

VALENCES OF DESIRE: THE SUSPENDED EROTICISM OF *MIDDLEMARCH*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to unpack moments of implicit sexual desire in George Eliot's realist novel, *Middlemarch* (1872), and focuses particularly on the sexually charged scene between Dorothea and Ladislaw in the library at Lowick. While previous readings of this moment have focused on economy or knowledge and their problematised relationships with desire, I argue that a truer understanding of how desire works here emerges from viewing these scenes in the light of Georg W.F. Hegel and Georges Bataille. Hegel, whose work Eliot would have known, lets us see the emergence of a recognised self-consciousness propelled by desire; but Eliot's novel also looks forward to Bataille's understanding of desire, particularly in his theorisations of general and restricted economies. If we are to grasp the realism of Eliot's text, we must come to terms with how desire structures this reality; if we are to grasp how the novel deals with the economies of its historical moment, we would profit from seeing it in the terms of Bataille's general and restricted economies. The dynamic nature of desire in Eliot's text requires this multivalent philosophical lens: one which historically influences her work and one which she greatly anticipates.

While he was speaking there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other – and the light seemed to be the terror of a hopeless love. Dorothea darted instantaneously from the window; Will followed her, seizing her hand with a *spasmodic* movement; and so they stood, with their hands clasped, *like two children* looking out on the storm, while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them, and the rain began to pour down. Then they turned their faces towards each other, with the memory of his last words in them, and they did not loose each other's hands.¹

Bodily desire in nineteenth-century literature is largely implied rather than explicitly enunciated. In her novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72), however, George Eliot appears to be working through a theorisation of desire that separates bodily desire from its expected scandal-marked plot lines. Rather, she showcases its social value and personal importance. This is not the bodily desire in Eliot's early work that leads to Hetty Sorrel's illegitimate pregnancy in *Adam Bede* (1859), nor is it the hinted-at desire that the rehabilitated Janet harbours for the Reverend Mr Tryan in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). To illustrate her literary experiment, this paper is a case study of

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. by Bert G. Hornback (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 498 (emphasis mine). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Eliot's grappling with the expression of bodily desire in this late-career novel. I focus particularly on the interaction between Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw in the library at Lowick, a scene that best lends itself to a dynamic representative reading of desire's function in Eliot's work. I will be drawing on the philosophies of desire in the work of Georges Bataille and Georg W.F. Hegel. Even though these philosophies converge within this text, each serves a different function for an understanding of character motive throughout the novel. Eliot, along with her lover and intellectual partner George Henry Lewes, shared an ardent interest in German philosophy and literature, and the couple travelled extensively throughout Germany. Much of Lewes's own philosophical writing speaks to the work of German and French philosophers such as Hegel, Comte, Herder, Schelling and others. Eliot's own writing career began with translating German texts into English, her first project being a translation of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846). She also actively read and commented on the work of Ludwig Feuerbach and Auguste Comte.

Even though this is an exploratory argument that privileges Hegel for historical reasons, Bataille necessarily complicates the way I see Hegel working in Eliot's narrative. The intellectual alliance that I am establishing between Bataille and Eliot shows crucial elements of desire that unfold throughout the text that a Hegelian reading alone cannot wholly account for. The desire is there, and Bataille and Hegel generate a dynamic understanding of its function within Eliot's text. This study of *Middlemarch* is not a mere exercise in theoretical application. This text specifically and deliberately matters. Eliot's exposure and subsequent influence from Hegel makes sense; however, I argue that her own critical thought and philosophy extends well beyond Hegel. Eliot discovered another facet of desire worthy of exploration in its Victorian context, and this facet is a constitutive one for the entire literary fabric and narrative momentum of *Middlemarch*. Her discovery, I assert, is articulated theoretically in Bataille's work, in which he both directly and indirectly responds to Hegel's theories on Absolute Knowledge and desire.² Anticipating Bataille's work, Eliot herself complicates the philosophical Hegelian foundation on which perceived human desire rests as she creates a literary space that offers alternative ways of conceiving bodily desire in nineteenth-century England.

First Looks Into the Library

Before fully offering my reading of the lightning bolt scene in Lowick, I want to show how desire within this library has previously been interpreted. Though these other readings provide insight only into a portion of what I deem to be Eliot's deeply social and psychological text, they do function as a means to further complicate the

² See Georges Bataille, 'Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice', in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 279-95.

stakes of the relationship between Dorothea and Ladislav. In ‘An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice’ David Kurnick places Dorothea in the role of the restless and perpetually desirous novel-reader. Kurnick argues that *Middlemarch*, as a novel about English society, shows how Dorothea as the heroine is also trying to become the reader of the novel itself. Kurnick labels ‘the fraught relationship between novelistic eroticism and social understanding’ as promoting ‘incompatibility between knowledge and desire’.³ He reads the library scene for Dorothea as her struggle to understand and make sense of her own desire. The bolt of lightning is her reminder of what has passed in Rome on her honeymoon, the memory of which haunts her because of her ‘unappeasable desire’.⁴ By equating Dorothea with the hungry reader of novels, Kurnick sets up a frame for a desire for knowledge, but this needs to be pushed further still. Where Kurnick suggests a gap between desire and knowledge, I want to show how Dorothea fuses her desire with knowledge. This does not, of course, always work in her favour, evidenced in her first failed marriage to Casaubon and his damning *Key to All Mythologies*. Dorothea must play around, trial-and-error style, to discover the ideal fusion between the two. Eliot shows how in the climactic scene of desire, Dorothea sees the face of Ladislav, and their dialogue becomes a discussion of the whys and why-nots regarding the possibility of a marriage between them. Despite their shared desire for one another, they can and do engage in a conversation that is not wholly blind to the true knowledge and reality of their unusual situation; shared desire dovetails with shared knowledge.

In an economic approach to the text, Anna Kornbluh’s ‘The Economic Problem of Sympathy: Parabasis, Interest, and Realist Form in *Middlemarch*’ posits a different type of opposition. Similar to Kurnick’s desire/knowledge binary, Kornbluh’s split between personal passion and social good overlooks Eliot’s move to erase the issue behind Dorothea’s choice to be with Ladislav. Kornbluh considers Dorothea’s ardent nature regarding reform and philanthropy as inconsistent with her more private passion for Ladislav. Kornbluh argues that ‘choosing Will means withdrawing from philanthropy’.⁵ She reads the clasping of hands between Dorothea and Ladislav as a ‘spasmodic, radiating, political economy-sanctioned merger’ that ‘hushes her [Dorothea’s] economic critiques and stoppers her philanthropic restitution’.⁶ The lightning bolt is not something to be carnally understood in Kornbluh’s argument; rather it is an aesthetic manifestation of personal fulfillment, rather than of any social good. However, I argue that Eliot is instead carefully setting up Dorothea to occupy a

³ David Kurnick, ‘An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice’, *ELH*, 74 (2007), 583-608 (pp. 584-85).

⁴ Kurnick, ‘An Erotics of Detachment’, p. 598.

⁵ Anna Kornbluh, ‘The Economic Problem of Sympathy: Parabasis, Interest, and Realist Form in *Middlemarch*’, *ELH*, 77 (2010), pp. 941-67 (pp. 961-62).

⁶ Kornbluh, ‘The Economic Problem of Sympathy’, p. 962.

position that will allow her to satisfy both a personal and social good. Her desire to be philanthropic realises itself in a more personalised desire (for Ladislav). Kornbluh's reading preserves the gap between the personal and the social, which I argue Eliot is consciously trying to bridge through the relationship between Dorothea and Ladislav. Granted, Eliot's resolution comes as a delayed gratification. Ladislav does not become a Member of Parliament until the novel's finale. This occupational change facilitates Dorothea's philanthropic efforts; as his wife, she is presented with the opportunity to promote social good. By insisting on bodily desire and mutuality, Dorothea seeks a relationship that departs from the Victorian stereotype of the domestic wife.

If Kornbluh neglects the body in favour of a political-economic allegory, Gillian Alban does account for the physicality of desire, but not fully. Alban focuses on the rush of blood flooding the face as a result of a recognised gaze, locating the libido within the blush and describing it as a 'metonymously displaced orgasm'.⁷ Significantly, Alban's account shows that reciprocal blushes happen between Dorothea and Ladislav, while the blushes that Casaubon evokes in Dorothea are one-sided. Alban does not, however, spend much time reading the scene in the Lowick library; she glosses over this bolt of lightning and the opportunity to realise the more intensely physical response is missed in favour of the more chaste dialectic of blushes. Alban's signaling towards the idea of 'displaced orgasms' in Eliot's work at large buttresses the more specific reading of the implied orgasm that I am uncovering in the culmination of desire in Lowick.

These alternative readings of the library scene all appear to be skirting around a similar gap: one that seeks to read Eliot's heroine as a desiring character perpetually in flux between, broadly construed, the private and the public. In providing my own corrective to these readings, I draw on Hegel and Bataille, the former insofar as he informs Eliot's developing philosophical thinking, and the latter as a means to show how Eliot actively began to see beyond her philosophical foundations. Both are necessary for understanding what Eliot is doing through Dorothea, particularly how each theorises the notion of Absolute. Where Hegel establishes that there is an Absolute to be ardently sought after, Bataille dismisses this goal as a wholly futile endeavour. It is this philosophical divergence over Absolutes that forms the basis for my own reading of the scene at Lowick.

The Men Themselves: Hegel and Bataille

Hegelian desire is intimately linked with the development of self-consciousness, which in turn is a constitutive element of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807),

⁷ Gillian Alban, 'From the Erotic Blush to the Petrifying Medusa Gaze in George Eliot's Novels', *Victorian Newsletter*, 118 (2010), 67-86 (p. 67).

the articulated journey towards Absolute Knowledge. While I realise Hegel does not explicitly name or label desire until the section on Self-Consciousness in the *PhG*, I want to show how he implicitly postulates desire's role earlier than the transition point of becoming a recognised self-consciousness.⁸ This early evidence of desire in the *PhG* occurs as Hegel considers general negation:

The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. The Now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is *not* Night; equally, it preserves itself in face of the Day that it now is, as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general. This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, viz. Day and Night, is *not*.⁹

The mediated existence of the self-preserving Now has a dependence on an other (not-Now). Preservation happens in negation. I want to suggest that this Now/not-Now dynamic gestures towards the 'struggle' later seen as desire fully manifests itself as self-consciousness. I do not want to suggest that the dialectical movement toward self-consciousness is also a dialectical movement towards desire. The groundwork for a functioning desire is already a part of the phenomenological argument, implicitly, before the transition. However, desire emerges explicitly as essential in order for consciousness to move to self-consciousness.

Desire is a necessity because Hegel shows it to be such. Hegel illustrates how self-consciousness can only be understood insofar as it is desire for recognition from another, working its way from abstraction as a self-consciousness existing merely for itself. The inherently reproducible nature of desire and the negative relationship to an other is the only way self-consciousness may eventually begin to desire recognition in an other that shows itself to be its equal. The self-awareness of self-consciousness occurs through a negative relationship with the object. Hegel's emphasis on the importance of experience for the awareness of self-consciousness relies first on there being a desire that propels the abstract self-consciousness out into the world to seek an other. 'Self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well'.¹⁰ At first, this other will itself be an object, not another self-consciousness. However, as Hegel stresses, the eventual turn of desire for recognition of another self-consciousness rather than just a general violent cycle of consumption

⁸ For the remainder of my paper, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* will be referred to as *PhG*.

⁹ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 96.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 175.

of an object validates desire's position within the *PhG*.

It seems that only the principal moment itself has been lost, viz. the *simple self-subsistent existence* for consciousness. But in point of fact self-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially the return from *otherness*. As self-consciousness, it is movement; but since what it distinguishes from itself is *only itself as itself*, the difference, as an otherness, is *immediately superseded* for it; the difference *is not*, and it [self-consciousness] is only the motionless tautology of: 'I am I'; but since for it the difference does not have the form of *being*, it is not self-consciousness. Hence otherness is for it in the form of a *being*, or as a *distinct moment*; but there is also for consciousness the unity of itself with this difference as a *second distinct moment*.¹¹

Hegel notes that 'with that first moment, self-consciousness is in the form of *consciousness*'.¹² However, the first moment needs to be considered along with the second moment in order for 'the whole expanse of the sensuous world [to be] preserved for it', since the second moment entails 'the unity of self-consciousness with itself'.¹³ The aforementioned sensuous world is only an appearance and self-consciousness becomes fueled by desire to demolish and consume it in the effort to truly feel the unity with the pre-self-conscious consciousness.

This rhetoric of demolition and consumption for the sake of self-consciousness is ultimately what makes a privileging of the Hegelian dialectic in *Middlemarch* necessary. The dialectic resolves itself with the happy formation of two self-consciousnesses that retain the knowledge of the pre-self-consciousnesses that were allegedly demolished for their purposes. Death by consumption becomes a realisation of Life and it is through the support and development of desire that this is made possible.

Providing the necessary groundwork for establishing the preoccupation with self-consciousness that pervades Eliot's work, Hegel brings us to the point where we must further inquire about what else matters in this process of self-consciousness formation *vis-à-vis* an other outside of itself. To take this next step, Bataille, utilising desire's relationship with consumption offers the crucial link between self-consciousness and his theoretical notion of economies of the self. A restricted economy is Bataille's idea of a system of production and exchange with utilitarian ends. Any and all actions and resources are used efficiently in order to meet a particular, necessary goal (usually one related to an appropriate maintenance of life's basic sustenance). A general economy, on the other hand, is unproductive and relies

¹¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

¹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

on needless expenditure and waste. The most basic underpinning of Bataille's general economy is the fact that 'neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of excess'.¹⁴ Excess is necessary for growth, but a society running solely on excess would be ruinous. How desire is handled becomes a determining factor in which of the two economies is produced. The Bataillean conception of desire resonates deeply with the Hegelian conception of self-consciousness:

The desire of the senses is the desire, if not to destroy oneself, at least to be consumed and to lose oneself without reservation. Now, the object of my desire does not truly respond to it except on one condition: that I awaken in it a desire equal to mine. Love in its essence is so clearly the coincidence of two desires that there is nothing more meaningful in love, even in the purest love. But the other's desire is desirable insofar as it is not known as a profane object is, from the outside.¹⁵

The way I read Eliot's text hinges on this co-existence of desires. What Hegel calls mutual recognition and the formation of two equal self-consciousnesses, Bataille calls Love. Even so, there is the shared idea that the sides must be equal in order for the process involving desire to be complete. I want to stress Bataille's comment that this dovetailing of desires happens 'without reservation'; this is not something highly restricted or regulated; this lack of reservation is needed and it becomes a stipulation in and of itself. Bataille's insistence that a general economy is necessary for the existence of life and society implicitly raises the question of the significance of death.¹⁶ Death is certainly a version of expenditure, and the Bataillean idea of sacrifice shows how death lends itself to consumption (sacrifice seen as a gift for the taking, rather than an act of sheer waste). This sort of rhetoric plays an important role in the key transition point for self-consciousness in Hegel's *PhG*. The way desire works in the development of Bataille's two economies also serves, significantly, as an illustration of the way Hegel and Bataille diverge on the point of Absolute Knowledge. Bataille maintains that 'to speak about the absolute: an ignoble phrase, an inhuman term! Something you would imagine ghosts longing for.'¹⁷ Seeking absolutes should not be what drives the desiring questioner (and seeking the absolute,

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 188.

¹⁵ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 265.

¹⁶ See Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious', in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 671-702. In his seminar, Lacan articulates the 'being of non-being' whereby the subject 'I' is constituted as existing because of death – 'death sustains existence'. We know we exist because we can (and will) die.

¹⁷ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 96.

in the form of the *Key to All Mythologies*, is what eventually kills Casaubon). It is on this point of absolutes that Bataille lingers over the language of violence and implicitly harnesses Hegel's assertion that desire is inherently reproducible. Bataille believes that 'the questioning of all things resulted from the exasperation of a desire' and thus, 'questioning without desire' (seeking knowledge without the drive of desire) is a questioning that has no value, no importance.¹⁸ This 'exasperation of desire' implies an intensified condition, marked even with a (violent) passion.¹⁹ This intensification is a form of excess, a feature of the general economy. Bataille's vehement response against the absolute suggests that the process of questioning, a process backed and driven by a reproducible desire, is more valuable than the arrival at a definitive, intended answer. Under these terms, then, I argue that Eliot accounts for both treatments of the Absolute, coming out in favour of the Bataillean one, where Dorothea is quite far from being a ghost; she is a physical body with burning questions (results from her exasperated desire), seeking human interaction in order to even begin the process of answering them.

Self-Consciousness and Missed Climax in the Hegelian Paradigm

Ladislaw's figurative penetration of Dorothea in her late husband's library at Lowick during a storm is the ultimate giving way of reason to passion, a true indulgence in the needless expenditure that a natural phenomenon makes possible. This resonates with Bataille's idea of Inner Experience, which he describes as a moment of 'non-knowledge'; the moment of reaching the outermost boundary or limit of what is possible to have familiarity with in one's consciousness.²⁰ It is a point beyond ecstasy that is nearly painful because of its unknowable exteriority to the self. Keeping this in mind along with the development/creation of a rupture, this moment when the flash of lightning coincides with the physical clasping of hands is the ideal instant or moment. Theorising about laughter, Bataille states:

The main thing is the moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another in a feeling of magical subversion. You encounter this same feeling in tears. On another level, to look at each other and laugh can be a type of erotic relation (in this case, rupture has been produced by the development of intimacy in lovemaking). In a general way, what comes into play in physical or psychological eroticism is the same feeling of 'magical subversion'

¹⁸ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 112.

¹⁹ See the *Oxford English Dictionary*: exasperation (1) increase of violence or malignity; (2) intense provocation; (3) exasperated feeling, violent passion or anger, <<http://www.oed.com/>> [accessed 20.02.13].

²⁰ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 84.

associated with one person slipping into another.²¹

In the lightning bolt scene, it is significant that the handclasp is akin to that of two children, as if the ruptive laugh could be possible. At the same time, the looming prospect of the 'terror of hopeless love' suggests what Bataille says of inner experience and its encounter with anguish: the instant, ideal moment's direct relationship with trauma. However, to strip this scene of its multivalent suggestions and read it strictly as a Bataillean embrace would be to severely disregard the subtleties of Eliot's prose. The flash causes Dorothea to move instinctively away from the window, as if she must protect herself from the penetrative bolt. In his pursuit of her, Ladislav's seizure of her hand happens in an erratic 'spasmodic' fashion. Their bodies move separately at first, before this handclasp, but the movements occur as if without conscious and deliberate thought from either party. The potentiality of the shared orgasm presents itself before they turn to face one another and engage in that activity of recognition. What Bataille calls the magical subversion of one subject slipping into the other, I call the Hegelian self-consciousness recognising itself in another self-consciousness.

Hegel states in the *PhG* that 'self-consciousness is Desire in general'.²² Hegel tells us: 'But *for us*, or *in itself*, the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element has, on its side, returned into itself, just as on the other side consciousness has done. Through this reflection into itself the object has become Life'.²³ Returning to the idea that self-consciousness *is* desire, then, I want to consider the subject's relationship to the object as consciousness. Both the subject and the object are striving for equally independent (through one another) attainment of unity. However, self-consciousness is still mired in the stage of development where it considers itself to be completely *for itself*. Eventually, self-consciousness becomes divided where one self-consciousness recognises itself by way of another self-consciousness. Dorothea and Ladislav stop existing for themselves in isolation in this moment: barriers break down in the flash, permitting Hegelian recognition.

Similar to what I read as the implicit existence of desire throughout the *PhG* before the moment of self-conscious recognition, this lightning bolt of electricity is foreshadowed in the novel. In the first book of *Middlemarch*, when we are just meeting Dorothea, her uncle brings her religious pamphlets while she is in her own home library at Tipton Grange:

It seemed as if an *electric stream* went through Dorothea, thrilling her from despair into expectation [...] when he [Dorothea's uncle] re-entered the library, he found Dorothea seated and already deep in one of the pamphlets which had

²¹ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 61.

²² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 168.

some marginal manuscript of Mr Casaubon's, taking it in as eagerly as she might have taken in the scent of a fresh bouquet after a dry, hot, dreary walk. (p. 25, emphasis mine)

The difference between this early occurrence and the one in the library at Lowick where passion comes to near climax lies in the projection of desire. In the Lowick scene, the desire is shuttled back and forth between Dorothea and Ladislaw, mutual recognition. In Tipton Grange, Dorothea's excited desire seems on the surface to be related to Casaubon. These are, after all, the pamphlets from *his* library and bear the markings of *his* pen. However, there is a disjunction here since Dorothea and Casaubon cannot and will not engage in a moment of recognition. Rather, Dorothea's building libidinous feelings are projected onto the pamphlets themselves and what they do for her.

At this point in the novel, she is in the early stages of the Hegelian dialectic where she is a self-consciousness existing for herself, but she is under the self-created illusion that she is relying on Casaubon for this happiness ignited within her. The 'dry, hot, dreary' rhetoric is suggestive of the aftermath of a sexual encounter, though it sounds more like a post-coital scenario that has not been the result of a truly pleasurable experience. It sounds, more particularly, like an experience that has been unproductively laborious (the 'dreary walk'), and lacking in sensual gratification (the body is left 'dry, hot' as opposed to calm and moist from a build-up of shared perspiration). The satisfaction Dorothea derives for herself comes from her solo-interaction with the pamphlets, rather than a human-to-human interaction with Casaubon. But what sort of sexual encounter happens when one is alone with literature that solicits excitement? Dorothea's moment of autoerotic reading must happen in the library, serving as the foreshadowing of the next sexual encounter in a library that will not be performed single-handedly. That this future encounter will happen with Ladislaw and not Casaubon is further hinted at in the museum in Rome. Dorothea is highly susceptible to the alien aesthetic that she witnesses in Rome: 'Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present [...] all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual [...] at first jarred her as with an electric shock' (p. 124). Ladislaw is the only other character described as experiencing this electric shock, which occurs in the library at Tipton Grange during a meeting with Dorothea's uncle: 'When Mrs Casaubon was announced he started up as from an electric shock, and felt a tingling at his finger-ends [...] Dorothea's entrance was the freshness of morning' (pp. 241-42). There is a noticeable change in his complexion in light of this freshness, similar to the change in Dorothea in her metaphorical imbibing of the aforementioned 'scent of a fresh bouquet' made manifest in the religious pamphlets.

Further evidence that Casaubon cannot be the self-consciousness through which Dorothea recognises herself is seen through his inability to pull himself out of

the intellectually constraining mire that is his *Key to All Mythologies*. He is closed off from the moment of genuine self-consciousness through another self-consciousness. His isolation is not broken because of a desire rooted in physical and psychological passion, but rather, he operates through drive, a drive that is ‘formal, immaterial’, in order to preserve his intellectual labour.²⁴

She [Dorothea] could understand well enough now why her husband had come to cling to her, as possibly the only hope left that his labours would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world. At first it had seemed that he wished to keep even her aloof from any close knowledge of what he was doing; but gradually the *terrible stringency of human need* – (p. 297, emphasis mine)

This is a call for necessity and not a genuine display of desire. The acquisition and application of knowledge is Dorothea’s true desire; however, it is initially sought in a restricted marriage. Dorothea’s first spouse is chosen because of a desire that is actually incompatible with the marriage itself.

Despite the prevailing power of the Hegelian dialectic in *Middlemarch*, Bataille provides the language with which to analyse the reworked and reframed pathology of desire that Eliot stages. His very definition of desire relies on an act of consumption, if not one of destruction, by another active desire. Thus, Eliot’s text raises provocative questions about who is having sex in *Middlemarch*, or, in Bataille’s parlance, who is sensuously desiring one another in the text. These questions carry a heavier weight under the reconsideration of the link between death and sex. In the lightning bolt scene, Dorothea and Ladislav do not have intercourse, but the suspended moment of autoerotic orgasm is tantamount to a promise of their eventual union where intercourse will take place. However, what happens to Dorothea once she is in a palpable sexual union with Ladislav? She is forced to answer her sister Celia’s plea: ‘And then there are all your plans! You never can have thought of that [...] you might have gone on all your life doing what you liked’ (p. 505). Is sex, then, the death of Dorothea the English provincial reformer? This question forces my hand to signal caution. Broader schools of criticism would have it that this is an instance of a classic moment of the public/private space divide that preoccupied Victorian society. I argue, however, that this is Dorothea’s second marriage of her own choosing; she does not allow herself to become the unrecognised self-consciousness that she was before. Rather, she reformulates her plans in light of this new union and still manages to make herself useful. ‘Doing what [she] liked’ would come at the sacrifice of recognition, and thus, voiding desire in general.

²⁴ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 112. Bataille uses the language ‘formal, immaterial’ to describe what it means to seek knowledge without a backing desire. This is the type of failed questioning that Casaubon executes in his work.

Dorothea's continual leanings towards the pursuit of the general economy are reconstituted in a happy life within the chaste, appropriate restricted economy in the English provincial landscape.

A Conclusion with a Foil

Though Dorothea ultimately puts herself into the social role that keeps faith with the tenets of a restricted economy, she has desire-based aberrations that indicate an inclination towards a general economy. Where do these aberrations occur in the text and why do they matter? In the introductory pages of *Middlemarch*, Eliot gestures towards Dorothea's inclination towards a general economy through an examination of her marital views: 'Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very *childlike* ideas about marriage' (p. 7, emphasis mine). This is not the only time something Dorothea does or believes is described as 'childlike', that fateful clasping of hands with Ladislav in Lowick is also described as such. Eliot appears to use 'childlike' as a means for indirectly defining what English provincial society in the nineteenth century sees as an appropriate approach to marriage. Desiring fulfillment through knowledge that extends beyond Miss Lemon's school, where a young woman can even learn how to properly get in and out of a carriage, is deemed an infantile outlook on reality. Eliot-the-Realist of course does not believe this, but to portray society otherwise would be to misrepresent the norms of provincial Victorian England. I argue, however, that her use of 'childlike' carries more significant meaning. Children begin to learn about society through physical contact and basic trial-and-error, rather than through verbal abstractions. The physical, then, is the medium through which children may first gain knowledge of the world. Eliot's heroine's identification with the childlike knowledge of a marital relationship implies an important level of physicality; Dorothea seeks a more concrete, empirical way of understanding. In this way, she fulfills what Bataille conceives as the child's responsibility to be childish.²⁵ Childishness, he argues, is not merely a passing whimsical stage on the way to adulthood, but rather, a true necessity; a necessity because, in order to be a child, 'one must know that the serious exists'. Childishness is what allows for man's growing awareness that life must have space for both pleasure and pain.²⁶

Dorothea's foil, Rosamond Vincy, appears at the outset to be the more physically desiring character in the novel, embracing the general economy in all its expansive glory. However, her desire is problematic as she continually operates under the mentality of a single self-consciousness. Eliot as omniscient narrator prematurely laments what she knows will be the failed union between Rosamond and Lydgate:

²⁵ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 72.

²⁶ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 75.

‘Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing’ (p. 106). There is no space available for one self-consciousness to recognise another self-consciousness: this is a marriage predisposed to failure. Rosamond’s stagnancy within the Hegelian dialectic bars her from ever obtaining recognition:

For Rosamond, though she would never do anything that was disagreeable to *her*, was industrious; and now more than ever she was active in sketching *her* landscapes and market-carts and portraits of friends, in practising *her* music, and in being from morning till night *her* own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness, with sometimes the not unwelcome addition of a more variable external audience in the numerous visitors of the house. (p. 107, emphasis mine)

This one-sided way of living resonates with Bataille’s asserted belief that ‘there is no meaning for a lone individual [...] if I wish my life to have meaning for me, it is necessary that it have meaning for others; no one would dare give to life a meaning which he alone would perceive’.²⁷ This is exactly what Rosamond is inherently pushing against in her conception of her own life. Rosamond cannot be read as truly ‘a lone individual’, however, because she does wield an ample amount of influence and she depends on the audience for the perfection of her own consciousness, even if she does not reciprocate this recognition satisfactorily.

Rosamond does not exist within a vacuum: men suffer under her succubus-like power. Lydgate’s desire would be realised in Dorothea, but he submits to the general economy insofar as it exists in the sexualised Rosamond. Their marriage, however, still falls in line with that of a restricted economy as it is a union that subscribes to the ebb-and-flow of Middlemarch society. I asked the question before ‘who is having sex in *Middlemarch*?’ and therefore who dies because of it? Lydgate is left for dead: ‘He once called her [Rosamond] his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains’ (p. 513).²⁸ If *Middlemarch* is to be read as a novel that ends with marriages within the restricted economy, it is important to recognise that this theorisation of desire I have just unpacked shows that marriages participating in a restricted economy are not of the same cloth. Eliot’s developing theorisations of desire that

²⁷ Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 73.

²⁸ See John Keats’s ‘Isabella; or The Pot of Basil’ (1820), Keats’ narrative poem based on Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Lorenzo is in love with Isabella, but her brothers do not approve of the match and murder him. Inspired by a spirit to find Lorenzo’s forest burial place, Isabella retrieves his head and places it in a garden-pot, covering it with basil, which she waters with her tears. Her brothers steal the plant and she dies from pining away for her basil-pot, which held her soul’s sustenance.

anticipate Bataille's highlight the overlapping features of the marriages and relationships in Middlemarch society. Eliot's ending that subscribes to the wished-for Victorian novel ending does not fully discount the import of bodily desire that takes place throughout the text. That moment of physicality at Lowick is necessary for the Hegelian dialectic to resolve itself in its particular way, providing the means for understanding how desire and sex within the restricted economy can be ideally reconciled with the existence of two lives in mutual recognition of each other without the fear of death.

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