George Eliot called her novels “realistic,” but what she meant by “realism” and how successfully she practiced what she preached have been matters of controversy since her novels first appeared. In George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism, U. C. Knoepflmacher offers the most extended consideration of Eliot's break with her own “realistic” dicta to present “ideal” characters shaped to serve the author's moral concerns. For Knoepflmacher, realism, defined as a writer's presentation of the actual and commonplace, is still a possible undertaking; he only wishes to argue that George Eliot is not one of the writers who is most faithful to the task realism sets itself.¹

More recently, critics have used George Eliot's failure to accomplish her self-proclaimed goal of writing realistic novels as evidence of the impossibility of the realistic undertaking itself. These critics view realism as a mistake, as a theory of literature which loses sight of the inevitable transformation of the real when it is moved from life to art. It becomes a measure of Eliot's greatness that her novels do not achieve a simple translation of the real into art, and those novels are used to "deconstruct" her own statements of her intentions and the possibility of a realistic literature

¹ George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968). See the introduction and chapter 1 for Knoepflmacher's general definition of realism.
in general.\(^2\) Realism tries to maintain a close relationship of similarity between art and life, whereas the antirealist critics are intent on emphasizing the "difference" between literature and life.

However, the question of George Eliot's realism cannot be sidestepped simply by proclaiming realism an impossible undertaking and thus arguing that her novels are not realistic. George Eliot was well aware that the work of art is not reality itself, and yet she still believed that something which she called realism was not only possible but was the proper task of the novelist. In an essay he wrote for the Westminster Review in 1858, George Lewes stated the principle of difference clearly: "Art is a Representation of Reality—a Representation which, inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium; ... but while thus limited, while thus regulated by the necessities imposed on it by each medium of expression, Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but Falsism."\(^3\) George Eliot herself refers to this difference imposed by the "medium," which includes the author's peculiar sensibility, when discussing her realism. "I undertake to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are, seen through such a medium as my own nature gives me."\(^4\) Later, of Romola, she will write, "Approximate truth is the only truth attainable, but at least one must strive for that, and not wade off into arbitrary falsehood,"\(^5\) echoing the assertion in Adam Bede that the narrator will offer her readers no "arbitrary picture."\(^6\)


\(^3\) Unsigned review, "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction," \textit{Westminster Review} (Amer. ed.), 70 (1858), 273.


\(^5\) \textit{Letters}, IV, 43.

The passages from Lewes's essay and George Eliot's letters suggest a way of approaching realism which I think will prove useful for a study of Eliot's novels. Realism, granting the difference between representative and the thing represented, is concerned with the nature and quality of representation. More exactly, as Lewes argues, realism insists that representation in art be "true," not "false." Traditionally, working from pictorial realism, "true" representation has been identified with resemblance or mimesis. Recent attacks on literary realism have, in many instances, focused on the impossibility of resemblance between words and things. Lewes's and Eliot's statements reveal an awareness of the limits of mimesis and offer another criterion for the truth of representation: reference. Something represents something else "truly" when it successfully refers to it.

Gottlob Frege, in a now classic essay, distinguishes between "sense" and "reference." Paul Ricoeur offers the following description of Frege's distinction: "The sense is what the proposition states; the reference or denotation is that about which the sense is stated." Sense is internal to language, the meaning a group of words carries by virtue of its belonging to a linguistic system. Reference is that which connects language to the world. Applying his distinction to poetry, Frege concludes that literature is that kind of language which only has sense, which has no reference. Of The Odyssey, Frege writes: "We are interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused." There is nothing in the world which corresponds to the objects named in the poem, or in a novel. This is the essence of fiction: language used in such a way that the real existence of the objects and events described is not asserted. Fiction has no referent.

George Eliot's realism involves the refusal to recognize that literary language has no referent, and I wish to discuss here the complexities of assuring fiction's referential abilities. To reduce literature to only the "sense" function of language would seem to Eliot to assure its "arbitrariness," its solipsism. Her realism is preoccupied with establishing the literary work's relation to the world.

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8 Frege, p. 63.
and with its power to denote, describe, and represent things and
events in that world. I want to argue that Eliot moves from a sim-
ples realism of matching words to world in The Mill on the Floss to
a complex realism which envisions a world and converts readers to
that world’s reality in Middlemarch. The visionary realism of the
later work reflects the earlier novel’s inability to match adequately
word to thing, an inability which determines Maggie Tulliver’s
isolation from her society and her eventual tragic end. Middle-
march strives not only to denote a reality but also to create the
context in which its words will be understood, so that Dorothea
Brooke can eventually find her proper husband and her proper
task in the world. George Eliot must consider how we make
“sense” of our world, but also works to guarantee that such “sense”
is not merely the “arbitrary” nonreferential “play” and wish fulfill-
ment of an imagination detached from the world. The crucial turn
in Eliot’s realism is the shift from the world of objects to human
interaction with that world as the “reality” to which words must
adhere. I wish to locate this shift as a response to certain unresolved
difficulties in The Mill on the Floss and indicate how the new
realism works in Middlemarch, with the hope that this essay will
have a bearing on the general discussion of nineteenth-century
realism.

Before discussing George Eliot’s realism in particular, I want
to suggest briefly two reasons for realism as a literary theory. The
relation of literary language to the world becomes a crucial issue
for writers only when that relation has been seriously threatened.
A novelist’s insistence on the referential function of her works’
language is, at least in part, always necessarily divided against it-
self (as the deconstructionist critics show) because that insistence
stems, paradoxically, from an awareness of the novel’s fictionality.
Realism, so strongly defended by such a diverse group of nineteenth-
century writers, is a battle in a war already half lost. Realism can
be read, in part, as the Victorian continuation of the Romantic
protest against the tangential function given to the artist in the
modern industrial world. Whereas the Romantics stressed the
necessity of imagination and the benefits resulting from the artist’s

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9 Of course there are still realistic writers in this century, but the more typical
moderns are those like James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges, who fully admit the
arbitrariness of their fictional works.
difference from the technologist, the realists stressed that they were just as scientific, just as devoted to positivistic evaluation of the world, as the best materialists. The narrator in Middlemarch calls herself a "scientist" and proves a better one than Lydgate. The realist would return (almost every era's artists talk of a past when art was heeded) fiction to the center of life by demonstrating that art is as closely linked to the world as more "practical" forms of knowledge. George Eliot's realism always contains this "rhetorical" element, this attempt to persuade the world that the "truths" of fiction are vitally important.

Another reason for realism's prominence in the nineteenth century is suggested by Michel Foucault's The Order of Things. To simplify greatly, Foucault believes that, around 1800, the Enlightenment correlation of appearance with reality gave way to the Romantic belief that the most important truths lie hidden beneath the surface. For example, in eighteenth-century biology, plants and animals were classified according to similarities between outward features, whereas in nineteenth-century biology, "life," a general term designating sophistication of internal organization, becomes the means by which individual specimens are assigned to classes. This shift means that after 1800 "reality" becomes problematic in a way it was not before, and can only be discovered through an act of interpretation, which "reads" and organizes external signs in order to understand a hidden truth or meaning. Words themselves become dense, no longer carry their meaning on the surface, but require interpretation because they carry a meaning which, as material symbols or signifiers, they are not themselves. In other words, Foucault sees Saussure's division of the sign into the signifier, which is the sign's manifest appearance, and the signified, which is the meaning residing behind the signifier, as another example of reality's movement away from the surface in the modern era. Realism can be understood as a response to this new complexity. It becomes important to stress language's referential abilities precisely because the nature and reality of the referent itself has become a problem, and because a space has been

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opened up between the representative (signifier) which is present and the thing represented (signified) which is hidden. Lewes acknowledges the hidden nature of reality in his essay on realism when he includes among the artist's tasks the penetration of the moods and emotions of his subjects. In George Eliot's theory of fiction, the notion of "sympathy" covers both the epistemological and the rhetorical tasks of realism—both the need to understand and to persuade others to tolerate the "otherness" of our fellow creatures.

On the surface, The Mill on the Floss can be read as the failure of sympathy in both the senses just mentioned. St. Ogg's and Tom Tulliver fail to understand Maggie and fail to tolerate her. The two failures coincide when they ostracize her for an act—the renunciation of Stephen Guest—which was actually her attempt to affirm her ties to Tom and St. Ogg's. But the novel is also an examination of Maggie's own failings, which are tied, I will argue, to an unworkable model of literary realism. Maggie is chastised throughout the novel for the shortcomings of her self-knowledge and her knowledge of the world. But when she finally comes to full knowledge at the point when she renounces Stephen, she is still subjected to her tragic end. This inconsistency in the novel's treatment of its main character will point us to the novel's own epistemological problems, ones which will necessitate a recasting of George Eliot's understanding of realism.

Throughout most of the novel, Maggie's lack of knowledge is characterized as the conflict between her imagination (primarily literary) and the world out there, and this conflict is seen as the source of her potential for tragedy. "Everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind to Maggie: there was no indulgence, no fondness, such as she imagined when she fashioned the world afresh in her own thoughts. . . . The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt. . . . No wonder, when there is this contrast between the outward and the inward, that painful collisions come of it." Maggie's imaginary world has no referent, and

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12 See Lewes, "Realism in Art," p. 274.
she will suffer because she continually acts as if the world of books and of her imagination does denote the world, and because the fictional world “fashioned . . . in her own thoughts” is preferable to the actual world of the Mill and of St. Ogg’s. Maggie’s failure to grasp the fictional character of books—a failing she shares with Don Quixote—is best exemplified by the episode in which she runs away to the gypsies. This incident points to a truth Maggie will again and again fail to perceive: the words of fiction do not accurately reflect the lived world which exists outside books, and as the referent of ordinary language.

The second cause of Maggie’s sufferings—that fiction is better than life—leads the novelist into greater complexities. Fiction makes us unhappy in the real world because it portrays a better one. The Mill on the Floss as a novel is, like its main character, torn between the desire to live in the beautiful world of literature and the conscience-stricken sense that it must return to the real world. Ultimately the novel comes down firmly on the side of the real world. The Mill on the Floss is a novel suspicious of books, ever wary of fiction as mere wish fulfillment which must be renounced, and that same renunciation is demanded of Maggie. (The indulgence in fable of Eliot’s next novel, Silas Marner, follows, I think, from this novel’s stern renunciation of the imaginative.)

The novel refuses to endorse Maggie’s imaginative reveries because they have no referent. Desire is linked to imagination and fiction in the scene in which Philip Wakem offers to Maggie a copy of Scott’s The Pirate. Maggie (like Mary Ann Evans) had once read part of the book, and it had awakened in her “for a long while” a longing for the Shetland Islands. Now Philip offers to lend her the book so she might finish it. But Maggie refuses, because if she reads it, she will “want too much” (V, 1). In The Mill on the Floss, desire, seen as floating free of all referents, is limitless. The possibility of endless desire must be checked by referring the wishes

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14 At first glance, the novel which chastises one of its characters for forgetting the fictional nature of novels would seem to be pointing to its own fictionality. But it works the other way as well in both Don Quixote and The Mill on the Floss. By telling us that novels are fictional, the novel is telling us something “true” and is thus demonstrating its own veracity.

fostered by imagination back to one's responsibilities to others and to the possible consequences of any action precipitated by those wishes. The imagination's wishes, embodied in words or images cut loose from ties of reference, are dangerous because there is nothing to limit their fanciful constructions; they are completely arbitrary, answerable only to themselves. To the modern reader, Maggie's love for Stephen might seem foolish, but hardly dangerous. But to George Eliot, that love typifies desire divorced from all reference to social context or one's ties (familial and affectionate) to others.

The only desires the novel can endorse, the only desires bounded by a relation to the real, are the desires prompted by memory. Ties to the world and to others, in particular Maggie's ties to Tom and Lucy, constitute memory, and the renunciations of Philip and of Stephen are enacted in memory's name. Talking to Philip, Maggie insists: "I desire no future that will break the ties of the past" (VI, 10), and when she rejects Stephen, after a night spent floating free from her whole world, Maggie argues that their love "would rend me away from all that my past life has made dear and holy to me" (VI, 14). In the renunciation of Stephen Maggie achieves that clear knowledge of the real which the novel has held out as her goal. In the chapter entitled "Borne Along by the Tide," Maggie gives herself over to a "vision" of a life with Stephen, a vision which "excluded all realities" (VI, 13). But in the following chapter, entitled "Waking," she is disenchanted, recognizes that she has made herself "an outlawed soul with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion" (VI, 14), and uses the image of reality offered by memory to reestablish that outward guide, to escape solipsism and place herself back into contact with the real.

Given this ascension by Maggie to clear knowledge, why is she

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denied a happy ending? To answer that question we must consider the “reality” which the novel establishes or, rather, the two realities it presents as the referents to which Maggie is bound. For lack of better terms, I will call them the “oppressive referent” and the “nostalgic referent.” The novel fluctuates in its allegiance to one or the other of these referents, and the result is that confusion at the core of the novel’s tragedy which has bothered so many critics. One cause for the tragic ending is simply the clash between the oppressively narrow (both words are Eliot’s) world of St. Ogg’s and the more extravagant claims of Maggie’s imagination. This conflict, however, fails to explain completely Maggie’s situation because it offers no reason for endorsing her acts of renunciation. If the novel blames Tom for being a prig, as it surely does, it also blames Maggie for having extravagant desires. If memory’s only referent were the oppressive St. Ogg’s, then the novel’s praise of memory would be impossible to justify.

However, the novel offers another referent for memory, the “nostalgic referent.” The past which Maggie holds sacred is a past separate from St. Ogg’s, the childhood world characterized by a total absence of desire and by her perfect union with her brother Tom. A conversation with Philip reveals this image of the past. Maggie speaks first.

“O, it is quite impossible we can ever be more than friends—brother and sister in secret, as we have been. Let us give up thinking of everything else.”

“No, Maggie, I can’t give you up—unless you are deceiving me—unless you really only care for me as if I were your brother. Tell me the truth.”

“Indeed, I do, Philip. What happiness have I ever had so great as being with you?—since I was a little girl—the days Tom was good to me.” (V, 4)

Philip’s question makes clear that the brother-sister relationship signifies innocence and a lack of desire. Does Maggie care for him only in that way, have no sexual desire for him? Maggie’s answer is that she will want no other type of union than the innocent and happy union she once knew with Tom. Later, the dream of Tom rowing past on the river without looking at Maggie (VI, 14) will inspire her renunciation of Stephen. The union with Tom pre-dates passion, and the desire to regain that union, a desire fed by
memory and used to effect the renunciations of Stephen and Philip, is the only desire the novel allows Maggie to hold without chastisement.

Yet the novel contains much evidence to suggest that this endorsed desire is just as much an unjustified, "arbitrary" creation of Maggie's imagination as any of the other desires which she is chastised for holding. My description of that perfect childhood relies on Maggie's memories of it, not its presentation in the narrative, because the novel, from its earliest chapters, shows Maggie alienated from Tom, unable to win and keep his affection, just as she is alienated from the world around her. The experience of separation from Tom is the birth of the passionate desire for union, the desire for love, which is identified as "the strongest need in poor Maggie's nature" (I, 5). From the start, Maggie is a creature of desires, all of them seemingly beyond her ability to satisfy, and there is no reason the desire for Tom should be deemed legitimate while other similar desires (and ones more likely to be fulfilled) are ruled out.

The Mill on the Floss, then, offers two explicit reasons for Maggie's tragedy: her incompatibility with the narrow world of St. Ogg's, and her growth away from the perfect world of her childhood. The first reason locates the cause of tragedy in the nature of the two combatants; the second reason locates the cause in the inevitable changes wrought by time. The novel advances both reasons because its tragic conclusion is only dictated by their conjunction. The novel appeals to time's distancing of Maggie from her childhood when it affirms the reality of the "nostalgic referent"; the novel appeals to Maggie's conflict with her environment when it wishes to demonstrate imagination's divorce from the real.

The conjunction of these two causes is reflected in U. C. Knoepflmacher's reading of the novel in George Eliot's Early Novels. The chapter on The Mill on the Floss is entitled "Tragedy and the Flux," but the reason for the tragedy most often cited by Knoepflmacher is Tom's and Maggie's "opposing temperaments" (p. 188), the fate which has made Tom take after the Dodsons and Maggie after the Tullivers. "In Tom, the Dodson strain has been magnified; in Maggie, the 'richer blood' of the Tullivers is dominant. . . . Tom embraces the reality of St. Ogg's; Maggie yields to the fantasy life that was her father's destruction" (p. 210). But how does this cause of Maggie's tragic end relate to the "flux" mentioned in the chapter's title? Knoepflmacher identifies the two causes offered by the novel for its tragic ending, but does not seem to recognize that either cause should be sufficient in itself and that this need to offer two causes points to important confusions in the novel's structure and aims.
The two reasons, existing side by side in the novel, are never explicitly combined because, while the novel sends Maggie to her tragic end, it tries to evade the more sweeping tragic conclusion that mind and world, desire and reality, are necessarily irreconcilable. To maintain the possibility of a realism in which the words and images of imagination can find a home in the real world, the novel must cling to its insistence that Maggie's perfect childhood did exist, that she is right to preserve its image in memory as her proper "guide."

The Mill on the Floss tacitly recognizes that memory's referent is a human construction since the novel gives the reader the means by which to recognize that the perfect childhood is open to the same kind of criticism as Maggie's image of the gypsies. But the novel does not make this recognition explicit. George Eliot, at this point in her career (and, I would assume, at this point in her meditations about her own past), is not quite ready to abandon that image of an ideal past in which reality was adequate to desire, in which imagination was not forced to construct itself a world in which to live. The explicit belief in The Mill on the Floss that such a past existed means that any fictional construct must be rejected in favor of the reality itself. Thus, the narrator rejects metaphor in favor of the actual names of things. "O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being 'the freshest modern' instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech, as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor,—that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else?" (II, 1). The Mill on the Floss, being modern, laments the loss of the ability to "declare what a thing is." Nostalgia condemns the novel to tragedy because its realism insists there was a referent in the past which served as the "thing" which language denotes, but now that referent is gone, and language, floating free of that past, keeps saying "something else," except when restrained by the strongest efforts of memory. Unable to assert that imagination's words find a home in the present, the novel locates that home in the past, and then laments its exile from that past.

This exile can be tied to the novel's allegiance to what Umberto Eco has termed a "metaphysics of the referent," a phrase
which describes those theories of meaning which hold that the word's significance is dependent on its standing for some locatable real thing which the word designates.\textsuperscript{18} Eco has no intention of denying that words can name, or "mention," things, but he insists that their meaning is in no way dependent on this ability. Rather, the meaning of words is essentially cultural, since the "codes" which establish significance are conventional, and are creations of society. Two important points undermine the insistence that language's relation to the world is the source of its ability to signify. First, words used to lie still succeed in conveying a message, although the state of affairs the lie designates does not exist; second, the meaning of "a sign can only be explained through another sign." "The semiotic object of a semantics is the content, not the referent, and the content has to be defined as a cultural unit." Contents are constructed by codes and are then identified by signs. Discussing Frege's distinction between "sense" ("Sinn") and "reference" ("Bedeutung"), Eco writes: "To say that Walter Scott and the author of Waverley are two expressions that have the same Bedeutung but two Sinn concerns a theory of sign-function only insofar as: (i) the Bedeutung is intended as the definition of a historical entity that a culture recognizes as a single person, and is therefore a denoted content; (ii) the Sinn is a particular way of considering a given content, according to other cultural conventions."\textsuperscript{19} By rejecting any appeal to real things, to referents, Eco places both the referential and sense functions of language entirely within the system of the human production of meaning which is language.

In The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot has come close to recognizing that referents are constructed entities, that they are "contents" in Eco's sense. But the novel backs away from this knowledge and can only end tragically, split between its insistence that the nostalgic referent exists but cannot be regained and its unacknowledged understanding that the image of a perfect childhood is only a creation of Maggie's desires. The impasse The Mill on the Floss reaches marks the bankruptcy of a simple realism where words denote an actual world. From this autobiographical novel, George Eliot turns to historical novels which attempt to describe the tem-

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pp. 61-62.
poral and social processes by which cultural contents (referents) are created. The novelist’s response to the problems encountered in *The Mill on the Floss* is to explore the ways in which the Maggies of the world create their vision of reality and its significance, and to consider how that vision might be communicated to others so that a community might act upon it. George Eliot’s historical novels work from the premise that the grounds of human life, the final referents of our speech, are humanly constructed, with the fact that those grounds change from one historical period to another taken as one important proof that they are man-made. The later novels examine both how the referents are constructed and how individuals are to judge correctly the social conditions (and possible behavior allowed by those conditions) of their particular time. The realistic novel now takes as its referent the production of meaning itself. My discussion of *Middlemarch* will, I trust, make the import of these generalizations clear.

The historical vision in *Middlemarch* commits George Eliot to a more complicated understanding of the relation of words to world than we found in *The Mill on the Floss*. If Foucault is right in claiming “reality” is hidden in the nineteenth century, then the theory of evolution remains a primary example of that hiddenness.20 The thing is never only what it is now, but it is also the history of what it has been and the potential of what it will be. Names are inadequate; only narratives can fully describe an object. A knowledge of the thing as it appears now is not enough; we must view a thing’s history. Of Lydgate, *Middlemarch*’s narrator writes:

He was at a starting-point which makes many a man’s career a fine subject for betting, if there were any gentlemen given to that amusement who could appreciate the complicated probabilities of an arduous purpose, with all the possible thwartings and furtherings of circumstance, all the niceties of inward balance, by which a man swims and makes his

20 In keeping with Eco’s insistence that referents are culturally produced, we should note that Foucault claims reality “hides” itself, not because reality itself has changed, but because the way a culture organizes its knowledge about reality has changed. The theory of evolution, for Foucault, would be one example of a general movement away from explanations of reality by surface characteristics to explanations which search out data and connections not immediately available to perception.
point or else is carried headlong. The risk would remain, even with close knowledge of Lydgate's character; for character too is a process and an unfolding. The man was still in the making.\textsuperscript{21}

The novelist will show the "process" and "unfolding" which reveals, over time, the referent of the name "Lydgate." A referent is not simply an object out there which is named but an object always in process, always being created by virtue of its interaction with others in the whole context we call society. Realism must not only be flexible enough to record the object's changes but must also denote the process of change itself, catch the object in the middle of its march from one condition to another. The novel's story is of the meeting between character (nature or potential) and environment. Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke are understandable only in the context of Middlemarch. In the novel, there are no "things in themselves." The thing is always in relation to other things, and its nature is constituted by that relation. To name something is not enough; the name must be used in a sentence, placed in the context of its relation to other significant units.\textsuperscript{22} The part can be differentiated from the whole, can be given a name, but the part is only fully known when seen in relation to the whole. This principle is the foundation of George Eliot's conception of "form," developed in the late 1860s. She writes: "as 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. And the fullest example of such a whole is the highest example of Form: in other words, the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is itself in the most varied & therefore the fullest relation to other wholes."\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Middlemarch, ed. Gordon S. Haight, Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton, 1956), Bk. II, ch. 15. Subsequent references are from this edition with book and chapter numbers given in the text of the essay.

\textsuperscript{22} My discussion here of how the word changes when placed in a sentence and my later discussion of metaphor are both heavily influenced by Ricoeur's The Rule of Metaphor. For a short summary of Ricoeur's aims in his work on metaphor, see his essay "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling," Critical Inquiry, 5 (1978), 143–59.

One example of Middlemarch's adherence to this recognition that parts cannot be divorced from the whole occurs during the negotiations surrounding the appointment of a hospital chaplain. "Thus it happened that on this occasion Bulstrode became identified with Lydgate, and Lydgate with Tyke; and owing to this variety of interchangeable names for the chaplaincy question, diverse minds were enabled to form the same judgment concerning it" (II, 18). In a world in which names become "interchangeable," clear knowledge results, not just from the proper assignment of names, but also from designating the processes by which names slide and come to stand for one another.

Furthermore, names give an illusion of separateness, an illusion which sometimes serves to aid the desire to deny the intimate connections between certain entities. Lydgate distinguishes between the pleasure he feels in Rosamond's company and "love," but the narrator comments: "Our passions do not live apart in locked chambers, but, dressed in their small wardrobe of notions, bring their provisions to a common table and mess together, feeding out of the common store according to their appetite" (II, 16). The "feeding" metaphor points to that communion in which separate things take part, that interdependence of dissimilars which George Eliot calls "form," and apart from which the dissimilars cannot be understood. The novelist must maintain the tension between individual and context, between separate identity and definition by interaction. That tension is "form" and is the pattern all knowledge must assume. The syntactic unit of such form is the sentence, with its relation of noun to predicate. The sentence is the prototypical example of the cultural formation of referents, of the definition (qualification) of nouns by the application of other words to them. The object is always modified by its environment, the meaning of a word is always dependent on the words with which it appears, and realism must take these interactions into account.

Middlemarch, while abandoning a "metaphysics of the referent," is still a realistic novel in its attempt to designate the process by which referents ("contents" in Eco's terms) are culturally produced. The novel's "referent" is this process, is the "form" which knowledge takes, with a secondary referent being the problems individuals face in properly recognizing their historical period's method of organizing signification. The novel's "sense" would be the story it tells, the particular aesthetic "form" the
The novelist creates in order to indicate the nature of cultural forms. The novel's particular created form would be recognized as separate from actual social forms prevailing in George Eliot's England but as contiguous to those actual forms, i.e., related to them metonymically. Aesthetic knowledge would take up the task set forth by the "Notes on Form" of relating the given "whole" of the novel to "other wholes."

The cultural production of "contents" is illustrated in Lydgate's story; the doctor's fate springs from the union between his personality—revealed in the tale of his passion for the French actress—and the attitudes and actions of Rosamond and Middlemarch toward him. The story of Dorothea is more concerned with the problems an individual living within a certain society encounters in her attempt to understand how that society "codes" its world, and how it creates its "codes." Dorothea, like Maggie Tul­liver, is given the task of working from a position of ignorance (her complete misjudging of Casaubon) toward the knowledge enjoyed by the narrator.24

The first obstacle to knowledge lies in the limited perspective of the self, a perspective further hampered by the tendency of desire to lead perception. The limitation of a single point of view is a constant theme in George Eliot's novels. In Middlemarch the narrator performs a singular act of self-humiliation to demonstrate her overcoming such limitation. "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young. . . . Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us" (III, 29). Only by portraying both sides of the relationship can the narrator present its full reality. The visible switch in point of view is an indication to the reader of the narrator's good faith, as well as a demonstration of the interaction thesis of the novel. The narrator's flexibility follows the flexibility of a world in which subjects acting with and reacting against one another create society.

24 I have, of course, exaggerated the distinction between the Lydgate and Dorothea portions of the novel to make the point that the novel is dealing with two related but different problems.
The Turn of George Eliot's Realism

Yet this switch in point of view also raises serious questions about the possibility of gaining adequate knowledge of that created society. The switch is a staged renunciation, a point when the narrator, despite her desire to do otherwise, will extend her sympathies to Casaubon. This renunciation is absolutely necessary to the novel's realism. To define the real, the referent of speech, as the product of the interaction of people through time is to define that referent as both radically beyond the reach of individual action and radically affected by individual action. As long as the individual is limited to his own point of view, he must always fail to know fully or accurately his society and his world. Yet, since that individual is involved in the construction of that society and that world, his every action, however limited, alters that world. In this last notion, we find one reason for Eliot's argument for "minute cause," for the eventual effect of actions which now seem trivial.

The problem presented to knowledge by this interaction theory of the referent is acute, and it is on this point that J. Hillis Miller focuses in his "deconstruction" of Middlemarch.25 Miller argues that Middlemarch presents all knowledge as partial (i.e., governed by individual desires, and limited to individual perspectives) and that all acts of knowledge (interpretations) change the thing known in the very act of coming to know it. The novel's narrator is in "bad faith" insofar as she claims to transcend the limitations of a particular point of view, especially since her novel demonstrates the impossibility of such transcendence. The referents of speech are created by an intersubjective process, but are viewed by individuals from subjective stances. As a result, the novel is full of characters who miss the actual significance of the people and events they encounter. Dorothea misinterprets the intentions and characters of Sir James and Mr. Casaubon; Middlemarch does not understand Lydgate or the necessity for reform; the novel's scholars, Casaubon and Lydgate, fail in their efforts. The complexity of social reality dooms these individual efforts to comprehend it, and surely Miller is right to question the narrator's mastery of that complexity when the novel only portrays characters who cannot master it.

I want to argue that the social reality which is Middlemarch's

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25 Miller's reading of Middlemarch is offered in the two essays cited in n. 2.
referent, while complex, is not necessarily unknowable. We must remember that individual acts of understanding are socially mediated as much as individual attempts to create social reality are. In other words, Lydgate's story demonstrates that a man does not simply create himself and cannot simply impose his will on a particular society, shaping it to conform to his vision of how things should be. Similarly, individual acts of comprehension are not purely individualistic. The individual must use categories, concepts and words given to him or her by society and its language. Thus Dorothea's early aspirations can be tied to certain "codes" of religious piety, while Rosamond's romantic ideas come, in part, from novels. What George Eliot portrays in Middlemarch is not the impossibility of comprehending the world, but that fragmentation characteristic of a modern world which offers the individual so many different and partial ways to understand it. The characters' misinterpretations are not tied to any necessity of misinterpreting but to there being "no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (Prelude). The narrator, working in this world of multiple "codes," is master of them all, and can show us how two people working out of different "social faiths" misunderstand one another.26

Can a "coherent social faith and order" be reestablished? George Eliot sees all the difficulties of the task, but also, I submit, thinks that reestablishment is the proper task of the novelist and the justification of realism. But the realism demanded by this goal is quite different from the realism of The Mill on the Floss. The historical novels demonstrate that social reality keeps changing, and the novelist who would adequately describe that reality must adapt her language to those changes. Ordinary language is not good enough since its meanings seem to lag behind the changes taking place in the world; ordinary language, like the language of The Mill on the Floss, seems doomed to a nostalgic naming of things which are no longer there. In a world of change, a realistic

language must mirror the processes of change in its own processes, must create novelties as the novelties in the world are created. In other words, a realistic language must be metaphoric, introducing new concepts and images into language and into the social world in which language is used.

Metaphor, no matter how strikingly new, is always social insofar as speakers of the language can understand it. If not understandable, it is not metaphor, but nonsense. Metaphoric speech does not, however, "refer" to the world as ordinary speech does, a point underlined by recalling the description, in The Mill on the Floss, of metaphor as declaring "what a thing is . . . by saying it is something else." A metaphor, since it applies the word in a way which violates its dictionary meaning, only makes "sense" if the audience is able to adjust its understanding of the word to accommodate its novel use. In Frege's terms, then, if the metaphor does succeed in making "sense," its "reference" must be to the process of adjustment which takes place in the codes of signification; that is, the metaphor's referent is the poet's love now seen under the sign of "red, red rose," a "seeing" which has more to do with conceptual and linguistic processes than with perceptual seeing. Since George Eliot in the historical novels is interested primarily in how socially held meanings are created, a new interest in visionary or metaphoric language, the direct means by which new meanings are introduced, seems inevitable.27 Ladislaw's call for a "vague" language as opposed to representational painting points toward the change in George Eliot's own attitudes toward language since she wrote The Mill on the Floss. "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. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is difference in their very breathing: they

27 U. C. Knoepflemacher's excellent essay "Fusing Fact and Myth: The New Reality of Middlemarch," in This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch, ed. Ian Adam (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 43-72, demonstrates "the fluidity of the rhythms and images created by George Eliot" in the novel (p. 59) and argues that this new fluidity in language is Eliot's response to a more complex vision of reality in Middlemarch as opposed to her earlier novels. Obviously, Knoepflemacher's thesis parallels my own in this essay, and his detailed consideration of Middlemarch's language does much to show the allegiance to metaphor which I am here asserting as an essential feature of the novel.
change from moment to moment” (II, 19). The static pictorial image or the word which simply designates an object is not adequate to a reality which “changes from moment to moment.”

Middlemarch has many characters who wish to win their fellow villagers over to their particular vision of society and of the future. Mr. Brooke, Bulstrode, Ladislaw, and Lydgate all have a “cause” to promote. They want to persuade the village to see things in a new way. All of them, with the possible exception of Ladislaw, fail, but that failure does not mean that Eliot disapproves of the attempt.28 The centrality of politics in her historical novels—and the disheartening fact of political chaos in modern times—can be directly linked to the lack of a “coherent social faith.” Middlemarch’s realism is justified by the belief that men can understand what they make, and George Eliot in the historical novels sees politics as a crucial field of human making. And politics, as practiced by Savonarola, Felix Holt, and Ladislaw, is primarily the linguistic act of persuasion. The politician prepares for novelty in the social order by preaching those novelties, by using words to say new things. Ladislaw is a poet before he is a politician, and despite many readers’ dissatisfaction with him as a character, I think the novelist sees him as the right husband for her heroine and wants to suggest that Dorothea and Will take up the proper task when they work to further Will’s career in political persuasion.29

The distinction between ordinary language and metaphoric language, and the way in which the latter might be seen as more “realistic,” can be considered once more by discussing the relative positions of Mary Garth and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch (interestingly enough, the two characters never meet). Middlemarch is not entirely free of the nostalgia we found in The Mill on the Floss. There was a time when Theresas were aided by a coherent social faith. There was a time when epic was possible. As long as the writer cherishes a past to which her characters and the

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28 The reasons for their failures and the lessons such failures are meant to teach others who might pursue the same task are outside the scope of my discussion here. It seems characteristic of George Eliot’s fiction that she demonstrates the complexity of certain undertakings by showing characters failing where she hopes to succeed.

29 Gordon S. Haight has summarized many of the traditional complaints about Ladislaw (focusing on those of Henry James and F. R. Leavis) and has offered a more sympathetic reading of the novel’s young hero in “George Eliot’s ‘Eminent Failure’: Will Ladislaw,” in This Particular Web, pp. 22–42.
modern world cannot return, her historical novels will always be
burdened by a protest against their very subject: the fact and neces-
sity of change. Mary Garth is allowed to live in the nostalgic and
unchanging world of childhood as Maggie Tulliver was not. Signi-
nificantly, Mary explains her constancy to Fred in terms of ad-
herence to a familiar language. “It would make too great a differ-
ence to us [not to love one another]—like seeing all the old places
altered, and changing the name for everything” (VIII, 86). The
old names are adequate because Mary is granted immunity from
the very fact of change which the novel demonstrates is inevitable.

Yet Dorothea, although denied Mary’s peaceful ending and
sent into exile from her native town, is more central to the novel;
and Dorothea’s heroism, her acceptance of modernity (with its con-
stant change and its lack of a coherent social faith), indicates that
Middlemarch, unlike The Mill on the Floss, is more concerned
with looking forward than back. The whole novel is based on the
premise that the provincial world it describes is dead (killed by
the Reform Bill and the railroad), and that world is being ex-
amined to find the indications of its descendant’s birth. While
Mary is concerned to keep the same name for everything, Dorothea
is attempting to find new names for things. Mrs. Cadwallader ex-
presses the opinion of Middlemarch when she tells Dorothea: “We
have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane, and call things
by the same names as other people call them by.” To which Doro-
thea retorts: “I never called everything by the same name that all
the people about me did” (VI, 54). This independence is both
Dorothea’s strength and her weakness, a measure of her distance
from the common and of her modernity. Dorothea’s use of her own
names for things, her indulgence of her imagination, will not be
punished as Maggie’s similar traits were. Middlemarch fully ad-
mits the limitations of the world’s Mrs. Cadwalladers, and finds in
imaginations like Dorothea’s the sources of new contents. George
Eliot would like everyone to call things by the same names, but
not by the names Middlemarch and Mrs. Cadwallader would use.
The historical novels indicate the complexities of historical pro-
cess which make ordinary language inadequate to the task of com-
prehending those processes. Only a metaphoric language, which
is the process of creating new contents in miniature, offers us ac-
cess to those historical processes. And this new language, in its
revelation of the foundations of thought and of code making, car-
ries with it the possibility of generating a society in which human needs might be better served than at present.

George Eliot's later novels hold, as their rhetorical (read "political" or "moral") purpose, the desire to create that "coherent social faith" by which the social realities of the future, the new referents of speech, might be constructed and understood. This recognition of metaphor as both the most realistic form of language and the carrier of new contents guarantees that Dorothea's fate is much different from Maggie's, despite the many similarities between the two characters. When in *Middlemarch* George Eliot embraces metaphoric language, as she cannot do in *The Mill on the Floss*, she does not abandon realism's insistence that its words have a referent. Rather, as I have tried to show, she has discovered that metaphor does not so much denote her subject as enact that subject—the creation of meaning—in the novel itself.

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