



PROJECT MUSE®

Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*

Summer J. Star

ELH, Volume 80, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 839-869 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2013.0030>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/520495>

FEELING REAL IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

BY SUMMER J. STAR

In the harrowing aftermath of Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Edward Casaubon, the narrator of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) describes our heroine, tearful and distraught in her honeymoon boudoir, with an attitude of discordant urbanity. Indifferent as a distantly yawning prime mover, the narrator perceives the very normality of Dorothea's distress and yet, instead of attending to her thoughts, conveys the slow accumulation of changes in feeling of which she herself cannot yet be aware.

Dorothea was crying, and if she had been required to state the cause, she could only have done so in some such general words as I have already used: to have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows, for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr. Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream.¹

This is the second time in the chapter that the narrator uses the phrase “new real future”—a thing necessarily destructive, unwilling, and deeply foreign to the conception of reality it replaces. The passage, in fact, articulates the two main principles of reality at work throughout *Middlemarch*: first, reality is definitively unlike the “imaginary” conceptions of individuals (whether they be sober-minded Farebrothers or narcissistic Rosamonds); second, it is something that forms “secret[ly]” and slowly—like the watch-hand mentioned here, or the proverbial growing grass. Nearly every personal crisis in the novel is presented as a moment of “replac[ement]” like this one—with “reality” appearing like a changeling in place of the theory, delusion, or hope one held the night before.

While most criticism of *Middlemarch* is centered, arguably, in these moments of conflict, the place of its characters' metaphysical realizations of reality has yet to be considered within the discourse of literary realism. When we consider Dorothea's confrontation with her “new real

future,” or Casaubon’s wincing from the reality of his impotence, or the public disclosure of Bulstrode’s hypocrisy—how, we might ask, are these moments central not only to the plot dynamics of *Middlemarch*, but to its metaphysical claims about what reality perception is and to how we recognize Eliot’s formal innovations in narrative perspective?² Beyond a minute attention to everyday real objects, or psychological accounts of the way we really perceive, *Middlemarch* in particular presents a view of what it means to *become* aware of reality in the sense of becoming aware of oneself as a given being, in a given world that is greater than one’s individual conception.³ Realism was thus not so much an empirical but a phenomenological approach to narrative, as Eliot was practicing and developing the genre. As such, realism becomes a function of representing: 1) the lived nature of experience, the moments in which subjects realize themselves as limited parts, as opposed to ordaining surveyors, of their given worlds; and 2) the quality of human perception that alternately prevents and provides such realization. While most accounts of realism have been concerned with its tentative representations of totality and omniscience, I offer that Eliot’s narratives force us to redefine realism from an inverse position, locating her characters’ access to reality in moments that specifically defy a totalizing vision—that is, in moments of liminal consciousness, of blind spots, of bodily, rather than visual awareness. This also allows for a redefinition of the readerly experience of realist texts, placing the perspectives of readers and characters at similarly occluded angles. The second claim of this paper is that Eliot demonstrates that these moments of realist perception are specifically aesthetic. This is an argument I make through the definitions she gives of the aesthetic in her essay “Notes on Form in Art” (1886) and their correspondence with the nature and functions of realist experience in her novels. In this way, and by way of more contemporary theories of phenomenology, metaphysical realism, and gestalt theory, I contend that Eliot was using aesthetics and realism to redefine each other: to reposition the former in the sphere of everyday life, in the spontaneous and bodily perception of form in one’s surroundings; and to ground our reality-perception in a fundamentally aesthetic mode of perception, one thus particularly amenable to literary representation. My discussion of this mutual redefinition will move us between three of Eliot’s texts: *Middlemarch*, the essay “Looking Inward” from *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), and “Notes on Form in Art.”

Eliot is often seen by critics as a kind of artistic collaborator with the skepticism whetted by Darwinism, positivism, and the German higher criticism alluded to by her own characters. While Eliot's stake in higher criticism is clear from her translation of David Strauss, her sympathies with positivism were less definite. Her letters to Frederick Harrison, himself an ardent proponent of Auguste Comte's positivism, convey a reticence to ally herself—or her art—with any theoretical school. She reminds Harrison, for instance, of “the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me just in the flesh, and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching, because it deals with life in its highest complexity; but if it ceases to be purely aesthetic, if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram, it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.”⁴ Clearly philosophy poses the danger of reducing such “complexity”—something that requires an author both to realize ideas “in the flesh” and pass them along in that same, unsublimated state to her reader. Aesthetic instruction, for Eliot, is somehow most like the manner of lessons we learn from our bodies—from the effects of sleep deprivation, hunger, strength training, or bones set and reknit. The “teaching” potential of any novelist is thus proportional to the extent that she allies herself with this slow, experiential, physical mode of learning and resists the attraction of becoming a philosopher, politician, or other producer of abstraction. And the attraction can be equally strong for realist criticism.

Like the seventeenth century's expanding economic horizons and scientific revolutions that informed the meticulous but everyday style of the Dutch Masters, so, in the nineteenth century, the cultural phenomena of Darwinism, materialism, positivism, and early anthropology have underwritten the critically imagined realist novel. The current wave of “thing criticism” in Victorian Studies is a testament in itself to the largely economic understanding of what realism was about.⁵ More generically, the seminal realist critics Bernard Paris and Barbara Hardy situate Eliot's realism precisely in her narratives' preoccupation with the webs of social existence: the dual fact of our supreme egoism and the universality of it among men.⁶ J. Hillis Miller, on the other hand, along with many others before and after him, locates Eliot's realism in her obsession with visual perception—in the effort to see and represent as minutely and faithfully as possible while acknowledging in the same instant the impossibility of this attempt. In this way, the duality of effort and conscious *échec* produces a kind

of model for what Hillis Miller sees as the realist contribution to the problem of representation.⁷ More recently, Avrom Fleishman has defined Eliot's realism as a kind of bridge between the early realist approaches of Charles Dickens and W. M. Thackeray, and the advent of naturalism with Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad. For Fleishman, the realist approach of Eliot's novels resides specifically in her narrative tone of "dispassionate and non-judgmental explanation, especially of human behavior."⁸ In reading, and considering the reading *experience* of *Middlemarch*, however, it becomes clear that Eliot's idea of "perceiving the real"—and the extent or manner in which we do—is not so much an "epistemological attitude," but the nature of a basic, liminally conscious perception that moment by moment draws us to the object world and substantiates our belonging to it as fellow, bodily, objects. This is a kind of peripheral awareness, or what Ned Block has called "phenomenal consciousness": a mode of perception that interacts with, but is functionally distinct from, "access consciousness," which in Block's language is what controls thought and action through our rational and deliberative capacities.⁹ The essentially qualitative, experiential nature of phenomenal consciousness, its resistance even, as Block has maintained, to verbal description, allies it fundamentally with Eliot's insistence that novels embrace the "complexity" of the "incarnate." While her medium is language, the mode of consciousness she develops in her characters and appeals to in her readers through narrative structure is phenomenal, fleshy, and thus essentially inarticulate. Such is the "secret motion" of Dorothea's unreasoning despair in her honeymoon boudoir, or Mary Garth's "miserable" perception of "something indefinable, something like the resolute suppression of a pain in Mr. Farebrother's manner," upon admitting her love for Fred Vincy (*M*, 359). In both cases, and indeed in the most significant communications and realizations of *Middlemarch*, Eliot makes the recognition of one's personal reality, or that of another individual, expressly non-deliberative. What then, we must ask, was at stake for Eliot in associating not only these moments of revelation with phenomenal consciousness but with the purpose of her own "aesthetic teaching" as a novelist? How does the phenomenal mode allow characters to see themselves and others differently, and why does Eliot privilege the difference of things revealed "just in the flesh"?

"What is it," asks Rosamond of Will Ladislaw, "what is it that you gentlemen are thinking of when you are with Mrs. Casaubon?" "Herself," says Will, "When one sees a perfect woman, one never thinks of her attributes—one is conscious of her presence" (*M*, 300). This consciousness of presence speaks not only to Will's unique perception and appreciation of Dorothea, but to the kind of phenomenal consciousness that guides him, above all other characters in the novel, in his interactions with the object world. Earlier in their friendship, for example, while discussing poetry and poets, Will tells Dorothea, ardently, "You *are* a poem," and while the meaning of this remark is explored no further than in Dorothea's smile of pleasure, the implications of it go beyond the adoration of the speaker (*M*, 155). In essence, the presence and poetry of Dorothea that interest Will are related in the way that both speak to a kind of Kantian "purposiveness" that he perceives in her.¹⁰ Form and meaning are not correlative or related: they are one and the same. The analogy of a poem works here much as it does for Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, as he compares the human body to a work of art. As the expressiveness of a poem is not the calculable sum of its words, a painting the conglomeration of its colors, or a novel the facts of its plot, so the style and habits of our movements seem to be informed by a cause both inseparable from flesh, bone, and nerve, yet guiding them in a distinctly semi-conscious way. These forms of art and the phenomenal "synthesized" body Merleau-Ponty describes stand together in that they are, as he puts it, "beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed."¹¹ For Merleau-Ponty, Eliot, and even G. H. Lewes in *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874), the use of a poem or artwork as a figure of "synthesis" is essential to expressing both the unanalyzable way in which we recognize others as themselves and the non-deliberative sense of physical relations which guide subjects through the object world. This is centralized for both Merleau-Ponty and Lewes in the implicit perception one has of the relations between the parts of one's body—in the way, seemingly, without thought one knows a particular book to be in arm's reach, and yet that another is not. Even so, and long before phenomenology proper, Lewes proposed a fundamental principle of relation-perception through a subject's constant, unthought sensing of bodily orientation: a synthesizing principle of how we perceive things going together before poising them for contemplation.¹² It is a consciousness that is fundamentally *of* the body.

Individually, Will and Dorothea are represented in recurring collision with their worlds—run-ins with any variety of convention or expectation (whether their own or others'), which both set these two apart from the rest of the novel's characters and unite them in a likeness of perceptual idiosyncrasy.¹³ Indeed, these collisions go unperceived not only by others but often, initially, by Will and Dorothea themselves as, instead of a crash of vehicles or improvident meeting of a nose and a door, *these* collisions take place in a sphere of morals and aesthetics: will or desire butting up against what is perceived as given, provided, or prohibited by circumstance.

Dorothea is presented as experiencing these collisions on account of what her sister, Celia, sees as a lack of vision. As Celia chides her at the beginning of the novel: "You went on as you always do, never looking just where you are, and treading in the wrong place. You always see what nobody else sees; it is impossible to satisfy you; yet you never see what is quite plain" (*M*, 23). Later, making amends to Sir James for her sister's ignorance of his advances, she explains more precisely that he should not "be angry with Dodo; she does not see things. She thought so much about the cottages" (*M*, 36). Here, Dorothea's inability to "see" certain interpersonal facts is bound up with the overly ardent nature of her "thought." So focused on the value of her proposed improvements to the cottages on Sir James's estate, Dorothea neglects Sir James's interest in herself. One gets the sense from Eliot's representation of this situation that the perception of inter-social realities relies on a degree of unclaimed space in the mind—the reserve of a margin of consciousness, held apart from even (and perhaps particularly) one's most absorbing passions. Interpersonal consciousness is peripheral. In her authorial voice, Eliot identifies this kind of indirect consciousness as the "persistent" self: "Strange," as she writes, "that some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and waits for us" (*M*, 104). The quality or character of this "persistent self," its patience and composure, is something that seems to haunt Eliot's novel, like a creature one rarely sees but nevertheless finds ever-present. The feeling of such a presence, in the way Eliot describes it, also carries resonance with Antonio Damasio's description of the "feeling of knowing" and "sense of self" in *The Feeling of What Happens*: "Images that constitute knowing and sense of self—the feeling of knowing—do not command center stage in your mind. They influence mind most powerfully and yet they generally remain to the side; they use discretion."¹⁴ The thought that the "discretion" of

this self could be a significant reason for its power will return in our discussion of the limits of self-consciousness for Eliot.

The question of how we think when we're not thinking about it, though, or what we see when not consciously seeing, is particularly problematic with a character like Dorothea, whose "ardour" (*M*, 32) and "theoretic mind" (*M*, 2) seem from the first to constitute her nature and separate it from those of others. This difference is echoed in Mrs. Cadwallader's reassurance to Sir James of the problems Dorothea would have posed as a wife: "Miss Brooke," as she tells him, is "a girl who would have been requiring you to see stars by daylight" (*M*, 38). But what are these stars? What are these impossible things that "nobody else sees" but which have Dorothea so fixated? As Eliot makes clear during her heroine's progressively disillusioning marriage to Casaubon (a character who, even more than Dorothea, seems cursed by a life of grasping after that which no one, even his own secret self, sees the worth of), those stars are largely fiction. They are the "lamps of knowledge" which Dorothea initially hopes will "illuminate principle" and provide "a standing ground from which all truth could be seen more truly" (*M*, 42). The novel thus associates knowledge and insight not only with literal vision, but with a particular mode and perspective of command. While this would seem to mirror the position of a third-person narrator as well, by allying Dorothea with the novel's own tentative omniscience, Eliot, in first great phase of the novel (Dorothea's marriage and disappointment with Casaubon), uses the very figure of literal sight and bodily perception to unhinge both Dorothea and her novel's conception of the real from a position of omniscient vision.

In the first harrowing phases of her marriage to Casaubon, Dorothea's altered view of these potential pedestals and lamps amounts to a crisis of faith. But it is a shift in conviction that Eliot indicates less through direct (or indirect) discourse from Dorothea, and more by an actual shift in the narrative's representation of perception. The eye of the narrative has always unflinchingly rested on the significance of the tactile, visible world—whether the "brown pond" (*M*, xiv) imagined in the prologue's swan analogy, or Casaubon's white mole and smile "like wintry sunshine" (*M*, 15)—details that suddenly shake the text, and the reader, into a crystalizing sense of incarnate presence. But Dorothea herself, before the trip to Rome and return home as a wife, has never paid much heed to the world around her body, so that when the novel brings us into her blue-green boudoir on one of the first mornings of her return, it is as though she has been newly enveloped in a sense of her body and the draw of her own perception—both kinetic and

visual. The narrative eye and Dorothea's eye have, one feels, come to a unique consensus as she looks out of her bow-window at the view from Lowick Manor:

and in the morning, when Dorothea passed from her dressing-room into the blue-green boudoir that we know of, she saw the long avenue of limes, lifting their trunks from the white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before. . . . She was glowing from her morning toilette as only youth can glow: there was a gem-like brightness on her coiled hair and in her hazel eyes; there was warm red life in her lips; her throat had a breathing whiteness above the differing white of the fur which itself seemed to wind about her neck and cling down her blue-grey pelisse with a tenderness gathered from her own, a sentient commingled innocence which kept its loveliness against the crystalline purity of the outdoor snow. As she laid the cameo cases on the table in the bow-window, she unconsciously kept her hands on them, immediately absorbed in looking out on the still, white enclosure which made up her visible world. (*M*, 188–89)

A prelude to her meditations on the frustrations of marriage and her feelings of uselessness as a gentlewoman and wife, this narrative moment conveys even more strongly the potency of Dorothea's physical presence. She is "glowing" in her youth and from the steam of the bath; her lips are warm with "red life"; her throat is breathing and tender. The "loveliness" invoked by the narrator proceeds precisely from the "sentient" quality of Dorothea; a quality that, itself, comes from the intricate instances of "commingling" in this description: her breath with her skin, her skin with the white fur, her clothing with the outdoor world. "A sentient commingled innocence"—Eliot uses these words to capture the aesthetic experience of this moment in a deeper way than simple description might. Dorothea's particular innocence, even in this moment of sadness and disappointment in her marriage—this moment of feeling, indeed, a sort of failure in love—comes from the kind of "commingling" of self and world that Eliot presents as the very function of her nature: she at once is "immediately absorbed" by her surroundings and "keeps" herself distinct against them. By phenomenally acknowledging Dorothea's absorption, her belonging to this world of other objects, being, herself, a very tactile object among them, Eliot paradoxically asserts Dorothea's fore-given distinctiveness. "Sentient commingled innocence" does hold its own, this is to say, does "keep

its loveliness against the . . . purity of the outdoor snow,” because it is of a nature all the more pure for its tenderness. It is outward-looking, commingling itself with the “visible world” of which it is eager to be a part. Its strength is its vulnerability.

This moment in *Middlemarch* represents a number of significant facts in a significant way. Our heroine is not alive, breathing, and interesting to us because she is engaged in conversation, inner dialogue, or even some kind of activity—drawing cottage plans, crying, or even *being* observed by someone else. She is in a moment of suspension from doing: she lays her hands on the cameo boxes and, yet, is unconscious of them and her gesture. Eliot gives us a description of Dorothea here that is all body and perception, and in which body forms an integral part of perception; something that is told by the narrative eye and the way it commingles not only with Dorothea’s perceptive body and vision, but in the way that body itself mingles with the “visible world.” In this moment of looking, the heroine is at once a richly living, breathing body and yet seemingly “unconscious” of it. She, like the narrative, is “absorbed in looking”—*not* in thinking about the symbolic “enclosure” of her gentlewoman’s boudoir and her ever-narrowing prospects for a happy, active life (a symbolism which Eliot at once tempts us to identify and warns us from identifying here). To be “absorbed in looking” connotes a type of phenomenal consciousness, or proto-consciousness, which we have yet to see in the text; and it is a type of consciousness and perception that requires a feeling body.

In this moment of absorption, Eliot is introducing not only a new possibility of perception, but a new way of being for her character, an association which is significant to the phenomenal nature of both. This is a mode of perception and being that can only come out when Dorothea is suspended from activity and purpose-driven thought. For a moment, there is no categorizing of things as practical or impractical, noble or ignoble. Her “theoretic mind,” as Eliot calls it, has been subsumed in “absorption,” both filling out into the visible world and being filled by it. As opposed to the earlier desire to find the lamps and summits of masculine knowledge, those means to assume and aid (if also to objectify) the world, here Dorothea is absolutely in the *midst* of her world, a position which is communicated in the obscurity of her monochromatic view. From the outlook of her high bow-window, she is nevertheless, optically speaking, as good as in the middle of that snowy “flat” before her. Indeed, there is no vista.

The meditation that follows this perceptual moment is enough, as mentioned above, to make one think of this description as symbolic.

As Eliot writes, in alignment with Dorothea's vision:

Meanwhile there was the snow and the low arch of dun vapour—there was the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid—where the sense of connection with a manifold pregnant existence had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision, instead of coming from without in claims that would have shaped her energies. . . . Her blooming, full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight. (*M*, 189)

Beyond the symbolism that Eliot makes explicit here, the narrative interest seems to be in just what constitutes this said "moral imprisonment": a feeling of disconnection, ineffectiveness, of being a kind of "ghost" herself, in a vapory, "vanishing world." Importantly, though, it is specifically the subjective "sense" and "feeling" of these things that constitutes such imprisonment. Dorothea, herself, is "blooming" and "full-pulsed"; she is, as the narrative makes so complexly palpable, "comingled" in that "manifold pregnant existence" through the potency of her own sentient being. If we seem to be getting the portrait of a kind of existential, moral crisis in this narrative of Dorothea's thoughts, the narrative of her more primary perception suggests a surety of connection that is more vital; more vital, indeed, than it was even before this crisis. For even while Dorothea seems consciously to crave activity, efficiency, and industry to make her feel a part of existence, the meditation ends with a conclusion that sums up the more primary sense of being and belonging in the passage: "She rose quickly, and went out of the room, hurrying along the corridor, with the irresistible impulse to go and see her husband and inquire if she could do anything for him. . . . She felt as if all the morning's gloom would vanish if she could see her husband glad because of her presence" (*M*, 190). In this conclusion, we see a succinct duality in Dorothea's consciousness: there is a worth in doing, and a worth in being. And the phrasing here is important. It is specifically to "see" him glad that will banish the gloom, and for him to be so, not because of her attractiveness or the practical aid she can offer, but "*because of her presence*" (emphasis added). A longing at once basic and grandiose, Dorothea's desire for her presence to *cause* this gladness displaces the exigency of doing and grounds her worth in the reality of herself: her presence, in that moment, when she should appear in the library before this other being. If Dorothea

is, on the one hand, desperate for reassurance of her participation in the manifold world of common life, she is, on the other, even more fundamentally (if unconsciously) sure of her participation. Like Will's explanation to Rosamond that, more than "thinking" of Dorothea, he is "conscious of her presence," here Dorothea non-verbally develops a similar consciousness of being a presence herself. The passage, through its narration of perception of the consciousness subtending Dorothea's articulated thought, has developed the conclusion of self-regard that results in and is testified to by her action: a foundational conclusion that she *should* have the ability to cause gladness with the wholeness she offers as a human presence.

I have focused on this passage in particular for the way it communicates several key aspects of the relation between sensuous perception and conception of self in *Middlemarch*. Firstly, it asserts a kind of existential certainty that is given in the subject and whose givenness is manifested in un-willed perception, in a consciousness, to use Block's term, not "poised" for self-reflexive use.¹⁵ Like the full, deep detail of one's surroundings or the thoughts of others, "presence" is something that at once comprehends the self and is beyond the self's consciousness.¹⁶ It is at once what gives actuality and what is separate from one's observations and control. Secondly, the passage demonstrates that it is the commingling of self-in-world through sensuous perception that gives value to this existential self-certainty. Through its own alignment with her perception—the phenomenal actuality of Dorothea's body and mind—the narrative merges the character's presence with the actuality of the landscape she observes; they belong together not so much by symbolic meaning as by their mutual givenness in a particular coordinate of time and space. Dorothea is *able* to be absorbed in the perception of this world also, however, because of the significant shift of perspective it represents: away from her former focus on peaks, lamps, and stars from which to view the world and think about it rightly, and toward, or rather into, the experience of being in the midst. In this way, the sensuous experience both of her own bodily presence in relation to her surroundings, and of this view of her new home, involve a paradoxical reorganization of how we think about consciousness. In the first place, we, as readers, see what she feels but does not see (the synthesizing function of her own presence); yet, because she experiences her position *in* rather than surveying *over* her world, she is denied the ontological certainty of belonging (something she wants to have confirmed by Casaubon's glad reaction to her presence). In the second place, however, it is this very phenomenal sense of belonging

that Eliot creates through her narrative—the very thing confirmed by Dorothea’s embedded point of view.

In this way, the realism I am describing in *Middlemarch* is of neither a sociological, nor an epistemological, nor a photographic nature. Rather, it is an effort on Eliot’s part to evoke and investigate what gives one the feeling of “reality,” of being inside one’s world, and the contradictions of perception this state entails. As Eliot herself wrote in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” the task of an author should be to recognize herself writing from a “point” rather than a “pedestal,” and, while she does not explicitly say why in her essay, the narrative of *Middlemarch* does offer a potential reason.¹⁷ Writing a realist novel, this is to say, requires not so much a complex interweave of characters and minute description of scenes and objects; rather it is the narration of one’s apprehension of a particular placement of oneself in the world, a “process of Orientation” (to use Lewes’s phrasing) in and to that world, which gives forth a continual experience of being both a given whole in one’s own right and a part of another whole—which, by reason of this embeddedness, one can sense but never fully comprehend.

What I would like to posit as a function of this alliance in Eliot’s writing between novel-writing and the phenomenal experience of reality (as well as the realization of self-meaning that comes from feeling oneself embedded in a given, relational world) is that this mode of perception is also specifically aesthetic. Of course, writers in cognitive science as well as transitional object theorists have claimed the relation between object and subject to be the basis of consciousness in its most basic manifestation; this claim is particularly characteristic of D. W. Winnicott, with his concept of “transitional phenomena.”¹⁸ With such rich theories of perception and its psychology, it might seem unnecessary at best, at worst, limiting, to argue that such an experience as Dorothea’s in her boudoir is necessarily aesthetic. Yet the point is forced by the novel way in which Eliot, herself, along with her mid-Victorian contemporaries, was redefining what the aesthetic *was*, as well as by the clear similarity between her definition of the aesthetic and the nature of narrated perception in *Middlemarch*. Eliot’s aesthetic task as a realist required her to show how aesthetic perception differs from perception more generally and how it can elicit the kind of phenomenal self-realization that her novels showcase.

The purview of aesthetics in *Middlemarch* is clearly broader than the concerns of formal art or even the artist's perspective. Will and Dorothea's early conversation about art and beauty in Rome only makes explicit what is at once a very philosophically particular and practically expansive understanding of the aesthetic that Eliot shapes in the novel. To begin, and in line with much of the aesthetic philosophy she inherited from the previous century, it is a kind of perception that involves, on the one hand, an immediate, almost visceral reaction and, on the other, a judgment of value. Ambivalent in her condemnation of the art in Rome and what often seems "a consecration to ugliness rather than beauty," Dorothea does identify the cause of that ugliness in her inability to see "the reason" of this art. While she can say that such works are "wonderful," she maintains that "the feeling is often low and brutal, and sometimes even ridiculous." When she does recognize the worth of something, moreover, she says that it "takes [her] at once as noble" (*M*, 153). In this way, Eliot shows Dorothea using almost exclusively moral terms in her response to art. However, Eliot also suggests that that response is something more immediate, even instinctual, than considered. This would be a case in point for someone like Ruskin, who promoted the "moral sense" as the primary organ concerned with aesthetic experience (which, for him, was also something immediate and above, or at least always prior to, intellectual judgment).¹⁹ Indeed, while the narrative seems to indicate that the "reason" of this art might be something Dorothea could learn, which would then open her to its appreciation, this would not be in accord with the immediacy of feeling that she nevertheless expects from aesthetic experience as such. An instance of such immediacy occurs in the very first chapter as Dorothea and Celia sort through their mother's jewels. The power that Dorothea senses in the jewels is something almost supernatural. She claims that it would make her head spin to wear them, that indeed she "should not know how to walk" (*M*, 6). Sense of self and aesthetic judgment are imbued in each other, as this foreboding implies. Dorothea's very literal, bodily sense of self (thinking of that, as we did before with Lewes, as a sense of orientation) would be thrown off by wearing something she feels is contrary to what she calls the "complexion" of her soul—a phrase that poetically marries both moral and aesthetic perception (*M*, 9). The immediacy of this reaction is even deeper, and even more visceral than Dorothea's reaction to the art in Rome. And while the specific moral judgment attached to her assessment of Roman art (as low and ridiculous) is something up for debate in the

world of the novel (particularly as Eliot continues to unfold the potency of Dorothea's mistakes—both aesthetic and otherwise), what remains is the notion that aesthetic perception is something that necessarily involves both literal, sensory perception and moral discernment, and that communicates immediately through those senses. The aesthetic is never simply an object or body of work, but a “reason,” a purpose, embodied, which requires something more than even well-trained eyes to see. Yet this sense of “reason” on which Dorothea insists, and to which she responds more strongly than to any technical merit, is in fact a kind of incognito presence of another term Eliot defined more explicitly in her prose: form. This is the term that, when discussed by Eliot, immediately resonates with certain moments, like the one above, which one might not otherwise understand as aesthetic. However, with Eliot's specific understanding of form, which we'll go on now to consider, it becomes clearer how and why the moments of “feeling real” in her novels necessitate a mutual dependence between aesthetics and morality: apprehending and representing the real dimensions of any object, emotion, or scene, meant for Eliot an invitation to confront (whether with joy or loathing) the dimensions of one's own experience—and of one's deeds—in the world.

In Eliot's “Notes on Form in Art,” written in 1868, she describes “form” both in its general and artistic sense as denoting “unlikeness” and a “whole.” “A flash of light,” as she writes, “is a whole compared with the darkness which precedes and follows it.”²⁰ In specifically artistic terms, this wholeness is achieved and conveyed through the “structure or composition” of what Eliot calls “a set of relations” (“N,” 233). The “set of relations” expresses the essential complexity of form—that it is not simply a relation between parts, but a relation of relations, a whole that is defined by the specific disposition of its parts in their groupings. In an interesting inversion of Merleau-Ponty's comparison of a human body to a work of art, Eliot calls upon the human body to express what she sees as the living quality of form, “a constant interchange of effects among its parts” (“N,” 234). “It is wholeness not merely of mass,” she writes, “but of strict and manifold dependence” (“N,” 234). Such language, the juxtaposition of those terms “strict” and “manifold,” readily brings to mind the kind of symbiosis described by Darwin in his descriptions of natural selection, further echoed in the way Eliot describes poetic forms created by emotion and “the recurrence of its elements in adjustment with certain given conditions of sound, language, action, or environment” (“N,” 235). What I wish to lay stress on, however, is Eliot's specific notion of these “wholes” in art

as the expression of “emotional states” (“N,” 235). There is, or ought to be, according to her argument, a unity in the effective representation of emotion, a unity conveyed by repetition. Yet such a unity is also always necessarily “growing” (a term Eliot uses frequently in this essay). If emotion can be conceived as a “state,” it is hardly static, or even homogenous. Rather, it is expressed through the “dependence,” “consensus,” and “grouping” (“N,” 234) of elements; not the sum of an equation, but rather the algorithm of its factors.

Returning to Dorothea’s aesthetic attitudes in *Middlemarch*, we can see that what might be more important than a particular moral judgment of “base” or “noble” is the way in which Dorothea is attuned to the *formal* potency of art. Rather than as a “shell which should hold emotional expression” or “ingenious pattern-work,” or even as mere decoration, art, through Dorothea’s perspective, communicates an agency, something that means (“N,” 232). And the use of a moral vocabulary expresses this, a vocabulary constructed for the description of purposes that necessarily affect the lives of others. Acknowledging this alliance between formal perception and moral responsiveness necessitates a dual reconsideration of aesthetic and moral meaning. What the two things share is a concern in relations of relations. The quality of intention, therefore, like Eliot’s definition of form, is complex and dynamic.

Middlemarch takes the proposition from “Notes on Form” that form is the expression of an emotional state a step farther, affirming that no “state” can occur or be interpreted in a vacuum. If the form of a work of art is defined by its particular wholeness, it is a whole that depends upon and exists within the context of greater wholes—the group of people looking at the painting, the systems of belief and habit that have formed their minds and feelings, the place of those systems among other systems. It is in this sense that Eliot interfuses the moral and aesthetic: not as a subordination of aesthetic means to moral ends, but as a way to evoke the deep psychological reach and potency of form itself. As she so famously writes in *Middlemarch*, then, of the way we all “walk about well-wadded with stupidity” and the way this dulls what might otherwise be a “keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life” (*M*, 135), so we might imagine the situation concerning our perception of meaning in art. There too, she seems to suggest, is a “roar which lies on the other side of silence”; perhaps the other side of a mute painting, a curve of silent sculpture, or the narrative form of a novel (*M*, 194).

Such an interpretation of aesthetic perception—of the perception, that is, of definite intention in the form of objects or configurations of them—runs a great risk of sounding mystical, or at the very least mistaken, substituting a critical attitude with inevitable psychological projection. Yet the fact that such aesthetic perception is hardly limited to encounters with art objects in *Middlemarch* conveys a way in which aesthetic experience inheres more fundamentally to humanistic experience for Eliot. If it be mere projection or pathetic fallacy, this is to say, it must be a fallacy that guides our primal judgments of and movements in the world. As George Levine writes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*,

The intensity and formal complexity of George Eliot's novels . . . must be credited in part to her refusal to disentangle representational precision, psychological states, formal coherence, and moral significance. Getting it right was for her no simple matter of recording external facts precisely, but of making herself capable of the most complete possible honesty by opening her mind and feelings to the otherness of things and people.²¹

Yet “getting it right” does not seem to be a concern for the author only. Being as open as possible to the “otherness of things and people” also involves being attentive to the way those others are also constantly engaged in “getting it right,” or at least, like the author, trying to. Contrary to Levine’s larger argument that the purpose of physical detail in Eliot’s work is to act as a “marker in the stage of consciousness” for her characters, critics have asserted the very real importance of attention to the actual and commonplace as the defining quality of realist art.²² Yet between these two sides of the tug-of-war over what realism is seems to be the forgotten feature discussed previously in context of Dorothea’s morning view from chapter 28: namely, what it is that constitutes and gives forth the experience of reality, and what that has to do with the aesthetic task of the novelist. As I will continue to argue through the following discussion of theories of perception (both from current researchers and Eliot herself), the recognition and designation of reality-perception is founded first in the apprehension of particular configurations of the object-relations and proportions of one’s surroundings (much as one could ideally perceive and feel those things in the form of a work of art). Yet, secondly, and indeed most importantly, the realization of reality entails apprehending oneself as a *part* of this configuration. This is the realization that we will discover to be the ethical upshot of Eliot’s redefinition of the moment of feeling real in *Middlemarch*.

Theories of just what this "experience of reality" is have been proposed and expanded by phenomenologists, cognitive scientists, and moral theorists alike, and the interdisciplinary nature of such theories is only growing. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty tries to describe what constitutes of experience of reality through an investigation of its opposite: the experience of delusions, dreams, hallucinations, and so forth. As he explains, even patients who experience hallucinations regularly and who appear fully engaging with the objects of their hallucinatory states nevertheless indicate a qualitative difference between hallucinatory situations and those perceptible to other subjects. There is a perceived and reiterated depth to the object-world that the hallucinatory experiences lack, despite their powerful sensory presence. The gesture towards such thinner visual phenomena in order to relieve the contrasting (and convincing) depth of real experience is also crucial to more recent metaphysical defenses of realism against relativism. Crawford Elder argues that reality is crucially "mind-independent," something we realize through persistence of qualia, the phenomenon of sameness across time.²³ Elder finds the depth quality to reside precisely in the phenomena of sameness, which we might even think of as an object's "persistent self," to use Eliot's phrase. Drew Leder formulates a similar notion of reality-depth nicely: "The inexhaustible depth of the perceptual object, ever promising more than I now see, is precisely what lends to the texture of reality, distinguishing it from the flat image or hallucination."²⁴ In this way, Leder supposes a kind of essentially textured or dimensional vision taking place: a vision, on the one level, of the frame of the object "I now see," and on another level, of the infinity of other views I cannot. It is this second level, something that is sensed rather than roundly observed (even as "inexhaustible depth" necessarily pushes the limits of our perception), that somehow establishes the real quality of reality.

This perception of depth and texture in (and as) reality, moreover, is crucially tied to the effacement of one's own self-perception. For Leder, this effacement is what occurs as any organ in the body comes to actively perceive: in the moment it perceives a thing in the object world, it ceases to perceive itself. As Leder writes: "Insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it discloses."²⁵ This may be seen, for example, in the way my hand, pressing against a warm bench in the sun, ceases to perceive itself as it feels the warm wood's resistance. In Leder's leading example, the eye, just as it is generally our most active and relied-upon organ of

perception, is also incapable of seeing itself without the aid of a mirror. This situation discloses the main fact of reality and touchstone of Leder's thought: that "my being-in-the-world depends upon my body's self-effacing transitivity."²⁶ That is to say, "being-in-the-world" (or what we can think of in the context of this discussion as the experience of reality) and complete self-perception are inimical to one another. And the point, for Leder, is hardly coincidental. Rather, this self-effacement is a prerequisite for the ability to engage with a world outside our own bodies and selves. This "pregnant little fact" (*M*, 182), to use Eliot's own phrase, is similarly essential to Merleau-Ponty's observation of how the limits of self-perception are what enable us to act at all. The signatures of a self, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, such as the gait of my walk, habits of gesture, facial movements, the sound of my voice—the things which make me recognizable to others *as* myself—are the very things that reside in the blind spot of my self-perception. They proceed from me, perhaps even preceding me, yet are as foreign to my awareness as the dances of a foreign land that I have never seen. Yet for Merleau-Ponty, as for Leder, there is meaning in this concealment. The self that resides in my blindspot is significantly hidden. Were I able to observe these signature qualities, to be aware of the movements I do not generally, willfully dictate, Merleau-Ponty predicts a result of absolute paralysis. In a state of complete self-consciousness, I would cease, in effect, to be an agent.

In Eliot's essay "Looking Inward" from *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, her assumed bachelor persona struggles with a very similar temptation towards the wish for such total self-awareness. In Eliot's text, however, it is a much more explicitly moral struggle. Here, one's acceptance of the limits of one's own self-awareness is directly relational to one's acceptance of the limits of others as well. Indeed, in the collection of often sternly critical essays that make up *Impressions*, "Looking Inward" stands as a kind of introduction and apology for Eliot's persona, Theophrastus Such. As he explains to his readership, "the more intimately I seem to discern your weaknesses, the stronger to me is the proof that I share them."²⁷ More central to Such's concerns, however, is the dilemma between accepting his blindspot as a part of the human condition and striving to correct this liability. His examples are numerous, but the anxiety over the limits of self-awareness is perhaps best illustrated in his anecdote of the hornpipe dance from his childhood:

When I was a lad I danced a hornpipe with arduous scrupulosity, and while suffering pangs of pallid shyness was yet proud of my superiority as a dancing pupil, imagining for myself a high place in the estimation of beholders; but I can now picture the amusement they had in the incongruity of my solemn face and ridiculous legs. What sort of a hornpipe am I dancing now? ("L," 5)

The point of issue here is not the ridiculousness of the boy's legs themselves, but rather the gap, the incongruity, between how he sees himself and how he seems to others: what lies *between* the inwardly felt earnestness of "arduous scrupulosity," pride, and solemnity, and the evident lack of grace in his movements. He did not know what he was doing, in short, precisely in the moment when he felt he did most strongly. While there is a flavor of unease and paranoia in the memory of this situation, Such admits that this disjunction between self-perception and appearance-to-others is not always a matter of failure or cause for shame and self-suspicion. Taking the example of Rousseau, Such writes that "half our impressions of his character come not from what he means to convey, but from what he unconsciously enables us to discern" ("L," 7). This unconscious enablement is what he calls the "naïve veracity of self-presentation"—a phenomenon neither good nor bad, but native to one's humanity and necessary to our ability to form our understandings of one another ("L," 7). Indeed, this blindness seems to be a kind of loophole for the veracious self, the "persistent self" (*M*, 104) to return to our earlier term, to sneak through when self-consciousness is not present to mark and reform it. "Naïve veracity" is rather akin, in this way, to Merleau-Ponty and Leder's thoughts on the functionality of our blindspots of self-consciousness. They are not simply *there*, to be caught and monitored with mirrors as closely as possible; rather, they are what *allow* our selves to engage with the world, to act and to communicate with our surroundings and other beings. The trouble of this condition for Such, and for Eliot herself as we will continue to discuss in the case of *Middlemarch*, is when the fact of that veracity, the fact that others see parts of oneself that one cannot see, let alone control, is denied by the subject; when a *particular* self-perception is perceived as the only possible reality (a fallacy similar to denying the manifold relations between relations, that occasion, according to Eliot, our perception of form, as discussed above). For Eliot, this necessarily leads to seeing oneself as the *only* real thing. This mode of implicit self-privileging, moreover, does not simply distort and confuse self-reckoning; it warps one's ability to engage with, by acting within, reality. It is the difference, we might say, between a blindspot, which

everyone has, and total, obfuscating blindness. Such calls this problem a kind of “inward squint” and wonders whether such a defect could not be corrected in the same way a literal ocular defect might be. His notion of correction, however, is singularly similar to the way Eliot represents Dorothea’s desires for objective knowledge in *Middlemarch*. “The standing ground worth striving after,” Such writes, “seemed to be some Delectable Mountain, whence I could see things in *proportions* as little as possible determined by that self-partiality which certainly plays a necessary part in our bodily sustenance, but has a starving effect on the mind” (“L,” 13, emphasis added). Like Dorothea, Such, too, seems to see the prospect of objective knowledge as the sole and deeply desirable remedy to the dangers and frustrations of subjective existence. Yet what both seek, or believe themselves to seek, is like the state of total self-awareness predicated by Merleau-Ponty; it would come at the price of paralysis, of ceasing to be a part of the reality one pretends to take in from the vista of this mountain. By wishing to view the objective “proportions” of reality, one takes oneself out of the ratio. By doing this, moreover, if it were indeed possible to do so, one would end up in a similar position to that of having the gravest “inward squint”: by “curing” one’s ignorance completely, one would no longer be able to perceive. To an extent, then—as Such seems to obliquely resolve in the essay, and in line with Leder’s argument about the recession of self-perception in order *to* perceive—limitedness is necessary to moral vision. Between “curing” one’s “inward squint” and solipsistically denying it, we find that there must lie a middle stance: of not only granting the gaps in self-awareness, but seeing them as the opportunity for our most primary agency as “beings”—and as the starting place of empathy as well.

V. “THE ART OF VISION”

From the moment of her return from Rome and morning meditations at the bow-window, Dorothea’s task is largely one of finding this middle stance; of finding the mean between accepting her limitations as a subject and self-reflexively striving to correct errors of both judgment and feeling. Criticism of *Middlemarch* and of Eliot’s work in general has dwelt long and patiently on the problems and impulses of sympathy.²⁸ Taking the famous passage concerning “moral stupidity” as their cue, critics like Hillis Miller have concerned themselves with the problem of other minds in the novel—of a character’s inability or unwillingness to imagine another’s mind and experience of reality.²⁹

Being “well-wadded with stupidity” is a part of the human condition (even for the “quickest”) according to Eliot; yet does that obviate the obligation to *try* to feel with another? If not, then where, as realist critics, do we locate the *effort* of feeling? What most critics have neglected, it seems, is the thing—whether organ, function, phenomenon, experience—upon which sympathy as a phenomenon is predicated in *Middlemarch*. Is the feeling something that simply happens to a person? Is it a part of one’s given nature? Is it co-dependant with intellect or with imagination? As I want to argue here, and to some extent against notions of sympathy based in the exercise of will, any experience or movement of sympathy for Eliot seems to be 1) an effective cause and enactment of one’s engagement with reality, and 2) only possible through an affirmation of one’s self as an integral *part* of a larger reality. What I wish to show, moreover, is the way in which aesthetic perception in *Middlemarch* is necessary to the *experience* of such affirmation by causing and enabling a shift in how one sees.

Peggy DesAutels proposes a direct, and indeed causal, relation between aesthetic perception and morals through gestalt theory. Similar to I. A. Richards, Chanita Glicksohn, and Joseph Goodblatt more recently, who argue for gestalt psychology as the key to our understanding of metaphor, DesAutels argues that “gestalt shifts play a significant role in the mental processes used to determine the moral salencies of particular situations.”³⁰ The view of gestalts she presents in this chapter is that they are not only “significant” to moral perception, but “common and unavoidable” as cognitive processes.³¹ In this way, moral perception is helpfully naturalized and relocated to a more primary level of experience. DesAutels uses an example from Stephen Covey to illustrate the potency of such a shift. In the example, Covey, who has been aggravated by the unruly children on a subway train to the point of speaking to their father “with what [he] felt was unusual patience and restraint,” finds out from the man’s reply that they are coming from the hospital where the man’s wife has just died. “Suddenly,” Covey writes, “I *saw* things differently, and because I *saw* differently, I *thought* differently.”³² The salient quality here, though not marked specifically by DesAutels, is the primacy of “seeing” *before* “thinking,” the sensual before the deliberative. The shift that takes place is one that simply happens; yet it is something that happens inside. The objective facts of the situation have not changed—the man and his children have been in the same fresh state of shock all the time—but Covey’s experience is of a stark reconfiguration of his surroundings, a reconfiguration inimical to how he formerly saw. This total shift of

gestalt is what DesAutels calls a “framework shift.”³³ Carol Gilligan conceives of such shifts as involving “different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment: self, others, and the relationship between them.”³⁴ We could say, in this way, that our perception of the salencies of certain situations, our perception of their meanings as emergent wholes, speaks to three distinct qualities of moral perception. First, the diverse moral meanings we may perceive in situations are, as gestalts, “not readily integrable”³⁵ Rather they represent *necessary* shifting, like the classic example of the “duck-rabbit” figure (we can see one or the other, but not both at once). Secondly, the necessity of such shifting and the example of Covey’s experience communicate the unreflective nature of this reconfiguration; it is something our minds “do” more than something we self-reflexively “will.” Thirdly, and most crucially, the perceiver of the gestalt and experiencer of the shift is also a part of the configuration she perceives. Thus, *unlike* the duck-rabbit example, in the situation of moral gestalts the new object-perception means new self-perception as well. Because the configuration has changed, because the “relationships” between things have changed, I almost have the experience of being in a new place myself. The shift of perception has moved me.

In *Movement and Vision in George Eliot’s Novels* (1959), Reva Stump proposed the dynamic between movement and vision as the guiding thematic in the metaphors of Eliot’s novels. Throughout her rather systematic analysis, Stump also makes it clear that the metaphors of interest are specifically moral ones, as is the kind of “vision” they describe. Stump directly designates this as “moral vision” and defines it as “the deeply felt perception of the human condition, a perception so deeply felt that it must profoundly influence what one is in relation to his fellow human beings.”³⁶ Like the theories of moral gestalts, Stump’s notion of “moral vision” could imply a sudden and radical event—something that happens. Like perception itself, moral vision is something one experiences without consciously or willfully causing it (rather akin in this way to S. T. Coleridge’s primary imagination). This formulation also shares with the gestalt theories the important factor of self-adjustment. “Moral vision” does not simply influence how one sees oneself. It alters “what one is.” This “what”—something more primary even than identity—is fundamentally allied with a sense of “relations.” In other words, the reconfiguration of relations between self and world does not simply re-jumble the figures. It redefines and reforms what “a self” might be.

But what is the nature of this “moral vision”? In *Adam Bede*, Eliot describes “the art of vision” as something “we learn . . . by a good deal of hard experience, often with bruises and gashes incurred by taking things up by the wrong end, and fancying our space wider than it is.”³⁷ In *Middlemarch*, the mastery of this “art of vision” is similarly processual. It is also similarly learned through mistake-making. And the use of physical, embodied experience in the metaphor above is significant. It represents the kind of knowledge that one can only come to perceive through the “blind” body, around the rim of consciousness and that simultaneously familiarizes the subject with just how incomplete her presumed consciousness is. “Art of vision” is learned, in this way, through feeling the limits of one’s vision. Harkening back to the blindspots of self-awareness discussed by Merleau-Ponty, Leder, and Eliot herself in “Looking Inward,” the attainment of moral vision requires a kind of dual suspicion of and trust in the limits of one’s self-consciousness. “Bruises and gashes” can only be won through a kind of physicality that is necessarily blind, as the body learns its relations to the heft of an object or the configuration of a room. Moral vision is the kind of vision that comes, we might say, just when the subject isn’t looking.

This account of moral vision suggests the seriousness of the relationship for Eliot between the notion of self and the nature of one’s physical perceptions. Thus, reaching back to Dorothea’s discussion with Will about art in Rome, we can see the plausibility of Dorothea’s worries. The aesthetic object is not simply something one looks at or studies, a thing whose curves and style the eye roams over at will and may judge as it pleases. The work rather, in that it has a “form,” offers a particular configuration of the world, and necessarily affects the person who looks at it, proposing a shift in the way she herself exists as a moral being. Indeed, we might say in this way that one never looks without feeling, too; one never looks at a configuration without one’s mind being phenomenally reconfigured, itself—whether or not one condones or is even aware of it. Yet this kind of reconfiguration, rather than being limited to the sphere of art objects, is for Eliot simply an intensified experience of the way her characters experience the actual spaces, objects, and figures around themselves—and how they come to feel their own real places amongst them. Aesthetic experience is the apprehension of these relations and the re-relating of self to world that such perception incurs.

In the last book of *Middlemarch*, entitled "Sunrise and Sunset," nearly every character undergoes some integral moral reconfiguration—a rearrangement of his or her sense of relations to the world and a consequent revolution in *what* he or she conceives this self to be. For each of these characters, the rearrangements are significantly prompted or allied with a distinct environmental change—a feeling, that is, of *being* in a new place, whether because of a significant shift in circumstances or the feeling of difference opened by another's presence. Yet this feeling, while allied with stark environmental or object shifts, is also presented as a kind of culmination of minute actions and ways of seeing that have been building through the novel. A succinct but rich example of this comes in the character of Bulstrode. Earlier in the novel, Eliot writes of Bulstrode's "misdeeds" that they are "like the subtle muscular movements which are not taken account of in the consciousness, though they bring about the end that we fix our mind on and desire" (*M*, 461). In such a description, Bulstrode's offences are almost naturalized in order to show the very ambiguous place they hold in his consciousness. Like the muscles in his arm as he might reach for an object, they, the very things which enable the reach and attainment, are not a part of his consciousness. The "I" in charge of those muscle movements, like the "I" that has been in charge of Bulstrode's moral choices, practices that habit of "discretion" alluded to earlier in Damasio's account of selfhood. This is similar to the account of moral vision offered by Iris Murdoch when she speaks of the "piecemeal" nature of moral life: "The exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not in a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices."³⁸ Bulstrode is still making choices, is still an agent, but in a way peripheral to his own awareness. It is for this reason, moreover, that the awful explicit realization that Bulstrode does finally have of himself is so very mortifying for him. It is a revelation not of one bad decision, one mistaken explicit action, but of the person he has made himself to be without ever quite knowing it himself. In this way, surrounded by his townsmen in the hall after Raffles's death, the revelatory aesthetic experience of his environment is intimately related to what Murdoch would call the "darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality."³⁹

All eyes in the room were turned on Mr. Bulstrode, who, since the first mention of his name, had been going through a crisis of feeling almost too violent for his delicate frame to support. . . . The quick vision that his life was after all a failure, that he was a dishonoured man, and must quail before the glance of those towards whom he had habitually assumed the attitude of a reprover—that God had disowned him before men and left him unscreened to the triumphant scorn of those who were glad to have their hatred justified—the sense of utter futility in that equivocation with his conscience in dealing with the life of his accomplice, an equivocation which now turned venomously upon him with the full-grown fang of a discovered lie:—all this rushed through him like the agony of a terror which fails to kill, and leaves the ears still open to the returning wave of execration. The sudden sense of exposure after the re-established sense of safety came—not to the coarse organization of a criminal—but to the susceptible nerve of a man whose intensest being lay in such mastery and predominance as the conditions of his life had shaped for him. (*M*, 502–3)

Five days before this moment, on the morning of Raffles's death, the narrative shows Bulstrode at prayer, yet specifically withholds any of the "crisis of feeling" or "quick vision" felt in the quote above. Rather, Eliot speaks with doubt that prayer could ever "necessarily go to the roots of action": "Private prayer is inaudible speech, and speech is representative: who can represent himself just as he is, even in his own reflections?" (*M*, 490).⁴⁰ Comparing these two quotes, these two moments of self-reflection, one is aware of the experience in the hall as uniquely poignant and uniquely effective in figuring forth what Bulstrode "is." While *he* cannot "represent himself just as he is," the given, physically embedding situation in the town hall does represent it, and so plainly that the man himself can hardly physically bear the sight. Evoking Bulstrode's bodily reaction—not only literally, but figuratively through the metaphors of vision, hearing, and feeling—Eliot substantiates the necessity of this physical event, this specific environment, to Bulstrode's realization of "vision."⁴¹ For while "the conditions of his life had shaped" one way of being for him, one moral "organization" of things, the new condition presented by this scene forces reorganization. Bulstrode's "crisis of feeling" is aptly named, since "crisis" etymologically signifies a "discrimination, or decision," coming from the Greek verb *κρίνειν*, "to decide."⁴² It is a moment of necessary shift between one mode of vision and another, between two organizations of reality and notions of self that cannot coexist. Eliot creates this moment in the public sphere and in a moment unrealized through speech (as opposed to Bulstrode's time at private prayer) because it

creates a reversal of the particular center of Bulstrode's delusion—his perception of his dominance over others. The representation of this reversal through the physical situation of the scene (rather than through words, speech, or thought) enables a moment of seemingly infallible vision. Rather than representing *himself*, or even hearing others do so, Eliot allows the world to represent the reality of Bulstrode's self here—the culmination and crisis of how his life has been built and how it must be lived.

But on what level of consciousness is this experience occurring? The description of the agony and crisis points strongly to the agency of outside, physical forces *upon* the character: "God had disowned him . . . and left him unscreened," his "equivocation . . . now turned venomously upon him," "all . . . rushed through him" (*M*, 502–3). We take it for granted that none of this is literally happening in the object world of the meeting, none of it literally observed by the other men. We are inside Bulstrode's mind here, evidently. Indeed, we are so deeply inside it that it would be hard to say that this description is even showing him thinking. The narrative speaks of how Bulstrode is alive to his surroundings, feeling meaning in them, yet in a way that is neither symbolic nor a scripted stream of self-talk. Rather, Eliot is describing a moment in which Bulstrode's moral crisis—the shift in his perception of the relations between self and the world, *and* the entailed re-envisioning of what his self is and means—is necessarily dependent upon formally aware, embodied experience. For not only is this a level of experience that constitutes a deep reckoning with proportions, but the articulation of this experience in the narrative points again to the distinctly aesthetic character of moral consciousness for Eliot. This is "quick vision," as Eliot writes, but no less deep for its quickness. Indeed, Murdoch's articulation of the "darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality" speaks well to Bulstrode's situation for the sort of double meaning of "darker" we can interpret in it. "Darker" because less generally open to access consciousness, aesthetic experience here is something phenomenal and thus necessarily hidden-in-the-flesh—something one feels but does not see, is sure of, but without logical reasoning. It is "darker" because it is at once hidden from the self and at a more primal level of perception (like the relational perception discussed by Merleau-Ponty and Lewes). Eliot's narrative of Bulstrode's "quick vision" makes such darkness clear: this moral event is occurring at a level of awareness between fully realized, communicable consciousness and the dark state of the body. By placing both the moral event and aesthetic experience

at this level, moreover, she identifies these capacities with the most nascent, phenomenal modes of perceiving. Becoming aware of the configuration of men in the room around him, of his relation to them, and the shift from former relations this portends, Bulstrode's aesthetic experience does not simply "represent" the situation to him—just as Eliot's metaphors do not simply "represent" or "symbolize" his feelings in the moment to readers. Rather, the aesthetic event is an efficient cause of the moral shift he undergoes. Actually "seeing" differently, Bulstrode must "be" differently, and the metaphors enact this revolution. Bulstrode's "quick vision" moreover, requires that he perceive himself inside the configuration of his world—neither from a perch of "predominance" as the "reprover" of his fellows, nor from a kind of out-of-body, cerebral comprehension of "truth" (a more likely situation perhaps if Wordsworth had written this chapter). The aesthetic experience in Eliot's novel, as we saw in the narrative of Dorothea's bow-window view as well, requires and reinforces the feeling of oneself in the midst of one's reality: the feeling which is also primary to moral awakening and discovering agency in Eliot's moral world.

Perhaps the most profound quality of Eliot's morality, and profoundly different from current ethical models used in literary studies, is the notion that the justice, the "realism" of one's vision begins not so much with the way one sees others, but in the way one considers the nature of one's own perception. Locating the most just moments of moral vision in *Middlemarch* precisely where characters are perceiving through phenomenal consciousness, feeling themselves as integral parts in the matrix of their surroundings, Eliot similarly shifts the focus of realist narrative to the representation of that mode of consciousness. "Feeling real," if necessary for a just regard of oneself, is only possible through the sensuous perception of the formal configurations of one's surroundings and in the openness to being reconfigured by a new given form. "The manifold pregnant existence" of which Dorothea longs to be an active part is, itself, a mirror image of "strict manifold dependence" from "Notes on Form in Art." The possible aspects of reality, like the possible forms of a sculpture, are manifold indeed, but for reality to be recognized as "pregnant" with meaning of any kind, a strict attention and sensitivity to the specific, dependent dynamics of its parts is required. Eliot's artistic creation of a pregnant reality in her text is thus based in the constant reminder (not only through direct speech, but through her narrative of limited perception) that on the other side of strictness, of seeing a cameo, tree, theory, duck, or rabbit clearly, is a manifold depth of other forms. Feeling real

in *Middlemarch* may feel like a great variety of states—bath-warm, marble-cold, socially reviled—but it is also always the unthought surety of one's own presence and of manifold possibilities for self-perception in the moments one is looking away.

San Francisco State University

NOTES

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977). 133. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *M*.

² In *Adventures in Realism* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), Matthew Beaumont articulates the problem of “realism” as one that subtends criticism, regardless of the literary period it addresses or the trends of our own contemporary opinion. Beaumont begins with a rebuttal to Jean-François Lyotard's lambast of realism as standing, in Lyotard's words, “somewhere between academicism and kitsch” (*The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984], 75). Beaumont's self-proclaimed “reclaiming” of realism is particularly important as it points to the philosophical and aesthetic importance of realism, rather than simply its cultural manifestations in the nineteenth century (1). The renewal of realist criticism in nineteenth-century studies, however, has tended to stay in the realm of cultural studies in order to validate itself; see, for instance, Nancy Armstrong's *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); Kate Flint's work on visibility, especially *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); and, more recently, Daniel Novak's *Realism, Photography and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), all of which make historically important claims. The overwhelming tendency to connect seeing and realism, to the exclusion of other senses, has been criticized duly; see, for example, Peter Capuano, “An Objective Aural-Relative in *Middlemarch*,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 47 (2007): 921–41. Such approaches to realism do not necessarily discuss, however, why realism *in itself* matters aesthetically, morally, or metaphysically.

³ Two accounts of “givenness” are of particular importance here: one aesthetic, the other metaphysical. The first is offered by Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999): her theory of the “radical decentering” caused by encounters with the beautiful foregrounds the unexpectedness of the event (111). At the same time, however, she writes of the way in which beauty “greet[s] us when we are in its presence (25). This perception of welcome creates what she calls a “pact” between the subject and her world: “Your arrival seems contractual, not just something you want, but something the world you are now joining wants” (26). The other account of givenness that interests us here is that of Jean-Luc Marion, whose “third reduction” of phenomenology, traced historically through readings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in *Reduction and Givenness* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1998), is articulated most strongly in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002). In the latter, Marion's claim for the phenomenon of givenness is that there is a necessary stage of phenomena prior to their “showing themselves” (323). This is what he calls their “giving” of themselves, which eventually entails the renaming of the “subject” as “the gifted” (4). For Marion, most profoundly, realizing oneself as “the gifted” entails a radical renewing and revaluing of the moral self.

⁴ Eliot to Frederick Harrison, 15 August 1866, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vol. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954–55), 4:300.

⁵ See, principally, Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 2006.

⁶ See Bernard Paris, *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1965); see also Barbara Hardy, *The Novels Of George Eliot: A Study In Form* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967) and *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1980). Though not explicitly aimed at Eliot's realism, Philip Fisher's reading of *Middlemarch* in *Making Up Society: The Novels of George Eliot* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1981) offers a powerful account of the “-ism” of that concept. Fisher, in brief, looks to the ways in which discontinuities and fragments in the novel “create” the need for inference and imagination, which can penetrate the unknown part of experience to create a coherence, a predictability, a self behind the cluster of signs” (175). In this way, Eliot's production of “inference and imagination”—not only in her characters but in readers as well—could be read as the very method of realism in *Middlemarch*.

⁷ See J. Hillis Miller, “Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*,” in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), 125–45.

⁸ Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 95.

⁹ Ned Block, “On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness,” *Brain and Behavioral Sciences* 18.2 (1995): 227–47.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Warner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 64.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 134.

¹² In *Problems of Life and Mind* (London: Trubner, 1874), George Henry Lewes articulated this constant subconscious work of relation and orientation long before phenomenologists. For Lewes, in his attempt to describe and define “the inner life,” this orienting activity was a crucial way of accessing the nascent, embodied stages of consciousness. As he writes: “There is a process of Orientation incessantly going on both in the sphere of Sense and in the sphere of Thought” (91).

¹³ Melissa Raines reads Eliot's texts for the grammatical signs of such inwardly felt collisions; see her recent article, “George Eliot's Grammar of Being,” *Essays in Criticism* 5.1 (2008): 43–63. Raines's research into Spenser's theories of consciousness, moreover, substantiate contemporary correlations between “nervous shock” and more physical injury. Quoting Herbert Spencer: “The state of consciousness so generated is, in fact, comparable in quality to the initial state of consciousness caused by a blow (distinguishing it from the pain or other feeling that commences the instant after); which state of consciousness, caused by a blow, may be taken as the primitive and typical form of nervous shock” (*The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vol. [London, 1881], 1:150–51).

¹⁴ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harvest, 2000), 128. The notion of this “discretion” of the “feeling of knowing” could be traced to Immanuel Kant's presupposition of a unified “I”—rather than something directly perceived by the self, its indication resides in the connectivity between our disparate perceptions over time. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 350.

¹⁵ Block, 376.

¹⁶ This resonates with Marion's theory of givenness. It also, however, resonates with Merleau-Ponty, whose theory of perception also begets a phenomenal theory of self in the latter stages of his work: "I am given to myself" (419).

¹⁷ Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," in *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. Nicholas Warren (New York: Penguin, 1991), 153.

¹⁸ See D. W. Winnicott, *The Child and the Family* (London: Tavistock, 1957), 171.

¹⁹ See John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 7 vol. (Whitefish: Kissinger, 2005), 1:26. Ruskin writes: "Ideas of beauty, then, be it remembered, are the subjects of moral, but not of intellectual, perception" (1:103).

²⁰ Eliot, "Notes on Form in Art," in *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, 232. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated "N."

²¹ George Levine, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 9.

²² The most significant is Ruth Bernard Yeazell's recent work, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008).

²³ Crawford Elder, *Familiar Objects and Their Shadows* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 55.

²⁴ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 13.

²⁵ Leder, 14.

²⁶ Leder, 15.

²⁷ Eliot, "Looking Inward," in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (London: W. Pickering, 1994), 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated "L."

²⁸ See, for example, Tom Sperlinger, "The Sensitive Author: George Eliot," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 36.3 (2007): 250–72. Sperlinger's discussion of "moral stupidity" in *Middlemarch* makes a helpful distinction, namely that "it has to do with sensation or 'feeling,' not with intellect or 'reflection'" (265). The distinction is important, as it points toward both the naturalness and the necessity of such dullness, helping us to survive that "roar which lies on the other side of silence" (M, 194). Sperlinger's depiction of sympathy in *Middlemarch* is grounded in the acknowledgement of other "centers of self"—an acknowledgement that he sees embodied in the project of the novel itself. This is what he calls "a grand project of containment, in which different centers of self are given sympathy at the same time" (266).

²⁹ See J. Hillis Miller, "Eliot: The Other Side of Silence," in *Others* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 65–82.

³⁰ Peggy DesAutels "Gestalt Shifts in Moral Perception," in *Mind and Morals: Essays on Ethics and Cognitive Science*, ed. Andy Clark, Marilyn Friedman, and Larry May (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 129. The "Gestalt-Interaction Theory of Metaphor," developed by Chanita Glicksohn and Joseph Goodblatt, is based on three principles. These include the understanding of metaphor as 1) "an emergent whole"; 2) occurring within a larger context; and 3) "akin to problem solving and involv[ing] an act of perceptual and semantic restructuring" ("From Practical Criticism to the Practice of Literary Criticism," *Poetics Today* 24.2 [2003]: 213). This last principle highlights the very literal cognitive shift that metaphor causes. "Restructuring" implies the very real structuring capacity of aesthetic productions—that aesthetic experience means being restructured in some way. See also Glicksohn, "Metaphor and Consciousness: The Path Less Taken," *Journal of Mind and Behavior* 22.4 (2001): 343–63.

³¹ DesAutels, 130.

³² Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Fireside, 1990), 31, emphasis original.

³³ DesAutels, 131.

³⁴ Carol Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (New York: Westview Press, 1995), 22.

³⁵ DesAutels, 131.

³⁶ Reva Stump, *Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels* (Washington: Univ. of Washington Press, 1959), 7.

³⁷ Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 206.

³⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1971), 37.

³⁹ Murdoch, 43–44.

⁴⁰ The specific reason for this suspicion of prayer is particularly interesting for the way it is grounded not so much in the doubt that there is a deity to hear the prayer, but in the suspect nature of self-representation in speech. This corresponds with the compelling argument made by Timothy Larsen that it was the evangelical inadmission of "honest doubt" and self-questioning against which Victorian intellectuals reacted, more than a rejection of God and religion as such; see his *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

⁴¹ The way Eliot's metaphors are working here—pointing to some level, not quite conscious, on which these things really are perceived by Bulstrode—recalls the discussion of Eliot's metaphors more generally in Hillis Miller's *Others*. In revision of his claims in "Optic and Semiotic," Hillis Miller makes a radical claim for the validity of metaphor: "The domain of *Middlemarch* really is whatever the narrator calls it: a web, or something flowing, or a text, just as Lydgate builds his theory on a literal word, 'tissue.' The body is woven of tissues. We still use that word not as a figurative substitution for some other more literal word but as the correct term" (80).

⁴² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "crisis, n."