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ASPECTS OF 'INDEFINITENESS' IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*

By Omar Sabbagh

As notions come of abstractions, so images come of experiences; the more fully the mind is occupied by an experience, the keener will be its assent to it ... and on the other hand, the duller will be its assent and the less operative, the more it is engaged with an abstraction

John Henry Newman

We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire....

George Eliot

In this article I will be teasing out the significance of the various uses and senses of 'indefiniteness' in *Middlemarch*. Whether it is in relationships between other characters, or between Dorothea and other characters, or between Dorothea and herself, or indeed between Dorothea and the novel or the reader, it will be seen that indefiniteness often stands in for unfavourable conceptions of abstraction and externality, and that all contribute to disharmony in Eliot's rendering. This disharmony is resolved by the end of the novel, and it seems to me that this particular resolution is one of the novel's main themes.

Let us start with the Prelude. In his review of *Middlemarch* Henry James laments the fact that there a 'definite subject' is established, the centrality of Dorothea and her story, but that then the novel fails structurally in diffusing the centrality of this main character.¹ He is complaining of a resulting diffuseness in the novel, a lack of sufficient symmetry and neatness; he thinks it rambles. Barbara Hardy has argued against such a criticism in her formal analysis of contrast and correspondence in *Middlemarch*. She claims that these contrasts and correspondences are such a glaring feature of the novel that they are in effect 'a reading direction', that they are just as much a part of the reader's enjoyment and experience of the novel, if, as I would suggest, at a second order level. And, this being so, these formal or structural attributes 'concentrate' the novel.² So even if Dorothea fades out as the central concern of the novel, the structural properties of its resulting multiplicity prevent it from becoming diffuse or indefinite (to use the opposite term to James's choice of word).

If we look at the Prelude and the parallel drawn between St Theresa and Dorothea, and consider it in relation to the ensuing novel, we realize that Dorothea cannot become another St Theresa because of the limits to individuality in *Middlemarch* society; her indefinite spiritual ardour (the equivalent of St Theresa's 'illimitable satisfaction') must be realistically checked by her concrete situation, *her* 'domestic reality'. This is why the novel veers away from Dorothea after Book One.

From the beginning, then, Eliot is perhaps signalling a humane preference not for attachments to universality – which can be illimitable and indefinite precisely because it is abstract – but for more realistic, local, concrete concerns. Lerner is right in stressing the narrator's sympathy for Dorothea's indefinite spiritual ardour but also in pointing out the irony directed towards **the**

equally indefinite or vague reality she mistakenly embraces early on by marrying Casaubon. Right from the first chapter, for all the sympathy we have for Dorothea, she is kept at a distance from the reader through the amiable judgments of Celia. And what is being made room for is the reader's critical sense that Dorothea is somehow blinded by her immaturity, the ideal or unreal or abstract nature of her faith. It is the 'dimness and uncertainty of the prospect she sees before her' that we feel is faulty.³ But let us look a little closer at the Prelude in terms of the 'indefinite' and the definite, before we move into the novel proper.

According to the Penguin *Dictionary of Saints* St Teresa of Avila 'is the classical example of one who combined the life of religious contemplation with an intense activity and commonsense efficiency in "practical" affairs ...'.⁴ In one sense, Dorothea has both these qualities – her spiritual ardour and her practical talents mentioned early on in relation to the cottagers. In Chapter One Dorothea is likened to 'a fine quotation from the Bible, – or from one of our elder poets, – in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper'. This suggests rather in the manner of the Proem of *Romola* a tension between the eternal and the concrete or quotidian. But when the narrator talks of the 'inconvenient indefiniteness' of women she is referring to two kinds of indefiniteness, that of the 'vague ideal' and that of 'the common yearning of womankind'. It may seem, therefore, as opposed to what we have seen so far, that in offering two opposed forms of 'indefiniteness' the narrator is not signalling a preference for the concrete over the vague or indeterminate. However, for the early Dorothea both *are* the same. In her search for external authority in Casaubon (versus the inner validation that Eliot eventually grants her heroine), Dorothea is satisfying both her religious faith and her (falsely conceived) duty as a woman. They are part of the same external or abstract conception of the good. The indefinite is thus portrayed unfavourably in terms of abstraction and externality. (That this is a real concern of Eliot's can be seen by looking at her essay of 1856, 'The Natural History of German Life'.)⁵ We will return to this idea of externality and abstraction below, when we come to discuss in a little more detail the Dorothea/Casaubon marriage. But if we return now to this idea of the indefinite as the spiritual and counterpoise it to the definite as the material (as suggested by the early tension set up in the biblical analogy) we see it emerge in another analogy. In Rome Will's German painter friend, Naumann, likens Dorothea to Antigone, setting up a tension between spiritual passion and sensual force which are in fact the rival claims on Dorothea symbolized by her marriage to Casaubon and her eventual rescue into love with Will.⁶ The latter is real, not ideal (a dichotomy we will return to later), and, because validated by genuine feeling, concrete.⁷

If we move now into the novel itself we see the word 'indefinite' crop up almost immediately after the Prelude. The amiable and comical Mr Brooke's vague and rambling mind is introduced to us as 'glutinously indefinite'.⁸ Then, in Chapter Three, we see Dorothea's first bit of girlish wishful thinking about Casaubon wanting to marry her, and her ardour for duty is expressed in terms of a 'haze' and 'indefiniteness'.⁹ And it is this indefiniteness that is the (structural, at least) cause of Casaubon's and Dorothea's attraction for each other. Casaubon's studies are indefinite in three senses. First, they seemingly go on forever. Second, by its very nature what he is trying to do, bring the particularity of many different mythologies and traditions under one rule, is wishy-washy and vague.¹⁰ And third, his studies lack human significance, they are futile ('a *lifeless embalment* of knowledge'),¹¹ partly as a result of the first two forms of indefiniteness.¹²

For Eliot the concrete or the particular are humanly opposed to the inhumanity of abstraction or indefiniteness. Harvey cites Eliot's essay on the poet Young to stress her prioritizing the importance of the particular over the abstract for the moral purposes of art – arousing human sympathy and the nobler feelings. Young, she says, lacks 'those living touches by virtue of which the individual and particular in Art becomes the universal and immortal... ', as 'emotion links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstractions...'.¹³ One of the comments Casaubon makes early on to Dorothea (Chapter Two) is precisely the type of comment that lets Dorothea think he understands her and appreciates her, resulting in her early attraction. Sir James wants to know why Dorothea thinks horse-riding wrong, Dorothea dithers and Casaubon comes to the rescue with, '[w]e must not inquire too curiously into motives ... they are apt to become feeble in the utterance'.¹⁴ This is a very good example of the subtlety of Eliot's understanding of human nature, the human mind and in particular intellectual experience. On first reading it, one might think it one of Eliot's many home truths. But once we have read on and realized who Casaubon really is and his role in the novel, we can't but look back on this comment as signalling symbolically and unfavourably an abstract, not fully grounded or unnatural relationship between Dorothea and Casaubon.

But this abstract quality is, as we have seen, also evoked as externality and *impersonality*. Casaubon addresses everyone including Dorothea with 'chilling rhetoric' as if he were talking out of a formal treatise, and even proposes in the least personal way, both through Mr Brooke and in a horribly formal letter. Once again, this corresponds to a 'lack of feeling' and a mild egoism on Dorothea's part, which is described as a lack of 'distinctness' in Chapter Twenty-One. It is the famous passage about how we are all born into moral stupidity. Dorothea has begun to emerge from this natal state,

but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling...that he had an equivalent centre of self....

This is to express Dorothea's immature and external conception of duty, something born of reflection and not internally validated by feeling. Through the stress on feeling and distinctness what is being suggested is some sort of disharmony in Dorothea's own self. To use terms from ethics, her reasons for acting do not coincide with her motivations. She doesn't *want* what she thinks is right, and her blindness with regard to Casaubon in particular telegraphs this to the reader.

This derogative evocation of externality is linked to the indefinite in the sense of the infinite. We learn in Chapter Ten that Dorothea is looking for a 'binding theory' in Casaubon. Something that will unite all that is scattered within her into one true system. She is looking for intellectual authority; but she is also looking to 're-ligio', to re-connect everything *within* herself and herself with the world. In short, she thinks she will be aiding Casaubon in a seminal and monumental study that will prove Christianity to be true. And Dorothea's religious faith is directly linked to her misguided faith in Casaubon. Her faith in him fills in his defects (Chapter Nine). But her search for the indefinite or infinite is a mistake because she is just looking *for* external reasons, which take the place of her own inner feeling. Her incipient identity is *being*

hijacked from the outside, making Eliot's a romantic reaction to an enlightenment conception of duty (such as Kant's), which sees duty as solely based in reason, and emphatically ignores subjective emotion. But, as mentioned earlier, perhaps one of the structural reasons why Dorothea marries Casaubon is that he too, though in a less admirable way, has an external conception of duty. Sir James is right to think (Chapter Seven) that even when Casaubon does the right thing, such as helping his relatives, he does it for the wrong reasons. He helps Will because he is 'bound' (Chapter Nine). And later, in Chapter Twenty-Nine, we learn that Casaubon sees marriage as an 'outward requirement'.¹⁵

Significantly, just before Casaubon dies, when Dorothea is still considering following his wishes and continuing his studies after his death, she puts the dilemma to herself in these terms: 'Still, there was a deep difference between the devotion to the living, and that indefinite promise of devotion to the dead' (Chapter Forty-Eight). And significantly after his death, once Dorothea has long since realised her mistake (in fact it is right at the beginning of Book Six that she puts Casaubon behind her by writing his ghost a note, giving closure), Dorothea's saving trustfulness vis-à-vis Lydgate shows itself in terms of the local and concrete as opposed to the universal and abstract. She says, with respect to helping Lydgate, '[p]eople glorify all sorts of bravery except the bravery they might show on behalf of their nearest neighbours'.¹⁶ The second, recommended kind of bravery, because tangible, is more live and real than the first.

The negative conception of the abstract, the external and the ideal are also apparent in the parallel marriage of Lydgate and Rosamond. Lydgate and Rosamond are attracted to each other for their external features. Rosamond for her seeming docility and beauty and Lydgate for his blood. In Chapter Forty-Eight, again just before Casaubon's death when Dorothea is presenting the aforementioned dilemma to herself, she says that only the 'ideal' not the 'real' yoke of marriage would require her to carry out his wishes. She has realised since the start of her story that her previous conception of duty, in being vague and indefinite in the senses shown so far, was unreal. And then in Chapter Sixty-Four, by the time it has hit home to both that their marriage is a failure, both Rosamond *and* Lydgate put this realisation in terms of the failure of the real to match up to an 'ideal conception'. The parallel failed marriages both have the same moral.

Towards the end of Book One, Chapter Ten, Will, in contradistinction to the indefiniteness of Casaubon's studies perhaps, thinks of genius in terms of being able not to do something 'in general, but something in particular'. This is perhaps Eliot's comment on her own novel, the wonderfully concrete 'body of particular life', to use Harvey's felicitous phrase. Arguing against James's aesthetic criticisms directed against Eliot's moralism, most notable in supposedly omniscient authorial intrusions, Harvey says quite correctly that the reason these intrusions do not *intrude* is that they are received by the reader as truly felt in the context of the novel, implicitly weighted by lived experience – that of the concrete life of the plot and characters.¹⁷ I say Will's comment might well be Eliot's comment on her own novel because towards the end of the novel (Chapter Eighty-One) we learn of Dorothea's 'genius for feeling nobly'.¹⁸ Permit the following syllogistic operation. If we bear in mind what was mentioned earlier about Eliot's purpose in her art to arouse noble feeling, moral sentiment and human sympathy precisely through particulars, we can clearly see an identification re-emerge between

Dorothea and Eliot at the end. In fact it is Dorothea's actions that tie up the Lydgate, the Bulstrode and the Vincy plots.

But to conclude by returning to where we started, perhaps the final way in which the indefinite is used – this time in a positive sense – is in the idea of 'long-recognisability' in the Prelude. Yes, Dorothea does not end up being another St Theresa; but in a way she does. It is precisely the more human and flawed story of Dorothea that makes her exemplary. Near the end (Chapter Eighty-Four), where Mr Brooke is relating the coming marriage between Dorothea and Will, he says (rather comically given his fuzzy character) that 'there's something singular in things: they come round, you know'. This sentence sums up those aspects of the novel that I have highlighted in this article. In the end, not only Dorothea and her story, but indeed the whole multiple life of the novel has indefinite value, has been 'long-recognisable' to all its readers since its publication, precisely because of its singularity. Ultimately, *Middlemarch* is eminently singular for being, in human terms, exemplary.

Notes

- 1 Henry James, 'George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), pp. 81-2.
- 2 Barbara Hardy, 'Possibilities', in *George Eliot, Middlemarch: A Casebook*, ed. Patrick Swinden (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 96.
- 3 Laurence Lerner, 'Dorothea and the Theresa-Complex', in *George Eliot, Middlemarch: A Casebook*, pp. 225-47 (229).
- 4 Donald Attwater, *A Dictionary of Saints* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 319.
- 5 This essay reviews a German social historian's work on the German peasantry. Eliot starts out by stressing the difference between an abstract understanding of a word and a more concrete and inner understanding of a word – such as 'railway'. Any layman will associate this word with his favourite station, say, but some hypothetical person who has worked in all areas connected with railways will have a much weightier experience of the phenomenon and will have an understanding of the word that is much more valid. Cf. George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 267-8. Indeed the increased reality, and therefore value, of the inner and concrete understanding or apprehension corresponds to Newman's prioritizing of 'real assent' over 'notional assent': cf. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (London, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 32-48 (41).
- 6 Though, as many commentators have noted, the over-idealised Will is a slight failure as a character. Lydgate is the real (though limited) hero of the tale.
- 7 Eliot sets up these two rival valid claims 'perennial in human nature' in her essay, 'The Antigone and its Moral' (cf. *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).) And it occurs to me in relation to Antigone, that

perhaps the glaring parallel between Lydgate and Dorothea (as the most identified-with characters of the novel) represents a sibling relationship. They have a unique chemistry throughout this novel, reaching its climax in Chapter 76 where Dorothea makes the parallel clear by identifying with his burdensome marriage, and noting his desire for a 'higher life'. If we accept this idea of a sister-brother affinity between Dorothea and Lydgate, perhaps it is no accident that when St Theresa goes out at a young age to fight and seek martyrdom against the Moors she goes with her brother.

8 In this particular passage it is a 'habit' – his use of his snuff-box – which tempers Mr Brooke's indefiniteness. In the same way, in her essay on 'The Natural History of German Life' Eliot writes somewhat favourably about the German peasantry's love of tradition and local custom (their love of the hearth), as opposed to more universal loyalties.

9 Later, in Chapter 20, Dorothea is said to be 'a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into *principles*, fusing her actions into their *mould*, and whose quick emotions gave the most *abstract things* the quality of pleasure and pain'. My italics.

It is interesting to note that in this wishful thinking Dorothea thinks to herself 'How good of him', which echoes a line from the second scene of Goethe's *Faust* (Vol. 1) – where a peasant expresses his obligation for the great doctor walking among them. This I believe must be intentional, as it coincides perfectly with the cast of Casaubon in the story – as the monomaniac scholar.

10 Indeed, this is why Brooke's indefiniteness is comic relief to Casaubon's morbidly grave variety.

11 This is why Casaubon is always associated with shrunken, gloomy, and deathly imagery, whereas Dorothea, being 'a bright creature' is surrounded by light everywhere she goes.

12 Arguably, all three are suggested by Will's subtle satire of Casaubon's studies in Rome. (Chapter 22).

13 W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 37.

14 This is a sly and low move by Casaubon. It looks forward, I believe, to Chapter 66 where Fred is drawn back to dabble a little in the base action of gambling and cannot give himself 'formal reasons' for it. 'It is in such indefinable moments that action often begins'. Note the similarity of anatomical imagery used in Chapters 68 and 70 to describe the *semi*-consciousness of the base motives of Bulstrode with regard to Raffles and Lydgate (the bribing).

15 Indeed there is a parallel between Farebrother and Casaubon. Unlike Casaubon, Farebrother has no 'uneasy consciousness' (Chapter 17). It is his concrete humanity or humaneness, not any rational argument or doctrine that makes him a good parson and a good character; and, significantly, his religion manifests itself in his 'domestic

manners' (Chapter 18).

- 16 Indeed, trustfulness or faith (or 'truten', to use a phrase from *Silas Marner*) is a recurrent saving grace for Eliot's characters. Adam has it for Hetty, or the puppy-like Tessa for Tito.
- 17 Harvey, op. cit., p. 83.
- 18 Peter K. Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 150.