“Book Second” of *Adam Bede* (1859) begins and ends with depictions of reading and writing. Its final chapter, “The Night-School and the Schoolmaster,” details both the promise and the difficulty that the people of Hayslope face in their quest for education. In church, they do not hold prayer books because “not one of them could read,” but there is a palpable desire among the common workers to learn despite very basic challenges. Bartle Massey’s schoolhouse offers them the opportunity, in the evening and after long days of physically exhausting work. Learning to read is no less exhausting. Bill, a young stone-sawyer, “found a reading lesson in words of one syllable a harder matter to deal with than the hardest stone he had ever had to saw,” because he was unable to discern differences between letters, noting that they are so “uncommon alike, there was no tellin’ ‘em one from another” (253). But Bill, and others like him, continues to try, and the narrator identifies this slow process of becoming literate as a humanizing act: “It was,” the narrator remarks, “almost as if three rough animals were making humble efforts to learn how they might become human” (255). In the chapter that opens “Book Second,” “In Which the Story Pauses a Little,” the authorial voice famously interrupts the story to justify her creation, commanding that artists not exclude from their works the “common, coarse people” who populate the world. For art to portray that world more completely, artists must change their subject choices, and readers and viewers must alter their expectations. In this extranarrative disquisition, Eliot implores readers to be patient and charitable, to expand their understanding of art, and, by doing so, to expand their sympathies: “the way in which I have come to the conclusion that human nature is loveable,” she writes,
“has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace and vulgar” (201).

The link between Eliot’s entreaty and Bartle Massey’s work in the schoolroom may seem obvious: in Eliot’s vision, readers of *Adam Bede* are like Massey’s pupils, who, through their efforts to read, are working to expand their own humanity. *Adam Bede* exposes readers to the “commonplace and vulgar,” and the exposure will expand their sympathies and make them more tolerant of their fellow men. That simple parallel may comfort some readers (who think that they are being edified merely by reading a novel) and frustrate critics (who protest Eliot’s pedagogical or pedantic overtones). But surely such a conclusion is too simple, for it overlooks what Eliot so strongly emphasizes throughout *Adam Bede*: learning is a difficult, mostly slow, and often painful process, made all the more difficult by instances in which readers are lulled into believing that meaning is self-evident. All versions of discernment, it seems, entail a learning curve. Even “nature’s syntax,” which ought to precede any academic refinement, can be grossly misleading if read too hastily or without careful deliberation. Just ask Adam Bede. Adam’s misinterpretation of Hetty Sorrel’s beauty is costly, but he is not the only poor reader of “nature’s syntax” in Eliot’s oeuvre.

Perhaps more so than any of the other writers addressed in this study, Eliot describes literature’s potential to expand her readers’ largesse within her prose, and the mechanisms for that growth into other-awareness are mirrored in the repetitions of narrative dynamics throughout her works. Focusing on *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*, this chapter addresses Eliot’s approach to representing intersubjectivity, an approach typified in these novels (one early and one late) but one that is evident throughout her works. I am concerned with interpersonal relationships depicted within her novels and via their form, as opposed to readerly engagement with empathic extension. This focus distinguishes my readings from those of others who address the ways that Eliot engages her reader in the empathic or sympathetic process, including those by Rachel Ablow, Ellen Argyros, and Suzanne Keen. Certainly Eliot was concerned with the effect her novels might have on their audience, but if the edification is to occur through exposure, then surely it is important to understand how empathic process is depicted within the novels.

Unlike Dickens’s depictions of other-awareness, Eliot’s works emphasize the process of becoming. Whereas Dickens’s characters often either are or are not other-aware, a distinction that seems to depend on an individual’s intrinsic nature, Eliot’s depictions build on Dickens’s by rendering this awareness as the result of a process. Eliot confirms not
only that the encounter with the radically different other is a startling, sometimes painful process, but also that it is not a static encounter. For Eliot, engaging in the development of other-awareness offers the potential for growth; connection through language becomes possible only after the self recognizes the other as ultimately unknowable. To be sure, Eliot’s plots are determined by the ability of characters to navigate their own identities, but they are also determined by their ability to navigate alterity. Eliot’s oeuvre is populated by unfulfilled lovers, ignored family members, misunderstood and misunderstanding protagonists, each of whom undergoes a version of Adam’s struggle to recognize Hetty independent of his idealized vision of her. Essential to interpersonal literacy is learning one’s limits and understanding the limits of learning.

The recognition of difference instantiates one such limit. As is the case in Adam Bede, Eliot’s statements about the goals of art often stress the potential for expanding fellow feeling. These moments are undoubtedly well-trodden ground for the critic, but it is worth revisiting some—if only briefly—to note that the emphasis might fall somewhere other than those places that garner most attention. Eliot’s letter to Charles Bray in which she argues that art must “enlarge men’s sympathies,” for example, is remarkable for her insistence that the expansion occurs toward those who are not like oneself but instead differ from oneself, “in everything but the broad fact of being suffering, erring human beings.”

The distinction is important. Too often in art, comfortable idealizations intrude upon the actual, impeding the recognition of alterity rather than facilitating it. Such idealizations are built upon the familiar and the non-threatening; they propose that what is known or desired is broadly representative of what is. What must also be embraced is the possibility of the unknown. A lack of knowledge may be mitigated by learning based on what is apart-from-the-self, but for that to happen one must move beyond easy identifications or assumptions. J. Hillis Miller astutely notes that in Eliot’s works, those easy identifications or assumptions are often predicated on thinking of the other via analogy of the self, what Miller calls “figurative displacements,” along with the inherently solipsist position of the self as the center of everything and everyone surrounding.

Eliot’s most consistent means of representing the movement outside of identification into a perception of difference rest on describing the limitations of what is known or what is knowable; assume you know too much and risk misunderstanding or shutting down the possibility of genuine empathic response. Consider the opening of “The Natural History of German Life.” Eliot contrasts an individual having limited knowledge of the railways with someone who has an intimate familiarity;
their relative knowledge determines the richness of “the range of images” called up by the mention of the word “railways.” When human beings are the focus of concern, both individually and collectively, the stakes are much higher, and the epistemological certainty that one might have about the railways, for instance, is disrupted. Yet the easy dependence on idealized versions of fellow man is tantalizing for artists and their audience precisely because it provides a sense of certainty—regardless of how unwarranted—and both groups embrace artistically influenced and often euphemistic ideals of the rural poor or other groups of people with whom they lack intimate familiarity. Understanding or interpreting others is made more complicated when one cannot even see them clearly; art may thus cloud interpretation, rendering viewers less literate, less aware of the other’s lived experience:

Only a total absence of acquaintance and sympathy with our peasantry, would give a moment’s popularity to such a picture as “Cross Purposes” where we have a peasant girl who looks as if she knew L. E. L.’s poems by heart [. . . ]. The notion that peasants are joyous, that the typical moment to represent a man in a smock-frock is when he is cracking a joke and showing a row of sound teeth, that cottage matrons are usually buxom, and village children necessarily rosy and merry, are prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind, which looks for its subjects in literature instead of life.

That such poems or paintings (Eliot also takes to task Holman Hunt’s *The Hireling Shepherd*) were popular supports Eliot’s point that audiences prefer the trouble-free version of country life perpetuated by art. Here and throughout “German Life,” Eliot also emphasizes the difficulty of an artist rendering an image free of idealized virtue of the rural poor, given how engrained in the collective imagination and artistic convention those idealizations are; “falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult,” as she writes in *Adam Bede*. But the difficulty in rendering images that work against idealized notions of the other is a fact of reality and, in addition to bemoaning it, Eliot works to include such myopic vision in her characters. For example, *Middlemarch’s* young, idealistic Dorothea Brooke, who seeks out suffering where others seek to avoid it, is disappointed when the curate of her new husband’s estate describes his peasants in terms similar to those of “Cross Purposes”:

Everybody, he assured her, was well off in Lowick, not a cottager in those double cottages at a low rent but kept a pig, and the strips of
garden at the back were well tended. The small boys wore excellent corduroy, the girls went out as tidy servants, or did a little straw-plaiting at home: no looms here, no Dissent; and though the public disposition was rather towards laying by money than towards spirituality, there was not much vice.\(^8\)

On the one hand, the passage is critical of the curate, who is unable or unwilling to describe the cottagers outside of an artificial veil of contentment. On the other hand, Dorothea does not question his assessment. While Dorothea is concerned with the welfare of others, she still imagines others’ suffering in terms of herself; though she feels “ashamed,” she regrets there is not more suffering at Lowick, so that she would have a greater function there.\(^9\) Dorothea lacks curiosity beyond her interests, and both characters fail to reconcile these Lowick strangers with their own predilections or desires. These failures do not indicate a hopelessly flawed character; instead they demonstrate the thorough difficulty of accurately understanding the other, perceiving his position, reading his intentions.

Eliot’s writings, from \textit{Scenes of Clerical Life} through \textit{Daniel Deronda}, regularly depict such fissures in identification or recognition. Eliot often details the impediments to interpersonal understanding through the inclusion of extreme reactions to alterity: solipsism, wherein one cannot regard the other independently of one’s needs or desires, and self-abnegation, wherein one desires to sacrifice the self entirely to the other. Although these positions seem to sit at opposite ends of the spectrum of human interactions, both refuse to grant the other independence or autonomy. Navigating the gulf between the two extremes requires a tempering of self-regard in relation to that beyond the self—much like the tempering of metal, this requires an encounter with a force that might, in other circumstances, be debilitating. Such efforts are not always successful, and the aspirants are not always the heroines of the novels, but Eliot’s invocation of \textit{learning} as the means to achieve the desired end validates efforts toward that tempered recognition and underscores the idea that appreciating alterity is a process and not an inherent quality.

\textit{Learning Not to Feel: Hetty Sorrel as Moralist}

Since the publication of \textit{Adam Bede}, reductive readings of the characters of both Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel have persisted: Methodist preach-
er Dinah is good, saintly, and selfless, while dairy maid Hetty is flawed, deviant, and selfish. In her 1883 analysis of Eliot’s works, Mathilde Blind invoked this formulation, describing Dinah as “a beautiful soul; whose spring of love is so abundant that it overflows the narrow limits of private affection, and blesses multitudes of toiling, suffering men and women with its wealth of pity, hope, and sympathy” and Hetty as a “shallow, frivolous little soul” who hides a “hard little heart” under her “soft dimpling beauty.” Over one hundred years later, Judith Mitchell echoes this characterization, noting again that Hetty’s “shallow, selfish nature” opposes Dinah’s benevolence. Mitchell further suggests that Dinah’s heroism is due not only to her selflessness but also to her beauty acting as a “true signifier” for her good soul, whereas Hetty’s exterior beauty is a “false one.” By continually placing Dinah and Hetty in such formulations—good/bad; selfless/selfish; true signifier/false signifier—much of the past scholarship on the novel only supports these bifurcated categories, when in fact the novel seeks to break up these easy formulations.

Adam Bede’s rural setting is a particularly apt environment in which to document the necessity of nuanced “readings” of people because judgments are admittedly made based solely on appearance. This community and the assessments its members make offer a version of judgments that readers are likely to make, and when the characters’ assumptions are proven incorrect, the critique applies to the metanarrative as well. Mrs. Irwine, who insists that nature would not make “a ferret in the shape of a mastiff,” is a typical voice within Hayslope. She declares: “[no one can ever] persuade me that I can’t tell what men are by their outsides” (72). Not mere entitlement or snobbery, this attitude cuts across class lines; Mrs. Poyser frames a similar comment in terms she knows better, saying, “Some cheeses are made o’ skimmed milk and some o’ new milk, and it’s no matter what you call ‘em, you may tell which is which by the look and the smell” (104). Mrs. Irwine and Mrs. Poyser, as the novel shows, are wrong. Nature may encode the body with messages about the soul, but they are neither explicit nor easily interpretable.

Common critiques that Hetty is simply a soulless ego (her “vanity and selfishness,” one critic argued, lead not only to her own “terrible crime and shame,” but to “misery for others!”) overlook what is achieved by reducing others’ apprehension of her to pure surface: Hetty becomes a kind of text to be interpreted, allowing the novel to function as a critique of the ways her exterior is read. Hetty is above all a hard text to read, and the difficulty of reading her is emphasized precisely
because she seems to be such an easy text to read. Committed to enhancing her attractiveness, Hetty furthers the readable distance between her interior and exterior. She presents—via her body, her expressions, and her actions—an obstacle to easy legibility, as her startling beauty leads others to form more generous opinions of her than actions support. Serving as an obstacle, forcing those around her to challenge their own interpretive skills in this way, Hetty performs a valuable function for the community she otherwise defies. Further, she is shown to be able to recognize, finally, the limitations of her own interpretative powers. In these ways, Hetty does far more work in the novel than playing the role of a hard-hearted beauty; Hetty may just be the best teacher the novel has to offer.

The relationship between Hetty’s beauty and its message for others is linked to Hetty’s lack of interiority, her simplicity of mind, and her inability to care for others in situations that normally generate a caring response. Her limitations in this regard are often read as an indication of her narcissism. After Thias Bede’s funeral, for example, Hetty meditates not on the family’s loss but on her many suitors and her power over them. Eliot asks the reader, “In this state of mind, how could Hetty give any feeling to Adam’s troubles, or think much about poor old Thias being drowned?” (111). How could she indeed. Hetty is aware of others—aware of their presence insofar as it acknowledges her own presence. But to imagine them as being analogous to herself, to imagine their interiority, is beyond her powers because of her youth, her self-centeredness, and the cocoon of leniency granted her as a consequence of her disarming looks: “Young souls, in such pleasant delirium as hers, are as unsympathetic as butterflies sipping nectar; they are isolated from all appeals by a barrier of dreams—by invisible looks and impalpable arms” (111). Her youth and capriciousness are important considerations if one is to appreciate Hetty’s humanity and understand the limitations of empathy. Here, as in other novels, Eliot is determined that “the reader understand all the extenuating circumstances pleading for” her characters, a way to explain—if not excuse—their behaviors. Coming into awareness is, Eliot insists, a process.

Complicating a reciprocal understanding between herself and her community is Hetty’s refusal to engage fully in the agreed-upon community order, a resistance seen as petulance and not individuation. She fails to recognize alterity because she fails to recognize those around her at all, one might say, except to the extent that they reflect her self-conception. Although aware that others judge her exterior, Hetty at first does little to internalize that knowledge or apply it to her interactions.
with them. This egoism is literalized through her inability to read texts. The narrator notes that she “had never read a novel: if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her” (148). Her ignorance of novelistic romance left Hetty without a frame in which to place her own experience, without “a shape for her expectations” (148). It also meant she lacked exposure to representations of another’s interior experience, the very possibility ostensibly presented by novels (such as *Adam Bede*) for their readers. Her limitations in reading underlie broader difficulties in communicating and in living within a community. She is, for example, chronically late, either misreading clocks or unable to reconcile clocks set at different times. When scolded for arriving home late, she responds, “I did set out before eight, aunt [ . . . ] but this clock’s so much before the clock at the Chase, there’s no telling what time it’ll be when I get here” (158–59).\(^9\) Failing to negotiate the real difference between her family’s time and “gentlefolk’s time,” Hetty is out of step with her household. Given her difficulty differentiating between the trappings of the life she has and those of the life she wants, it is not surprising that she has difficulty deciphering handwriting. When she attempts to read the letter in which Arthur breaks off their relationship and dashes her hopes at marriage, instead of devouring it she can only read it slowly, despite the fact that “Arthur had taken pains to write plainly” (361). The gentleman’s “handwriting” is meant both figuratively and literally. Arthur believes (as he tells Adam) that he had been explicit about his intentions with Hetty—but not only can she not read his writing, she cannot discern his true intentions.

The faults of Hetty’s character—her egotism and inability to become part of a community—argue for the flatness and simplicity of her persona. Yet while Hetty is a poor reader of novels and letters, she is felicitously aware that others constantly read her. It is this gift of insight that lifts her from being a purely one-dimensional character. Her studied primping displays a vanity that is both controlling and controlled, through which she can affect the conclusions others draw about her. It is an extraordinary command; she constructs her visage and demeanor in such a way to ensure that her affair and her pregnancy are not discovered. She is vain, to be sure, but early in the novel she merely seeks confirmation that her vanity is based on beauty perceivable to others. Once her circumstances change, she seeks confirmation that the changes in her body are *not* perceivable to others, and this requires considerable manipulation on her part. While readers are told that, “on Hetty’s blooming health, it would take a great deal of such mental suffering as hers to leave any deep impress” (366), Hetty becomes aware of the
necessity of controlling her countenance so that her pain cannot be read. Rather than *accentuating* her charms, she must now *enact* charm to disguise her pain. She demonstrates a kind of active self-control that is new in her character, catalyzed by the shattering of her illusions: “She must not cry in the day-time: nobody should find out how miserable she was, nobody should know she was disappointed about anything; and the thought that the eyes of her aunt and uncle would be upon her, gave her the self-command which often accompanies a great dread” (366). At this point, she finds the self-command that is not told on her face, and her interiority changes though her exterior does not. By maintaining a veneer of her old self, Hetty is able to manipulate the readings of many in her family and community, and those who never read past her surface are sufficiently convinced by her (purely) superficial composure. By anticipating those reactions, Hetty demonstrates an ability to recognize how others perceive her—how she appears from the outside.

More importantly, Hetty’s active construction depends on the complicity or inattention of those around her, since they must be poor readers to overlook the tale her body eventually tells against her will. The novel reminds its audience that reading is a two-way street; in Hayslope, Hetty can write her body but the community has to join in the reading. Hetty’s work to manipulate others’ readings of herself is thus, for the most part, effective. Only the astute Adam recognizes a change in her, noting that “there was something different in her eyes, in the expression of her face, in all her movements [. . . ]—something harder, older, less child like” (383). While his love-induced blindness causes him to cast his observations in a most generous light, believing the best about his bride-to-be, not all of her community has such a compelling excuse to support their overlooking the obvious. Perhaps the greatest misreading of all is that no one in Hayslope notices Hetty’s pregnancy—the *most* visible, physical sign of Hetty’s past actions and present anguish as well as a visible sign of the social upheaval caused by a landowner breaking rank to prey upon a dairy maid. It cannot be understood, however, that Hetty was simply adept at hiding her pregnancy, because when she leaves Hayslope to find Arthur, her “condition” is immediately detected: “the stranger’s eye detects what the familiar unsuspecting eye leaves unnoticed” (408). Surrounded by the unchanging context of Hayslope, changes that defy expectation or defy the community’s existing understanding of Hetty are not read by her family or friends, and Hetty’s pregnancy is not seen.

Hetty’s relationship with her community is then one of mutual, perhaps even willed, misunderstanding. It is easy to place the blame completely on Hetty. In his introduction to the novel, for example, Stephen
Gill concludes that Hetty’s “tragedy” is that she has neither a “lively sense of others” nor “a feeling for [her] place in the present and past community.” Barbara Hardy argues that Hetty’s self-absorption and lack of sympathy in response to the death of Adam’s father demonstrate her rejection and neglect of the community. Hardy further suggests that “to be a deviant from the community is to be in serious danger, and ultimately to endanger and disturb the entire community.” Hetty does deviate from the community, and the consequences of her actions are soon clearly wrought upon her and those she loves. Her disgrace and her isolation are, however, not solely her fault. When confronted with the true weight of her actions—leaving—her illegitimate child to die—residents of Hayslope recognize the damage wrought by their failure at educating Hetty or educating themselves about her.

Of course, readers are privileged to information that Hetty hides from those around her. Readers know that beneath the dimpled exterior lies a narcissistic liar; the information readers can access serves as a corrective to the misinformation Hetty’s controlled face and manners present to those around her. Those critics of Hetty who insist she is the true inverse of Dinah are lulled by this impression that the novel provokes. Yet Eliot employs in her novel’s structure many of the same techniques that Hetty used to her own advantage, and to the same end. The novel demonstrates that its audience, like those in Hetty’s community, may be poor readers too: Adam Bede coaxes readers into thinking that we understand this girl, just as those in Hayslope think they understand her. Hayslopians think she’s a sweet dear thing; readers of the novel think she’s rotten to the core, but both conclusions are incomplete. Eliot’s plot insists that Hetty can fool her community, that impressions-based assumptions of knowledge are dubious at best: those in Hayslope think they can see her and that therefore they know her, and novel readers also believe they can read her accurately. But surely the novel insists that our satisfaction in understanding Hetty is, like her community’s, unwarranted. The novel encourages in readers the same self-smug belief that Adam and Dinah share, establishing a level of comfortable certitude, which is then challenged.

Eventually, Hetty’s community learns what readers have known (her affair with Arthur; her narcissism), and if we may judge by the voice of critics, both object to her egotism and to her crime. Because loveliness is celebrated, because it is naturalized as good, Hetty’s moral grounding is expected to be equal to her physical beauty. Falling short of that overreaching expectation, Hetty is denounced harshly by much of her community and by many readers.
But while those around her may be grossly disappointed in her, Hetty shows herself to be cannily aware of her own limitations. When in jail and Dinah tries to convince her to repent, Hetty responds, “I can’t feel anything like you” (489). This line is not evidence of Hetty’s selfishness; it is instead a crucial moment that establishes Hetty’s awareness of Dinah’s alterity. Hetty’s self-centeredness makes her weirdly better able to maintain the gulf between herself and the other. This moment is essential because Hetty grasps that others remain unknown and unknowable to her. Though the admission is in one sense condemning, it also shows that Hetty understands herself in relation to those around her.

Hetty is able, in this most fraught moment, to realize something that even the pious Dinah cannot: Hetty acknowledges the fundamental differences between her reality and the expectations of her community. In this encounter, Dinah tries through the only means she knows to bring Hetty to confess, an evangelical argument, replete with promises of release from pain and promises of eternal comfort after death. In her sermon on the green, which introduces Dinah to Hayslope and to the novel, she seized upon Chad’s Bess’s vanity, threatening Bess with damnation should she fail to repent and calling Bess a “poor blind child” (36). Now, in Hetty’s cell, Dinah calls upon the same strategies, framing Hetty as a blind child whom Dinah must lead to the Lord and his forgiveness. Hetty—let’s not forget—is imprisoned for the murder of her child, whom she bore to a man she loved and a man she thought loved her, after her hopeless journey seeking that man. Dinah, who consistently seeks pain and suffering and seems, in fact, to derive a kind of pleasure from it, speaks to Hetty as if she is personally aware of the devastation Hetty feels: Dinah asks Hetty, “But isn’t the suffering less hard when you have somebody with you, that feels for you—that you can speak to, and say what’s in your heart? . . .” The ellipsis seems to indicate that Hetty is silent, and Dinah waits. Then it is Dinah who answers her own question: “Yes, Hetty” (488). What eventually sways Hetty to confess is the same fear that sways Chad’s Bess. It is not a movement into love, but a giving in to the fear that Dinah has cultivated—a fear of the unknown that she promises to ease through her religious certainty. What Hetty does say indicates her awareness that Dinah’s engagement with the spiritual realm is beyond her comprehension: “I can’t know anything about it”; “I can’t feel anything like you” (488–89). When has Dinah admitted that her knowledge of the other—others’ needs, others’ feelings, others’ priorities—is limited? She cannot even acknowledge that she does not fully know herself.23

The moment recalls another in “The Two Bed-Chambers” chapter, wherein Hetty and Dinah are contrasted: the one self-centered, gazing
into her mirror, and the other focused on everyone but herself, looking out her window. In that moment, Dinah rushes to Hetty, seeking to offer her services as confidante or confessor, pleading with Hetty until she finally begins to cry. Lest the reader regard this scene as one of good, selflessness triumphing over cold-hearted egotism, the narrator intervenes:

It is our habit to say that while the lower nature can never understand the higher, the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower. But I think the higher nature has to learn this comprehension, as we learn the art of vision, by a good deal of hard experience, often with bruises and gashes incurred in taking things up by the wrong end, and fancying our space wider than it is. (175)

Later, when in jail, Dinah reminds Hetty of her offer of friendship that night at the Hall Farm. Then, instead of the narrator providing the corrective, it is up to Hetty to do what she can to call Dinah into the realization that she has not yet learned to comprehend Hetty. Hetty’s corrective to Dinah’s imploring—“I can’t feel anything like you”—is a corrective to the reader as well. For the reader in this moment, Hetty insists on the insurmountable difference between herself and Dinah, and in her simplicity and even her selfishness, she gives way to an awareness of difference that Dinah works so hard to elide. The reader can in this moment see what Dinah cannot: Hetty’s insistence on alterity, that the human other must never be foreclosed, is one of the novel’s great lessons; the novel presents through its omniscient narration the ability to see what is at that time unknown to Dinah. Dinah, at the end, moves into a more nuanced understanding of herself, which requires her opening up a space for what she had thought impossible—that she could marry someone she loved. She must allow herself to be surprised, a movement that comes in the novel after her encounter with Hetty and (moreover) her colliding with her own desire that was itself a surprise, and not always a welcome surprise.

Learning Not to Help: Dorothea as Masochist

Like Dinah, Dorothea Brooke of Middlemarch (1871–72) treads a delicate line between self-abnegation and masochism, so thoroughly imagining herself into others that she fails to realize a distinct separation between
herself and them. Her marriage to Casaubon is the central example of this dynamic. She bases her actions and choices in response to Casaubon on an idea of him; unfortunately, that idea/ideal is itself based upon her misinterpretations of his desires. In fact, both failed marriages in Middlemarch are the result of one partner’s (Lydgate’s, Dorothea’s) failure to realize the other (Rosamond, Casaubon) as having desires and priorities that are distinct from his or her own. If these are models of empathic extension, the results are hardly encouraging. Through its multiplotted structure, Middlemarch features multiple characters engaged in relationship dynamics that are not unlike those in Adam Bede. Whereas my analysis of Adam Bede focused on Hetty as a misread individual, in Middlemarch I first turn my attention to she who misreads: Dorothea. As in Adam Bede, in Middlemarch the novel’s very form encourages the apperception of limitations. An omniscient narration lends a feeling of comprehensive understanding to the text. It is a feeling Dorothea shares: she believes in her ability to cut through communal fallacies to the truth of a situation or idea, she believes that she has access to a higher purpose and understanding hidden from others. That belief, as we will see, is tempered. And just as Dorothea is surprised, other characters surprise as well. A Casaubon, a Rosamond Vincy may seem to be eminently knowable to other residents of Middlemarch, but as Dorothea comes to learn, those easy conclusions are often shown to be false, and if not false, at least based on a projection of the self.

Dorothea’s evolution from a self-sacrificing helpmate, both unsatisfied and unsatisfying, to something else has long attracted attention of those who attempt to situate her behavior with regard to Eliot’s intended instruction. Eliot’s famous metaphor of the pier glass offers a basis for one interpretation, extolling the reader to remember that every individual is the center of her own universe, and that around her center all others serve merely as constellations. Characters in the novel exhibit such awareness with varying degrees of success. The novel too works toward this end, forcing the reader to switch perspectives, as when it poses that self-reflexive question “Why always Dorothea?” (278).

Yet Dorothea is interesting because she seems from the novel’s opening to insist on her alterity, to insist that she is unlike all others. The novel supports Dorothea’s fundamental difference from those around her by pairing her actions or responses with those of another character: her reaction to Sir James with Celia’s reaction, her ambitions to Lydgate’s ambitions, and her relationship with Ladislaw versus Rosamond’s. In part, she becomes complacent in her perceived radical alterity and thus cannot negotiate herself among the others around her, and this compla-
cency poses an obstacle to richly mutual relationships with her friends, family, and neighbors. By grouping all of those people into a massive “other” and asserting herself in opposition to them, Dorothea nurses a self-righteousness that is destructive. She, like the omniscient narrator, affects knowledge of all. Dorothea is committed to working against the conventional, and although the young woman might believe that she accords independence to others as to herself, the novel demonstrates that she has instead constructed the collective other purely out of her self. Their ostensible alterity is instead an inversion of Dorothea’s dearly held opinions and beliefs.

To Dorothea, her sister Celia seems to be a representative of conventionality. But Celia actually exhibits a corrective moderation to Dorothea’s earnestness. Even Celia’s nickname for her sister, “Dodo,” indicates the contrast between the sisters: to Celia, Dorothea seems both as antiquated as the extinct bird and as foolish as the word has come to imply. Celia sees plainly what Dorothea often refuses to acknowledge, and she informs Dorothea of this difference, telling her sister that “You always see what nobody else sees; it is impossible to satisfy you; yet you never see what is quite plain” (36). Celia relishes the moments when she can prick the soap bubble of Dorothea’s mind: “She dared not confess it to her sister in any direct statement, for that would be laying herself open to a demonstration that she was somehow or other at war with all goodness. But on safe opportunities, she had an indirect mode of making her negative wisdom tell upon Dorothea, and calling her down from her rhapsodic mood by reminding her that people were staring, not listening” (32). A further reminder of the disconnect between what people actually thought of Dorothea and what she imagined they thought is communicated in Celia’s understanding that to contradict Dorothea would be to declare “war with all goodness.”

The distinction between staring and listening is a subtle one to recognize or understand, and here Celia demonstrates an awareness and command of life in society with others that Dorothea cannot. It recalls the relationship between Hetty and Dinah. Though regarded as the less serious of the two, Hetty has a more sensible grasp of the community than Dinah does. And Dorothea, like Dinah, exists on aspirations that ennable her and set her apart from that community. But that imposed separation ultimately inhibits the connection she so longs for. Dinah wants to touch others through religion, and Dorothea through good works, but neither can effect her desired result in part because of their overdetermined, insistent self-differentiation. Theirs are not genuine encounters with radical alterity, but rather inverted projections of the self onto the wholesale “other.”
Dorothea is only one of many perpetrators of this version of self-centered-ness. Her uncle reads Dorothea in light of his own critique of her ideology: she is too religious, and thus when “She was an image of sorrow,” her uncle “at once concluded Dorothea’s tears to have their origin in her excessive religiousness” (37) without curiosity about their true origin. And the good Sir James also misreads Dorothea, interpreting her reactions according to his own predilections and preference: “Her roused temper made her colour deeply, as she returned his greeting with some haughtiness. Sir James interpreted the heightened colour in the way most gratifying to himself, and thought he never saw Miss Brooke looking so handsome” (30). So Dorothea is not wrong to object to such characterizations, which are to her indicative of communal views in general, though she regards herself as immune to such solipsism.

And thus Dorothea works diligently to set herself apart from the vague plural others, and in some cases her contrariness is simply that. When Dorothea is in Rome on her honeymoon, Will Ladislaw is astonished by her unwillingness to enjoy or even appreciate the city’s rich artistic offerings. And when she comments on his own artwork, finding it uninspiring, she offers as a consolation: “I never could see any beauty in the pictures which my uncle told me all judges thought very fine” (206). Whom does she deprecate with this statement? Any humility about her inability to appreciate art is undercut by the implicit critique of her uncle and, by extension, “all judges.” Hers is truly a remonstrance against all who are not her, or all who do not share her unique perspective. At this point in the novel she is only beginning to recognize that her husband, the one man whom she has given her approval (and her submission), differs from her imagined version of him. It takes considerably longer for her realization to spread to others: if she had misunderstood Casaubon, might she have similarly misjudged “all judges” whose ideas she had rejected?

Is Dorothea thus the only one out of balance in an otherwise sane world? Is the mob necessarily correct? The narrative voice seems to indicate not: in some cases, Dorothea’s peculiarity seems as such only in relation to others, and others, the narrator reminds, might actually be the odd ones after all: “She would perhaps be hardly characterized enough if it were omitted that she wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind [ . . . ] at a time when public feeling required the meagerness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls and bows, never surpassed by any great race except the Feejeean” (27). Yet even in this seeming defense of Dorothea, who rails against the unnatural fashions of her day, the narrator struggles to articulate the description:
the phrasing “would perhaps be hardly characterized enough if it were omitted that” is remarkable for its murkiness.

If Dorothea represents the complexities of adapting self-abnegation to a relationship with others, *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond Vincy offers an alternate model of the complications facing the individual-in-community. Rosamond Vincy shares with Hetty Sorrel distractingly good looks, family and friends who indulge her whims, a solipsistic worldview, and—in the end—a moment in which she escapes, perhaps surprisingly and fleetingly, from that solipsism. Both women are also mischaracterized by others, who often believe that a pliant and sweet exterior indicates a similar disposition. The novel’s development of Rosy’s relationship with Lydgate provides a basis for development that Hetty lacked: their interaction offers the reader examples of mutual oversight and misunderstanding nearly equal in their depth and frequency. Such misunderstandings are not, the novel emphasizes, due to a lack of concern or due to neglect: “Between him and her indeed there was that total missing of each other’s mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other” (587). Thinking of the other does not ensure thinking as the other or thinking like the other. Their problem is not simply one of missed mental tracks, an image that suggests each recognizes that the other has a separate mental track and might look for it only to miss it—overlook it, jump it, and so forth. Instead, both Lydgate and Rosamond are bound to their own mental tracks, and each has configured the other in terms of him- or herself—they lack an appreciation of genuine, or radical, alterity.

Lydgate’s vision of Rosamond and his expectations of her as a wife are so self-centered and self-indulgent that the narrator marks them as fantasy; his early vision of her existed in a “dreamland” wherein she “appeared to be that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband’s mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone” (583). Even before their marriage, then, Rosy functioned for Lydgate as an example of an imagined perfection, and his vision required a wife to revere and adore her husband exclusively. She was a type, an ideal, and a type of mermaid, not even human.

Tertius Lydgate is not alone in this vision, as Rosy’s unrealistic expectations and imagination matched his before their marriage and received an equally harsh blow from reality: “The Lydgate with whom she had been in love had been a group of airy conditions for her, most of which had disappeared, while their place had been taken by everyday details which must be lived through slowly from hour to hour” (661). So each
partner indulged in nearsighted fantasies about the other, and they built a marriage upon unuttered expectations that were, from the start, impossible to fulfill. Throughout the novel, though, Rosamond’s view of Lydgate is shown to be no momentary lapse in an otherwise thoughtful, rational, expansive mind, but rather a natural by-product of a soul who valued her own circumstances to the exclusion of all others:

In fact there was but one person in Rosamond’s world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked. (665)

Rosamond’s eventual turn outside of herself is thus both unexpected and hard-earned. She was not used to recognizing the desire, or even the existence, of the other, “except as a material cut into shape by her own wishes” (777), and so the encounter with a person and experience profoundly different from her own is a painful process, described in one instance as the other’s feeling being “burnt and bitten into her consciousness” (779).

The coming together of Rosamond and Dorothea stages a meeting of those two kinds of self-centeredness in Eliot’s fiction—one who sacrifices herself at all costs and the other who promotes herself at all costs, and achieving an accurate mutual understanding is both complex and shocking:

It was a newer crisis in Rosamond’s experience than even Dorothea could imagine: she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred toward her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her. (796)

It is the harsh reality that intrudes violently upon Rosamond’s consciousness. She experiences a “great shock,” her “dream-world” is “shattered,” and the realization “breaks” upon her. One source of this intense intrusion of an alternate reality into Rosy’s mind is the realization that her previous assumption about Dorothea’s character was false. The alternate understanding of Dorothea that “shatters” Rosy’s previous opinion, described as it is in negative and even violent terms,
is a less antagonistic, more positive view of Dorothea. That is, Rosy recognizes that Dorothea does not, in fact, “necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her.” While that information may be comforting, while it may render Dorothea more friendly or approachable in Rosamond’s eyes and perhaps allow for the generous turn of Rosamond’s actions, the realization of her alterity is not easy for Rosamond because it requires freeing Dorothea from the long-held internal definition Rosamond maintained.

Negotiating the self in relation to the other, whether an individual or a collective, depends on accepting the limitations of the self rather than acknowledging empirical reality, a distinction that is mirrored in the shape of the realist novel. Seen in this light, the scene in which Mrs. Cadwallader encourages Dorothea to “exert” herself “a little to keep sane, and call things by the same names as other people call them by” (537) appears to be less about the pressures of the bland majority of Middlemarch forcing Dorothea into a state of conformity than it is about Dorothea’s difficulty reconciling her version of reality to those versions experienced by others. Her “stout” response to Mrs. Cadwallader, “I never called everything by the same name that all the people about me did” (537), demonstrates her persistent clinging to her personal vision even if it leaves her woefully out of step with others. Theirs is a conversation about language, about the naming of objects. If we believe that language serves as the basis of the ethical relationship, to refuse to communicate is to shut down the possibility of ethical communion—curiously, something flatly at odds with Dorothea’s stated desires. Further, Middlemarch’s parochial social scene is genuinely chafing to Dorothea’s temperament. Middlemarch is described early in the novel as a place where “sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know how to avoid them” (9). And yet Dorothea’s uncle, who is undeniably a game neighbor, and who ensures his sanity according to the status quo, nevertheless implores Dorothea to reconsider her marriage plans, which he views as conforming too rigidly to her set expectations: “But there are oddities in things,” he argues, “Life isn’t cast in a mould—not cut out by rule and line, and that sort of thing” (41). She struggles “in the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of paths that led no wither” (29). But Dorothea works through that struggle, learning her way through the maze; Eliot’s realism depends upon her depiction of that negotiation, that process of learning the stakes of living in relation.
Altruism and the Affect of Learning

Recognizing that not everyone operates in the same manner as oneself is—as depicted in Eliot’s fiction—a difficult, though learnable, proposition. Despite the difficulty of that recognition, and despite the very real possibility that one may never reach perfect insight, working toward this realization is imperative and contains the promise of the kind of empathic extension the author endorses. It is through this working-toward that humanity proves itself. The impossibility of reaching the ultimate realization is no deterrent. Such aspiration resonates with the realist goal: to describe accurately and comprehensively the human condition may be an impossibility, but as a goal the desire elicits no bad faith.

In Eliot’s fiction, that impossibility is rendered through tropes of illegibility and illiteracy. Those who read others often draw mistaken conclusions; those who are read are often read incorrectly. A shared unwillingness to recognize this possibility of misreading or being misread demonstrates why characters such as Hetty are such a problem—it is not because they are inherently bad, but because they are too easily misread. They present cases where others’ assumptions are wrong; they embody the realist doctrine of unknowability. Within their plots, both Hetty and Rosamond are sacrificed—Hetty to death in America, and Rosamond to a life of banality—but both present the obstacle that another must encounter on the way to growth, serving as a check on easy assumptions. Such characters instantiate the knowledge that the insurmountable difference between individuals is not due to beauty, ignorance, or any other particular physical or personal trait. The unknowability of the other is instead inherent and universal. Eliot’s narrative voice is complicit in this lesson, as its tone is one of certainty, and the narrator affects an accurate omniscient comprehensiveness that individuals must necessarily lack.

With her focus on learning, Eliot forestalls the ease of immediate access, a point supported through her portrayal of both extremes: the narcissist whose beauty (for example) leads to her being misread, and the self-abnegating characters, whose inborn or ingrained desire to help others still requires a movement into genuine awareness of alterity before their good intentions can be fulfilled. That awareness must not be a function of insisting that oneself is different from everyone else—the kind of wholesale alterity that marks Dorothea and Dinah. They are confusing to their communities. They are misunderstood. Unfortunately, both women insist upon this difference as a matter of point, and yet in
doing so end up denying the kind of unique sovereignty to those who make up their community as well as to themselves.28 Even the seemingly most understanding, most compassionate person must learn.

The importance of that process is made evident in Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*,29 whose main character, Latimer, has the ability to experience others’ consciousness, and with that ability he ought to be perfectly suited to life within Eliot’s universe. There seems to be no greater human facility within Eliot’s oeuvre; as Sally Shuttleworth puts it, “Latimer is granted the gifts George Eliot deemed crucial to narrative art: an ability to enter into the minds of others, and the power to foresee the future.”30 Latimer’s “previsions” or “presentiments” do not, however, ensure productive affective relationships, but rather the opposite. His is a miserable and lonely life, and his only sustained interest in another human being was directed at a woman who presented “the only exception” to Latimer’s “unhappy gift of insight.” About his future wife, Bertha, and Bertha alone, he was “always in a state of uncertainty.” Such uncertainty is tantalizing, even if only to the extent that it allows Latimer to maintain his fantasy that his future wife might think fondly of him; he is “unable to imagine the total negation in another mind of the emotions that are stirring in his own.”31 If this is what life looks like when one has genuine empathy for others—when one can truly feel what it is to be another—why should we encourage empathy? In seeking to explain this fissure, some point to Eliot’s biography, insisting that the novella was written in a moment of personal crises. But more recently, critics have begun to take on questions of the relationship between knowledge and sympathy more directly. Kate Flint asks, “If sympathy toward others is a desirable thing, is it only possible to express this sympathy when we do not know as much as it would be possible to know about the other person?”32 Flint concludes by noting that in *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot counters the Victorian desire of making all things visible by instead “arguing that we perhaps would not want to see where we might be able to see,” privileging the imagination over the scientific eye.33 Rae Greiner and Thomas Albrecht follow Flint by adding shades to the conclusion that Eliot’s depiction of sympathetic extension in *The Lifted Veil* is in line with, and not in opposition to, her larger ethical project. Albrecht suggests that through a complex treatment of characters, the invocation of visual metaphors for other-awareness, and its indictment of Latimer’s solipsism, *The Lifted Veil* is consistent with Eliot’s broader conception of ethical engagement, an engagement predicated on the apprehension of difference.34 I would go further to suggest that *The Lifted Veil* not only champions a selfless apprehension of alterity (an ability that, as Albrecht notes, Latimer
lacks) but also places grave importance on learning. It is too easy for Latimer, who gains his ability to see others’ thoughts as a result of an illness. He thus assumes access to others in ways they cannot contradict, shutting down any possibility for surprise, and ensuring that even his engagement with a supernatural ability to experience another’s reality is ultimately rendered a function of himself.

The recognition of radical alterity that Eliot endorses must be predicated on hard work: the hard work of earning literacy, and the pain of bumping up against the other’s desires, experience, and consciousness. The ability always to anticipate the other precludes that collision. This is true of Eliot’s characters just as it is true of Eliot’s readers, and the glory of Eliot’s work is that it shows a movement into that kind of awareness-of-limits which must precede intersubjectivity. That movement is not sufficient, but merely necessary, as some actors (Hetty, Rosamond) will retreat from their encounter with alterity and resume life—or death—as it had been. But others are able to effectively incorporate a newly nuanced understanding of the other into their lives—this is the work that enables Adam, Dinah, and Dorothea to end the novels facing a promising vista of potentiality.