai’s interpretation is wrong and that women are not so good and self-destroying. “She wanted [the lover] when she was dead to

³⁵ Alison Booth underscores the ways that Eliot saw women’s potential being restrained. “Eliot shows how women are denied their due influence, but any protest is rigidly controlled, primarily as the bitter censured outcry of a sinning woman” (“Not All Men Are Selfish and Cruel” 148). Eliot reinforces this ideology while ostensibly critiquing it by leaving it to Gwendolen.

know what she had done, and feel that she was better than the other. It was her strong self, wanting to conquer, that made her die” (735).³⁶ This story of a “strong self” could serve as a warning to Gwendolen earlier in the novel, and it is the dangerous, selfish alter-ego of the self-sacrificing martyr introduced in “Janet’s Repentance.” Beyond just necessary selfishness, Mirah’s reading of the Midrash invokes true, basic selfishness. The inversion of the gender roles, the poisonous flower, and the fear of selfish motives all work to question conventional marriage as an end in itself.

IV. The Strong Self that Conquers and Dies: Henleigh Grandcourt

The word of all work Love will no more express the myriad modes of mutual attraction, than the word Thought can inform you what is passing through your neighbour’s mind. (301)

If Gwendolen’s plight is the true heart of the novel, as many critics have argued, then Grandcourt is the central narrative roadblock to happiness.³⁷ He is the most typically selfish character in the novel, despite the frequent anxiety over Gwendolen’s tendencies in that direction. Although not a self-sacrificer, he really is the selfish monster that Mirah imagined in the myth Mordecai and Mirah discuss. As the last great egoist rogue in Eliot’s fiction—after Arthur Donnithorne, Godfrey Cass, Nicholas Bulstrode, and Tito Melema—Grandcourt

³⁶ Although Mirah is a passive, fairly listless character, her interpretation of this story suggests a more sinister potential. Alicia Carroll explains that because Mirah “is an Other, a Jewish woman, [she] is also invested with exotic properties that complicate her virtue and childish innocence. Indeed, the Jewish woman served as a target for English fears, allowed a seductive beauty in literature where it is always qualified by exoticism. As such, her sexuality contains deeply threatening, disruptive, even violent forces” (134).

³⁷ Grandcourt has also attracted a great deal of critical attention. Bissell finds him “a masterful analysis of what we might call the ‘infernal aristocrat’ beside whom Lord Steyne [of *Vanity Fair*] is a genial and attractive Don Juan” (221). He goes on: “I do not think that George Eliot wants us to look upon Grandcourt as a symbol of aristocratic decay; she was not given to symbolism and besides she was not naïve enough to suggest that moral qualities are simply the product of social background” (229). Instead, Grandcourt is lucky enough to be given agency, but his evil qualities are of his own generating—just as Maggie’s or Janet’s or any number of other characters’ good qualities are independent of station. Grandcourt does take full advantage of his aristocratic privilege, though, and he sees it as a right in a way that Eliot does not.

is also the strangest. Eliot's relationship to Gwendolen as a character is complex because she cares for her and develops the readers' sympathy for her at the same time as she reveals her character's flaws. She does no such thing with Grandcourt, who is cut out to be loathsome from the beginning with no redemption possible.³⁸ He is different in kind than Eliot's other villains because he is lazy, self-indulgent, cruel, and aristocratic. Where Godfrey Cass might have been both self-indulgent and aristocratic—and both men ruined women socially beneath them—Grandcourt acts to deprive others more than he does to secure happiness for himself. As an Iago-like figure, he serves as a foil to Gwendolen. His cruelty is a refraction of her desire for self-control. Grandcourt's three most important qualities are his iron control, his cruelty, and his lassitude.

Gwendolen becomes aware of Grandcourt's desire for mastery early on. She worries that he "seemed to feel his own importance more than he did hers" (114). Eliot's narrator interrupts her at that moment to show the reader which side of the argument to take up. She introduces an axiomatic statement set off by dashes when she refers to people who think themselves more important than others "—a sort of unreasonableness few of us can tolerate—" (114).³⁹ The "us" here are Eliot's readers, and although it is true that the reader's sympathy is with Gwendolen at this point, we are held partially at bay by conflicting

³⁸ "Grandcourt is the only major character whom George Eliot made totally unsympathetic, but he is never treated unfairly. And he has the right kind (if not intensity) of effect on our distance from Gwendolen. He, not Deronda, wins our sympathy for her" (Doyle 168).

³⁹ At least some critics read Gwendolen's decision to tolerate Grandcourt's sadistic mastery as a form of docile servility. "Gwendolen marries Henleigh and embarks on a life in which she utterly sacrifices her petulant authority and bends to the subtle and severe commands of her husband. She wishes him dead for cruelties she cannot articulate—particularly to Daniel Deronda who demands strict adherence to a moral law based on reason—she believes herself to have murdered Henleigh by supernaturally making her 'wish [appear] outside [her].'" Marlene Tromp, "Gwendolen's Madness," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.2 (2000) 452, emendations Tromp's. I cannot agree that his demands are "subtle," and I do not think she completely "sacrifices her petulant authority." Instead, I see Gwendolen fighting Grandcourt as strongly as she can and trying to confess her troubles to Daniel.

impulses. We simultaneously agree with Gwendolen and recognize that agreeing with her makes us suspect to the criticisms already leveled against her. Might not the narrator here have become a bit unreliable? In backing off our identification with the embattled heroine before deciding that we do agree with her, after all, we become suspicious of our own motives. The narrative technique of superimposing our identification with the heroine on top of our reservations in accepting her traits as our own is both clever and tricky. The superimposition models sympathy for people who do not always earn it at the same time that it asks us to look at our own assumptions about who does and who does not deserve that kindness. We as readers are drawn back to the story's official version because in this case, the explicit statement of the case—that Grandcourt is wrong in exercising his selfish promptings on Gwendolen—is more true than the implicit critique of Gwendolen's presuppositions.

The sense of Grandcourt's mastery works according to the lesson taught by Sir Cheverel in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story": a strong will is the only magic.⁴⁰ When stirred to action, Grandcourt can overcome the lassitude which makes up most of his daily character. At one point, he becomes angry and imperious with his servant Lush. "Hitherto we have heard him speaking in a superficial interrupted drawl suggestive chiefly of languor and *ennui*. But this last brief speech was uttered in subdued, inward, yet distinct tones, which Lush had long been used to recognise as the expression of a peremptory will" (127). This will is the

⁴⁰ Once again, I am indebted to Peter Fenves for linking up two disparate elements because he takes the Grandcourt-to-characters-from-the-*Scenes* further than I had when he pairs Grandcourt with Dempster in "Janet's Repentance." "Dempster reappears as Grandcourt, but Grandcourt is an immensely more powerful concatenation of antinomious elements than Dempster: his life is spent in a grand exercise of control, and it is this control that cancels all individuality and that finally fixes history as mere repetition" (444). I suppose it is Grandcourt's "immense power" that prevented my making the symbolic link although it is worth extending Fenves's analysis by pointing out the way both characters are effectively killed off by their disapproving author. I anticipated Fenves's next move when I compared Mr. Tryan and Daniel, but Fenves also wants to throw Janet into the reincarnation as part of Daniel's character.

terrifying power which he wields over Gwendolen, and it is the quality which she lacks herself. She wants to be certain that no one can ever exercise control over her, but she never develops the willpower that would safeguard her. Uniting the desire and the power would make her truly dangerous, but she is aware that turning towards this sort of “peremptory will” would make her more truly selfish than she had ever been. Grandcourt sees his will as a birthright and part of his aristocratic heritage. As a result, he is both unreflective and truly selfish. He never questions his rights. “He had an ingrained care for what he held to belong to his caste, and about property he liked to be lordly; also he had a consciousness of indignity to himself in having to ask for anything in the world” (348). Although Daniel has as much claim to aristocratic privilege—both by birth as the son of the Princess Alcharisi and by inheritance under Sir Hugo Mallinger—he never assumes it or claims it. Just as Gwendolen questions the reality of love within marriage and focused instead on the power it bestows, Grandcourt neglects emotionality in favor of dominance. He asks her, “What do *you* know about the world? You have married *me*, and must be guided by my opinion” (593). His insistence on controlling Gwendolen is a factor of both his desire to dominate and his cruel streak. In the context of my larger argument, Grandcourt’s selfish exercise of power and Gwendolen’s inability to resist him together become figures for society and its victims. Without the necessary selfishness that would enable them to protect themselves, they are powerless before a misapplication of strength such as Grandcourt’s. To make my language more universal, I can rephrase my derivation in the following way: individuality and self-protection help people deal with a world that does not understand or accept them.

Many critics have recently discussed the abusive nature of Gwendolen and Grandcourt's marriage.⁴¹ What Eliot calls "his delight in dominating" marks Grandcourt's sadistic nature (343). Although he never physically abuses Gwendolen "onstage," readers are left free to imagine that it happens out of the text. The control he exerts over her is the most obvious sign of his cruelty, but Eliot relentlessly links his cruel exertion of power to selfishness in more subtle ways. "An imaginary envy, the idea that others feel their comparative deficiency, is the ordinary *cortège* of egoism; and his pet dogs were not the only beings that Grandcourt liked to feel his power over in making them jealous" (279). Gwendolen, Lush, Mrs. Glasher, Daniel, and the dogs all feel themselves pitted against the people who would naturally aid them in other circumstances. In standing between everyone else and manipulating their access to one another, Grandcourt symbolizes the failure of sympathy. His sociopathic detachment from the emotions of other people shows the monster that selfish people can become if they go beyond the "ordinary *cortège* of egoism" and try to realize all of their selfish wishes (279). Grandcourt is also representative of the complete denial of Eliot's demand that her characters try to understand one another. Towards the end of the novel, the depth of her disillusionment becomes clear to Gwendolen. "Any romantic illusions she had had in marrying this man had turned on her power of using him as she liked. He was using her as he liked" (598).

Of course, Grandcourt's abusive exercise of power is far from unique in Victorian fiction. Heathcliff, Becky Sharp, Count Fosco, Jagers, Edward Hyde, Alec D'Urberville,

⁴¹ Although SurrIDGE's *Bleak Houses* is the most compelling recent study, there is a long tradition of attention to the status of marriage in the novel. "Thus romance, which in Eliot's earlier fiction has been uncomfortably domesticated into proper marital closure, becomes monstrous and Gothic (in the story of Gwendolen and Grandcourt) or is quashed and subsumed by the more pressing requirements of epic heroism (in the story of Daniel, Mordecai, and Mirah) (Gates 701). For more on the specifically Gothic elements of the story, see Judith Wilt, *Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987).

and many others spring readily to mind. What is so precisely odd about Grandcourt is his strange lassitude. He is like a caricature of a gentleman, all courtesy and non-exertion. He will not show that any of his work takes effort if he can help it. His cruelty sets up a bizarre kind of sprezzatura—disturbingly transfigured into effortless cruelty. Eliot draws a connection between his lack of desire and his perverse relationship to his wife.

“Grandcourt’s passions were of the intermittent, flickering kind: never flaming out strongly. But a great deal of life goes on without strong passion . . . without the zest arising from a strong desire” (156). The lassitude he embodies makes Grandcourt into a queer figure. The joining of power to lack of desire makes Grandcourt even more monstrous than the fantasy lover Gwendolen imagined. She predicted an enamored man making advances, and she ended up with a passionless lord making demands. When Gwendolen thinks Grandcourt is about to propose to her, he delays because he does not like having to fulfill a role that he thinks is dictated to him. Eliot likes disease metaphors to explain psychological stubbornness and disappointment, and she uses one here when she describes “the languor of intention that came over Grandcourt, like a fit of diseased numbness, when an end seemed within easy reach: to desist then, when all expectation was to the contrary, became another gratification of mere will, sublimely independent of definite motive” (150).⁴² His willfulness and his cruelty unite under the umbrella quality of his languor when it appears as a perversion of “expectation.” Again, the reader’s reaction to a character in the book aligns with

Gwendolen’s position: “Gwendolen would not have liked to be an object of disgust to this

⁴² The other famous example is found in *Middlemarch*. “[I]n certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St. Peter’s, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitude and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.” In George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1994) 194. The “languor of intention” and “diseased numbness” from *Daniel Deronda* match up nicely with the “dull forlornness” and “disease of the retina” from *Middlemarch*. Eliot perceives stupefaction as a disordered state.

husband whom she hated: she liked all disgust to be on her side” (602). She prefers to judge rather than to be judged, but her power to unite punishment to judgment is frustrated by Grandcourt’s mastery. She, like Eliot, requires the sympathetic identification of her audience to alleviate the unbearable strain of an impossible situation.⁴³

Grandcourt’s three attributes of iron will, cruelty, and laziness work together to insulate him against anything which might be likely to ameliorate his selfish tendencies. Eliot motivates this reading with several terms. She describes him, “There was nothing that Grandcourt could not understand which he perceived likely to affect his *amour propre*” (301). How many words are there now for selfishness? Egoism, egotism, narcissism, self-preoccupation, and now *amour propre* are all at work. Looking for finer and finer divisions of her “besetting sin,” Eliot turns to the French term, which is literally translated as “self-love.” Most of her better characters recognize their selfish tendencies and continually work to recuperate them. At the same time, most of her worst characters displace their own failings onto other people. Latimer was the explicit case in “The Lifted Veil.” By this point in her career, Eliot has a shorthand for these self-obsessed men and women, so when Grandcourt complains that Daniel “thinks a little too much of himself,” the frequent Eliot reader is well equipped to reverse the accusation onto the proper body (329). His accusation is worth some analysis because the book is explicitly Daniel’s story even though its first half

⁴³ Whereas Lisa Surrige is incisive in evoking the debate over marital violence in relation to “Janet’s Repentance,” she barely has a paragraph to spare for *Daniel Deronda*. “Eliot continues her contemplation of marital abuse but switches her attention to mental cruelty, in a present-day setting. And there it is fascinating to see her reiterate many of the moves made by earlier writers in their consideration of physical assault. . . . Eliot’s radical vision in the 1850s on the subject of women’s physical abuse thus seems to have failed in the 1870s in the face of mental cruelty” Lisa Surrige, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2005) 130. She compares Janet’s escape before Dempster’s death to Gwendolen’s inability to flee until after Grandcourt’s death. Surrige finds Eliot’s reliance on providential death to save Gwendolen to be a sign that she did not know how to solve mental violence as thoroughly as physical violence. I take issue with this interpretation on two counts. First, Gwendolen’s victimization might be physical, and Janet’s is certainly also mental. Second, Gwendolen seeks the same sort of help that Janet did, but the robust and wicked Grandcourt is a more effective tormentor than the alcoholic Dempster.

centers on Gwendolen. Even if it is Grandcourt who poses the question, the reader must stop to imagine what form Daniel's selfishness takes. Eliot leaves the answer with her characters for now as they consider that Grandcourt values his own opinion more highly than other peoples'. Shortly after he complains about Daniel, Gwendolen sits and reflects.

"Grandcourt, she inwardly conjectured, was perhaps right in saying that Deronda thought too much of himself:—a favourite way of explaining a superiority that humiliates" (331). Just as Gwendolen had her "favourite formula," this "favourite way of explaining" is treated with irony (132). Having a "superiority that humiliates" becomes a point of difference that must be undermined by misunderstanding (as in, failing to recognize the truth of the superiority) and then misappropriating it (by rejecting its claims and calling it hypocritical overreaching). The path of sympathetic identification is therefore closed off by jealousy.⁴⁴

In relation to the two main characters of the book, Grandcourt acts as both a crisis and a warning. Gwendolen experiences their married life as a sort of trauma, and Daniel experiences his acquaintance with him as a potential doom to a better life for his friend Gwendolen. In either case, Grandcourt acts as a tonic to marital complacency. "Why should a gentleman whose other relations in life are carried on without the luxury of sympathetic feeling, be supposed to require that kind of condiment in domestic life?" (425). This question asserts that sympathy is nothing more than a "luxury" or a "condiment," but it clearly does so with indirect association to Grandcourt's opinion. Since he is the villain, his viewpoint is the opposite of what the reading enforces. Therefore the inverted lesson comes through the filter of interpretation that 'a gentleman needs sympathetic feeling in all the relations of his life as much as he needs it as the firm basis of his domestic life.' Concerned

⁴⁴ A more elaborate explication of this scapegoating/deriding plot device is available in Chapter Two's discussion of "The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton."

as always with the moral interpretation of her work, Eliot makes the point into a strong statement against Grandcourt himself. “There is no escaping the fact that want of sympathy condemns us to a corresponding stupidity” (596). The point of Eliot’s argument, and therefore mine, could hardly be clearer. Failing to perform the work of self knowledge and sympathetic identification dooms a person to stupidity. The characters who assume that Grandcourt is a “real” gentleman are the same people who tar Amos Barton, Maggie Tulliver, and George Eliot herself with the same brush of misunderstanding.

V. “Something Spiritual and Vaguely Tremendous”

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolen’s small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving. . . . But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy—something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all anger into self-humiliation. (804)

If George Eliot’s social plight is identifiable in the life of Maggie Tulliver, and if she looks encouragingly at Gwendolen Harleth’s struggle towards sympathy, then why does Maggie drown, and why does Gwendolen blame herself for her husband’s death? The answer is not simple, or Eliot would have written her way through it in an essay or two and been reunited with her brother Isaac in a few months. Similarly, Gwendolen’s attempts to lift herself up out of self-complacency are painful and slow. At certain moments, she achieves the grander view that is only fully available to the “narrator of human actions,” and the prospect is almost nauseating in the way it opens subjectivity up to infinity (164). One of these moments comes early in the book when Gwendolen considers her insignificance in comparison to immensity. “Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined

feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself” (64). This perspective is pivotal in tracking a shift between two forms of the sublime. Compare the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime with the Shelleyan view of “Mont Blanc.” Although both Romantic accounts are outdated by the point Eliot writes, Shelley’s version is more resonant with the battered, disempowered characters in Eliot’s fiction.⁴⁵ In recognizing herself as something miniscule in a larger scheme, Gwendolen becomes aware of the insignificance of her wants. There are only a few paths out of this sort of despair. One is a collapse into selfhood by ignoring the pressure—or more appropriately, vacuum—of outside forces and becoming more egotistical than ever. The better path is to be pulled away from selfhood into a consideration of the outside world. Doing so is also dangerous because it could lead to a complete eradication of the self.⁴⁶ In this interpretation, the martyrs in Eliot’s fiction loom up menacingly as examples. Survival only seems possible and healthy when there is some external source of sympathy to guide the imperiled character. Daniel will become this person for Gwendolen, but unfortunately, he will ultimately fail to provide her the protection she needs.

Self-awareness is a dangerous puzzle for someone like Gwendolen. She has to confront herself as Maggie had done. “Even in Gwendolen’s mind . . . one of two likelihoods that presented themselves alternately, one of two decisions towards which she

⁴⁵ Neil Hertz provides a partial treatment of the sublime in Eliot’s fiction in *George Eliot’s Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003). He works from Kant’s phenomenological and systematic versions of “a dynamic and a mathematical sublime” to differentiate between the meanings of “sublime” for Burke, Shelley, and Wordsworth (1). The sublime reference mostly drops away after the introduction when Hertz treats the ways various characters “function as skewed, heavily or lightly disguised surrogates of their author” (2).

⁴⁶ Levine interprets this danger as an aspect of Eliot’s realist technique. “The price of realism was Maggie Tulliver’s death, Felix Holt’s political failure, and Dorothea Brooke’s deeply compromised life. *Daniel Deronda* spends half its time reaffirming the often deadly cost of realism, but the other half is spent seeking alternatives. Surrender of self for knowledge of the other entails a kind of death, but refusal to attempt to know the other leads to an anomic society” (Levine 57).

was being precipitated, as if they were two sides of a boundary-line, and she did not know on which she should fall” (136). The moments where she stares into the darkness of “wide scenes” and sees the tracings of the “hidden pathways” are terrifying because they speed her too fast along the path of self-discovery. Gwendolen sees herself at these times teetering on an edge, and she is afraid of the impetuosity which pushes her towards marrying Grandcourt callously or her inertia when he is drowning. “She began to be afraid of herself, and to find out a certain difficulty in doing as she liked” (138). The difficulty is not just that she sees her wishes will not always be fulfilled but that they should not be. Eliot continues: “At this moment she would willingly have had weights hung on her own caprice” (139). In looking for an external source of sympathy, she is looking for something like these weights which would disempower her baser motives. At first, she has to rely on the weak but intuitive gift of her own conscience. She later goes looking for someone to bolster it because she recognizes the conscience as the entry into a better life. Her first attempt to find a confidant turns her towards Klesmer, the music teacher. Eliot describes her vacillations, writing, “. . . perhaps she had never before in her life felt so inwardly dependent, so consciously in need of another person’s opinion. There was a new fluttering of spirit within her, a new element of deliberation in her self-estimate which had hitherto been a blissful gift of intuition” (251). Like Maggie’s gift of sorrow, Gwendolen has a “gift of intuition,” but it is repeatedly frustrated by her situation as a beautiful, petted girl. The gift does not yet open up a new life. She needs Daniel for that.

When she gives up on Klesmer and finally begins to use Daniel as a confessor, Gwendolen addresses the problem directly. She asks, “Why shouldn’t I do as I like, and not mind? Other people do” (445). Daniel’s advice is for her to move out of herself.

Look on other lives besides your own. See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. Try to care for what is best in thought and action—something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot. (446)

Gwendolen has to process this advice for a moment before responding “You mean that I am selfish and ignorant” (446). Daniel demures and answers. “You will not go on being selfish and ignorant” (446). Her response is to the point. “I *am* selfish. I have never thought much of any one’s feelings, except my mother’s. I have not been fond of people” (450). She accepts the accusation and treats it seriously, but the point that crystallizes out of the incident is that selfishness and ignorance are relentlessly linked. The logical corollary is that being wise makes a person unselfish. Or even better, that being unselfish makes a person wise.

Eliot returns to the disease metaphor to render Gwendolen’s selfishness as a sort of convalescence from which she must emerge. Daniel recommends that Gwendolen “Take the present suffering as a painful letting in of light. . . . You are conscious of more beyond the round of your own inclinations—you know more of the way in which your life presses on others, and their life on yours” (452). His metaphor imagines opening up curtains in a sickroom, but it also suggests that the way to “thread the darkness” is to turn light onto it (164). Finally, Daniel comes to be the external source of sympathy and more particularly the external conscience that Gwendolen has needed so badly. He becomes one “to whom her thought continually turned as a help against herself” (548). The link between an external source of sympathy, a plot set up by Janet and Tryan in “Janet’s Repentance” and an external conscience, which plays out more explicitly here, engenders a significant symbolic link. Consciences are meant to be inside oneself, after all, and perhaps sympathy for oneself should be, too. Gwendolen’s doom at the end of the novel lies in the fact that she cannot

forgive herself for what she sees as her role in Grandcourt's drowning.⁴⁷ Although she internalizes the conscience that Daniel embodies, she does not internalize the sympathy. After the immediate episode when Daniel first opens up a better path to her, she explains that his "painful letting in of light" had been helpful and begs him to go on helping her in the future. "Your saying that I should not go on being selfish and ignorant has been some strength to me. If you say you wish you had not meddled—that means, you despair of me and forsake me" (563). It also means that she fails to learn his lesson because she becomes dependant on him as a source of strength. He may not despair of her,—and his last words to her are actually very encouraging—but he does forsake her. Ultimately, she finds the light painful and does not mend properly.

Eliot had practiced the scene where murderous intent is stopped only by the *deus ex machina* killing of the antagonist in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story." Both Caterina there and Gwendolen here remain technically innocent, but Gwendolen has to live with the complications of knowing that she might have saved her husband if not for her momentary hesitation. Daniel weighs guilt and innocence, just as Maynard Gilfil did. He rationalizes that it was "almost certain that her murderous thought had had no outward effect—that, quite apart from it, the death was inevitable" (696). However, the words "almost certain" are damning, and he does not reassure Gwendolen as much as he might have done if he had been

⁴⁷ She would feel worse still if she knew what the critics have said about her. Gilbert and Gubar side with her only as they would with a feminist revolutionary. "Eliot suggests that relations between men and women are a struggle between the transcendent male and the immanent female, the only powers are demonic ones deriving from her pact with the physical world" (497). Gwendolen joins a diverse cast of murderers, both accidental and intentional. "Thus Maggie's affinity with the water that kills Tom resembles Romola's trust in the river that brings life to her and death to her husband" (497). I doubt that Eliot would be comfortable with critics who count the number of men who drown in her novels, nor would she like that Gilbert and Gubar call her an "Angel of Destruction." In their study, they are always on the lookout for madness and doubling, so Gwendolen's struggle gets recast as both internally and externally psychological. "What distinguishes the heroine from her double is her deflection of anger from the male she is shown justifiably to hate back against herself so that she punishes herself, finding in self-abasement a sign of her moral superiority to the man she continues to serve" (498).

secure in her innocence. She may not heal fully from her intention and her feelings of guilt. We never know because Eliot leaves the ending of the novel ambiguous. However, we know the possibility exists and that Gwendolen could fully recover. Her “remorse was the precious sign of a recoverable nature; it was the culmination of that self-disapproval which had been the awakening of a new life within her” (696-97). This moment is singularly important in Eliot’s fiction because it reveals the possibility: “the awakening of a new life,” the tool: “remorse,” and the moment: “the culmination of . . . self-disapproval” all at once. The path to remorse is one of identification with the world, and it leads one out of the darkened rooms of ignorance and spiritual sickness.

Eliot shows Mirah and Mordecai’s father in the decay that comes to people who do not get up from the sickbed of selfishness. People like him die a slow death of moral numbing. “Among the other things we may gamble away in a lazy selfish life is the capacity for ruth, compunction, or any unselfish regret—which we may come to long for as one in slow death longs to feel laceration, rather than be conscious of a widening margin where consciousness once was” (742). In this lesson, “consciousness” slides closer and closer to synonymy with “conscience.” Mordecai “had the incongruity which selfish levity learns to see in suffering and death, until the unrelenting pincers of disease clutch its own flesh” (776). Stated more clearly, selfishness numbs people to the trouble that they face and for which they could have prepared themselves if they had been sympathetic to others in need. Each individual person is born with a different degree of selfishness and sympathy within him or herself, and no one is trapped at one end of the spectrum or the other. Just as Gwendolen can come to a better sense of herself and those around her, Mr. Lapidoth can come to a worse end by ignoring the suffering of others. As Eliot puts it, “Lapidoth was not born with this sort of

callousness: he had achieved it” (776). His path is the opposite of the path of universal identification that Eliot encourages, and it begins with a selfish act: taking from someone else what one wants oneself.

Just after Grandcourt drowns, Gwendolen gives a version of Maggie’s credo which she has just learned by heart. She realizes that she is no longer willing to profit by other people’s losses. “I wronged some one else. . . . I meant to get pleasure for myself, and it all turned to misery. I wanted to make my gain out of another’s loss . . . it was like roulette—and the money burnt into me. And I could not complain. It was as if I had prayed that another should lose and I should win” (692). Later in the novel, Eliot asks a rhetorical question that places all of her readers with Gwendolen as secret, imaginary sinners, who are only happy when they have stolen good fortune from others. “Who has been quite free from egoistic escapes of the imagination picturing desirable consequences on his own future in the presence of another’s misfortune, sorrow, or death?” (710).⁴⁸ We are being chastised with Gwendolen for our *schadenfreude* because pleasure in someone else’s pain is the darkest possible appreciation of our interconnectedness. The critic Carol Christ believes that recognizing our guilt is a basic step in the process of betterment laid out by Eliot. “Deronda’s judgment of Gwendolyn [sic] shows that Eliot sees even an overreactive and exaggerated sense of guilt as an active guide to betterment, hence as essentially constructive behavior. Through Grandcourt’s death, Eliot transforms aggressive energy into the guilt that is the initiative to a new way of life.”⁴⁹ This new way of life is the individualistic, non-

⁴⁸ This comment recalls the wish-fulfillment that disturbs Latimer’s conscience in “The Lifted Veil”

⁴⁹ Christ 133. The endpoint of this sort of active recognition of guilt leads to repression becoming a positive goal. In her analysis of *Middlemarch*, she pairs Dorothea’s anger at Casaubon to Gwendolen’s murderous hatred towards Grandcourt, saying that Eliot “insists that the energy of aggression can be transformed into the energy of repression. Like Gwendolyn [sic], Dorothea turns the energy of her desire to strike to the conquest of that desire” (136).

dependent, non-exploitative, and selfless possibility that is just barely possible for those who are willing to do the work of self-reflection.

Gwendolen's conversion to a more sympathetic self is extremely painful because she only grows into it with Daniel's help. Or if it is not done with Daniel's help, it is accomplished at least with Gwendolen's idea of Daniel's help. Because she must look to Daniel, and because Grandcourt becomes suspicious of the way she always looks to Daniel, Gwendolen becomes more emotionally rigid around him and more self-conscious. This is, however, a morbid self-consciousness that manifests as a sort of repression. "In fact, she was undergoing a sort of discipline for the refractory which, as little as possible like conversion, bends half the self with a terrible strain, and exasperates the unwillingness of the other half," making "her abrupt betrayals of agitation the more marked and disturbing" to Daniel (594). She reacts strongly to the "letting in of light" and pulls away from it. She experiences many small victories and losses, but she is left at the end without any full resolution.

With all her early indulgence in the disposition to dominate, she was not one of the narrow-brained women who through life regard all their own selfish demands as rights, and every claim upon themselves as an injury. She had a root of conscience in her, and the process of purgatory had begun for her on the green earth: she knew that she had been wrong. (669)

Eliot recapitulates many pieces of her argument in this passage. Gwendolen moves from a position of "indulgence" to "purgatory" by recognizing her "wrong" by dint of her "conscience" in contradiction to other "narrow-brained women" who expect to satisfy their "selfish demands." All of these positions are possibilities now in a way that they had not been in Eliot's earliest stories. Yes, the Countess Czerlaski in "Amos Barton" was indulgent. Yes, Caterina experiences both a wasting "purgatory" and recognizes her "wrong" in attempting to murder Captain Wybrow in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story." Maggie certainly had a

“conscience” in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Bertha was a “narrow-brained woman” in “The Lifted Veil.” David in “Brother Jacob” and Tito Melema in *Romola* make “selfish demands,” but no one other than Gwendolen moves as fully across the spectrum of understanding and sympathy.

This “root of conscience” is most frequently invoked in Gwendolen’s relationship with her mother. At the end of the novel, she decides to take some of her dead husband’s money so that she can live virtuously with Mrs. Davilow. She explains her mother’s poverty and tells Daniel that she is otherwise tempted to reject all of Grandcourt’s inheritance. “Perhaps you may not quite know that I really did think a good deal about my mother when I was married. I *was* selfish, but I did love her, and feel about her poverty; and what comforted me most at first when I was miserable, was her being better off because I had married” (766). Once again, she clearly links the disenchantment of marriage with financial gain. Although this same motive offended her clerical uncle earlier in the story, Daniel is gladdened by Gwendolen’s motive and clear sight. He encourages her to take enough for both of the two women to live on, and he discourages her from mortifying herself. “Your feeling even urges you to some self-punishment—some scourging of the self that disobeyed your better will—the will that struggled against temptation” (767). Although Gwendolen only finds disappointment in her reduced lot and in her limited sphere of sympathetic influence, Daniel achieves a happier result because he chooses a more active pursuit.

VI. Why Always Gwendolen?: Daniel Deronda

Theodora. *And as for Deronda himself I freely confess that I am consumed with a hopeless passion for him. He is the most irresistible man in the literature of fiction.*

Pulcheria. *He is not a man at all.*⁵⁰

Despite the reader's attraction to Gwendolen, she is not the novel's main character, or at least, she is not the novel's title character. Daniel Deronda hardly appears in the first half of the book, but his comparatively calm life fills up the second half. Despite some readers' aversion to the Daniel plot, Eliot felt that his story was necessary in the book. She wrote in her journal on December 1, 1876, "I have been made aware of much repugnance or else indifference towards the Jewish part of Deronda, and of some hostile as well as adverse reviewing. On the other hand . . . Words of gratitude have come from Jews and Jewesses, and there are certain signs that I may have contributed my mite to a good result."⁵¹ The attack on Daniel takes two forms. Either he is rather boring, or the Jewish story is uninteresting and improbable. Eliot was only willing to acknowledge the latter. I will address Daniel as a person first, and then I will return to the Jewish plot. He makes an intriguing foil to Gwendolen, and it is tempting to imagine the two of them married to each other instead of Grandcourt and Mirah, but I will show why such an outcome is impossible. Having cast Gwendolen in the role of the anti-Maggie, Daniel's trajectory is less obvious. Daniel is like the Jewish child of Maggie and Philip Wakem since he is similar to Maggie in his cleverness and intuition, and he is just as much like Philip in his morbid sensitivity and romantic unavailability. He is also like Eliot herself: deeply interested in philosophy, in the internal lives of others, in finding an intellectual project, and in being guided by virtue. Although I have already troubled simple narrative identification of characters with authorship in my discussion of "The Lifted Veil," Daniel's similarity to the narrator, at least, is worth

⁵⁰ James "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation" 70.

⁵¹ In *Letters* VI.314.

investigating. His interpretation of events mirrors those of the narrative voice. For example, he tells Gwendolen who she is and who she ought to be.⁵² He unearths hidden connections between Mordecai and Mirah. He passes judgment on the wicked and the good. Although his subjectivity is constantly called into doubt when Eliot describes his contradictory qualities and his uniqueness, the doubt is always eradicated by the power of the narrative itself.

Just as critics always adopt a feminine pronoun when describing Eliot's narrator (except in the cases where she makes them emphatically masculine), readers are nearly forced into adopting a feminine pronoun in reference to Daniel. Eliot tries to explain his gendered peculiarity.⁵³ "He had not lived with other boys, and his mind showed the same blending of child's ignorance with surprising knowledge which is oftener seen in bright girls" (167). It is as if Eliot now treats her depiction of Maggie as a standard by which to judge "bright girls," and it is true that Daniel reacts similarly to her on many occasions. In particular, he shares her sensitivity—almost pathologically so. "Daniel had the stamp of rarity in a subdued fervour of sympathy, an activity of imagination on behalf of others, which did not show itself effusively, but was continually seen in acts of considerateness that struck

⁵² James "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation" 70. Daniel's role as "lay father-confessor" is called a "horrid" bore by James's Pulcheria (86). "But what can be drearier than a novel in which the function of the hero—young, handsome and brilliant—is to give didactic advice, in a proverbial form, to the young, beautiful and brilliant heroine?" (80). James is giving voice to all the readers who find Daniel to be "a dreadful prig" and without "blood in his body" (77). This reading of Daniel turns him into a simple construct for authorial intrusion, moral sermonizing, and plot expediency. Still, James's Constantius confesses that if Daniel is a "failure," at least he is "a brilliant failure" (77).

⁵³ Leavis is always critical of Daniel, and he dislikes most of what Eliot has to say about him. His greatest disappointment seems to be in the precise feminine qualities that I am currently discussing. As he says, Daniel "decidedly, is a woman's creation" (82). It is unclear to me why this fact is necessarily damning because Leavis will eventually argue that Isabel Archer is obviously a man's creation. Leavis does not seem to think Eliot incapable of writing convincing male characters, given his appreciation of Casaubon, but Daniel's effeminacy apparently offends him. His criticism stays with generalities like the feeling that "Daniel was conceived in terms of general specifications," but the intensity of his aversion runs deeper (Leavis 83).

his companions as moral eccentricity” (178). Both the storytelling and the people within the story itself set Daniel apart from others because of his ability to deny himself and because of his sympathetic identification with others, over and above his own claims. Although he is usually passive, his demeanor does not manifest in any way similar to Grandcourt’s lassitude because “under his calm and somewhat self-repressed exterior there was a fervour which made him easily find poetry and romance among the events of everyday life” (205). Grandcourt occasionally lashes out with repressed emotion; Daniel instead contains a potential for just action. However, he does not make any Felix Holt-like mistake because he never introduces violence into his just causes. In a word, he is feminized.⁵⁴ He embodies a spirit of harmony that can smooth over and make easy difficulties in other peoples’ lives, rarely even using his power to contradict anyone else. As Eliot puts it, “there was hardly a delicacy of feeling this lad was not capable of” (168).

The similarities to Eliot and to Maggie depend partially on Daniel’s early instruction in the difficulties of a life marked by difference. Eliot knew that polite ladies refused to have her to dinner because of her relationship with Lewes. Maggie knew that she could not marry Philip because of her family’s legal status. Daniel similarly knows that his questionable parentage sets him apart. “And the idea that others probably knew things concerning him which they did not choose to mention, and which he would not have had them mention, set

⁵⁴ Gates’s reading of Daniel’s feminine qualities energizes her argument for his epic—as opposed to romantic—heroism. “To manage the desired closure for Daniel, the narrative must shift him into a generic world outside romance, one whose conventions require that its heroes possess some of the qualities that romance assigns its heroines, thus bypassing the need for any essential regendering scenes” (723). George Levine points to the same scenes I do in treating Daniel’s femininity, but he arrives at a different conclusion. He starts by referencing Leslie Fiedler, who “once remarked that *Deronda* is one of the most impressive heroines in English fiction, and his secondariness is played out everywhere but in the title . . . Ironically, then, like the protagonists of the female *Bildungsroman*, *Deronda* must learn not to deny but to assert himself. He knows how to know, but he must learn how to desire” (Levine 62-3). The need to assert oneself is a lesson in all of Eliot’s fiction, not just the stories with female protagonists (as I have previously explained), but Daniel’s need to “learn how to desire” is very interesting. Perhaps it is his incomplete success in learning to desire that keeps readers at a distance and which attracts us more to Gwendolen, who certainly knows both lessons by heart.

up in him a premature reserve which helped to intensify his inward experience” (168). Both fictional characters and their author experienced this process of intensification. However, Daniel’s destiny is different from the fictional woman and the real woman because although he shares some of their feminine and feminized traits, he is a man.⁵⁵ The clearest depiction of what the gender difference means within the world of the novel comes in Daniel’s encounter with his mother, the Princess Alcharisi.⁵⁶ Although she begins by telling him that he is “a beautiful creature,” she explains why his sympathetic identification with women is not the same thing as really being one: “You are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is to have a man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl” (625, 631).⁵⁷ This statement of the case is sexist from a modern point of view, but it bears a strong emotional argument in a book written by a woman calling herself George Eliot, whom all of her readers knew was in truth a woman named Marian Evans

⁵⁵ Just as critics have tended to like Gwendolen’s masculinized activity, from Leavis forward, they have generally disliked Daniel’s feminized passivity. Apart from Sarah Gates, one thorough treatment of the issue is Margaret Moan Rowe, “Melting Outlines in *Daniel Deronda*,” *Studies in the Novel* 22 (1990) 10-18.

⁵⁶ Neil Hertz interprets the Princess as “a means of bringing [Eliot’s] plot to a conclusion and as a brief but intense experiment in writing herself into her text. And out of it again” (112). He cites as evidence other “twentieth-century interpreters [who] have drawn attention to the language that marks the Princess as an autobiographical figure, a more explicit portrait of the artist than Maggie Tulliver or Dorothea Brooke” (113). He specifically names Nina Auerbach’s *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Ruby V. Redinger’s *George Eliot: The Emergent Self*, and Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, but I am less than convinced.

⁵⁷ Joanna Long DeMaria puts the Princess in dialogue with the Victorian “woman question” in “The Wondrous Marriages of *Daniel Deronda*: Gender, Work, and Love,” *Studies in the Novel* 22.4 (1990) 403-17. Her general goal is to “propose that we see the contending voices as enacting a debate about women’s social and vocational aspirations; this debate in the novel is contiguous with this debate as it took place throughout the period” (403). Specifically, the Princess represents an assumption of masculine privilege that contrasts usefully to Daniel’s more passive nature. “The Princess’s insistence that love is a talent that only some have, and not a universal feminine trait, is highly unusual; many nineteenth-century arguments in favor of women’s work asserted the value to the society of bringing the feminine ‘affections’ into the public sphere, and idea implicit in Eliot’s presentation of *Deronda*” (408). The Princess, in contrast, wants to be free from such expectations and to be allowed to appear on the stage and to dominate over men.

(called Lewes).⁵⁸ The Princess assumes that Daniel has tried to imagine himself as a woman, but she assures him that he can never understand the way that women are essentially enslaved. Curiously, Eliot reverts from the mature nouns “man” and “woman” to “girl” to make the final point.

Daniel must be educated, too, because at the beginning of the novel, he looks for simple explanations in complex situations. He looks for the one-to-one correspondence between signs and meanings that Eliot so clearly distrusts. “And often the grand meanings of faces as well as of written words may lie chiefly in the impressions of those who look on them” (186). Daniel looks for the hidden signs that could unlock Gwendolen’s thoughts, much as she had prayed that he could in the previous chapter. He wonders whether she feels “self-reproach, disappointment, jealousy” about Grandcourt’s secret mistress (433). “He dwelt especially on all the slight signs of self-reproach: he was inclined to judge her tenderly, to excuse, to pity” (433). Like Maggie, who was schooled by a history of insults and misunderstandings, Daniel is made sympathetic by his “acute experience” (433). Daniel goes on to mistake some of the details about Grandcourt and Mrs. Glasher and Sir Hugo’s knowledge of them, but though he is wrong in the fine points, he gets the larger point. As Eliot puts it, “He thought he had found a key now by which to interpret [Gwendolen] more clearly” (434). He is not quite right because, as we very well know by now, perfect keys never exist in Eliot’s fiction, but the idea of them works nearly as well. Daniel adopts the

⁵⁸ Barrett makes the comparison between Eliot and Gwendolen (rather than Daniel or the Princess) and shows both in a different light altogether. “When her audience accepted Gwendolen, they accepted, for the first time, not the ‘made woman’, the ‘self that restrains self’, but the part of Marian Evans that she had found it necessary to make over, to restrain. The self-portraitive element is as present in Gwendolen as in the other heroines, but in Gwendolen it is confession not cover-up, disrobing not disguise” (Barrett 157). As a result, a comparison between Gwendolen and the Princess becomes more interesting. “Alcaharisi is the only woman in all George Eliot’s fiction who finds a vocation and sticks to it. She is the only woman in the novel with a personal power greater than Gwendolen’s. . . . but her reflections are not what one might expect from an author whose professional excellence and personal happiness grew symbiotically” (Barrett 167).

right attitude in relation to Gwendolen even though he has slightly misjudged the situation. This recognition is essential to the sympathetic narrative. Even characters who misrecognize details can assume the right emotions. Without full revelation, this sort of willingness to accept working definitions becomes necessary. The characters never have the full revelation that is available to the narrator, so they make do with what they have. Or rather, the best characters do; the worst assume they know everything already and are never prepared for their definitions to be false. The narrator herself acknowledges the impossibility of true representation and analysis in an early passage where she dramatically fails to describe Grandcourt. "Attempts at description are stupid: who can all at once describe a human being? even when he is presented to us we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances. We recognize the alphabet; we are not sure of the language" (111). Eliot has moved a long way from positivism, and she urges her readers to avoid looking for signs of interiority registered in external circumstances. Daniel learns this lesson fairly quickly and becomes a better person for it.

Daniel is uniquely positioned to become an icon of unselfishness first for Gwendolen, second for Mordecai, and third for readers. His representation of a way out of selfishness depends on his emotional constitution. He is conscientious, and self-aware, but he is not totally capable of predicting the reactions to him. In short, he is reasonable and limited in the way that Eliot imagines good people to be. "Daniel fancied . . . that every one else's consciousness was as active as his own on a matter which was vital to him" (170). He does not accurately predict other people's detachment from the causes which motivate him, but he acts in such a way that they would be happy with him whether they understand him or not.

This is one of the first principles of the rule of charity that guides Eliot's better characters. In her words, he sees his "own frustrated claim as one among a myriad," and his awareness of separateness in the face of the immensity that weighed heavily on Gwendolen becomes for him an "inexorable sorrow [that] takes the form of fellowship and makes the imagination tender" (175). Instead of falling back on simple egotism and aggrandizing himself to improve his position "among the myriad," Daniel allows himself to widen his subjectivity through identification with the people around him. Although he is always kind (to his adoptive family, to his friend Hans, to the woman he rescues from suicide who becomes his wife, and everyone in between), Daniel's first real trial is with Gwendolen. He explains his attempt to help her by lionizing a sympathetic self-abnegation. "Our pride becomes loving, our self is a not-self for whose sake we become virtuous, when we set to some hidden work of reclaiming a life from misery and look for our triumph in the secret joy—'This one is the better for me'" (378). His lesson reclaims happiness in the act of helping another. As a result, sharing in someone else's sorrow opens up the possibility of sharing someone else's joy. However, Eliot's fiction always resists Gnostic solutions, and Daniel's path towards enlightenment is subject to suspicion. There was no "key to mythologies" in *Middlemarch*, and there is not absolute answer in *Daniel Deronda*. Instead, Eliot leaves it up to the reader to determine about Daniel "How far was he justified in determining another life by his own notions?" (383). The answer seems to be that within the limitations of lived experience in which we cannot fully read one another or achieve a perfect epistemology, we do the best we can. Daniel ultimately fails Gwendolen, but he saves Mordecai.

Eliot shows Gwendolen thinking that Daniel "was unique to her among men, because he had impressed her as being not her admirer but her superior: in some mysterious way he

was becoming a part of her conscience, as one woman whose nature is an object of reverential belief may become a new conscience to a man” (415). This passage is peculiar not just because it explicitly makes Daniel into a factor of Gwendolen’s conscience but because it makes clearer the societal role he fulfils and which is odd in Eliot’s fiction. In more common sentimental literature—or more precisely in the Patmore-style beatific verse—women are the forgiving angels who lift men into their better selves. Here, and in *The Mill on the Floss*, as well as in “Janet’s Repentance,” the women are the sinners converted to goodness by masculine virtue. In the more common male sinner/female saint pairing, the natural outcome is a loving marriage. In each of Eliot’s stories, that possibility is foreclosed by narrative manipulations. Gwendolen marries Grandcourt, the cad, instead of Daniel, the gentleman.⁵⁹ Maggie nearly marries Stephen, the rogue, instead of Philip the broken saint. Janet had already married Dempster, the rake, instead of Tryan, the martyr.

In all of these frustrated love plots, the heroine is attracted to her savior figure, but she becomes attached to a more barbarous and more destructive man. It is as if the role of external conscience and angelic guide feminizes each of the “good” men, making them yield their places to more masculine forces. Sentimentalizing the men also neuters them and denies the women their healthier love-outcomes. Each woman realizes her mistake after repairing it becomes impossible. Eliot feminizes the masculine sympathetic ideal; he always has to be unavailable in some way. In this novel, Daniel becomes angelic to Gwendolen. Eliot reiterates Gwendolen’s particular need for sympathy while simultaneously presenting Daniel’s position in relation to her as one that would be a universal benefit to anyone who

⁵⁹ Victorian readers thought that Gwendolen and Daniel would marry at the end of the novel, providing a standard narrative closure. Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial*, Victorian Literature and Culture Ser. 8 (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1991). As Gates points out, “interest in the novel fell off sharply once it became clear that such a marriage was not going to take place” (723, n26).

knew someone like him. She explains that “to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness” (430). This subduing force could happen in companionate marriage, but that outcome is impossible for Gwendolen because she needs an intuitive gift—like Maggie’s “gift of sorrow” or Daniel’s “rare and massive power”—more than love (496). After all, many men offer her love, and she accepts the chilly Grandcourt instead. Daniel’s position in relation to her requires the “master sympathist” that Tryan embodied positively in “Janet’s Repentance” and that Latimer betrayed so horribly in “The Lifted Veil.” Gwendolen fantasizes about Daniel and what he could be to her. “‘I wish he could know everything about me without my telling him,’ was one of her thoughts, as she sat . . . looking at herself in a mirror—not in admiration, but in a sad kind of companionship. ‘I wish he knew . . . that I am in deep trouble, and want to be something better if I could’” (430). In the same richly layered self-admission, she imaginatively turns Daniel “into a priest” (430). Gwendolen looks at the mirror to see her only close friend, and she wishes Daniel could read her mind and her experience like a book. Does Gwendolen really want Daniel? Or does she want to be a character in a novel with an audience who can read her? Reading an author through her characters may be tacky, but it is impossible to avoid seeing Gwendolen’s dream as Eliot’s wish fulfillment.

Although he rescues her from suicide and marries her, Mirah is less important as a character in relation to Daniel than Gwendolen is.⁶⁰ Mirah is instead a plot catalyst and—curiously—an appropriately feminine stand-in for her brother Mordecai.⁶¹ She repeats the

⁶⁰ She is, however, the final artist in Eliot’s fiction. Mirah has an operatic voice and performs beautifully.

⁶¹ There has been a critical vogue to find these feminine stand-ins since the publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

non-romantic, sacrificing and simultaneously detached-deific language of Gwendolen. She says that “Mr. Hans said yesterday that you thought so much of others you hardly wanted anything for yourself” (465). This episode goes on to introduce the well-studied story of Buddha and the tigers. Mirah says that Hans “told us a wonderful story of Bouddha giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving. And he said you were like Bouddha. That is what we all imagine of you” (465). The link between Daniel and self-sacrificing sanctity is explicit. Daniel rejects this distorted retelling of his life because he rejects martyrdom, thereby allowing that an unselfish life can continue beyond its immediate relief of others’ wants. “Even if it were true that I thought so much of others, it would not follow that I had no wants for myself” (466). He goes on to interpret this “myth” of the Buddha by explaining the mythopoetic process as an “exaggeration” and as the “extreme image of what is happening every day—the transmutation of self” (466). This startling possibility of ascendancy becomes a figure for artistic apotheosis, and it functions on three levels. It happens novelistically with characters in fiction. It happens culturally with the taking up of protagonists and heroes from fiction into the social realm. And it happens historically and biographically to the authors and real actors on the historical stage. Following Daniel’s line of thinking, each of these figures develops a significant potential for interpreting Eliot’s work in a dense and useful way—one that addresses the importance of

Mirah as the symbolic heteronormative link between Daniel and Mordecai is impossible to deny. Gates makes the point specific while simultaneously turning it into an aspect of Daniel’s religious/philosophical destiny: “Daniel’s relationship to Mordecai, figured at first as libidinal cathexis whose sexual energy is drained off by a female body, becomes an icon through which Daniel’s contradictory gendering is resolved—according to the generic conventions of divine scripture” (715).

individual selves in larger contexts. The goal of social amelioration deriving from individual action has its basis in a doctrine of “minute causes” that add up to global improvement.⁶²

VII. A Prophecy Fulfilled: Mirah Lapidoth and Mordecai Ezra Cohen

Reverently let it be said of this mature spiritual need that it was akin to the boy's and girl's picturing of the future beloved; but the stirrings of such young desire are feeble compared with the passionate current of an ideal life straining to embody itself, made intense by resistance to imminent dissolution. (474)

Gwendolen and Daniel are an inappropriate match. Mirah and Daniel are a match that frustrate readers. Who would be better? Hans's sisters assert “No woman will do for him to marry,” but marriage is not out of the question (656). Readerly frustration with Daniel's decision to take Mirah to Palestine is relieved, but only slightly, by the recognition that he marries Mirah because he cannot marry Mordecai, with whom he is more truly infatuated.⁶³ After all, it is his relationship with Mordecai that reveals his Jewishness to him, and he does stalk Mordecai through London. But who is Mordecai, why does he attract the sensitive Deronda, and how does their relationship help to solve the problem of selfishness?

Mordecai is often called a “monomaniac” in the novel, but he sees himself more mystically as a sort of possessing spirit who will one day inhabit Daniel's body (510). Is

⁶² This argument is taken up by John McGowan, among others. “As long as the individual is limited to his own point of view, he must always fail to know fully or accurately his society and his world. Yet, since that individual is involved in the construction of that society and that world, his every action, however limited, alters that world. In this last notion, we find one reason for Eliot's argument for ‘minute cause,’ for the eventual effect of actions which now seem trivial.” John McGowan, “The Turn of George Eliot's Realism,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.2 (1980) 187.

⁶³ The “marriage” between Daniel and Mordecai is one of the central points of Joanna Long DeMaria's essay. She reads their relationship as a critique, or more properly, a transposition of heteronormative marriage from its traditional participants. Daniel and Mordecai's spiritual union is in contrast to the “dense pattern of themes and images which link marital prostitution to power, inheritance, and murder, [in which] Eliot insists on both the personal and the social destructiveness of the mercenary marriage” that brings together Gwendolen and Grandcourt (405).

what he imagines insane, or is it loving? He uses romantic language when he calls the fantasy “the marriage of our souls” (751). Mordecai insists on the metaphor by explaining that his physical death is the union’s precondition, “and then they who are betrothed shall unite in a stricter bond, and what is mine shall be thine” (751). The sympathetic Jewish characters in this novel are prepared by their history of suffering to receive a reward. The anti-selfish plot that Eliot endorses follows a Zionist motive.⁶⁴ Mordecai, Mirah, and Daniel are all members of the Chosen People, but the “bad” Jews in the novel—Mr. Lapidoth and Daniel’s mother—are made to suffer for their sins and their lack of penance. Even before finding out his family history, Daniel accepts these terms. He calls Mr. Cohen an “unpoetic Jew,” saying that “no shadow of a Suffering Race distinguished his vulgarity of soul from that of a prosperous pink-and-white huckster of the purest English lineage” (391). This assertion is strange enough, but Eliot goes on to write that “It is naturally a Christian feeling that a Jew ought not to be conceited” (391). Daniel is distinguished for his mixture of Christian feeling and respect for Jewish heritage. Eliot was both living in the culture and critiquing it, so her approach to it was both influenced by it and critical of it.

Victorian anti-Semitism was taken for granted, and the Jew was conceived as the paragon of selfishness.⁶⁵ At this moment of linguistic conjunction, “selfishness” collapsed

⁶⁴ “Although Hegel dismissed the Jews as a nation whose time had passed and although extremists attacked the Jews as rootless wanderers, Eliot treats them as a distinct and valuable nationality.” Sara M. Putzell-Korab, “The Role of the Prophet: The Rationality of Daniel Deronda’s Idealist Mission,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.2 (1982) 179.

⁶⁵ Blackwood wrote to Lewes on May 11, 1876 to discuss Eliot’s surprisingly deft—and marketable—treatment of Jews, despite the prevailing culture of anti-Semitism. “Jews are not generally popular pictures in fiction, but then look how they are served up. They never have been presented before like human beings with their good and their evil, their comic and their tragic side” (*Letters* VI.250). Blackwood had already hyperbolically asked the “whole tribe of Israel [to] fall down and worship” Eliot, and he maintained his opinion that Eliot’s work had been essentially rehabilitative (“John Blackwood to George Henry Lewes,” 2 March 1876, *Letters* 227).

from its concatenation of a host of terms into the attackable vice of greed.⁶⁶ Eliot recognized the link between the mistaken stereotype of the “selfish” Jew, and she went to work deconstructing it as she had done for other selfish figures: the “adulterous” preacher (Amos Barton), the unromantic bachelor (Maynard Gilfil), the hopeless alcoholic (Janet Dempster), the self-obsessed artist (Latimer), the stubborn daughter (Maggie Tulliver), and the shallow beauty (Gwendolen Harleth). More than just pitying the misunderstood, she hoped to show a path towards improvement. Eliot’s reasoning in light of the Jewish question is obvious, and she articulated it in the language of redressing a wrong—while writing to no less a fellow reformer than Harriet Beecher Stowe. “But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is—I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to.”⁶⁷ Eliot felt that Christians owed a specific respect to Jews, given the beginnings of Christian faith.⁶⁸ Although Daniel is the figure who transforms from Christian to Jew, the profoundest encounters with Jewish culture surround Mordecai.

Mordecai bears some resemblance to Latimer in “The Lifted Veil” in his doomed, prophetic quality. The two also share a world-weariness. Eliot writes that Mordecai “wanted to find a man who differed from himself” (472). However, it will become clear that what Mordecai wants is really a man who is the same as himself but different. If it were just the

⁶⁶ I refer here back to the multiple definitions (referenced in the first chapter) active in the OED before this point and to the relative paucity after the middle of the nineteenth century.

⁶⁷ “To Harriet Beecher Stowe,” 29 October 1876, *Letters* VI.301.

⁶⁸ “But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. . . . [Christian anti-Semites] hardly know that Christ was a Jew” (*Letters* VI.301-02).

criterion of difference, he would be too much like Gwendolen, attracted to whatever is most fully Other. For both Mordecai and Gwendolen, though, this “different man” will turn out to be Daniel. Fundamental dissimilarity is what ultimately drives the potential male-female couple apart, but it is what brings the male-male couple together. In many ways, Mordecai and Daniel make a more effective pair than either Daniel and Gwendolen, or even Daniel and Mirah.⁶⁹ Eliot’s text takes on one of the queerest tones she ever strikes when Mordecai dreams of the prophetic figure who will help him out of his own dying body.

Tracing reasons in that self for the rebuffs he had met with and the hindrances that beset him, he imagined a man who would have all the elements necessary for sympathy with him, but in an embodiment unlike his own: he must be a Jew, intellectually cultured, morally fervid—in all this a nature ready to be plenshed from Mordecai’s; but his face and frame must be beautiful and strong, he must be used to all the refinements of social life, his voice must flow with a full and easy current, his circumstances be free from sordid need: he must glorify the possibilities of the Jew, not sit and wander as Mordecai did, bearing the stamp of his people amid the signs of poverty and waning breath. (472)

Readers already see Daniel as the one man in this book who can help characters out of intense self-preoccupation. Daniel is Mordecai’s dream man. He is “beautiful and strong.” He knows “refinements” because he has been raised an aristocrat. His speech is “full and easy.” He is free from “sordid need” because he is independently wealthy. He “glorifies” his heritage because he is obsessed with Jewish philosophy and rational teachings. He is stable, and he is not marked: Daniel can easily pass as a Christian. He always has. Daniel is the man for Mordecai in ways that he cannot be for Gwendolen. Since he is feminized,

⁶⁹ Although Gilbert and Gubar analyze Latimer’s feminine qualities in considerable detail, they avoid making the same claims with Mordecai.

Gwendolen does not explicitly desire him, but his “beautiful” face and “full” voice are exactly what Mordecai wants and needs.⁷⁰

Mordecai is truly a mystic and believes in the angels of the earth and sky. He watches the sunset with Daniel and reveals that he, too, believes in a self outside of the body which interacts with the one in the body. He explains that the sunset and his dream to find someone “different” were what he “loved best” and had eventually “brought me my new life—my new self—who will live when this breath is all breathed out” (494). Daniel is, understandably, moved. Eliot explains that he is “strangely wrought upon” and experienced a “submissive expectancy,” but Daniel does not realize that Mordecai’s experience is different from his own (494). Whereas Daniel has already had moments when he felt his soul expand, narcissistically embracing the world around him and expecting it to answer him back, Mordecai believes in a literal version of this same experience. Daniel is the incarnation of his mystic dream: Daniel is the “new self—who will live when this breath is all breathed out.” Although Daniel is once again unaware of the details of the situation in which he finds himself, he reacts appropriately to the mood and assumes the role needed of him. “In ten minutes the two men, with as intense a consciousness as if they had been two undeclared lovers, felt themselves alone in the small gas-lit book-shop and turned face to face, each baring his head from an instinctive feeling that they wished to see each other fully” (495). For once, Eliot declares that she is unable to paint the scene adequately, writing “I wish I could perpetuate those two faces . . .” (495). Even she must back away from the painfully emotional scene of the desperate man and the ardent sympathist.

⁷⁰ Mordecai’s prophetic dream shows Eliot’s familiarity with classical representations of selfhood. Here, she invokes the Aristophanes’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium* to recreate the possibility of “soulmates.”

Daniel is hyper-sensitive. He is the most fully realized sympathetic individual in Eliot's fiction because he is aware both of his gift for sensitivity and the gift's limits. He articulates his position, and he instinctively knows when to give up the interpretive act for willing emotional receptivity. In the scene with Mordecai, this "exquisite quality of Deronda's nature—that keenly perceptive sympathetic emotiveness which ran along with his speculative tendency—was never more thoroughly tested" (496). Daniel is Eliot's dream man, too. His "exquisite quality" is what arrests readers and makes him difficult to imagine. We feel more easily what the flawed Gwendolen feels because we have trouble recognizing his "perceptive sympathetic emotiveness" in either ourselves or the people we know. Unlike Maggie, who is both flawed like Gwendolen and sympathetic like Daniel, Daniel's "speculative tendency" is united with action. We feel a discomfort with Daniel's kind response to Mordecai because we have trouble imagining ourselves reacting similarly. Eliot shows him feeling "a profound sensibility to a cry from the depths of another soul; and accompanying that, the summons to be receptive instead of superciliously prejudging" (496). Here is Eliot's explicit statement of her character's talent. "Receptiveness is a rare and massive power . . ." (496). Daniel's receptive difference, along with his racial heritage and feminine qualities, combine to make him into what Leona Toker calls a "secret outsider."⁷¹

The danger for Daniel is like the danger for other receptive characters. Although Eliot once wrote to a friend that "[a]ll self-sacrifice is good," she was increasingly aware that "good" is not the same thing as "best."⁷² What might be good for someone else or for a society is often not what is best for individuals. They might be absorbed in the demands of

⁷¹ Leona Toker, "Vocation and Sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*: The Self and the Larger Whole." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32.2 (2004) 566.

⁷² *Letters* I.268.

becoming fully sympathetic.⁷³ Mordecai tells Daniel, “You will be my life: it will be planted afresh; it will grow. You shall take the inheritance; it has been gathering for ages” (500).

This future is a large claim to make on someone else, but Daniel engages it by pursuing Mordecai’s plan to take Mirah to a Jewish homeland. In fact, Eliot calls him “heroic”: she depicts “that heroic passion which is falsely said to devote itself in vain when it achieves the godlike end of manifesting unselfish love” (559). Eliot insists that this end is not in vain.⁷⁴

Mordecai’s will imposes on him, and Daniel is vulnerable to the other man’s needs. At another point, Eliot discusses Gwendolen’s desire to marry Daniel herself, imagining a willingness that is not there. “We diffuse our feeling over others, and count on their acting from our own motives” (771). Unfortunately for Gwendolen, Mordecai’s soul-marriage had made the prior claim. Eliot enlarges the point by making a claim about the plans of an almost-transcendent God who does not bend to mortal caprice, saying that “we are all apt to

⁷³ Toker is aware of this danger although she is more interested in Daniel’s reluctance to enter into national politics at Sir Hugo’s request. “Yet, Daniel’s reluctance to commit himself to the British political arena is associated not only with his inability to choose a consistent political platform but also with a much more private fear of the loss of self. . . . This is Daniel’s secret meeting point with Gwendolen, who dreads her liability to impulsive wrongdoing and whom he advises to turn her dread into a safeguard” (566). In all of these cases, the danger is a dissolving selfhood. Toker is generally skeptical about Eliot’s faith in sympathy as a way past egoism. “When the listener takes over some of the speaker’s burden of pain, part of the listener’s own personality shrinks. Such a self-mortification can, in principle, be salutary for the listener, but in *Daniel Deronda* the danger of excessive sympathy to its donor is emphasized at least as strongly as its positive effects on its recipient” (Toker 569). Toker is correct to pay attention to this danger, but it is important to notice how resolutely Eliot perseveres in making sympathetic identification attractive despite her own doubts.

⁷⁴ Putzell-Korab interprets the idealism of Daniel’s mission as an organic development from Eliot’s earlier fiction.

What she has done, as in all her novels, is to show how individual work and thus identity are defined by community and culture. She has also described more fully the kind of community already suggested in *Romola* and *The Spanish Gypsy*, within which an individual can find the grand noble life for which so many of her protagonists yearn. *Daniel Deronda* accordingly completes Eliot’s vision of an evolving humanity by depicting the highest possible level of identification or fusion of the individual with his community. The vision is idealist, but it is a qualified, temperate idealism. She offers no assurance that Deronda will achieve his mission. (Putzell-Korab 180)

In fact, achieving his mission is not really the criterion for success here. It is the willingness to try and to lead by example. Putzell-Korab is convincing in arguing that Daniel’s mission is already successful on that account because of the self-reflection he has encouraged in Gwendolen.

fall into this passionate egoism of imagination, not only towards our fellow-men, but towards God” (796). At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that sympathy—more than just awakening us from the stupidity that was revealed earlier—is the antidote for selfishness. In Mordecai’s death scene, he shows “a spirit already lifted into an aloofness which nullified only selfish requirements and left sympathy alive” (809-810). Only the worst of him dies off because his work and his legacy are continued by Daniel.

VIII. “Hidden Pathways”: National Goals and Personal Action

We English are a miscellaneous people, and any chance fifty of us will present many varieties of animal architecture or facial ornament; but it must be admitted that our prevailing expression is not that of a lively, impassioned race, preoccupied with the ideal and carrying the real as a mere make-weight.
(102)

Daniel Deronda lifts Gwendolen out of her selfish tendencies and shows her a better path. He helps Mordecai to a sort of personal heaven through the fulfillment of prophecy. He is only a character in a book, though. What can he do for real people? The answer returns to the social duty which Gwendolen barely glimpsed when she began to imagine what her life might mean to others since theirs had meaning for her. The question of Englishness itself is raised as Daniel’s investigation into his Jewish identity progresses. The first hints of the concern come near the beginning when Daniel asks his uncle Sir Hugo Mallinger to let him study abroad. Sir Hugo asks, “So you don’t want to be an Englishman to the backbone after all?” and Daniel responds, “I want to be an Englishman, but I want to understand other points of view. And I want to get rid of a merely English attitude in studies” (183). Sir Hugo’s response is telling in that it links Englishness with selfishness very directly: “But, for God’s sake, keep an English cut, and don’t become indifferent to bad tobacco! And, my dear

boy, it is good to be unselfish and generous; but don't carry that too far" (183-184). Is being English then to be selfish and ungenerous? Part of the danger of Englishness comes from its overextension in this period of great colonial expansion. Its qualities might be diluted or mixed. What does it mean to be English and Indian? What does it mean to be English and Caribbean? More to the point, what does it mean to be English and Jewish?

One of Mordecai's debating partners argues that hybridity is the healthiest outcome in an encounter between the races. "There's no reason now why we shouldn't melt gradually into the populations we live among. . . . And I'm for the old maxim, 'A man's country is where he's well off'" (527).⁷⁵ Clearly, this lack of patriotism is one of the principal dangers facing the novel's characters. Looking outside of oneself for external help shows a lack of strength. And blending might be fatal to personal character as much as national character. However, Eliot was willing to kill off characters to make a point or if it felt true to her conception of the world, and in this case, she was on a mission of education. She once bragged to Blackwood about her success. "A statesman who shall be nameless has said that I first opened to him a vision of Italian life, then of Spanish, and now I have kindled in him a quite new understanding of the Jewish people. This is what I wanted to do—to widen the English vision a little in that direction and let in a little conscience and refinement."⁷⁶ And

⁷⁵ The postcolonial discourse around hybridity also marks critical response to Daniel Deronda because he embodies Mordecai's friend's point. Alicia Carroll depicts Daniel as a hybrid character who combines English and Eastern traits in one body. "As much as *Oliver Twist's* pinkness and fairness are the living proof of his middle-class origin and virtue, Deronda believes that his own physical beauty is the mark of his mother's illicit behavior" (113). Therefore, his relationship with Mirah brings his heritage into conflict with his Englishness. "The meeting between Daniel and Mirah simultaneously embodies the lure of race to race and Other to Other. Daniel, of course, is both: English by culture, Jewish by ethnicity. Often his Englishness is established by his manners, education, and speech. As often, his physical qualities are stereotypically Jewish—brown skin, penetrating dark eyes, luxurious dark hair, and a beard" (118). Rather than a degradation of Jewish heritage exposed to Gentile cultures, as Mordecai fears, Daniel represents its intensification under the influence of British civility.

⁷⁶ "To John Blackwood," 3 November 1876, *Letters* VI.304.

these statements came only seven months after she had privately worried in her journal that “The Jewish element seems to me likely to satisfy nobody.”⁷⁷ She had good cause to worry, but she was ultimately justified in her attempt to improve things.

Nancy Henry works from a postcolonial position to describe Eliot’s involvement in a colonial enterprise, but she also deconstructs elements of the “self-perpetuating critical tradition about *Deronda* . . . since Said’s initial pronouncement of the novel’s complicity in European imperialism.”⁷⁸ She starts from the assumption that “Eliot’s reading in colonial literature influenced the formulation of her realism and that the roles of stepmother to colonial emigrants and wealthy investor in colonial stocks, which she assumed simultaneously in the early 1860s, shaped the moral outlook of her fiction, particularly in relation to children and money.”⁷⁹ However, she then goes on to question the efficacy of the “imperialist” label because “what we call imperialist ideology was unrecognizable until imperialism was embraced as a political position.”⁸⁰ According to Henry, Eliot was part of the larger discussion of imperialism rather than an imperialist as such because “‘imperialist’ emerged as an identity for pro-expansionist Englishmen at the time Eliot was writing her last work. While the uneven development of imperialist ideology may be traced throughout the nineteenth century, we must ask how Eliot reacted and contributed to ‘imperialism’ as a concept that Victorians could approve or oppose.”⁸¹ Nancy Henry’s adaptation of Mary Poovey’s “uneven developments” works parallel to my own technique. Her real question is

⁷⁷ 12 April 1876, *Letters* VI.238.

⁷⁸ Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, Ser. 34, ed. Gillian Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 113.

⁷⁹ Henry 113.

⁸⁰ Henry 126.

⁸¹ Henry 126-7.

not which label to affix but how “Eliot’s realist vision fragmented, even as she maintained her belief in the moral imperative of realism.”⁸² Just as she questions the language around the concept of imperialism without stating simply that Eliot was or was not imperialist, I question selfishness without putting Eliot on one side or the other, mainly because what selfishness truly is depends on its definition.

Whenever Eliot considered the Jewish plot in the novel, she linked the personal to the national. Daniel’s story of discovery was on behalf of the British people. As such, his story was yet another case of breaking from selfishness into social understanding. The “hidden pathways” and “invisible courses” of the planets, nations, and men had been made visible. Daniel’s example is easier to follow than most of Eliot’s characters. Although her readers would not be expected to give up their lives and potential love stories to relocate to a racial homeland as Daniel does, they would be expected to give sympathy in his fashion, and they might be expected to side with grand causes in more localized ways. Given *Daniel Deronda*’s position in Eliot’s canon as a final novel (intentionally or not), it becomes important to see where Eliot was headed. She ended with a concrete example of selfless identification with real-world problems. Her particular example needed a national scale.

Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs.⁸³

Eliot’s belief in sympathetic identification as a way past narrow selfishness depends on concrete goals. In the case of Janet Dempster and Gwendolen Harleth, individual interaction

⁸² Henry 127.

⁸³ “to Harriet Beecher Stowe,” 29 October 1876, *Letters* VI.301.

is sufficient because they encounter their master sympathists. But Eliot was aware that improvement could not depend on finding gifted confidants and supporters with the leisure to help whenever it might be needed.⁸⁴ Therefore, readers must find another path. Two possibilities remain. Either they must become their own confessors through an act of extreme introspection (as Maggie's suffering had done for her), or they must find someone or something to support for themselves (as Daniel had done for both Gwendolen and Mordecai). This action would lift the readers out of themselves and give them new purpose. Daniel models this behavior in simultaneously finding a concrete religious/political/racial cause, and his choice is apparently one that Eliot thinks is available to a large number of readers—although not necessarily the specific cause of Zionism. In the end, she is happy with anything that undoes selfishness by causing people to look for similarities within difference. As she put it, she had no tolerance for the “inability to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as our own . . . is a sign of the intellectual narrowness—in plain English, the stupidity, which is still the average mark of our culture.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Many novelists would make these confidants literally confessors by making them clerical figures. It is true that Gilfil, Farebrother, and Lyon perform these roles, but they usually act as friends and secular supporters before they revert to religion as a solution.

⁸⁵ *Letters* VI.302.

Chapter Five: Other Selves: Individualism, Narcissism, and Post-Victorian Selfishness

I. Why It Matters: Selfish Variations after 1880

*Do I not live with myself and tire of myself until I have no need of metaphysics to make me believe that there is nothing certain but that self exists? And you after all your philosophical lectures to me, would keep me on a spot where I have already pirouetted until I am giddy, until I am one of the most egotistical speakers and writers in this world of egotists.*¹

I am afraid that I, like Sarah Sophia Hennell in this 1842 letter, am in danger of refashioning Eliot into an egotist. After all, I have spent the better part of a book explaining how she carved out a position for embattled selfhood, and I am casting her well-known penchant for sympathetic writing as an outgrowth of selfish reflection. I have depicted society as a villain and the individual as a hero with Eliot's own life as one of the plots helping to prove my point. However, Eliot was never content to reduce causes to simple explanations, and I should step back a moment to acknowledge the anti-reductive move by admitting counterexamples. Some of Eliot's heroes were extremely flawed, and the condemning societies themselves were rarely unified monoliths. "Society is a very culpable entity, and has to answer for the manufacture of many unwholesome commodities, from bad pickles to bad poetry. But society, like 'matter,' and Her Majesty's Government, and other lofty abstractions, has its share of excessive blame as well as excessive praise."² I have tried to avoid giving the social groupings around Eliot's characters "excessive blame," but Society

¹ "To Sarah Sophia Hennell" on 30 August 1842. *Letters* I. 145

² George Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 324.

writ large is, more often than not, the force of misunderstanding rather than the individual heroes of her novels. Consequently, the characters ideologically aligned to their larger societies were usually Eliot's targets. If pressed, I would make an identical claim for Eliot herself that I make for her embattled heroes. After all, she was the heroine in her own story, just as everyone is in his or her own life. Without this sense of life's evolution and plotting, we lose hope in meaning. A secularized world is a demythologized, disenchanted world. Fiction might be the answer for reenchancing it.³ For those who have lost faith in God—and even for those who have not but who live in a world of science, philosophy, and politics—novels, and stories in general, reproduce the helpful feeling of development, of telos, even destiny. Embracing identity and accepting that some selfishness is a necessary, humanistic, humanizing requirement for living prevents existential despair. Subsequently, accepting others' selfish needs is a recognition of their "human claims."

Eliot models this behavior in her novels, but her technique is suspicious to some readers, specifically because of her directness and her engagement. F. R. Leavis becomes my critical straw man one last time. He is critical of Eliot's narrative intrusions, saying that her "tendency towards [the] direct presence of the author [must] be stigmatized as weakness."⁴ His argument is biased against all direct presence, though. What he reads as a weakness often functions to help draw the reader into a relationship with the author. The sort of intrusion Leavis complains of becomes less and less common in Eliot's later career, and its very disappearance helps to instantiate authorial detachment in a narrative of improving

³ "Nonetheless, that social entity called 'the world' vibrates with significance, not only in drama but most particularly in the novel, a genre defining its space as the intersection of the social and the individual." Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 8.

⁴ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher Inc., 1937) 33.

technique. Such an argument valorizes cynicism over involvement and interprets Eliot's early work as something abandoned in favor of greater elegance. Yet, most of Eliot's readers actually like her writing better when she speaks directly to them. Why is there a disconnect between what readers say they believe and what they really feel?⁵ The modern world finds irony and detachment much more fashionable than earnestness and engagement, but this cynicism is exactly what alienates readers from books and people from one another. It—all of it—is what Eliot fought against.

Leavis is dissatisfied by anything in Eliot's writing that he thinks is a regression from Jane Austen, who is his first touchstone. He seems unhappy with anything like immediacy in the relationship between writer and reader. In Eliot, he specifies "an emotional quality, something that strikes us as the direct (and sometimes embarrassing) presence of the author's own personal need."⁶ Since her first stories show more of these "embarrassing" moments, they are worse. In reference to *The Mill on the Floss*, Leavis asks, "Isn't there, in fact, a certain devaluing to be done?"⁷ I would answer, No, there is not. The product of Leavis's criticism is to send readers looking, not for what is wonderful and useful in Eliot but instead to the places where Eliot avoids sacrificing her artistry to her emotionality. Leavis, and critics following him, unyoke intelligence from feeling as if they were separable qualities: "Intelligence in her was not always worsted by emotional needs; the relation between the artist and the intellectual in her . . . was not always a matter of her intellect being enlisted in

⁵ George Levine would argue that we should fight fire with fire. "The transformation of the 'bourgeois subject' into a 'cogito' reporting things-as-they-are-always-and-everywhere was an effort to resist the corrosive power of individualism. If that particular structure of knowing has done some dirty work, the refusal of detachment and objectivity may do equal damage and be equally coherent. It takes detachment to locate the secret ideologies disguised by strategies of detachment." George Levine, "*Daniel Deronda*: A New Epistemology," *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzy Anger (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 53.

⁶ Leavis 32.

⁷ Leavis 35. He continues, "Certainly charm is overrated when it is preferred to maturity" (35).

the service of her immaturity.”⁸ Eliot’s emotional qualities were necessary conditions for the form her intelligence took. Her emotions determined her thematic (maybe selfish) obsessions and led her to the plots which Leavis and others did appreciate and which fashioned her as one of the greatest of English novelists.

I admit that my use of “selfishness” has occasionally been a bit idiosyncratic, but I find myself echoing Raymond Williams again by explaining my critical investments. “This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions . . .”⁹ The historical conditions that create my world are post-Eliot, post-Victorian, and post-Adam Smith, so I cannot not be affected by them. Selfishness, the language around it, and the anxieties they produce are as much a part of the twenty-first-century United States as they were a part of nineteenth-century England. Mary Poovey’s confession works just as well for me: “[T]here is no escaping the fact of investment; to adopt the position I have adopted is to renounce even the pretense of objectivity.”¹⁰ In a moment, I shall turn to Oscar Wilde and then to Virginia Woolf to consider, briefly, how Eliot’s successors treated selfishness and individualism. Following Poovey, I admit to a lack of objectivity here. I chose Eliot, Wilde, and Woolf first because they are useful and second because I like them.

I look at Wilde for a glimpse of the real world and to see how fiction can directly affect it. I choose to study “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” instead of *The Importance of*

⁸ Leavis 54.

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 22.

¹⁰ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1988) . My condition of identification with Eliot’s characters is, I think, part of Eliot’s goal.

Being Earnest, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or even “The Selfish Giant” because Wilde so exactly lives through script of social damnation for perceived selfishness which has been largely metaphorical throughout this dissertation, and *The Soul of Man* essay is his most prescient work in setting up the specific terms for his downfall. Wilde held firmly to the reality and social power of his idealist message, and he was imprisoned for having challenged “public morals” with his own interpretation of “individualism.” Wilde’s “individualism”’s failure came with the same judgment that damned Amos Barton, Maggie Tulliver, and Gwendolen Harleth. They were all judged selfish because of social prejudice. This is a negative reading of Eliot’s legacy. Her pessimism and doubt was given its due in Wilde’s treatment during the trials.

I then turn to Woolf because she directly responded to Eliot and because she is also considered an architect of the modern self. Her depictions of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe follow a developmental trajectory straight forward from Maggie Tulliver and Daniel Deronda in terms of psychological fragmentation, reintegration, and social awareness. Although not the end of the story, Woolf’s novels take the technology of selfhood and the critique of selfishness into the twentieth century. They also engage meaningfully with the first modern tragedy of twentieth-century Britain, the First World War. Bracketing this moment of psychic rupture, *To the Lighthouse* becomes a powerful example of how people might reconstruct their shattered selves when even more of life’s certainties had slipped away than had for the Victorians. This is a positive reading of Eliot’s legacy.

II. Selfish Variations, 1891: Oscar Wilde and the Individual as Artist

*I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age.*¹¹

*We are the very stuff of culture, but not fully aware of how culture is the very stuff of each one of our individual selves. We suffer from delusions of individuality.*¹²

Oscar Wilde's 1891 essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" which incorrectly predicted a rapid worldwide turn towards socialism made a case for the importance of what Wilde called "Individualism." His narrative of individualism under an ego-crushing modern social order provides an alternative reading to his own struggle for social acceptance in a repressive society. Wilde's battles with Victorian ideology were usually waged on the artistic front, so it is unsurprising that his political battle here imagines a fictional and utopian future where artists like himself will manifest their "true personality" since "public opinion is of no value whatsoever." Echoing Percy Shelley's claim that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," Wilde says that "The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful." This subversion of Victorian capitalist pragmatism attempts to embarrass the moral certitude of that culture's policing of artistic production and individual freedom by emphasizing the artist's suppressed role as policy maker. I will begin with The Soul of Man essay and present some material from Wilde's biography and from his long prison letter *De Profundis* to explain his philosophy of personal absorption into artistic production and the way in which the British public rejected such an absorption via aestheticism.

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis," *De Profundis and Other Writings*, ed. Husketh Pearson (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 151.

¹² John McGowan, "Modernity and Culture, the Victorians and Cultural Studies," *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 7.

“The Soul of Man under Socialism” was printed in February 1891 in the *Fortnightly Review*. The argument was a partial reworking of an article published in the same journal two months before by Reverend Hugh Price Hughes over “Irresponsible Wealth.”¹³ Critic Josephine M. Guy believes that historians have ignored the essay’s content, which they have received as plagiarized according to Wilde’s famous habit in favor of his style. Ostensibly, socialism “was all around Wilde,” but J. D. Thomas notes that the piece is really “a treatise on Individualism.”¹⁴ He goes on to explain “The modern critical reluctance to attend to the significance of late nineteenth-century Individualism seems to derive from a perception that the subject is too protean.”¹⁵ The confusion is obvious but resolvable since Individualism, capitalized, had a very specific context in the 1890s. Guy does necessary work recuperating this almost lost tradition of big *I* “Individualism,” asserting that other critics had avoided it to keep from questioning the parts of Wilde’s argument which seem least plagiaristic. The Individualists’ “central platform was a rigorous anti-statism that entailed an opposition to many of the traditional functions of government, including collectivist legislation.”¹⁶ “Their hostility to any kind of social reform meant that in practice their policies were conservative, advocating the preservation of the political status quo.”¹⁷ I believe that Guy and Thomas miss the point in their attempts to historicize the article. Wilde quickly leaves off talking about big *I* individualism in favor of the kind most of us assume: ego, personality, and

¹³ Wilde’s essay’s debt to the Rev. Hughs’s is explained in Josephine M. Guy “‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’: A (Con)Textual History,” *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed., Joseph Bristow (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003) 67.

¹⁴ Danson and Thomas quoted in Guy 69

¹⁵ Guy 69.

¹⁶ Guy 70.

¹⁷ Summary of Taylor in Guy 71.

freedom from restriction. Essentially, we think of individualism as accomplished selfhood. Wilde writes, “It will be a marvellous thing—the true personality of man—when we see it . . . It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they are different” (26-27).¹⁸ Even if he uses the capital *I*, Wilde is conflating the political movement with his personal philosophy. It is just this sort of combination that makes Wilde so difficult to pin down. His paradoxes and redefinitions keep us away from what he really means and tempt many people to think that it is all just an exercise in style. However, this conflation—of politics and self—is itself the deeper meaning of Wilde’s text.

Put aside for a moment the specters of political movements and the various -isms Wilde reworked. Even though it is his original thesis and it is in his title, Wilde quickly moves away from talking about socialism as such. George Bernard Shaw responded to the essay saying that it “was very witty and entertaining, but [it] had nothing whatever to do with socialism.”¹⁹ So Wilde uses socialism and individualism as reference points to explain his ideas of self-expression and aesthetics. He moves from claims like “Under Socialism [the current disorder of things] will, of course, be altered. There will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags. . . . Upon the other hand, Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism” (20). He moves from these concrete claims towards a more idealized political destiny for the artist and extols the virtues of the artist as critic and “unacknowledged legislator.” Incidentally, this discussion forecasts the central argument of his later essay “The Critic as Artist.”

¹⁸ This reference, and all future parenthetical citations in this section, refer to Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” *De Profundis and Other Writings*, ed. Husketh Pearson (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 17-54.

¹⁹ Shaw’s remarks are paraphrased in Husketh Pearson, “Introduction,” *De Profundis and Other Writings*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 15.

“The Soul of Man” is primarily optimistic—in its quest for utopia, for example. Wilde writes “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias” (34). He really believed this, and he was always surprised when people did not take his good faith for what it was. Wilde’s foresight was impressive. Consider the current state of world affairs in comparison to Wilde’s concern that “if there are Governments armed with economic power as they are now with political power; if, in a word, we are to have Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first” (21). Wilde also spoke out against the intellectuals and the ordinary citizens who let apathy and faith in the *status quo* make them complicit in the nation’s degradation: “[I]t is almost incredible to me how a man whose life is marred and made hideous by such laws can possibly acquiesce in their continuance” (23). His solution to these problems is optimistic and entrenched in idealist, rather than pragmatic, catalysts for change. Essentially, he substitutes artistic principles for conventional morality.

Wilde’s prose contains a Blakean strain of Romanticism wherein Good and Evil are revalued, and defiance becomes the cardinal human virtue. “Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion” (22). These sentiments would have been unfathomable to Maggie Tulliver. Wilde’s powerful artist—and the critic as artist, as Wilde fashioned himself—is the Satanic figure of temptation who offers the knowledge of good and evil in a world where absolute perfection is the result of progress and improvement, not a perfectly created state of nature. The artist is also Prometheus giving a

spark of inspiration to humanity. But if we trust the pre-Romantic versions of these stories, the mythical Prometheus foresaw his punishment, and Milton's Satan saw his punishment, too. I believe in Wilde's gift of personal prophecy, at heart knowing that his iconoclasm would doom him.

He is famous for following Walter Pater and the Aestheticians in insisting on "Art for art's sake," stating in his Preface to *Dorian Gray*, also written in 1891, that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."²⁰ Wilde wants to have it both ways. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," he says that critics call a piece of art "grossly immoral" when "they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true" (37). By asserting the impossibility of the category "immoral" and by shifting its meaning at the same time, he distills the hidden thrust of his argument. His Latimer-like gift of accuracy foretells his personal doom with those same words. The byword of his famous trials just a few years later were indeed the charges of "gross immorality." Wilde's message can be reduced to the following syllogism: 'Artists are outside of morality. An outsider's position allows freedom to create. The products of free creation will be reappropriated and recognized for their social usefulness.' This crystallization marks the transition from polemical treatise and into an assertion of personal aesthetics and value. The shift is important because it shows the way in which Wilde conflated the public with the private and absolutely refused to acknowledge the possibility of the private becoming public in its turn. He writes "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. . . . Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known" (34). Art and

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, "Preface," *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Peter Ackroyd (New York: Penguin, 1985) 21.

individualism screen private character and make it unimportant. Or rather art makes the personal into an artistic act of beauty, unassailable by criticism except aesthetic criticism. Morality melts in the crystal waters of pure aesthetics, and any personal peculiarity is forgiven by the cult of the artistic genius.

Wilde thought he was practically synonymous with his artistic production. “My art was to me, the great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then myself to the world . . .”²¹ Unfortunately this revealed self was increasingly unpalatable to the British public. The screen of art and individualism failed to mask his unforgivable sins. Seven years later, after the three trials which had condemned him, Wilde wrote “De Profundis” as a long letter from prison to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas.²² He was to take up his earlier train of thought, his combination of individual identity with artistic expression, writing “I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy. . . I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy.”²³ His self-conception as an individualist and as an artist had blinded him to the consequences of the fame that went with them. Life imitates art especially when the life is completely bound to its own notions of art: “To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all.”²⁴ Indeed, Wilde conceived of his persona, described more thoroughly in “The Decay of Lying” and “The Truth of Masks,” as a performance.

²¹ Wilde “De Profundis” 129.

²² This name was given to the letter much later because it was not originally intended to serve as an essay—at least not at the very beginning of its composition. Wilde originally called his letter “Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis” and worked on it every day over many months.

²³ Wilde “De Profundis” 124.

²⁴ Wilde “De Profundis” 171.

Unfortunately back in 1895, the British establishment had not been willing to forget the violation of the conservative order. Wilde's artistic project crossed too many borders. Lord Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, began his own literary campaign to destroy Wilde. He wrote letters to Wilde and Lord Alfred. He performed guerilla reviewing when he showed up for one of Wilde's plays' opening nights with a basket of vegetables. All of his maneuvers were frustrated until he left a notorious card to be delivered to Wilde at a lunch club four years after "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Wilde saw Queensberry's insult as a challenge to his rights as an individual. His artistic and social lives came into direct collision when he responded to Queensberry by taking him to court for criminal libel.

The stage was set for the "revolting and repellent" tragedy to begin. Wilde wrote in *De Profundis* "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age."²⁵ His faith in a sort of aesthetic aegis protecting him from questions of common morality deluded him. He really believed in what he later wrote: "Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws."²⁶ By declaring himself as an artist, he had hoped to place himself outside of normal concerns, writing "The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all. Authority over him and his art is ridiculous" (46). Wilde was eventually forced to submit to the authority he denied in *The Soul of Man*. On the morning of April 3, 1895, he and his counsel Sir Edward Clarke squared off in court as the prosecutors against the Marquess of Queensberry and his primary counsel, Edward Carson. The first trial took two and a half days and was heavily reported in *The Times*. "The defendant pleaded 'Not Guilty,' and put in a

²⁵ Wilde "De Profundis" 151.

²⁶ Wilde "De Profundis" 154.

plea alleging that the libel was true and that it was published for the public benefit.”²⁷ *The Times* reports of the first two days of the libel trial never make explicit what exactly the “false, malicious, and defamatory libel” was.²⁸ By the end of the trial, Wilde was outed as a criminal and a deviant. In the two trials that followed in which he faced criminal charges of “gross immorality,” the author’s writings came back to haunt him.

The literary evidence in the trials included the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, two articles in the *Chameleon*, three letters from Queensberry to his family, and two letters from Wilde to Lord Alfred. All of these items were produced to show Wilde as immoral. The aphoristic claim that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” regrettably admitted the existence of morality, controverting the more aesthetically-based claims of “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.”²⁹ Wilde clarified his opinion while on the stand saying that “there was no such thing as morality or immorality in thought, but there was such a thing as an immoral emotion. The realization of one’s self was the prime aim in life, and to do so through pleasure was finer than through pain.”³⁰ Unfortunately, this statement must have been interpreted as sensuality and epicureanism by the jury. Wilde’s belief that the purpose of life is in self-realization certainly has a legitimate psychoanalytic valence, and it is consonant with the literature he both read and wrote, but his peers found the selfish individualism Wilde supported to be distasteful. They believed that the purpose of life was to prop up the nation, support their families, and worship God. Wilde was found guilty and

²⁷ “Central Criminal Court, April 3: Before Mr. Justice Collins,” *London Times* (4 Apr. 1895) 7. John Bernard Partridge caricatured Wilde in *Punch* in the “costume of a French foot soldier” according to Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000) 322n.

²⁸ “Central Criminal Court, April 3: Before Mr. Justice Collins,” 7.

²⁹ Oscar Wilde, “The Preface,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

³⁰ “Central Criminal Court, April 3: Before Mr. Justice Collins,” 7.

sentenced to two years of hard labor. Leaving prison and seeking exile in France, he died in the Hotel d'Alsace near the school of Beaux Arts in Paris in 1900.

In Jonathan Dollimore's analysis of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," he underscores Wilde's belief that art and individualism are "a disturbing and disintegrating force," in the positive and necessary sense.³¹ He goes on to state that "art, like individualism, is orientated towards the realm of transgressive desire."³² Dollimore goes on to a Sedgwickian analysis of the binary formulations of modern society (straight/gay, natural/unnatural, etc.), reading Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic" as a partially failed attempt to subvert these binaries. He specifically cites the first trial as the locus of this attempt, quoting H.M. Hyde's account: "the implication of opposing counsel being that [*Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894) and its] elegant binary inversions, along with *Dorian Gray*, were 'calculated to subvert morality and encourage unnatural vice.'"³³ I distrust the extremism of all these claims because I think Wilde supported the social order and saw himself as a necessary part of it. He tried to live more openly than was currently allowed, but he thought his status as a practicing artist gave him what we figuratively call "artistic license." That he collapsed certain binaries along the way should not surprise us. The 1890s are the same decade that Foucault gives for the 'birth of the homosexual.' Violation of simple categories is inherent in the script of homosexual individuation. As Wilde moved from private family man to famous homosexual, he needed to create some sort of self-identification.

³¹ Quoted in Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 11.

³² Dollimore 11.

³³ Dollimore 67.

He claimed that “Every single work of art is the fulfillment of a prophecy: for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image. Every single human being should be the fulfillment of a prophecy . . . ”³⁴ He wanted to fulfill the prophecy of art and individualism but revealed the truth of a darker prophecy, which I believe can instead be traced through his play *Salomé* and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, along with his essays. He revealed that the public will condemn that of which it does not approve, be it a person or that person’s art, by calling it (in the terms of “The Soul of Man”) one of the following things: ‘immoral, unintelligible, exotic, unhealthy, or morbid’ (38). The ban of both artist and art—or critic and criticism if you prefer—are continuous with Wilde’s philosophy when it commutes a “human being” into a “work of art” through the common term of “prophecy.” Wilde underscored the conjoined identity when he wrote “Between my art and the world there is now a wide gulf, but between art and myself there is none. I hope at least that there is none.”³⁵

I admit that it is strange for Wilde to use an essay on socialism to introduce an aesthetic philosophy, but Wilde believed that the new order had to be better than the current one, and he thought socialism was rapidly coming. His self-defensiveness became clearer when he wrote that “On the whole, an artist in England gains something by being attacked. His individuality is intensified” (38). This assertion continues the intensification by suffering that Janet Dempster noticed in *Mr. Tryan*. It also explains Wilde’s belief that he and his art were synonymous in his prison suffering (in the passage quoted above). Finally, he forestalled the criticism of artistic individualism as a substitution for selfishness with one of

³⁴ Wilde “De Profundis” 172.

³⁵ Wilde “De Profundis” 183.

his quirky rhetorical inversions: “Individualism will also be unselfish and unaffected” (49). The resolution comes in the repurposing of the word “selfish.” His statement of the cause is the clearest I have encountered, and that is why I began this dissertation with it. “Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live. And unselfishness is letting other people’s lives alone, not interfering with them” (49). Under his rubric, Wilde was indeed completely unselfish.

The intensification of identity in the face of opposition comes across as surprisingly contemporary to a modern reader, and the supplanting of the Victorian capitalist model with individualism as cultural capital seems amazingly prescient. Maybe Wilde was just a century ahead of his times? Was he a proto-existentialist when he claimed that “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all” (26)? It is potentially distorting to graft our own understanding of global realities or nascent queer politics onto our ancestors, and Wilde would have resisted the move since he was essentially rather conservative. Besides, he wrote elsewhere that “Whenever people agree with me, I always feel I must be wrong” (14).

Richard Ellman introduces a similar discussion in his biography of Wilde.

By a dexterous transvaluation of words, Wilde makes good and evil exchange places [in saying “What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress” in the *Critic as Artist*]. Even socially sin is far more useful than martyrdom, he says, since it is self-expressive rather than self-repressive. The goal of man is the liberation of personality . . . What muddies this point of view in Wilde is his looking back to conventional meaning of words like sin, ignoble, and shameful. . . . His private equation is that sin is the perception of new and dangerous possibilities in action as self-consciousness is in thought and criticism is in art. He espouses individualism, and he encourages society to make individualism more complete than it can be now, and for this reason he sponsors socialism as a communal egotism, like the society made up of separate but equal works of art.³⁶

³⁶ Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 101-102.

Wilde asked to be defined by a set of mores which he believed would eventually come but which were not yet possible. A century later, we are still in the same situation—looking forward to a utopian future when individual development—artistic or otherwise—will be socially valued and not merely denigrated as selfish or escapist. With the advent of more democratic states and with socialism a reality in some places, we see that that while individualism is more possible, it is no more certain than it was in Wilde’s time. We still look forward towards less regulation over individual rights and states of being, and we recognize our dreams of acceptance and individualism in Wilde’s prophecy of the artist: “But the past is of no importance. The present is of no importance. It is with the future that we have to deal. For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are” (48).

III. Selfish Variations, 1927: Virginia Woolf and Reintegrating Selfhood

The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?³⁷

She was by way of being terrified of him—he was so fearfully clever, and the first night when she had sat by him, and he talked about George Eliot, she had been really frightened, for she had left the third volume of Middlemarch in the train and she never knew what happened in the end . . .” (100)³⁸

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed., Andrew McNeillie, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984) 149.

³⁸ Unless otherwise identified, the parenthetical citations in this section refer to Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, ed. Mark Hussey (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2005).

The shift from nineteenth-century British Victorian realism to twentieth-century British modernism is typically narrated as a movement from certainty and fixity towards confusion and aesthetic tumult. As the third person omniscient narrator dissolved into first person limited and sank under the swift current of the stream of consciousness, the individual selves of the British novels sank with them. But the chaotic, or more optimistically termed, eclectic modes of modernist technique really allowed new possibilities—possibilities that were revealed, not lost, in the welter of changes. While George Eliot had presented an almost complete woman in Maggie Tulliver, the pressure of moral certainty exerted by Eliot’s realist narrative technique drowned Maggie—first figuratively and then literally. I suggest that the pressure of Victorian ideology did the same to the British national character. In contrast, the already-shattered narrative voice of England between the Wars required very little of its characters. They were expected to be lost in the changed modern world, and the low expectations freed them. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf’s heroines Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are frustrated but free and resilient to psychic pressure.³⁹

I like to imagine the characters in *The Mill on the Floss* and *To the Lighthouse* living in a pair of fishbowls. The narrators are like the glass holding the bowls together and allowing readers to see the characters as they swim around and visit interesting castles and skeletons. In the realist novel, the characters are all contained, but they are so contained that we can never touch them, and they can never reach out to us. They may philosophize and address huge ontological questions, but when they do, they seem to do it in reference to their

³⁹ The most thorough comparison between Eliot and Woolf is Alison Booth’s *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992). Her analysis works very differently from my own and would require too much reconstitution to make it valuable to this short a comparison, and it would require me to do too much violence to the subtlety of her argument. The most useful section, were I to pursue the comparison further in terms of biography, is her chapter “Miracles in Fetters: Heroism and the Selfless Ideal,” pp. 130-68. However, my comments in this section will deal almost exclusively with the text of *To the Lighthouse* without going into Woolf’s complicated biography.

own contained bowl-world. If they swim too hard towards the reader, they hit the bowl and get hurt. In the modernist novel, the fishbowl is as fragile as the narrative voice. Characters can break right on through, and they either flop around and die and disgust us, or they become weird floating half-literary, half-real creatures maintained in their own “bubbles of selfhood,” to use Woolf’s term. They can come right up to readers, and they can see the real world. George Eliot’s characters are aware of their fishbowl—rewritten as the narrative of Victorian culture—and they try to imagine the world outside it, but they cannot escape. Virginia Woolf’s characters look beyond the glass and float out like bubbles. To emerge from the fishbowl metaphor and onto the much drier land of literary theory, I propose that the monologic voice of realist fiction specifically empowers the narcissistic break that Victorian ideology accepted as a necessary condition for being in the world; whereas, the modernist technique of stream of consciousness either insulated characters against the narcissistic break or allowed them to pass back and forth between primary narcissism and living in the world.

My adaptation of monologism is freer here than it was in the discussion of *Daniel Deronda*. In a rigorous application of Bakhtin, I would not abbreviate my claims about Victorian realism as monologic but would instead assert that modernism is increasingly dialogic. However, it is easier for argumentative purposes to establish the two periods as opposite ends of a binary, even if they are really in truth much closer. For Bakhtin, the monologic voice and unitary language were more precisely a quality of drama and poetry, and novels were already in dialogue since “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized . . . [The] internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a

genre.”⁴⁰ However, Bakhtin’s insight can be extended along the lines of an Althusserian critique of ideology to discuss the way that an author can be complicit with a cultural prejudice towards valorizing only certain types of speech or writing—whether I choose to call this a monologic force or an official language or even a master narrative, it is largely towards the same end. I choose to read the pressure of Victorian cultural hegemony on individual authors as an autonomously policed monologic voice. In consequence, dialogism is both a revolutionary response and the natural evolution within the novelistic structure: it frees authors to write as they choose, and it allows a more naturalistic form of expression. Unmediated access to characters’ thoughts denies the filter of narrative interpretation. Virginia Woolf explained something like my point when she attacked her predecessors although her critical target was named “materialism”:

“[I]f a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”⁴¹

Woolf’s novelistic project, taking her essay “Modern Fiction” as a sort of manifesto, then, is to break the shackles and to base her “work upon . . . feeling and not upon convention.” Doing so freed her from the constraints which had bound previous authors to characters with fractured identities. I align the monologic voice of Victorian realism with the pressure creating the narcissistic break.

⁴⁰ Bakhtin 1192.

⁴¹ Woolf “Modern Fiction” 150.

Woolf's novel is a response to Victorian literature in general and Eliot's novels in particular. Part of what makes Maggie Tulliver seem so real and feel so complete is her doomed quality. She is also more complete than anyone we can personally know unless we have a third person omniscient narrator speaking somewhere in our heads, telling us our neighbor's every move. This classic form of narration, especially as it is at work in Eliot's novels, represents a paranoid pathology. Maggie is sensitive, and she is damaged by the brutal force of what society expects of her since she cannot conform. She eventually sinks beneath the weight of those expectations, and at the end of the novel, she drowns in the flood. The realist text's authoritative narrative voice assumes that individuation requires identity to contract in on itself and to acknowledge its own boundaries. These boundaries are strongly tied to chronology and the sequential nature of time. Eliot tries to have a character who can break free and reach out to those around her and be herself fully, but Maggie becomes too dangerous and has to be killed off. Not before being insulted, disowned, called an adulteress, and driven to poverty, however. The world has too many expectations for what a person ought to be to allow her to be simply what she is.

But Virginia Woolf's form of modernism allows an escape from this universal and personal ruin by denying the narrative voice's (and by extension, society's) authority. She insists that personal experience matters more. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf allows a return to the previously forbidden paradise of a narcissistic identification of self with world. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are forgiven for their need to reintegrate themselves. They link their inner lives to the world around them and stubbornly—solipsistically—demand the importance of self in a world which would otherwise ignore it. Curiously, the uncertainty of

Modernism allows individuals to choose their own paths more fully than Realism's certainty did. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily swim and float in a way Maggie cannot.

I will turn to a letter from Woolf to her friend the psychoanalytic critic Roger Fry before looking at the novel itself.

I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse* [in the book]. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalized way. Whether it is right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.⁴²

It is difficult to resist flirting with the intentional fallacy here despite Woolf's claims against interpretation. Woolf published her book in 1927 and broke it into three chronological scenes. The first takes place in just before the outbreak of the war. The second is a beautiful prose poem called "Time Passes," and it covers the next ten years (including the First World War). She wrote that the middle of the book was to show the "gradual dissolution of everything . . . contrasted with the permanence of—what?"⁴³ The question is significant. What is permanent around the World Wars? The third section happens after the war, just before Woolf wrote the book. These time periods are chosen to make a parenthesis around the First World War, which made the definitive break in the British psyche with the Victorian—and then in a lingering sense, the Edwardian—Era. Also in 1926, Woolf had tea with the elderly Thomas Hardy, who had managed to survive into the Modernist Period while

⁴² Virginia Woolf to Roger Fry, 27 May 1927. Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) III.385. I am indebted to Mark Hussey's introduction to *To the Lighthouse* for pointing me to this letter, as well as specific examples in Woolf's diaries and in the essay "Modern Fiction."

⁴³ Virginia Woolf, "Notes for Writing," *To the Lighthouse: The original holograph draft*, ed., Susan Dick (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982) 51.

still writing Victorian realist novels. She recorded some of his comments at that tea in her diary. Hardy reportedly said, “Theyve [sic] changed everything now he said. We used to think there was a beginning & a middle & an end. We believed in the Aristotelian theory. Now one of those stories came to an end with a woman going out of the room.”⁴⁴ Although Hardy’s explicit referent was Aldous Huxley’s story “Half-Holiday,” it is hard not to think of the ending of Woolf’s own *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf thought the old ways were inadequate: she “argued that reality itself had come to mean something very different for her generation than it had for the pre-First World War Edwardians or for the Victorians” (lvi). She was conscious of a break with those who came before her. To this end, she wrote a piece called “Modern Fiction” in 1925.

No single phrase will sum up the charge or grievance which we have to bring against a mass of work so large in its volume and embodying so many qualities, both admirable and the reverse. If we tried to formulate our meaning in one word we should say that [the Victorians] are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul.”⁴⁵

She complained that the Victorian method was faulty. She referred to her predecessors going about the “appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.”⁴⁶ She asserted that she would contrast the Victorian realist materialism with a hunt for the “flickerings of that innermost flame” of consciousness

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). 101.

⁴⁵ Woolf “Modern Fiction” 149. In this essay, she calls on historians who will come after her to make her value judgments concrete with the assistance of hindsight. “It is for the historian of literature to decide; for him to say if we are now beginning or ending or standing in the middle of a great period of prose fiction, for down in the plain little is visible” (146).

⁴⁶ Woolf *Diary* 3:209.

as she thought James Joyce had done.⁴⁷ The warm and humid land of materialism was fertile and halcyon. Returning there was impossible after the War and the knowledge, to return to the persistent Edenic metaphor, of Good and Evil it brought. So fiction writers wander out into the desert, catalyzed by knowledge and searching for more. If I am going to so recklessly invoke this metaphor again, I had better pay for it by extending it. The expulsion from the Garden also brought down a few curses: Death is pretty easy to parse in this context, but the masculine and feminine forms of labor (by the sweat of his brow and by her pain in childbirth) interest me more. In a fractured, arid world, how can the writer frame a story, and how can a character find him or herself, let alone the greater world?

Well, as Eliot and Wilde and many others had said in their various scripts for self-realization and individualism, it is painful. Woolf dreamed in her diary of writing “the greatest book in the world,” saying that it would be “made entirely solely & with integrity of one’s thoughts,” but complaining that “the process of language is slow and deluding. One must stop to find a word; then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it.”⁴⁸ For Woolf, writing *To the Lighthouse* was explicitly part of the psychoanalytic process, which she knew pretty well from her brother Adrian. For both her and her readers, the book would “[express] some very long felt and deeply felt emotion” (81). Bakhtin’s dialogism achieves a new valence here. For the author doing psychoanalytic work in her own fiction and grappling with the language of real people and expressing her real feelings through them, the dialogue becomes an exchange between one character and another, between the reader and the author, and between analyst and analysand. The attempt to mimic the heteroglot

⁴⁷ Woolf “Modern Fiction” 151.

⁴⁸ Woolf *Diary* 3:102. In “Modern Fiction,” she refers to this same problem as “the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life” (149).

nature of reality frees the artist and allows her characters more room to breathe and to manifest . . . well, whatever it is they have to manifest. They are less compelled to swim hard against the glass of their fishbowls, and they can do what they like. “If we want life itself, here surely we have it.”⁴⁹ However, Woolf’s characters see the fishbowl differently than her readers do. At a dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, the group sits “around a table” when “the night was shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily” (99). Like Latimer, they look beyond their immediate experience to an alienated audience that exists for them as a refraction of the world they know.

At several moments in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf describes the process whereby an individual self can return to the dream of belonging, to the narcissistic world order where everything is connected. These are transcendent moments. Mrs. Ramsay looks out to sea, towards the lighthouse and muses “It was odd . . . how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus . . . as for oneself” (66). Once in touch with this power, the seer’s eyes become more powerful. Mrs. Ramsay becomes aware that she can look at each of the people around her at her dinner party. She sees them in their own bubbles—in their own narcissistic fantasies:

It could not last, she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. (108)

⁴⁹ Woolf “Modern Fiction” 151.

The mind's ability to expand exposes it to danger since it can go out too far, but learning the trick of reconnecting with the world also teaches the individual how to connect with him or herself. In other words, to contract. Mrs. Ramsay thinks at one point that "now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. . . . all the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (65). Unlike Latimer, Mrs. Ramsay acknowledges the privacy of other people's experience and her own need to look out for herself. She, too, is a lesson in necessary selfishness. Woolf claimed that the lighthouse itself resisted her own ability to interpret it beyond her stylistic need for a central axis in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is likewise a "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (and this symbol will repeat later for Lily Briscoe) that resists interpretation, necessarily.

Within the Modernist novel, layers and layers of meanings can butt up against one another and go unnoticed. At one point, Woolf wonders "how in the chambers of the mind and heart of [Mrs. Ramsay] . . . were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public" (54). The pages in the narrative therefore become "sacred inscriptions" which have somehow been made—almost indecently—public. Woolf has Lily Briscoe, an artist, wonder these things, and critics have traditionally interpreted Lily as a figure for Woolf herself. So it seems like a genuine part of Woolf's own struggle to represent truth when Lily wonders "What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored?" (54). Is this a case of Freudian object-libido dissolving into ego-libido? Lily's

infatuation with Mrs. Ramsay leads her on a quest for understanding that lasts for the rest of the book, and therefore for the next eleven years. Even at the end of the novel, as she stares out to sea, remembering that Mrs. Ramsay has died in the interim, Lily has only begun to understand what the woman ever meant inside. As readers, we are privileged to see inside both characters' heads in a way that neither woman could see inside the other, but no one had to suffer a violent, Maggie-like death to get us there. In another of the novel's last passages, Lily muses

One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke? (201)

Only fiction can provide these multiple pairs of eyes. Only stories can tell us what secrets are in the locked rooms of other people's hearts. Novels, more than anything else, can reveal "thoughts . . . imaginations . . . desires" by making them real to us. Woolf heals the fractured people in Eliot's fiction, not by denying selfishness but embracing it, by taking us into a fictional world where we can dream of not just sympathizing with others but experiencing their selfhood with them.

IV. A Coda: What We Owe Eliot

*The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies.*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 270.

In the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot reveals a need for people to protect themselves from one another by moving carefully between forms of selfishness and selflessness. Critics usually read sympathy as the easy answer to overcoming selfishness in Eliot's fiction, but in "The Lifted Veil," she shows that sympathy is dangerous if it is not preceded by self-reflection, and she therefore begins to place her characters on a continuum of perceived and real selfishness. In *The Mill on the Floss*, she reveals that self-reflection, sensitivity, and sympathetic identification are an ongoing, recursive process that depends on mutual assistance and understanding. And finally, in *Daniel Deronda*, she reveals her fear that sympathy is not as freely available or as easy to achieve as we need. She therefore recommends finding strength within ourselves, but turning self-knowledge into useful self-protection is extremely difficult. As an alternate choice, we can look for larger causes to help us find purpose and guidance because although help is always good, it is never sure.

I have already quoted from a letter in which Eliot explained the power of her fiction: "The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly."⁵¹ Luckily, for the readers and authors who have come after her, Eliot's vision and storytelling were astute when they combined to create her essays, stories, and novels. The works she left behind constitute a useful tool for self-reflection and social analysis, and they continue to help us even today to look beyond the limitations of narrow selfishness.

⁵¹ *Letters* II.362.

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