Embroiled Mediums: George Eliot and Environment; or, the Ecologies of Middlemarch

This essay ponders the relative scarcity of ecocritical analyses of George Eliot’s fiction and argues that Eliot’s ecological “credentials” are to be sought less in the themes foregrounded in her novels than in the conjoint reading of her fiction with recent re-interpretations of Spinoza’s Ethics as an “ecosophy” led by contemporary European philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Corine Pelluchon. Taking its inspiration from critic John Parham’s template for a specifically “Victorian ecology” in literature, the essay examines the relations the characters of Middlemarch entertain with the various environments or “mediums” in which they move, from the physical “land” they own or exploit, to the less tangible (albeit solidly depicted) social “medium” of rumour and gossip which hampers, clogs and contaminates their endeavours, to the minds of other characters which form the “medium” in which their sense of self takes shape. The focus is thus shifted away from the moral framework of “sympathy” in which Eliot’s work is often cast, and onto an ethology of bodies that combine to form more or less harmonious communities or sociabilities.

‘The sketch must be very grand, if it conveys so much,’ said Dorothea. ‘I should need some explanation even of the meaning you give. Do you intend Tamburlaine to represent earthquakes and volcanoes?’
‘Oh yes,’ said Will, laughing, ‘and migrations of races and clearings of forests—and America and the steam-engine. Everything you can imagine!’
‘What a difficult kind of shorthand!’ said Dorothea, smiling towards her husband. ‘It would require all your knowledge to be able to read it.’ (Middlemarch, XXI, 200)

Will Ladislaw’s somewhat hyperbolical exegesis of his effort at “daubing” (XXI, 193) while studying art under the German Adolf Naumann in Rome is usually read as Eliot’s parodical “twitting” of the Nazarene school of painting’s excess of ecclesiastical meaning, as well as a taunt aimed by Will at his cousin and benefactor Edward Casaubon’s doomed undertaking to write the Key to all Mythologies:

‘I am not so ecclesiastical as Naumann, and I sometimes twit him with his excess of meaning. But this time I mean to outdo him in breadth of intention. I take Tamburlaine in his chariot for the tremendous course of the world’s physical history lashing on the harnessed dynasties. In my opinion, that is a good mythical interpretation.’ Will here looked at Mr Casaubon. (XXII, 199-200)
For the twenty-first century reader, however, confronted with impending ecological collapse and its consequences for the human and nonhuman alike, Will’s “difficult kind of shorthand” may take on a more literal resonance that momentarily stirs our contemporary anxieties about geological disruptions, migratory pressures, and the depletion of natural resources that impel them, all fuelled by the rampant capitalism symbolized by “America” and enabled by the hyper-industrialization that originated with the carbon-spewing “steam-engine,” whose invention in 1784 is now commonly held to have ushered in the current geological epoch known as the Anthropocene.¹

At the risk of reading into Middlemarch an “excess of meaning” that will “outdo [it] in breadth of intention” (XXII, 199-200), I wish to hazard an ecocritical reading of Eliot’s *magnum opus* that draws on contemporary environmentalist and posthumanist approaches to literature alongside recent re-readings of Spinoza’s *Ethics*—which have become central to environmentalist thinking as found, for example, in the “ethics of consideration” of Corine Pelluchon—and to consider what Eliot’s œuvre might contribute to the debate. Although they were not primarily those of Eliot’s day, such ecocritical perspectives form both the lived and theoretical backdrop against which her work will be read by present and future readers and so, while avoiding the pitfalls of anachronism, my hope is also to avoid the fate of Casaubon, whose spectre hovers over all scholarly endeavour. If Casaubon’s irrelevance is sealed by his insulation from thinking that was contemporaneous to his day and compounded by his ignorance of German and “want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world” (XXI, 194), Eliot’s greatness inheres in the way her texts respond fruitfully to the pressures of new critical paradigms and continue to speak to our contemporary condition.

**Eliot, ecocriticism, and anthropocentrism**

In the burgeoning field of eco- and environmental criticism, ecocritical approaches to George Eliot’s fiction remain scarce. To date, a rapid search of the MLA International Bibliography under the key words “George Eliot + ecocriticism” yields just three entries, including two on *Adam Bede* (Carroll)—perhaps the novel that lends itself most readily to an analysis of the “natural world” conventionally associated with ecocriticism—and none on *Middlemarch*. Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison’s recent collection on *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives* features articles on the novels of Hardy, Dickens, and the Brontës among others, while the insightful and original reading by Anna Feuerstein of Eliot’s Ilfracombe Journal opens the field but does not venture far beyond her non-fictional work. Despite some notable work from the perspective of human-animal studies on Eliot’s fiction (Ayres; Fulmer; Kingstone; Håkansson; Henry), it is hard to disagree with Troy Boone that “Eliot’s works could use more attention from ecocritics” (Boone 111). Such paucity is perhaps all the more surprising given the celebrated “organicism” of George Eliot’s fiction and her views on “the organic structure of society” as outlined in her essay “The Natural

¹ The term Anthropocene was coined and popularized by Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen to refer to the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.
History of German Life” (Eliot 1990, 133). Her debunking in this essay of the pastoralism of artists who would paint the rural life while “look[ing] for its subjects into literature instead of life” (108-9) is, moreover, reminiscent, or rather prescient, of early ecocriticism’s highlighting of the artifices of so-called “nature-writing” as instantiated by Raymond Williams’ founding work of proto-ecocriticism, The Country and the City.²

Interestingly, it is scholars working not in literary studies but in the fields of cultural theory and philosophy (critical posthumanism, environmental humanities, new materialisms) who have seen in Eliot a potent advocate for a renewed ethical attention to the environment. Feminist philosopher of the posthuman Rosi Braidotti enlists Eliot in support of her neo-Spinozist materialist or “matter-realist” worldview (Braidotti 2013, 57) which aims at overcoming the traditional anthropocentric humanism that is held by some, especially so-called “deep,” ecologists to be at the root of today’s environmental crisis.³ Braidotti opens chapter 2 of her book The Posthuman with the well-known lines from Middlemarch which evoke humanity’s insulation from the palpitating heart of the nonhuman life that surrounds it: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.” (XX, 182) Braidotti identifies in these lines a call for the reader to hone her faculties so as to reconnect with the “raw cosmic energy” (Braidotti 2013, 55) of the Spinozist monistic universe identified as one vital and indivisible substance—“unity of all matter, which is central to Spinoza” (57) as well as to the environmental ethics of the “deep ecology” movement founded by Arne Naess.⁴ Observing that George Eliot was an early translator of Spinoza, Braidotti reads Eliot as ushering us “surreptitiously and fatally—into a monistic universe of intersecting affective relations that simply make the world go round” (55). For Braidotti, the vital materialism of the monistic universe constitutes the core of a posthuman sensibility that will allow for the emergence of a new post-anthropocentric subjectivity of relationality capable of curbing the ravages incurred by human exceptionalism.

If we uphold common definitions of ecology which all emphasise the study of the relations “between species and habitats,” or “between nature and culture” (Howarth 69, 71), then Eliot’s “relevance” to the ecocritical perspective is to be sought in her insistence on the “relationality” and interconnectedness of Life. This she shares with both Spinoza’s philosophy and contemporary environmentalist critique, as Braidotti underlines: “George Eliot is the introduction to Spinoza; she was the first British translator, but people forget that, I fear. Middlemarch is in a way a translation of The Ethics; you can see how it’s all about relationality.

² Williams’s claim that Renaissance pastoralism does “not look [...] at what the country was really like” but is essentially an adaptation of classical literary modes, its images standing “not in a living but in an enamelled world” (18), echoes Eliot’s point that such artists are “still under the influence of idyllic literature, which has always expressed the imagination of the cultivated and town-bred, rather than the truth of rustic life” (Eliot 1990, 109).
³ As early ecocritic William Rueckert put it: “In ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (113).
⁴ For the significance of Spinoza for the ecological movement, see Naess and Haukeland.
for her—a flow of relations in which everything is connected, like a geometry of passions” (Braidotti 2017, 180). One of the conclusions Eliot took from Spinoza is that “our mode of being is constitutively relational: we learn who and what we are, or can become, through interacting with our fellow human beings” (Gatens 2009b, 81), a relationality that Braidotti extends beyond the human to the nonhuman/more-than-human, natural world.5

Not all critics, however, would concur with Braidotti’s joyously affirmative gloss of Eliot’s celebrated “squirrel passage” as being a key to “another type of vital cultural criticism—new materialism, nomadics, new Spinozism, new George Eliotism, whatever we want to call it—[...] to excite and re-energize cultural critique” (Braidotti 2017, 186). Michael Malay, using the same quotation from Middlemarch as a way into his discussion of “Creaturely Encounters in Philosophy and Literature,” starts by making the “ecological” argument for Eliot, stating that the sentence

  
  enacts what it celebrates: it turns outwards. Beginning with a ‘vision’ of ‘ordinary human life,’ it moves towards a larger, ecological landscape, one which includes the grass’s growth and the squirrel’s beating heart. Moving outwards, the sentence also rides on the circles of a widening sensibility—modulating from a human ‘we’ to an intimate form of ‘hearing’ others, before ending with a recognition of the immense activity that ‘lies on the other side of silence’. (142)

By leaning towards a sense of “cross-species communion” (Kingstone 97), this reading seems to extend to nonhuman living beings the more usual humanistic interpretation of the passage as advocating larger interpersonal sympathy with human suffering.6 Yet, as Malay concedes, this overlooks the conditional “If we had” on which the injunction to feel and hear is predicated: what Eliot is really saying is that this mode of attention is impossible to sustain, for “we should die of that roar” (142). Indeed, elsewhere in Eliot’s œuvre, notably in the novella “The Lifted Veil,” in which the protagonist Latimer is cursed with a “preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness” (Eliot 1985, 26), keenness of vision and hyper-sensitive feeling, far from engendering fellowship or enlarged understanding, induce inertia and horror, leading Helen Kingstone to conclude that Eliot “views some calibrated ‘dullness’ of our emotional hearing as essential so that we may prioritize communication with fellow humans and function in the world” (100). Being “well wadded with stupidity,” it turns out, may be the very condition of human survival.

This brings us to the vexed question of anthropocentrism and the unavoidable humanist focus of Eliot’s writing, which falls somewhat shy of the bio- or zoe-egalitarianism extolled by Braidotti or the more geo- or zoe-centred literary accounts favoured by ecocriticism. Eliot’s exhortations in “The Natural History of German Life” regarding the necessary “extension of our sympathies” and the heightened “attention to what is apart from [our]selves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment” that art must offer, concern the human, rather than the nonhuman, arena, of “contact with our fellow-men” (Eliot 1990, 110; emphasis mine). Braidotti’s admiring quotation of the “squirrel passage” tellingly omits the preceding sentence

5 The term “more-than-human” was coined by David Abram in The Spell of the Sensuous to refer to the world beyond the human.
6 Although, as Helen Kingstone astutely points out, “it would be difficult to argue convincingly that the life and growth of squirrels and grass equates directly to suffering: if anything, they imply a pastoral idyll” (99).
which anchors it contextually to the everyday tragedy of the human oikos, in this case marriage, and specifically Dorothea’s unhappy marriage to Casaubon: “That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it.” (XX, 182) However, this is not to dismiss Braidotti’s critical/creative appropriation of Eliot in support of “the transformative agenda of posthumanism” (Braidotti 2013, 57), since her counter-intuitive yoking of this most quintessentially humanistic of Victorian writers to the “post-anthropocentric turn,” which “strikes the human at his/her heart and shifts the parameters that used to define anthropos” (57), opens up a valuable new avenue of inquiry into Eliot’s much contested brand of humanism.7

Insofar as Eliot’s novels cannot be said to foreground issues of environmental justice, or to depict the environment, whether natural or man-made, as much more than a background or “framing device” for the staging of essentially human dramas, they are not obvious candidates for ecocriticism which, in the words of Dominic Head, is “predicated on a typically postmodernist deprivileging of the human subject” (235).8 Indeed, with its “tendency to focus on personal development, and on social rather than environmental matters (and on time rather than place)” (236), and faced with what Roman Bartosch has identified as the “cultural dilemma of environmental change, aporias of humanist ethics, and the radical questioning of what is now known as the ‘hegemonic centrism’ [...] of our culture,” the canonical Victorian novel in general seems to be “more or less at a loss, incapable of rising to this challenge, for these texts themselves are decidedly anthropocentric, concerned with the psychology of humanist thinking” (Bartosch 99). Nevertheless, it seems apropos at this stage to invoke Glen Love’s timely warning in Practical Ecocriticism that critics should beware of over-policing the literary heritage and, in the manner of an “eco-policeman, dragging past writers to the dock for violations of today’s sense of environmental incorrectness” (11). For as Robert Kern points out in “Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?”, “ecocriticism becomes more interesting and useful [...] when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere” (11). In fact, Laurence Buell favours the term “environmental criticism” over “ecocriticism” in order to register the broadening conception of “environment” from a focus on the merely “natural” to an embrace of urban, manufactured, and even degraded environments (Buell 12). It is in this light that this essay will address the various environments, “mediums” or “ecologies” of Middlemarch.

The metaphorical stretch of the notion of “ecology” as “energy-exchange and interconnection” (Snyder 9) is such that it can cover multiple realms, being, according to Gary Snyder, “a valuable short-hand term for complexity in motion” (9). Whilst we should also heed cautionary voices such as Timothy Clark’s, who warns against the dilution of the term to “name almost any field of interaction between entities [...] in effect, an ‘ecology’ of everything and anything!” (103), John Parham’s recent defence of a specifically “Victorian ecology” in a

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7 Hina Nazar’s essay “The Continental Eliot” gives an informative overview of Eliot’s engagement with the different humanist traditions of continental philosophy through her translations of David Friedrich Strauss’s The Life of Jesus and Ludwig Feuerbach’s The Essence of Christianity.
8 Lawrence Buell points out that early ecocritical approaches held that “the nonhuman environment must be envisaged not merely as a framing device but as an active presence” (25).
special edition of *Green Letters* is compelling. Parham sees in Victorian writers’ proximity to scientific developments such as evolutionary theory and energy physics, “that would converge to form scientific ecology” (5), one of the primary justifications for seeking in Victorian literary culture new perspectives on what he calls the “ecological humanities” (5). If, as Parham argues, the scientific *zeitgeist* of the Victorian age conferred on writers not “especially interested in science” such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli “a strong sense [...] of the interconnectedness of all life” as well as of “the contingency of both natural and human history,” endowing their writing with a peculiar “ecological efficacy” (25), how much more must this be true of George Eliot, who not only inscribes her novels in an explicitly Darwinian evolutionary framework, as Gillian Beer has magisterially demonstrated, but also draws extensively on the scientific advancements of her time, as Sally Shuttleworth has shown. *Middlemarch* clearly answers to the first of the criteria Parham offers in his typology for appraising literary works that might inform a “human ecocriticism,” namely to be “informed by those scientific paradigms which correspond to ecological understanding in the period under discussion” (26).

Whether *Middlemarch* can be said fully to conform to the rest of Parham’s template for the “human-ecological novel,” or whether it will turn out to be a “blind green alley” (6), remains to be seen.9 However, its foregrounding of relations through the painstaking tracing out of “fresh threads of connection” between the different milieus of “municipal town and rural parish” (XI, 88) promises to reward investigation from an ecological angle which trains its focus on the various environments forged by “new connexions and hitherto hidden facts of structure” (XV, 139), as Lydgate had planned to do for the human body. The dispassionately impersonal eye that the narrator brings to bear on her “Study of Provincial Life” is that of the natural scientist who, “watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another” in the subtle movements and extinctions, if only of the “solar guinea,” of “old provincial society” (88–9). The town of Middlemarch is thus envisaged as part of an enlarged constituency of the human and nonhuman, couched as it is in the naturalistic language of water and rock thanks to Eliot’s “rhetorical habit of analogy” (Flint 67), with some of its members “caught in political *currents*” while others stand “with rocky firmness amid all this *fluctuation*.” What is more, the narrative attention to “those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence” models the attentiveness to unsuspected relations and unexpected consequences in the subtle “movement and mixture” of life and of organism-in-environment which is central to today’s understanding of ecological feedback loops. The idea that “the unit of survival is organism plus environment” and not the species or subspecies, forms the basis of the contemporary ecological thought behind Felix Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies* (82), which is inspired by the naturalistic and immanent philosophy of Spinoza and its emphasis on man as “part of nature” (Lloyd 1994).

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9 Other criteria concern a demonstrable “affinity for other species and/or the landscape/environment,” an attention to “polluting, unsustainable economic practices” with an investigation of their (human) causes, and an indication of the author’s “preferred political responses” (Parham 26).
The word “environment,” first introduced into English from the French by Thomas Carlyle in 1827 (Warde 27), does not appear in the text of Middlemarch, and yet much of the novel’s moral force derives from the manner in which the different protagonists position themselves with regard to that which “environs” them, whether this be “nature” (“men and women’s openness to nature tends to be an index of moral worth in Eliot’s world,” writes Rignall, 285) or the “petty medium” (XVIII, 175) of Middlemarch’s gossiping social life in which all are immersed. The natural world and the social nexus or web form two of the three inter-related areas or “ecologies” that Guattari identifies in The Three Ecologies as being intimately entangled, namely the “environmental ecology” and the “social ecology,” the third area being the psyche or “mental ecology” (28). Working from an “ethico-aesthetic paradigm” of an “ecosophy” (rather than from a scientific or pseudo-scientific paradigm) towards the production of a new, reconfigured, singular subjectivity, Guattari insists on the necessary articulation of the three ecologies in the “reconstruction of social and individual practices” if the “increasing deterioration of human relations with the socius, the psyche and ‘nature’” (28) is to be addressed. First developed by Arne Naess, ecosophy insists on the intimate and complex interconnection of the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity. More recently, Corine Pelluchon has underlined Arne Naess’s debt to Spinoza in developing his concept of ecosophy. Eliot’s novel, I suggest, can be fruitfully read in the light of this three-fold emphasis as dramatizing the reconfigurations of subjectivity which today’s ecological agenda is beginning to foreground as necessary to addressing such degraded relations.

The rest of this essay will therefore examine the ways in which the characters of Middlemarch are defined by their “environmental entanglement” (Buell 22), either with the land that constitutes the “natural world” in the novel, or with their social “medium”, Eliot’s preferred term for the environment. The term “medium”, while somewhat abstract, harbours material and concrete connotations that make it akin to the “plane of immanence or consistency” which for Spinoza constitutes “Nature” (Deleuze 128). A character’s medium in Middlemarch is typically limited in scope and local in emphasis, and refers to that which environs the individual and impacts materially on his or her existence, either to enhance or to diminish it, or, in Spinozistic terms, to increase or decrease their power of acting (or *conatus*). Hence, the genteel estates of Tipton and Freshitt are said to be “unfriendly mediums” for Dorothea’s “passionate desire to know and think,” resulting in “crying and red eyelids” (IV, 36), while by the end of the novel, the narrator famously explains that Dorothea cannot become “a new Theresa” or “a new Antigone” because “the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone” (Finale, 785).

My contention will be that the novel’s exploration of its characters’ attitudes towards the nonhuman medium or environment engages a reflexion on the subjective dispositions that are more, or less, conducive to the thriving and flourishing of sustainable relations in the three inseparable “ecologies” of nature, socius, and psyche. Characters who pursue hubristic quests for aloof *independence from* the milieu/medium are chastened by the eventual *absorption into* it or *expulsion out* of it, revealing them to be inadequate relations that translate the “moral

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10 One of the earliest uses of the term likely to have been encountered by Eliot was to be found in social theorist Herbert Spencer’s 1855 *Principles of Psychology*. 
stupidity [of] taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves” (XXI, 198). Behind this parable of the supreme self’s hubris is the Spinozist denunciation of the anthropocentric illusion of free will of those who “seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion”, and who “believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of Nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself” (EIII Pref). This state of disconnect from “Nature” conceived Spinozistically as “things outside us” (EIVP18S) produces what we could call, following Corine Pelluchon, the “desolation” of the self, if not its dissolution. In its stead, the novel seeks out a new mode of “relational” subjectivity which models an ecosophical ability to respond to the environment in ways that “acknowledge our interactions with other living beings and milieus and are conducive to [...] an ecologically responsible and fulfilling way of life” (Pelluchon 86-7; translation mine).

**Living on (and off) the land**

As mentioned above, human-animal studies critics have already begun to address the “ecological affinity for other species” (Parham) in Eliot’s fiction by looking at the real and metaphorical animals—what Lippit calls the “animetaphors”—in her novels, notably asking whether animals are anything more than just another, if powerful “means for considering what makes us human” (Kingstone 93). While they go some way towards conveying Eliot’s sense that “any confidence we might have in being loftily superior to the animal kingdom is misplaced and foolish” (Kingstone 97), the consensus seems to be that Eliot struggled with the implications of a post-Darwinian universe: “Eliot recognized the proximity of humans and animals but could not fit them into history,” concludes Kingstone (100-1)—to the extent that she ultimately retreats into a sense of human apartness rather than affinity.

To uncover a critique of human apartness or aloofness from the natural world, we must turn to the novel’s representation of affinity with the land. I use the word “land” rather than “landscape,” which is Parham’s term, in order to stress the material, sustaining role of the earth as a resource or source of sustenance for characters whose livelihoods are embedded in it; “landscape,” by contrast, implies the shaping of the land by human efforts for aesthetic purposes or the satisfactions of the discerning, and detached, human eye. The English Midlands described in chapter 12 during Fred and Rosamond’s ride to Stone Court may be picturesque—“a pretty bit of midland landscape, almost all meadows and pastures, with hedgerows still allowed to grow in bushy beauty and spread out coral fruit for the birds” (XII, 96)—but as Rignall underlines, the function of landscape in Eliot’s novels “is always eloquent of some human significance” (Rignall 190). The tenant Dagley’s ramshackle homestead of ivy-choked chimneys, “worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance,” and

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11 I use the conventional way of referencing the different parts of the *Ethics* introduced by his translator Edwin Curley. Isobel Armstrong points out that Eliot’s translation of Spinoza’s example of “the infant [who] believes he freely wants the milk” (EIIIP2S) to illustrate the illusion of free will and the fallacy that “the mind can have absolute dominion over its affects” (EIII Pref) is much more “graphically” rendered as, “the infant believes that it freely seeks the breast,” suggesting to her that this line from the *Ethics* stands behind Eliot’s udder image (Armstrong 299).

12 Pelluchon’s notion of “désolation” builds on Hannah Arendt’s notion of “loneliness” to designate the individual’s disengagement from participation in the “common world” (Pelluchon 20).
“mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it” (XXXIX, 369) may make “a sort of picture which we have all paused over as a ‘charming bit,’” but it is also an “eloquent testimony to Mr Brooke’s negligence as a landlord” (Rignall 190). The narrator’s judicious use of scare quotes registers his disdain for the unmindful aloofness which the aesthetic perspective evinces while failing to stir those sensibilities more attuned to “the depression of the agricultural interest and the sad lack of farming capital” in which the scene is embedded. The observation echoes Dorothea’s distaste for “the simpering pictures in the drawing-room” of Tipton Grange which she cannot reconcile with the material living conditions of “those poor Dagleys, in their tumble-down farmhouse, where they live in the back-kitchen and leave the other rooms to the rats!” or “the village with all that dirt and coarse ugliness” (XXXIX, 365)—an argument she uses in order to urge her uncle to carry out improvements on his estate if he is sincere about standing as a reforming member of Parliament.

**Dorothea: eco- or ego-centric environmentalist?**

In her drive to effect environmental improvements in the tenants’ degraded living conditions, Dorothea turns to the limited insights of political economy, “that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights” (II, 17), to discover “the best way of spending money so as not to injure one’s neighbours, or—what comes to the same thing—so as to do them most good” (LXXXIII, 756). But engrossing herself in theoretical writings offers less outlet for energetic activism than immersion in the material living conditions, however squalid, of her neighbours, whether it be by “kne[eling] suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and pray[ing] fervidly” (I, 9), setting up an infant school in the village (I, 11), or designing plans for improved sanitation in their cottages based on “Loudon’s book” (III, 29). In environmentalist terms, Dorothea’s is very much a “glocal” ethic: “I think we have no right to come forward and urge wider changes for good, until we have tried to alter the evils which lie under our own hands,” she declares (XXXIX, 365). It is how her aspiration to “lead a grand life here—now—in England” (III, 27) expresses itself, which in moral terms could be seen as a “charity-begins-at-home” ethic or, alternatively, as a version of today’s ecological injunction to “think global, act local,” and it is often cited as a mark of Dorothea’s altruistic, other-oriented striving which sets her off from a more “egoistic” character such as Rosamond.

A re-framing of the rather binary dualism of egoism and altruism (in which much discussion of Eliot’s characters is often cast) in the light of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, of which *Middlemarch* has been considered in many ways a translation (Henson), may give cause to reconsider Dorothea’s environmentalist credentials. For Spinoza, all human beings, like all other things, strive to “persevere in [their] being” (EIIIP7), to preserve themselves and enhance their well-being (the famous Spinozist conatus): “We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness” (EIIIP28). Later, he writes, “No one strives to preserve his being for the sake of anything else” (EIVP25), which Spinoza scholar Michael Della Rocca reads as “a

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13 Daniel Malachuk (376) makes a similar observation about the “glocalism” of Lydgate’s aspiration to “do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world” (XV, 139).
denial of a particular kind of altruistic desire” (Della Rocca 232). On this view, Dorothea’s apparently altruistic intentions for the improvement of the cottages, moved as she seems to be by pity for the tenants’ suffering, would not involve altruism at all since for Spinoza pity is a form of sadness (EIIIP22S) and “when I act out of pity, I am striving to ease my own suffering which is involved in that very feeling of pity” (Della Rocca 232). There is a muted sense—which somewhat tempers her compunction—that what Dorothea’s actions will achieve is the removal of a source of personal discomfiture from “that part of her world which lay within park palings” (LXXVII, 727): “I think, instead of Lazarus at the gate, we should put the pig-sty cottages outside the park-gate,” she declares to Sir James (III, 29; emphasis mine). For all her dislike of “simpering pictures,” Dorothea’s environmentalist efforts seem to be affect-driven and determined by an unconsciously aestheticizing desire “to make the life of poverty beautiful!” (III, 29). However, as Corine Pelluchon suggests, the harnessing of affect may work not only as an aid but as a necessary mechanism in bringing people to wish for the common good.14

Indeed, most of the “other-oriented striving” (Della Rocca) that is displayed by the proprietors of Tipton and Freshitt with regard to the land and its denizens is largely self-interested. There is no sense of the land having value in and of itself, but only insofar as it ensures the comfort and prosperity of the landed individuals whose chief concern is to combine and enlarge their estate, thereby enhancing their social standing. Sir James may hold that “one is bound to do the best for one’s land and tenants, especially in these hard times” (XXXVIII, 357) but he soon reveals the true motivation to be his own “pocket”: “I don’t believe a man is in pocket by stinginess on his land” (XXXVIII, 358), with which the droll Mrs Cadwallader concurs: “Oh, stinginess may be abused like other virtues: it will not do to keep one’s own pigs lean.” (XXXVIII, 358-9) The imperative of keeping land in the family drives the novel’s various inheritance plots: leaving one’s land “away from [the] family” (XXXII, 292) as Peter Featherstone is accused of doing by his sister Mrs Waule, is deemed the height of social impropriety; Mr Brooke measures the eligibility of both Sir James and Mr Casaubon for his nieces’ hands in marriage by the lay of their land: Sir James is “a good match” because “our land lies together” (IV, 37), while Casaubon has “a handsome property independent of the Church” including “a considerable mansion, with much land attached to it” (V, 47); and it is only after some demur that Sir James refuses Mr Brooke’s proposal to “cut off the entail” following Dorothea’s unseemly marriage to Will Ladislaw, despite the fact that “the union of the two estates—Tipton and Freshitt—lying charmingly within a ring-fence, was a prospect that flattered him for his son and heir” (LXXXIV, 768). Dorothea struggles to understand “why land should be entailed” at all when it perpetuates social inequalities of gender and class by disinherit the likes of Will’s grandmother for marrying outside her social circle: even people “who are no more aristocratic than retired grocers, and who have no more land to ‘keep

14 Pelluchon wonders “what set of representations and affects, what ways of being must be encouraged in individuals so that laws, principles, and norms should have meaning for them, and that they should not be torn between happiness and duty but find pleasure in, for example, modifying their lifestyles, reducing their consumption of animal products and actively supporting and taking part in the ecological transition” (Pelluchon 2019; my translation).
together’ than a lawn and a paddock” would agree that her grandson Will had “a prior claim,” she feels (XXXVII, 349).

“A lien on the land” (XXXIV, 304)

In *Middlemarch*, whatever “claim,” however “prior,” one may have to land or to living off its fruits takes on different connotations depending on whether one owns the land, manages the land for others, or depends on the natural produce of the land for mere sustenance and survival, as do Mr Brooke’s impoverished tenants who are pushed into poaching, or Flavell the Methodist preacher, “brought up for knocking down a hare that came across his path” and, “in his shabby black gaiters, pleading that he thought the Lord had sent him and his wife a good dinner, and he had the right to knock it down” (XXXIX, 368-9). Brooke vaguely registers Flavell’s “prior claim” to the fruits of the land he lives off, which could be called either divine law or natural law (“I couldn’t help liking that the fellow should have a bit of hare to say grace over”) but he is forced to concede that it is human or civil law that has absolute sway: “It’s all a matter of prejudice—prejudice with the law on its side, you know—about the stick and the gaiters, and so on. However, it doesn’t do to reason about things; and law is law.” (XXXIX, 369)

Legal ownership of land enables those endowed with it to manipulate, cajole, defy, and control their neighbours, fostering dispositions of defiance and disgruntlement which unsettle the social ecology. The relations Peter Featherstone has with his entourage are predicated on the lay of the land around Stone Court: his “especial dislike” of Mr Casaubon is due to the rector of Lowick’s having “a lien on the land in the shape of tithe” (XXXIV, 304), whereas his relations with Mr Cadwallader, the rector of Tipton, are of a different, more congenial kind because “the trout-stream which ran through Mr Casaubon’s land took its course through Featherstone’s also, so that Mr Cadwallader was a parson who had had to ask a favour instead of preaching” (XXXIV, 305). (The trout-stream is also what leads the angling Mr Cadwallader to endorse Casaubon as a good hand for Dorothea: “It is a very good quality in a man to have a trout-stream.” VIII, 65) The tug and pull of social relations, of mutual obligations and dependencies, and the disorders they generate are conducted over claims to land, as Fred Vincy discovers to his cost when he becomes a pawn in the power play between his two uncles Featherstone and Bulstrode, to the latter of whom he must apply to prove that he has not been “speckilating” on land he thinks he stands to inherit (XII, 102-3).

Ownership of, as opposed to mere “speckilation” on, land confers financial security and, crucially, independence, and Fred looks forward to being financially independent from his family if his “expectations” (XII, 111) are realized. “Independence” is a highly charged word in the novel, and is variously connoted. The financial independence Mr Farebrother receives when he is given the living at Lowick relieves him of the anxiety of having to provide (through assiduous whist-playing) for his numerous female relatives “whose dependence on him had in many ways shaped his life rather uneasily” (XVIII, 166). Yet mostly, aspirations to independence in the novel denote censurable conduct or ambitions, as in Mr Brooke’s unavailing efforts to stand as a “future independent member [of Parliament], who was to fetter
himself for this occasion only” (LI, 468), or the work-shy John Raffles’ indolent request for an “independence” from Bulstrode whom he is blackmailing: “That’s what I want [...] I want an independence” (LIII, 495). On the other hand, Dorothea’s laudable aim—from a feminist perspective—of buying and managing her own land (“I should like to manage [my property] myself, if I knew what to do with it,” LXXVI, 727) becomes an expression of her autonomy or agency, and we see her poring over “a map of the land attached to the manor and other papers [...] which were to help her in making an exact statement for herself of her income and affairs” (LIV, 508). With the aid of political economy, she aims at “finding out how men can make the most of the land which supports them all” rather than just “keeping dogs and horses only to gallop over it” (II, 16), although it is not clear whether “making the most of the land” denotes exploitative productivism or ecological sustainability. In Yorkshire (LXVII, 642), she plans “to take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make it a little colony, where everybody should work, and all the work should be done well. I should know every one of the people and be their friend” (LV, 517). If the plan founders, it is less because “the risk would be too great” (LXXVI, 720) than because Eliot refuses to allow her heroine to be lured into an artificial sense of community conferred by a delusory apartness from the Spinozist “common society” (EIVApp14) or “common world” (Pelluchon 2018, 20). Instead, she draws her back into the Middlemarch milieu where she can reconnect with the life around her: following her night of sorrow on the floor at Lowick, from which she awakens to a pastoral vision of the shepherd and his dog and men and women toiling in the fields (LXXX, 741), Dorothea recognizes herself as “part of that involuntary, palpitating life” (LXXX, 741) “which ranges across both class and species boundaries” (Kingstone 98) and, in the words of Daniel Malachuk, “tints in green her ‘yearn[ing] towards the perfect Right’” (376). Her quest for independence and physical apartness in an artificially insulated “model village” confers no true agency but is treated as a misguided attempt to transcend her given environment; in its place, she is given to experience what Corine Pelluchon terms “transdescendence”: “a movement of deepening of oneself that permits the subject to experience the link that unites him or her to other living beings and that transforms consciousness of its belonging to the common world into a lived knowledge” (Pelluchon 2019) as well as “consciousness of the link between generations and all living beings” (Pelluchon 2018, 80; my translation). In Pelluchon’s “ethics of consideration,” inspired by Spinoza’s Ethics, “transdescendence,” as opposed to trans(as)cendence, is what defines “the subject of consideration,” the subject which we must all become if an ecologically sustainable way of living is to be attained, that is, a sober individual whose disposition towards the natural world is one of cooperation not of defiance, born of the desire not simply for present gain but to transmit a liveable world to future generations. An individual such as Caleb Garth.


16 In defining the “subject of consideration,” Corine Pelluchon asks: “What moral dispositions must citizens possess for them to find pleasure in doing good, to be sober, to replace defiance with cooperation, and to work together for the transmission of a liveable world?” (Pelluchon 2018, 10; my translation)
Caleb Garth: a “subject of consideration”?

Employed by both Sir James and Dorothea on account of his “knowing more of land, building, and mining than most of the special men in the county” (XXIV, 236), Caleb Garth is one of the novel’s ethical touchstones in view of his relation to the land which he works with no eye to personal gain (“he could not manage finance,” XXXIV, 236) but rather to its sustainable management and conservation for posterity, since he desires nothing better than to have the chance of getting a bit of the country into good fettle, as they say, and putting men into the right way with their farming, and getting a bit of good contriving and solid building done—*that those who are living and those who come after will be the better for. I’d sooner have it than a fortune. I hold it the most honourable work that is.* (XL, 377; emphasis mine)

Caleb embodies the moral dispositions and civic virtues that are to be found in Corinne Pelluchon’s “subject of consideration.” Described as plant-like on account of his elliptical turns of phrase which “had many thoughts lying under them, *like the abundant roots of a plant that just manages to peep above the water*” (LVI, 525; emphasis mine), Caleb also has a sense of wonder before the natural world which is nonetheless only partly redolent of the exalted enchantment of nature found in some ecocriticism: “the world seemed so wondrous to him that he was ready to accept any number of systems, like any number of firmaments, *if they did not obviously interfere with the best land-drainage, solid building, correct measuring, and judicious boring (for coal).*” (XXXIV, 236; emphasis mine) For despite his awe and respect for the triple *oikos* of land, work, and marriage identified by Malachuk in *Middlemarch*, Caleb is no “deep ecologist” or Rousseauian proponent of a return to nature, but a hard-headed materialist, impatient with mismanagement of the land, and intent on getting “the best possible terms from railroad companies” for Dorothea (LVI, 522). For all that he is hailed as a nineteenth-century Cincinnatus-like citizen-farmer (XL, 376), Caleb’s care for the environment does not preclude support for industrialisation in the shape of the newly-arrived railway which he considers “a good thing” (LVI, 525), unlike the Waules and Featherstones, who paint a picture of ecological ruin and social predation, with the countryside being “overrun with these fellows trampling right and left and wanting to cut it up into railways; and for all the big traffic to swallow up the little traffic” (LVI, 522). For Caleb recognises the truth of Rosi Braidotti’s more recent contention that “the technological artefact [is] as intimate [and] close as nature used to be. The technological apparatus is our new ‘milieu’” (Braidotti 2013, 83); or as Deleuze puts it: “Artifice is fully a part of Nature.” (Deleuze 124)

An interventionist who actively shapes the land in and around Middlemarch, Caleb finds a balance between maintaining a healthy independence of mind—he is considered by Mr Cadwallader to be “an independent fellow” (XXXVIII, 358)—and a level of immersion in his environment that engages with, and forces the respect of, all parties. The Garth home, “a rambling, old-fashioned, half-timbered building,” is significantly situated “a little way outside the town [...] but was now surrounded with the private gardens of the townsmen” (XXVI, 227),

17 “it’s a most uncommonly cramping thing [...] to sit on horseback and look over the hedges at the wrong thing, and not be able to put your hand to it to make it right [...] it drives me almost mad to see mismanagement over only a few hundred acres.” (XL, 379)
at once apart from and embedded in the social and natural environment. Caleb’s manner of
dealing with the rebellious farmhands who are opposed to the railway is emblematic of the spirit
of reciprocality he adumbrates: he acknowledges their reasons for protesting and concedes that
the railway “may do a bit of harm here and there” (for, as the narrator recognizes, these are
“rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth,” LVI, 526); but while he voices the
labourers’ grievances and validates their sense that “Times ha’ got wusser for [the poor mon],”
he also emphasizes their own part and place in the network of relations that encompass both the
land and the railway: “Things may be bad for the poor man—bad they are; but I want the lads
here not to do what will make things worse for themselves. The cattle may have a heavy load,
but it won’t help ’em to throw it over into the roadside pit, when it’s partly their own fodder.”
(LVI, 525–6) Caleb’s acceptance of the railway is less an enthusiastic paving of the way for the
ravages of industrial capitalism than a metaphysical acceptance of necessity and a willingness
to work within its constraints for the benefit of the greater number: “You can’t hinder the
railroad: it will be made whether you like it or not.” (LVI, 525) Yet he is not averse to aiding
the ruthless banker Bulstrode to buy up “some houses in Blindman’s Court” with a view to
demolishing them “as a sacrifice of property which would be well repaid by the influx of air
and light on that spot” (LXIX, 651), though scant mention is made of the displaced inhabitants
who stand to become “the dead fish of the environmental ecology” whose fate Félix Guattari
was to document a century later (Guattari 29).

Nevertheless, Caleb is also capable of “pulling up in time”—unlike Mr Brooke (LI,
468)—and (unlike Lydgate) of uncoupling his affairs from the banker’s when he realizes the
toxic nature of Bulstrode’s past dealings with Raffles (LIXIX), thereby keeping himself
“independent” in a positive way. Mr Farebrother puts this down to Caleb’s having “a good
wife” in Mrs Garth, a paragon of rational (wo)mankind, versed as she is in all subjects from
“the Subjunctive Mood [to] the Torrid Zone” (XXIV, 228): “a good unworldly woman—may
really help a man and keep him more independent.” (XVII, 164) Lydgate misconstrues
Farebrother’s warning to “keep yourself independent,” though, by taking it to mean free from
“family ties [...] conceiving that these might press rather tightly on Mr Farebrother” (XVII,
163). Yet what Mr Farebrother calls “independence” is really a form of active inter-dependence
or, in Spinozistic terms, the increased “power of acting” (EIIIP54) that ensues “when we
encounter a body that agrees with our nature, one whose relation compounds with ours”
(Deleuze 27-8). Spinoza writes:

if we consider our mind, our intellect would of course be more imperfect if the mind were alone
and did not understand anything except itself. There are, therefore, many things outside us which
are useful to us, and on that account to be sought.

Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those which agree entirely with our nature.
For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they
compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful
than man. (EIVP18S; emphases mine)

18 In this sense, Caleb embodies a Spinozistic conception of freedom insofar as “freedom is not the
release from necessity but the consciousness of necessity that comes when we see the world sub specie
aeternitatis and ourselves as bound by its immutable laws” (Scruton n. p.). For Moira Gatens, Eliot is
“a Spinozist on the issue of freedom” (Gatens 2003, 35).
As Aurelia Armstrong underlines, for Spinoza, openness to “things outside us”—which I believe is to be read in the broad sense of “all that environs us,” our “environment”—that is, “our receptivity, or openness to what can affect us, is not the mark of our passivity in the face of the external forces of nature, but is itself a power, and a power that increases our power of acting” (Armstrong 54). Characters such as Caleb who demonstrate this capacity to be acted on by that which is outside them, to respond to or “take the pressure,” as it is also said of Will Ladislaw (L, 467), of the ties, claims, connections, and thoughts of others, in short the contingencies that constitute their milieu, are endowed with greater “power” or, what amounts to the same thing for Spinoza, with a greater capacity to be virtuous (EIVD8). Lydgate, on the other hand, seeks only to act upon his milieu while wishing to avoid being acted upon by it, and would eschew the ties that bind him, whether it be to Sir Godwin, to Bulstrode, or to the rest of his profession, only to find himself increasingly ensnared in the “petty medium” he had once meant to master.19

Living in a material world

“What he really cared for was a medium for his work, a vehicle for his ideas” (XVIII, 168), but Lydgate mistakenly thinks that a provincial town “where people [...] are less of companions” and one can “follow one’s own course more quietly” (XVII, 163) will allow him to remain above the fray. One of his errors consists in mistaking personal preferences for binding obligations and overlooking other connections: “was he not bound to prefer the object of getting a good hospital [...] before anything else connected with this chaplaincy?” (XVIII, 168-9; emphasis mine)20 Lydgate is defeated when he ignores Mr Farebrother’s lesson that true independence requires, paradoxically, the acknowledgement of connections and regard for that which is “outside us,” including, in Lydgate’s case, the medical practitioners already installed in Middlemarch, Dr Minchin, Dr Sprague, Mr Wrench and Mr Toller.21 “Regarding themselves as Middlemarch institutions,” they make up Lydgate’s particular oikos, the medical profession

19 Ironically Lydgate tries to follow Mr Farebrother’s advice by bringing forward his marriage to Rosamond in the belief that his “independence” will be enhanced if he can only curtail the distractions of courtship and hasten their “being continually together, independent of others, and ordering our lives as we will” (XXXVI, 330; emphasis mine). Lydgate and Rosamond are not, however, bodies “of the same nature” and the “Rose of the world” is the opposite of Mr Farebrother’s “unworldly woman.”

20 In Spinozistic terms, Lydgate is encumbered with “inadequate knowledge” inasmuch as he fails to perceive the true causes of things, his perception of them being coloured by the lens of his own body: “the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies.” (EIIP16C2) Lydgate, as well as Casaubon, embodies Eliot’s dictum that there is “no speck so troublesome as self” (XLII, 392).

21 Daniel Malachuk draws the useful distinction between the “individualism” of a Lydgate who has only “a self-regard without regard for others” and the “sociable individuality” of a Caleb who has “a self-regard that engages society’s regard” (379). Will also demonstrates the latter insofar as, like Caleb, he is concerned by how he will be regarded by his fellow Middlemarchers when gossip links him to Bulstrode, and like Lydgate, he maintains that his “personal independence is as important to me as yours is to you” (XLVI, 438), although the emphasis falls somewhat differently to Lydgate’s claims to independence, being more akin to the “relational autonomy” that Aurelia Armstrong detects in Spinoza’s ethics (Armstrong 46).
which is nested within the broader Middlemarch environment and, being “ready to combine against all innovators, and against non-professionals given to interference” (XVIII, 170), they succeed in “swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably” (XV, 144) before eventually expelling him entirely, forcing him and Rosamond to live “according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place” (Finale, 781). In an ironical reversal, it is Rosamond who emerges as more aloof and “independent” than her husband, thanks to her “cleverness,” which is also that of the town itself: “He had regarded Rosamond’s cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman. He was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was—what was the shape into which it had run as into a close network aloof and independent.” (LVIII, 549-50; emphasis mine) The figure of the “close network,” also present in the “hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity” (XVIII, 169) which winds its dense skein around Lydgate and obstructs his sphere of action, offers a very concrete, material image for the prophylactic means, profoundly underestimated by Lydgate, that the town will deploy in order to shield itself against the contaminating effects of the outside world of which it is highly suspicious, whether it be the railways, disease, or new-fangled “flighty, foreign notions” (XXVI, 246) which threaten “respectable constitutions” (XLV, 427) both bodily and political.

The scattered references to the introduction of disease into Middlemarch—the typhus that Fred brings back from the insalubrious backstreets of Houndsley (XXVI) or the cholera that over the course of the novel progresses from “Dantzic” (XLV, 416) to London (LXVII, 640) until it finally reaches Middlemarch itself (LXXI, 681)—are the closest the novel comes to fulfilling Parham’s stipulation for the “human-ecological novel” that it should address the risks posed by “polluting, unsustainable economic practices.” The cholera outbreak is largely contained thanks to Bulstrode’s new fever hospital, an ironically fortuitous offshoot of the banker’s other more “polluting” investments in the Plymdale family’s noxious blue and green dyes that “rot the silk” produced in Mr Vincy’s manufacture (XIII, 121). Beyond these sparse markers of contagion and poor sanitation, the idea of pollution or environmental toxicity in Middlemarch is chiefly a metaphorical and psychological polluting of the socius. Individuals themselves can constitute the toxic environments of other individuals: if Lydgate is an extraneous irritant that Middlemarch must expel, provincial life with its “petty degrading care” (LVIII, 551) of debt-incuring dinner-services and scandal-mongering gossip becomes in turn a figuratively contaminating environment for the doctor, who becomes “conscious of new elements in his life as noxious to him as an inlet of mud to a creature that has been used to breathe and dart after its illuminated prey in the clearest of waters” (LVIII, 550). The predatory images of preying and swallowing in which Lydgate’s relations to the “petty medium” of Middlemarch are worded, cast the human drama as a fight for survival of organism-in-environment, which is intensified by Eliot’s portrayal of human relations in the materialistic (and largely Spinozistic) terms of the physics of moving bodies, in support of which she enlists Lucretius’s atomistic theory from De Rerum Natura: “It was no more possible to find social isolation in that town than elsewhere, and two people persistently flirting could by no means escape from ‘the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on.’” (XXXI, 275)
For this petty medium has the consistency, texture, and motivational force of bodies in motion, which bear on the characters’ actions as much as their behaviour shapes the medium others move in, either in enhancing or devitalising ways. As Deleuze observes, “[a] body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity” (Deleuze 127). In Middlemarch, language in the shape of “conjectures and comments” confers “body and impetus” on the news that Lydgate has paid off his debts (LXXI, 676); it has carnal and corrosive properties, as seen in “the corrosiveness of Celia’s pretty, carnally-minded prose” (V, 44) or the gossip at work in Mrs Cadwallader’s mind which is “active as phosphorous, biting everything that came near into the form that suited it” (VI, 56). Meanwhile, scandal about Bulstrode’s past congeals and hardens around him like a molten substance, “melted into a mass of mystery, as so much lively metal to be poured out in dialogue, and to take such fantastic shapes as heaven pleased” (LXXI, 677). The figurative viscosity of the medium ensnares even such “kindred natures” as Lydgate and Dorothea, envisaged as bodies “moving [...] in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully-illuminated life” (XXX, 272). Similarly, the carping criticisms of the “shadowy, unapplausive audience” (XX, 190) of Pike, Tench and Carp, unwittingly given “a more substantial presence” by Dorothea’s insistent urging that her husband should publish his Key, contribute to Casaubon’s “sense of moving heavily in a dim and clogging medium” (L, 463; emphases mine).

“Hampering,” “embroiled,” “clogging”: the social medium of Middlemarch is repeatedly figured as a densely material milieu which depletes the power of acting both of those who struggle to remain aloof from its otherness (and who are reduced to being “shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gr...” XV, 135), as well as of those, such as Dorothea, who crave “complete renunciation” to it (XX, 186). Dorothea’s heightened susceptibility and much-vaunted altruism are revealed to be a form of self-absorption in the energy-sapping medium of “feeling” which is sanctioned by her world as an appropriately feminine habitus: “She was humiliated to find herself a mere victim of feeling, as if she could know nothing except through that medium: all her strength was scattered in fits of agitation, of struggle, of despondency, and then again in visions of more complete renunciation, transforming all hard conditions into duty.” (XX, 186; emphasis mine) Absorbing the self in the overarching claims of the other offers no more sustainable a way of living than does the desolation of a vainglorious search for independence. Or in the terms of the notorious “squirrel passage,” neither “well-wadded” isolation nor dying of the “roar which lies on the other side of silence” offers a viable mode of interaction with the medium.

Eliot portrays as a condition of living sustainably in the “embroiled medium” an acknowledgement and acceptance of the necessary “friction” (XV, 137) that the individual encounters with the distracting “modal environment” (Atkins 40) of the Spinozist universe. Fatally, Lydgate attempts to remain impervious to such “retarding friction” on “his course towards final companionship with the immortals” (XV, 137) when he dismisses with a casual “What then?” whatever public opinion might make of his “currying favour with Bulstrode” over the chaplaincy of the New Infirmary (XVIII, 168). Casaubon too, where possible, eludes confrontation with the opinions of his critics, evolving his theories in a rarefied vacuum, void
of contradiction, which deprives them also of the friction and collision with other bodies of thought necessary to make them viable:

Mr Casaubon’s theory of the elements [...] was not likely to bruise itself unawares against discoveries: it floated among flexible conjectures no more solid than those etymologies which seemed strong because of likeness in sound, until it was shown that likeness in sound made them impossible: it was a method of interpretation which was not tested by the necessity of forming anything which had sharper collisions than an elaborate notion of Gog and Magog: it was as free from interruption as a plan for threading the stars together. (XLVIII, 450)

The corporeality of the imagery (“bruise,” “solid,” “sharper collisions”) is symptomatic of Eliot’s conception of the social milieu as an essentially material environment of interacting bodies whose trappings ensnare those characters (Bulstrode, Lydgate, Casaubon) who would transcend it with their arrogant individualism or sense of intellectual or evangelical exceptionalism while they also seek to shape it to their own ends. In contrast to both Casaubon and Lydgate, Will Ladislaw is one of those “characters which are continually creating collisions and nodes for themselves in dramas which nobody is prepared to act with them. Their susceptibilities will clash against objects that remain innocently quiet” (XIX, 179-80). He embodies a receptive openness to his environment, a mode of being whose power and activity is enhanced, not diminished, by his being affected by and acted upon by others, and which constitutes a healthy “mental ecology” in Middlemarch.

Impressible stuff: towards an ecosophical subjectivity

_Pace_ those critics who regard Will Ladislaw as a failure in terms of characterisation,²² it is the Polish-emissary-cum-Italian-with-white-mice (XLVI, 434; L, 460), with his attunement to minor or overlooked living beings—the local children he takes “on gypsy excursions” (XLVI, 435) or the diminutive Miss Noble to whom he is especially attached—who displays the “ordinary affect” (Stewart), or what Félix Guattari calls the “new gentleness” (34), central to the receptive, ecosophical subjectivity. Will has the “temperament to feel keenly the presence of subtleties [that] a man of clumsier perceptions would not have felt” (XLIII, 409) and, being “made of very impressible stuff” (XXXIX, 364), he exemplifies Eliot’s plastic, embodied conception of emotion and affect that she derived from Spinoza. His heightened sensitivity to his surroundings comes with the capacity to shift his point of view and understanding of the world which is at the heart of the ecological consciousness and of Eliot’s moral theory of “sympathy”: “The bow of a violin drawn near him cleverly, would at one stroke change the aspect of the world for him, and his point of view shifted as easily as his mood.” (XXXIX, 364) An early description of Will highlights “the uncertainty of his changing expression. Surely, his very features changed their form; his jaw looked sometimes large and sometimes small; and the little ripple in his nose was a preparation for metamorphosis” (XXI, 196). Will’s physical pliability is the index of his heightened receptivity to external stimuli that does not exclude the deleterious ones of wine and opium—“The attitudes of receptivity are various, and Will had

²² Henry James famously damned Will with faint praise as “the only eminent failure in the book,” seeing him as conceived with the “complacency” a male writer would not have displayed: “he is, in short, roughly speaking, a woman’s man.” Bert G. Hornback calls Ladislaw “a weak, unworthy, unsatisfactory, and unreal, or unrealized creature with a rippling nose and coruscating hair” (Hornback 654, 676).
sincerely tried many of them” (X, 76-7)—but it is precisely this openness that enables him to be “a creature who entered into everyone’s feelings, and could take the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance” (L, 467). The character of Will Ladislaw takes us out of the framework of morality for understanding Eliot’s novel and the world and into that of an ethology which Deleuze defines in his essay on Spinoza as the study of that “which define[s] bodies, animals, or humans by the affects they are capable of” (Deleuze 125). Indeed, the questions Deleuze asks in describing Spinoza’s ethology, seem to stand behind the character of Will and his relationship with Dorothea; it could even describe Eliot’s literary project in general as an exploration of different types of “sociabilities,” as well as setting forth the blueprint for an ecosophical disposition towards the nonhuman environment:

It is no longer a matter of utilizations and captures, but of sociabilities and communities. How do individuals enter into composition with one another in order to form a higher individual, ad infinitum? How can a being take another being into its world, but while preserving or respecting the other’s own relations and world? And in this regard, what are the different types of sociabilities, for example? What is the difference between the society of human beings and the community of rational beings?... Now, we are concerned, not with a relation of point to counterpoint, nor with the selection of a world, but with a symphony of Nature, the composition of world that is increasingly wide and intense. (Deleuze 126)

Will’s ability to respond to his environment—his “response-ability” (Haraway 2)—, from the sound of a violin to the subtly solid odour of prejudice, is key to the kindling of his sense of political “responsibility” which he later invests in his role as a newly elected member of the reformed Parliament to bring about “social change.” Will’s political engagement, and the “incalculably diffusive,” however “unhistoric” effects of “beneficent activity” (Finale, 785, 782) that Dorothea too finds in it, offer a vision of one of Eliot’s “preferred political remedies” (Parham 26) to the question of how individuals can enter into flourishing and sustainable relations with their medium and one another: through the fostering of a “response-able” subjectivity that is in tune with the bodily, affective, material relations of the individual and its environment which Eliot foregrounds in her fiction.

In this essay I have tried to show that the grounds for reading Middlemarch from an ecocritical perspective reside less in the themes foregrounded in the novel than in Eliot’s Spinozistic understanding of individuals’ striving to exist in affective relations of interdependence with other bodies to form a sustainable and harmonious world. By attending to the materialistic and affective relations the characters entertain with the various environments

23 “Spinoza’s ethics has nothing to do with a morality; he conceives it as an ethology, that is, as a composition of fast and slow speeds, of capacities for affecting and being affected on this plane of immanence [...] you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination.” (Deleuze 125) Eliot’s conception of character as “a process and an unfolding” (140), “not cut in marble [...] not something solid and unalterable [but] something living, and changing [that] may become diseased as our bodies do” (692), is also redolent of Spinoza’s ethology with its insistence on “affective capacity.”

24 “[...] prejudices, like odorous bodies, have a double existence both solid and subtle—solid as the pyramids, subtle as the twentieth echo of an echo, or as the memory of hyacinths which once scented the darkness.” (XLIII, 409)
or “mediums” in which they move as so many “entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on’” (XXXI, 275), from the physical “land” they own or exploit, to the less tangible (albeit solidly depicted) social “medium” of rumour and gossip which hampers, clogs, and contaminates their endeavours, to the minds of other characters which form the “medium” in which their sense of self takes shape, I have sought to shift the focus away from the moral framework of “sympathy” in which Eliot’s work is often cast and onto an ethology of bodies that combine to form more or less harmonious communities or sociabilities. By upholding a new relational, or what I have called “response-able” subjectivity, as instantiated by Will Ladislaw or Caleb Garth, one capable of “taking the pressure” of, and entering into harmonious compositions with “things outside” the egocentric sphere instead of remaining aloofly “independent” from them, Eliot anticipates the enlarged ecosophical subjectivity with its decentring of the Anthropos that environmental philosophers of today consider conducive to an “ecologically responsible and flourishing life” (Pelluchon 2018, 87).

**Bibliography**


