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Incommunicable Consciousness:

A Study on Perspective in *Middlemarch*

Anna Michele Dunavin

A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

This study investigates the function of communication and its correlation with perspective in George Eliot's sixth novel *Middlemarch*. In particular, it focuses on the function of communication in disclosing communal and individual perspectives; examines the narrator's role in mediating multiple points of view and shaping readers' interpretations; and considers the relationship of communication to Eliot's epistemological and ethical concerns. *Middlemarch* is widely recognized as one of the great experiments in nineteenth-century literary realism. Scholars have examined Eliot's engagement with realist discourse from a variety of approaches and usually include some mention of perspective or language, yet none have examined the function of communication at length or its connection to perspective. I draw on principles from narrative theory to evaluate how and to what extent George Eliot uses communication in *Middlemarch* to further her rhetorical objective. In doing so, I argue that Eliot deliberately structures *Middlemarch* from many points of view in order to show the subjectivity of perspective and to reveal the individual's capacity, or incapacity, for self-knowledge and sympathy for others. In contrasting verbal and nonverbal communication she demonstrates how a narrow perspective contributes to misperceptions and misinterpretations, as evidenced by many, if not the majority, of the novel's characters. I argue that the inability of language to communicate consciousness speaks to Eliot's interest in assisting readers to enlarge their understandings of the fictive world she represents and of their own realities. My interpretations are based on a close reading of the text as well as on the philosophical and sociological ideas that influenced George Eliot's thinking as outlined in her essays and personal correspondence. I also make use of

critical studies of Eliot and her works and studies of literary form and theory to interrogate my reading of *Middlemarch*. Ultimately, the study shows that Eliot uses both communication and silence in the pursuit of her aesthetic and moral aims to represent life realistically and to foster sympathy.

Acknowledgments

This project would be incomplete if I did not express thanks to those who have assisted me over the past several years in what has been a very demanding but enriching experience. I owe a debt of gratitude to my thesis director, Dr. Sue Lonoff, for her generous encouragement and indispensible guidance. She challenged me to look beyond my initial interpretations to discover new insights and taught me to trust my literary intuition.

I wish to thank Harvard University for providing opportunities to enlarge my vision, both intellectual and professional, and very much appreciate the allowances my colleagues in the Harvard College Library made so that I could further my academic interests.

I am thankful to Jenifer Sweeney, Ann-Marie Portera, Rebekah Crawford, Judy Pate, and Emily Raymond, who provided immeasurable emotional support at various times during what became, quite often, a test of endurance. Special thanks go to my parents, Timothy and Betty Dunavin, my sister, Amy Albach, and my brother, Joseph Dunavin. Although they are geographically distant, I have felt their sustaining influence in very tangible and significant ways.

Only one individual truly knows all of the struggles I have gone through during this process. My deepest appreciation goes to him for understanding what I cannot communicate in words.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements. v

I. Introduction 1

II. A Clearer Conception of the World: The Role of Perspective in *Middlemarch* 9

“Bless me, now, how different people are!” 13

“[S]o much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissue” 16

“[S]igns are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable” 19

III. Constructs of Perspective: *Middlemarch*’s Narrator and the World as it Seems . . . 25

Middlemarch’s Omniscient? Narrator 29

“[T]here must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry” 35

George Eliot’s Aesthetic Objective and *Middlemarch*’s Narrative Modes 39

IV. Social Organicism: Disclosing Communal and Individual Perspective 44

Circulating Gossip 47

Gendered Speech 51

“[T]he meaning we attach to words” 57

“Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing?” 60

V. Inadequate Words 64

Silence in Middlemarch 66

“[T]he Other Side of Silence”: Incommunicable Consciousness 70

Self-consciousness and the Development of Sympathy 75

VI. Conclusion 80

VII. Bibliography 84

Chapter I

Introduction

Scholarly criticism of George Eliot and her works is extensive, particularly since the publication of her letters (1954-1978) and essays (1963).[1] Much of this criticism examines Eliot's aesthetic and social concerns within a historical context. A number of studies highlight the complex ways Eliot employs narrative form and linguistic structure to achieve her objective to foster moral development and sympathy. Critics have used a variety of methods to analyze her works, including, as John Peck points out, "structuralist, deconstructive, Marxist, New Historicist, and feminist" approaches.[2] Indeed, the variety of approaches used to analyze the author's works speaks to what Peck sees as the "complexity of [her] writing and to the complexity of the cultural function that the text is attempting to serve."[3]

Despite the insights that these different approaches provide in understanding George Eliot's fictional works, I have been unable to locate any analyses of the role of communication in her sixth novel, *Middlemarch*, as it relates to her larger artistic and moral objectives. This thesis, then, will provide a chance to look closely at the connection between George Eliot's use of communication in *Middlemarch* (narrative form) and her stated intention in writing. I am interested in examining how and to what extent Eliot uses

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[1] Kathleen Blake, "George Eliot: The Critical Heritage," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 211.

[2] John Peck, introduction, *Middlemarch: George Eliot*, ed. John Peck (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 1.

[3] Peck 11.

verbal communication, which is represented through dialogue, as well as nonverbal communication, which includes letter writing, gestures, and silence, in the pursuit of her aesthetic and moral aims to represent life realistically and foster sympathy. In particular, I would like to examine how George Eliot uses multiple perspectives to determine the ability of communication to disclose consciousness.

My research will investigate the following questions: How do various modes of communication function in *Middlemarch*? In what ways do verbal and nonverbal communications demonstrate the subjectivity of perspective? How do gender and society influence perspective and communication within the novel? What does communication reveal about an individual's consciousness? How does communication in *Middlemarch* reflect or run counter to George Eliot's aesthetic ambitions? What implication does a study of communication and perspective in *Middlemarch* have for how George Eliot's other novels are read and studied?

I will argue that George Eliot deliberately structures *Middlemarch* from many points of view in order to show the subjectivity of perspective and to reveal the individual's capacity, or incapacity, for self-knowledge and sympathy for others. In contrasting verbal and nonverbal communication she demonstrates how a narrow perspective contributes to misperceptions and misinterpretations, as evidenced by many, if not the majority, of the novel's characters, most notably Dorothea Brooke, Edward Casaubon, Will Ladislaw, Tertius Lydgate, and Rosamond Vincy. Yet while George Eliot very often translates individual consciousness into language or gesture, instances exist in the novel in which she does not, one of the most important being near the end of the novel when "Dorothea's heart was full of something that she wanted to say, and yet the words were too difficult. She was wholly possessed by them: at that moment debate was

mute within her."[4] I also hypothesize that George Eliot uses silence in the text not only to show the limits of communication to disclose consciousness but also to challenge assumptions about what is happening in the novel and force readers to acknowledge that some things are incommunicable.

Because George Eliot's aesthetic beliefs inform her fictional writings to such a great extent, any analysis of *Middlemarch* and its narrative form must include some discussion of Eliot's views on art. Many of these views are evident throughout the articles she wrote as a journalist for the *Westminster Review* between 1851 and 1857.[5] Among the most informative of these essays in relation to her belief of what art should accomplish includes her review of Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* (1855) and her oft-cited essay, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856):

> [A] picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment . . . . Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen beyond the bounds of our personal lot.[6]

Eliot's efforts to use her fictional writing as a "mode of amplifying experience" has been noted by a number of scholars most often within the context of nineteenth-century literary realism and its focus on representing the ordinary and commonplace.[7] Yet while

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[4] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 2nd ed., ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000) 499 (Hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text.).

[5] Thomas Pinney, introduction, *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) 1.

[6] George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) 270-271.

[7] The complex history of literary realism has produced numerous works. Among the most helpful in my assessment of nineteenth-century literary realism and Eliot's use of perspective in *Middlemarch* include Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Lilian R. Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981);

"amplifying experience" is an essential aspect of Eliot's writing, it is not the only one which she addresses in her fiction. Even as she believes that art "is the nearest thing to life," she also recognizes the difficulties in attempting to represent life truthfully. As *Adam Bede*'s narrator is quick to point out:

> Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin—the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius, is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion. Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings—much harder than to say something fine about them which is *not* the exact truth.[8]

The realistic representation Eliot seeks for and her recognition of its inherent difficulties is perhaps best portrayed in *Middlemarch* in her use of multiple perspectives. As the narrator notes early on in the narrative, "[I]t is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view" (43).

Everywhere in *Middlemarch* George Eliot emphasizes this point by constructing the text from numerous points of view and making those points of view available to characters in the novel primarily through communication. In attempting to alert her sister to the fact that Sir James Chettam "means to make [Dorothea] an offer" of marriage (23), for instance, Celia Brooke inadvertently sets off an exchange which reveals something of the importance of verbal communication in *Middlemarch*, not only for its function to disclose information but, perhaps more importantly, for its potential to reveal something about the speaker's consciousness. As Dorothea maintains, "Of course, people need not

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George Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[8] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (London: Penguin Books, 1985) 178-179.

be always talking well. Only one tells the quality of their minds when they try to talk well" (23).

While verbal communication reveals much about the quality of individual characters' minds, it also demonstrates Eliot's concern with individuals' relationships to the community and the societal influences that shape personal points of view. Several studies that focus on George Eliot's use of speech in *Middlemarch*, in particular Alan Shelston's consideration of language and education[9] and Robert Kiely's examination of dialogue,[10] are useful in establishing a cultural and historical context for looking at verbal communication in the text. Where these studies offer broad generalizations about verbal communication, however, my study investigates in more detail the subjective nature of perspective, as demonstrated in both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Eliot's investigation of the subjectivity of perspective is evidenced primarily in the ways characters interact and communicate with one another. Equally important to this investigation, however, is her use of the narrative voice in mediating characters' points of view and in constructing narratorial perspective.[11] Unlike Linda Raphael, who asserts that *Middlemarch*'s narrative voice serves as a "self-reflective consciousness . . . [that readers are] not to doubt,"[12] I question the narrator's omniscience, reliability, and objectivity and

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[9] Alan Shelston, "What Rosy Knew: Language, Learning, and Lore in *Middlemarch*," *Critical Quarterly* 35 (1993): 21-30.

[10] Robert Kiely, "The Limits of Dialogue in *Middlemarch*," *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 103-123.

[11] George Eliot's use of the narrative voice has been an ongoing topic of interest among scholars. Among the most relevant analyses to this thesis include Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: Althone Press, 1959); Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); John L. Tucker, "George Eliot's Reflexive Text: Three Tonalities in the Narrative Voice of *Middlemarch*," *SEL* 31 (1991): 773-791.

[12] Linda Schermer Raphael, *Narrative Skepticism: Moral Agency and Representations of Consciousness in Fiction* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001) 20-21.

will investigate how the narrator's point of view contributes to readers' interpretations of what is happening in the text. When the narrator protests in Chapter Twenty-nine, for example, that Dorothea's is not the only possible point of view and goes on to elaborate Casaubon's disappointments in having done his duty in marrying, I argue that he[13] does so not to create sympathy for Casaubon's plight, but to emphasize the subjective nature of perspective.

Structuralist theories of narrative form provide a framework to examine how the narrator's perspective contributes to an understanding of the text. Of particular interest to my study is Ansgar Nünning's investigation of the "perspective structure of narrative texts"[14] and Dorrit Cohn's concept of "narrated monologue," a term Cohn coins to discuss how individuals' thoughts are presented within the narrative.[15] While both studies effectively demonstrate how narrative constructs influence perspective, their explanations focus only on the mechanics of narrative structure and do not consider the reasons behind Eliot's incorporation of perspective and free indirect speech in the text. I will show that the way individuals interact in the novel is based largely on their inability to look past

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[13] Criticism regarding the gender of *Middlemarch*'s narrator is wide-ranging, and while I will not address this issue in my investigation, the following studies have informed my decision to refer to the narrator as "he" throughout this study: Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Wendell V. Harris, "Bakhtinian Double Voicing in Dickens and Eliot," *ELH* 57 (1990): 445-458; John L. Tucker, "George Eliot's Reflexive Text: Three Tonalities in the Narrative Voice of *Middlemarch,*" *SEL* 31 (1991): 773-791. Of particular note is Kathryn Bond Stockton's assessment that the narrator's "implied access to education, 'his' self-defined vocation as an 'elegant historian,' and 'his' pointed investment in ideas-as-capital all seem to characterize a male professional" [*God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) 167].

[14] Angsar Nünning, "On the Perspective Structure of Narrative Texts: Steps Toward a Constructivist Narratology," *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, eds. Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 207.

[15] Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

observable signs and that the development of sympathy is the result of overcoming one's subjective perspective. By employing multiple perspectives, Eliot attempts to assist the novel's readers in understanding these concepts.

The attention Eliot gives to juxtaposing observable signs and personal points of view speaks to her interest in the correlation between exteriority and interiority. My investigation of exteriority and interiority will be somewhat different than that of Michael Davis, who maintains that the "conscious self [in *Middlemarch*] is shaped by language."[16] While I agree that language does influence the individual's conscious self in *Middlemarch*, I will argue that George Eliot also uses moments of silence in the text to reveal the inability of language to fully disclose consciousness. Indeed, it is her investigation of the inadequacy of language that perhaps best portrays her moral objective to foster sympathy for it is only in looking past such observable signs as language that allow individuals to be able to perceive the world from different viewpoints and acquire a sense of moral obligation to assist others.

At the same time George Eliot's fictional writings demonstrate her belief in what art should accomplish, they also reveal much about her wide-ranging interests including philosophy, epistemology, science, and psychology. Of particular interest to Eliot are those ideas that center on moral development, the acquisition of sympathy, and truth as presented in the writings of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums*, the latter of which she translated as the *Essence of Christianity* and which was published in 1854.[17] I will seek to demonstrate that Eliot incorporates these

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[16] Michael Davis, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006) 8-9.

[17] Several studies have informed my understanding of the influence that philosophies of Spinoza and Feuerbach had on George Eliot including Rosemary D. Ashton, "The Intellectual 'Medium' of *Middlemarch*," *Review of English Studies* 30 (1979): 154-168 and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Negotiating

notions in *Middlemarch* by using communication to examine the individual's capacity to view circumstances from other perspectives and acquire sympathy for others through experience. When Dorothea speaks with Rosamond near the close of the novel, for instance, Dorothea is so "completely swayed by the feeling that she [is] uttering, [that she] forgets everything but that she [is] speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond's. The emotion . . . wrought itself more and more into her utterance" (489). That Dorothea experiences this coming together of feeling and language is due, in large measure, to her previous experiences and to her desire to alleviate the suffering of others despite her own suffering. Individuals in the novel who are unable to see circumstances from another point of view are unable to achieve this same level of sympathy.

Much of the recent scholarship on *Middlemarch* has focused on the openness of the text and its ability to be read and analyzed from a variety of perspectives. I agree with Karen Chase who suggests that "criticism [of *Middlemarch*] can be more vivid when it reads with and against the grain that George Eliot has etched."[18] With this thesis I will show how George Eliot's use of perspective and communication in *Middlemarch* not only demonstrates the author's aesthetic and moral objectives but also challenges readers' perceptions of reality as they engage with the text. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* asserts, "[s]igns are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable" (16).

Middlemarch," *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karen Chase (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 116.

[18] Karen Chase, introduction, *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karen Chase (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 9.

Chapter II

A Clearer Conception of the World: The Role of Perspective in *Middlemarch*

Soon after her return from Rome, Dorothea looks out of her window at Lowick Manor “on the still, white enclosure which ma[kes] her visible world” (173) and contemplates her new life. That the following passage is presented from Dorothea’s point of view, though not directly quoted, is revealed by the text’s emotive tone:

> The duties of her married life, contemplated as so great beforehand, seemed to be shrinking with the furniture and the white vapour-walled landscape. The clear heights where she expected to walk in full communion had become difficult to see even in her imagination; the delicious repose of the soul on a complete superior had been shaken into uneasy effort and alarmed with dim presentiment. When would the days begin of that active wifely devotion which was to strengthen her husband's life and exalt her own? Never perhaps, as she had preconceived them; but somehow—still somehow. In this solemnly-pledged union of her life, duty would present itself in some new form of inspiration and give a new meaning to wifely love. (173)

The narrator refers to Dorothea’s external, visible world as an enclosure and compares tangible “furniture and the white vapour-walled landscape” to Dorothea’s internal, less-tangible perception of her situation, which is fraught with disappointment as she attempts to adjust her preconceived notions of marriage to what is quickly becoming the reality of her new life. The descriptive words in the passage that reference thoughts and emotions—“contemplated,” “expected,” “imagination,” “presentiment,” “preconceived,” “inspiration”—emphasize not only the centrality of internal perspective in attempting to make sense of experience but the tendency to look inward when experience is contrary to previous expectations.

While this scene allows readers to understand how Dorothea sees the world from early on in her marriage—both from physical and mental points of view—the significance that Eliot places on perspective in this instance is enhanced later in the novel when Dorothea looks out of her window again. Time has elapsed, experience has given her a new perspective, and her ability to sympathize with others allows her to see past her own sorrow:

> She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (486)

Dorothea's sense of shrinking and despondency portrayed in the earlier passage and mirrored in her pallid, enclosed surroundings has been replaced by the "pearly light" of a new day and feelings of "largeness" with the world. In fact, the phrases Eliot uses here—"fields beyond," "outside the entrance-gates," "on the road," "Far off"—underscore the imagery of looking outward rather than inward. The contrasting passages highlight the fact that Dorothea's view of her world, and her ability to look beyond her own perspective, has altered considerably. As Barbara Hardy perceptively notes about these and other passages in *Middlemarch*, it is the "metaphors associated with windows" that reveal the gaps between the exterior, public worlds and the interior, private spaces that individuals inhabit.[19]

In some respects, Eliot's interest in the complexities of individual perspective is

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[19] Barbara Hardy, "The Woman at the Window in *Middlemarch*," *Perspectives on Self and Community in George Eliot: Dorothea's Window*, eds. Patricia Gately, Dennis Leavens, and D. Cole Woodcox (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press 1997) 5.

attributable to nineteenth-century literary realism's concern with accuracy of representation. Kate Flint proposes that this concern to provide an honest account of individuals and the worlds they inhabit speaks to the Victorian "preoccupation with the visible, recordable world."[20] Her reference to Peter Brook's study of nineteenth-century "semioticization" of the body is insightful:

> The dominant nineteenth-century tradition, that of realism, insistently makes the visual the master relation to the world, for the very premise of realism is that one cannot understand human beings outside the context of the things that surround them, and knowing these things is a matter of viewing them, detailing them, and describing the concrete milieux in which men and women enact their destinies.[21]

Indeed, the notion "that one cannot understand human beings outside the context of the things that surround them" manifests itself in Eliot's fictional works in the metaphors and visual descriptions she uses—mirrors and telescopes, short-sightedness and "inward" vision (173), perspective and point of view—to interrogate the exterior, visible world her characters occupy.

Yet what distinguishes Eliot's mode of realist discourse, as George Levine suggests, is not "simply accuracy in representation of things as they are," but "also and necessarily a kind of authenticity, an honest representation of one's own feelings and perceptions . . . extend[ing] from the external world to the world of individual consciousness."[22] It is, in part, a response to what John McGowan argues was a nineteenth-century view that was shifting from "the Enlightenment correlation of appearance and reality . . . to the Romantic belief that the most important truths lie hidden

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[20] Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 2.

[21] Quoted in Flint 13.

[22] George Levine, "Introduction: George Eliot and the Art of Realism," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 9.

beneath the surface."[23] Eliot's interest in the complex association between exteriority and interiority is apparent throughout *Middlemarch* in her portrayal of the novel's characters as they appear in relation to one another and in her representations of characters' internal perspectives.

Eliot's attempts to depict individuals' perspectives in realistic terms stem from her aesthetic concerns. In a letter to her publisher, John Blackwood, written the year after her essay "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), Eliot asserts that: "Art must be either 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."[24] The idea that art should provide a realistic image of human life is prominent throughout Eliot's works. *Adam Bede*'s narrator, for instance, is "content to tell [his] simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity."[25] Even as Eliot seeks to avoid falsity, however, her writings reveal an understanding that narrative perspective can complicate the representation of truth:

> I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.[26]

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[23] John P. McGowan, "The Turn of George Eliot's Realism," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35 (1980): 175.

[24] George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 2, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954) 362 (Hereafter cited as *Letters.*).

[25] Eliot, *Adam Bede* 178.

[26] Eliot, *Adam Bede* 177.

In reference to this passage from *Adam Bede*, Lilian Furst acknowledges that "Eliot does not attempt to conceal the subjectivity of her vision, nor does she underestimate the difficulties of 'truth' in contrast to the relative ease of 'falsehood' which she dreads and shuns."[27] It is the subjective nature of perspective, in fact, which Eliot highlights through her use of literary realism and in her artistic representations of the external and internal.

By looking at perspective within the framework of nineteenth-century literary realism and Eliot's aesthetic objective to assist her readers to acquire "a clearer conception"[28] of the world, I will argue in this chapter that Eliot's use of visible and less visible signs is a vital influence in shaping individuals' perceptions and points of view. Whether Eliot depicts representational perspective, personal attitudes and tastes, or the interpretations and misinterpretations individuals make based on outward signs, an examination of the nature and role of perspective in *Middlemarch* is crucial to understanding the relationship between perspective and communication, something this thesis will examine in subsequent chapters.

"Bless me, now, how different people are!"

Eliot's artistic endeavor to represent life in realistic terms in *Middlemarch* may seem at times more subtle than her earlier works, owing in part to her focus on the complexities of representing realistically the "inward life" (15). Yet Eliot's treatment of the visible world that the novel's characters inhabit is no less important than in her previous novels. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the narrator's frequent contrasting of characters' physical appearances and their representational perspectives. The narrator's

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[27] Lilian R. Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) 3-4.

[28] *Letters* vol. 4 472.

preliminary description of Dorothea Brooke's beauty and bearing, for example, gives the impression that, much like a relief in an artistic representation, juxtaposing images will play an important part in how readers are led to view and understand individuals in the novel:

> Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments. (1)

The attention Eliot gives to appearance and dress as outlined in this passage suggests the importance of exteriority in shaping readers' perceptions of individuals within the novel. Indeed, Eliot frequently draws attention to appearance and dress to highlight the role of perspective in the novel. The portrayal of Mrs. Garth, for instance, "her sleeves turned above her elbows, deftly handling her pastry" (154), reveals that she is not of the same social ranking as Dorothea. The details offered with regard to Rosamond's attire—the "pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar which it was to be hoped all beholders would know the price of" (268)—speak to the value Rosamond places on outward signs of refinement. Even the account of Mrs. Bulstrode's acceptance of "a new life in which she embraced humiliation" (463) is described in terms of dress: "She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist" (463).

Instances are scattered throughout the text that detail contrasting representations of individuals' physical appearances. Just after the preliminary description of Dorothea, the narrator provides a contrasting perspective of Dorothea in relation to her sister, Celia, who is spoken of by Middlemarch neighbors as having "more common-sense" (5) and

who appears “more innocent-looking” (7) than Dorothea, whose “large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking” (7). Middlemarch’s mayor and manufacturer, Mr. Vincy, “a florid man, who would have served for a study of flesh[, stands] in striking contrast with the Franciscan tints” (60) of his philanthropic brother-in-law Mr. Bulstrode. Casaubon appears “all the dimmer and more faded” (133) next to Will Ladislaw’s “sunny brightness” (133). And when Dorothea and Rosamond meet for the first time, the narrator notes emphatically the differences in style and comportment, a contrast, he observes, which “would certainly have been striking to a calm observer” (268).

Perhaps one of the best examples of relational perspectives is illustrated in the episode in which Rosamond and Mary stand side-by-side in front of a mirror at Stone Court. The narrator remarks that Mary “ha[s] the aspect of an ordinary sinner” (72). Short, with dark curly hair, Mary “seem[s] all the plainer” (72) standing next to Rosamond, who is referred to by some as an angel and whose “hair of infantine fairness” and “slim figure” (72) make her appear as a nymph, an image that recurs throughout the text. While the narrator’s voice provides the description, Mary too acknowledges that she is a “brown patch” (73) compared to Rosamond.

The observations the narrator offers about individuals’ appearances and what those appearances suggest are substantiated in the novel by individual judgments. Just after meeting Casaubon for the first time during a dinner hosted by their uncle, the Brooke sisters offer their opinions on Casaubon’s outward appearance, Celia pronouncing that he is “very ugly” and “sallow” (13) and Dorothea asserting that “[h]e is one of the most distinguished-looking men” (13) she has ever seen. Opinions are freely offered when Lydgate is mentioned among various groups and individuals that make up Middlemarch society. Upon seeing the newly-arrived doctor for the first time, Lady Chettam affirms that she has been “told he is wonderfully clever: he certainly looks it—a

fine brow indeed" (59). When Rosamond asks Mary "what sort of looking man" Lydgate is, Mary responds: "How can one describe a man? I can give you an inventory: heavy eyebrows, dark eyes, a straight nose, thick dark hair, large solid white hands—and—let me see—oh, an exquisite cambric pocket-handkerchief" (73-74). While Mary's answer serves as an acknowledgment of Rosamond's concern with outward appearances and highlights Mary's awareness of Rosamond's ability "to discern very subtly the faintest aroma of rank" (106), it also hints at the potential of verbal communication to disclose personal attitudes, for it is in Mary's response that readers learn of her propensity for sarcasm.

Physical appearance is one of the most obvious indicators of perspective in the novel, and the importance Eliot gives to physicality as an outward sign of internal attitudes and values is highlighted in her frequent references to individuals' "habitual gesture[s]" (102). While these nonverbal cues may be more subtle than dress, they are nonetheless appreciable signs of individuals' states of mind. Rosamond's frequent turning of her long swan-like neck and patting of the hair, for instance, have less to do with grooming than with expressing "perfect obstinacy" (214) and "placid indifference" (371). Will's recurring tossing of the head indicates his carefree attitude, an obvious dissimilarity from Casaubon's habit of keeping his hands behind his back while he walks and talks, a mark of his tendency to remain aloof.

"[S]o much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissue"

Even as Eliot conveys a realistic impression of how individuals appear in relation to one another through physical perspective, she also underscores the more important aspect of perspective, internal attitudes and impressions, through her depictions of individuals' personal tastes. Subtle though they may be at times, glimpses of personal

interests and attitudes provide valuable insights into individuals' mentality. That Rosamond's favorite poem is *Lalla Rookh*, for example, suggests that she has no difficulties in vividly imagining herself playing the part of a princess to whom suitors flock. With its melodramatic romantic theme, the poem serves as a sort of handbook for Rosamond as she "register[s] every look and word" she exchanges with Lydgate as "the opening incidents of a preconceived romance" (106).[29] Although the narrator never directly compares Rosamond's reading selection to Mary Garth's, it seems unlikely that the practical Mary would be interested in Sir Thomas Moore's exotic poem when she has read such historical and sentimental novels as Sir Walter Scott's *Anne of Geierstein* and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*,[30] both of which have as their principal characters individuals of sensibility and fortitude who overcome hardship. As one who does not conform to others' expectations, Mary would appreciate novels that show strong-willed individuals who successfully change their hapless circumstances. That these publications enjoyed widespread popularity is indicative of Mary's interest in the

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[29] Meg M. Moring offers astute commentary on George Eliot's attention to detail and Rosamond's interest in popular Romantic fiction in her article, "George Eliot's Scrupulous Research: The Facts Behind Eliot's Use of the *Keepsake* in *Middlemarch,*" *Victorian Periodicals Review* 26 (1993): 19-23. Moring evaluates the scene in Chapter Twenty-seven in which Rosamond, Plymdale, and Lydgate discuss an engraving featuring a bridegroom, which Moring identifies as "The Magic Mirror" that accompanied Sir Walter Scott's story "My Aunt Margaret's Mirror." Her claim, that its inclusion in the narrative is meant to show Rosamond's adherence to Romantic values propagated by popular periodicals, supports my argument that Rosamond's tastes serve as an outward sign of her personal attitudes.

[30] Reviews of Sir Walter Scott's Waverly novels from the 1820s and 1830s are plentiful. One such review of *Anne of Geierstein* appearing soon after its publication states that "*Anne of Geierstein* will rank among the best of Waverly novels . . . . The same antiquarian lore, incomparable descriptive arc, and power of giving to romance the present and living interest of real existence, have, in the work we have been noticing, the same strength of charm as the earliest works of the great author" ("Book Review," rev. of *Anne of Geierstein*, by Walter Scott, *Monthly Review* (Jun. 1829): 288). Few critical reviews for *The Vicar of Wakefield* were written during the time Mary would have read Goldsmith's novel, although contemporary scholars acknowledge that the number of printings during this period is indicative of its popularity. Robert L. Mack points out that editor William Spalding remarked later in the nineteenth century that "Goldsmith's novel had been 'read and liked, oftener than any other novel in any other European language'" [Robert L. Mack, introduction, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, by Oliver Goldsmith, ed. Arthur Friedman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) xii].

world beyond Stone Court: "I am not fond of a school-room: I like the outside world better" (249).

While such indications of personal taste and perspective could easily be missed, even by the most observant individual, Eliot's inclusion of such details suggests that less obvious signs contribute significantly to an awareness of other perspectives. Among the most important of these indistinct signs, and which is even less accessible to outward observation than personal tastes and attitudes, is internal perspective. Representations of individual characters' consciousnesses are, at best, partial and yield only a limited understanding of perspective, yet readers of *Middlemarch* come to appreciate various points of view and to comprehend the role of perspective in the text from these depictions of interiority.

This focus on interiority has been noted by recent Eliot scholars as part of her interest in philosophical, psychological, and religious inquiries about the mind. Citing Davis's study on Eliot's engagement with nineteenth-century psychology, for instance, Marilyn Orr interrogates the "interplay in Eliot's work between religious consciousness and psychological consciousness" and looks at interiority in terms of "unknowability."[31] I argue that Eliot's interest lies not merely in determining the knowability of consciousness but in assessing whether internal perspective is communicable.

The passages at the beginning of this chapter are telling, not only for what they say about perspective and interiority but also for their relevancy to Eliot's use of multiple perspectives. Metaphors of space and the image of the window figure significantly in the narrator's depiction of Casaubon's perspective. Whereas the narrator symbolically links Dorothea to a window, he describes Casaubon as "lost among small closets and winding

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[31] Marilyn Orr, "Incarnation, Inwardness, and Imagination: George Eliot's Early Fiction," *Christianity and Literature* 58 (2009): 468.

stairs" (126), where he has "forgot[ten] the absence of windows, and . . . ha[s] become indifferent to the sunlight" (126). Readers learn that Casaubon, like Dorothea, finds himself "under a new depression" (177):

> Inclination yearned back to its old, easier custom. And the deeper he went in domesticity the more did the sense of acquitting himself and acting with propriety predominate over any other satisfaction. Marriage, like religion and erudition, nay, like authorship itself, was fated to become an outward requirement, and Edward Casaubon was bent on fulfilling unimpeachably all requirements. (177)

At the same time that this passage points to Casaubon's dissatisfaction in discovering that marriage is not what he had imagined, it also provides an understanding of his perspective that is unavailable to characters in the novel. His sense of duty to fulfill all "outward requirement[s]" (177) speaks to his obsession with how he appears to others, not so much in his physical appearance but in his scrupulous propriety and his resolution "to be a man of honour" (176). His desire to conceal his insecurities and protect his ego predominates "over any other satisfaction" (177), revealing a tendency to hide behind a façade. But unlike Dorothea's myopia, which sometimes prevents her from seeing clearly, Casaubon's inability to look outward prevents him from acknowledging that other perspectives exist and are as valid as his. Where the text offers a contrasting view of how Dorothea's perspective changes over time, it can offer none for Casaubon's since, as the narrative so bluntly points out, his bitterness and indifference is "fixed and unchangeable as bone" (126).

"[S]igns are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable"

Questions regarding what constitutes truth and reality, how knowledge is acquired, and the ways individuals seek to find meaning and make interpretations based on what they experience as individuals and as individuals within a community are all facets of realism that find expression in Eliot's fictional writings, most especially in

Middlemarch. Whether it is Dorothea Brooke, seeking to find a "binding theory . . . [to] give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions" (55), the Reverend Edward Casaubon, whose entire life's work is to interpret other men's interpretations of the world in order to find a key that will unlock the mysteries of all things mythological, or Tertius Lydgate, who longs to find the "primitive tissue" (95), all characters in *Middlemarch* seek to find meaning in the world, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. This emphasis on the act of interpretation in *Middlemarch*, and in all of Eliot's novels, has been noted by several scholars as George Eliot's engagement with nineteenth-century hermeneutics. David Carroll, for example, focuses on a hermeneutics that draws attention to what he reads as a "crisis of interpretation" in Victorian thought in general, and which manifests itself in Eliot's writings as "a tension between the outside and inside . . . discrepancies between the characters' rationale of life, their feelings, and their actions."[32]

Like Carroll, Suzy Anger maintains that Eliot's writings were influenced significantly by philosophical theories of interpretation but stresses that interpretation, for Eliot, is more "an ethical issue" than a theoretical concern.[33] Whereas Carroll emphasizes a hermeneutics that focuses on the indeterminacy of meaning, Anger argues for a "hermeneutics of sympathy" in which "[Eliot] enacts interpretive conflicts not to demonstrate indeterminacy, but to reveal the conditions needed for more accurate interpretation."[34] Eliot's aim, Anger points out, "is to find a way to correct for these differences. Repeatedly, she demonstrates that holding on to an ego-centered perspective

[32] David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 8.

[33] Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) 99.

[34] Anger 117.

and operating without sympathy are moral failings and result in misinterpretations."[35]

Carroll and Anger's studies provide useful insights into Victorian hermeneutics and nineteenth-century ontological and epistemological philosophies and theories that influenced Eliot and her writings. Like Carroll, I acknowledge that Eliot's writings consider the correlation and conflict between exteriority and interiority. My discussion on Eliot's moral objectives in writing fiction builds on Anger's assertion that: "By striving to enter imaginatively into the perspectives of others [Eliot demonstrates that] one can work against the limitations of subjective perspective."[36]

Yet where Carroll and Anger focus on Eliot's theory of interpretation in relation to hermeneutics, I examine how Eliot uses signs—both visible and less visible—to examine the complex relationship between individual consciousness and the ways individuals make interpretations. Nearly all characters in *Middlemarch* make interpretations based on such outwardly perceptible signs as physical appearances, gestures, and communication. Most of these interpretations change depending on where the individual stands, both literally and metaphorically, in relation to the individual's perception and willingness to accept different interpretations. Will's initial impression of Dorothea as "an unpleasant girl" (51), for instance, is based on her uneducated opinions about his painting and the fact that she is going to marry Casaubon. Yet this perspective alters after his first conversation with her in Rome where he determines that she is "not coldly clever and indirectly satirical, but adorably simple and full of feeling" (133). Similarly, Lydgate's opinion of Dorothea changes from his first perception that she is "a little too earnest" (60) to an appreciation for her ardor: "She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before—a fountain of friendship towards men" (474).

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[35] Anger 117.

[36] Anger 99.

Just as Eliot juxtaposes physical representations of perspective, so too does she compare individuals' interpretations. In the weeks leading up to her marriage, Dorothea relies on Casaubon's "efforts at exact courtesy and formal tenderness" (47) to complete her understanding of his character: "She filled up all blanks with unmanifested perfections, interpreting him as she interpreted the works of Providence, and accounting for seeming discords by her own deafness to the higher harmonies" (47-48). Dorothea's interpretation is based primarily on the few conversations she has with Casaubon and her myopic perception that he will be a guide who "would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance" (19). It is just over a month after her wedding, however, while still on her honeymoon in Rome, that Dorothea's perspective of marriage to Lowick Manor's erudite thinker begins to alter.

The outward signs of Casaubon's character do not change in the first weeks of marriage; as the narrator is quick to point out, "no man was more incapable of flashy make-believe than Mr Casaubon . . . he had not actively assisted in creating any illusions about himself" (125). Dorothea's viewpoint about her husband, however, *has* changed, and from where she stands in Rome, having crossed the threshold of marriage, she quickly learns that reality does not always correspond with previously held expectations. The small measurable signs of Casaubon's verbal cues—his "way of commenting on the strangely impressive objects around them," the "blank absence of interest or sympathy," and the "dreary" indifference with which he answers Dorothea's inquiries—all serve as outward manifestations for Dorothea's expanding realization that "[w]hat was fresh to her mind was worn out to his" (126). From her husband's "measured official tone, as of a clergyman reading according to the rubric" (126), Dorothea comes to understand that he cares more about his work than he does for her, and she begins to interpret her husband's work, and by extension her husband, as a "lifeless embalmment of knowledge" (126).

Despite this realization, or perhaps because of it, Dorothea comes to recognize that "she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr Casaubon, and she . . . fe[els] the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own" (134-135).

Dorothea's correct interpretation of her husband's lack of interest seems somewhat ironic given the fact that later in the novel the outward signs of Dorothea's virtue do little to convince Casaubon that her "wifely devotedness" (260) is anything more than "a penitential expiation of unbelieving thoughts" (260):

> To his suspicious interpretations Dorothea's silence now has a suppressed rebellion; a remark from her which he had not in any way anticipated was an assertion of conspicuous superiority; her gentle answers had an irritating cautiousness in them; and when she acquiesced it was a self-approved effort of forbearance. (260)

The narrator observes that Casaubon's "habits of mind and conduct" (261) save him from a "coarse misinterpretation of Dorothea" (261), particularly in regard to her relationship with Will Ladislaw, yet his inclination to doubt leads him to misjudge his wife. Unfortunately, Casaubon's "intense consciousness" (175) does not allow him to interpret Dorothea's genuine solicitude for his feelings from anything other than his own perspective. His disposition to avoid any honest evaluation of his perception and judgments in order to safeguard his ego prevents him from relinquishing his feelings of jealousy and suspicion. What begins as a feeling of suspicion eventually turns into distrust of Dorothea's affection.

The majority of what readers learn about Casaubon's perspective remains inaccessible to characters within the novel. Yet the fact that the narrator makes this perspective available to readers suggests that Eliot means to challenge assumptions about what is happening in the text. That is to say, just as individuals within the novel have limited access to others' perspectives, so too do the novel's readers. Eliot invites readers

to contrast and juxtapose “small measurable” (16), observable signs with less observable signs to formulate their own interpretations of what is happening in the text. The narrator’s role in mediating perspectives and shaping interpretations reveals that much of what readers learn is from the narrator’s view of the world.

Chapter III

Constructs of Perspective: *Middlemarch*'s Narrator and the World as it Seems

Chapter Twenty opens with what appears to be a simple statement of fact: "Two hours later, Dorothea was seated in an inner room or boudoir of a handsome apartment in the Via Sistina" (123). Set apart from the paragraphs that follow, the sentence emphasizes the fact that Dorothea sits alone. While details such as this draw attention to Eliot's concern with representation, it is the sentence that follows which highlights the relationship between representation and perspective. The narrator's introductory remark, "I am sorry to add" (123), is not unlike many of the remarks he makes throughout the narrative; the phrase not only discloses a sympathetic view toward Dorothea but also reveals the narrator's ability to construct and shape perspective by participating in the narrative as one viewpoint among many. But as Chapter Twenty demonstrates, the narrator also serves as a reporter of and mediator for multiple points of view as he navigates between Dorothea's and Casaubon's internal perspectives. The juxtapositions which Eliot highlights throughout *Middlemarch* to illustrate various representational points of view are manifested here with emphatic detail.

Much of the first half of Chapter Twenty centers on Dorothea, her "preoccupation with her personal lot" (124), her views of "the new real future which was replacing the imaginary" (124), and her growing awareness "that her mind was continually sliding into inward fits of anger and repulsion, or else into forlorn weariness" (126). In shifting the focus from Dorothea's point of view to Casaubon's, the narrator again makes a sympathetic remark: "Poor Dorothea! She was certainly troublesome—to herself chiefly; but this morning for the first time she had been troublesome to Mr Casaubon" (127). The

narrative then details the conversation between the newly-married couple in which Dorothea verbalizes her frustrations: “And all your notes . . . All those rows of volumes—will you not now do what you used to speak of?—will you not make up your mind what part of them you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world?” (128).

The narrator’s sympathetic voice alters somewhat as he introduces Casaubon’s contrasting perspective by pointing out Dorothea’s inability to understand their “mutual situation” (129) from any other perspective than her own: “She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heart-beats, but only felt that her own was beating violently” (128).

While Dorothea suffers from an inability to see, Casaubon experiences no deficiencies in hearing:

> In Mr Casaubon’s ear, Dorothea's voice gave loud emphatic iteration to those muffled suggestions of consciousness which it was possible to explain as mere fancy, the illusion of exaggerated sensitiveness: always when such suggestions are unmistakably repeated from without, they are resisted as cruel and unjust. We are angered even by the full acceptance of our humiliating confessions—how much more by hearing in hard distinct syllables from the lips of a near observer, those confused murmurs which we try to call morbid, and strive against as if they were the oncoming of numbness! (128)

Several textual clues in this passage imply a shift between Casaubon’s perception—that Dorothea is articulating vocally what he has avoided admitting to himself—and the narrator’s general observations about “muffled suggestions of consciousness” including the colon, which marks the transition, the shift from past to present tense, and the use of the inclusive “we.” The exclamation point which ends the passage also indicates the narrator’s tendency towards emphasis.

Immediately following the narrator's interjection, the text returns to the past tense and to Casaubon's perspective:

> And this cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife—nay, of a young bride, who, instead of observing his abundant pen-scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird, seemed to present herself as a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference. (128)

The passage does not include quotation marks to indicate that it is from Casaubon's point of view, but no such marks are necessary for readers to understand that Casaubon is struggling to find an explanation for the differences in how Dorothea appeared before marriage and how she seems to him now.

After offering these contrasting points of view the narrator ends with this final comparison: "Both were shocked at their mutual situation—that each should have betrayed anger towards the other . . . . To Dorothea's inexperienced sensitiveness, it seemed like a catastrophe, changing all prospects; and to Mr Casaubon it was a new pain" (129). While Dorothea's and Casaubon's interpretations of the situation reflect their personal attitudes—to Dorothea the situation "seemed like a catastrophe," to Casaubon "it was a new pain"—both perspectives result from subjective views of one another and an inability to sympathize because of egoistic tendencies.

As evidenced from the passages cited, such details as sentence placement, verb tense, and punctuation often signal how Eliot uses narrative form to construct perspective. Several components of narrative theory provide useful reference points from which to examine the narrator's task of navigating through multiple viewpoints and shaping interpretations. Nünning's study on narrative perspective, for example, interrogates character perspective and narrator perspective. Character perspective, he suggests, is constructed by readers' interpretations of individual characters' external appearances, the ways those individuals communicate, and their internal, subjective

viewpoints about what is happening to them.[37] Closely corresponding to the notion of character perspective is narrator perspective, which Nünning defines as "the system of preconditions or the subjective worldview of a narrating instance" and which is "manifest[ed] solely in what [the narrator] says, that is in the discourse that 'reflects the contents of his or her mind.'"[38] For Nünning, however, narrator-perspective has application only for those narrators who participate in the narrative as characters (homodiegetic narrators) and not for anonymous speakers (heterodiegetic narrators).[39]

Although I agree with Nünning's definitions of perspective, I take issue with the notion that narrator perspective can only be applied to homodiegetic narrators. *Middlemarch*'s narrator, while not participating directly in the narrative as a character, is nonetheless a subjective voice which shapes and challenges readers' interpretations of what is happening in the text. I will refer frequently in this chapter to the narrator's subjective perspective and will contend that the narrator's subjectivity stems from an assumption that he can offer impartial assessments based on his privileged access to individuals' points of view. But rather than the objective bystander he purports to be, the narrator is a participant who is subject to the same constraints of limited perspective as the novel's characters. I argue that the narrator should not be viewed simply as a detached voice because, as Nick Mansfield rightly maintains, "The word subject . . . proposes that the self is not a separate and isolated entity."[40] In addition to narrative perspective, the narrative modes Eliot uses, both diegetic and mimetic, provide clues as to how the

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[37] Nünning 212.

[38] Nünning 214.

[39] Nünning 214.

[40] Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 3.

narrator constructs perspective in the text. How the story is communicated is just as important as what the narrator chooses to include about individuals and the provincial society in which they interact.

Drawing on concepts of narrative theory and Eliot's rhetorical objectives, I will answer the following questions in this chapter: What role does the narrator play in negotiating the novel's multiple perspectives? How do the different narrative modes in *Middlemarch* emphasize perspective as a construct? How does the narrator communicate his own perspective? In answering these questions, I will reveal that readers' interpretations of what is happening in *Middlemarch* are largely dependent on the narrator's perspective, a perspective that is meant to challenge assumptions about what is happening in the text.

Middlemarch's Omniscient? Narrator

When Casaubon receives Will Ladislaw's letter indicating Will's refusal to give up working with Mr. Brooke and quit Middlemarch, the narrator is quick to offer sympathy for Casaubon's position: "Poor Mr Casaubon felt (and must not we, being impartial, feel with him a little?) that no man had juster cause for disgust and suspicion than he" (234). This passage is one among many in *Middlemarch* that demonstrates the narrator's ability to provide access to individual characters' feelings and internal perspectives, perspectives which remain largely inaccessible to other characters within the narrative. While this passage implicitly points to the narrator's infinite knowledge about those of whom he writes, it also references the narrator's sympathetic view toward Casaubon and his belief in his own impartiality.

The notion of objectivity is an important factor when considering the narrator's

reliability in presenting multiple points of view.[41] Audrey Jaffe rightly asserts that omniscient narration is "a narrative mode that has traditionally signified an unquestioned assertion of authority, [but which] may be understood instead to interrogate the grounds of its authority."[42] It is "a primary means whereby the Victorian novel creates an effect of subjectivity."[43] The "effect of subjectivity" created by the narrative voice in *Middlemarch* is central to the narrator's role in navigating multiple perspectives. Indeed, the narrator's frequent commentaries and observations, much like his claim to impartiality, challenge readers' assumptions about individual characters in the novel.

A number of the narrator's commentaries provide factual information and juxtapose exteriority and interiority; others reveal the narrator's view of himself as an authority or provide glimpses into the narrator's own subjective perception of individuals and the society about which he writes. Similar to the external signs that provide representational perspectives of individuals in relation to one another, many of the narrator's commentaries offer a context for better understanding individual relationships within Middlemarch's provincial social structure. Inserted in the narrative as parenthesized annotations, as in the passage cited at the beginning of this section, many of the narrator's comments mimic Celia Brooke's frequent "by the by[s]" (31) and provide such details as the age of the Vincy's youngest child, Mr. Featherstone's

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[41] Studies on the function of the narrator in realist fiction are numerous, particularly in relation to notions of omniscience, objectivity, and reliability. See, for instance, Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative*; Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[42] Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 168.

[43] Jaffe 170.

relationship to the Garths and Vincys, and the fact that the stethoscope “had not become a matter of course in practice” (180) during the time the narrative takes place.

Other remarks indicate individuals’ unique character traits. Through them readers learn, for instance, that Celia “sometimes seemed to blush as she breathed” (36), that “Will was given to hyperbole” (131), and that Casaubon “always said ‘my love’ when his manner was the coldest” (144). At the same time that these remarks provide information about individual characteristics, they also speak to the narrator’s interest in determining how exteriority signals internal perspective and how that perspective shapes and motivates individual behavior. As Chase correctly maintains:

> The seeking of reasons . . . furnishes a major occupation for all of the novel’s principals who, when they are not formulating reasons of their own, are speculating on the reasons of others . . . . [T]he most eager exponent of reasons is the novel’s narrator, who seems to take a special pride in explaining behavior.[44]

The enthusiasm with which the narrator investigates individual behavior is often exhibited in the challenges he makes directly to readers, inviting them to make assessments about individuals based on the information he provides:

> If any one will here contend that there must have been traits of goodness in old Featherstone, I will not presume to deny this; but I must observe that goodness is of a modest nature, easily discouraged, and when much elbowed in early life by unabashed vices, is apt to retire into extreme privacy, so that it is more easily believed in by those who construct a selfish old gentleman theoretically, than by those who form the narrower judgments based on his personal acquaintance. (201)

Implicit in such challenges is the narrator’s view of himself as a wise, authoritative voice. This perception is further evidenced in the didactic exhortations and moral maxims scattered throughout the text: “let all plain young ladies be warned against the dangerous

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[44] Karen Chase, *Eros & Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* (New York: Methuen, 1984) 143-144.

encouragement given them by Society to confide in their want of beauty" (255); "for time, like money, is measured by our needs" (91); "We know what a masquerade all development is, and what effective shapes may be disguised in helpless embryos.—In fact, the world is full of hopeful analogies and handsome dubious eggs called possibilities" (53).

While the narrative voice demonstrates the subjective nature of perspective, it also serves as a mouthpiece for public opinion, and the way public opinion is presented has the same potential to influence readers' interpretations of what is happening in the text as does the opinion itself. When the narrator describes local attitudes toward Dorothea and Celia Brooke in Chapter One, for example, readers are led to believe that the unreferenced remarks are from Middlemarch neighbors. Such introductory remarks as "She was usually spoken of" (5), "She was regarded as" (6), and "The rural opinion about the new young ladies" (7) indicate that what follows represents general opinions based on observation and conjecture. One representative paragraph suggests that the narrator purposely combines his understanding about Dorothea's "theoretic mind [which] yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world" (6) with local opinion so as to make his knowledge and public opinion nearly indistinguishable. The intertwining of the narrative voice with the Middlemarch mindset is perceptible in the combining of present and past tense:

> And how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles—who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-

> horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them. (6-7)

While outward signs—Dorothea's beauty, her social status, and outward displays of religiosity—shape rural opinion, there are also less observable signs that would not be discernable to the casual acquaintance. Dorothea's neighbors would certainly not know or understand the notions by which she "[insists] on regulating life" (6), her impatience with her uncle in the handling of his estate, or her longing to do some good when she comes of age. Nevertheless, in this provincial setting, individuals are judged by external appearances and on whether or not their actions comply with social and cultural expectations. Dorothea, with "her insistence on regulating life according to [strange] notions," her "love of extremes" and "strange whims," does not fit Middlemarch's conception of what a handsome, marriageable young woman "of birth and fortune" should be or do. Middlemarch society, after all, has little interest in individuality since it is primarily concerned with ensuring conformity to socially-accepted behavior. As the narrator points out later in his introduction of Lydgate, "[T]he respectable townsfolk there were not more given than mortals generally to any eager attempt at exactness in the representation to themselves of what did not come under their own senses" (99). Indeed, they are "often in haste to conjecture how a new acquaintance might be wrought into their purposes, contented with very vague knowledge as to the way in which life had been shaping him [or her] for that instrumentality" (99).

This passage describes Middlemarch's perception of Dorothea, but it also presents a telling portrait of the society to which she belongs and reveals the narrator's sarcastic perception of that society's narrow-minded attitude. The text is also replete with the narrator's judgments about individuals within that society. Of Casaubon's way of speaking, for instance, the narrator observes, "No speech could have been more

thoroughly honest in its intention: the frigid rhetoric at the end was as sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an amorous rook" (32). Early reviewers of *Middlemarch* frequently viewed such narratorial assessments with disappointment. One such critic, R. H. Hutton, expressed disapproval of Eliot's "biting power of . . . acrid criticism"[45]:

> To us one of George Eliot's great charms consists in her large friendly way of letting the light fall on human weakness; and these mannered sarcasms . . . seem altogether out of keeping that way, seem like broken lancet-points in a living body. She gains her ascendancy over the imagination without inflicting these little superfluous wounds, and they only diminish it.[46]

Later critics have also recognized Eliot's use of sarcasm but tend to focus instead on the function of irony and satire to provide tonality and to demonstrate the complexities of the various modes of discourse that Eliot uses to examine the subjectivity of perspective.[47] That the narrative voice acts as a mediator between observation and interpretation is demonstrated in the narrator's function as a transitional voice from one viewpoint to another. Yet the narrator functions also as a voice that offers another perspective—a perspective, I argue, which reveals that the narrator is not so much an omniscient commentator as a critic. Whether the text highlights the narrator's representations of individuals, of individuals in relation to others, or of Middlemarch opinions, all points of view in the novel, including the narrator's, serve to demonstrate the subjectivity of perspective.

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[45] R. H. Hutton, "Unsigned Reviews, *Spectator*," *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge, 1995) 289.

[46] Hutton 289-290.

[47] See for example Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: Althone Press, 1959); John L. Tucker, "George Eliot's Reflexive Text: Three Tonalities in the Narrative Voice of *Middlemarch,*" *SEL* 31 (1991): 773-791.

“[T]here must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry”

In an oft-cited excerpt from an 1876 letter to Dr. Joseph Frank Payne, Eliot indicates that her writing is “simply a set of experiments in life” meant to “see what our thought and emotion may be capable of.”[48] *Middlemarch*’s opening lines, in fact, reveal that this will be a novel of experimentation dealing with “how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time” (3). Given Eliot’s interest in experimentation and her focus on the correlation between appearance and reality, it is not surprising that she incorporates scientific imagery to examine the relationship between observation and perspective. Scholars have long recognized Eliot’s interest in and use of scientific imagery and inquiry in her fictional writing. Diana Postlethwaite’s overview of George Eliot’s engagement with nineteenth-century scientific thought, for instance, claims that *Middlemarch* “portrays two—and dramatically contrasting” ways of scientific inquiry, that of “subtle observation” (397) as personified in the natural historian, the Reverend Camden Farebrother, and the more methodical and research-oriented approach advocated by Tertius Lydate, the “theoretical, professionalized ‘natural [scientist].’”[49] This assessment of the different ways individual characters interpret the world around them has application to *Middlemarch*’s narrator as he presents and mediates various points of view.

Among the most relevant scientific images that Eliot incorporates into the narrative is that of the microscope. With its ability to bring into focus that which is not readily visible, this optical instrument is particularly useful in underscoring the importance of perspective and observation:

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[48] *Letters* vol. 6 216.

[49] Diana Postlethwaite, “George Eliot and Science,” *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 99.

> Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. (38)

The reference to the microscope in this particular case is directed at Mrs. Cadwallader and her matchmaking efforts, yet the explanation the narrator offers regarding interpretations also has a more general application to the subjective nature of perspective. Lawrence Rothfield's evaluation of the relationship between observation and perspective is particularly fitting in a discussion of Eliot's use of the image of the microscope. Rothfield points out that, while the microscope "may multiply the range of scientific vision, a scientist will still see what he or she looks for. As Lewes puts it, 'No little of what passes for microscopic observation is the substitution of a mental image for the optical image;' mental images are already interpretations, bound to the interests of the scientist's paradigm."[50] In other words, what an individual, in this case the narrator, observes has as much to do with his own subjective perspective as the actual image that is being examined under the lens.

While perspective shapes interpretation of what is being observed under a microscope, the strength of the lens also influences interpretations. Echoing Lydgate's belief that "a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass" (396), the narrator frequently offers general, all-inclusive "we" observations and applies those observations to specific

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[50] Lawrence Rothfield, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) 95.

characters.[51] In all of these instances, the punctuation serves to separate the narrator's general remarks and the application of those remarks to specific individuals, and vice versa:

> Poor Mr Casaubon had imagined that his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment, and that large drafts on his affections would not fail to be honoured; for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them. (55)
>
> We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon . . . than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling . . . that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference. (135)
>
> We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire; and poor old Featherstone, who laughed much at the way in which others cajoled themselves, did not escape the fellowship of illusion. (202)

In each of these passages, the narrator presents and mediates a subjective viewpoint, one in which each of the individuals of whom he makes mention imagines something based on his or her own egocentric perspectives. Rothfield's remark about the "scientist's paradigm," then, has relevance not only to the narrator, the one who is making general observations, but also to the individual characters in the narrative. What the narrator

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[51] Several critics have noted this frequent shift from general to specific in *Middlemarch*. For Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, these shifts mark Eliot's use of the narrative voice as a "transitional device" to navigate through multiple perspectives (Ermarth, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*" 121). J. Hillis Miller claims a deconstructionist interpretation of *Middlemarch*'s totalization and claims that the shift can be defined in terms of a "combination of specificity, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, generalizing interpretation on the basis of specificity" [J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1975) 128]. Taking a quite different approach, Barbara Hardy interrogates the recognizable "shift[s] from particular to general" in terms of Eliot's aesthetic and moral objective to remind her readers of 'that element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency'" [Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: Althone Press, 1959) 163].

chooses to include and the general observations he makes about individuals' interpretations reveals the narrator's perspective.

Even as the image of the microscope points to Eliot's concern with observation, other images further illustrate the correlation between perspective and observation. The image of the lighted candle, for example, speaks to Eliot's interest in illusions and optics:

> Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. (166-167)

Just as the light "falling with an exclusive optical selection" illuminates the "illusion of a concentric arrangement," what the narrator chooses to highlight in the narrative about individuals influences readers' interpretations. What may appear as objective and impartial comments based on the narrator's experimentation of placing a light against a pier-glass, metaphorically speaking, are, in fact, subjective interpretations based on personal perspective.

Similar to the metaphoric imagery of the lens and the candlelight magnifying and illuminating various objects, other images suggest the indispensability of experimentation based on the collection of measurable data. In Chapter Forty, for instance, the narrator introduces the Garth family using the image of a battery. The emphasis on representational perspective suggests the importance of observation in experimentation: "In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up" (248). Of this passage Selma Brody notes that "Just as an experimenter sets up a circuit, the narrator has set up the novel's

'circuitry'; control of effects is maintained by the narrator, not the battery."[52] Similar to Jaffe's notion of the creation of the effect of subjectivity in Victorian fiction, this notion that the "control of effects is maintained by the narrator" is significant when one considers the narrator as a mediator and shaper of perspective.

George Eliot's Aesthetic Objective and *Middlemarch*'s Narrative Modes

Even as Eliot emphasizes her concern for realistic representation by using scientific images, she also acknowledges the subjective nature of perspective and its inherent limitations. As her narrator uses two scientific approaches to present and mediate multiple perspectives, so he makes use of two narrative modes, diegetic and mimetic (showing and telling), to present the world as it seems to him. The differences between showing and telling are perhaps best illustrated in the narrator's comparison between himself and Henry Fielding. Unlike Fielding, who called himself "a great historian" (90), *Middlemarch*'s narrator identifies himself as a "belated historian" (91):

> I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (91)

The reference to Fielding suggests that the narrator acknowledges that he, like Fielding, is a storyteller; that he views himself as a "belated historian" as well points to his concern with determining connections and providing explanations about individuals, not just detailing individuals' actions. This concern with providing a sense of historical context in storytelling has been recognized by Harry Shaw, who maintains that "the dynamic behind Eliot's realism leads her to attempt to make even her narrator subject to history. By

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[52] Selma B. Brody, "Physics in *Middlemarch*: Gas Molecules and Ethereal Atoms," *Modern Philology* 85 (1987): 42-53.

placing her narrator as well as her characters under the constraints of history, she hopes to gain ethical authority as she invokes her readers' own responsibilities as historical beings."[53]

But even as the narrator presents himself as both storyteller and historian, the text reveals that the narrator is doing more than simply reciting a story or determining connections. David Lodge's observation about how diegesis and mimesis function in the realist novel is applicable to Eliot's structure of *Middlemarch*. Instead of alternating between showing and telling, Lodge contends that the realist novel "mixes the two discourses in a more fundamental sense; it fuses them together, often indistinguishably and inextricably . . . [often through] extensive use of free indirect speech, which obscures and complicates the distinction between the two types of discourse."[54] Eliot's combination of the two narrative modes highlights her concern with representing interiority but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, it denotes her belief in the need for sympathy when making interpretations based on subjective perspective. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth correctly asserts, "There is never a single way of looking at things in George Eliot . . . . It is never this *or* that . . . . It is always this *and* that."[55]

While the narrator often acts as a transitional voice between shifting perspectives and between generalized observations and more specific details, Eliot also blends the narrator's voice with individual characters' thoughts through what Cohn has termed

[53] Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 218.

[54] David Lodge, "*Middlemarch* and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text," *Middlemarch: George Eliot*, ed. John Peck (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 51-52.

[55] Ermarth, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*" 112, 125.

"narrated monologue," a third-person technique for revealing consciousness.[56] As Rachel Provenzano Oberman indicates:

> Narrated monologue gives us that which, outside of the fictional realm, is unknowable: the contents of another's consciousness . . . . The narrative voice is continually forcing the reader to consider multiple points of view, pointing out each character's perceptive limits, and imaginatively depicting for the reader what other consciousnesses sound like.[57]

This process of publicizing what is private implies that *Middlemarch*'s narrator has access to all points of view and motives. No other characters would know about Dorothea's true feelings toward Will Ladislaw, for instance, yet readers are made aware of those feelings at several key points in the narrative, one of which details Dorothea's realization of her feelings for Will and another in which she is confronted with feelings of anger after seeing Will with Rosamond together. Much like the parentheses that set off the narrator's comments in the text, the narrative voice is set off in the following paragraph by dashes, yet the blending of the narratorial voice with Dorothea's unspoken thoughts indicates Eliot's use of narrated monologue:

> Joy came first, in spite of the threatening train behind it—joy in the impression that it was really herself whom Will loved and was renouncing, that there was really no other love less permissible, more blameworthy, which honour was hurrying him away from. They were parted all the same, but—Dorothea drew a deep breath and felt her strength return—she could think of him unrestrainedly. At that moment the parting was easy to bear: the first sense of loving and being loved excluded sorrow. It was as if some hard icy pressure had melted, and her consciousness had room to expand: her past was come back to her with larger interpretation. The joy was not the less—perhaps it was the more complete just then—because of the irrevocable parting; for there was no reproach, no contemptuous wonder to imagine in any eye or from any lips. He had acted so as to defy reproach, and make wonder respectful. (392-293)

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[56] Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 100.

[57] Rachel Provenzano Oberman, "Fused Voices: Narrated Monologue in Jane Austen's *Emma*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 64 (2009): 10.

The joy that Dorothea experiences in realizing, for the first time, Will's feelings for her and her feelings for Will is sharply contrasted with her perspective of Will after she sees him with Rosamond. The dashes and questions in the following passage indicate that the narrator's voice joins together with Dorothea's internal dialogue:

> And there, aloof, yet persistently with her, moving wherever she moved, was the Will Ladislaw who was a changed belief exhausted of hope, a detected illusion—no, a living man towards whom there could not yet struggle any wail of regretful pity, from the midst of scorn and indignation and jealous offended pride. The fire of Dorothea's anger was not easily spent, and it flamed out in fitful returns of spurning reproach. Why had he come obtruding his life into hers, hers that might have been whole enough without him? Why had he brought his cheap regard and his lip-born words to her who had nothing paltry to give in exchange? He knew that he was deluding her—wished, in the very moment of farewell, to make her believe that he gave her the whole price of her heart, and knew that he had spent it half before. Why had he not stayed among the crowd of whom she asked nothing—but only prayed that they might be less contemptible? (485)

Eliot's modes of representation, both diegetic and mimetic, invite readers to actively participate in the interpretation process and highlight her concern with overcoming subjective perspective through the development of sympathy. Hina Nazar, who examines Eliot's emphasis on sympathy within the context of realist representation, points out that, for Eliot "representation is not reducible to sense perception, including vision. It does not imply passive spectatorship or mimesis but calls the senses into account to shed 'new light on the less obvious relations of human existence.'"[58]

Inviting readers to make assessments of individual perspectives, including the narrator's constructs of perspective, is one way Eliot highlights the notion that "the self is not a separate and isolated entity."[59] That *Middlemarch* takes place within a community

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[58] Hina Nazar, "Philosophy in the Bedroom: *Middlemarch* and the Scandal of Sympathy," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15 (2002): 299.

[59] Mansfield 3.

speaks to Eliot's theoretical concern with the 'relations of human existence,' not only of relations between individuals but also relations of individuals within the larger community.

Chapter IV

Social Organicism: Disclosing Communal and Individual Perspective

Several years before the publication of her first novel, George Eliot articulated what has since come to be regarded as her theory of social organicism: "The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium."[60] This excerpt from her essay, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), has served as the basis for a number of studies that evaluate the relationship and potential conflicts between individual and communal claims in Eliot's fictional works.[61] Among the most relevant to a discussion on language and communication in *Middlemarch* are J. Hillis Miller's influential essay, "Optics and Semiotics," and Sally Shuttleworth's examination of Eliot's beliefs about the correspondence and contradictions between the social whole and individual parts as related to nineteenth-century social and scientific thought.[62]

Working from a deconstructionist perspective, Miller argues that the metaphors Eliot uses in *Middlemarch* to describe the interactions of individual characters are

[60] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life" 287.

[61] George Eliot's interest in and focus on individuals' relationships within the community and the complex intersection of public and private has been the subject of numerous studies. See for example William Deresiewicz, "Heroism and Organicism in the Case of Lydgate," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38 (1998): 723-740; D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Raymond Williams, "The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 2 (1969): 255-268.

[62] Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

unreliable in constructing a coherent and organic view of society because they contradict and invalidate one another. In other words, those metaphors that point to an objective, quantifiable reality—the web, stream, and woven cloth—tend to subvert the novel's optical metaphors, which suggest that perception, and thereby interpretation, is subjective. "Seeing," Miller asserts, "is never simply a matter of identifying correctly what is seen . . . . Seeing is always interpretation.[63]

Although Miller's examination of metaphors in *Middlemarch* focuses on the question of formal unity rather than the specific function of language and communication, his assessment is, nevertheless, relevant to an investigation of verbal communication in the narrative. A number of characters in the novel use figures of speech in communicating with one another, and the narrator's use of metaphors to analyze Middlemarch society further draws attention to the importance of language. I agree that the novel's metaphors of vision underscore the subjective nature of perspective, and Miller's assessment of language reinforces my argument that Eliot uses communication to challenge readers' assumptions about what is happening in the text. However, Miller's line of reasoning regarding the irreconcilable differences between objective and subjective metaphors fails to take into account Eliot's deliberate use of contrasting images to examine the complex relationship of parts to the whole. Eliot's use of language manifests these differences in verbal and nonverbal communication as well as silence.

Unlike Miller, who seeks to prove the disunity of *Middlemarch* as a text, Shuttleworth examines Eliot's theory of social organicism to demonstrate "how scientific ideas and theories of method affected not only the social vision but also the narrative

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[63] J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1975) 143.

structure and fictional methodology of her novels."[64] Recognizing the importance Eliot gives to language in her application of social organicism, Shuttleworth maintains that "The unity of *Middlemarch* is based primarily on the shared community of language . . . the primary connecting bond is the shared linguistic medium. Through language, characters articulate both their individual and communal identity."[65] Much of my investigation of verbal communication builds on Shuttleworth's premise.[66]

While such studies inform readers about the association between George Eliot's views on organicism and the overall structure of the novel, they tend to overlook the different functions of verbal communication as they relate to external, social perspective and more private individual points of view. I will build on past criticism by answering the following questions: What is the role of gossip in the community of Middlemarch? How does gender shape communication? In what ways does dialogue demonstrate the subjectivity of perspective? What do verbal and nonverbal communications reveal about individual consciousness? I will examine these questions by looking at the function of communication both as a social convention and as a private means to disclose perspective.

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[64] Shuttleworth x.

[65] Shuttleworth 147-148.

[66] Like Shuttleworth, Suzanne Graver [*George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)] takes a historicist approach in her examination of George Eliot's theory of social organicism. While Graver's discussion of language in *Middlemarch* is nominal, her work has informed my understanding of Eliot's views of communal perspective in shaping individual point of view. My argument is in keeping with Graver's assertion that "the novel has structural coherence because . . . Eliot makes fragmentation and separateness her abiding subject" (203).

Circulating Gossip

> Old provincial society had its share of . . . subtle movement . . . constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. (61)

Writing to a friend shortly after the publication of *Romola*, George Eliot explained: "It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself."[67] As Tim Dolin points out, Eliot's application of the word "medium" in this context has relevance to how she treats the individual in relation to the larger social whole in her fictional works: "Each individual exists only by virtue of his or her position in that organism, and the organism exists only by virtue of the internal relations of its constituent parts. An extremely complex structure such as an advanced industrial society is therefore conceived as a living body, unified by its internal relations even as it changes over time."[68]

Eliot's treatment of individuals interacting within Middlemarch's "constantly shifting boundaries of social intercourse" (61) is integral in determining how verbal communication shapes communal perspective. A handful of critics mention, if only briefly, Eliot's inclusion of gossip in *Middlemarch* and acknowledge the function of small talk in shaping public opinion. William Deresiewicz, for instance, looks at gossip's diffusive nature, maintaining that "communal opinion develops out of the activity of dozens of discrete social units."[69] Karen Chase takes a negative approach toward the role of gossip, arguing that: "Public opinion, especially in the form of gossip, is the weapon

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[67] *Letters* vol. 4 97.

[68] Tim Dolin, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 200.

[69] William Deresiewicz, "Heroism and Organicism in the Case of Lydgate," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38 (1998) 733. While less relevant to my study, D. A. Miller also offers a discussion of gossip in terms of the novel's structure in *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

wielded by the community against the strong protagonist."[70]

While Deresiewicz and Chase offer interesting approximations of gossip's function in *Middlemarch*, they fail to consider Eliot's concept of community as it relates to her theory of social organicism in which "boundaries of social intercourse" are "constantly shifting" (61). My argument develops Shuttleworth's claim that George Eliot "actively eschews, in general, the technique of linking all her characters through relations of direct personal contact."[71] Instead, gossip "functions as the fundamental linking force" between the individual and community.[72] The image of the world as a "huge whispering-gallery" (256) in Chapter Forty-one speaks to this idea of linking individuals in a community who may not be in close proximity, physically or socially, but who share a common cultural identity. Just as individuals standing in a whispering gallery may pass along messages to one another by merely whispering, so too can members of the community transfer and share information.

In a conversation with Mrs. Cadwallader, Mr. Brooke asserts that "there is no part of the county where opinion is narrower" (35) than in Middlemarch. He may be speaking about politics, but his insightful comment about provincial attitudes serves to reinforce the notion of "boundaries of social intercourse" (61) and is confirmed throughout the text in the frequent opinions offered and received by Middlemarch merchants, laborers, and professionals, most often in public places, such as the Tankard and the Green Dragon. Much of what readers learn of individuals in the novel comes from opinions passed on from the narrator, a nameless participant in the never-ending flow of gossip that links one storyline with another. Whether the narrator introduces Casaubon, who is "noted in the

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[70] Karen Chase, *George Eliot, Middlemarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 49.

[71] Shuttleworth 147, 148.

[72] Shuttleworth 148.

county as a man of profound learning, understood for many years to be engaged on a great work" (7) or remarks on the community's "general impression" of Lydgate as a "not altogether . . . common country doctor" (91), the inclusion of Middlemarch opinion, relayed in this secondhand manner, highlights gossip's function to shape perspective indirectly, both that of individual characters and the novel's readers.

The generalities that manifest themselves in the community's opinions are also revealed in the way gossip spreads: "The certainty that Miss Vincy and Mr Lydgate were engaged became general in Middlemarch without the aid of formal announcement" (216). Likewise, news of Raffles' death is linked with Mr. Bulstrode through "much head-shaking and biting innuendo," for "[e]verybody liked better to conjecture how the thing was, than simply to know it; for conjecture soon became more confident than knowledge, and had a more liberal allowance for the incompatible" (445).

Most gossip is dispersed throughout the community by way of general opinion and vague and quiet whisperings, with no identifiable point of origin. Certain individuals, however, become representative voices for the community's perspective. As one of Middlemarch's most outspoken residents and local gossips, Mrs. Cadwallader supplies abundant opportunities for communal conversation in the parishes of Freshitt and Tipton. Her ability to provide a sense of social cohesion to her small area of influence reveals that individuals within the community "would have felt a sad lack of conversation but for the stories about what Mrs Cadwallader said and did" (34).

Individuals who participate in gossip do not generally share Mrs. Cadwallader's standing as persons upon whom the community relies to provide news and information, yet their inclusion in the text suggests that nearly all individuals in the community contribute to the "consciousness of interdependence" (61). Dorothea's faithful servant Tantripp, for instance, does more than brush Celia's hair, accompany Dorothea to Rome,

and announce guests. Quite often it is from Tantripp's small conversations that information is disseminated. Whether that information is always correct is unconfirmed by the narrator. Nonetheless, it is through her whisperings that Celia learns of Sir James' intended proposal to Dorothea and Farebrother's mother, aunt and sister become aware of Casaubon's codicil.

Eliot's inclusion of minor characters' participation in gossip suggests that there is nothing minor about the ability of communal gossip to shape perspective. Although most idle talk is not calculated to elicit malice, its ability to influence perceptions, sometimes in negative ways, is evidenced throughout the text. Relying on her brother Solomon's insights, garnered through the gossip he has heard from the indefinable "everybody," Mrs. Waule eagerly takes the opportunity to influence Mr. Featherstone's opinion of Fred Vincy: "My brother Solomon tells me it's the talk up and down in Middlemarch how unsteady young Vincy is, and has been for ever gambling at billiards since home he came" (68). With her "low, muffled, neutral tone, as of a voice heard through cotton wool" (67), Mrs. Waule epitomizes one who passes along information in Middlemarch's private whispering gallery. The fact that Solomon Featherstone too takes part in communal gossip speaks to the fact that women and men contribute equally to public opinion. When he determines to "[act] on his views" (342) about the impending arrival of the railroad, for example, he does so, from his point of view, "in a thoroughly diplomatic manner, by stimulating suspicion" (342-343).

What of those who don't participate in Middlemarch's idle talk? For such individuals as Casaubon, who "seem[s] even unconscious that trivialities [exist], and [who] never hand[s] round that small-talk of heavy men" (22), the "consciousness of interdependence" (61) that exists within Middlemarch will forever remain a mystery. Others, such as Farebrother, who Miss Winifred observes to be "the most wonderful man

for knowing things and not telling them" (370), will perhaps be marginalized to some extent but will also have the respect of friends and family.

While gossip shapes public and private opinion and helps individuals form a sense of communal cohesion, the narrative reveals that verbal communication alone is incapable of fully disclosing individual perspective. Patricia Meyer Spacks' study of gossip provides useful insight into how idle talk functions within the community: "People endlessly interest one another, but although natural affinities create illusions of understanding, one never grasps the full dimensions of another consciousness."[73] That this is so is revealed repeatedly in *Middlemarch* in individual conversations, in Eliot's use of indirect speech, and in the narrator's ubiquitous observations.

Gendered Speech

George Eliot's focus on idle talk as a form of public communication in *Middlemarch* addresses the idea that speech is an important social convention that allows individuals to participate as members of a community. Scholars have examined Eliot's use of speech as an indication of social class and frequently cite her early novels, in particular *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, and *Felix Holt*, to investigate her realist characterization of dialect.[74] Shelston points to the role of societal influences in shaping speech in *Middlemarch* by arguing convincingly that "George Eliot . . . dramatizes dialogue . . . by suiting speech to the speaker . . . setting [characters] in situations which

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[73] Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 206.

[74] See Lynda Mugglestone, "'Grammatical Fair Ones': Women, Men, and Attitudes to Language in the Novels of George Eliot," *The Review of English Studies, New Series* 46 (1995): 11-25 and Kathleen Watson, "Dinah Morris and Mrs. Evans: A Comparative Study of Methodist Diction," *The Review of English Studies* 22 (1971): 282-294.

highlight the wider contexts of education, gender, and class."[75] As Eliot emphasizes in her view of social organicism, it is the "external conditions which society has inherited from the past" that have an impact how individual perspective is verbalized within the community.[76] My evaluation of verbal communication as it relates to individual perspective in *Middlemarch* moves beyond Shelston's generalizations to look specifically at how gender shapes communication and how gendered communication functions within the context of Eliot's theory of social organicism.

In many respects, Eliot's view of social organicism anticipates Jane Flax's feminist theory: "Gender, both as an analytical category and a social process, is relational. That is, gender relations are complex and unstable processes . . . constituted by and through interrelated parts. These parts are interdependent, that is, each part can have no meaning or existence without the others."[77] Insofar as my analysis of the relationship between gender and verbal communication is concerned, gender as an "analytic category" classifies men and women according to their differences, much as social class divides individuals into separate economic groupings. As speech demonstrates the contrasting masculine and feminine perspectives, it also reveals that gender functions as a "social process," a series of social interactions that strengthen the separate spheres men and women inhabit.

The idea that gender shapes individuals' perceptions has received much attention in recent decades. Carol Gilligan's theory of the disparities between male and female

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[75] Alan Shelston, "What Rosy Knew: Language, Learning, and Lore in *Middlemarch,*" *Critical Quarterly* 35 (1993) 24.

[76] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life" 287.

[77] Kate Flint, "George Eliot and Gender," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 163.

moral development, for instance, maintains that women make decisions based on their sense of responsibility to care for others. Seeking to make connections, their sense of identity is closely linked to their interactions with others and their desire to nurture relationships. Men, on the other hand, tend to interact as autonomous individuals in competition with others in a hierarchal structure and are guided by rules and restrictions.[78] These differences are evident throughout *Middlemarch* in the ways women and men communicate verbally. For women, verbal communications are often accompanied by small signs of affection such as Dorothea "putting her cheek against her sister's arm caressingly" (10) or Mrs. Garth patting the head of her daughter, Letty, or squeezing the shoulder of her husband. For men, verbal exchange is sometimes viewed as a competition with established rules as verified in the text's references to the game of chess. For example, as Raffles speaks with Bulstrode in Chapter Fifty-three, "there [i]s an evident selection of statements, as if they had been so many moves at chess. Meanwhile Bulstrode . . . determine[s] on his move" (328).

The notion that women seek to nurture relationships through making connections is demonstrated throughout *Middlemarch*. Communications between women take place most often in small circles and frequently in drawing rooms. During many conversations, women occupy themselves with such domestic tasks as knitting. Indeed, the frequent mention of knitting suggests symbolically the ability of verbal communication to unify individuals and highlights women's concern with using communication to create and establish relationships. Mrs. Taft "count[s] stitches and gather[s] her information in misleading fragments caught between the rows of her knitting" (166) while Mrs. Farebrother frequently "recur[s] to her knitting" after making a "neat little effort at

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[78] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

oratory" (334). Mrs. Garth not only knits as she discusses business with her husband but uses it to ready herself for a verbal attack on Fred: she "could either look at Fred or not, as she chose—always an advantage when one is bent on loading speech with salutary meaning" (354).

While female friendships in *Middlemarch* do not receive an inordinate amount of attention, the narrator's description of the "the long-standing intimacy" (185) between Mrs. Plymdale and Mrs. Bulstrode reveals much about how women interact and the types of details that make up their conversations:

> [T]hey confided their little troubles of health and household management to each other, and various little points of superiority on Mrs Bulstrode's side, namely, more decided seriousness, more admiration for mind, and a house outside the town, sometimes served to give colour to their conversation without dividing them: well-meaning women both, knowing very little of their own motives. (185)

The fact that the narrator uses the descriptive word "little" twice in this passage suggests that the attention to the quotidian is significant in conversations between women in the novel; whether it is two friends discussing "troubles of health and household management" (185) or Mrs. Cadwallader asking Mrs. Fitchett how her "fowls [are] laying" (33), women demonstrate their concern for one another by finding commonalities in the details.

This passage is important for what it reveals about how women communicate, yet it is also important for another, very telling, reason. Both Mrs. Bulstrode and Mrs. Plymdale know "very little of their own motives" (185), suggesting that most individuals in the novel communicate verbally for many reasons, not the least of which includes underlying egocentricity. Although Mrs. Bulstrode claims that she is "not fond of gossip" (185), the text intimates that perhaps she too wishes to have a sense of belonging in the community as she invites Mrs. Plymdale to share what she knows about communal

conversations regarding her niece and Lydgate: “I am not fond of gossip; I really never hear any. You see so many people that I don’t see” (186). Moreover, Mrs. Plymdale’s concessions to her friend’s “little points of superiority” (185) may have more to do with ensuring the “profitable business relation of the great Plymdale dyeing house with Mr Bulstrode” (460) than with any genuine feelings that Mrs. Bulstrode is of superior character. Despite these implied motivations, these longtime friends are, as the narrator points out, “well-meaning women both” (185).

A primary purpose of verbal communication among women is to strengthen social connections, but it also provides opportunities for Middlemarch women to offer moral correctives. Evidence of this is perhaps best illustrated in the opening paragraphs of Chapter Seventy-four, where the narrator provides a revealing, and rather humorous, description of how the women in this provincial setting communicate from a “love of truth” and “regard for a friend’s moral improvement” (458):

> To be candid, in Middlemarch phraseology, meant, to use an early opportunity of letting your friends know that you did not take a cheerful view of their capacity, their conduct, or their position; and a robust candour never waited to be asked for its opinion. Then, again, there was the love of truth . . . [but] Stronger than all, there was the regard for a friend's moral improvement . . . which was likely to be benefited by remarks tending to gloom, uttered with the accompaniment of pensive staring at the furniture and a manner implying that the speaker would not tell what was on her mind, from regard to the feelings of her hearer. (458)

This general observation, offered as a preface to Mrs. Bulstrode’s discovery of the town’s “bad opinion of her husband” (458), says much about how women communicate their concern for social propriety. Just as Mrs. Bulstrode and Mrs. Plymdale are “well-meaning women” (185), Middlemarch women, in general, have “no spiteful disposition towards [Mrs. Bulstrode]” (458). Indeed, her intimate acquaintances “[talk] together much of ‘poor Harriet’” (458). Yet the fact that they demonstrate more anxiety “to ascertain what it would be well for her to feel and do under the circumstances” (458) rather than

determine how to assist her implies that they are perhaps more concerned with their own feelings of moral superiority than offering real companionship and support. Such phrases as "tending to gloom," "pensive staring," and "a manner implying" (458) suggest that these women prefer an indirect approach when sharing their opinions about difficult subjects. How something is communicated is just as important as what is, or is not, stated.

Where women's conversations tend to focus on small details of everyday life, much of the verbal communication between men centers on vocation, politics and such topics as the "subject of the chaplaincy" (100) and "a sanitary question which had risen into pressing importance by the occurrence of a cholera case in the town" (448). Unlike the more intimate settings in which women's discussions take place, men's conversations generally occur during dinners or town meetings, settings in which men's competitive natures come to the forefront. In Chapter Sixteen, for instance, the narrator is careful to point out the professional positions the men hold in Middlemarch, not only to highlight Lydgate's status as an outsider, but to provide insight into the importance men give to education, rhetoric, and argumentation in communication. As Lydgate states, "People talk about evidence as if it could really be weighed in scales by a blind Justice. No man can judge what is good evidence on any particular subject, unless he knows that subject well" (101). When one-on-one communication does take place between men, it reveals men's tendency toward reticence. During Lydgate's and Farebrother's initial meeting, for instance, readers learn that Farebrother has already heard of Lydgate through a mutual acquaintance yet chooses to remain silent about the details of what he has heard.

Both women and men participate in communal small talk, but while women take advantage of gossip in private settings to build relationships or to ensure that social

etiquette is followed, the text suggests that men use idle talk in public settings primarily for information gathering. Although Mr. Bambridge, the horse dealer, has a limited "range of conversation" (150), he is able to initiate gossip about Mr. Bulstrode's past and Raffles' death simply by standing outside the Green Dragon waiting for a passerby:

> [A]ny human figure standing at ease under the archway in the early afternoon was as certain to attract companionship as a pigeon which has found something worth pecking at. In this case there was no material object to feed upon, but the eye of reason saw a probability of mental sustenance in the shape of gossip. (442)

That differences exist between how men and women communicate is evidenced throughout the text, and the narrator's commentary on Rosamond and Lydgate's relationship reinforces the Victorian ideology of separate spheres between men and women: "Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (106).

"[T]he meaning we attach to words"

The relationship between what is said and how it is delivered in *Middlemarch* underscores the differences between men's and women's perceptions of the world and reveals that all characters are concerned, to some degree, with "propriety of speech" (62). Rosamond Vincy is considered the "flower of Mrs Lemon's school" (62), partly because of her ability to speak well and to "say the right thing" (102). Casaubon "deliver[s] himself with precision, as if he had been called upon to make a public statement" (12) and is certain to use "appropriate quotation[s]" (22) when conversing. Dorothea and Rosamond chastise sister and mother, respectively, for using "odious" (24) and "vulgar" (63) expressions. Mrs. Garth is eager to teach her children to "speak and write correctly, so that [they] can be understood" (155). Even the narrator is quick to comment that "the right word is always a power" (190). Individuals judge one another based on how they

communicate verbally, and this is revealed in the ways they interpret others' ability, or inability, to speak correctly. Mr. Brooke, for example, presumes that Lydgate is a gentleman because of his ability to "talk well" (59) and praises Will Ladislaw's intellect for the same reason. Mrs. Vincy takes pride in her son's speech because it indicates that he has been to college. Lydgate's rationale for "shorten[ing] the period of courtship" (218) is, in part, due to Mr. Vincy's way of answering questions with "trenchant ignorance" (218).

While concern for correct speech emphasizes the social aspects of communication, it also alludes to the subjective nature of individual perspective. Eliot's emphasis on the subjectivity of perspective in verbal communication is perhaps best illustrated in her use of dialogue. Just as Shelston recognizes the importance of dialogue in *Middlemarch* as a social convention, so too does Kiely. Unlike Shelston, however, Kiely asserts that much of the dialogue in *Middlemarch* is deficient and ineffective. For Keily, such instances as Mr. Brooke's tendency to "incomplete ideas and unfinished sentences," Rosamond's view of words as "a symbol of status and fashion," and "Mr. Vincy's tendency to generalize" suggest that speech is "not an agent of exchange, of growth, or expansive communication. To speak . . . for many of the characters in *Middlemarch*, is to participate in the prevention of dialogue."[79] The examples that Kiely provides to support his claims are insightful, insofar as they examine what language reveals about individuals' personalities. Yet his focus on the limited "range and flexibility of language" and his interpretation that dialogue in *Middlemarch* is "oppressive and destructive" fail to take into account the function of verbal

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[79] Robert Kiely, "The Limits of Dialogue in *Middlemarch*," *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 108, 114, 119.

communication in the narrative to demonstrate the subjective nature of perspective.[80] Dialogue in *Middlemarch* is meant to challenge readers' assumptions about what verbal communication can and cannot accomplish in disclosing individual perspective.

The outward manifestations of interiority that Eliot details and juxtaposes in physical appearances and personal tastes are emphasized in the ways individuals communicate with one another in private conversations and in the ways they interpret those conversations. Dorothea and Will's verbal exchange in Chapter Twenty-two, for instance, reveals not only how individual perspective interferes with correct interpretation but also emphasizes the fact that what an individual chooses to withhold or share, and the motivations behind those choices, contributes significantly to the effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, of communication. Will has come to see Dorothea expressly, being certain to call when he knows that Casaubon will be absent. His perspective of Dorothea is shaped, to a certain extent, by his dislike of Casaubon, and in large measure, by his romantic imagination of Dorothea's "divineness" and his desire for her "to take more emphatic notice of him" (139). The text makes repeated references to Will's view of Dorothea as someone to be worshipped, an "angel beguiled" (133).

Will's thoughts of Hades and Minotaurs are fitting, and somewhat ironic, given the fact that Casaubon's work on mythologies is what is uppermost in Dorothea's mind as she communicates with Will. Will is so fixated on the idea that Dorothea is offering herself as a sort of living sacrifice to Casaubon's lost cause that he is unaware of her perspective and motivations. The time that Dorothea has spent in Rome has begun to alter her conception of marriage to Casaubon, and when she speaks of art, it is from a growing recognition that her husband's work is futile. She explains to Will her belief that it is a

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[80] Kiely 121.

"[great] pity that there is so little of the best kind [of art] among all that mass of things over which men have toiled so" (140). Unbeknownst to Will, Dorothea's words are motivated by her anxiety of having to "[consult] a third person about the adequacy of Mr Casaubon's learning" (141).

Both Will and Dorothea are similarly passionate in the ways they view life, yet the dissimilarities in the ways they communicate highlight their very different perspectives. The narrator draws attention to Will's habit of speaking with emphasis with such words and phrases as "impetuously" (140), "energetically," "lively way of speaking," and a "tone of angry regret" (141). Dorothea's tone, on the other hand, is somewhat reserved as she attempts to say "what ha[s] been in her mind" (141). Her words, up until she finally asks Will about "the necessity of knowing German . . . for the subjects that Mr Casaubon is engaged in" (141) suggest that she is preoccupied with her thoughts. She speaks "without any special emotion" (140), "an almost solemn cadence," and "a timidity quite new to her" (141). Neither is aware of the other's perspective, and neither is able to fully articulate what they are thinking. Both interpret what is being said from their own perspectives and, as the narrator observes, "the meaning we attach to words depends on our feeling" (141).

"Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing?"

Eliot investigates the correlation between verbal and written dialogue in much the same way that she contrasts representational perspectives. Just as concern for proper speech reflects something of internal perspective, so too does attention, or inattention, to good writing. Farebrother's pride in having made an "exhaustive study of the entomology of th[e] district" (110) manifests itself in his carefully arranged collection of insects "with names subscribed in exquisite writing" (111). Caleb Garth is "very particular about his

letter-writing" (250), which is confirmed in his energetic response at seeing Fred's illegible handwriting: "What's the use of writing at all if nobody can understand it?" (350). At the same time that young men of Fred's social standing believe that "it [i]s beneath a gentleman to write legibly" (350), young women such as Rosamond adhere to the dictates of social etiquette that prescribe "elegant note-writing" (169) as a sign of proper education. Just as Rosamond's "neatly-flowing hand" (495) signals a concern for refinement, it also intimates her desire to appear irreproachable, as evidenced in her note to Will Ladislaw after her visit with Dorothea. Dorothea too "pique[s] herself on writing a hand in which each letter [i]s distinguishable without any large range of conjecture" (29). The attention she gives to writing her acceptance letter to Casaubon's proposal, however, does not stem from any desire to appear refined but rather from a wish to demonstrate to Casaubon her ability to help him in his work.

Much of the written dialogue in *Middlemarch* illustrates Eliot's attention to the prevalence of letter writing as a means of formal and informal communication.[81] As Mariaconcetta Costantini, Francesco Marroni, and Anna Enrichetta Soccio observe about nineteenth-century interest in letter writing, "Epistolary communication was . . . perceived as an essential experience which provided opportunities for public connection as well as private release."[82] The text makes a number of references to various forms of

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[81] Calls for postage reform during the late 1830s and the resulting Uniform Penny Post in 1840 took place several years after the incidents in *Middlemarch*, yet the frequency of written correspondence in the novel speaks to the importance of letter writing as a vital form of communication. See Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Jonathan Rose, "Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader," *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Stephanie A. Tingley, "'A Letter Is a Joy of Earth': Emily Dickinson's Letters and Victorian Epistolary Conventions," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 5 (1996): 202-208.

[82] Mariaconcetta Costantini, Francesco Marroni, and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, preface, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, eds. Mariaconcetta Costantini, Francesco Marroni, and Anna Enrichetta Soccio (Rome, Italy: Aracne, 2009) 7.

written correspondence—professional transactions, business propositions, invitations, announcements, solicitations, notes of thanks and of reprimand, and wills.

While letters differ in their functions, they all provide information about individuals and the community in which they interact. Eliot renders verbatim very few of these letters in the text, suggesting the private nature of personal correspondence. The letters that she chooses to paraphrase or to include in full, however, reveal much about the function of written correspondence to convey and shape individual perspective. Instead of the immediate reactions that speech can elicit, a letter can be read multiple times before the recipient chooses whether or not to respond. Communication can occur without having to be in the same location. Indeed, as Shelston remarks about letters in Victorian fiction, "the call for a letter only arises when one of the parties involved is separated from the other."[83]

Written correspondence has the potential to disclose private thoughts in ways that verbal dialogue and other forms of nonverbal communication do not, yet the possibility for misinterpretation is perhaps even greater. Allan Christensen's poststructuralist reading of "Dorothea's misreading" of Casaubon's pedantic marriage proposal highlights the fact that Dorothea's ardent desire to "devote herself to large yet definite duties" (28) prevents her from correctly interpreting not only the letter but also the "author of that letter."[84]

Even as George Eliot uses dialogue in *Middlemarch* to explore the subjectivity of perspective, her inclusion of written correspondence suggests that many forms of

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[83] Alan Shelston, "Letters as Presence and Absence in Victorian Fiction," *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, eds. Mariaconcetta Costantini, Francesco Marroni, and Anna Enrichetta Soccio (Rome, Italy: Aracne, 2009) 49.

[84] Allan C. Christensen, "'Not a Love Letter': Epistolary Proposals of Marriage and Narrative Theory in *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch*," *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, eds. Mariaconcetta Costantini, Francesco Marroni, and Anna Enrichetta Soccio (Rome, Italy: Aracne, 2009) 63.

communication can be employed when attempting to make one's point of view known to others. Where verbal dialogue and written correspondence are absent, silence can also function as a form of communication. While Eliot acknowledges that silence can signal a refusal to communicate, it can also reveal the limitations of communication and an inability to articulate perspective.

Chapter V

Inadequate Words

Shortly after Dorothea offers to relieve Lydgate of his debt to Bulstrode, Lydgate hands her a letter and laments, "When one is grateful for something too good for common thanks, writing is less unsatisfactory than speech—one does not at least *hear* how inadequate the words are" (487). Readers are never privileged to know the precise contents of this letter, but Lydgate's assertion that both written expressions and verbal exchanges are sometimes insufficient to convey emotion suggests that communication is fraught with potential challenges and limitations.

Part of the challenge of communication that Eliot draws attention to in her use of multiple perspectives is the subjective nature of individual points of view and the inability of communication to fully disclose consciousness, which for the purposes of this study I define as the sum of individual thoughts, impressions, and feelings. By focusing on the relationship between communication and consciousness, Eliot addresses one of her principal concerns, that is, how individual knowledge is acquired, not only knowledge about oneself but, more importantly, knowledge about the individual's relationship to others within a community and the development and cultivation of sympathy.

Eliot's interest in the acquisition of knowledge and the development of sympathy is closely tied to her focus on epistemological and ethical issues. Her conceptions of truth and sympathy were largely influenced by the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach. Indeed, the type of sympathy for which Feuerbach argues and which emerges in Eliot's use of multiple perspectives in *Middlemarch*, as Ermarth shows, involves a "recognition of difference: between oneself and another, or between the differing impulses of one's own

complex motivation."[85] Anger similarly observes:

> George Eliot's epistemology rests on the belief that morality is a necessary condition for full knowledge. Only a sympathetic disposition will allow one to escape subjective bias, to see from other viewpoints, and so attain a sort of impartiality. By overcoming one's own viewpoints and imaginatively entering into the perspectives of others, one can transcend the limitations of subjective experience.[86]

The notion that "[o]nly a sympathetic disposition will allow one to escape subjective bias" is apparent in *Middlemarch*, not only in the way Eliot structures the narrative from many points of view, but in her use of communication, which very often reveals the individual's capacity, or incapacity, for self-knowledge and sympathy for others. As the text shows, an individual's perception of the world is naturally egocentric, yet the development of sympathy, often obtained through a painful learning process, is crucial to seeing past one's own limited perspective. As the narrator observes, "character . . . is a process and an unfolding" (96).

Eliot's investigation of individual consciousness and its relationship to and interactions with the larger social environment also speak to Eliot's interest in nineteenth-century science and its associated disciplines, including biology, anthropology, psychology, and evolution.[87] Davis's study is valuable in situating George Eliot's thinking in the context of scientific and philosophical views on the mind, particularly

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[85] Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40 (1985): 25.

[86] Suzy Anger, "George Eliot and Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 86.

[87] Critics who have contributed to my understanding of Eliot's engagement with nineteenth-century scientific thought include Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Lawrence Rothfield, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

those of Baruch Spinoza and his notions of the unity of mind and body. Davis registers in Eliot's works a complex relationship between the interior mind and the external world, and a significant portion of his work focuses on the "unpredictable ways in which external factors shape individual minds."[88]

Despite the insights that Davis and other critics offer about Eliot's engagement with scientific thought, I have found little discussion on the correlation between consciousness and communication in Eliot's fictional works, and any analysis of communication as it relates to epistemological and ethical concerns is mentioned only briefly, if at all. As I have shown in previous chapters, Eliot's focus on multiple and individual perspectives in *Middlemarch* is evidenced in the ways she juxtaposes interiority with exteriority, translates private perspective through the inclusion of mental dialogue, and examines various ways characters communicate verbally, primarily through dialogue, and nonverbally, through gestures and writing. Instances exist throughout the novel, however, in which she employs silence, not only as a form of communication, but more importantly, as a means to reveal the inadequacy of communication to fully disclose consciousness. My objective in this chapter is to examine how the use of silence underscores Eliot's epistemological and ethical concerns and challenges assumptions about what is happening in the novel, forcing readers to acknowledge that some things are incommunicable.

Silence in *Middlemarch*

George Eliot uses both verbal and nonverbal exchanges in *Middlemarch* to examine the subjectivity of perspective and to suggest that many forms of communication

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[88] Davis 5.

can be employed when attempting to make one's private point of view known to others. Silence, as the text suggests, can certainly serve as a mode of communication and can be motivated by sensitivity to cultural values, by an individual's sense of propriety or reserve, or by egocentric attempts to conceal thoughts and feelings.

Just as dialogue in *Middlemarch* highlights contrasting masculine and feminine perspectives, the absence of dialogue can also signal differences in how men and women disclose or conceal personal viewpoints. Those differences are often shaped by cultural and societal influences, and although Eliot does not directly address the Victorian debate over the nature and role of women in *Middlemarch*, she certainly portrays women's limited avenues for self-expression in a patriarchal society in Dorothea's inability to communicate her aspirations either through speech or action.[89]

Joan Bellamy's depiction of the limits of self-expression in *Middlemarch* centers less on Dorothea's inability to articulate her desires verbally than on her lack of opportunities for education and independent action.[90] Yet the fact that Dorothea has limited chances to express her desires through action is an important aspect of the role of silence in the novel. When Celia tells her sister of her certainty that Sir James Chettam and others interpret Dorothea's actions of drawing plans for cottages as a sign of her interest in him as a suitor, Dorothea laments that she must tell Sir James that she will "have nothing to do with [the cottages]" (24). Her response alerts readers that Dorothea

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[89] Feminist criticism about Eliot's participation in the Victorian debate over the nature and role of women is extensive. For a discussion about women and communication see, Gilbert and Gubar; Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View," *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 10-21; Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[90] Joan Bellamy, "Barriers of Silence; Women in Victorian Fiction," *In Search of Victorian Values: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society,* ed. Eric M. Sigsworth (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

accepts the limits that society places on her as a marriageable young woman. However, the narrator's subsequent comment that Dorothea is "disposed . . . to accuse the intolerable narrowness and the purblind conscience of the society around her" (24) suggests that while Dorothea is inclined to remain silent about the true nature of her frustrations, she is willing to lay blame for her circumstances on social dictates.

Such feminist criticism as Bellamy's is useful in evaluating the role of culturally produced silence in Eliot's fictional works, yet my analysis of *Middlemarch* questions the assumption that silence is strictly a gender-related issue. I agree that social custom contributes to the ways men and women interact and communicate in the novel, yet gender is only one influence among many that shapes personality and perspective. Silence, as the text demonstrates, can provide considerable information about individual disposition. When Fred Vincy discloses to his father his decision to work under Caleb Garth, for instance, Mr. Vincy listens "in profound surprise without uttering even an exclamation, a silence which in his impatient temperament was a sign of unusual emotion" (351). Rosamond often participates in difficult conversations by busying herself with tea things or muslin-work, "listen[ing] in silence, and at the end [usually giving] a certain turn of her graceful neck, of which only long experience could teach you that it meant perfect obstinacy" (214). Caleb Garth, whose "talents [do] not lie in finding phrases" (250), sometimes has difficulty articulating what it is he wants to say when under duress and remains speechless. Farebrother's reticence marks him as a somewhat self-sacrificing and passive participant in society who is ever-willing to forgo personal wants.

Just as silence reveals something about culture and individual disposition, it also acts as a form of nonverbal communication. One of the most telling instances of this is

portrayed in the unspoken exchange between Nicholas and Harriet Bulstrode after Mrs. Bulstrode has learned about the scandal involving her husband:

> They could not yet speak to each other of the shame which she was bearing with him, or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness, as she would have shrunk from flakes of fire. She could not say, "How much is only slander and false suspicion?" and he did not say, "I am innocent." (464)

This passage, which is preceded by a description of Mrs. Bulstrode locking herself in her room to allow herself "time to get used to her maimed consciousness" (463), suggests that while she does not want to hear the full truth, she does not need to hear it in order to communicate her loyalty to her husband.

Unlike the silence that unites the Bulstrodes in expressing difficult emotions, or at least postponing the verbal articulation of truth, the silence between Rosamond and Lydgate shortly after Raffles' death denotes a refusal to communicate. Lydgate, who interprets Rosamond's silence as a belief in his guilt, does little to dispel any notions he believes Rosamond may have of him. Rosamond's silence serves to define her characteristic neutrality, a neutrality that reveals that she cannot be counted on to assist her husband in diffusing the situation. As the narrator so aptly points out, "it was as if they were both adrift on one piece of wreck and looked away from each other" (467).

While Lydgate and Rosamond's refusal to communicate is mutual, other instances exist in the narrative in which it is sometimes one-sided. When Dorothea returns to Lowick Manor after her husband's death, for example, she looks for but discovers no written correspondence "addressed especially to her" (306) except for a paper entitled "Synoptical Tabulation" (306). She is filled "with the sense that around his last hard demand and his last injurious assertion of his power, the silence was unbroken" (307). The empty desk, much like Casaubon's unwritten *Key to All Mythologies*, and Casaubon

himself, represents incommunicable consciousness, that is, an inability or refusal to articulate interiority. For Casaubon, this incommunicability is deliberate in the sense that he desires to conceal his doubt and skepticism, but it is also the result of an "intense consciousness" (175) that is "spiritually a-hungered" (175), two notions that Eliot examines in *Middlemarch* through her use of silence.

The function of silence in the text as a means of communication reveals much about individuals' perspectives about themselves, others, and the worlds they inhabit. For Eliot, however, the more important aspect of silence involves not its function as a means of communication but its ability to reveal the limitations and inadequacy of communication in disclosing perspective.

"[T]he Other Side of Silence": Incommunicable Consciousness

> 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. (124)

The ways individuals interact in Middlemarch society evidence the limitations of both verbal and nonverbal communication to fully articulate internal perspective. Eliot's investigation of these limitations is one aspect of her epistemological concern as she represents different consciousnesses—the flawed, the altruistic, and the uninformed—to demonstrate that even the "quickest" (124) will have a difficult time in acquiring the necessary vision to overcome egocentricity. As Rick Rylance rightly maintains, "*Middlemarch* is a work concerned with limitations, with characters who do not know enough—about their own worlds, about the other worlds with which they come into

contact, or about themselves."[91]

The limitations and insufficient knowledge that Rylance describes often lead individuals to make erroneous assumptions that frequently result in failed communication. In examining incommunicable consciousness, Eliot reveals the dangers inherent in making assumptions based on what is or is not shared vocally, assumptions that individuals make about one another in the novel as well as assumptions readers make about individuals based on what the narrator chooses to reveal or withhold.

Part of the reason for individuals' assumptions and the prevention of, or failed attempts at, communication can be found in individuals' inability to know in full all of the circumstances that make up another's experience and point of view. As the narrator observes, most individuals "walk about well wadded with stupidity" (124). Lydgate, for instance, "walked by hereditary habit; half from that personal pride and unreflecting egoism . . . and half from that *naïveté* which belonged to preoccupation with favourite ideas" (217). Rosamond too demonstrates a critical deficiency in understanding others' perspectives and her own motives despite her ready ability to discern how her actions will elicit certain responses. When Rosamond learns of the allegations against her husband, for instance, the narrator is quick to point out that "it would have required a great deal of disentangling reflection, such as had never entered into Rosamond's life" (467) to understand her husband's perspective.

In speaking of the mind and its relationship to the external world, Davis correctly asserts that "the mirror of the mind is not a fully adequate source of knowledge in itself . . . . It points to the potency with which the conscious, ostensibly rational mind is

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[91] Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 244-245.

able to distort information about the world to suit the egoism of the subject."[92] This is demonstrated in the incorrect interpretations individuals make when they base their judgments solely on their own subjective views of the world and in their inability to communicate consciousness. One such misinterpretation occurs when Dorothea approaches her husband in the "dark silence" (233) of the night with the proposal that he include Will Ladislaw in his will. Casaubon quickly assumes that Will has spoken to her on the subject and responds with "biting quickness" (233) that Dorothea should not interfere "in subjects beyond [her] scope" (235).

Unknown to Dorothea is the fact that her husband's disapproval is due, in part, to his assumptions about her relationship with Will, and unfortunately, his "proud reticence had prevented him from ever being undeceived in the supposition that Dorothea had originally asked her uncle to invite Will to his house" (235). That Casaubon remains undeceived because of his erroneous assumptions is evident in his failed communication with his wife as he chooses to remain "proudly, bitterly silent" (235).

The attention that Eliot devotes to representing multiple perspectives and the complexities of individual consciousness speaks to the importance she places on the necessity of overcoming subjectivity to gain knowledge about others:

> Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes, or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure. (54)

This interjection from the narrator is one, among many, that Eliot places in the text as a type of cautionary admonition to readers that a "too hasty judgment" (54) is an open

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[92] Davis 140.

invitation to potential misinterpretation. The narrative continues from the narrator's interjection to reveal Casaubon's unsettling feelings about his impending marriage and his inability to "account for a certain blankness of sensibility" (55). As I have shown in previous chapters, such private viewpoints as Casaubon's are, for the most part, unavailable to others in the narrative. The inclusion of such thoughts and feelings may provide readers with a sense of privileged insight by which to judge individual characters. Indeed, the narrator's introduction of Casaubon's perspective with such words as "suppose" and "wonder" seem to invite readers to make assumptions. Ironically the narrator also cautions readers to avoid hasty generalizations, and moments exist in the novel in which the narrator withholds information. Chapter Thirty-three, for example, is presented largely from Mary Garth's point of view, and while the narrator includes descriptions of Featherstone's actions and dialogue with Mary, he refrains from including Featherstone's point of view of the situation. Readers are left to conjecture the reasons for which the dying man wishes to destroy his will based on Mary's perspective and Featherstone's actions and not on Featherstone's internal perspective. Silence, in such cases as this, is meant to alert readers to the fact that their interpretations are based on partial information.

Individuals often make assumptions in order to make sense of experience, and the failed attempts at communication that result from erroneous assumptions are usually not deliberate. Instances exist in the narrative, however, in which individuals conceal perspective intentionally and thereby seek to prevent communication. The narrator is careful to point out early on in the narrative that Rosamond's blue eyes are "deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite" (72). In describing Casaubon's ever-present suspicion, the text states that "[t]he tenacity

with which he strove to hide this inward drama made it the more vivid for him; as we hear with the more keenness what we wish others not to hear" (260). Speaking in more general terms, but with application to Casaubon, the narrator comments that "behind the big mask and the speaking-trumpet, there must always be our poor little eyes peeping as usual and our timorous lips more or less under anxious control" (177). Bulstrode too has made concealment of his past "the habit of his life" (506).

In looking at the reasons for individuals' attempts to conceal perspective and suppress communication, it is useful to examine the passage that introduces this section. Both Gillian Beer and Davis point out the similarities between Eliot's discussion of the limits of consciousness and an extract from T. H. Huxley's 1869 essay, "The Physical Basis of Life":

> [T]he wonderful noonday silence of a tropical forest is, after all, due only to the dullness of our hearing; and could our ears catch the murmur of those tiny Maelstroms, as they whirl in the innumerable myriads of living cells which constitute each tree, we should be stunned, as with the roar of a great city.[93]

Davis interprets this "dullness" of individual consciousness to perceive the world from other points of view as an intentional "means by which the subject polices and limits its awareness both of the world and of the self, to preserve a coherent sense of identity."[94] Davis is correct to a certain extent. As the examples of Casaubon, Rosamond, and Bulstrode demonstrate, efforts to conceal perspective can certainly be motivated by a desire to limit what others know. But the narrative also reveals that the failure to understand alternate perspectives and the deliberateness with which individuals prevent

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[93] Quoted in Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 142.

[94] Davis 142-143.

communication involve more than an individual's safeguarding of his or her sense of identity, as exemplified in the misinterpretations individuals make.

Part of the process of overcoming one's own subjective perspective, as the text suggests, is the recognition that communication will never be able to fully articulate thoughts and feelings. Eliot's primary concern, as Rylance suggests, is to identify how individuals come to recognize and become "conscious of the limitations of [their] own views,"[95] or as Levine maintains, to "find a way to move beyond the narrow limits of individual consciousness into a sympathetic and empathic relation to others."[96]

Self-consciousness and the Development of Sympathy

> What seems eminently wanted is a closer comparison between the knowledge which we call rational & the experience which we call emotional.[97]

Closely associated with Eliot's epistemological concerns, as portrayed in her representations of consciousness in *Middlemarch*, is her moral philosophy that combines intellect with feeling in the development of sympathy. Eliot penned her thoughts about the need for a "closer comparison" between reason and sentiment in the years just following the publication of *Middlemarch* under the heading, "Feeling is a sort of knowledge," yet she outlined her ideas as early as 1855 in "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming": the "highest moral habit, the constant preference of truth, both theoretically

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[95] Rylance 260.

[96] George Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) vii.

[97] Quoted in Thomas Pinney, "More Leaves from George Eliot's Notebook," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 29 (1966): 364.

and practically, pre-eminently demands the co-operation of the intellect with the impulses."[98]

Eliot often employs metaphoric language to represent the moral development that leads to increased sympathy through the uniting of intellect with feeling. Dwight Purdy investigates Eliot's notions about feelings and knowledge by devoting an entire essay to Eliot's use of the word "poor" as it relates to her "synthesis of sympathy and irony."[99] Purdy rightly asserts that "Feeling [for Eliot] may be a sort of knowledge, but, divorced from understanding, feeling only impoverishes."[100] This idea of impoverishment is also noted by Nazar, whose study of the "philosophical underpinnings of Eliot's realism" points to the notion that sympathy, for Eliot, "functions not only as a principle of social practice ('love') but it also carries a distinct epistemological charge—'insight' being a word Eliot associates with concepts, abstractions, and mental representations."[101] Citing Eliot's assertion that sympathy "is the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love,"[102] Nazar maintains that the poverty Eliot alludes to is "perhaps not the poverty of sympathy at all but the poverty of language, a language traditionally signifying insight or ideas in isolation from love or social practices."[103]

This image of impoverishment is portrayed poignantly in the narrator's description of Casaubon, whose "small hungering shivering self" represents a

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[98] George Eliot, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," *The Works of George Eliot: Essays and Leaves from a Notebook* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1900) 130.

[99] Dwight Purdy, "'The One Poor Word' in *Middlemarch*," *SEL* 44 (2004): 805.

[100] Purdy 810.

[101] Nazar 293.

[102] Quoted in Nazar 293.

[103] Nazar 293.

consciousness that has never been “rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion” (177). So concerned is Casaubon with his acquisition of scholarly wisdom that he fails to acquire the emotional understanding and sympathy needed to see other points of view. In consequence, he is unable to articulate or vocalize his emotions, either to himself or to others. Unlike Casaubon’s inability to have his consciousness “transformed into . . . the ardour of a passion” (177), Dorothea suffers from an abundance of ardor. For Dorothea, sitting alone in her boudoir in Rome, the poverty of language is signified in her inability to make sense of her thoughts; she has “no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself” (123). Yet “in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty” (123).

While emotions often prevent articulation of consciousness, the text reveals the difficulty that individuals sometimes experience in translating impressions and feelings into a language that can be easily understood, either by themselves or by others. Before Will and Dorothea part in Chapter Sixty-two, for what each think will be the last time, “each was looking at the other, and consciousness was overflowed by something that suppressed utterance. It was not confusion that kept them silent, for they both felt that parting was near” (390). During Dorothea and Rosamond’s conversation in Chapter Eighty-one, Rosamond, who is usually silent by choice, is “taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words” (491). It is in such instances as these that Eliot suggests that the close relationship between thought and emotion make it difficult at times for individuals to articulate consciousness.

This idea of the inextricable link between the rational and the emotional is further depicted in the narrator's descriptions of individuals' internal perspectives. Dorothea, for instance, is one whose "passion [is] transfused through a mind struggling towards an ideal life" (29). She is disappointed to learn during her first visit to Lowick that the parish does not have "a larger share of the world's misery, so that she might have . . . more active duties in it" (50). In an attempt to reconcile herself to a different future than she had anticipated, Dorothea thinks of the "higher knowledge" that she might acquire in a "more complete devotion to Mr Casaubon's aims, in which she would await new duties" (50). The "higher knowledge" (50) that Dorothea eventually gains, however, is not the intellectual erudition that she believes at the beginning of the novel will bring transcendence. Instead, the type of education Dorothea receives involves an overcoming of her naïveté and myopia and a growing awareness that her perspective is subjective.

While language is sometimes insufficient to articulate consciousness, it is the recognition of this fact that Eliot views as an essential part of individuals' attempts to overcome the subjectivity of individual perspective. Will Ladislaw's assertion seems to speak for Eliot's belief: "To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge" (142-143). Dorothea too echoes this sentiment in her conversation with Celia near the end of the novel. In Celia's curiosity to know how Dorothea discovered her feelings for Will and agreed to marry him, Celia's inquiry and Dorothea's reply are equally telling: "'Can't you tell me?' said Celia, settling her arms cozily. 'No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know'" (506). In truth, Dorothea really can't tell her sister of her feelings. Verbal communication will never fully articulate the emotions that Dorothea

feels, and Celia will never fully understand her sister's perspective based solely on words.

The inadequacy of words to communicate perspective that Eliot highlights throughout the novel is perhaps best portrayed in the concluding chapters where she employs silence in a dramatic yet subtle way to denote individuals' altered perspectives and their acceptance of or resignation to changed circumstances. Whether it is in Lydgate's tacit acceptance of his "burthen" (493), Bulstrode's aversion to confessing in full his past history to his wife, or Dorothea's unspoken feeling that "there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better" (513), Eliot demonstrates not only the inadequacy of words to communicate feeling but also the incommunicable nature of individual consciousness.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Middlemarch's narrator introduces the Finale, or Epilogue, with a fitting assertion: "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending" (510). This notion is evident in George Eliot's investigation of communication and perspective in her seventh, and final, novel, *Daniel Deronda* as well as in her previous works. Indeed, understanding the relationship between perspective and communication in *Middlemarch* has implications for how Eliot's other novels are read and studied and raises similar questions to those that Eliot addresses in her sixth novel. How, for instance, does communication function within familial relationships? What does rural dialect reveal about class distinctions and individuals' perceptions of their roles within the community? How does gender affect the ways individuals communicate and interact in personal relationships? What are the different ways Eliot represents consciousness? Do these representations change from novel to novel? What is the function of silence? What role does the narrator play in shaping perspective? In all of Eliot's fictional works, albeit in different ways and to differing degrees, she examines how cultural, political, scientific, psychological, and religious perspectives shape the ways individuals communicate and how they interact within their communities.

Comparative analysis between George Eliot's novels would allow for a more comprehensive study of the relationship between perspective and communication. For example, the differences in the ways men and women communicate that she touches on in *Middlemarch* are evident in all of her works and are examined in *The Mill on the Floss* in her portrayal of the dichotomous experiences of Maggie and Tom Tulliver. By looking

at the experiences of a young Maggie and Tom and tracing their experiences into adulthood, Eliot seeks to show the effects of childhood and adolescent socialization on how men and women learn to communicate.

As an impulsive girl growing into young womanhood, Maggie is expected to abide by societal rules that require submissive obedience to men. Her desire to be obedient, though genuine, is tested time and again by her unfulfilled yearnings for affection, wisdom, and independence in thought and action. Maggie struggles to find a sense of identity as she strives to subdue these desires and care for others in a world that places emphasis on justice and rights rather than on relationships.

Separated from his family at an early age, most of Tom's socialization takes place among other boys who are taught the importance of interacting with one another in terms of establishing rules in games and of individual autonomy. Just as Maggie learns the importance of responsibility in caring for others, Tom discovers the indispensability of rules amid competition. Both Maggie and her brother communicate from a perspective largely influenced by society, and this is a theme that Eliot touches on throughout her fictional works.

In *Silas Marner* too Eliot's conception of the mind raises interesting questions of how the absence of consciousness might affect perspective and communication. Even though Anna Neill does not deliberately examine Eliot's use of communication and perspective, her analysis of consciousness and silence in *Silas Marner* offers valuable insight. For Neill silence in *Silas Marner* reveals "a withdrawal of the mind into the unknown":[104]

> In Eliot's other novels, it is the growth and flexibility of minds as well as the subtle interactions among them that brings the subjective state into

[104] Anna Neill, "The Primitive Mind of *Silas Marner*," *ELH* 75 (2008): 941.

> relationship with its larger environments, creating new social possibilities through what the narrator of *Middlemarch* calls "unhistoric acts." *Silas Marner*, on the other hand, puts the blank mind of catalepsy at the heart of a world unchangingly shaped by tradition, superstition, and the tendency to describe that which is unknown as "dark to the last."[105]

Similarly, Robin Sheets' examination of *Felix Holt, the Radical* provides a perspective on the limitations of language that could contribute to an understanding of the limits of communication in *Middlemarch*. Speaking of individuals in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, Sheets maintains that "For George Eliot, discourse—in speech or in writing—has become fraught with difficulty . . . . Words provoke controversy because they yield a variety of meanings, and the community cannot agree upon strategies for interpretation."[106] Sheets' perceptive observation of the relationship between individuals' styles of communication and communal perspective in *Felix Holt* could be expanded to include a discussion of religious and political styles of speech in *Middlemarch*.

While George Eliot's novels prior to *Middlemarch* demonstrate a concern for communication and/or consciousness, her examination of how consciousness shapes experience culminates in *Daniel Deronda*.[107] Eliot displays the same concern with the correlation between feeling and thought and the same interest in the development of sympathy through experience that she investigates in her other novels in general and in *Middlemarch* in particular. While she also examines the incommunicability of consciousness, she emphasizes to an even greater degree the role of imagination in shaping individual perspective. Gwendolyn's heightened sense of imagination, for instance, is magnified by the written communication she receives from Lydia Glasher

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[105] Neill 942.

[106] Robin Sheets, "*Felix Holt*: Language, the Bible, and the Problematic of Meaning," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (1982): 148.

[107] Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as DD. All references will be to George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).

with the diamonds. For Gwendolyn the diamonds have “horrible words clinging and crawling about them, as from some bad dream, whose images lingered on the perturbed sense” (DD 385).

The narrator refers often to Deronda’s “imaginative susceptibility” (DD 654) and points out that:

> Our consciences are not all of the same pattern, an inner deliverance of fixed laws: they are the voice of sensibilities as various as our memories (which also have their kinship and likeness). And Deronda's conscience included sensibilities beyond the common, enlarged by his early habit of thinking himself imaginatively into the experience of others. (DD 464)

For Gwendolyn Harleth and Daniel Deronda, as for all of George Eliot’s characters, thought, imagination, and perspective are all shaped by communication, whether it is the internal voice of consciousness or the external influences of society.

In a letter to his wife, John Blackwood wrote that Eliot explained to him her feelings that “Any real observation of life and character must be limited, and the imagination must fill in and give life to the picture.”[108] Eliot understood that any attempt to represent internal perceptions would always be limited and subjective, based on personal opinions, experiences, memories, and attitudes. Even so, her attempts to represent interiority and her interrogation of the incommunicability of consciousness reveal what she saw as a need for the development of fellow-feeling, a sympathetic understanding that not all perspective can be communicated. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* so poignantly concludes: “[T]hat things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (515). The hidden life, while perhaps difficult to communicate, is still a life worth telling.

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[108] *Letters* vol. 3 427.

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