

George Eliot: Immanent Victorian

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"Your sister's a master-mind", Joe Gargery tells Pip in an early chapter of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, "a master-mind." "What's that?" Pip responds, almost sure that he is stumping his brother-in-law. But Joe is ready for that question, and answers "with a fixed look, 'Her.'" (Dickens 1989: 45) Dickens's joke points beyond Joe to a common problem in defining the relation between general categories and the individuals that constitute them. Exploiting the ambiguity in the question, what is a mastermind?—which can be interpreted to mean either, what are the definitive features of any mastermind? (the question Pip thinks will stump Joe) or, what is an instance of a mastermind? (the question Joe answers with the pronoun "her")—it defies us to say just what, if anything, is absurd about Joe's answer. For despite its ungrammatical and comic circularity, Joe's response merely enacts our frequent tendency to point to instances when asked to discourse on the nature of a class of persons.

Indeed, the circularity of Joe's thinking is coiled at the heart of the novel genre, whose earliest practitioners maintained that they were reforming the relation between general and particular. For example, when explaining the difference between his satire (a satire employing truly *fictional* personae) and that of the *chroniques scandaleuses* that were all the rage in the early eighteenth century, Henry Fielding declared, "I describe... not an individual but a species." (Fielding 1967: 189)¹ By a "species," Fielding meant any category of people. Like the other mid-eighteenth-century writers who invented the novel properly speaking, he was trying to break the reader's habit of interpreting characters as personal satires (or libels) on particular individuals. The founding claim of the form, that which distinguished novelists from libelers,

1 For a strong historical argument about the genesis and development of these ideas about types and fictional characters, see Lynch (1998), esp. 23-79.

was the insistence that the referent of the text was a generalization about, and not an extratextual, embodied instance of, a “species.” Certainly the novel provides instances, but it should not, strictly speaking, refer directly to individual examples in the world. The *fictionality* defining the novel inhered in the creation of instances, rather than their mere selection, to illustrate a class of persons. A general referent was thus indicated through a particular, but explicitly nonreferential, fictional individual.

The referential claim of the novel, its stake in the world outside the text, therefore attaches to classes of persons, whereas the fictionality of the novel, its disavowal of personal reference, defines the individual characters. The novel is thus “true” in its generality even though all of its particulars are merely imaginary. Indeed, practitioners asserted, the novel’s general applicability depended on the overt fictionality of its particulars, since taking examples from among real people would only confuse the issue of reference; *because* they had dispensed with the individual referents, the novelists’ characterizations could only have referential value by pointing to what Fielding calls a “species.”

This description of the novel—in which the type is the presumed referent while individuals are presumed to be fictional—inverts normal empirical ways of thinking about the relation between the real and the imaginary, the sensual or experiential, on the one hand, and the ideational, on the other. Most novelists would freely have admitted that the species is that which one never expects to encounter in actuality; it is to be grasped only by an abstracting effort of the mind. Individuals, on the other hand, present themselves as the given data of the world. The novel thus reverses the commonsensical empiricism that pervaded the intellectual atmosphere of England at the time of its invention. Novelists took the abstract entity, the species or type, to be the given, the thing-in-the-world referent grounding the form, and conceded that their individuals are imaginary concoctions. At first glance, then, it seems as though the novel as a form asserts not only the cognitive but also the ontological priority of the general over the particular.

However, novels simultaneously conjured as their own “background” an empirical cultural understanding that the type is only a mental abstraction from more real concrete individuals in the world. Novel theorists since Ian Watt have been right to note the literary form’s affinity with empiricism, but they have paid too little attention to the special turn it gives empiricist logic by invoking both a knowledge that types are induced from persons in the world and a further awareness that characters are deduced from types. (Watt 1957:

9-34)² The complexity of the general/particular relation in the novel therefore goes beyond the usual epistemological puzzle of requiring categories to perceive facts but simultaneously requiring facts to create categories. It demands two sorts of individuals: those given in and those twice removed from an inferred world. We could think of the form as claiming to be structured like a triptych, in which ontologically distinct categories of “the particular” appear on either side of a category of “the general,” creating a centrality for the middle category not normally sustainable under the empirical assumptions that contrast the ideality of the type with the substantiality of the experientially available individual.

I emphasize these general features of the form as a prelude to discussing one particular novelist, George Eliot, not because she’s typical (although, if asked what a novelist is, I might be tempted, like Joe, to say “Her”), but because she atypically and consciously exploited and explored these standard assumptions of her medium. Here is an example, from *Middlemarch*, of her construction of one of those triptychs. Characterizing the heroine’s uncle, Mr. Brooke, the narrator comments,

“Mr. Brooke’s conclusions were as difficult to predict as the weather: it was safe to say that he would act with benevolent intentions and that he would spend as little money as possible in carrying them out. For the most glutinously indefinite minds enclose some hard grains of habit; and a man has been seen lax about all his own interests except the retention of his snuff-box, concerning which he was watchful, suspicious, and greedy of clutch.” (Eliot 1998: 8)³

This initial description of the character proceeds from the particular individual, Mr. Brooke, to the general category of persons by which we are to make sense of him: those glutinously indefinite minds enclosing hard grains of habit. The sentence making the transition from character to species begins with the word “for,” signaling that the sentence to follow will explain Mr. Brooke by locating his type in an imputed world that precedes his invention. Then, as soon as the type, or referent, has been described, it seems to want experiential grounding, a want supplied by instantiating someone belonging to

2 For an excellent recent discussion and reassessment of Watt’s ideas of empiricism in the novel, see Shaw (1999: 38-89).

3 All quotations from the novel are from this edition, and page numbers are given in the body of the essay.

the same species but sensually available: “and *a man has been seen* lax about all his own interests except the retention of his snuffbox.” The “and” beginning that clause tells us we are continuing in the reference mode. Of course, it doesn’t matter whether or not such a man has actually been seen, for we aren’t exploring the truth of the narrator’s claims here, only the structure of her rhetoric, which (to repeat by way of summary) assures us that Mr. Brooke is not a copy of the man with the snuffbox but is rather a fictive instance of a class that has such extradiegetic, real instances as the snuffbox clutcher.

Eliot here explicitly carries the reader through the arc of induction and deduction, deduction and induction that gives generalities weight and substance. The very language of the description emphasizes the trajectory, moving as it does from the specificity of the named character to the fluid and “glutinously indefinite” quality of the abstract “mind” of his class, then through the “hard grains of habit” that signal the beginnings of another individual and seem to collect in the snuffbox being clutched. It is as if we are being made aware that Mr. Brooke was precipitated out of a nebulous viscous element (the type) into which the snuffbox clutcher had been previously imperfectly absorbed, the grit of his personality remaining available for reference. The subtlety of such movements among referential levels, together with their frequency and seeming candor, the softening and hardening from instances to generalities and back again, reassures the reader that *this* fiction is always connected to the stuff of the real, that the type may be ideational but it has fed on life.

Eliot, though, is also the nineteenth-century novelist who is most skeptical about categorical thought, who turns her sharpest satire against those most apt to engage in it. Indeed, the narrator of *Middlemarch* herself no sooner invokes a “species” than she proceeds to dissolve it in qualifying subdivisions or expand it until its shape is no longer recognizable. In the passage about Mr. Brooke, for example, we notice not only the gelatinous quality of the mental group englobing him but also the mixed nature of the general category to which the character supposedly refers: a man with benevolent intentions who is nevertheless stingy with his money. That is, he really belongs to two normally distinct categories that happen to overlap in his character. It is this perceived inconsistency that seems to require the narrator to make an explicitly referential gesture toward a more general category where the anomalous traits might be reconciled. That is, because Mr. Brooke does not fit what we might call a stock type, the narrator needs to classify him under an unusual category. His full rubric might read: careless thinkers (indefinite minds) who

are, out of mere habit, very careful about certain items of their own property. But this category doesn't so much explain the coexistence of the traits as restate them, and the narrator finally justifies her character by pointing to someone in the world, the snuffbox clutcher, who is even less consistent than Mr. Brooke.

Hence, on closer inspection, Mr. Brooke's species—careless people who are habitually careful about some things—doesn't really seem to do much referential work. When skeptically attended to, it only asserts that there are eccentric careless people who have inexplicably rigid habits. The snuffbox clutcher, it will be noticed, has nothing else in common with Mr. Brooke; nothing about him recalls the traits that at first seemed to conjure the species. He is neither benevolent nor stingy. Mr. Brooke and the snuffbox clutcher are just two instances of generally careless people who aren't always careless. One might, therefore, say that they belong to a set of *category defiers* that the narrator, adhering to a formal demand of the novel, constructs as a class. A class constructed just to accommodate random exceptions, however, might easily be read as a skeptical commentary on classification.

It would seem, then, that the passage under analysis assures us both that characters in the fictional world have the ontological ballast of general reference and that there will always be gaps between general types and individuals. That this should be so even when the individuals are characters made on purpose to illustrate types may at first seem puzzling, but we should bear in mind that it is only under these seemingly optimal conditions—the conditions of fictionality—that the problem of the general and particular can be fully discerned. For in the real world the problem will often be perceived as a gap between the nature of given things and the nature of concepts, or language, about them. But individuals in fiction are at least as conceptual and linguistic as types; they make no pretense to be the given data of the world. The inability of the class to account for the individual is thus more obviously a *logical* problem in fictional than in nonfictional discourse. As soon as the category of careless people who are both benevolent and stingy is figured in one Mr. Brooke of Tipton Grange, who has a niece named Dorothea, many things about him are already irrelevant to the class of people he supposedly signifies. In novels it becomes possible to reflect on the fact that it is in the nature of examples generally to exceed that which they are supposed to exemplify.

Lest it be suspected that the example of an obvious eccentric too neatly fits my generalization about the necessary superfluity in all instances, I'll supply

one more descriptive triptych in which the narrator asks the reader to find a living example of the type represented by the character Mary Garth:

“Ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street tomorrow... Fix your eyes on some small plump brownish person of firm but quiet carriage, who looks about her, but does not suppose that anybody is looking at her. If she has a broad face and square brow, well-marked eyebrows and curly dark hair, a certain expression of amusement in her glance which her mouth keeps the secret of, and for the rest features entirely insignificant—take that ordinary but not disagreeable person for a portrait of Mary Garth. If you made her smile, she would show you perfect little teeth; if you made her angry, she would not raise her voice, but would probably say one of the bitterest things you have ever tasted the flavour of; if you did her a kindness, she would never forget it. Mary admired...” (382)

The description, like the person it describes, is self-consciously undistinguished; it nicely illustrates, however, the impossibility of remaining for long on that threshold of typicality between fictional illustration and persons in the world. Once the physical type is found, the passage teeters for a moment between referencing through the imagined model on the street, who is inside the novel but supposedly outside the fiction, and realizing the character of Mary Garth. In the movement between the two sentences beginning with “If,” we can locate the segue: both are written in the second person, direct address to the reader often signaling the onset of a triptych in *Middlemarch*, but the grammatical resemblances between the two only underline the automatic way in which the passage slides, by the mere gravity of detail, into fiction. Whereas the first sentence uses “if” to name the conditions, the physical characteristics, that would qualify a woman on the street to be classed under the “Mary” category, the “if”s in the second sentence introduce increasingly narrative vignettes that, we soon realize, cannot be predicated of the class. By the time we read, “if you made her angry, she would not raise her voice, but would probably say one of the bitterest things you have ever tasted the flavour of,” we know that such an extraneous particular as a very sharp tongue has put us back onto the side of the fictional, where characters are realized. Indeed, the progression the reader is asked to follow from sighting a Mary to tasting one, from distanced viewing to more intimate sensation, figures the movement from type to fictional particular as, paradoxically, a process of increasing embodiment.

Individuated fictional characters, in other words, can never efficiently refer to types that, in turn, organize individuals in the world. To be sure, we might reduce their very excessiveness to a referential formula by noticing that it is typical of individuals to exceed types or depart from them; then the essentially referable thing about the specifics is just the very general fact that they are specific. Such a formulation verges on the absurd because it classifies individuals as things that depart from classifications. It nevertheless does yield some insight into the nature of novels by indicating why the extravagance of characters, their wastefulness as referential vehicles, is precisely what makes them seem real.

This point needs emphasis because a novel's realism is often assumed to be a matter of referential fidelity.⁴ When we analyze the nature of the gap between the general and the particular, however, reference and realization appear to be quite distinct, whereas fictionality and realization appear to be identical. Fictional characters may *refer* to people in the world by conforming to type, but they only *resemble* people in their *nonconformity*. The impulse toward reference and the impulse toward realization are thus not only separate but also deeply opposed, and their tension, rather than cooperation, might be said to define realism.

George Eliot masters this tension not by easing, concealing, or even self-consciously reflecting on it; she masters it, rather, by harnessing its energy and making it the dynamo of her narratives. She converts the strife between type and instance, between reference and realization (strife belonging primarily to characterization), into a vigorous narrative friction between probability and surprise. Every novel may be bound to negotiate its plot between these rival narrative exigencies—between the all-too-likely and the unaccountable—but Eliot's give us the keenest awareness of what might be at stake in such negotiations.⁵ In *Middlemarch* especially she conceives of the plot as driven by the competing needs to adhere to type and to deviate, to mean and to be, to have significance and to become real. There she takes the plight that belongs specifically to novel characters—that they are supposed to illustrate types from which they must depart—and makes it the central

4 This seems to be the case even for those “possible-worlds” theorists who think of characters as bundles of attributes drawn from menus of possible characteristics. See Doležel (1988: 475-96).

5 For a rich discussion of the interrelations between characterization and probability in the novel, see Newsom (1988: 90-106).

dilemma of a life story. She etches the heroine's plot quite precisely onto the outlines of the formal predicament we've been tracing, so that theme and genre, representation and its mode, coincide. When literary critics discover coincidences of this sort, we often conclude that the author is playfully exposing her artifice, giving away the representational game and admitting that her character is, after all, just a fiction. I would, however, like to pursue a different line of thought about this coincidence, for *Middlemarch's* formal self-consciousness is not just a comment on some fundamental lack at the heart of fictions; it is, rather, a disclosure of their function. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to the proposition that Eliot's fiction gives us something we might never otherwise experience: a *desire* to be real.

Middlemarch begins with the understanding that only the atypical can generate plot and only the exceptional can desire it.⁶ Witness this early description of Dorothea Brooke delivered by the astonished and uncomprehending chorus called "rural opinion":

"A young lady of some birth and fortune who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles—who had strange whims of fasting like a papist and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were supposed to have weak opinions, but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them." (9)

This description not only implies normal behavior for "a young lady of some birth and fortune" by enumerating Dorothea's deviations but also locates the place in which such norms are established: in the average, conventional, and

6 In concentrating on Dorothea to the exclusion of her placement in a semantic field of characters, I am following the lead of the novel's narrator, but I want (like her) to note that we might also ask, why always Dorothea? For a discussion of the self-conscious tension in *Middlemarch* between focusing on the protagonist and paying equal attention to all fictional "centers of consciousness," see Wolloch (2003: 30-32). Eliot's novel, he points out, calls our attention to the "asymmetric norm that had become an essential aspect of nineteenth-century omniscient narrative" (32).

conservative provincial mind as it calculates risk, specifically the risk of being impetuously awakened from rustic torpor. Initially this voice has trouble even finishing statements about Dorothea because—well, who knows how her story might end? The first two phrases in the passage never complete themselves in a proper sentence but end abruptly in an exclamation point, as if “sane people” were too startled to supply predication. Typifying is thus satirized here as an attempt at foreknowledge and at foreclosing the very possibility of unexpected events. Since novel readers are ipso facto in search of plot, the passage obviously implies our superiority in this counter-posing of the conventionally typical and the narratable.

Eliot does not, however, engender a desire for realization simply by threatening us with boredom and congratulating us on our desire to be surprised. After all, Mr. Brooke, whose “conclusions were as difficult to predict as the weather” is equally surprising, but we don’t want to read a novel about him because his unexpectedness is merely random; it never holds out the promise of a new significance. A serious longing to be real, Dorothea’s plot demonstrates, can only proceed from the exhaustion of the categorical mode; hence it must begin not in the semicomical, dismissible classifications of rural opinion, but in types that command our respect. And so it does.

Before hearing the rural opinion about Dorothea, we have already encountered the category through which this fictional character is supposed to refer to the world. The novel’s “Prelude” has established St. Theresa of Avilla as the historical exemplar of a certain class of women who are not satisfied by the common occurrences of female destiny, women whose “nature” demands an “epic life.” Dorothea’s characterization begins with the induction of the type from that historical person: “That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago was certainly not the last of her kind,” we are told. “*Many Theresas* have been born.” (3).

But no sooner is the type—“Therasas”—named than it begins to dissolve, and its dissolution is linked not only to narrative but to fictional narrative. “*Many Theresas* have been born,” the sentence continues, “who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action.” Between the subject of this sentence and its conclusion, we encounter a surprise: the many Theresas have not lived lives conforming to their species. For Saint Theresa, type and story coincided: after false starts and hindrances, we are told, “She found her epos.” But the stories of all the other Theresas veer off from this norm; their lives do not result in any such coincidence of potential and actuality. Hence Theresa, oddly, becomes

atypical of the category of Theresas; although they are conceived under her rubric, she is useless as a predictor of their destinies.

The passage does not, however, abandon its general pronouncements. Since the normal story prevents the realization of the type, a new subtype takes shape, which the narrator calls "latter-day Theresas." All that can be said of the latter-day Theresa as a type, however, is that her story will deviate from a known heroic norm, and in her deviation she will become obscure. To speak of this type is therefore to resort to conjecture: the latter-day Theresa has lived, we are told, "*perhaps* only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; *perhaps* a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion." Since the failure to be a Theresa results in obscurity, the stories of how latter-day Theresas fail are unknown. As such they invite hypotheses, probable imaginings: "perhaps...; perhaps..."

Fictions, stories that begin with an implied "perhaps," are certified here as the only way to understand, not just a given "species," as Fielding would have had it, but the standard, socially and historically determined, deviations from a species. These standard deviations, moreover, lead us into the quotidian, and therefore the forgotten, and therefore the conjectural, and therefore the *fictionally* specific. The links established here between the mundane, the unknown, and the fictional are crucial to the stimulation of narrative desire in Eliot's realism. We should notice that they oppose the associations in the mind of rural opinion between normalcy and complete foreknowledge: if the superficial provincial mind seeks ordinariness for its predictability, the serious realist seeks it for its uncertainty. It is, after all, no great accomplishment to muster curiosity by promising tales of unusual adventure. Eliot's task is more difficult: to convince us that what seems familiar—the process by which people become ordinary—is in fact radically unknown. She thus makes us curious about the quotidian because of its very obscurity and defines the fictional by contrasting it with the heroically *renowned*. Thus, even as she presents the departure of the latter-day Theresas from their heroic type as a pity, and even as she gathers up her instances of failure into new categories, Eliot uses the gap between type and instance to create a momentum, an impulse toward the prosaic that is indistinguishable from the desire to read a fiction. To learn about the unknown through fictional particulars is to resolve the mysteries of daily life: mysteries such as, how could a Theresa, in the very act of aspiring toward her type, become a drudging wife-scribe to a provincial pedant?

In the “Prelude” to *Middlemarch* Eliot rouses our desire for fiction by promising to show us just exactly how it is that one does not conform to type. Classification, foreknowledge, and reference are the inevitable framework of the novel, but the dynamic impulse established here is toward fiction, unpredictability, and particular realization. Curiosity directed at a particular ordinary outcome, moreover, is stimulated periodically by Dorothea’s progress; she comes to occupy a series of subcategories, each of which is in turn experienced as restrictive, artificial, and potentially plot-obstructing. These stages of Dorothea’s plot can, indeed, be mapped onto the standard deviations mentioned in the “Prelude,” as if to demonstrate that the subtypes, too, must be instantiated and, in that process, departed from. Dorothea must undergo paradigm exhaustion; she must be, as we say in the vernacular, troped out.

“Perhaps only a life of mistakes” is the hypothesis that looms over the novel’s first book, “Miss Brooke,” which draws on one of the oldest novelistic types, the female Quixote, a visionary young lady who projects the ideal beings of her imagination onto very unlikely people. Miss Brooke even comes complete with a Sancho Panza—her sister Celia—and the structure of the plot is also true to form: it proceeds with ironic efficiency to demonstrate that the Quixote’s failure is the result of her ambition. But every reader of *Middlemarch* will at once see the inadequacy of this model, and it takes no great critical acumen to begin piling up the particulars that make Dorothea an exception to the quixotic norm. Not the least of these is the resolution of the first stage of her plot: instead of coming to her senses or proceeding on to new adventures, Dorothea finds herself trapped inside the consequences of her first mistake, so that the novel segues from the proposition that she might lead “perhaps only a life of mistakes” to the possibility that she could be “perhaps a tragic failure.” Inside this hypothesis, too, however, the particulars of the tragedy eventually become anomalous. One potential agony, that she might knowingly waste her life completing her late husband’s vain project, the worthless *Key to All Mythologies*, is supplanted by another when she seems condemned to live separately from the man she loves, and this apparently futile love—initially presented as a painful consequence of her quixotic mistake—transforms her into a different sort of heroine. In short, the details of her affliction force the plot to swerve from its trajectories repeatedly, to be retrieved by other general scenarios, or standard deviations, until the subcategories seem exhausted. Hence, when told in the novel’s “Finale” that “our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas,” we would be

perfectly justified to respond with a question like Pip's: "But, George, what is a Dorothea?" And by that point, the only truly satisfactory answer should be "her."

The effect of a curiosity impelled toward greater and greater narrative particularity should, in other words, finally yield a nonexemplary immanence, a minimally referential character. And yet it does not. Despite her compelling realization and her overwhelming particularity, by the end of the novel, Dorothea's referential power has, if anything, increased, so that when the category of "Dorotheas" replaces the former category of "Therasas," we recognize it. For, as we noticed earlier, even the impulse toward the specific can be conceived in general terms, and in *Middlemarch* Eliot not only generalizes the process of becoming particular but also assimilates it to both ethical and erotic drives. Being-in-particular becomes not simply an endpoint of narrative, but a value-laden desideratum, and it is Dorothea whose story gives the singular such gravity.

Because the *ethical* importance of particularizing has long been noted by readers of Eliot, indeed, because Eliot's narrators themselves frequently underscore it, I'll only briefly sketch its well-known outlines here. As Dorothea herself is realized by departures from type, so too does she learn to realize others by imagining their particularity instead of pressing them into categories. From a dark night of the soul that all readers of the novel will recall, the heroine awakens to a sympathetic understanding of errancy itself. She finds what heroism is left over for women in the modern world by an empathetic envisioning of the suffering of the very people who have just wounded her, Rosamond and Will Ladislaw. In short, realizing in others what the narrator calls "equivalent centers of self" is the supreme ethical act in Eliot's novels, and when the Dorotheas appear on the other side of the novel's final triptych, we understand that they might be women who spend their lives in feats of compassionate particularization.

Eliot's *ethics* of realization, however, have perhaps been overemphasized; by stressing the ethical drive toward the particular, we have created an Eliot who seems to some moralistic and all-too-Victorian, perhaps even sentimental, in her earnestness. Eliot can easily be caricatured as a lugubrious author who gives her novels gravity by weighing down the exuberance of narrative curiosity with moral strictures. To counter this caricature, which has, alas, survived a century of refutations, I will conclude this lecture by arguing that, especially in *Middlemarch*, Eliot's ethics are preceded and animated by an *erotics* of particularization. Long before Dorothea's dark night, a crucial

moment of transformation occurs. It is one of those nodes of transition between subtypes, but it represents more than the dawning of a further stage of mental awareness. It establishes a new vector of energy in the novel, one that pulsates through to the end and enables whatever ethical resolution occurs. The moment I'm about to discuss, in which Dorothea becomes the last of the several subtypes of latter-day Therasas, marshals the powers of eroticism and produces a yearning toward embodiment.

The last thing to be said about the latter-day Therasas in the "Prelude" is that "their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood, so that the one was disapproved as extravagance and the other condemned as a lapse" (3). Dorothea's penultimate state is not that of the tragic but that of the *lapsed* Theresa, and it is in the transition between the two that Eliot stimulates a desire for realization most intensely; it is also there that Dorothea's plot is retrieved for general reference by taking on almost the quality of a parable about becoming real. For although the lapsed Theresa at first seems just another standard deviation from the saint, she is in fact a dramatic enlargement of the referential category. Hence the narrator figures the transformation not as a gradual departure but as an abrupt metamorphosis, a sudden addition of species characteristics. The transmutation takes place when Dorothea is liberated from her oppressive sense of duty by learning that her husband had added a humiliating codicil to his will specifying that she would forfeit her inheritance if she married Will Ladislaw. The tumult of sensation that accompanies this revelation marks the "alternation" (to use the language of the "Prelude") from saintly ardor to "the common yearning of womanhood." The species change described in this passage, in other words, is not from one variety to another of blundering and suffering Saint Therasas:

"She might have compared her experience at that moment to the vague, alarmed consciousness that her life was taking on a new form, that she was undergoing a metamorphosis in which memory would not adjust itself to the stirring of new organs. Everything was changing its aspect... Her world was in a state of violent convulsion... One change terrified her as if it had been a sin; it was a violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband... Then again she was conscious of another change which also made her tremulous: it was a sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw." (461)

The metamorphosis figure allows Eliot to imagine Dorothea as a passive plastic medium being reshaped from the outside. Even her own emotions seem

temporarily external, as the syntax indicates. *She* does not yet exactly yearn toward Will Ladislaw, but instead is “conscious of a change [...]: it was a sudden strange yearning of heart.” Yearning seems to be somewhere in the vicinity and will soon be lodged in Dorothea, but during her suspension between one species and another, while she is being remade as the “type” who can own these feelings, all experience is momentarily alien. The species toward which she is metamorphosing, moreover, is unlike those she has previously instantiated; it is the “common womanhood” of the lapsed Theresa. To metamorphose simply into “woman,” however, especially in a text consistently contemptuous of generalizations about women, is not so much to take on a specifiable new set of widespread mental characteristics as it is to long for a particular man, to have a specific desire. Eliot partly renovates Dorothea, in other words, makes her “woman,” so that she can experience an utterly individual longing, a yearning toward some one man. This, then, is the moment when the very particularity of a desire simply refers to the particularity of women’s desires generally.

But this passage does even more than stretch the limits of referentiality by temporarily decreasing the tension between class and instance. With its language of being stirred by new organs, it indicates the sudden eruption of erotic sensation in Dorothea; indeed, it implies the addition of the very capacity for such sensation, the implanting of unaccustomed vitals. The idea called “Dorothea” is reshaped around a sexual and reproductive core, so that the very notion of her “species” takes on a newly biological meaning. Hence, the striking widening of the “species” from tragically failed Theresa to “common womanhood” is simultaneously a shift away from “character,” in the usual sense of the word, to physiological sensation. Dorothea, it seems, experiences not just a reorganization of her consciousness but its annexation of a desiring body.

This crucial, metamorphic, realization, therefore, strains toward an incarnation, in which a specifically sexual human body is imposed upon the character.⁷ Through it Dorothea obviously becomes the “elevated” type who de-

7 I am grateful to Ian Duncan for reminding me that this connection between particularization and erotic embodiment is established earlier in the novel, especially in the description of Dorothea’s Roman honeymoon, where the implied sexual wreck of her marriage to Casaubon is figured in: “all this vast [Roman] wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emo-

scends onto the plain of everyday appetites, but she also comes to signify just “type,” ideality, fictional construct, the word itself wanting to take on flesh. She stands, we might say, for all novel characters in their demand for realization, their demand that we think of them as possessing the specificity of organic beings. Indeed, characters can only have the bodies we imagine for them, a fact the narrator emphasizes in telling us that Dorothea must be given her erotic womanhood by others: “It had never before entered her mind that [Will Ladislaw] could, under any circumstances, be her lover: conceive the effect of the sudden revelation that another had thought of him in that light, that perhaps he himself had been conscious of such a possibility” (461). Dorothea’s erotic body must be twice created: once by the other fictional characters imagining it; and then again by readers conceiving the effect of the characters’ imagining. Dorothea does not take on flesh and blood easily; and the harder it is to incarnate her, the more we want to do it.

This turn of desire in the novel certainly contains its own paradoxes and ironies, for the erotic pursuit of the particular is precisely what reproduces the biological species. The proximity between the urge of the species, in Charles Darwin’s rather than Fielding’s sense of that word, and the specific longing of the character, moreover, might be said to squeeze out what had before seemed individual and unique about Dorothea. The passage and its aftermath in the novel, indeed, remind one of Ludwig Feuerbach’s contrast between “species-being,” which is always embodied particularity, and those modes of individualization that create aloofness from one’s kind. The turn toward the physiological, in other words, threatens to close the genre-defining gap between type and instance by redefining both. And yet such a narrowing also follows a generic imperative that the protagonist’s being should come to resemble the uncharacterizable universal consciousness of the narrator and implied reader as the novel progresses. In the beginning, a novel heroine is an individual by virtue of her unusual characteristics, but by the end these should have been converted into the particularity of a unique plot, a story that can be told “about” her, leaving the “character” unencumbered by many of her earlier peculiarities.⁸ The extraordinary achievement of *Middlemarch* is to accomplish

tion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory... the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.” (181–82)

8 This essay has throughout been in dialogue with the work of D.A. Miller, and in this section it is particularly responsive to the contrast he makes, in *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2003: 31–32), between Jane Austen and George Eliot: “Of that godlike au-

this turn toward generic consciousness through embodiment, a turn that produces, in its very erotic torque, an offshoot of regret: “Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth” (785), the “Finale” tells us. In short, this yearning for the real is not simple; it is philosophically and generically overdetermined, and it is mixed with melancholy; it is nevertheless desire.

The frequency with which one encounters figures like Dorothea in nineteenth-century literature—ideational, immortal and spiritual beings impelled by amorous energy toward the state of mere humanity—indicates that Eliot was herself born along by a massive redirection of longing away from disembodied transcendence and toward embodied immanence. When we give ear to them, it seems as if the culture’s imaginary creatures were sending up a lament for their missing bodies, demanding with John Keats’s *Lamia*, “Give me my woman’s form” or leaning out over the bars of heaven with Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Blessed Damozel* and sighing for their earthly lovers. The animation for which all great art strives, I would argue, nineteenth-century writers want to accomplish by adding flesh to spirit. The end of art no longer seems to be transcendence, but immanence; matter is not in need of soul, but soul in need of matter. To enliven is not so much to inspirit as to embody. And it fell to the lot of George Eliot to instantiate this yearning most fully. As the English translator of Feuerbach, she was well acquainted with the thesis that humans endow their gods, mere creatures of their imaginations, with their own most valued characteristics. Her own incarnation myth is a subtle revision of this idea: it gives us the disembodied spirit, the novel character, as a new sort of erotic, female Christ, who only craves to be us.

Because George Eliot makes us imagine, not an independently living and breathing Dorothea, but instead an idea called Dorothea requiring that we conceive her bodily sensations to make her real, our very organic reality becomes newly desirable. That this desire will always remain partly unfulfilled,

thority which we think of as the default mode of narration in the traditional novel, Jane Austen may well be the only English example. Whether our standard is Fielding in the eighteenth century, or Thackeray in the nineteenth, the omniscient narrator’s divinity proves constantly betrayed by his human verisimilitude, the all-too-familiar “character” with which he can’t help tending to coincide... Even George Eliot, when not occupied with simulating [the male know-it-all figures of Fielding and Thackeray], ventriloquizes the well-remembered voice of that all-knowing, all-understanding, and all-forgiving woman to whom—uniquely—everyone has been accustomed to submit: the mother.”

for our physicality cannot make us wholly one with ourselves, only increases its intensity. Through Dorotheas, and perhaps in no other way, we can experience a longing for that which simultaneously seems already given as the basis of our being: our incarnate selves. George Eliot is the greatest English realist because she not only makes us curious about the quotidian, not only convinces us that knowing its particularity is our ultimate ethical duty, but also, and supremely, makes us want it.

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