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MIDDLEMARCH'S MEDIUM: DESCRIPTION, SYMPATHY, AND REALISM'S AMBIENT WORLDS

BY JAYNE HILDEBRAND

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is unique among nineteenth-century British novels for its unusually light reliance on the modes of neutral, literal presentation that are supposed to characterize the realist novel. The described world of *Middlemarch* is distinguished by a surprising absence of objects that are just there, of details—especially details in descriptions of domestic interiors—that nestle in the descriptive prose solely to enhance the visibility of a fictional world, without rising to a symbolic or metaphoric plane. Critics have noted this quality of Eliot's description, observing that *Middlemarch*'s descriptive language typically exceeds its basic local function of creating what Roland Barthes called a "reality effect," possessing instead an excess of elements that ascend or ossify into symbolic significance rather than remaining on the denotative level of mere literal description.¹ Although the narrator's description renders select objects highly memorable—Dorothea's poor dress, a pier-glass, the set of emeralds that Dorothea reluctantly admires in the first chapter—these items are so over-freighted with symbolic meaning, as Elaine Freedgood has observed, that they strain away from literal description and toward metaphor. Freedgood views this move as ideologically and aesthetically conservative, arguing that Eliot's narrator works aggressively to "curtail" the disruptive readerly potential of description by reducing the "infinite individual possibilities for metonymic interpretation" to "proper metaphors," a goal she achieves by exhaustively pursuing all the metonymic associations of a described object before fixing it with a dominant metaphorical (and thus "literary") meaning.²

Yet at the same time that *Middlemarch* does not read like an inventory of objects and interiors to the extent that we might expect from a Victorian realist novel (does any reader of *Middlemarch* come away from the book with a detailed sense of what Tipton and Freshitt are really like?), much of the novel's immersive power arises from its descriptions of weather and atmospheric phenomena. Rarely do the novel's characters set foot out of doors, or even glance out of windows, without the narrator pausing to note the atmospheric conditions that

surround them. Some instances: when Fred Vincy tries his hand at fieldwork for the first time, “it was one of those grey mornings . . . when the clouds part a little, and the scent of the earth is sweet along the lanes and by the hedgerows.”³ When Mr. Farebrother pays a visit to the Garths, he comes “up the orchard walk, dividing the bright August lights and shadows with the tufted grass and the apple-tree boughs” (378). Dorothea’s first visit to Lowick, prior to her engagement, is on “a grey but dry November morning” (67), and her first meeting with Casaubon is followed by a solitary walk during which she notes “the solemn glory of the afternoon with its long swathes of light between the far-off rows of limes, whose shadows touched each other” (25). These are only some of the most casual, offhand notations of weather in the novel, which also includes meteorological descriptions with a much more emphatic emotional charge, such as the bleak winter that forms the background to the disappointing early months of Dorothea and Casaubon’s marriage, or the violent thunderstorm that rages during Dorothea and Will’s cathartic love scene at the novel’s end. But these extreme instances that verge on pathetic fallacy are the exception, rather than the rule, in the novel, which more often presents a gentle alternation of rain, snow, sunshine, and shade, passing just below the threshold of readerly attention, and lending the novel its slow, diurnal rhythm.

This essay argues that the pervasive descriptions and notations of weather in *Middlemarch* are not merely an example of a Barthesian reality effect, nor a metaphorical apparatus that imbues the novel with literariness. Instead, I connect Eliot’s atmospheric description to the emerging concept of the environment in a range of British sciences in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the biological, psychological, and sociological writings of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and G. H. Lewes. Biological life itself came to be defined during this period as the interaction between an organism and a singularized entity called the environment or medium, an insight that resulted in environmental influence taking a central role in many areas of Victorian thought, including psychology and the social sciences. This meant that the inanimate and non-human world, whether natural, cultivated, built, manufactured, or some combination of these, ceased to be conceived aesthetically as a mere pictorial backdrop for human action and development, but was instead intimately, dynamically, and materially involved in human life itself. When Eliot’s narrator observes in *Middlemarch*’s closing paragraph that “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies

outside it," she is directly referring to this growing conviction in the sciences that the relationship between organism and environment was the key to understanding all of biological life (784–85).

In what follows, I explore how Eliot shapes the fabric of *Middlemarch*'s described world—particularly its weather—in a way that responds to, and puts to use, the mid-century sciences' newfound emphasis on environment as an essential part of creaturely and human life. *Middlemarch* goes beyond simply dramatizing the dynamics of environmental influence and determinism, and instead imagines the environment in affective terms, as a medium that plays an instrumental role in establishing sympathetic connections between the novel's characters, particularly those from disparate plots and social positions. Many of the novel's most significant scenes of sympathy include descriptions of environmental conditions, foregrounding characters' perceptions of these conditions as a vital step in their ability to experience sympathy. By granting the environment a significant role in the perceptual mechanics of sympathy, the novel outlines a model of sympathetic connection in which the ability to sympathize with another person is predicated neither on direct identification, nor on abstract reasoning, but rather on individuals' recognition of a shared material environment, or medium. This article thus proposes a new reading of sympathy in Eliot's fiction, as a triangular process that relies on the environment as a third term that mediates between self and other. It also suggests that Eliot's descriptive practices in *Middlemarch*, particularly her privileging of auratic, atmospheric description over concrete, static details, draw on recent theories of the organism-environment relationship in order to reimagine the descriptive apparatus of realist fiction as a dynamic, formal analogue to a biological environment, rather than as a static, pictorial background.

I. THE CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENT IN MID-VICTORIAN ORGANICIST THOUGHT

The idea that all living organisms exist in relation to a singular entity known as a medium or an environment became central to nineteenth-century biology and sociology during the 1850s and 1860s, as major scientific writers such as Comte and Spencer came to define life itself as a phenomenon constituted by harmony between a body and its surroundings. Arguing against earlier vitalist biologists such as Xavier Bichat, who held that life was an intrinsic force within the body that an organism had to defend and protect against external impingements, Comte and Spencer (who read Comte at Eliot's behest in the early

1850s) insisted that life was a continual process of exchange between an organism and its external conditions—what Comte called its *milieu* or medium, and Spencer called its environment.⁴ As Comte wrote in his *Cours de philosophie positive*, “the harmony between the living being and the corresponding *medium* (as I shall call its environment) evidently characterizes the fundamental condition of life; whereas, on Bichat’s supposition, the whole environment of living beings tends to destroy them.”⁵ Both Comte and Spencer relied on the idea of organism-environment interaction as the foundation of biological life, and, by extension, of social and psychological life as well; the environment, or “medium,” was no less essential to life than were the inner workings of the body. Following Comte, Spencer insisted that “the changes or processes displayed by a living body are specially related to the changes or processes in its environment,” going so far as to offer a basic definition of life itself as “the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations.”⁶ This emphasis on a constant, gradual adjustment between organism and environment cast the relationship between the two entities as reciprocal rather than purely deterministic, imagining the environment as an entity that could be both hostile and nourishing, both deterministic and responsive.

The use of the singular terms “medium” and “environment” to refer to an organism’s surroundings was a terminological innovation that set Comte, Spencer, and their followers apart from writers who preferred plural terms such as conditions or circumstances, and produced a subtle but significant effect on the ways in which these organicist thinkers envisioned the organism-medium relationship. Although Charles Darwin is frequently treated as a major figure in the history of the idea of environmental influence, Darwin himself very rarely used the term environment, preferring instead the plural phrase “conditions of life” to describe the plethora of environmental factors affecting an organism’s survival.⁷ While a term like “medium” theoretically encompassed the same diverse range of factors and influences, referring to these as a singular entity led those who wrote about the “environment” or “medium” to imagine it aesthetically as a unified entity or homogeneous substance, rather than as an aggregate of objects or bodies. As historian of science Trevor Pearce has argued, this subsumption of the array of individual influencing factors into a single noun effected a “progressive concealment of the different elements that make up the world outside the organism and the relations between these elements.”⁸ The singularized term thus rhetorically conferred a unity on the abstract entity called the environment, providing a convenient shorthand for

describing the environment as a sum of causes, but also making it more difficult to distinguish between those causes. On the level of representation and aesthetics, this singularization invited writers to envision individuals' environments as ubiquitous substances or media, like the liquid or gaseous fluids that support invertebrate and single-celled organisms, rather than the motley, discontinuous sets of objects and substances that make up the environments of plants and vertebrates. Indeed, the invertebrate or single-celled organism is the privileged example throughout Comte and Spencer's writings of the relationships between organism and medium, and is treated as a prototype of life in its most basic form. The utter material dependence of the marine invertebrate on its liquid medium only makes visible the intimacy that obtains equally, if in a more abstract way, in the relationship between more complex organisms and their heterogeneous *milieux* or media. To visualize a dog or a person swimming about in the fluid, airy atmosphere as a protozoa swims through water thus has a certain diagrammatic truth to it, insofar as it provides a concrete image for the abstract but not always perceptible relationship between more complex life forms and their world. The aesthetic promoted by the singularized notion of an environment or medium can thus be described as an ambient aesthetic, a sense of almost ineffable continuity between objects, media, substances—a heightened awareness of physical bodies as always in communication with something ubiquitous and proximate.

This palpable ubiquity of the environment as it was imagined by Spencer and Comte was linked to a sense that the medium's relationship to the organism was supportive as much as it was agonistic. Unlike Darwin, who suggested that the conditions of life function primarily as a winnowing agent that indifferently eliminates ill-adapted individuals, Spencer and Comte promoted a more flexible view of the organism-medium relationship, acknowledging that it could on occasion be destructive, but also insisting that environments and organisms evolve in tandem towards higher degrees of complexity, the life of each individual always pressing towards greater harmony with its environment. Comte insisted, for example, that although "certain perturbations of the medium occasionally destroy life, its influence is, on the whole, preservative; and the causes of injury and death proceed at least as often from necessary and spontaneous modifications of the organism as from external influences."⁹ Spencer insists on a similar complexity of relationship: acknowledging that "the changes or processes displayed by a living body are specially related to the changes or processes in its environment," he nevertheless finds this special relationship to be

almost inarticulable: “we have no word sufficiently general to comprehend all forms of this relation between the organism and its medium, and yet sufficiently specific to convey an adequate idea of the relation; . . . the word *correspondence* seems the least objectionable.”¹⁰ For both Spencer and Comte, the organism-medium relationship is intimate but highly variable, running along a spectrum of affective orientations from the agonistic to the profoundly nurturing.

While this reciprocal conception of environments and organisms shared some features with earlier biological models, particularly Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s, organicist thinkers like Comte and Spencer departed from earlier frameworks in their ambitious application of biological models to social phenomena. When Spencer insisted that the social milieu was a medium to which humans adapt just as organisms adapt to their natural media, he meant it literally, making no ontological distinction between physico-natural and social phenomena. Historian of science Georges Canguilhem notes that the rise in the nineteenth century of the idea that biological life is tied to its milieu correlated to a newfound conviction that “human history is unintelligible without understanding the connection of humanity to the land and to the whole earth,” while Douglas Mao locates in the same era the moment when the idea of the environment became “a cornerstone of Western approaches to social problems and indeed of inquiry into the nature of the universe.”¹¹ At every level, biological and social development was thought to proceed according to the same law of the “adjustment of internal relations to external relations,” of organism to environment.

Eliot was very much at the center of this burgeoning discourse about organism-medium relations in the 1850s. Her partner, George Henry Lewes, was instrumental (along with Harriet Martineau) in popularizing Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* in England through a series of essays in the *Fortnightly Review* that summarized Comte’s philosophical system. Lewes’s own biological and psychological writings—particularly his *Problems of Life and Mind*—were profoundly influenced by recent theories of organism-medium interaction, and his *Sea-Side Studies*, a work of popular science recounting his experiments on marine invertebrates during a trip he and Eliot took to the English seashore, consists largely of records of experiments that involve immersing specimens in different environments or media with an eye to testing their capacities to thrive under a range of conditions.¹² The journal that Eliot kept during the same trip demonstrates a similar sense of the physical world as a shared substrate supporting a diverse array of living beings, but Eliot also shows an expansive interest in

applying Lewes's biological framework to the local human communities that she observed no less closely than Lewes observed his invertebrates. Describing the hilly seaside town of Capstone viewed from a neighboring ridge, Eliot remarks that in a hilly country

one cannot help thinking of man as . . . an epizoon making his abode on the skin of the planetary organism. . . . [W]hen one sees a house stuck on the side of a great hill, and still more a number of houses looking like a few barnacles clustered on the side of a great rock, we begin to think of the strong family likeness between ourselves and all other building, burrowing house-appropriating and shell-secreting animals.¹³

The most basic point of kinship between humans and other living things is, for Eliot, their dependence on a supporting medium—"the planetary organism" upon which human habitations look like barnacles, and which aligns us with "all other building, burrowing house-appropriating and shell-secreting" beings—in other words, beings that live (like all life) by managing the boundary between the body and what lies outside it.

For Eliot, the environment's newly acquired prestige as an explanatory rubric for much of what takes place in human and animal affairs meant that the novelist was no longer justified in representing character as the realist novel's sole or even primary agent. The paraphernalia of circumstance that surrounded individuals—including other characters, social conventions, landscapes, domestic interiors, clothing, and of course the weather—were no less important than plot and psychology. Eliot used the idea of a singularized medium in which individuals move and live to designate this array of ambient conditions. In an 1863 letter, Eliot defended her inclusion of excessive historical detail in *Romola* (1862) through reference to this idea of a medium, which, she insists, is central to all of her fiction: "It is the habit of my imagination," she writes,

to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. The psychological causes which prompted me to give such details of Florentine life and history as I have given, are precisely the same as those which determined me in giving the details of English village life in 'Silas Marner,' or the "Dodson" life, out of which were developed the destinies of poor Tom and Maggie.¹⁴

Eliot's justification of her descriptive practices is significant both in its emphasis on the idea of a biological-sounding "life" as her representational goal, and in its insistence on the link between the seemingly static detail of description and the dynamic development of plot and

character: the “destinies of poor Tom and Maggie” are “developed” directly from the “details of English village life.” By directly tying novelistic description to the biological medium within which organisms develop, Eliot pries description away from static pictorialism and endows it with a dynamism that makes it difficult to separate from plot and character development.¹⁵ It is in *Middlemarch*, however, that Eliot most fully develops the idea of a medium within which her characters live, making it central not only to the development of her characters, but also to the ethical problem of sympathy with which the novel is so deeply concerned.

II. MIDDLEMARCH'S SYMPATHETIC ATMOSPHERES

The narrator of *Middlemarch* frequently uses the term *medium* to convey the agonistic relationship between an aspiring or desiring protagonist and a constraining social environment. Thus, in an early chapter, Dorothea suffers from “a passionate desire to know and to think, which in the unfriendly mediums of Tipton and Freshitt had issued in crying and red eyelids” (36). Coerced by Bulstrode into voting for Mr. Tyke against his better judgment, Lydgate likewise resents the “petty medium of Middlemarch [that] had been too strong for him” (175). In both instances, the word designates an inhospitable milieu in which the self struggles to find traction for its desires and ambitions. Eliot's narrator adapts the biological terminology of Comte and Spencer to describe a deterministic relationship between character and milieu, in which the latter continually thwarts the former.

Yet other instances of the word in the novel suggest a more positive connotation, one that promotes sympathetic connection and communication between characters, rather than (or in addition to) the frustration of aspiration or desire. Such instances of *Middlemarch's* media appear most frequently in scenes where characters from the novel's multiple plots momentarily cross paths, forging intense yet fleeting connections with people from outside of their immediate social universes. In the first convergence of Dorothea and Lydgate's plots, for example, during the first onset of Casaubon's illness, the two characters, barely acquainted, share a moment of wordless, mutual understanding: “For years after Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him by this involuntary appeal—this cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully illuminated life” (272). Although the Comtean-sounding “medium” here is no less

constraining and “embroiled” than in the earlier passages, conveying the same sense of entanglement and struggle, it also harbors flickers of “life,” and enables communication and connection between two characters who would otherwise find one another opaque and inaccessible. The “medium” in this passage appears to function both as a medium in the biological sense, as a material substance that supports life, and medium in the technological sense, as a mode of transmitting communication between two subjects.

While Eliot uses the actual term “medium” to evoke her characters’ immersion in a mediating surround, she also employs atmospheric description throughout the novel to convey a literal sense of this imbrication of bodies and their environments. Eliot’s narrator frequently turns to vivid atmospheric or meteorological description in the middle of scenes of sympathetic connection, and in so doing develops a model of sympathy that relies neither on direct identification between self and other, nor abstract projection, as the existing body of scholarship on sympathy has largely suggested. By introducing a descriptive, atmospheric element into these crucial scenes, Eliot draws on and revises Comte’s idea of a biological medium to develop a model of sympathy based on mutual recognition of a shared environment, an environment that functions as a mediating third term between self and other.

In order to understand how atmospheric description in *Middlemarch* functions as a medium for sympathetic connection between the novel’s characters, it is important briefly to revisit the vast body of scholarship on the definition and role of sympathy in Eliot’s oeuvre, and in nineteenth-century realist fiction more broadly. Most theories of sympathy in the realist novel can be sorted across a divide between identification-based feeling and abstraction-based feeling. Audrey Jaffe and Catherine Gallagher, for example, both understand sympathy within a paradigm of identification, in which a spectator experiences sympathy by imagining him or herself in the position of a suffering other. Jaffe, following Adam Smith, imagines sympathy as a “scene” in which “the sufferer is effectively replaced by the spectator’s image of him or herself,” while Gallagher follows Hume in contending that sympathy is achieved through the imaginative appropriation of another person’s feelings.¹⁶ In her recent book on empathy and the novel, Suzanne Keen claims along similar lines that what nineteenth-century writers called “sympathy” was essentially what we now call “empathy,” which she defines in identificatory terms as a “spontaneous sharing of affect” in which “we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others.”¹⁷

Other recent critics, most notably Rae Greiner, have argued for a conception of sympathy based on distance and abstraction.¹⁸ Like Jaffe, Greiner turns to the work of Smith as a source for Eliot's representation of sympathetic situations, but unlike Jaffe, she interprets Smithian sympathy as primarily narrative and cognitive, rather than scenic and visual. As such, sympathetic connection is enabled less by specular identification with an image of another's suffering, than by the capacity to abstract from that immediate image in order imaginatively or rationally to grasp the narrative context within which the other's suffering occurs; sympathy is, as Greiner argues, comparable to a kind of historicization, effected through a cognitive process of abstraction or distancing from one's own immediate situation.¹⁹

Both of these models of sympathy come with their own ethical and cognitive difficulties. Framing sympathy as a matter of identification, as Rachel Ablow has noted, poses the problem of "threaten[ing] to make the other into merely an extension of the self—or the self into an extension of the other," dealing with difference simply by factitiously eliminating it.²⁰ The abstraction/distancing model of sympathy, on the other hand, tends to reify difference into something absolute and insurmountable, requiring what Greiner calls "strenuous imaginative labor" and burdening the sympathetic self with the task of performing near-impossible heroics of the imagination if his or her sympathy is not to be rendered inauthentic by points of specious identification.²¹ In both cases, the difficulty arises from sympathy's dualistic nature as a transaction between two irremediably discrete entities: an epistemological void separates self and other, and it can be traversed only by collapsing the other into the self, or by a heroic cognitive leap into alterity.

I propose that Eliot's use of atmospherics in *Middlemarch*—her close descriptive attention to the not-quite-empty spaces between and around characters' bodies—helps to aerate this vacuum that often separates self and other in theories of sympathy. It does so by interposing a third term between the opposed duality of self and other in scenes of sympathy, forming an intervening medium in which characters become capable of accommodating both similarity and difference, a necessary capacity that is often absent from theories of sympathy. It proposes a model of interpersonal feeling based neither on abstract projection, nor on wishful identification, but rather on recognition of co-presence in a shared environment, atmosphere, or "medium," to use Eliot's term. Such a recognition enables the self to accommodate similarity (of situations and contexts) and differences

(of both embodiment and psychology) simultaneously, in such a way that the shared medium becomes a medium for shared feeling, the site of an ambient sympathy that is activated by the environment as much as by individual subjectivities.²²

This ambient type of sympathy is enacted in one of the few scenes in which Edward Casaubon crosses paths with a character outside of his own plot, when he and Lydgate meet on the grounds of Lowick in order to discuss the older man's failing health. The scene is perhaps the only scene in all of *Middlemarch* in which a character other than Dorothea feels any compassion for Casaubon. Strikingly, the possibility of this sympathetic exchange seems to have everything to do with the narrator's description of the sunny afternoon that surrounds the two men:

When Lydgate entered the Yew-Tree Walk he saw Mr. Casaubon slowly receding with his hands behind him according to his habit, and his head bent forward. It was a lovely afternoon; the leaves from the lofty limes were falling silently across the sombre evergreens, while the lights and shadows slept side by side: there was no sound but the cawing of the rooks, which to the accustomed ear is a lullaby, or that last solemn lullaby, a dirge. Lydgate, conscious of an energetic frame in its prime, felt some compassion when the figure which he was likely soon to overtake turned round, and in advancing towards him showed more markedly than ever the signs of premature age—the student's bent shoulders, the emaciated limbs, and the melancholy lines of the mouth. (395)

This moment of sympathy is the result neither of identification, nor of distanced reflection. Indeed, Lydgate's response to the sight of Casaubon's body is closer to disidentification than to identification. Although Lydgate's compassion for Casaubon does result from a recognition of the older man's embodiment, it arises through a sense of drastic contrast rather than similarity or substitution. It is precisely because of his "conscious[ness] of an energetic frame in its prime," a consciousness engendered by the "lovely afternoon," that Lydgate is able to recognize that the prematurely withered Casaubon must experience the sunny day in a radically different way. Although the detail of the first few sentences—the falling leaves, the "sombre evergreens," the funeral dirge of the rooks—resembles a straightforward case of pathetic fallacy in which Casaubon's surroundings reflect his sense of his own decline, the fact that this passage is focalized through Lydgate's perspective indicates a more complex emotional circuit. This is not a

simple dualistic exchange between a solipsistic self and the external world, but rather a triple structure in which Lydgate's compassion for Casaubon is occasioned by a physical sense of mutual immersion in a common medium—a perception that two very differently embodied selves walk under the same trees and breathe the same air. Sympathy in this way is predicated not on a specular identification with the body of the other, as the identification-theory argues, nor on abstract reasoning about the other's situational context, as abstraction-based theories emphasize. Rather, the site of sympathy is the in-between place where the body and its medium meet. A similar dynamic is evident in the passage quoted earlier, in which Dorothea and Lydgate share a moment of sympathy in their “cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium.” While the two characters' sympathetic connection is predicated in part on their “kindred natures,” the narrator places much greater emphasis on their “consciousness” of “the same embroiled medium” in which they move. Eliot's medium is thus akin to the ecological philosopher Gernot Boehme's recent theorization of “atmosphere” as “the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived”—an intervening medium that does not level the difference between self and other, but which nevertheless provides a shared third term or space of common ground between them.²³ The similitude that enables Lydgate and Dorothea's sympathy is less the similitude of their natures, or their ability to imaginatively identify with one another's admittedly very different internal states, than their recognition of a shared medium that imposes different hardships on both of them but also links them together in a common world.

The atmosphere's in-betweenness allows it to reconcile the seeming contradiction between the problem of intersubjective difference that *Middlemarch* ceaselessly insists on, and the monistic vision of reality that the novel's figurative language simultaneously proposes. As J. Hillis Miller notes in his classic essay on *Middlemarch*'s dominant metaphors, the novel's processes of figuration develop “a quasi-scientific model to describe the subjective life of the individual, the relations of two persons within the social ‘medium,’ and the nature of that medium as a whole.”²⁴ Although Miller does not pursue the scientific connection far, he evocatively describes the novel's strange monism, its representation of all things and beings as in some way consubstantial. The narrator's favorite metaphors, he points out, imagine the world of the novel and everything it includes as “a spatially or temporally deployed material complex—a labyrinth, or flowing water, or woven cloth,” all of which

imply that “a society is in some way like a material field” characterized by a “strict homogeneity between the large-scale and the small-scale grain or texture of things.”²⁵ The wide-ranging similitude implied by a society that can be compared to a continuous, homogeneous “material complex” is difficult to reconcile with the strenuous negotiation of difference that is at the heart of Eliot’s representations of sympathy, a negotiation that Eliot’s narrator so often insists is no easy thing.

Middlemarch navigates this tension between diversity and monism, I want to suggest, by means of the idea of a ubiquitous material medium characterized by a unique ability to support and cultivate difference. While critics such as Ian Duncan and Gillian Beer have argued for reading the biological language of *Middlemarch* in a Darwinian context, the term medium is found much more frequently in the scientific writings of Lewes, who read Darwin but was arguably more indebted to Comte and to Spencer in his understanding of evolutionary development.²⁶ A major point on which Lewes diverged from Darwin was in his understanding of the role environmental influence played in the development and maintenance of variation. For Darwin, environmental influence (or the “conditions of life”) acted primarily to cull ill-adapted life forms from populations, so that the species inhabiting each environmental niche moved towards a single, ideally-adapted form.²⁷ Darwin’s environment is thus a parsimonious entity that works in part against variety and difference, selecting from the vast raw material of variation a smaller number of forms that are better-adapted than the rest.²⁸ In the Second Series of his *Problems of Life and Mind*, Lewes offers a theory of environmental influence that contrasts with Darwin’s, delineating a version of organism-medium relations that are much more accommodating of difference than Darwin’s “conditions of life.” Instead of assigning to environmental pressure the omnipotent capacity to hone species into a single, ideally-adapted form, Lewes imagines both a more flexible, accommodating environment and a more active diversity of living individuals:

Supposing that on a given spot there are a dozen protoplasts closely resembling each other, yet each in some one detail slightly varying; if this variation is one which, by its relations to the external medium, admits of a difference in the assimilation of materials present in the medium, it may be the origin of some *new direction* in development, and the ultimate consequence may be the formation of a shell, an internal skeleton, a muscle, or a nerve. Were this not so, it would be impossible to explain such facts as that chitine is peculiar to the Articulata, cellulose to Molluscoida, carbonates of lime to Mollusca

and Crustacea, and phosphates to Vertebrata—all assimilated from the same external medium. But we see that from this medium one organism selects the materials which another rejects; and this selection is determined by the nature of the structure: which assimilates only those materials it is *fitted* to assimilate. We hear a great deal of Adaptation determining changes of structure and function, and are too apt to regard this process as if it were not intimately dependent on a corresponding structural change.²⁹

In a Darwinian iteration of this thought experiment, the “dozen protoplasts closely resembling each other” at the outset would be whittled down to a smaller number of organisms better-adapted to the medium than the others. For Lewes, however, structural difference is not a zero-sum game, in which only the fittest structure survives; rather, structural difference enables the coexistence of distinct individuals within the same medium insofar as each distinctive structural trait provides a different path towards adaptation, the slight diversity in the organisms’ structures becoming gradually more pronounced and diversified as “one organism selects the materials which another rejects.” In this sense, the relationship between an organism and its medium, for Lewes, allows for and even promotes the coexistence of differences, rather than exclusively pitting those differences against one another in a struggle for survival.

While *Middlemarch* does not allegorize Lewes’s theory of adaptation in any direct way, Lewes’s capacious and forgiving vision of the environment-organism relationship resembles Eliot’s own attraction to the idea of an all-encompassing medium capable of mediating social and psychological difference. Put another way, Eliot’s fiction shares with Lewes’s writings the sense of, or desire for, a mediating surround that promotes coexistence, even community, while also permitting and even facilitating difference. Both writers evince a desire to expand the organism-environment relationship beyond an agonistic dualism straining towards adaptation, and into a more complex network of relationships, symbiotic as well as competitive, enabled by a living, supportive medium—something, we might say, more closely resembling an ecology.

This sense of physical *milieux* as capable of accommodating difference is visible in Eliot’s persistent emphasis on the media that surround characters—especially weather—in scenes where characters from *Middlemarch*’s multiple plots meet for the first time. That the atmospheric scenes discussed above between Lydgate and Casaubon, and between Dorothea and Lydgate, are both scenes of first-meeting

between their respective characters indicates a close connection between heightened atmospherics and the mechanics of the multi-plot novel. This connection between atmospheric description and multiplot-ness is further supported by the narrator's striking description of the scene, in the opening pages of book 4, in which the lonely Dorothea views Featherstone's funeral from afar, seeing for the first time the motley group of Middlemarchers with whom her story is to become entangled. These are the first sentences of book 4:

It was on a morning of May that Peter Featherstone was buried. In the prosaic neighbourhood of Middlemarch, May was not always warm and sunny, and on this particular morning a chill wind was blowing the blossoms from the surrounding gardens on to the green mounds of Lowick churchyard. Swiftly-moving clouds only now and then allowed a gleam to light up any object, whether ugly or beautiful, that happened to stand within its golden shower. In the churchyard the objects were remarkably various, for there was a little country crowd waiting to see the funeral. (303)

The shifting sky and landscape here emphasize the material linking together of variety, providing a topography of dynamic, boundary-crossing flows. The limits of individual property are rendered permeable by the wind blowing "blossoms from the surrounding gardens on to the green mounds of Lowick churchyard," a motion that suggests both the erasure of individual boundaries, as well as a complex weaving together of social and biological life, as the garden and the churchyard bleed into one another. The gleams of light cast by the "[s]wiftly-moving clouds" on the motley gathering of individuals create a shifting perspective that does not confine itself to a single psyche, skipping across and between different focal points, much like the novel's third-person narrator. The airy medium of May air that contains and surrounds the "remarkably various" crowd of funeral attendees is a living, shifting atmosphere that links discrete locales and individuals, resisting confinement to any local or individual perspective.

It is only after presenting this scene as if from an unseen aerial position that the narrator reveals that the vantage point actually belongs to Dorothea, who views the scene from an upper window of Lowick. The scene marks an important moment in Dorothea's developing sense of her relation to an outside world in that it is her first moment of visual contact with the world of Middlemarch and its plots. This chapter does not stage an actual convergence of Dorothea's plot with that of the Middlemarchers, for she remains separated by a window and a vertical

remove that is both physical (she is on an upper floor of the house) and social (the gentry do not mingle with the townsfolk). The scene does remain with her psychologically, though, as the site of a dawning awareness that she exists in a multiplot novel: “aloof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life,” the scene “always afterwards came back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the vision of St. Peter’s at Rome was inwoven with moods of despondency” (305–6). The narrator strangely characterizes the effects of the scene on Dorothea’s dawning awareness of her proximity to and potential involvement in other people’s lives by comparing it to the effect of vistas of landscape on perception and emotion: “Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbours’ lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness” (306). Eliot’s superimposition of natural landscape onto an image of social relations collapses culture into nature, figuring the lives that unfold around our own as a natural environment or ecosystem. It also strangely substitutes the image of a pastoral landscape devoid of human figures—an “aspect of the fields and trees”—for the more specifically-described vista of the cemetery, the overarching sky, and the human figures that populate it. Eliot’s elision of the distinction between natural and social environments suggests that responsiveness to material surroundings, including even such seemingly neutral phenomena as weather, constitutes a first step, a kind of ground tone, to the establishment of sympathy with other minds.

This visual turn to backgrounds and surrounding media as a constitutive precondition for the ethical knowledge that one is only a minor character in other people’s plots is a descriptive technique that recurs throughout *Middlemarch*. Moments in which the beginnings of sympathy are ignited by a visual encounter with a shared environment are often narrated in a proleptic, almost prophetic mode that infuses them with moral significance. The sight of Featherstone’s funeral and its surrounding landscape “always afterwards came back to [Dorothea],” just as Lydgate “for years after . . . remembered the impression produced on him” by his fleeting moment of connection with Dorothea in the “embroidered medium” of Middlemarch life (272). This proleptic narration takes seemingly fleeting moments of interpersonal perception and elevates them above the temporal flow of plot, marking them as epochal events possessing a surplus of affective significance that far exceeds their minimal function as narrative causes

or effects. That these affectively-charged moments always involve a turn, not only towards another person or people, but also towards a physical environment, whether abstract (an “embroiled medium”) or concrete (the “particular aspect of the fields and trees” to which the narrator compares the funeral scene), indicates the extent to which responsiveness to environmental conditions figures in Eliot’s understanding of the sympathetic connection that elevates momentary experience above the transient flow of everyday life. Moreover, the vitality of environmental conditions as a necessary background to interpersonal recognition in Eliot’s novel also results in a narrative economy in which visual description of setting is rarely set apart from narrative prose, or relegated to mere world-making, a Barthesian reality effect. It is instead nearly always integrated, frequently even on the level of the sentence, into the narration of internal states and perceptions.

Middlemarch’s persistent descriptive focus on atmospheres and landscapes suggests that physical surroundings function as a common reference point for sympathetic perception, but in an auratic, multiple way that resembles a modern environmental sensibility in that it is not reducible to ties of property. The relationship between character and environment is not a dual relationship between a single individual and a landscape that he or she owns, but rather a relationship involving multiple lines of connection, to landscape and atmosphere, and to other individuals as well. Kevin Morrison has argued that *Middlemarch*’s descriptions of landscapes evoke a “dynamic of exchange between mind and landscape” that serves to create affective ties of affiliation for individuals with no indigenous or physical connection to a local community.³⁰ Morrison’s suggestion that Eliot privileges affective, nebulous ties to physical landscapes over the concrete, legal ties of individual ownership is illuminating, but needs to be supplemented with the insight that these affective ties to landscape are also social, linking the self to the physical world but also, through it, to other groups and individuals. Eliot’s insistence on the physical environment’s necessity to social and interpersonal relationships is thus similar to the modern environmental sensibility that, as Harriet Ritvo has recently argued, emerged in Victorian Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, in which a collective, “nebulous new sense of ownership” arose, characterized by “a sense that citizens of a nation (or, still more expansively and vaguely, members of a supranational cultural community) should have some say in the disposition of significant landscapes even if they held no formal title to the property in question.”³¹ Eliot’s descriptive tendency to obscure distinctions of individual property,

while making attentiveness to physical environment an integral step in sympathetic perception, registers her recognition of the environment as a material entity that includes and supports a multiplicity of lives. This sense of multiplicity exceeds the Comtean duality of the organism-environment relationship, embracing instead a multiple sense of relatedness that has less to do with ownership or blood ties to a particular locale than with a mutual dependence on a shared resource.

In *Middlemarch*, this sense of the physical environment as a common resource that mediates human connections corresponds formally to an auratic type of description that eschews the concrete detail for atmospheric vagueness.³² The privileging of the auratic over the concrete is nowhere more evident than in the scene where Mr. Brooke confronts his tenant Dagley, a scene that contains both the narrator's most self-conscious reflections on her descriptive practices as well as one of the novel's most painfully awkward confrontations of social difference. As in the funeral scene discussed above, the narrator turns to the language of visual tableau as a way of invoking the ethical distinction between recognizing and failing to recognize as real the other lives that hover in the background of our own. But whereas for Dorothea the sight of her Middlemarch neighbors under a windy sky remains embedded in her mind as an intimation of the entwinement of her own plot with those of other characters, in this scene, Eliot's narrator explicitly warns of the tendency of visual tableaux to have the opposite effect, by reifying other characters into picturesque works of art and placing them on the other side of an ontological distinction drawn between art and life, rather than recognizing them as breathers of a common air. The narrator makes this point by describing Freeman's End with a visual specificity that many of her other descriptions in *Middlemarch* lack:

It is true that an observer, under that softening influence of the fine arts which makes other people's hardships picturesque, might have been delighted with this homestead called Freeman's End: the old house had dormer-windows in the dark-red roof, two of the chimneys were choked with ivy, the large porch was blocked up with bundles of sticks, and half the windows were closed with grey worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance; the mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it was a perfect study of highly-mingled subdued colour, and there was an aged goat . . . lying against the open back-kitchen door. . . . [A]ll these objects under the quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds would have made a sort of picture which we have all paused over. (369–70)

The narrator self-consciously catalogs a list of discrete details that together compose the image of Freeman's End, creating the most detailed description of any building, home, or landscape in Eliot's entire novel. Ruth Bernard Yeazell has recently argued that this high level of descriptive detail is an ethical touchstone of Eliot's fiction that operates by locating in the mundane, concrete detail the deep significance of everyday human lives.³³ Yet the narrator's suggestion that this type of description actually obstructs adequate moral perception indicates that the very visual specificity of detail is part of what produces moral failure here. Dividing Dagley and his family from the viewer by interposing an imaginary surface of canvas or text, the sharp focus of the description privileges the visual over other senses, and reduces environmental cues that might otherwise form a medium of connection between viewer and object—as does the rapidly shifting, windy sky in the scene of Featherstone's funeral—to static, representational surface. Thus it is the unification of “all these objects under the quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds” that, at the end of the passage, definitively freezes Freeman's End into tableau, the sky acting as an ontological frame for cottage and cottagers that cordons them off from the real world of the viewer or reader.

What the contrast between Eliot's descriptions of the Featherstone funeral and Freeman's End suggests is a paradox whereby aesthetic focus—directly and intently looking at or considering a person or object as the subject of an artwork—is somehow less productive of ethical recognition than is the vague awareness of other people as shadowy presences inhabiting the background of one's own, very real, world. If aesthetic focus is produced by detailed visual description, the auratic perception that draws no sharp ontological line between the real and the virtual is produced, in *Middlemarch*, by the evocation of a dynamic atmosphere that, however lightly, presses in upon the senses a feeling of one's own material continuity with the bodies of others, whether real or fictional. This sensation of multiplottedness thrives on details that record the contact or interactions between a body and a shared medium or environment. Thus the antidote Eliot's narrator offers to the illusory, picturesque description of the cottage is a set of details that replace the description's “quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds” with a chastening sense of meteorological conditions as an ambient surround that must be continually contended with: the back-kitchen door of Freeman's End is “the only entrance ever used, and one always open except in bad weather” (371); “the awkwardnesses of weather” is one of the few things that Dagley, by existential necessity,

“kn[ows] thoroughly” (373). Dorothea, too, protests her uncle’s disregard of the reality of his tenants’ poverty by mobilizing the language of vague physical sensation against picturesque visual detail: “I used to come from the village with all that dirt and coarse ugliness like a pain within me, and the simpering pictures in the drawing-room seemed to me like a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false” (365). For Dorothea, the vague sensation of being covered with or pervaded by dirt serves as an efficacious reminder of her immersive coexistence in a material world she shares with the villagers, while visual representations of village life only erode that sense of commonness.

The ethical privilege that *Middlemarch* grants to auratic over detailed description is confirmed in the novel’s most heroic act of sympathy, when Dorothea’s dim perception of the landscape outside her window at Tipton sparks the epiphany that motivates the visit she pays Rosamond to prevent her from committing emotional infidelity with Will Ladislaw. Following her traumatic vision of Rosamond and Will in romantic tête-à-tête, Dorothea weathers a long dark night of the soul, then turns her tear-reddened, shortsighted eyes on the pearly dawn:

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. (741)

The descriptive language in this passage studiously avoids all of the specificities of detail that deaden the description of Freeman’s End. The narrator’s use of the generic term “shelter” to describe the luxurious Tipton levels class distinctions by conjuring a sense of base-line survival, invoking the bare human requirement of shelter from the ravages of weather. The word distinctly recalls both the abandoned cottage schemes of Dorothea’s youth and the awkward visit to Dagley at Freeman’s End—the only dwelling in the novel that can be classified as a shelter in its most basic, literal sense. Despite its lyricism, this epiphanic landscape is not a figurative projection of Dorothea’s expansive mood, nor does it relegate the social world to mere background for Dorothea’s own plot. Read against the background of the novel’s frequently-invoked biological language of organic media,

Dorothea's recognition of her participation in the "involuntary, palpitating life" of the world points less to a vague symbolism than to the literal imbrication of biological bodies with each other and with their material environments. The spatial dynamics of outward expansion in this scene created by the arc of the "bending sky" and "pearly light," as well as the expansive progression of the narrator's description (from "curtains" to "road" to "fields beyond"), grants Dorothea a sensation of multiplottedness itself, a network of disparate figures encompassed within a shared field or medium of experience.

If atmospheric description enables this sensation of multiplottedness for *Middlemarch's* characters, I want to close by proposing that it does something similar for *Middlemarch's* readers. The boundary-eroding tendency of atmospheres within the diegetic space of *Middlemarch* extends, in the novel's finale, to the boundary between fiction and reality, between text and world. Readers are invited to feel themselves enveloped by the novel's world—and to experience such envelopment as a form of sympathetic connection—just as the characters experience and respond to their shared envelopment by the novel's weather. While making such a leap from the world within the novel to the world of the reader may seem naively intuitive, I would argue that such a move is warranted both by Eliot's understanding of the relationship between literature and material reality, and by recent theorizations of literary atmosphere as a uniquely material dimension of literary language.³⁴ Spencer's theory of social development, with which Eliot was intimately familiar, posited literature and language as emphatically material forces in the process of social evolution. As Suzanne Graver notes, "language is [for Spencer] the crucial nexus between the individual and the social organism, compensating for nothing less than the one major difference between them," namely that "the former . . . is composed of proximate parts that form a physical whole; the latter of living units more or less dispersed."³⁵ Language is what elevates the idea of a social organism from a metaphor to a literal reality, acting as a quasi-material substitute for the physical contiguity of the organism's constituent parts, a vital medium that flows between and unites the discrete bodies that compose the social whole.³⁶ Visible in Eliot's frequent appeals to the idea of a pervasive medium in *Middlemarch* is a similar interest in locating a unifying, communicative substance capable of filling in the empty gaps between living bodies.

In the novel's final pages, Eliot takes the biological idiom of the medium in which her characters live and extends it to her readers in such a manner as to further erode the boundaries between the novel's

intra- and extradiegetic space. The narrator positions the reader in direct relation to Dorothea using atmospheric language of diffusion and immersion, suggesting that just as Dorothea shares a medium with the other characters in the novel, so too do the reader and narrator share one with Dorothea. In summing up the “issues” (785) of Dorothea’s life, the narrator returns to the St. Theresa analogy of the novel’s prelude, lamenting that “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it”; modern endeavor cannot follow the heroes of history because “the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone” (784–85). Yet Eliot’s narrator compensates for this evaporated medium by employing a language of atmospheric surround that encompasses both Dorothea and a newly introduced *we*. Situating reader and narrator in a common world with Dorothea, Eliot envisions her readers as the preparers of a new medium in which Dorothea and those like her will enact their struggles: “But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas” (785). Two sentences later, this relationship is inverted, and Dorothea is now the diffusive benefactor of *you and me*. Averring that Dorothea’s “spirit had still its fine issues,” the narrator ends, “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that 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” (785). If this passage begins with a pessimistic statement about the determination of all creatures (Dorothea included) by external environments and media, it nevertheless restores a version of historical agency by positioning Dorothea as an influential factor in the environment of other individuals. The narrator’s sleight of hand inverts figure and ground, organism and environment, so that the determined organism is now presented as a source of determining influence. While it may be difficult to ascertain the source of agency in such a scenario—if all agents are externally determined, how is freedom to be found in the fact that some of them influence one another?—it seems to arise from the space between individuals, from the diffusive atmosphere whose absence, we are told, forecloses meaningful action, but whose presence perhaps enables it. Spirit, fine issues, incalculable diffusion: the atmospheric evanescence of Eliot’s language at the novel’s close progressively effaces the boundary between inside and outside, text and reader, fiction and reality. The sympathetic relay between Dorothea and us (and, by extension, between other people both inside and

outside the fictional text) is dependent on a diffusion or suspension of fictional boundaries, a suspension enabled by descriptive language that evokes a shared medium enveloping character and reader alike.

Eliot's posthumously published book *Essays and Leaves from a Notebook* contains near its end an untitled, contextless aphorism: "Enveloped in a common mist, we seem to walk in clearness ourselves, and behold only the mist that enshrouds others."³⁷ In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's atmospheric description works to reimagine this "common mist"—an ambient, embroiled medium that often seems to isolate and constrain—as something that, if we attend to it, also harbors flickers of life.

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NOTES

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 148. Critics who have observed this movement away from the literal in Eliot's descriptions include Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1982); and Andrew H. Miller, "Middlemarch: January in Lowick," in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (London: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 154–65.

² Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 115, 116.

³ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 556. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

⁴ The terms environment and medium were roughly equivalent to each other in mid-century organicist thought, and each was preferred by different writers. In her influential 1853 translation of Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*, Harriet Martineau used environment and medium interchangeably to translate Comte's term *milieu*. Herbert Spencer subsequently adopted and popularized the term environment (originally coined by Thomas Carlyle in 1827, but little used until the 1850s) in his 1855 *Principles of Psychology*. G. H. Lewes and Eliot both use medium more frequently in their writings to describe the sum total of external influences acting on an organism. For a detailed breakdown of the many different terms for environment in nineteenth-century biological science, see Trevor Pearce, "From 'Circumstances' to 'Environment': Herbert Spencer and the Origins of the Idea of Organism-Environment Interaction," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 41.3 (2010): 241–52.

⁵ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 2 vol., trans. Martineau (London: John Chapman, 1853), 1:360.

⁶ Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, 2 vol. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 1:74, 80.

⁷ For example, Charles Darwin writes that "natural selection is daily and hourly . . . working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life" (*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* [New York: Penguin, 1985], 133). Here, the relationship between the "organic being" and its "conditions of life" is a relationship

between a whole species and its surrounding conditions, not between the individual organism and its environment, as it is for Comte and Spencer.

⁸ Pearce, 249.

⁹ Comte, 1:360–61.

¹⁰ Spencer, 74, 79.

¹¹ Georges Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” trans. John Savage, *Grey Room* 3 (2001): 15; Douglas Mao, *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature, 1860–1960* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 35.

¹² For a striking passage in which Lewes describes mollusks’ absorption of lime from ocean water as an example of an organism-environment interaction that affects an entire ecosystem, see *Sea-Side Studies at Ilfracombe, Tenby, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey* (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1858), 358–60.

¹³ Eliot, “The Ilfracombe Journal,” in *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (New York: Penguin, 1990), 218–19.

¹⁴ Eliot to R. H. Hutton, 8 August 1863, in *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vol., ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954), 4:97.

¹⁵ In identifying description with dynamism and development rather than stasis, my argument departs from standard accounts of description as something that halts or pauses plot or narrative. The most significant recent iteration of this view is Fredric Jameson’s claim that nineteenth-century realism is defined by a tension between narrative movement and an emergent “scenic impulse” that “abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the tale . . . in the first place” (*The Antinomies of Realism* [New York: Verso, 2013], 11).

¹⁶ Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 2. See Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 171.

¹⁷ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 4–5.

¹⁸ Others who have recently argued for a model of sympathy based on abstraction include Cara Weber, who draws on Anderson’s influential work to contend that ethical insight in Eliot’s fiction is achieved through a “distance . . . [that] works to counteract the temptation to sympathetic identification” (“‘The Continuity of Married Companionship’: Marriage, Sympathy, and the Self in *Middlemarch*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 66.4 [2012]: 502).

¹⁹ See Rae Greiner, “Sympathy Time: Adam Smith, George Eliot, and the Realist Novel,” *Narrative* 17.3 (2009): 291–311.

²⁰ Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 71.

²¹ Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012), 10.

²² Recent theorists of the concept of atmosphere in literature have noted atmosphere’s capacity to act as a medium between subject and object, perceiver and perceived. Timothy Chandler, for example, describes atmospheres as “ontologically indeterminate quasi-objects of perception that lie between subject and object, literally in the medium” (“Reading Atmospheres: The Ecocritical Potential of Gernot Boehme’s Aesthetic Theory of Nature,” *ISLE* 18.3 [2011]: 558), while Jesse Oak Taylor points out that “atmospheric thinking emphasizes adjacency; it considers the way that bodies of all kinds influence the conditions of possibility in their vicinity” (*The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* [Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2016], 7).

²³ Gernot Boehme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. and trans. Jean-Paul Thibaud (New York: Routledge, 2017), 20.

²⁴ J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), 132.

²⁵ Miller, 129.

²⁶ See Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983); and Ian Duncan, "George Eliot's Science Fiction," *Representations* 125.1 (2014): 15–39.

²⁷ Of course, this is not to say that Darwin imagines a biological world that is poor in variety. But the engines of variation for Darwin are inheritance and reproduction, while the environment imposes a kind of limit on variation through the pressure of natural selection. See, for example, Darwin's assertion that "in living bodies, variation will cause the slight alterations, generation will multiply them almost infinitely, and natural selection will pick out with unerring skill each improvement" (219).

²⁸ Darwin defines natural selection as the principle "by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved" (115). While he thus initially represents it as a process that preserves variation, he subsequently explains that it works in equal measure to winnow out variations that are not useful: "It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good" (133). This process of selection "leads to . . . much extinction of the less improved and intermediate forms of life" (170).

²⁹ Lewes, *The Physical Basis of Mind: Being the Second Series of Problems of Life and Mind* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1877), 142–43.

³⁰ Kevin Morrison, "Cultural Embeddedness, Gendered Exclusions: The Symbolic Landscapes of *Middlemarch*," *Victorians Institute Journal* 39 (2011): 319.

³¹ Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

³² For a recent analysis of the importance of vagueness in Eliot's fiction in a philosophical context, see Daniel Wright, "George Eliot's Vagueness," *Victorian Studies* 56.4 (2014): 625–48.

³³ See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 110–11.

³⁴ Hans Gumbrecht, for example, asserts that "references to music and weather often occur when literary texts make moods and atmospheres present" because music, like weather, is "a form of physical reality . . . that 'happens' to our body and, at the same time, 'surrounds' it" (*Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012], 4).

³⁵ Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 186.

³⁶ See Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, 3 vol. (New York: D. Appleton, 1921), 1:447–48.

³⁷ Eliot, *Essays and Leaves from a Notebook* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1884), 292.