



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Discerning Syntax: George Eliot's Relative Clauses

Sarah Allison

ELH, Volume 81, Number 4, Winter 2014, pp. 1275-1297 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2014.0041>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/562931>

## DISCERNING SYNTAX: GEORGE ELIOT'S RELATIVE CLAUSES

BY SARAH ALLISON

“Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress.”<sup>1</sup> The first sentence of *Middlemarch* posits at once a character called Miss Brooke and a distinct type of beauty. It makes a claim about the story by referring to—and thereby creating—a concept from the world outside the story. This sentence shifts from the narrative past tense to a universalizing present by means of the relative pronoun *which*. This odd grammatical construction is not an anomaly, but recurs throughout *Middlemarch*—about 129 times, roughly as often as the suggestive word “possible.” This clause form pulls together two major features of mid-nineteenth-century style that signal very different literary trends: the present-tense statement and the expansive modifying clause. Present-tense statements generalize fictional particulars, often in order to make a direct appeal to readerly sympathy; long modifying clauses elaborate on fictional particulars, signaling a realist mode of detailed, critical observation. Both features are particularly striking in George Eliot, and the sentences that bind them together reproduce, in miniature, a key tension in her work between sympathy and critical observation. I call the “which” clause that shifts a sentence from past to present tense a commentative clause, and it is the subject of this article. D. A. Miller characterizes the mother-voice of Eliot’s narrative as “all-knowing, all-understanding, and all-forgiving.”<sup>2</sup> Commentative clauses work toward “knowing” and “understanding” but don’t quite get to the “forgiving.” At the level of the sentence, *Middlemarch* exhibits a pattern of sharp conceptual discrimination that is at odds with the larger trajectory toward sympathy that critics have long understood to shape its plot.<sup>3</sup>

My inquiry here is part of a renewed critical interest in style in the novel exemplified by Miller’s recent work on Alfred Hitchcock and by Garrett Stewart’s *Novel Violence* (2009).<sup>4</sup> Both focus on the uniqueness of the instance of style: Miller considers “touches” in Hitchcock only perceptible at the level of “too-close reading” (“little particulars that, while demonstrably *meant*, never strike us as deeply meaningful”) while Stewart focuses on how style creates meaning through the

particularity, the texture of emplotted words on a page.<sup>5</sup> I consider individual sentences, remarkably particular taken singly, as part of a syntactic pattern that recurs across a novel. This approach reveals how common grammatical structures can be put to new use in a fictional context. That is, relative clauses often modify head nouns, but the relative clause structure I discuss here also pins discourse to story.

By pairing the first glimpse of a major character with a conceptual reflection on the kind of beauty she has, *Middlemarch* models a process of seeing. The point of the novel's first sentence is not simply to describe which kind of beauty Dorothea possesses, but to integrate reflection into narrative presentation. Much contemporary criticism around the ethical work novels do considers reading as a relation between the reader and either the characters or narrator; I propose that there is also an ethics of syntax operating at the level of the clause. Instead of promoting specific values, these clauses inscribe a process of making judgments, and aim to educate the reader in methods of taking perspective on other people.

In the first line, the commentative clause imparts a generous amount of critical perception to the simple sentence, "Miss Brooke had beauty." The cautious "seems" captures the meticulous quality of description in *Middlemarch* more generally; it throws a hint of uncertainty into what is already a claim limited to the relative perception of a certain kind of beauty. Nevertheless, Dorothea's beauty does seem to glow, distinct, against her background. On examining these clauses as a group, I found that, while many of them were even more expansive than the novel's opening line, relatively few were so sympathetic. Elsewhere, the structure is more likely to delineate unflattering qualities, or to branch out from free indirect discourse to invoke platitudes. Some of the grossest platitudes in *Middlemarch* are obliquely attributed to Dorothea's foil, Tertius Lydgate, as in this triple-scoop of modifying clauses: "Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of happy beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys" (*M*, 164). This "sort of happy beauty" is a parody of Dorothea's, and the structural echo between the narrator's penetrating observation and the character's unreflective conventionality illustrates the difficulty of generalizing wisely in Eliot's texts. In many accounts of the novel, the key narrative arc is Dorothea's growing awareness of other people's pain; here, I focus on Lydgate's growing awareness of his wife's limitations.

My reading of the novel thus takes up the challenge to understand *Middlemarch* in terms of R. H. Hutton's 1872 review, that the novel is "not only a sketch of country life, connected by a story, but a running fire of criticism as well."<sup>6</sup> The first part of this essay examines past-present hybrid sentences in *Middlemarch* to argue that the most valuable part of the "running fire" of criticism resides not in the keen observations it offers, but in the way those observations are woven into the story. Rather than seeing the text as a third-person realist narrative, written in the past tense and occasionally disrupted by the figure of a sage speaking in the present tense, we should understand commentary as an essential element of the *Middlemarch* narrative texture.

The second part of this article considers how Eliot's essays and novels are shot through with generalizing statements about the importance of considering specific circumstances—maxims against maxims. I argue here that the commentative clause is Eliot's modern, novelized adaptation of the maxim. By looking closely at a pattern of embedded maxims, relative clauses written in the present tense, and the use of relative clauses in free indirect discourse, I suggest that Eliot imports to the novel an essayistic pattern of modifying key nouns. By using fictional circumstances to qualify generalizing claims, she creates highly specific and context-dependent maxims suited to the novel. Finally, I trace the commentative clause through the case of the character most closely associated with it: Tertius Lydgate. The appearances of this clause in Lydgate's free indirect discourse suggest that it—and the mode of perception it embodies—at once contributes to his growing understanding and signals the development of his character. Too often the scale of the Victorian novel makes it seem that plot is the only way to do justice to its structure. Here, I argue that local-level reading for variations in recurring patterns can make central elements of the novel newly visible to us.

\*\*\*\*\*

Present-tense generalizations in this novel are very often tempered by the use of a past-tense narrative statement. I know this because I have counted them, or at least those occurring in a survey of every third sentence in the novel (4400 sentences).<sup>7</sup> Tense is everything in the interpretation of fictional statements: Jonathan Culler calls it a "basic convention of literature" that all sentences not produced by characters are true; he follows Félix Martínez-Bonati in excepting the category of moral opinions, generalizations, and affirmations from

this convention.<sup>8</sup> Martínez-Bonati writes that “[t]hese affirmations . . . are not privileged, like the mimetic ones; they are the narrator’s own opinions and ideas. . . . [There is] no need to give them a feigned credence in order to experience the full sense of the narrative.”<sup>9</sup> Such skepticism is problematic in a book like *Middlemarch*. To say that we need not accept the paradigmatic statements of Marian Evans Lewes is fair enough, but the narrator’s opinions are central to the “full sense” of the narrative of *Middlemarch*, particularly insofar as the moral traits of the characters drive its plot.

Textual linguist Harald Weinrich offers an alternative to twentieth-century skepticism about the statements of a potentially unreliable narrator by linking narrative tense to generic discourse rather than fictional truth.<sup>10</sup> For Weinrich, *tempus*, or tense, indicates the mode of discourse rather than the time of utterance, and makes the difference between the *besprochene Welt*, or “commented world,” and the *erzählte Welt*, or “narrated world.” The dominant form of “commented world” writing is the persuasive essay. Since *Middlemarch* understands itself to do the work of the essay as well as of fiction, this is a useful way to approach its hybrid sentences.

Sentences that graft commentary onto narrative occur far more often than readers have previously noticed. The commentative clause makes it possible to discuss style without relying solely on shared readerly impressions; for example, my commentative clause is Hutton’s “running fire.” I connect the intuitive effects texts have produced on readers to specific patterns in style. This process also makes it possible to trace structural, rather than simply semantic patterns across texts, and opens an avenue of attention to the form of the sentence.

The unit of the sentence is primarily a written phenomenon: the *Longman’s Grammar of Spoken and Written English* prefers the term “independent clause” to “sentence” because “it is difficult to give a good linguistic definition of a sentence which applies equally well to writing and to spontaneous speech.”<sup>11</sup> Written, the sentence can (technically) be endlessly modified. As a subordinate clause, the commentative clause is more subtle than early nineteenth-century declarative precepts; as a relative clause in a realist novel, it modifies nouns according to situationally-specific traits. The final characteristic of this body of evidence is that the commentative clause works in a number of ways, some of them flatly contradictory. The pattern sometimes establishes new, complex truisms (“The Vicar’s [frankness] seemed not of the repulsive sort that comes from an uneasy consciousness seeking to forestall the judgment of others, but simply the relief of a

desire to do with as little pretence as possible" [M, 172]) and at other times invokes received ideas ironically ("that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music" [M, 164] and so on). In narrative commentary, its insight is sharp; in free indirect discourse, it indulges in cliché. The habit of modifying key nouns that brings these sentences together demonstrates how critical concepts might shape our ethical perception of others.

In his 1872 anthology of Eliot's poetry and prose, Alexander Main labels his selections of first-person, present-tense declarations by poet and narrator as "George Eliot (*in propria persona*)."<sup>12</sup> His conflation of narrator and author is typical of the longstanding interpretive problem presented by passages written in the first- or second-person, and in the discursive present tense. It is suggestive for the present argument because it blurs the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in order to foreground the author, a central problem in the study of style.

Style is often understood either as part of a larger linguistic phenomenon, measurable and subject to historical change, or as the distinctive imprint of an individual's language, marked by incident, training, habit, and personality. I consider Eliot's commentative clauses to reflect both an idiosyncrasy of style, developed in part through her early years as a reviewer, and a continual reengagement with the tension between an impulse to generalize and an impulse to qualify generalizations. The idea of the narrator does not quite cover the hybrid sentences in this study, produced by an encounter between a moralist and a storyteller.<sup>13</sup>

The tension between these roles is evident in Hutton's later review for *The Spectator* on "George Eliot's Moral Anatomy," which describes the narrator's habit of expanding critically on character traits as

a speculative philosophy of character that always runs on in a parallel stream with her picture of character, sometimes adding to it an extraordinary fascination, sometimes seeming to distort it by a vein of needless and perhaps unjust suggestion. . . . One is conscious at times of taking part with her characters against the author, and of accusing her of availing herself unfairly of the privilege of author, by adding a trait that bears out her own *criticism* rather than her own imaginative conception.<sup>14</sup>

Hutton's "parallel stream" of speculative philosophy, like the "running fire of criticism" in his earlier review, figures the relation between commentary and narrative in this text in a way that pits the author as creator of a fictional world against the author as moralist or arbiter of that world. Writing over halfway through the publication in parts

of *Middlemarch*, Hutton finds himself tempted to take Rosamond's part; she is a favorite target of the commentative clause. My study is, in part, an examination of the mechanics of *Middlemarch*'s narrative effects on readers, and the commentative clauses about Rosamond seem to illustrate Hutton's argument. She is said to possess that "sort of cleverness which catches every tone except the humorous" (*M*, 159), "that mild persistence which, as we know, enables a white soft living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock" (*M*, 345), and, most ominously, "that victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy in impetuous resistance" (*M*, 585).<sup>15</sup> Hutton's claim that such comments "run on in a parallel stream" with the presentation of character, for good or ill, captures an important characteristic of the commentative clause: it attracts attention in spite of its subordinate grammatical position. The claim about Rosamond's obstinacy might have been phrased *There is a victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy*, or even *That obstinacy is victorious which never wastes its energy*. The subordinate structure emphasizes how this particular obstinacy is associated with a particular character in a particular situation. This is also true of Rosamond's "mild persistence," which is buried within a sentence that spends the majority of its words on Mr. Vincy. The passage explains why Rosamond will probably succeed in convincing her father to let her marry Lydgate:

Apart from his dinners and his coursing, Mr. Vincy, blustering as he was, had as little of his own way as if he had been a prime minister: the force of circumstances was easily too much for him, as it is for most pleasure-loving florid men; and the circumstance called Rosamond was particularly forcible by means of that mild persistence which, as we know, enables a white soft living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock. (*M*, 345)

Although the mild persistence is described in a subordinate clause, as if it were merely a digression, it is the final and most memorable part of the sentence. This odd effect is typical of the commentative clause, which can branch off from a major point and yet elaborate on a concept central to the novel's moral framework—here, Mr. Vincy's character is illuminated by a general reflection on "pleasure-loving florid men," which is, in turn, illustrated by an example from the novel, "the circumstance called Rosamond." The final comment about Rosamond as a "soft living substance" describes the trait of "mild persistence" as an active process. The conflict between character and destiny is a central theme in Eliot's work, and we might compare the treatment

of “circumstance” above to the discussion of character “history” in *The Mill on the Floss*:

But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. “Character,” says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms,—“character is destiny.” But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet’s having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms toward the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than knitting a reflection on character “history” into the world of the novel, the passage pans out to rewrite *Hamlet* in brief, from the German Romantic reading of his (speculative and irresolute) character to his habits of speech in the play (soliloquies and sarcasms). The crack at Novalis’s “questionable aphorism” reveals Eliot’s skepticism of pithy speech, just as “But not the whole of our destiny” exemplifies her own tendency to pithiness. The nineteenth-century critic A. C. Dicey wrote of Eliot’s treatment of Novalis that “*Middlemarch* might have been written to illustrate at once the truth of the dictum and of the criticism.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the extended meditation in *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch* writes a key reflection on character and destiny into a commentative clause. Rosamond’s destiny is determined, in part, by how her character acts on her father’s character: “Papa was not a rock: he had no other fixity than that fixity of alternating impulses sometimes called habit” (*M*, 345). The commentative clause moves fluently between individual traits and context to show how character shapes circumstance and circumstance shapes character.<sup>18</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

The fact that these carefully descriptive and darkly suggestive clauses are subordinate is one reason it is so difficult to make Eliot’s analytical style visible as style. Everyone agrees that Eliot’s prose is analytical, but it remains unclear where in the prose the analysis lives. David Carroll notes a pattern in overviews of Eliot’s fiction at the time of her death, which objected to “the philosopher clumsily tampering with the creations of the artist on the instructions of a preconceived theory.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet, as twentieth-century critics have observed, narrative interruptions diminish in Eliot's later novels. Carroll suggests that "these moral comments are frequently short and . . . their intrusiveness decreases as George Eliot's career progresses and she becomes more confident and economical in creating a tone of voice which is both sympathetic and ironic, toward both characters and readers."<sup>20</sup> Barbara Hardy observes of the commentary that, "in the later novels in particular, there are many details which are not directly commented on but are left to the reader to supply."<sup>21</sup> On the shift away from a personified narrator (philosophical asides like chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*) W. J. Harvey writes that "while [Eliot's use of the historic present] irritates considerably in *Adam Bede*, there are only two or three brief instances in *The Mill on the Floss* and I cannot recall one single instance in *Middlemarch*."<sup>22</sup> Susan S. Lanser breaks with this line of argument to argue that moralizing moments in Eliot do not so much disappear as change shape: there is a shift from maxims rendered contingent by comments like "I believe" or "I think" to maxims embedded in narrative paragraphs.<sup>23</sup> I take this a step further to point out that, especially in the later novels, maxims are rendered "contingent" by the very circumstances of the narrative in which they occur. Such embedded maxims fuse the narration of action and the ethical interpretation of action. The traits seem to follow from the narrative facts they describe, but they also influence the working of the story.

For example, Rosamond's victorious obstinacy describes her and shapes the development of the plot. In context, Rosamond successfully refuses to promise Lydgate not to go horseback riding with his cousin during her pregnancy; she goes horseback riding again and an accident leads to the loss of her pregnancy. The tendency of Rosamond's obstinacy to be "victorious" is as important to the development of the plot as her early rejection of Ned Plymdale. The commentative clause is not only contingent on a particular character, but on the particular circumstances of that character at a given moment. In another instance, a commentative clause describing Rosamond is not only peculiar to her, but is also defined against Dorothea. In the first meeting between the two characters, Dorothea puts out her hand with her "usual simple kindness," and the narrator calls attention to the "striking" contrast between the two women:

They were both tall, and their eyes were on a level; but imagine Rosamond's infantine blondness and wondrous crown of hair-plaits, with her pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker

could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar which it was to be hoped all beholders would know the price of, her small hands duly set off with rings, and that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity. (*M*, 432–33)

The bulk of the prose in this contrast describes only Rosamond. By contrast, Dorothea's "simplicity" is so perfect that it is merely an attribute of the "simple kindness" in the way she reaches out to Rosamond; Rosamond's "expensive substitute" requires its own gloss. The assertion of equal height, and a measure of evenness between the characters whose eyes are "on a level" shifts tone in an imperative to "imagine" a pile of satirical particulars that evoke, rather than describe (excepting the "wondrous crown" of braids and the blue dress) key elements of Rosamond's self-presentation, with an emphasis on the effects it is designed to have on others. The final clause, "that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity," changes the connotation of "expensive" from the cash value of Rosamond's collar to a dark hint at the novel's development through a commentative clause. In a sense, Dorothea's simplicity is here thrown into relief by rich dress. The essayist's habit of making highly specific, argumentative claims invests a realist representation of detail with moral significance.

By changing tenses midstream from narrative past to commentative present, the commentative clause helps create the running fire of criticism that contributes to the distinctive style of *Middlemarch*. *Middlemarch*, a novel deeply uncertain about the possibility of true empathy, is marked by a preference for explicit description over implicit knowledge. In Eliot, however, the distancing relative clause that describes context as if it were unfamiliar to the reader is often paired with a demonstrative "that," creating an opposing effect, as if the reader were already familiar with the thing described: *that* \_\_\_\_ which \_\_\_\_\_. Thus, the commentative clause gives conflicting grammatical clues about whether it is presenting new knowledge or gesturing toward old knowledge. Eliot's psychological and concrete details are extraordinarily precise because of the essayistic style in which they are presented.

The commentative clause is thus only rhetorically suggestive of shared experience, the element of Eliot's narrative voice emphasized by Isobel Armstrong, who argues that by "generalizing the unique experiences portrayed in her fictional world she enables the reader to enter into those experiences."<sup>24</sup> The very length of these expressions

attests to the difficulty and even the deliberateness required in order to construct sympathy. The reader's relationship to the experience of the characters is unstable and uncertain, for instance: "Will Ladislaw was in one of those tangled crises which are commoner in experience than one might imagine, from the shallow absoluteness of men's judgments" (*M*, 802). This sentence both invites recognition of "one of those tangled crises" and corrects what you think you recognize: that such things are "commoner in experience than one might imagine." The clause introduces a concept in the guise of merely pointing to one. The shift to the general, "one of those tangled crises," is also a shift to a more precise description of the situation. A sentence moving between a fictional particular and a generalization models a mode of reasoning in which it is possible to move back and forth between the general and the particular. The purpose of the commentary is to elaborate on the situation rather than to sum it up or draw a general conclusion about it.

Unlike the maxim that stands alone, the relative clause that articulates specific circumstances allows for a technically limitless modification of the referent. How much of sympathy is the dogged attempt to preserve an objective perspective on someone else's experience? How many words on a page does it take to describe, and then to begin to understand that experience? Under what circumstances is an idea like beauty modified by careful attention to the case at hand, and when is it modified by cliché into a type having dangerously little to do with that case? These questions are prompted by the language of commentative clauses, which is not only complex, but often also tortuous.

The habit of thought the commentative clause models is not simply to imagine oneself in someone else's shoes, but to draw sharp distinctions among ideas. Commentative clauses in *Middlemarch* are realized through a highly specific set of textual circumstances, and they are *long*. At one moment in chapter 65, Lydgate feels not simply helplessness, but "that half-maddening sense of helplessness which comes over passionate people when their passion is met by an innocent-looking silence whose meek victimized air seems to put them in the wrong, and at last infects even the justest indignation with a doubt of its justice" (*M*, 665). In Catherine Gallagher's 2005 essay on Eliot, she considers passages that, like the ones above, move between a fictional instance and a highly particularized generalization. Gallagher suggests that the "unusual category," a "class constructed just to accommodate random exceptions . . . might easily be read as a skeptical commentary on classification."<sup>25</sup> Indeed. I would also point out, however, that this

skepticism prompts a moment of generic resourcefulness, in which Eliot draws on the power of the modifying clause to bring concepts as close as possible to experience. The multiplication of modifying clauses suggests that the best attempts to understand the experience of other people are asymptotic, approaching full understanding in the knowledge that it remains unattainable.

\*\*\*\*\*

Eliot's commentative clauses constitute a form of novelized maxim that stems from her philosophical investment in the importance of qualified claims: they are a specific site in which tensions in her moral theory of art are registered in prose. The paradox of moral commentary in Eliot is that her prose is stylistically marked by aphorisms and semantically characterized by attacks on conventional wisdom. The maxim against the use of maxims also figures largely in accounts of moralizing in Eliot by Lanser and Leah Price, but both understand it to be Eliot's response to fluctuations in her cultural authority.<sup>26</sup> In the well-known maxim against maxims commenting on the character Nicholas Bulstrode, style reflects the narrator's claim to a moral authority circumscribed by its own watchful fastidiousness: "There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men" (*M*, 619). Just as the power of direct fellow-feeling checks the pernicious effects of general doctrine, the first, sweeping pronouncement ("There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality") is "checked" by the clause that follows ("the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men"). The very complexity of this maxim, in its many adjectival qualifications (*general* doctrine, *deep-seated* habit, *direct* fellow-feeling, *individual* fellow men) and its piling on of negatives (*no* doctrine, *not* capable, if *un-checked*) suggests not a faith in some power of "direct fellow-feeling" so much as the essayist's reliance on complex syntax in order to communicate ideas. The admonitory maxim is both authorized and undercut by its scrupulous, halting style.

Eliot's first major experiment with creating novelistic maxims by adding qualifications and embedding them in the context of a story occurs in a narrative aside from *The Mill on the Floss*. Though the best-known maxim against maxims is often quoted simply as "All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the man of maxims," this phrase is slightly less than a quarter of the total

words in its sentence. A maxim is the kind of proposition that might begin with the words “All people,” yet what begins as an unqualified claim is immediately circumscribed to include only “people of broad, strong sense”—a statement that invites the reader to identify without actually including him or her. This claim is made—and should be understood—in the context of a discussion of casuistry, “that part of Ethics which resolves cases of conscience, applying the general rules of religion and morality to particular instances in which ‘circumstances alter cases’, or in which there appears to be a conflict of duties.”<sup>27</sup> In the passage below, I give the maxim I quoted in its context, as only part of a longer statement.

The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question, whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master-key that will fit all cases. The casuists have become a byword of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed,—the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.

All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims, because such people discern early that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy.<sup>28</sup>

The structure of the passage quoted above mirrors its content: moral judgments must be false and hollow *unless* they are perpetually checked against the circumstances of the case. Even the assertion about moral judgments has an “unless,” a condition that would make it false—that it is possible to have true and sound moral judgments if there could be perpetual reference to circumstances.

The embeddedness under discussion here happens in spite of the “quotable,” “lapidary,” and “sententious” quality Price traces through in Eliot’s moralizing.<sup>29</sup> As an instance of how Eliot’s maxims against maxims are marked by “their own axiomatic self-containment,” Price, following Main, cites as a single quotation pieces from both paragraphs from *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>30</sup> To make of this long meditation something that can be described as self-contained, both sentences must

be edited and the two paragraphs sewn together. The clause “—the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot” is taken from *The Mill on the Floss*, an early novel, and it contains an early instantiation of two tics that dominate Eliot’s style: the “check” we remember from the passage on Bulstrode, and the “unless” that turns “moral judgment” into an ongoing process. The theory of moral judgment as a dialectical process of empirical observation and abstract conceptualization is realized here at the level of the sentence by subordinate clause modifications. Thanks to its capacity to accrete subordinate clauses, the English sentence can grow longer and become more precise at the same time. It thus allows for a good deal of “checking” and “enlightening.” The resulting statements are the kind of highly modified abstract ideas that relative clauses exist to modify.

The relative clause in the passage above illustrates an important aspect of the ethical work the commentative clause does in *Middlemarch*, which is to interpret a fictional dilemma rather than to present a clear answer to it:

[T]he question, whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master-key that will fit all cases.<sup>31</sup>

This “question” redescribes the fictional situation in terms of a quite specific moral dilemma, which is at this moment not Maggie’s, but Dr. Kenn’s, to solve. Dr. Kenn’s consideration of Maggie’s case gives way to a restatement of the problem in general terms, yet the conceptual conflict is much more precisely described. The new formulation is primarily interpretive rather than judgmental—it reveals not how Maggie should act, but only what, exactly, her problem is. It provides a prescriptive formula for framing moral judgments that prefigures Eliot’s use of the commentative mode to clarify key moral problems of the novel.

This passage touches on the third major strand of maxim-making in Eliot: its complex relationship to the representation of character consciousness. The discussion of casuistry in relation to Maggie’s case concludes a passage written in what Dorrit Cohn calls “psycho-narration,” or present-tense narrative commentary that provides interpretive commentary on reported thought.<sup>32</sup> The interpretive commentary here

describes Dr. Kenn as a “man who had known spiritual conflict, and lived through years of devoted service to his fellow-men”—in other words, as a very good authority. As he considers “the possible issue either of an endeavour to restore the former relations with Lucy and Philip, or of counselling submission to this irruption of a new feeling,” the narrative shifts to the present tense and undercuts his ability to make the right decision by asserting the gravity of the moral problem he faces.<sup>33</sup> Is this description of “the moment” attributable to Dr. Kenn, or has it become the voice of the narrator itself?

Because the commentative clause tends to take over the noun it modifies, it is not always clear where one has ended up. Commentative clauses are often associated with free indirect discourse, as in the ironic description of Lydgate’s future wife, Rosamond. Elsewhere, they seem rather to break with free indirect discourse, or at least to change its register in relation to the narrator’s discourse. For example, a sentence that begins with an ironic description of Casaubon’s perception of Dorothea suddenly seems to validate that perception: “He had formerly observed with approbation her capacity for worshipping the right object; he now foresaw with sudden terror that this capacity might be replaced by presumption, this worship by the most exasperating of all criticism,—that which sees vaguely a great many fine ends and has not the least notion what it costs to reach them” (*M*, 200). When the sentence changes tenses, it changes sides. At each “which” clause, a sentence can branch into a new register as well as a new semantic direction.

Because each branch of a sentence gives a kind of gloss on the head noun or modified idea, these commentative clauses are well-suited to the ironic parroting of conventional wisdom. This pattern is especially important to characterization, and frequently occurs in free indirect discourse. The structure suited to making highly particularized experiences or traits more available to a reader also lends itself, particularly through free indirect discourse, to the unthinking rehearsal of platitudes. We should add to the comparison of “Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress” and “that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood,” a third example; Lydgate’s French lover, Laure, is described as: “a Provençale, with dark eyes, a Greek profile, and rounded majestic form, having that sort of beauty which carries a sweet matronliness even in youth, and her voice was a soft cooing” (*M*, 151). These campy versions of the novel’s opening use relative clauses to expound on an ideal of “feminine radiance” and a “matronly” beauty in counterpoint to the

relatively simple claim about the distinctiveness of Dorothea's beauty. Laure's beauty, in particular, becomes fully a goddess type: "Since he had had the memory of Laure, Lydgate had lost all taste for large-eyed silence: the divine cow no longer attracted him, and Rosamond was her very opposite" (*M*, 159). The commentative clause above enacts a mode of judgment in which preconceived concepts take the place of critical thinking—nouns are modified by received ideas instead of careful observation.

\*\*\*\*\*

The spectrum between the poles of received wisdom and wise observation is articulated by the representation of Lydgate's free indirect discourse across the novel through another use of relative clauses. Henry James's review of *Middlemarch* is also interested in Hutton's "running fire of criticism": "The constant presence of thought, of generalizing instinct, of *brain*, in a word, behind her observation, gives the latter its great value and her whole manner its high superiority."<sup>34</sup> The "*brain*" behind the observation that James describes in Eliot's manner is analogous to the mode of representation that I have been describing.<sup>35</sup> The best "realist" representation in *Middlemarch* is evoked not simply by the portrayal of everyday detail, or even by careful psychological portraiture, but by the "generalizing instinct" that treats such detail. With this emphasis, James finds that "the most perfectly successful passages in the book are perhaps those painful fireside scenes between Lydgate and his miserable little wife."<sup>36</sup> I agree, and it is in those passages that commentative clauses tend to cluster.

In my survey of commentative clauses in *Middlemarch*, 42 percent are either in Lydgate's free indirect discourse or descriptive of his qualities or circumstances.<sup>37</sup> Of these, the majority (13 of 18, which makes almost a third of all commentative clauses in the survey) is divided among the three sections that describe the beginning of his courtship of Rosamond, the couple's first conversation about debt, and the fight over Rosamond's secret letter to Sir Godwin. In these scenes, Lydgate develops an Eliot-like "brain," to his cost: he simply begins to qualify his ideas about Rosamond based on his observations of her rather than his assumptions about her. The sentences that mark this progress are in free indirect discourse, and are written entirely in the past tense. That is, this element of character representation is not done by commentative clauses, but by elaborate relative clauses that do similar work.

The key fireside scene in chapter 58 of book 6 presents Lydgate telling Rosamond about their debt and portrays his increasing understanding of Rosamond's inner life. It foregrounds the problem of legibility in its epigraph, eight lines from the middle of William Shakespeare's Sonnet 93. The sonnet is a meditation on falsely intelligible beauty that opens, "So shall I live, supposing thou art true / Like a deceived husband," while the omitted final lines read: "How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow, / If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show."<sup>38</sup> Like the access to Rosamond's inner life provided by the narrator, the last two lines of the sonnet are a context available to the reader. This chapter is a meditation on beauty's failure to signify goodness; it is here that Lydgate must learn to read Rosamond on his own: "For the moment he lost the sense of his wound in a sudden speculation about this new form of feminine impassibility revealing itself in the sylph-like frame which he had once interpreted as the sign of a ready intelligent sensitiveness" (*M*, 592). The problem of this new *form* of feminine impassibility abstracts the shape of Rosamond's body into the suddenly more urgent form of a concept.

In this scene, Lydgate gains ground in distinguishing physical form from his idea about it—and one idea from another. The gap narrows between Lydgate's shallow, free indirect discourse and a more carefully generalizing mode that considers the hard, particular fact of Rosamond herself. Early in the novel, the narrator attributes to Rosamond "that sort of cleverness which catches every tone except the humorous," but only here does Lydgate begin to think through that "cleverness" (*M*, 159). "He had regarded Rosamond's cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman. He was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was—what was the shape into which it had run as into a close network aloof and independent" (*M*, 586). This line pits an old concept against a new, suggesting Lydgate's better ability to observe Rosamond, with brain. His definition of "cleverness" is only structurally similar to the narrator's; the two are quite distinct in terms of tone and even content. But the structure matters: Lydgate no longer shifts to a generalization to return to received ideas, but to gain some objective purchase on his own experience that enables him to judge his wife better. What Lydgate attains is not sympathy for his wife's horrible littleness, but the vivid apprehension of its contours.

In the early representation of Lydgate, the commentative clause invokes platitudes. The syntactic shape of Rosamond's consciousness is differently ironic, and illuminates by contrast the way commentative clauses work: she uses a kind of crude shorthand. When Lydgate arrives

at home to find Rosamond and Will seated by the fire, Rosamond “had already seen that her husband was in a ‘horrible humour’” (M, 591). The use of internal quotation marks to separate Rosamond’s thought from the narrative discourse, in a kind of open mimicry, is rare in *Middlemarch*. Instead of subtly incorporating Rosamond’s perspective into the narrative, her thoughts are marked as distinct. In another instance, her misinterpretation of Lydgate is subsequently glossed by the narrator:

Lydgate, relieved from anxiety about her, relapsed into what she inwardly called his moodiness—a name which to her covered his thoughtful preoccupation with other subjects than herself, as well as that uneasy look of the brow and distaste for all ordinary things as if they were mixed with bitter herbs, which really made a sort of weather-glass to his vexation and foreboding. (M, 586–87).

If the commentative clause shifts to the generalizing present in order to take in the full scope of the circumstances of a quality or concept, Rosamond’s private shorthand is the language of egoism. She notices Lydgate’s “vexation and foreboding” but cannot conceptualize it beyond its immediate effect on herself.<sup>39</sup> Despite the moment when Rosamond’s sympathetic intervention helps to bring Dorothea and Will together, her egotism remains the story’s premier case.<sup>40</sup> The language of her observations is the anti-type of the commentative clause.

If Rosamond is a counterexample to Lydgate, how about an analogous one—what of the syntactic connection between the commentative clause and Honoré de Balzac’s “*un de ces*” [“one of those”]? To borrow Cohn’s example of how narrator-oriented novels work, Balzac’s generalizations spread outward like rings from the idea of Rastignac’s dreams in *Le Père Goriot* (1835):

The next day Rastignac dressed himself very elegantly, and at about three o’clock in the afternoon went to call on Mme de Restaud, indulging on the way in *those dizzily foolish dreams which fill the lives of young men with so much excitement: they then take no account of obstacles nor of dangers, they see success in everything, poeticize their existence simply by the play of their imagination, and render themselves unhappy or sad by the collapse of projects that had as yet no existence save in their heated fancy; if they were not ignorant and timid, the social world would not be possible.* Eugène walked with extreme caution in order not to get muddy[.]<sup>41</sup>

As Cohn notes, the change in tense and the change in subject (“from the specific Rastignac to the species ‘young men’”) allows Balzac to shift away from the specific to the general/evaluative mode.<sup>42</sup> The final generalization has even larger reach, encompassing the “social world.” The sentence is technically a commentative clause. In Balzac, as in Eliot, the generalization is structurally subordinate to the part of the sentence that tells “what happened,” yet overwhelms it: about 4/5 of the total words come from that initial modification of “dreams.” The phrase “one of those” cues the first example of Roland Barthes’s gnomic code in *S/Z*.<sup>43</sup> This is the code which refers the reader outward to the unwritten volumes of received knowledge, in which live what Eliot called in a letter to Cara Bray in 1873 the “crammed notions of what ought to have been felt” that stand in for critical self-reflection.<sup>44</sup> But how do we distinguish between a reference to an unwritten cultural code and a challenge to that code? When does the gnomic code become ironic?<sup>45</sup>

In Eliot, the sentences that sound like Balzac tend to be the satirical ones. His generalizing tendency finds its closest analogue in Lydgate’s first impression of Dorothea. He thinks, “She is a good creature—that fine girl—but a little too earnest. . . . It is troublesome to talk to such women. They are always wanting reasons, yet they are too ignorant to understand the merits of any question, and usually fall back on their moral sense to settle things after their own taste” (*M*, 93). Lydgate’s present-tense generalizations about “such women,” with his uncompromising “always,” are distinctly Balzacian. Commentative clauses that occur in the narration of *Middlemarch*, however, are also what we might call semantically subordinate to the narrative portion of the sentence. That is, instead of using the fictional world as a platform to make broader generalizations, Eliot’s subordinate clauses tend to zoom inward to make the major idea of the sentence more precise. Balzac moves from dreams, to the social world, and back to the mud; in Eliot, the range of images and details tend to speak less to the world outside the novel than to the extravagantly particular concepts that govern it. Eliot’s narrative sentence combines wide observation with narrow views.<sup>46</sup>

How do such narrow generalizations feed back into the problem of sympathy and critique in the novel, and Eliot's work more largely? Lydgate's reward for his lost illusions is a fully-apprehended Rosamond, while Dorothea's illusions are replaced by deep sympathy. Yet Dorothea's marriage is also, after all, one long, bitter revelation of Casaubon's pettiness. The emergence from moral stupidity is, for Dorothea, an extremely painful process. After seeing what she takes to be evidence of an understanding between Rosamond and Will Ladislaw, Dorothea faces the consequences of moral intelligence:

All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate's lot, and this young marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles—all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance. (*M*, 788)<sup>47</sup>

The final emphasis of the passage is on the consequences of “vivid sympathetic experience,” but the comparison with the more objective “acquired knowledge” suggests instead the stream of discerning observations supplied by critical narrative commentary. That is, the best way to understand sympathetic experience is by reflecting on acquired knowledge. Dorothea is no longer *allowed* to see as she saw in the “day of [her] ignorance”: she is forced to see things in the light, not only of what she “feels,” but what she now “knows” to be true.

Gaining a positive knowledge of the pettiness of others might be the mark of moral growth in Eliot, but such knowledge provokes a caustic, acerbic, antipathetic response as well as a more sympathetic one. Here, I am thinking not only of Maggie and Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*, in which the narrator grimly instructs those “inclined to be severe” on Tom to “remember that the responsibility of tolerance lies with those who have the wider vision,” but of Dorothea's initial burst of anger toward Will after she finds him with Rosamond: “Why had he not stayed among the crowd of whom she asked nothing—but only prayed that they might be less contemptible?”<sup>48</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer names, almost in passing, the key contradiction in *Middlemarch* between “the defense of commonness and the defense of the specially gifted character.”<sup>49</sup> She is right: the specially gifted character with the discriminating ethical perspective is, in many ways, at the mercy of the “crowd”—forced to sympathize with commonness in spite of its

limitations. Again, a major philosophical problem in *Middlemarch* is how to see others clearly, but without contempt: the many facets of this problem and the partial solutions to it that *Middlemarch* proposes are most clearly seen not in its plot, but at the level of the sentence, and not in the “wisdom” of narratorial commentary as such, but in its recurrent patterns of structure.

*Loyola University New Orleans*

#### NOTES

My thanks to the following readers for their generous critical engagement with earlier drafts of this essay: Marissa Gemma, Denise Gigante, Daniel Hack, Casie LeGette, Kenneth Ligda, Daniel Mintz, Franco Moretti, James Phelan, Meri-Jane Rochelson, Jennifer Sorensen Emery-Peck, Alex Woloch, and the members of the Nineteenth-Century Forum at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (New York: Penguin, 1994), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *M*.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Miller develops this characterization of Eliot’s narrative voice in contrast to that of Jane Austen in *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Among the critics who have written on the vein of satire running through this novel, I follow J. Hillis Miller and Rae Greiner in attending to the problem that knowledge of others may not (and sometimes cannot) lead to sympathy with them. Miller points out that the narrative commentary is often “ironically and even comically critical” (*Reading for Our Time: Adam Bede and Middlemarch Revisited* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2012], 53) and that, though “[t]he narrator says we should sympathize . . . [t]he narrative discourse gives grounds rather for the delicious pleasure of Eliotic irony at the expense of the characters” (54). Greiner gives a larger literary and philosophical history of the sympathy/knowledge problem in *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012). I focus here on a textual pattern that moves repeatedly from knowledge to moral judgment rather than from knowledge to sympathy.

<sup>4</sup> See D. A. Miller, “Hitchcock’s Hidden Pictures,” *Critical Inquiry* 65 (2010): 106–130, “Hitchcock’s Understyle: A Too-Close View of Rope,” *Representations* 121 (2013): 1–30; and Garrett Stewart, *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Miller, “Hidden Pictures,” 126, emphasis Miller’s. For a book-length discussion of George Eliot’s style, see Melissa Raines, *George Eliot’s Grammar of Being* (New York: Anthem, 2011), which traces the development of Eliot’s use of punctuation to produce psychological and physiological effects in her readers.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. Hutton, “‘Middlemarch. Part III,’ *Spectator*, XLV, 30 March 1872,” in *George Eliot: Critical Assessments*, 4 vol., ed. Stuart Hutchinson (Mountfield: Helm Information, 1996), 1:277.

<sup>7</sup> My thanks to Matthew Jockers, Hal Tily, and the Beyond Search Workshop at Stanford University for their support designing this survey. Approximately five percent of the sentences in the survey contained present-tense forms, of which 40 percent were

hybrid past-present sentences. Of these 113 sentences, 43 contained commentative clauses (38 percent of all past-present hybrids). Commentative clauses describe moods, moments, and experiences associated with the characters as well as characteristics. This paper considers commentative clauses throughout the novel and not only those I counted in my survey. 18 of the 43 commentative clauses I found are associated with Lydgate's free indirect discourse or describe him directly; the next-closest characters were Rosamond and Causaubon, who were described by five commentative clauses apiece (two of Rosamond's overlap with Lydgate's); and Dorothea was described by four. By looking at hybrid sentences that include both tenses, this study challenges the sharp narratological distinction between present-tense moral commentary and past-tense narration.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Culler, "Omniscience," *Narrative* 12 (2004): 27.

<sup>9</sup> Felix Martínez-Bonati, *Fictive Discourse and the Structures of Literature: A Phenomenological Approach*, trans. Philip W. Silver (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 32, 33.

<sup>10</sup> See Harald Weinrich, *Tempus: Besprochene und Erzählte Welt* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan, *Longman's Grammar of Written and Spoken English* (New York: Longman, 1999), 202. They explain that the notion of the sentence pertains primarily to writing because there are too many non-clausal units in speech (1082–1104). Moreover, "Speech is a continuous stream of sound without a clear division into units, but it can be analyzed into meaningful elements which recur and combine according to rules. In writing, such an analysis is expressed through the division into words and sentences" (50).

<sup>12</sup> See Alexander Main, ed., *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse Selected from the Works of George Eliot* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1872).

<sup>13</sup> My thanks to Franco Moretti for this formulation.

<sup>14</sup> Hutton, "'George Eliot's Moral Anatomy,' *Spectator*, XLV, 5 October 1872," in *Critical Assessments*, 1:285–86, emphasis Hutton's.

<sup>15</sup> Hutton acknowledges the limitations of his position as a reviewer of a novel published serially at *Middlemarch's* conclusion: "George Eliot has, no doubt, often smiled in reading the criticisms passed on her drift and purpose by those who had but part of her design before them. But so would any one who could see the end from the beginning often smile at the partial and fragmentary criticisms passed on human life" ("'*Middlemarch*,' *Spectator*, XLV, 7 December 1872," in *Critical Assessments*, 1:292). His partiality to Rosamond also shows how commentative clauses are embedded within the plot as well as within the context of their occurrence at a first reading.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 401–2.

<sup>17</sup> A. C. Dicey, "'Middlemarch,' *Nation*, XVI, 23 January 1873, 30 January 1873," in *Critical Assessments*, 1:339.

<sup>18</sup> Another example of the interplay between character and circumstance is that early paragraph on the possibility of the Lydgate marriage: "To Rosamond it seemed as if she and Lydgate were as good as engaged," and while Lydgate had other plans, "[c]ircumstances were almost sure to be on the side of Rosamond's idea, which had a shaping activity and looked through watchful blue eyes, whereas Lydgate's lay blind and unconcerned as a jelly-fish which gets melted without knowing it" (*M*, 271). Again, in the commentative clause that rounds out the simile is the most vivid part of the sentence, and describes the *process* undergone by the jellyfish.

<sup>19</sup> David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 38.

<sup>20</sup> Carroll, "George Eliot: The Sibyl of Mercia," *Studies in the Novel* 15 (1983): 18.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: Athlone Press, 1959), 13.

<sup>22</sup> W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), 78.

<sup>23</sup> See Susan S. Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Isobel Armstrong, "'Middlemarch': A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom'," in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Hardy (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), 132.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90 (2005): 64.

<sup>26</sup> According to Lanser's argument in *Fictions of Authority*, the maxim against maxims is one element of toning down narrative authority to distance the novels from the controversial public figure of "George Eliot." Leah Price argues in *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000) that Eliot uses the maxim against maxims to distance herself from the proliferating forms of wisdom literature.

<sup>27</sup> *OED*, s.v. "casuistry, n."

<sup>28</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, 497.

<sup>29</sup> Price, 105, 133, 132. Price's precedent for using the word "quotable" is George Lewes.

<sup>30</sup> Price, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, 497.

<sup>32</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 24.

<sup>33</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, 497.

<sup>34</sup> Henry James, "[Middlemarch], *Galaxy*, XV, March, 1873," in *Critical Assessments*, 1:490.

<sup>35</sup> Kent Puckett points out that the brain here is "not only an organ of intelligence, but also an organ," revealing the inextricability of the high and the low, idea and sensation, in *Middlemarch* ("Stupid Sensations: Henry James, Good Form, and Reading *Middlemarch* Without a Brain," *Henry James Review* 28 [2007]: 297).

<sup>36</sup> James, 1:489.

<sup>37</sup> In my survey, Lydgate was described by commentative clauses three times more than any other character.

<sup>38</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets: Updated Edition*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 73.

<sup>39</sup> A slightly different example of a narrative gloss on Rosamond's language is the passage in which Lydgate remarks on Dorothea's devotion to Casaubon: "'Of course she is devoted to her husband,' said Rosamond, implying a notion of necessary sequence which the scientific man regarded as the prettiest possible for a woman; but she was thinking at the same time that it was not so very melancholy to be mistress of Lowick Manor with a husband likely to die soon" (*M*, 293).

<sup>40</sup> Her exemplarity in this respect is oddly perfect, as Rosamond is the character around whose pier-glass reflection the circles arrange themselves to represent "the egoism of any person now absent—of Miss Vincy, for example" (*M*, 264). For a brilliant reading of the scene between her and Dorothea mentioned above, see Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Cohn, 24, emphasis mine.

<sup>42</sup> Cohn, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 17–18.

<sup>44</sup> Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, 7 vol., ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954–78), 1:471.

<sup>45</sup> My thanks to Garrett Stewart for this question, posed at the conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> I extrapolate this phrase from Eliot's essay on Wilhelm Henrich Riehl's *Natural History of German Life*, which George Levine calls "a kind of manifesto for moral realism" (*Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001], 8). The Riehl essay opens with a hypothetical discussion of which of two men can give the best opinion of a new railway to be built. "One who knows little about railways may entertain very expanded views as to the multiplication of railways in the abstract, and their ultimate function in civilization. . . . But it is evident that if we want a railway to be made, the man of wide views and narrow observation will not serve our purpose" (*Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963], 268).

<sup>47</sup> This passage is not a commentative clause but the type of running commentary that shifts to the present by means of a simile. I include it here because, like a commentative clause, it subordinates a key idea and describes it at length, weaving present tense into the past.

<sup>48</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, 500; *M*, 787.

<sup>49</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Eliot: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 55.