"Dwell on every detail and its possible meaning": The Subjective Particulars of *Middlemarch*

Introduction: The Subjectivity Effect

"Emotion links itself with particulars," writes George Eliot in her essay "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young" (1857), explaining, "an orator may discourse very eloquently on injustice in general, and leave his audience cold; but let him state a special case of oppression, and every heart will throb."[1] The particular occasion for this rather general pronouncement is a critical review of the eighteenth-century poet Edward Young, whose work she faults for its emotional and artistic "insincerity," evidenced by his "love of abstractions" and "telescopic view of human things."[2] To illustrate her point, Eliot paints a miniature word-picture that contrasts with Young's idealised abstractions both in its homely theme and its detailed representation:

> [Young] sees Virtue sitting on a mount serene, far above the mists and storms of earth: he sees Religion coming down from the skies… but we never find him dwelling on virtue or religion as it really exists—in the emotions of a man dressed in an ordinary coat, and seated by his fire-side of an evening, with his hand resting on the head of his little daughter… [and] in all the sublime self-renunciation and sweet charities which are found in the details of ordinary life.[3]

While Eliot's domestic details can be viewed as eliciting sympathy, her characteristic concern, I want to point to the paradoxical (if obvious) fictionality of this "really exist[ing]" scene: its accumulation of invented details, which require progressive imaginative particularization, invoking an inwardness that is doing the particularizing. Eliot herself uses details to evoke the inner lives of their perceivers, "men of active intellect and imagination, in

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[1] George Eliot, "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young", in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1990), 199.

[2] Eliot, "The Poet Young," 194, 186.

[3] Eliot, 199.

whom the abstract term rapidly and vividly calls up the particulars it represents, these particulars being the true source of the emotion."[4] As striking as the involuntary perception of details is the notion of the imagination rendering universal abstractions personal and particular. Eliot reveals details to be not given but created entities, which bear the impress of the perceiver's subjectivity and individuality—an alignment embedded in the etymology of detail: *détailler* (to cut or to carve, denoting the incisive activity of a perceiving subject). Yet in being "rapidly and vividly" carved, details also precipitate the inner lives they express: if they are the "source" of emotion, it is because they are imbued with the perceiver's feelings. This alignment of subjectivity and particularity influences Eliot's praise of William Cowper, whose "exquisite mind falls with the mild warmth of morning sunlight on the commonest objects, at once disclosing every detail and investing every detail with beauty!"[5] The perception of details is inseparable from charging them with emotion and significance. Catherine Gallagher describes the doubly fictional nature of individual characters in nineteenth-century realist novels, which are "deduced from types" that are in turn supposedly "induced from persons in the world."[6] In condensing this conjunction of fictionality and particularity, Eliot's details highlight its subjective nature, where details enable the constitution and representation of the inner lives and individuality of perceiving subjects.

In this essay, I examine moments of close engagement with details in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871-2), to uncover her use of details to represent inner subjectivity. Eliot's deployment of physical details as a means of characterization encapsulates the alignment of two realms of aesthetic modernity usually viewed in opposition: the representation of the external world, or objective reality, and the inner life, or subjectivity. To

[4] Eliot, "The Poet Young," 199.

[5] Eliot, 209.

[6] Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90, no. 2 (Spring 2005), 62.

illuminate this alignment, I turn to a key nineteenth-century philosophical tradition that locates the perceptual activity of the mind in the representation of details, and that has surprising affinities with the empiricism with which Eliot is principally connected: German Idealism, represented by G.W.F. Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (*Lectures on Aesthetics*, published 1835). Eliot was certainly aware of Hegel's aesthetic philosophy: in a letter to John Sibree (who translated Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* in 1857), she discusses the "inherent superiority of music," which accords with Hegel's praise of its emotional immediacy and power: "Painting and sculpture are but an idealizing of our actual existence. Music arches over this existence with another and diviner. Amen too, to that ideen-voll observation of Hegel's."[7] Hegel's *Ästhetik* was extensively reviewed by Eliot's partner George Henry Lewes, who owned and annotated a copy.[8] More relevant than the establishing of sources, however, is the striking convergence between Hegel's aesthetics and Lewes's formal analyses, and Eliot's reflections on aesthetic complexity in her letters and journals—which she seeks to realize in psychologically complex characters with complicated engagements with details. My opening section thus examines a key scene of reading details in *Middlemarch*, to uncover how Eliot employs the misperception of details to indicate the inner subjectivity of her heroine, Dorothea Brooke. In my second section, I trace Eliot's association of details with subjectivity to her engagement with idealist aesthetics, which reveals the appearance of reality in genre painting and poetic metaphor to be generated and enlivened by the artist's subjectivity and creativity. This animation of details shapes Eliot's stylistic technique in *Middlemarch*, her oblique representation of details in terms that render palpable the perceiver's subjectivity. In my final three sections, I examine scenes in which Eliot disrupts and enlivens Dorothea's engagement with details, by portraying them through

[7] George Eliot, Letter to John Sibree, 11 February 1848, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vol. (New Haven: Yale UP 1954-78), 1:247.

[8] Valerie Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 152.

metaphorical figures that occlude direct representation of those details in favor of rendering Dorothea's inner experience. The narrative break that details create, through their signification of misperception and formal diffusiveness, generates the effect of subjective inwardness and depth.

Dorothea's most crucial engagement with details in *Middlemarch* is characterized by occlusion, irony, and error. This is the pivotal scene in which she "forc[es] herself to dwell on every detail" of what she believes was an intimate encounter between Will Ladislaw—the man she has, unbeknownst to herself, come to love—and Rosamond Lydgate.[9] Distraught at finding them together the previous day, she suppresses her pain to peruse the scene carefully. Her resolution is usually viewed as a turn towards objectivity that indicates growing ethical awareness: Suzy Anger describes Dorothea's resolve as "progress… towards more accurate—because less subjective—knowledge."[10] This reading is predicated on a broader correlation between details and objectivity, influential in the reception of *Middlemarch*, that is paraphrased by Catherine Gallagher as the "ethical importance of particularizing": "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."[11] The imaginative engagement with the particularity of other lives is supposed to enable the access of sympathy. However, the narration of this episode complicates the correlation between details, objectivity, and sympathy. Instead of reading details with objective detachment, Dorothea "forces" herself to dwell on a scene that is painful to her. Her emotion does not disappear when suppressed, but charges her "dwelling":

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[9] George Eliot (Marian Evans). *Middlemarch*, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 485.

[10] Suzy Anger, "George Eliot and Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2001), 91-2.

[11] Catherine Gallagher, "Immanent Victorian," 70.

> She began now to live through that yesterday morning deliberately again, forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning. Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life.[12]

The representation of Dorothea's meditation highlights the absence of details from the narrative: we are *told* that she dwells on details, but not *shown* those details. Their absence underlines the fact that they are internal to Dorothea's imagination, and are thus represented not directly, but through the intense rush of sympathy they precipitate: "All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate's lot, and this young marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles—all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power."[13] Yet this sympathetic awakening is ironic, for Dorothea "dwells" not on the original scene between Ladislaw and Rosamond, but on her memory of that scene, which is shaped by an erroneous premise: that they are physically or emotionally intimate. What appears to be an ethical and imaginative triumph based on the scrupulous engagement with details is made possible by an epistemic failure.

That Dorothea's engagement with details precipitates erroneous epiphanies indicates a more complicated role for details in *Middlemarch*, and in nineteenth-century realism more broadly, than the connotation of empirical observation and scientific objectivity. The canonical status of *Middlemarch* as a realist novel arguably stems from the widespread view that the novel dramatizes in ethical terms the empirical perception of particulars that critics have traditionally identified with realism. Ian Watt's influential claim that realism "begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses" has shaped the association of detail with the meticulous representation of the external world. This

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[12] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 485.

[13] Eliot, 485.

identification marginalizes details in narrative terms, reflecting their broader relegation in the history of aesthetics.[14] In her study *Reading in Detail* (1987), Naomi Schor traces how the domination of neoclassical anti-detailism and modernist abstraction relegated the detail through association with the apparently unimaginative, trivial, and feminized categories of ornament and the everyday life of genre painting.[15] However, the details on which Dorothea "dwells" resist this marginalization: even as they are absent from the narrative, their misreading precipitates epiphanies pivotal to the plot. Their paradoxical textual role requires reconceiving details as active and disruptive entities that reveal the appearance of objective reality to be animated by subjective intensities.

In their narrative and affective unsettlements, *Middlemarch*'s missing details anticipate the disruptions that Jacques Rancière identifies in details in his lecture "The Politics of Fiction" (2009). Rancière takes issue with Roland Barthes's influential identification of nineteenth-century realist details with the empty signification of a bourgeois "concrete reality" in "The Reality Effect" (1968).[16] Instead, he identifies details with a broader break in representation: the suspension of the classical representational order, where the work of art was a "organic totality," with its constituent parts subordinated to the whole, in favor of a "democratic" order, where the proliferation of details signify the disruption of classical harmony and hierarchy: "the parts are not subordinated to the whole; the limbs don't obey the head."[17] In disrupting the form of classical narrative, details also disrupt its causal logic: while the "classical logic of representation" featured a sequence of momentous acts by

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[14] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 12.

[15] Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987; New York: Routledge, 2006), (xli-xliv).

[16] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard. Howard. (1968; University of California Press, 1989), 146.

[17] Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Fiction," Lecture, Berlin, ICI, 2009.

aristocratic characters, this is suspended in the democratic order in favor of an affectively charged everyday, where anyone can "turn the routine of the everyday into the depth of passion."[18] Seemingly random details such as the barometer in Flaubert's story "A Simple Heart" (Barthes's example) signify the breakdown of narrative causality under democratic affective intensities: "Images are not descriptions of the visible. They are operators producing differences of intensity… [that] evince a re-distribution of the sensory capacities, or… of the hierarchy between golden souls and iron souls."[19] Building on Rancière's claim, I posit that details effect the impression of subjectivity, by not only indicating modern subjects that experience intense passions in everyday life, but also by expressing those passions. The break in causality occasioned by excess details signifies an inner excess, a self that evades representation, even as its perceptions and emotions are rendered indirectly perceptible in details. The irony of Dorothea's dwelling, where her scrupulous scrutiny of details results in misguided epiphanies, makes explicit the originary paradox of detail: that the appearance of objectivity with which details are typically invested is subtended and enlivened by subjectivity. Error, indirection, and irony are the enlivening marks that reveal the impress of Dorothea's subjectivity on the details she (mis)perceives.

It might appear paradoxical to view in the seemingly lowly and static details of everyday life as the disruptive animations of a liberatory modern subjectivity. Yet this view stems from a key nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy that was an important source for Eliot (and Rancière): German idealism, exemplified by Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Hegel views the profuse details in modern literature and genre painting to be generated by modern subjectivity, which expresses its inner freedom indirectly, through incongruously virtuosic representations of humble everyday scenes. This subjectivity cannot express itself freely in

[18] Rancière, 2009.

[19] Rancière, 2009.

the modern world, where it is entrapped by the preponderance of bureaucratic institutions and material contingencies, as Hegel declares memorably:

> This is the prose of the world… a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw.[20]

Faced with this thwarting world, the spirit retreats inwards, and gains inner freedom and self-consciousness, which it expresses through meticulous yet skillful depictions of the external world. Modern or "romantic" art thus takes for its subject matter the very "prose of the world" that frustrates ideal aspiration and individual fulfilment, but whose representation and animation by the spirit expresses its freedom and creativity. Hegel locates modern creativity in two genres that are relevant to Eliot: seventeenth-century genre painting, and modern literature. While genre painters animate their mundane scenes through the play of color and light, modern poets employ metaphor to indicate the associative perspectives of their speakers. What both "romantic" genres have in common is the deployment of incongruous technical virtuosity to express the artist's subjective skill and freedom, which takes the form of enlivening or deranging equivalences of form and content (such as attributed to literal prose). Hegel's emphasis on incongruously virtuosic details as a mode of modern subjective expression illuminates Eliot's ironic, figurative, and affectively charged representation of details to render inner subjectivity.

Hegel excluded the nineteenth-century novel (which largely postdates the *Aesthetics*) from consideration, maintaining it depicted not the freedom of spirit but its assimilation in the world of prose—and certainly Dorothea's trajectory in *Middlemarch* lends itself to this view. Starting out as a latter-day St. Theresa, who aspires after an "epic life" in an age that denies

[20] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vol., trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.149.

women such opportunities, she becomes assimilated as the wife of Ladislaw, the eventual public man. Yet Eliot enlivens this trajectory through Dorothea's erroneous and ironic misperceptions of details, which are rendered by her seemingly omniscient third-person narrator in metaphorical terms that imbue Dorothea's encounters with her emotions, and blur the boundary between her subjective perceptions and the objects she perceives. While the plot depicts Dorothea's assimilation into the prosaic world through her engagement with details, Eliot's representation of Dorothea's intensely charged misreadings transform details into expressions of her inner life.

Idealism and Things; or, The Theory of Detail

To read in realist details the forming activity of subjects is to recover the oft-overlooked relationship between two sets of philosophical approaches usually viewed in opposition: empiricism and idealism. Eliot herself engaged with the work of writers who interrogated the divide between English empirical and German idealist approaches. In her letters in 1841, she refers to reading Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, popularizers of German idealism, who viewed it as a corrective to the limitations of sense-perception.[21] Claiming "Our Senses in no way acquaint us with Things, as they are in and of themselves," Coleridge revises Kant's distinction between the sensibility (sense-perception), the understanding (synthesized from sense-perceptions by the imagination), and a priori reason, to posit an imaginative perception that not only differentiates but also synthesizes sense-perceptions to apprehend a deeper spiritual reality: "The Primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the external act of creation in the infinite I AM.[22] Kathleen Wheeler terms

[21] Eliot, Letters to Martha Jackson, 16 December 1841, and to Maria Lewis, 21 August 1841, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, (New Haven: Yale UP 1954-78), 1.123, 1:104.

[22] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York and London 1957-1973), III, 3605, f.121; *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Adam Roberts (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 203.

Coleridge's revision a "Hegelian attempt at correction": while Kant claims that reason (or subject) cannot access noumenal reality (or object), Coleridge argues reason is "neither subject nor object exclusively but… the identity of both," which "manifest[s] itself in the SUM or I AM," so that the self apprehends its own inner infinitude in the world of which it is part.[23] This claim converges with Hegel's dialecticism, as I will outline below. Hegel's dialecticism also influenced the neo-Hegelian Higher Critics David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, translated by Eliot, who posited the identity of the divine and the human, so that man apprehends his divinity in the other; Feuerbach claimed, "The *absolute* to man is his own nature."[24] Similarly, Carlyle's protagonist in *Sartor Resartus* (1834), Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, perceives in "every Man" the "visible Manifestation and Impersonation of the Divinity."[25] As Valerie Dodd points out, these thinkers' attempts to merge antithetical approaches share a "duality of perception," characterized by "awareness of a dimension in reality beyond the merely material."[26] I argue that this dual perception destabilizes the divide between subject and object, by positing a dialectical self that is constituted by perceiving itself in the object. Combining idealism and empiricism reveals how Eliot's seemingly objective details constitute and express subjectivity.

Hegel's philosophy offers a particularly apposite theoretical framework for understanding Eliot's alignment of details and subjectivity. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* he views subjectivity not as a pre-existent and unified condition, but as a dialectic between perceived opposites—spirit growing in consciousness by apprehending itself in the object:

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[23] Kathleen Wheeler, "Coleridge's Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?" in *The Interpretation of Belief: Coleridge, Schleiermacher and Romanticism*, ed. David Jasper (London: Macmillan, 1986), 18.

[24] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Chapman, 1854), 4.

[25] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34; London: Chapman and Hall, 1853), 165.

[26] Dodd, *George Eliot*, 96.

"Only this *self-restoring* Sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself—not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such—is the True."[27] In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel embodies this dialectic in sensuous terms, where spirit progresses towards self-consciousness by realizing itself in matter, generating an increasingly particularized art forms: from the abstract Symbolic art of architecture, to Ideal or Classical art with its symmetrical Greek gods, to the "romantic" or modern arts of literature and genre painting, whose profuse details reflect the inwardness of modern subjectivity. Hegel thus identifies particularity in art with the expression of man's inner life.

This relationship between modern artistic details and the inner life, however, is negative or indirect. Where "Ideal" or Classical art, with its perfect fit of matter and spirit and its lack of details, embodies a Greek spirit that can realize its freedom externally, the prosaic modern world offers no such opportunities, so that the spirit can only withdraw inward, and attain an inner freedom. In the process, it objectifies and particularizes itself into a richly detailed interiority: "spiritual aims, mundane interests, passions, collisions, sorrows and joys," which enter representation.[28] Simultaneously, its withdrawal frees the external world to enter representation in its particularity, so that art "takes for its subject-matter" "contingent reality in its boundless modification of shapes and relationships… the incalculable mutability of the external objective world."[29] Modern art is thus characterized by the particularity both of the inner life and the external world—but their relationship is indirect, for there is no inherent connection between interiority and details. As Benjamin Rutter writes, the "project" of modern art consists in "depicting episodes of feeling and reflection in such a way that makes their depth and value palpable," while also "suggesting that in virtue of their very

[27] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP), 1977, 10.

[28] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.524.

[29] Hegel, 1.524.

depth and value the capacities for feeling and reflection cannot be fully presented in the mediums available to art."[30] The lack of fit between form and content in modern art is construed by Hegel as indicating an inner subjectivity that lies beyond direct representation, only rendering itself indirectly palpable through its virtuosic details.

This scenario foregrounds the subjectivity and creativity of the modern artist, who uses his virtuosity to not only render external details with fidelity, but also to imbue them with vitality. Hegel writes of seventeenth-century northern European genre painting, called "Dutch" painting, that while its domestic scenes lack inherent spiritual content, Dutch artists paint them with such "subjective skill" as to charge them with inner life and significance, making palpable "the external shape of spiritual reality in the most detailed situations, a woman threading a needle by candlelight."[31] Though the picture of a woman threading a needle cannot directly depict her inner life, Dutch artists paint the scene so skillfully as to make this contingent act appear the essential expression of her being: "the liveliness, even in the case of the most fleeting moments, is too great to leave any room for the idea that these figures would ever adopt a different position."[32] The woman's commitment to her task manifests the artist's commitment to the contingent details of the modern world, itself emblematic of the condition of modern man, who, being embedded in the material circumstances of everyday life, expresses his inner freedom by "fulfil[ling] every task, no matter how trivial, with heart and soul."[33] In making the contingent details of his surroundings appear as the expression of his inner being, Hegel's Dutch artist constructs the appearance of the unity of form and content, matter and spirit, that is not given in modern art.

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[30] Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel and the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 55.

[31] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.599.

[32] Hegel, 2.869.

[33] Hegel, 2.833.

Yet Hegel's identification of artistic subjectivity in Dutch details endows them with a dynamism that disrupts the correspondence between form and content he attempts to establish: not only is their virtuosity in excess of their mundaneness, but they also suggest hidden inner depths. In their disproportionate representational import, Dutch details do not actually represent ideal beauty, with its perfect fit of form and content, but "liveliness" (*Lebendigkeit*), described by Benjamin Rutter as a "looser and more dynamic fit" between the inner life and the external world.[34] The artist's indifferent animation of details, regardless of their inherent value, ironically transforms their materiality into a free play of appearances that manifests his inner freedom: "In contrast to the prosaic reality confronting us, this pure appearance, produced by the spirit, is therefore the marvel of ideality, a mockery, if you like, and an ironical attitude to what exists in nature and externally."[35] Hegel finds spirit shining on the surfaces of Dutch details, in the virtuosic play of color and light that enlivens and diffuses the objects represented: "hither and thither of reflections and sheens of colour, this mutability and fluidity of transitions" effect a "pure appearance of animation" that reveals "the spirit of the artist."[36] In their signification of inner freedom, rendered through a free play of appearances that dissolves formal boundaries, Dutch details exemplify the disjunctive alignment of excess materiality and interiority that details signify as an aesthetic category.

Hegel's attempts to contain the disruptive dynamism he locates in details influenced a key British reader: G.H. Lewes. In his in-depth review of the *Aesthetics*, Lewes explores the implications of Hegel's virtuosic details for contemporary literature, through his juxtaposition of lengthy excerpts on Dutch painting and Shakespearean drama. In the former, Hegel seeks to contain Dutch details in a coherent form/content relationship, by claiming their elaborate

[34] Rutter, *Hegel and the Modern Arts*, 87.

[35] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.163.

[36] Hegel, 2.848.

scenes of communal peasant celebration reveal their true content: the inner freedom of the Dutch people, who emancipated their country from Spanish rule and the domination of the sea, creating the everyday life they celebrate in art:

> The Hollander had, for the most part, made the country he lived in…. It is this citizenship, and the spirit of enterprise in trifles as in great things… which form the universal subject-matter of their paintings. This is no common vulgar subject-matter… It is a great nationality… In these pictures of marriages, dances, feasts, there is always a free, joyous wantonness of spirit hovering over all… the feeling of freedom and animal spirits (*ausgelassenheif*) penetrates the whole.[37]

Hegel's reading of Dutch details as manifestations of Dutch freedom idealizes them, by elevating the mundane content to match the virtuosic form. He employs this apparent correspondence of form and content to challenge the marginalization of Dutch art under neoclassicism. The eighteenth-century neoclassical artist and theorist Joshua Reynolds identified Dutch painting, and details in art generally, with the "mere mechanical labour of copying," which he considered the province of working-class artisans, as opposed to "the real labour of thinking" performed by free gentlemen artists of "Genius," who "distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences and deformities of things, from their general figures" to produce idealized forms that reflect their inner freedom.[38] Hegel challenges this divide by claiming for Dutch art the correspondence of free form and content Reynolds attributes to neoclassical idealism. Yet Hegel's attempted idealization and containment of Dutch details paradoxically reinforces their disruptive expressivity. In identifying intellectual freedom and creativity with details, Hegel posits a freer, more dynamic subjectivity that inheres not in

[37] G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, ed. H. G. Hotho, 3 vol., Berlin, *Verlag* von Duncker und Humblot: 1835, 1.217-18, cited in G.H. Lewes, "Hegel's Aesthetics: Philosophy of Art," *The British and Foreign Review* (January 1842), 46.

[38] Joshua Reynolds, *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: James Carpenter, 1842), 41.

abstraction but in in pausing upon particulars, and infusing them with vitality. Lewes's choice of this excerpt suggests his recognition of Dutch details as a mode of subjective expression .

Lewes also recognizes the possibilities details offer for representing the inner lives of literary characters. He follows the above excerpt with Hegel's discussion of "particularity" as a means of developing "character" in Shakespeare's plays:

> The ideal demands in a character some peculiar passion which leads him on to determinate aims, resolves and actions. Should, however, this principle be carried too far, the result will be, instead of an individual an abstract form of passion, in which all vitality and subjectivity is lost… In the particularity of a character, therefore, one side must appear as the dominant feature, as the centre round which the others play, so that the individual has space given him to develope himself in several situations, and the whole riches of his internal nature are brought into play.[39]

Details enable the representation of psychological complexity, by developing multiple facets and nuances of a character through engagement with contingent circumstances that might not directly depict his central "ideal passion." Hegel claims that Romeo's "dominant passion"—love—is enriched by "manifold relations to his parents, kindred and friends, in contest with Tybalt," and "even… with the apothecary from whom he buys the poison"—instances that do not convey his love for Juliet, but which are "always… elevated by the depth of his emotions." Yet his insistence that particularity must serve and be "elevated" by the ideal passion reveals an anxiety about the centrifugal capacities of details to diffuse the unity and consistency of character—and to degrade it through engagement with prosaic particulars. Accordingly, he criticizes Racine's Phèdre for "allow[ing] herself to be persuaded" by Oenone, "an inferior person" whose influence undermines her "heroic" "individual unity."[40]

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[39] Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 1.306-7, cited in Lewes, "Hegel's Aesthetics," 47.

[40] Hegel, 1.306-7, cited in Lewes, 47.

Hegel's ambivalence towards the inner depth and indirection that details signify influenced Lewes's literary criticism. In *The Life of Goethe*, Lewes cites Hegel on the importance of anti-didacticism: "Every work of Art has its moral, says Hegel; but the *moral depends on him that draws it*."[41] Detail enable formal complexity by refracting and complicating abstractions through embodiment in nuanced characters and circumstances. Accordingly Lewes praises Goethe as "an Artist, not an Advocate," who in *Faust* "paint[s] a true picture… in a form which would permit men to draw from it those opposite conclusions which might be drawn from the reality itself."[42] Yet, like Hegel, Lewes evinces formal and social anxiety in *The Principles of Success in Literature* (1865), where he denounces "detailism" in contemporary fiction as "obtrusiveness of detail and a preference for the Familiar," instead advocating "*characteristic detail[s]*" strictly selected to convey a character's central passion.[43] His attempt to delimit the disruptive power of details is haunted by their loose conjunction of "inferior" external excess and subjectivity, even as he appreciates their signification of formal complexity and inner depth. Lewes's theoretic ambivalence towards details is realized in the literary practice of his partner, George Eliot.

Lewes's mediations of the indirection and inwardness of Hegel's details illuminate Eliot's pursuit of aesthetic complexity in her fiction. One detects the influence of Lewes's argument and illustration in Eliot's famous statement on art:

> [I] have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first 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

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[41] Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 1.69, cited in George Henry Lewes, *The Life of Goethe*, 2nd ed (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1864), 506.

[42] Lewes, *Goethe*, 506.

[43] Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature* (1865; Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1891), 84.

> lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.[44]

Eliot equates aesthetic complexity with the embodiment and enrichment of abstract ideas in richly realized individual characters, whose particularized inner lives are developed through embedment in the external world. Details offer a way to grow diagrams into pictures, by particularizing abstractions into subjective passions and perceptions that can only rendered sensuously palpable in indirect and unpredictable ways. However, Eliot does not initially engage with details' subjective capacities. Her use of the hypothetical "as if" indicates that for her, particularity involves "severe effort" rather than natural inclination. Ruth Bernard Yeazell perceptively argues that Eliot's original impulses lay towards abstraction, which were closer to the nineteenth-century view of the Italian ideal. Dutch paintings, with their "faithful imitations of mundane appearances" that nevertheless carry spiritual meanings, offered Eliot a model for embodying her idealizing impulses in concrete representations of everyday life.[45] Eliot was already familiar with the Incarnation of God the Son in the human flesh from her translations of the Strauss and Feuerbach. As she turned to fiction, she drew on highly particularized renderings of everyday life in Dutch art to incarnate abstractions in complex characters.

Eliot's use of Dutch details converges with Lewes's and Hegel's insistence on "particularity" for developing complex characters, and shares their ambivalence towards the disruptive capacities of details. In her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), she famously takes the "vulgar details" of Dutch art as a model for her realism, praising the "rare, precious quality of truthfulness" of "these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence."[46] Like

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[44] George Eliot, Letter to Frederic Harrison, 15 August 1866, in *Letters*, 4.300-301.

[45], Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday*: *Dutch painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008), 112.

[46] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 157.

Hegel, Eliot creates a correspondence between the form (minute details) and the content (domestic scenes) of Dutch art. Unlike Hegel, however, she identifies details not with ideality but with humble truthfulness, which is transvalued from the supposedly mindless rendering of materiality into a more ethically and aesthetically significant achievement than the ideal forms of Italian art. In the process, however, Eliot emphasizes the concreteness and accuracy of Dutch art at the expense of its disruptive virtuosity. As we have seen, Dutch details do more than accurately render mundane scenes: their appearance of reality is generated and enlivened by the artist's subjective skill. This transformation of prosaic materiality into a "marvel of ideality" converges uncomfortably with Eliot's idealizing instincts. Hence her use of details to depict subjects is paradoxically accompanied by her insistent attempt to deny their subjective and expressive capacities. In a meticulous description of a Breughelesque scene that can be read as elaborating Hegel's "marriages, dances, feasts," Eliot excises the "joyous wantonness of spirit" that Hegel (and Lewes) found in Dutch art:

> I turn to that village wedding… where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips, and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and good-will.[47]

Eliot domesticates Dutch details by emphasizing their materiality and accuracy at cost of their expression of subjective inwardness and skill. While freedom is domesticized as "contentment" in Eliot's description of the picture's content, it is missing from the form altogether: Eliot describes detailed representation as a matter of "pain," which she frames as the price of accurate representation, invoking artists to "give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things."[48] "Pain" indicates Eliot's awareness of the

[47] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 157.

[48] Eliot, 158.

difficulty of trying to use details—highly aestheticized and disruptive entities whose formal excess indirectly signifies subjective inwardness and creativity—as a "humbly" transparent and objective representational mode. Eliot's "pain" reveals her attempt to excise her own idealizing subjectivity from her "active perception."

Later in her career, Eliot returns to her original instincts towards idealism and abstraction—but it is a knowing return, enriched by her experience with details, and taking the form of exploring their subjective intensities. In 1855, she described encountering busts of Goethe by different sculptors, each "widely different in form, as well as expression," making her reflect "how inevitably subjective art is, even when it professes to be purely imitative... the most active perception gives us rather a reflex of what we think and feel, than the real sum of objects before us."[49] Eliot returns to this insight in her unpublished essay "Notes on Form in Art" (1868), where she delineates a conception of form that accounts for subjective perception. Her opening claim, that form "must begin with the perception of separateness," is similar to the incision of details by a perceiving subject.[50] Showing some distance from objectivity pursued in *Adam Bede*, Eliot asks: "what is form but the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another?"[51] Yet with the perception of separateness comes the perception of underlying similarities:

> "[W]ith this fundamental discrimination [of separateness] is born in necessary antithesis the sense of wholeness or unbroken connexion in space & time: a flash of light is a whole compared with the darkness which precedes & follows it; the taste of sourness is a whole & includes parts or degrees as it subsides." [52]

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[49] George Eliot, "Three Months in Weimar," *Fraser's Magazine* LI (June 1855), 703.

[50] George Eliot, "Notes on Form in Art," in *Selected Essays*, 232.

[51] Eliot, "Notes," 233-234.

[52] Eliot, 232.

Eliot posits a subjectivity that perceives form as a dialectical interplay of sameness and difference, so that the perception of differences is inseparable from the abstraction of underlying similarities that form ideal categories. Her argument and illustration are similar to Coleridge's theorizing of a dialectical consciousness, based on an imaginative perception that is simultaneously synthesizing and differentiating: "Who ever *felt* a single sensation? Is not every one at the same moment conscious that these co-exist with a thousand others in a darker shade, or less light."[53] However, while Coleridge, like Hegel, emphasizes the harmony of dialectical consciousness, comprising sensations synthesized into a unified whole, Eliot's dialectic is informed by its precariousness. She delves into the difficulty of perceiving precisely where sameness begins to separate into form, for the distinction between categories consists of finely imperceptible "degrees" rather than a sharp boundary. Details give form to the blurred boundaries between categories, by incarnating abstractions in particulars that combine divergent traits, thus elaborating (to recall Eliot's "aesthetic complexity") diagrammatic modes into more realized pictorial forms. To perceive details clearly paradoxically requires perceiving their blurred nature: their embodiment of ideal abstractions in nuanced particulars that reveal categorical distinctions to be arbitrary and ambiguous. The difficulty of perceiving details—of negotiating their interplay of abstraction and particularity—precipitates subjective consciousness and complexity:

> [A]s knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction & combination, seeing smaller & smaller unlikenesses & grouping or associating these under a common likeness, it arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more & more multiplied & highly differenced, yet more & more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence.[54]

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[53] Coleridge, *Notebooks*, II, 2370.
[54] Eliot, "Notes," 232.

Eliot aligns the growth of formal complexity with that of inner complexity, where the subject's simultaneous perception of similarity and difference expresses inner states that do not fit within logical categories. Daniel Wright reads in Eliot's blurring of formal boundaries her interest in the philosophical problem of vagueness, "the ways in which the distinctions that make form possible and perceptible appear, upon closer inspection, to waver and blur."[55] Wright describes vagueness as an inherent property of language, which enables engagement with the "fullness" of inner states that defy categories of logical thought, such as the inextricability of erotic desire and ethical thinking explored by Eliot.[56] One can extend Wright's alignment of formal and inner vagueness to details, with their embodiment and complication of abstract categories in mixed particulars. Eliot writes of form as determined by, and expressing, inner states, as "a set of relations selected and combined in accordance with the sequence of mental states in the constructor.[57]" Details encapsulate this process, by giving form to inner states characterized by the commingling of thoughts and emotions that obscure categories.

Eliot's alignment of formal and inner vagueness leads her to highlight the art form she considers most suited to representing it: "poetry," which she equates with "all literary production."[58] Poetry suitability for representing in our states, lies in its indirect medium, language, which is created by the imagination, and which functions through symbols that are only arbitrarily related to what they express. Eliot declares poetry the most "superior" art, for its medium is "the least imitative and… in the most complex relation with what it expresses"—working not through direct resemblance (unlike painting), but by translating its

[55] Daniel Wright, "George Eliot's Vagueness." *Victorian Studies*, 56: 4 (Summer 2014), 626.

[56] Wright, 626.

[57] Eliot, "Notes," 233.

[58] Eliot, 233.

subjects into the mental and metaphorical plane of language.[59] The indirectness and subjectivity of language is exemplified by poetic metaphor, where the poet expresses himself through images whose connection to the referent is only discernible to himself. Poetic form thus builds on the indirect expressivity of the poetic image: "*Poetry* begins when passion weds thought by finding expression in an image; but *poetic form* begins with a choice of elements, however meagre, as the accordant expression of emotional states."[60] In this scenario, the subjective and symbolic nature of poetry can make explicit the arbitrary perception and ambiguity of formal boundaries: "Boundary or outline & visual appearance are modes of form which in music & poetry can only have a metaphorical presence."[61]

Eliot's praise of poetry's metaphoric indirectness converges with Hegel's account of poetry as the art most suited for depicting the inner life, for it expresses spiritual content in the medium of the spirit: "Poetry to a still ampler extent than painting and music, can comprise in the form of the inner life not only the inner consciousness but also the special and particular details of what exists externally."[62] While painterly virtuosity produces images that resemble the object depicted, poetic virtuosity produces metaphors, images, and similes that occlude the object while rendering its experience sensuously palpable: "we may describe poetry's way of putting things as *figurative* because it brings before our eyes not the abstract essence but its concrete reality" by creating "an image of the meaning before [the] mind."[63] Representing the felt experience of facts enables rendering the inner life of a subject that feels such experience, so the poet has an "an opportunity… to develop something like a persona, a

[59] Eliot, "Notes," 234.

[60] Eliot, 233.

[61] Eliot, 233.

[62] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2.961

[63] Hegel, 2.1002.

presence that has content, a point of view."[64] Crucially, representing subjectivity takes the form of deranging the relation between image and meaning. Hegel claims for modern poetry a "more deliberate energy" that disrupts and enlivens the transparency of prose with the poet's inner associations: while prose functions through "literal accuracy, unmistakable definiteness, and clear intelligibility," "what is metaphorical and figurative is always relatively unclear and inaccurate."[65] Metaphorical images diffuse the object into subjective associations, by requiring the reader to imagine different ways in which image and referent are connected; Benjamin Rutter, paraphrasing John Searle's analysis of the open-endedness and ambiguity of metaphor, writes that a metaphor might have a specific referent, while also shading into a "penumbra" of related meanings derived from the field of the reference.[66] The deliberate diffusiveness of poetic metaphor illuminates Eliot's alignment of formal and inner vagueness. In *Middlemarch*, Ladislaw argues for the superiority of language for depicting the inner life: "Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within, and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection."[67] In this scenario, the diffuseness of poetic metaphor gives form to the inner vagueness of perceiving subjects.

Metaphorical diffuseness converges with nineteenth-century theories of the instability of perception. Peter Garratt argues that nineteenth-century writers such as Eliot were increasingly aware that the self, the source of sense-experience, was constituted and rendered unstable by that experience, destabilizing the divide between subject and object: "If our knowledge claims must be made ultimately referable to sense experience, then self,

[64] Rutter, 197.

[65] Hegel, 2.1005-1006.

[66] Rutter, 152.

[67] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 122.

knowledge, and reality soon threaten to shade into one another."[68] According to Lewes's literary executor, the psychologist James Sully, "Hardly anyone is consistently sober and rational in his perceptions and beliefs… Our luminous circle of rational perception is surrounded by the misty penumbra of illusion"—an image that anticipates the metaphoric diffusion of an object into a "penumbra" of personal associations.[69] Sully's boundary between rational perception and the surrounding "misty penumbra of illusion" is destabilized by Eliot's claims about the subjective perception of form, where the precise point of separateness is blurred. In this scenario, diffuse metaphorical images become a mode of representing the inner vagueness of subjects struggling to perceive details by negotiating their interplay of sameness and difference. Specifically, the metaphoric diffusion of details is used to render the inner life by one specific subject whose misperceptions evince her vagueness, her state of being at once "ardent" and theoretic," of straining to idealise while also responding to sensuous particularity: Dorothea Brooke.

In *Middlemarch,* Eliot employs the blurred boundaries of metaphor to represent Dorothea's misperception of details as she struggles to engage with the prosaic particulars of her world. Eliot's genre of prose fiction was notably excluded by Hegel from aesthetic consideration due to its literalness, which he considered only fit for ordinary speech. His expression "prose of the world" vividly (and ironically, given its figurativeness) encapsulates his view of prose as emblematic of the amorphousness and mundanity of the modern world. Accordingly he views the novel genre as exemplifying the assimilative shapelessness of the world of prose, as it dramatizes man's *Lehrjahre* or "apprenticeship" (Hegel derives this from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*) "into the concatenation of the world" as a

[68] Garratt, Peter, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 18.

[69] James Sully, *Illusions: A Psychological Study* (London: Kegan Paul, 1881), 2-3.

"Philistine."[70] However, Eliot employs figurative prose details to depict Dorothea's growing assimilation in the world of prose, deriving from this paradoxical combination her virtuosic animation of that world. While Dorothea's trajectory traces her embeddedness in the world through her growing engagement with details, Eliot depicts this trajectory in terms that disrupt and enliven the literal accuracy of prose, using highly diffuse metaphors that render palpable Dorothea's inner vagueness, her simultaneous ideality and sensuousness. While Dorothea is aware of details, she neglects them, or projects her ideal aspirations on to them. This ideality persists alongside her growing sensuous apprehension, ultimately shaping her individual subjectivity, her particular manner of intensely engaging with details. While Dorothea's plot traces the descent of the epic individual into the concatenation of the world, Eliot's virtuosic representation of this descent, by rendering the details Dorothea misperceives into representations of her inner subjectivity, makes *Middlemarch* a subjective epic of modern life.

Details, What Details?

Middlemarch is in the anomalous position of being a text on detail without abounding in the concrete descriptive particulars usually identified as details. The reader is initially told that the Brooke sisters are a dark and a fair pair, without being given specifics. While *Adam Bede*'s narrator renders the touch of sunlight that "lit up [Dinah's] pale red hair to auburn" with the precision of the Dutch paintings he celebrates, *Middlemarch*'s narrator reveals nothing initially of the color of Dorothea's eyes, or her facial features—details that might have helped visualize the paradoxical beauty that is "thrown into relief by poor dress."[71] Such details as the narrator provides are remarkably abstract: "Her hand and wrist were so finely

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[70] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.593.

[71] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 67; *Middlemarch*, 5.

formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters."[72] Elaine Freedgood views in this description "the precise dictation of a narrator who makes connections and comparisons exhaustively and authoritatively," creating a descriptive excess that specifies meaning.[73] But this descriptive excess renders Dorothea in terms that are remarkably abstract and allusive, requiring the reader to make a heightened imaginative effort. To visualize her requires a rarefied knowledge of Italian Madonna paintings—the idealized opposite of Dutch art, containing forms whose symmetry and lack of particularity reveal any boundaries to be arbitrary and ambiguous. In requiring the reader to 'carve' details in a genre associated with ideality, the narrator reveals reality to generated and enlivened by the subjective perception and imagination.

The narrative's abstract details reflect Dorothea's inner abstraction, her lack of awareness. This abstraction shapes the narrative through indirection and delayed recollection, as revealed in the very first mention of "detail":

> [Celia:] "Tantripp [the maid]… said that Sir James's man knew from Mrs. Cadwallader's maid that Sir James [Chettam] was to marry the eldest Miss Brooke."
>
> "How can you let Tantripp talk such gossip to you, Celia?" said Dorothea, indignantly, not the less angry because details asleep in her memory were now awakened to confirm the unwelcome revelation.[74]

In what will become a recurrent pattern, the narrator does not reveal what details, noted unconsciously by Dorothea during her encounters with Chettam, are "awakened" in her mind. The narrator's coy "details asleep" disrupt the flow of narrative, requiring the reader (like

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[72] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

[73] Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 120.

[74] Eliot, 23.

Dorothea) to return to the encounter with Chettam in the previous chapter to identify the details in question. However, the episode resists such searching, for the details Dorothea notices are only indirectly significant:

> The thought that [Chettam] had made the mistake of paying his addresses to herself could not take shape… But he was positively obtrusive at this moment, and his dimpled hands were quite offensive. [75]

Chettam's dimpled hands exemplify detail as fleshly materiality—the opposite of the idealized Madonna's hand. They fascinate Dorothea by repulsing her, operating like a reverse Barthesian punctum. Barthes describes the punctum as transfixing the viewer by encoding a personal significance: it is "the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."[76] The viewer can be said to perceptually carve the punctum from the wider scene of undifferentiated details ("studium"), on identifying its embodiment of her desires. Dorothea's repulsion can be attributed to Chettam's fleshly hands representing the opposite of her inner ideality. Yet her noticing his hands reveals her sensitivity to sensuous particulars, even if she does not engage with their significance: they metonymically indicate his unspoken marriage proposal. Dorothea's vague perception of details signifies her inner vagueness and complexity: her aspiring ideality as well as her incipient sensuousness.

Dorothea's lack of engagement with details is in keeping with her ideal aspirations and rejection of the seemingly trivial world of everyday life. Before encountering Chettam, she was immersed in dreams of a "visionary future" as the wife of the scholarly Casaubon: "There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Every-day things with us would mean the greatest things."[77] This follows the narrator's characterization of Dorothea as a latter-day

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[75] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 19.

[76] Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

[77] Eliot, 19.

Saint Theresa, whose "ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent" nature is "hemmed in" by a narrow social existence. [78] Marriage to Casaubon, with its promise of intellectual and spiritual fulfillment, not only offer an escape from triviality, but also an apotheosis of her ideal nature. That she should encounter Chettam while immersed in such ideal dreams underscores their irony, for they are based on a misreading of Casaubon, and are soon disappointed. The narrator ironizes Dorothea's dreams by representing her, in her state of ideal passion, in more concrete terms than previously used:

> She walked briskly in the brisk air … [s]he wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner… [T]here was nothing of an ascetic's expression in her bright full eyes, as she looked before her, not consciously seeing, but absorbing into the intensity of her mood, the solemn glory of the afternoon with its long swathes of light between the far-off rows of limes, whose shadows touched each other.[79]

In rendering Dorothea's abstractedness with an unprecedented degree of particularity (even revealing her hair color), the narrator signifies not only her ideality but also her sensuous apprehension. While her "bright, full eyes" do not "consciously see" the swathes of light and merging shadows, they "absorb" them into the "intensity of her mood," where they resurface in the metaphoric suffusion of color that Dorothea's abstract "notions of marriage" "take" from her "exalted enthusiasm." In charging and diffusing Dorothea's surroundings with her emotions, the narrator blurs the boundary between Dorothea's external environment and her inner experience. The merging shadows of the trees signify her inner vagueness, her simultaneous ideality and incipient sensuousness.

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[78] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

[79] Eliot, 17.

"Questionable details"

The narrator uses vague details to render Dorothea's inner confusion in marriage, where she is forced into a consciousness of "every-day things" by the union intended as an escape from triviality. During her disappointing honeymoon at Rome, Dorothea reassesses her courtship:

> In their conversation before marriage, Mr. Casaubon had often dwelt on some explanation or questionable detail of which Dorothea did not see the bearing but such imperfect coherence seemed due to the brokenness of their intercourse, and, supported by her faith in their future, she had listened with fervid patience to a recitation of possible arguments to be brought against Mr. Casaubon's entirely new view of the Philistine god Dagon and other fish-deities. [80]

This is the first mention of "questionable details" in Dorothea's courtship, sending the reader—like Dorothea—to look back on the courtship scenes for any reference to the deities. However, the courtship scenes only refer to vague "historical examples" offered by Casaubon to affirm Dorothea's religious faith, which had ironically led her to conclude: "He thinks with me… rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror."[81] Isobel Armstrong views the Casaubons' marriage as revealing the precariousness of the "Hegelian drama" of "mutual recognition," where the self becomes real to itself by being recognized as real by the other, so that "identity is in the keeping of another self-consciousness."[82] Dorothea's submission to Casaubon, who seeks self-affirmation in her without reciprocating, makes explicit the potential for "asymmetry, one-sidedness, and

[80] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 123.

[81] Eliot, 16.

[82] Isobel Armstrong, "George Eliot, Hegel, and *Middlemarch*," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 29 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.1992>.

reversal" in this "highly unstable" process.[83] Their courtship can be said to exemplify a converse dialectic of (mis)recognition, where Dorothea imposes her relentlessly idealizing vision on Casaubon, seeking in him her magnified image. His vague historical instances evoke in Dorothea intimations of spiritual infinitude, which the narrator fittingly conveys in images of soaring ideality, tempered by irony: "Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and in girls of sweet, ardent nature, every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky, and colored by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge."[84]

In contrast, the mundane "questionable details" indicate Dorothea's growing awareness of the pedantic instances she had gloriously misinterpreted. Yet even their mundaneness is mysterious to her, as her awareness leads not to insight but to bewilderment. Dorothea remains unable to state the cause of her unhappiness except in the narrator's "general words":

> [T]o 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.[85]

"History of lights and shadows" recalls the earlier play of light that Dorothea, immersed in her ideal dreams, could only unconsciously absorb. In reusing this diffuse metaphor for Dorothea's changing awareness of her marriage, the narrator highlights her growing

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[83] Armstrong, "George Eliot."

[84] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 16.

[85] Eliot, 124.

engagement with details—and its limits. While she is conscious of her changing experience of marriage, this change proceeds so imperceptibly ("endless minutiae") that she cannot 'carve' any precise point of change, but only apprehend it dimly. The narrator's abstract metaphor of the play of light conveys the impossibility of representing this "history of the lights and shadows," which can only be rendered allusively, through figurative language that diffuses what it describes.

The narrator dramatizes Dorothea's vague consciousness in aesthetic terms, through her encounters with the art of Rome. Dorothea had imagined Rome, the "city of visible history," as the ideal setting for embarking on her "visionary future" with Casaubon. But her experience of Rome is remarkable for her *lack* of responsiveness, which mirrors her bewildered experience of marriage:

> Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present… the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual… 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 emotion.[86]

This highly aestheticized description depicts the artworks that overwhelm Dorothea as concrete manifestations of her "struggling" marital incomprehension. The narrator renders the statues as struggling consciousness made sensuous form: the dim marble eyes, which reflect Dorothea's unseeing eyes, contain "the monotonous light of an alien world"; "Titanic life gazing and struggling" embodies spirit frozen in its struggle towards awareness. The description recalls Hegel's characterization of Classical art in terms of self-contained,

[86] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 124.

inexpressive perfection, which has not yet attained the particularity of specific emotions or external details. Yet Classical statues not wholly devoid of particularity: under their smooth marble skin lie "fine nuances" that are imperceptible "at a first glance," but that nevertheless effect a "general impression" of animation that would later emerge in modern art.[87] The Classical perfection, frozen and yet alive with submerged nuances, that overwhelms Dorothea, signifies her subjectivity as it struggles towards consciousness through sensuous engagement with details.

Dorothea's inner struggle is reflected in the succession of progressively detailed artworks in the "Ariadne" scene. Her preoccupied pose beside the Ariadne/Cleopatra statue inspires Ladislaw and the painter Naumann to debate the medium of art best suited to represent Dorothea, recalling Hegel's trajectory of increasingly conscious and particularized arts. Naumann suggests painting—reflecting the Hegelian conception of painting as a more modern art form than sculpture. Ladislaw responds by praising Dorothea's voice as "much diviner than anything you have seen of her," recalling Eliot's claim of "diviner" power of music in her discussion of Hegel. Similarly, Ladislaw's declaration that the fortunate "vague[ness]" of language can convey inner states, reflects Hegel's account of the indirection and diffuseness of poetry. This alignment of verbal and inner vagueness is exemplified by the narrator's use of simultaneously diffuse metaphorical details to render Dorothea's struggling consciousness. Fittingly, it is Ladislaw's encounter with Dorothea during her honeymoon that establishes their friendship, and her gradual emotional and erotic awakening.

The description of Dorothea after her return from her honeymoon indicates this unconscious awakening. The narrator's details render Dorothea in the most concrete terms yet (we finally learn her eye color: hazel!), even as they continually diffuse her particulars

[87] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2.725.

into their abstract categories, rendering Dorothea simultaneously ideal and concrete, continually in the process of embodiment:

> She was glowing from her morning toilette… there was 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-gray pelisse with a tenderness gathered from her own, a sentient commingled innocence which kept its loveliness against the crystalline purity of the outdoor snow.[88]

The narrator's stylistic details commingle ideas and things. Dorothea is diffused by her "glowing": her physical features radiate their abstract qualities ("brightness," "whiteness"), which are in turn charged with physical vitality ("warm red life"). The fur takes on Dorothea's "tenderness," as though her boundaries are dissolving. Having animated Dorothea's fur, this "tenderness" quickens into a "sentient commingled innocence"—a description that enacts the commingling it describes, by rendering innocence a sentient entity, with a possible inner life of its own. Catherine Gallagher describes Dorothea's trajectory in Middlemarch as a "turn toward generic consciousness through embodiment" through the erotic.[89] However, the narrator's embodiment of ideal categories blurs the divide between abstraction and particularity, rendering a concreteness that is diffusive, and abstractions that are sensuous and living.

This conflation of ideality and particularity accords with Dorothea's growing engagement with details while continuing to idealize them. In the same scene, she unconsciously perceives Will in a portrait of his grandmother:

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[88] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 172.

[89] Gallagher, "Immanent Victorian," 72.

> [T]he colors deepened, the lips and chin seemed to get larger, the hair and eyes seemed to be sending out light, the face was masculine and beamed on her with that full gaze which tells her on whom it falls that she is too interesting for the slightest movement of her eyelid to pass unnoticed and uninterpreted.[90]

Dorothea's engagement with the portrait takes the form of perceptually 'incising' its features into those of Ladislaw, and animating them. Remarkably, the narrator renders the portrait as assuming life of its own accord, making Dorothea the passive perceiver of her animating process. As the portrait assumes sentience, Dorothea becomes the object of the perceptual incision and animation she is conducting: the portrait particularizes her "slightest movement" while infusing it with life and significance. Only through this unconscious dialectical recognition can Dorothea experience her desire for Ladislaw. Her unconscious animation of the portrait signifies the processual and incomplete nature of her erotic awakening and embodiment: she is unaware that Ladislaw loves her, and that she is falling in love with him.

"Dwell on every detail and its possible meaning"

Dorothea's erroneous "dwell[ing]" on the scene with Rosamond and Ladislaw seems less anomalous when viewed in the context of her vague engagements with detail. To briefly establish the context: Dorothea visits Rosamond in her attempt to help Rosamond's husband, Dr Lydgate, through scandal and possible bankruptcy. Right on the threshold of their drawing room, however, she sees:

> Seated with his back towards her on a sofa which stood against the wall on a line with the door by which she had entered, she saw Will Ladislaw: close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat

[90] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 173-4.

> Rosamond… while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervor.[91]

This description is curiously flat, lacking in emotion and interpretation. Though the scene is focalized through Dorothea's perspective, there is no emotion on her part, for she is in shock. This shock is realized visually in Will and Rosamond's reduction to outlines in a flat tableau, without detail or nuance, under Dorothea's swift unthinking certainty that they are intimate.

It is this earlier flattening of the scene that Dorothea attempts to correct, when she "forc[es]" herself to "dwell on every detail and its possible meaning." Her resolution not only indicates her awareness of details, but her openness to their vagueness, their penumbra of "possible meaning[s]." While this open-endedness is limited by the misperception that precipitates it—Dorothea's erroneous assumption of Will and Rosamond's intimacy, which shapes her focus on Rosamond as an equal center of self, with an inner life of her own—it effects a correspondingly diffuse visual experience:

> [Dorothea] opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving –perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labor and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.[92]

While it is commonly accepted that this scene resembles a landscape painting, the description's interplay of detail and diffusiveness is remarkably difficult to visualize. This

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[91] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 478.

[92] Eliot, 486.

scene is at once more detailed and more obscure than Dorothea's earlier visualizations of light and landscape: while she perceives details—the "figures moving" in the background—they are obscure, unidentifiable, and generalized. Spatially and formally, they occupy the mid-point of the narrator's increasingly abstract description, as it moves from the legible, if anonymous, persons in the foreground, to the obscure figures, before diffusing into the "pearly" (rather than transparent) light, and then dissolving into the felt experience of "the largeness of the world"—a phrase that enacts the vagueness of its meaning, as we are not told precisely what this feeling entails, and how it is evoked by Dorothea's perception of details. The diffuseness of Dorothea's perceptual experience is reflected by the narratorial perspective: though we are told she "was a part of that involuntary palpitating life," it is unclear if this is Dorothea's inner realization (focalized by the narrator in free indirect discourse), or the narrator's observation, or prescription.

The progressive obscurity of these details results from the idealization that continues to characterize Dorothea's engagement with particularity. Unlike her "illimitable" misreadings of Casaubon's signs, however, here Dorothea's idealization does not consist of imposing or projecting herself on details, but of unraveling the bounds of her subjectivity in order to concentrate intensely on them. This dissolution of the divide between subject and object is encapsulated by the obscure figures, live details whose diffuseness reflects Dorothea's inner vagueness: they are not only objects of Dorothea's perception, but are also metaphorical manifestations of her struggle to move beyond grief and feel part of the "involuntary, palpitating life" around her. This is an aesthetic experience Dorothea herself conjures, by charging details with her emotions and sensations, diffusing them into intimations of "the largeness of the world."

In her intense attention to details, Dorothea recalls Hegel's modern artist, who transforms mundane particulars into "marvel[s] of ideality" by diffusing the surfaces of

objects with his virtuosic play of color and light, or the literal accuracy of prose with the ambiguity of metaphor. The diffuseness of the landscape details enacts Dorothea's aesthetic transformation of these contingent background figures into intimations of ideality and infinitude: specific particulars that suggest the infinite subjectivities of other people. While the modern world of prosaic particulars might occlude the possibility of ideal transcendence, it also offers a mode of realizing the ideal, through the perception and enlivening of those particulars. In treating details in her particular way, Dorothea realizes her individuality in the process of becoming embedded in the world.

Dorothea's growing individuality through her perception of details provides a fuller picture of the development of stock types into individual characters in nineteenth-century realism. Catherine Gallagher traces how Dorothea attains individuality through the accumulation of details that exceeds ideal types. While she begins as "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," Eliot "begin[s] piling up the particulars" that make Dorothea deviate repeatedly into a different kind of heroine—initially a trapped wife, then a widow yearning for the man she loves, and finally assimilated into "'common womanhood'" as Ladislaw's wife.[93] I posit that the addition of individuating traits is reflected—and facilitated—by Dorothea's (mis)perception of details. In this scenario, particularity does not occlude ideality, but incarnates it in the perception and animation of details. Dorothea's typical quality of idealizing does not disappear when she engages with details, but becomes transmuted into her individual subjectivity, realized in her manner of attending to details, and charging them with significance. Her particularization of details achieves the ideal in terms of the immanent world of prose, by transforming its mundane,

[93] Gallagher, "Immanent Victorian," 69, 71.

contingent particulars into the felt experience of the infinite inwardness of other lives: "the largeness of the world."

The "largeness" Dorothea experiences gives rise to a similarly imprecise resolution: "What she would resolve to do that day did not yet seem quite clear, but something that she could achieve stirred her as with an approaching murmur which would soon gather distinctness."[94] Her attempt to realize it is in keeping with the irony that characterizes Dorothea's engagements with detail: when she later visits Rosamond, the latter reveals that she and Will are not intimate after all), making possible their eventual union. This marriage—the opposite of the union with Casaubon—represents the realization of Dorothea's sensuousness in a way that embodies rather than occludes her ideality.

Critics characterize Dorothea's trajectory in terms of increasing immanence and embeddedness in the prose of the world. Franco Moretti views *Middlemarch*, and nineteenth-century realism in general, as depicting the assimilation of aspiring individuals into the "background" of everyday life. This process is enacted by the prose itself, which Moretti terms "prose as *work*… [the] work of *analysis,"* with every term laboriously "observed, measured, qualified, improved."[95] Certainly the narration of Dorothea's fate in the "Finale" lends itself to this view: as Ladislaw's wife, she is viewed by others as being "absorbed into the life of another… only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother."[96] This is an anticlimactic, even tragic, ending, as suggested by the narrator's surprisingly violent metaphor from Herodotus: "Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength,

[94] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 485.

[95] Franco Moretti, "The Serious Century," in *The Novel. Volume I: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 382.

[96] Eliot, 515.

spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth."[97] The woman who had longed for an ideal life is now dispersed into details too fine to be detailed by the narrator.

Yet, in keeping with the interplay of ideality and detail that characterizes Dorothea, there is another way to read her fate. The narrator's assertion that Dorothea's "effect… on those around her was incalculably diffusive" enacts the diffusiveness it describes: its tantalizing vagueness cannot be visualized, only apprehended internally.[98] In this light, the representation of the real is not incompatible with subjective inwardness and imprecision. One can achieve the ideal in the real, by transforming prosaic details into virtuosic manifestations of subjective inwardness. In the process of being particularized, Dorothea becomes, as Catherine Gallagher writes, an abstract category of her own, an ideal of future brilliant, if thwarted, women, as the narrator writes: "we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas."[99]

One such conspicuously inconspicuous Dorothea is found fifty years after the publication of *Middlemarch*, in the work of a modernist author, which usually is viewed as a repudiation of the materialist descriptions of nineteenth-century realism. In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), Virginia Woolf enhances Eliot's virtuosic charging of everyday life with passions and sensations in her rendering of Mrs. Brown, whose dull name and quotidian appearance contrast with the overwhelming and peculiar impressions that Woolf describes as pouring out of her "like a draught, like a smell of burning."[100] Similarly, in "Modern Fiction" (1925), Woolf's famous evocation of life recalls Eliot's disruption of plot causality with subjective inwardness and vagueness:

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[97] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* 515.

[98] Eliot, 515.

[99] Eliot, 515; see Gallagher, "Immanent Victorian," 69.

[100] Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays,* ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford UP), 2009, 41.

> Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.[101]

Woolf's images of indeterminacy and translucency recall Eliot's charging of external reality with subjectivity—down to the diffusive, translucent light. Though Woolf contrasts nineteenth-century sequential plots with the amorphous luminosity of modernist narratives, her criticism of sequential plots ironically consummates Eliot's disruption of narrative causality with her heroine intense passions, and her diffusive charging of details.

Today the presence of details of daily life taken for granted in fiction, together with the representation of subjective inwardness; the historical connection between them is forgotten. Yet to the Victorians, the elaborately detailed representation of everyday life effected a breakdown in aesthetic hierarchies that signified the advent of an equally intricate and inward modern subjectivity. Recovering the alignment of details and subjectivity in Eliot's realism enables us to unravel a knot in the long entwinement of the inner life and the external world in modern literature.

[101] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *Selected Essays,* 9.

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