

Christian Evaluation and Moral Action in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

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George Eliot's legacy for modernism is worth considering on multiple grounds but especially in the context of religious belief and its influence on social morality. The comments of two early twentieth-century writers are suggestive of the mixed nature of her legacy. On the one hand, novelist Virginia Woolf (among the most strident critics of Victorian culture) famously said of *Middlemarch* (1872) that it was "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people," i.e., modernists (657), while, on the other hand, sociologist L. T. Hobhouse, writing in 1915, decried the amorality of modernist aesthetics and praised *Middlemarch* for "uphold[ing] the traditional virtues" and providing "a justification for all that was then usual to sum up in the word altruism" (qtd. in Collini *Liberalism* 246). Problems are immediately apparent when dealing with a figure who, in the modernist mind, simultaneously *stands in* for the whole of Victorian literature and culture and *stands out* as exceptional, even anomalous, to that tradition. These strikingly contradictory endorsements highlight the fact that British modernism found itself an ambivalent legatee when it came to Eliot's work in general and her representation of belief in particular. Part of this, of course, is due to the ambiguity of Eliot's own position.

In his review of *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), W. H. Mallock offers Eliot as “the first great godless writer of fiction that has appeared in England” (qtd. in Qualls 119), yet Eliot herself emphatically resisted these kinds of characterizations, insisting repeatedly over the course of her career on the value of religious belief and Christian faith specifically.¹

But for all her protestations, Eliot’s own belief, while it may have been sincere, was not traditional. She left her Anglican upbringing far behind under the influence of German historical criticism, which she introduced to Britain through her translations of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* (1840) and Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* (1854). Later, Eliot’s exposure to positivism contributed to an ongoing transformation which only served to heighten the problem of belief as a preoccupation of her fiction. Yet a consideration of Eliot’s representation of religious belief as the basis for moral action in *Middlemarch*—a novel which meditates on the problem of belief in the modern age but does so in an environment of aesthetic self-consciousness—proves rewarding, for the combination of religious and aesthetic polemicism makes that novel uniquely suited to such inquiry. T. R. Wright suggests that *Middlemarch* is “quite modern in its concern with the twin problems of perception and interpretation, with the way in which people look at life and attempt to invest it with meaning” (140). The novel’s relentless satire of traditional religious practice and its promotion of Eliot’s brand of realist aesthetics are part of the same epistemological revision. *Middlemarch* attempts to recast religious orthodoxy as moral pragmatism based in realist aesthetics. In this effort she joins a number of her contemporaries seeking to find a new basis for moral action in a post-traditional society. Although Eliot’s effort to define and promote certain qualities of moral sentiment belong to the Victorian moment, the means she employs gesture toward a more modernist sensibility.

¹Barry Qualls cites a comment Eliot made in 1862 which reflects her resistance to characterizations like Mallock’s: “Pray, don’t ever ask me again not to rob a man of his religious belief, as if you thought my mind tended to such robbery, I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no faith, to have any negative propagandism in me” (119).

Hobhouse's association of Eliot with the term "altruism" is highly self-conscious: he is marking a particular cultural moment during which the term functions as a kind of ensign for Victorian moral and aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, the concept plays a central role in Eliot's attempts to reimagine the Victorian moral economy. Introduced to English society by Eliot's common-law husband, George Henry Lewes, through his translations of works by the French social philosopher Auguste Comte in the mid-1850s, "altruisme" was quickly picked up by other intellectuals and public moralists. In his study of the popularization of Comtean ethics, Stephen Collini shows how a Victorian culture of altruism came to define "the texture of moral response among the most prominent Victorian intellectuals" at least as much as the "self-interest and rational calculation" which tend to characterize histories of nineteenth-century liberalism (*Public* 62). Collini demonstrates that altruism became a touchstone for critics of Victorian morality who would influence modernist thinking, most notably Friedrich Nietzsche. W. Caldwell believed the growing popularity of Nietzsche in early twentieth-century England was "simply a part of the reaction against psychological and romantic literature and against foolish altruism and foolish philanthropy" (qtd. in Collini *Public* 88). Nietzsche criticized Victorian "altruistic morality" as "the formula for decadence" (qtd. in Collini *Public* 88–89). In his introduction to the first English translation of *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Alexander Tille argues that "by intoxicating themselves with phrases like altruism, charity, social justice, equality before the law, freedom and right to labour and happiness, the majority of English-speaking people do not feel that they live in a world in which these things are by no means self-evident or fundamental to society" (qtd. in Thatcher 26). Nietzsche strikes at the foundations of the English liberal tradition by challenging, as he does in much of his work, the processes of universalization and by exposing the contingent nature of the social norms that governed nineteenth-century middle-class life:

If the English really do believe they know, of their own accord, "intuitively," what is good and evil; if they consequently think they no longer have need of Christianity as a guarantee of moral-

ity; that is merely the *consequence* of the ascendancy of Christian evaluation and an expression of the *strength* and *depth* of this ascendancy: so that the origin of English morality has been forgotten, so that the highly conditional nature of its right to exist is no longer felt. For the Englishman morality is not yet a problem. (Qtd. in Collini *Public* 90)

But in *Middlemarch* morality is a problem in precisely the way Nietzsche claims it is not. Eliot is one of the conscious architects of what Nietzsche views as an unconscious transformation: the ascendancy of what he terms “Christian evaluation” without Christian metaphysics. In fact, Eliot’s very awareness of the “conditional” nature of morality absent theological and institutional underpinnings provides a justification for literary expression. Indeed, in “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. John Cumming,” published in *Westminster Review* in 1855, Eliot felt comfortable in revising traditional Christian ideals to relocate the problem of belief from a foundation in metaphysics to a foundation in moral sentiment: “The idea of God is really moral in its influence. . . . The idea of a God who . . . sympathizes with all we feel and endure for our fellow-men . . . is an extension and multiplication of the effects produced by *human* sympathy” (188). Here Eliot insists on social morality as the basis for a belief in God. This version or “idea” of God becomes the figurative source for the innate human impulse of sympathy. Eliot and other Victorian moralists viewed sympathetic identification—altruism—as the antidote to the enervating effects of egoism or self-interest which political economists had argued since Adam Smith was the only viable motive for action in the public sphere. Literature’s obligation to cultivate proper feelings in the individual thus had important aesthetic implications for Eliot and helps explain the high level of aesthetic self-consciousness projected in *Middlemarch*. Her advocacy of altruism as a social, moral, and artistic principle casts the transformation of religious belief in fundamentally epistemological terms, thereby rendering the problem of belief (in a way that modernists would find legible) as a problem of representation.

Early in her career, Eliot expressed a commitment to this moral/aesthetic relationship by attempting to differentiate her literary methods from those of her mid-Victorian counterparts. In her 1856 essay

“The Natural History of German Life,” published in *Westminster Review*, she argued that

[t]he greatest benefit we owe to the artist . . . is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as the 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. (270)

Authentic artistic representation in Eliot’s view can fashion the “raw material of moral sentiment” into a genuine experience of sympathetic identification, thereby extending one’s sympathies outside conventional social boundaries and ameliorating the “vulgarity of exclusiveness” produced by class distinctions (270). Eliot’s notion of sympathy constitutes the basis for her exploration of a post-traditional moral terrain in her most celebrated novel.

Writing in the early 1870s, Eliot sets *Middlemarch* at the beginning of the Victorian era in order to look back upon the advent of major religious and social transformation and, in some ways, anticipate, even argue for, what would eventually supplant the outmoded foundations of selfhood, among them institutional religion, which the novel satirizes. One of the central dynamics of *Middlemarch* involves its exploration of the relationship between individual motive and public identity within an evolving Victorian moral economy. The center of the novel’s prescriptive vision of moral selfhood is Dorothea Brooke.² In her “Prelude” Eliot invokes the figure of St. Theresa of Avila whose epic nature “quickly burned up the light fuel” of “many-volumed ro-

²Collini argues that Victorians responded to the threat of enervating self-interest by enlarging the circle of obligations in the form of expanded duties (74–77). But Eliot is careful not to rely on the system of duties as the total answer. In Dorothea, Eliot offers a figure whose moral universe is not entirely circumscribed within a system of duties in the way that one might

mances” and turned to religious reform as the source of her “epos” (3). Eliot identifies Theresa’s “epic” heroism in order to question its relevance in a modern context. She follows her definition of heroism with an image of modern Therasas who have “no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul” (3). The declining authority of institutions associated with Eliot’s so-called knowledge function, such as Mrs. Lemon’s finishing school and the church, leaves women such as Dorothea Brooke and Mary Garth caught in a moment of historical transition. Without these traditional vehicles for social orientation, such women have no cultural means of expressing their dedication to the greater good, “their ardour alternat[ing] between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood” (3). Eliot’s novel attempts to remedy this problem through both a rigorous critique of vestigial institutions and practices and what emerges as a new definition of public selfhood that observes the logic of altruism.³

The untenability of a modern Saint Theresa provides the occasion for Eliot’s exploration of an alternative; the novel wants to turn Dorothea as philanthropist into the new model of moral subjectivity, and yet her public ambitions and the philanthropic form they take are fraught with contradiction. At least part of that contradiction stems from the fact that Eliot’s preface invites readers to see Dorothea’s social ambitions and their limits as historically marked. Dorothea is the outcome of an interaction between a traditional religious type, St. Theresa, and a modern social context, a particular instance of “Theresahood” that necessarily transforms the model. The contradictions become im-

³The novel frames the relationship between realist aesthetics and temporality in its “Prelude” and “Finale” through the social figurations of St. Theresa and Dorothea. Eliot uses Theresa in the “Prelude” as an entry point to her exploration of the type of female heroism in a new historical context. What is the fate of would-be “Therasas” with the advent of modernity? In the “Finale” the narrator replaces the figure of Theresa with Dorothea herself who has now become a type against which to assess “the lives of many Dorotheas” (838). The “mixed result” of Dorothea’s benevolent efforts Eliot attributes to an “imperfect social state.” Her life is not “ideally beautiful,” and this, too, is

mediately apparent in Dorothea's choice of Casaubon as a husband, which reflects her view of marriage as an institution that can "perform the function of knowledge" (3). Dorothea's chief ambition as Casaubon's intellectual disciple is to gain access to those "provinces of masculine knowledge" that will enable her to improve the conditions of others (64), as is evident upon her first visit to Lowick where, disappointed to discover the comparative prosperity of Casaubon's tenants, she acknowledges to herself that she would have preferred to discover her future home in a "parish which had a larger share of the world's misery, so that she might have had more active duties in it" (78). The marriage degenerates quickly, in part because Dorothea becomes disillusioned with the "masculine knowledge" which she intended to be a vehicle for her philanthropic ambitions. Readers come to see Casaubon as Dorothea's antithesis in that his own quest for knowledge is marked by withdrawal and insularity, and his misanthropy interprets Dorothea's altruistic instincts as threatening gestures.

Against this backdrop of unfulfilled marital ambitions, the narrative puts pressure on Dorothea's social and moral vision as she grows increasingly class conscious. For example, at Mr. Featherstone's funeral Dorothea looks out over the procession and struggles to identify with those outside her class, only to be confounded by her inability to extend her sympathies:

The dream-like association of something alien and ill-understood with the deepest secrets of her experience seemed to mirror that sense of loneliness which was due to the very ardour of Dorothea's nature. The country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air: dotted apart on their stations up the mountain they looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below. And Dorothea was not at ease in the perspective and chilliness of that height. (326)⁴

Eliot explains that Dorothea will forever after recall this scene in response to the "touch of certain points in memory" (326), implying

⁴Harry Shaw cites this passage as an example of what he sees as a characteristic oscillation between "metaphorical and metonymical modes of understanding,

that the consciousness-shaping power of the episode stems from the interaction between collective and personal histories. “Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbors’ lot are but the background of our own,” says Eliot, and yet those scenes “become associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of the unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness” (326). Notably, in this moment of social cognition, Dorothea becomes aware of the “imperfect discrimination” with which her class apprehends other social strata. Dorothea’s inmost thoughts give witness to a struggle against inherited modes of social apprehension which defines her philanthropic efforts as well.

That the upper classes are engaged in classifying those around them there can be no doubt. Dorothea thanks Mrs. Cadwallader for encouraging her to witness the funeral parade because she is “fond of knowing something about the people [she] lives among” (326). Mrs. Cadwallader responds by analyzing for herself the funeral-goers, chiefly the Lowick farmers who are “‘as curious as any buffaloes or bisons . . . monsters—farmers without landlords—one can’t tell how to class them’” (326). This is precisely her purpose for “watching” in the first place, namely, to assign subjects to an appropriate social stratum. The presence of social anomalies, the autonomous farmers, highlights the difference between Dorothea and Mrs. Cadwallader’s motives for watching. The imposing mode of representation Mrs. Cadwallader exemplifies attempts only to instantiate class differences and feels threatened by anomalies such as the Lowick farmers. A prescriptive view of the “thicker life below” is the very thing Dorothea’s emerging philanthropic gaze resists in favor of a more discriminating perspective (326).

Insofar as they too depend on classification, Dorothea’s good works are hampered by her inability to see her subjects as other than abstrac-

with metaphor more overtly at play” (232). He points out that this scene expands into “social and economic analysis, motivated by [Mrs. Cadwallader’s] own historical positions in class, gender, and politics” (233). Although he does not acknowledge J. Hillis Miller directly, his reading revises Miller’s deconstructive reading which argues that metonymy, or synecdoche more specifically, is Eliot’s central mode.

tions, as “background.” Up to this point in the narrative, Dorothea’s “inheritance” has been the paternalist tendency to aestheticize or idealize the poor: her original, unsuccessful philanthropic effort—the model cottages—aimed to “make the life of poverty beautiful” (32). This leads directly to Dorothea’s disappointment at finding Lowick residents living above a certain aesthetic standard of neediness. The depiction of this impasse recalls the epistemological roots of what Eliot had earlier termed the “exclusivities of class” in “The Natural History of German Life” (270). Midway through *Middlemarch* Dorothea does not have the wherewithal to transgress the boundaries of her class, but, unlike Casaubon and her uncle Brooke, she is now fully aware of their limitations as her failed philanthropic efforts, which were intended to ameliorate social differences, alienate her from her class of origin. Eliot appropriately chooses a funeral scene to stage the demise of the old order of sympathy. Confounded by the social hedges that limit her ability to see society on levels other than her own narrow plane, Dorothea begins to cast about for alternative ways of viewing people who, to this point, have been her potential beneficiaries and, therefore, her subordinates. Using both her and Will Ladislaw, Eliot devotes the remainder of the novel to promoting her own brand of altruism.

In the course of Dorothea’s career, the early incarnation of the philanthropic heroine is a fundamentally romantic figure in contrast to the one Dorice Williams Elliot and others find at the end of the novel.⁵ It is, in fact, this earlier romantic Dorothea that Eliot sheds as the narrative progresses. What some critics term Dorothea’s failure—her decision to give up her wealth and ambitions to marry Ladislaw—is instead a victory for the novel’s moral vision, for while the very presence of social ambi-

⁵In her far-reaching study of women’s philanthropy, Elliott argues that any effort to understand the novel’s contribution to middle-class hegemony must take into account the rise of philanthropy as “a powerful discourse that helped shape eighteenth- and nineteenth-century subjectivity as well as literary form” (219). Elliott’s work focuses primarily on how the novelistic treatment of women’s philanthropy contributed to a naturalization of women’s public ambitions (218). While aesthetic implications are only of marginal interest for her project, Elliott argues for a link between philanthropy and traditional sen-

tions may mark Dorothea as being ahead of her time, the initial form those ambitions take does not. Her renunciation of paternalistic beneficence precedes her renunciation of her widow's fortune. Readers typically view the latter as a gesture of self-sacrifice, an exchange of wealth and autonomy for love. But Dorothea leaves behind more than money and high social position when she chooses to remarry. After all, her first husband's legacy, thanks to the codicil and his unfinished scholarship, ensures that after his death she will continue to be bound within the narrow limits of Victorian womanhood Casaubon dictated during his life. When he is alive, Dorothea willingly sees herself under the proprietary terms of Victorian marriage, just as she sees the poor as the objects and obligation of her beneficence. The common folk of Lowick are part of the inheritance of marriage she most looks forward to, and she is sorely disappointed when they have no outstanding needs to which she can minister. Casaubon's death and the subsequent execution of his will reveal the nature of her former marriage and, by extension, her philanthropy to Dorothea which in turn initiate a sequence of events that culminates in a crisis of self-revelation. The result is that Dorothea's view of her relationship to society and history is fundamentally altered. She achieves a new way of seeing her circumstances, even as she realizes that the "objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her" (788), an explicit counterpoint to the Featherstone funeral where Dorothea had been the

participation in the public sphere through voluntary philanthropy reached its zenith in the early nineteenth century and began to decline as the state took a more active role in social problems. One consequence of this approach is that her reading of *Middlemarch* insists on a sentimental basis for the novel's treatment of philanthropy. She understands Dorothea's remarriage as a sign that Eliot rejects the figure of the professional "philanthropic heroine" in "favor of the traditional literary romantic heroine who ends up marrying the man she loves" (190). In other words, in order to see the novel registering the failure of philanthropy as a vehicle of female ambition, *Middlemarch* must be read as a romance. This reading joins a host of other criticism which attempts to account for the novel's ideological commitments from the standpoint of Dorothea's

“mere spectator” she now no longer is:

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. (788)

The social recognition Dorothea experiences here is unlike her near passivity in the funeral scene, which emphasized epistemological limits in her inability to classify the subjects she viewed. Now, a fully sympathetic gaze has replaced the “imperfect discrimination” of the less experienced Dorothea (326).

In the revised scene, Dorothea comes to identify with those outside her social sphere, even though such identification requires her to leave her “luxurious shelter” forever. Through this epiphany Eliot expresses faith in what during her time was termed the “concord of feelings,” the possibility of an individual’s achieving what Eliot elsewhere in the novel calls a “federal” understanding that eludes other would-be philanthropists (148). Eliot’s use of the term “federal” implies a central unity that accommodates individual distinction or independence. The profoundly integrative nature of Dorothea’s revelation gestures, if only provisionally, to an altruistic imagination in that her own scene of suffering has placed her on different epistemological ground. Her former way of seeing, which the novel takes pains to identify with a romantic worldview, has been rendered untenable. From this turning point Dorothea acts in a way that reflects cognizance of her moment in history, with all its limitations. Appropriately, her subsequent actions include her first meaningful acts of benevolence.⁶

In order to make the articulation of common feeling meaningful, Eliot uses the concluding chapters of *Middlemarch* to offer her alternative altruistic vision. The philanthropic ambitions of the likes of Lydgate and Bulstrode have come to nothing.⁷ Lydgate's hospital suffers because of his flawed social vision which failed to make concessions for the "petty medium" of Middlemarch society (187). In Bulstrode's case the synthesis of religiosity and business proves a disastrous combination. Bulstrode is Middlemarch's primary philanthropist, but his beneficence is characterized as "at once ready and severe—ready to confer obligations, and severe in watching the result" (155). Bulstrode's history indicates that his professional turning point came when he opted for a career in business instead of the church: "That was the setting-in of a new current for his ambition, directing his prospects of 'instrumentality' towards the uniting of distinguished religious gifts with successful business" (616). Bulstrode's ability to incorporate his personal and moral life within his commercial interests offers a model of proprietary, even mercenary, philanthropy that leads to the banker's downfall. Eliot clearly uses the example of Bulstrode, the capitalist, to distance her altruism from the logic of the market, imagining instead an alternative synthesis between altruism and capitalism in Dorothea's second marriage.

Thus, Dorothea and Will become, in a sense, the last philanthropists standing. Just prior to their climactic reunion, they are involved individually in abortive attempts at philanthropy. In Ladislav's case, his stated reason for returning to *Middlemarch* is to accept his rightful portion of his mother's inheritance in the form of Bulstrode's hush

⁶Among these, her relief of Lydgate's debt to Casaubon stands out as she saves the doctor from total personal and professional degradation.

⁷Mrs. Cadwallader introduces readers to Lydgate as a "sort of philanthropist" (91). Later, Eliot employs the term to define Lydgate's professional ambitions: "he did not mean to imitate those philanthropic models who make a profit out of poisonous pickles to support themselves while they are exposing adulteration, or hold shares in a gambling-hell that they may have leisure to represent the cause of public morality" (147). Lydgate's philanthropic project is the reform of medical practice, beginning with the compromising tradition of acting as both physician and apothecary.

money with which he intends to fund a philanthropic project. When confronted with the responsibility of her first husband's fortune, Dorothea turns to books on political economy in an effort to "get light as to the best way of spending money . . . so as to do [one's neighbors] the most good" (805). Both are diverted from their efforts, which appear untenable from the outset, by the opportunity for marriage. The hallmark of Dorothea's new life is that it is "filled with beneficent activity" (836), implying that she has finally achieved her original aspiration, though her means have radically changed. When Eliot states that the "medium in which ardent deeds took place is forever gone" (838), "medium" has social implications. The social context for Dorothea has changed, and her mode of representation is changing with it. In the end the concerted effort of both Dorothea and Will finally represents a viable brand of altruism.

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