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I

Trans Realism and Its Referents

“Woman’s genital organs arouse an inseparable blend of horror and pleasure; they at once awaken and appease castration anxiety.”

— SARAH KOFMAN, *THE ENIGMA OF WOMAN:
WOMAN IN FREUD’S WRITINGS*

WHATEVER ELSE LITERARY REALISM has in common with psychoanalysis, they share at least this: they are too often assessed purely on the basis of their depictions of objects and too rarely understood as practices of self-care.¹ Within realism, the objects that detain readers consist of individual characters or character types, historical situations or themes, and poignant little details. Within psychoanalysis, they can include luridly contrived pathologies, theories of psychological development, and vivid symptoms. Yet for their creators, realism and psychoanalysis were both also techniques to be evaluated not just on the basis of their elegance, but on the basis of their efficacy. George Eliot and Sigmund Freud both claimed for their writing a therapeutic power that could help readers and patients lead happier and more fulfilling lives. These descriptive and normative goals sometimes conflicted.² But the therapeutic impulse was never fully subordinated to the abstract in either Freud’s or Eliot’s career, so that as late as his “New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” in 1932, Freud could privilege the “practical” task of psychoanalysis (which called for a “technique”) over the “theoretical task,” which “can only be a theory.”³ Likewise, it was not merely the young Eliot of *Adam Bede* (1859) that extolled the power fiction holds to moderate unrealistic expectations; the narrator of *Middlemarch* laid down a truth for all of that novel’s grateful readers when concluding that “things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been.”⁴ These techniques, of realism and psychoanalysis, work to deprive

readers and patients of the pleasure that beautiful but damaging fantasies provide and to supplant that pleasure with the deeper sense of well-being that comes from having grown into the ugly world. That, in short, is the premise for this essay, which attempts to describe the rhetoric of “realness,” that Eliot and Freud, perhaps surprisingly, share: an address designed to persuade their patients and readers to relinquish a beautiful fantasy and face a discomfiting truth about the inadequacy of their own material existence. Against the Romantics’ attempt to make the desirable possible, realism and psychoanalysis persuaded their addressees that the possible was, after all, desirable.

Of course, as soon as we have accepted that premise, we realize it cannot possibly be so simple—that the relation of self to self encompasses the regime of objects in crucial ways. Our problem derives from the complexity of the word *real*, which means a number of different (and contradictory) things, including: theoretically plausible (realistic); mimetically reproductive of the material world (naively realist); actually existing; praiseworthy on the basis of honesty or authenticity. To take an important recent addition to this sequence: in *Redefining Realness*, Janet Mock reframes the transgender coming-out narrative to place realness not as a type of socialization (that is, realness as passing) but as a theory of subjectivation (that is, realness as accepting an apparently impossible truth about oneself).⁵ The titular definition that Mock contests derives from the vocabulary of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1991) and specifically from the film’s “sage” (Mock’s term), who defines realness as, again in Mock’s words, “the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviate from the norm.”⁶ Yet although it is an “ability,” or a complex of abilities, Mock argues that trans women and femmes do not understand realness as a kind of performance but as a kind of embodiment: “a trans woman or femme queen embodies ‘realness’ and femininity beyond performance by existing in the daylight.”⁷ This realness is not ratified by the outside world—“a world that told me daily that who I was would never be ‘real’ or compare to the ‘real’ thing”—so, accordingly, it is felt as a relinquishing of both social interpellation and egoistic control of a trans woman’s personhood; it is felt as surrender.⁸ The last sentence of *Redefining Realness* is: “Eventually, I emerged, and surrendered to the brilliance, discovering truth, beauty, and peace that was already mine.”⁹

In literary historical terms, we might say that Mock’s account of realness dislodges the term from the domain of romantic irony and reconstructs it as a realist psychology. Defending *Paris Is Burning* against the antitrans feminists for whom mtf trans expression is necessarily “an imitation based on ridicule

and degradation,” Judith Butler argues that “identification is always an ambivalent process . . . [that] involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated.”¹⁰ Not so for Mock, whose narrative indicates that the very instability of social regimes of identification and introjection necessitates the grounding of the sexed subject in a psychic terrain reducible neither to socialization nor embodiment. What Mock calls here “the brilliance” is often casually referred to in medical terms as gender dysphoria, and I shall refer to it here as *trans realism*. By using this term, I mean to introduce into trans theoretical writing a term responsive to the ontologies of trans life absent the categories of parody and drag and to orient us away from the descriptions of trans as instability, fuckery, or interstitiality that reduce such ontologies to intellectual or aesthetic patterns. The realism on which Mock’s redefinition turns may be characterized as the overwhelming feeling that one’s body is not sexed adequately and that one’s claim on the world depends on a self-shattering acknowledgment of that fact; the method by which it is accessed is not experimentation but submission, not appropriation but surrender.¹¹

The notion that realness, the only realness worth the name, derives from a rejection of the social coding of the sexed body is, I will argue, surprisingly consistent with the realist rhetoric of Eliot and Freud, both of whom took the reversal of an apparently unassailable premise about the sexed body as the most real aspect of their projects. Indeed, I will argue that our understanding of Eliot’s literary realism and Freud’s psychoanalysis is merely hypothetical and formal until we have reckoned with the account of transsexuality that underpins both these projects. Trans realism appears in Eliot as the ethical injunction to re-sex the body, an injunction that, in startlingly literal terms, the author formerly known as Mary Ann Evans materialized in the masculine figure of Eliot, a figure for whom the term “masculine pseudonym” has never proven persuasive. In Freud, it appears as the bedrock fact of sexed subjectivity, but a subjectivity only partially or tentatively grafted onto the biological matter of the body and returning to consciousness as the two perennial truths of neurotic experience—penis envy and castration complex—whose literally fundamental presence within proprioceptive consciousness proves to the neurotic subject that, at any moment, sex can be and is subject to change. The second step of this essay’s argument, then, is to demonstrate not merely that realism operates as a technique for these two writers, but that they both, somewhere near to the center of their intellectual projects, sought to reorient

through technique the subject's relation to the sexed body. For Eliot, realism will not have been achieved before the reader has fully grasped the clumsy, ugly truth of the human body that therefore he or she is, a truth that must be imparted through novelistic craftwork, and indeed comes to define the novelist's craft in such moments as Eliot reaches to account for it. For Freud, castration complex and penis envy form, on the one hand, the ontological ground of neurosis and therefore the asymptote that psychoanalytic psychotherapy continually approaches; on the other hand (or rather, by virtue of that asymptotic relation), the utopian possibility of overcoming or thwarting penis envy or the castration complex suffuses Freud's writing on technique, an apparently inert metadiscourse by which the physician can prove the practical utility of the psychoanalytic method. The type of realism that comes into view when one foregrounds the question of technique, then, is not necessarily mimetic; nor does it in any necessary sense enjoy a privileged relation to history, as György Lukács argues.¹² On the contrary, a negation of the actually existing world's conventional pieties is the foundational gesture of both Eliotic and Freudian rhetoric. But this is not to deny that the normative element of realism is intimately connected with the descriptive or aesthetic element. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) treats these meanings of realism separately, as "characterized by faithfulness of representation" (which it dates to 1829) and "concerned with, or characterized by, a practical view of life" (which it dates to 1869),¹³ but as Raymond Williams points out in his genealogy of realism, the two are hardly so separate. The "practical view of life" is, after all, the view from the boardroom, and accordingly, "realistic" is "an immensely popular word among businessmen and politicians."¹⁴ That realist novels have plots, and that the success in those plots is usually figured simply as commercial gain or heterosexual world-building, might incline us to think that realism has established the contract of self-care in what Fredric Jameson describes as "bad faith": it simply wished, after all, to hollow out some desires that might have been troubling to the bourgeois class that produced and circulated novels and, using a complex network of stylistic trickery, rewire their husks with less ambitious fantasies.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the realness of Eliot's realism does not depend on any judgment about the ontology of the worlds it calls into being. "Better knowledge is ultimately hidden knowledge," the psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose observes of *Middlemarch*: true and hidden within the subject supposed to know.¹⁶

Consider the following passage of the novel, which has some claim on being the single realest moment in the whole novel and whose "awful fidelity"

was picked up by Eliot's reviewer in the *Edinburgh Review*.¹⁷ Nicholas Bulstrode, publicly shamed and ruined for his financial misdeeds and his part in the death of the alcoholic, Raffles, sits awaiting his wife, Harriet, to return, not knowing how she will respond to his disgrace:

It was eight o'clock in the evening before the door opened and his wife entered. He dared not look up at her. He sat with his eyes bent down, and as she went towards him she thought he looked smaller—he seemed so withered and shrunken. A movement of new compassion and old tenderness went through her like a great wave, and putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder, she said, solemnly but kindly, "Look up, Nicholas." He raised his eyes with a little start and looked at her half amazed for a moment: her pale face, her changed, mourning dress, the trembling about her mouth, all said, "I know"; and her hands and eyes rested gently on him. He burst out crying and they cried together, she sitting at his side. They could not yet speak to each other of the shame which she was bearing with him or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness as she would have shrunk from flakes of fire. She could not say, "How much is only slander and false suspicion?" And he did not say, "I am innocent."¹⁸

The goal of this passage is to make even the experience of being shamed desirable, and that goal is achieved with brutal efficiency: the recitation of oddly zeugmatic phrases ("his eyes bent down"; "her changed, mourning dress") disorients the reader enough to find the conspicuous plain-spokenness profoundly reassuring, as though we were ourselves undergoing the experience of grace Harriet confers upon Nicholas. Especially the pacifying repetitions, which resonate with an almost maternal sleepiness: "was silent . . . was silent"; "she could not say . . . he did not say." The passage risks a kind of pedantic literalism—"putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder"—in order to produce a powerful aesthetic of straightforwardness. Although the novel's narrator articulates this climactic state of intimate incapacitation between spouses, for the most part, as a series of negatives, nonetheless the "mutual consciousness" that obtains between the two characters is tender and even utopian; Harriet's "promise of faithfulness," after all, indicates to the reader (though not, explicitly, to Nicholas) that the condition that exists between them at this moment has

some chance of enduring. But nonetheless, the encounter between the Bulstrodes is not epiphanic, if that word implies discovery and heroic breakthrough. Nobody learns anything, and Harriet's "new compassion" is tempered by an "old tenderness." Rather, in this powerful moment, *Middlemarch* demarcates an aesthetic realness predicated on acceptance of a shared condition; of two people beginning to recover from their despair, to heal the shame of one and the suspicion of the other. To describe this moment as realism is to ascribe that aesthetic not to objective, but to subjective phenomena and, in this sense, is one of any number of moments in the novel where the same happens: when Dorothea finally confronts her feelings about Casaubon, and when she and Will are finally honest with each other.

Nor, obviously, does psychoanalysis primarily represent objective phenomena; just as the vehicle for Eliot's realism was fiction, Freud's stock-in-trade mostly consisted of fantasy on both sides of the ledger: his patients' dreams and stories for his own grand mythopoetic narratives. The name Freud gives to the cognitive experience of the real world—the reality principle—is one of the richest and most contradictory ideas in his oeuvre: the reality principle entails an exchange of fantasy for reality, where what one loses (fantasy) is both present and false; what one gains (reality) is both absent and true. The psychical difficulties of that implied quadratic detain Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in their brief gloss on Freud's reality principle, in which from multiple angles they strive to demonstrate that the mental experience of reality does not supersede but in fact precedes fantasy, just as the instinct to self-preservation must have preceded the sexual instinct.¹⁹ So readjusted, reality within psychoanalysis is not the sole authority against which instincts and desires are tested, but a felt dimension of psychic life itself. Not merely one fantasy among many, but not the singular antithesis of fantasy either, reality can only enter into psychic space, as it were, obliquely.

In short, it was the remit of both Eliotic realism and Freudian psychoanalysis, then, to subsume both the realm of objects and the entire business of getting to know them and talk about them, within the domain of what Michel Foucault calls the "*epimeleia heautou*," or the care of the self; glossing Marcus Aurelius, Foucault describes self-care as "a sustained effort in which general principles are reactivated and arguments are adduced that persuade one not to let oneself become angry at others, at providence, or at things."²⁰ As Foucault's mixture of passive construction ("are adduced") and middle voice ("persuade one not to let oneself become") suggests, however, self-care is not as simple as it sounds and involves a nuanced rhetorical positioning in which

the analyst/novelist's task is to persuade the patient/analysand to give up a satisfying hallucination in favor of a less satisfying, but *realer*, self-relation.²¹ In this sense, the rhetoric of ugliness is an attempt to answer the most serious objection to a self-relation of realism, which Freud himself articulates in his 1917 paper "Mourning and Melancholia":

It is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.²²

Not only does Freud appear to contradict the possibility of realism in the sense outlined above, he does so in a pair of sentences that could almost, were it not for the words "libidinal" and "psychosis," be taken for Eliotic—ascribing a hard truth to "general observation" before illustrating it with the authority of personal experience.²³ And this problem concerning the relation between the pedagogical and erotic dimensions of the realist project has been at the center of a number of recent major essays on Eliot. Gallagher's essay concludes with the claim that Eliot "is the greatest English realist because she not only makes us curious about the quotidian, not only convinces us that knowing its particularity is our ultimate ethical duty, but also, and supremely, makes us want it."²⁴ David Kurnick, perceiving in Gallagher's formulation an echo of a nineteenth-century debate over "whether the novel reader was (erotically) entranced or (intellectually) edified," answers: "always both . . . implicit in Eliot's method of making characters is the idea that novel reading offers access to a kind of insight through submission."²⁵ And a formulation similar to Gallagher's opens a recent essay by Mary Ann O'Farrell: the admission that "George Eliot makes me want to be bad."²⁶ Though Gallagher and O'Farrell surely have different objects in mind, yet how suggestive their common formulation "to make [one] to want," a formulation that resolves Freud's doubt regarding the abandonment of a libidinal position by synthesizing an external injunction (exhorting the patient to accept an ethical norm) with an internal decompression (permitting the patient to acknowledge what they already want)—what psychoanalysts might call a therapeutic decaathesis, or unblocking.

We can already see that self-care is a complex procedure, glimpsed only intermittently throughout these two oeuvres, one that must to some degree efface their technique. James Strachey, the editor of the English translation, remarks that "the relative paucity of Freud's writings on technique, as well as

his hesitations and delays over their production, suggests that there was some feeling of reluctance on his part to publishing this kind of material,” attributing that reluctance to Freud’s dislike of “the notion of future patients knowing too much about his technique” as well as his insistence that “a proper mastery of the subject [of psychoanalysis] could only be acquired from clinical experience and not from books.”²⁷ Moreover, in the *Papers on Technique* itself, Freud expresses his awareness that his understandable anxiety that patients’ access to psychoanalytic technique would ruin the magic (specifically, would drive the patient’s resistance to treatment further into the unconscious and distort their dreams) was, profoundly, a question concerning the elegance of any psychoanalysis requiring vocabulary drawn from the discourse of aesthetics:

I submit, therefore, that dream-interpretation should not be pursued in analytic treatment as an art for its own sake, but that its handling should be subject to those technical rules that govern the conduct of the treatment as a whole. Occasionally, of course, one can act otherwise and allow a little free play to one’s theoretical interest; but one should always be aware of what one is doing.²⁸

The rhetoric of psychoanalytic technique therefore accomplishes two quite divergent ends: first, it protects the patient from knowledge that will inhibit their progress; second, it protects the analyst from the embarrassment of having been caught up in their own aesthetic experience. If one therapeutic purpose of psychoanalysis is the strategic disenchantment of aesthetic phenomena—the draining of the fantasy of the beautiful—then the rhetoric of technique appears both as a pure discursivity deprived of any aesthetic illusion and as capturing the rhetoric of aesthetics (“art for its own sake”; “a little free play”) and ascribing it to the analyst’s experience of the treatment.²⁹ In order to maintain the ruse, however, Freud notoriously foreclosed that very aesthetic (and erotic) dimension of the analyst’s own experience in the same *Papers*, offering nothing more than a “warning against any tendency to a counter-transference which may be present in [the analyst’s] own mind.”³⁰

The repudiation of countertransferential expression comports, clearly enough, with Freud’s general injunction in the *Papers on Technique* that “the doctor should be opaque to his patients and, like a mirror, should show them nothing but what is shown to him.”³¹ The impassive word “doctor,” moreover, replaces references to the more labile young and eager psychoanalysts, whose understandable but callow impulses towards individualizing themselves for their patients Freud seeks to redress. On the other hand, the *Papers on Technique*

offer an account of psychoanalytic practice notable for its flexibility and frank emphasis on the analyst's spontaneity. There is only, Freud announces, "a single precept" to be borne in mind, which is that "the doctor must put himself in a position to make use of everything he is told for the purposes of interpretation."³² This rule is merely the "counterpart to the 'fundamental rule of psychoanalysis' which is laid down for the patient," that is, to the principle of letting one's speech be governed by free association that Freud outlines in "On Beginning the Treatment": "you must say [the unimportant or nonsensical thing] precisely because you feel an aversion to doing so. Later on you will find out and learn to understand the reason for this injunction, which is really the only one you have to follow."³³ Lest the new analyst suspect Freud of overstating the case, he also clarifies his position that technique is useful to the extent that it enables the free play of the interpretive faculty (which alone will ensure the success of the treatment) and unhelpful to the extent that it displaces the metapsychological research merely to become another metadiscourse constricting the flow of language and interpretation between patient and doctor:

One of the claims of psychoanalysis to distinction is, no doubt, that in its execution research and treatment coincide; nevertheless, after a certain point, the technique required for the one opposes that required for the other. It is not a good thing to work on a case scientifically while treatment is still proceeding—to piece together its structure, to try to foretell its further progress, and to get a picture from time to time of the current state of affairs, as scientific interest would demand. Cases which are devoted from the first to scientific purposes and are treated accordingly suffer in their outcome; while the most successful cases are those in which one proceeds, as it were, without any purpose in view, allows oneself to be taken by surprise by any new turn in them, and always meets them with an open mind, free from any presuppositions.³⁴

The desire for an iterable protocol by which symptoms might reliably be alleviated encounters its formal opposite: the free play of the faculties in an aesthetic state of contemplation. The result is a technique of zero technique—or, rather, a technique that subtends the discourse only as rhetoric, as the insistence that doing nothing, "without any purpose in view," is the most technically astute technique of all.

When the first idea came to Freud in 1909 for the text that became the *Papers on Technique* was "a little memorandum of maxims and rules of technique," supposed to circulate among a very limited readership of practicing analysts.³⁵

The six papers themselves were written and published separately between 1911 and 1913, and, despite the sequence of their publication being interrupted by other papers—crucially, for these purposes, by “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911), the first major articulation of the “reality principle”—they were republished together in 1918 and are still treated as a single text in the *Standard Edition*. The *Papers on Technique*, that is to say, exist in an unusual relation to the rest of Freud’s oeuvre; we read them in a breach of professional protocol quite unlike the breach of privacy in which we read, for example, the dreams of Freud’s unnamed patients or the detailed diagnoses of the more celebrated ones. A similar breach, or “pause” is the precondition for the self-theorizing of realism in Eliot’s first novel proper, *Adam Bede*, which breaks off a third of the way through for “Chapter XVII: In Which the Story Pauses a Little.”³⁶ Or rather, the narrative is interrupted by a voice ascribed to the reader:

“This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!” I hear one of my readers exclaim. “How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things—quite as good as reading a sermon.”³⁷

This chapter has been examined in more or less every theoretical framing of Eliot’s realist aesthetics to date—understandably, since it is so uniquely positioned as an argument for realism and therefore invitingly orthogonal to realism. Readers of novels were, and are, of course, used to being addressed. Indeed, Eliot has already done so by the second sentence of *Adam Bede*, in a tone closer to a contract than an intimate disclosure: “This is what I undertake to do for you, reader.”³⁸ But to be the object of a narrator’s prosopopoeia is an altogether more unusual affair—no less because, introduced now as “one of my readers” rather than the singular “you,” any intimacy conveyed by narrative apostrophe has been decisively violated. Rather than a confidant or even a co-negotiator, the reader is cast as merely one among a mob of dullards—indeed, put in the curious position of not being the addressed reader, but another reader over whose shoulder somebody else is heckling the narrator, who responds:

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable

opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath.³⁹

The narrator's response revises one model for realist narration, the mirror, and replaces it with another, the "oath." As we have seen with Freud's injunction that analysts behave like mirrors, the mirror metaphor was not as simple as he, or indeed Eliot, might have wanted. In *Adam Bede's* first sentence, the narrator had conjured an image of mimetic reproduction supervened not only by an Orientalist idiolect, but by an image contrived to conjoin opacity with reflectiveness: "With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past."⁴⁰ J. Hillis Miller has synthesized this image elegantly: "The mirror mirrors itself, not an external world which corresponds point for point to the sequence of the narrative."⁴¹ But the "as if" clause conjoining narrative art to legal testimony is surely no less complicated in the context of a novel whose narrative resolution depends on a religious confessor's capacity to obtain a truth that the witness-box had been unable to supply. Such witnesses who appeared in the trial of Hetty Sorrel for infanticide are not depicted but described to Adam (who waits outside the courtroom) by Bartle Massey in gently cynical terms: "the counsel they've got for her puts a spoke in the wheel whenever he can, and makes a deal to do with cross-examining the witness, and quarrelling with the other lawyers. That's all he can do for the money they give him."⁴² When the novel's central event (Hetty's murder of her child) is finally narrated, it is not in the witness-box but "In the Prison" (the name of the chapter)—and not to a courtroom weighing evidence, and therefore sensitive to rhetorical construction, but to the confessor Dinah Morris, whose only role is "to be with you, Hetty—not to leave you—to stay with you—to be your sister to the last."⁴³ Indeed, the realness that Hetty's confession approaches, like the realness of the encounter between the Bulstrodes, is conditioned upon the verdict already having been passed—a species of honesty not positioned as an alternative to the witness-box, but as a type of narrative dependent on the functioning, and then departure, of the social apparatus of judgment. The difference between the style of Hetty's confession and that of the narrator of *Adam Bede* is

more than that the character's speech is spoken ("subsumed to her own story as orally remembered and renewed," as Garrett Stewart puts it) and the narrator's written.⁴⁴ Rather, the prison scene captures a version of realism whose telos is purgative, not persuasive, the effect being a story that is both profoundly inconsistent ("I did do it, Dinah"; "I didn't kill it"; "I didn't kill it myself"; "I couldn't kill it any other way"; "I put it down there and covered it up"; "I couldn't cover it quite up") and, obviously, true.⁴⁵

To return to chapter 17: the mirror and the witness-box having been raised and, the first explicitly and the second ironically, complicated as defenses of realism, the narrator sets up a third possibility, that of readerly self-interest. The reader's objection describes a first-order pleasure that might be obtained from the broad-brush caricatures Eliot is eschewing—or at least claiming to eschew:

Perhaps you will say, "Do improve the facts a little, then; make them more accordant with those correct views which it is our privilege to possess. The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed entangled affair. Let all people who hold unexceptionable opinions act unexceptionably. Let your most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and your virtuous ones on the right. Then we shall see at a glance whom we are to condemn, and whom we are to approve. Then we shall be able to admire, without the slightest disturbance of our prepossessions: we shall hate and despise with that true ruminant relish which belongs to undoubting confidence."⁴⁶

Before describing the narrator's response, let me note in passing that the first interlocutor—"one of my readers"—appears to have been swapped out for another character, "perhaps you." The styles of the passages are a little different too: the first, the reader that was, so to speak, addressing the narrator from over your shoulder, was impetuous and enthusiastic; "perhaps you" is pompous, cruel, and very clearly a satirical personification. The narrator's response, however, does not register that switch, and turns instead to appeal to the reader's self-interest:

But, my good friend, what will you do then with your fellow-parishioner who opposes your husband in the vestry?—with your newly-appointed vicar, whose style of preaching you find painfully below that of his regretted predecessor?—with the honest servant who worries your soul with her one failing?—with your neighbour, Mrs. Green, who was really kind to you in

your last illness, but has said several ill-natured things about you since your convalescence?—nay, with your excellent husband himself, who has other irritating habits besides that of not wiping his shoes? These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience.⁴⁷

This second, more satirically constructed interlocutor is now possessed of an ostentatious set of predicates, whose conspicuous features the reader is, paradoxically, invited to adopt for herself: you have been sick but have recovered; you are a propertied and married woman whose husband holds some ecclesiastical position; you have no realistic hope of escaping a living situation that, evidently, brings you little joy. This is the same procedure in reverse, I think, as the characterization of Mary Garth that Gallagher details. There, a rhetorical construction ostensibly designed to render Mary representative of a type (“ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street tomorrow”) proceeds instead by superadding characterizing details such as “perfect little teeth” that render Mary less of a type, but more of a character. Leading, Gallagher observes, to this remarkable effect: “the progression the reader is asked to follow from sighting a Mary to tasting one, from distanced viewing to more intimate sensation, figures the movement from type to fictional particularity as, paradoxically, a process of increasing embodiment.”⁴⁸ Here, that fictional embodiment is, even more paradoxically, the reader’s own: if, stuck in romantic fantasies about human beings, we find ourselves unable to accept the necessary problems of everyday life, the proposed solution is to cultivate a love for the “ugly, stupid, inconsistent” people that, implicitly, we have allowed ourselves to become.

Over a few more paragraphs, Eliot’s narrator illustrates the proposition that ugly people are to be not merely accepted, but desired, in order that readers learn to accept the inevitable disenchantment of the world. The bodies in question are always sexed and exhibited with sadistic, satirical precision.⁴⁹ The major theme that emerges from their descriptions is erotic desire, the type of which is introduced through “an awkward bridegroom” and “a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride” surrounded by “elderly and middle-aged friends . . . with very irregular noses and lips”—an entire social confection of heterosexual defectiveness, which the author attaches to other stock characters

as well: a “friend or two” of the narrator, on whom “the Apollo curl . . . would be decidedly trying,” and the “motherly lips” of the women who admire them; the “young heroes of middle stature and feeble beards” and the “wife who waddles,” with whom they permit themselves to be “happily settled.”⁵⁰ What might feel like an oversupply of examples of the same thing drives towards a payoff whose effect is likewise dependent on the quantitative difference between beautiful and ugly people: “There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can’t afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men.”⁵¹ That is to say, although “ugly” here is the underprivileged side of a binary construction, that construction is not merely reversed—this is not merely “an inverted romance,” as Ian Watt calls the mistaken view of realism as simply “life from the seamy side.”⁵² Rather, the ubiquity of bodily dysphoria works to break a primal link between beauty and desire, and, like Bulstrode, who is erotically drawn to his own moral failings, we are drawn to confront our physical inadequacies without euphemism—our fatness, our unevenness, the inadequacy of our facial hair—and to encounter ourselves as degraded, and desiring, bodies.

So, this “perhaps you” is no less ugly than the others. But why must “you” be endowed with that especially demeaning characteristic, an attribute that, after all, belongs firmly within the domain of aesthetics, rather than ethics? Some readers have been tempted by a peculiarly tenacious (and, it need hardly be said, deeply misogynist) biographeme that has resurfaced recently in, for example, Rebecca Mead’s *New Yorker* article “George Eliot’s Ugly Beauty” and by Lena Dunham’s 2013 tweet offering the “thesis” that Eliot was “ugly AND horny!”⁵³ In thrall to a barely disguised (and fairly Eliotic) eroticization of the ugly, Henry James panted that she was “magnificently ugly, deliciously hideous”; in a more maudlin mood, Eliot’s early twentieth-century biographer Anne Fremantle reflected that “it must be a terrible sorrow to be young and unattractive: to look in the mirror and see a sallow unhealthy face, with a yellowish skin, straight nose, and mouse-colored hair.”⁵⁴ Yet, though Eliot’s letters and personal writings disclose some self-consciousness when it came to looks, one finds nothing to justify either James’s panting or Fremantle’s concern-trolling. Eliot self-describes as an “anxious, fidgety wretch” and rues that “I had never been good and attractive enough to win any little share of the honest, disinterested friendship there is in the world.”⁵⁵

One word with which Eliot never self-describes, however, is the word that the narrator of *Adam Bede* is especially eager to foist upon the novel’s reader

and the world at large: *ugly*. That word—which does indeed occur frequently in Eliot’s correspondence—is reserved primarily for architecture—and, more specifically, for the type of Continental European buildings that smack of Catholicism: the streets around the Trinità di Monte in Rome; St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome; Rome itself; Prague Castle; the theater in Dresden; the effect of marble statues on the otherwise splendid chapel in San Lorenzo; the leaning towers of Bologna; the Council Chamber in Florence; closer to home, the Welsh seaside town of Llandudno; and, most puzzlingly and ambiguously of all, the effect on a view of the Alps of one’s needing to look at them sideways because the sun is in one’s eyes.⁵⁶ In other words, Eliot reserves for fiction this particular phenomenology of physical displeasure; in the letters, ugliness is not merely unfleshed; it is associated with the very tropes—ornamentation, fashionableness, filigree—against which it is euphemistically contrasted in *Adam Bede*.

some pronouns for the author of *Middlemarch*

Middlemarch’s pronouns are important, and the novel *knows* they are important. I won’t pretend that they are the “key” to *Middlemarch*, a word, in any case, Eliot teaches us to mistrust—to substitute with “tomb.” In one sense, pronouns are important because (like many things Eliot valorizes) they are unremarkable, pragmatic, and nearly invisible. Neither our eyes nor our minds savor them as they do the novel’s spicier words: “*Parerga*,” “*morbidezza*,” “squirrel.” (Though “squirrel” actually occurs twice.) They are words to which *Middlemarch*’s narrator occasionally draws our attention, because they cannot draw attention to themselves. But more to the point, pronouns have come to interest me as I’ve been beginning to write about the rhetoric of realness, because they refer to people and things that they don’t represent—that are “elsewhere in the discourse,” as the *OED* has it. Their unique capacity to specify particular objects (“him”; “me”; “that”) without representing them directly might additionally strike a reader as especially important in the context of realism, a literary mode that also depends on the play of abstraction and particularity, ontogeny and phylogeny, individual and type, among whose recurring themes are the paired questions “how will I be referred to?” and “how should I refer to others?” Pronouns in English possess an additional unique and bizarre characteristic: that, despite the obvious fact that we can group objects in any number of ways—some are evangelical lay preachers, some are merely hamlets, some are wealthy, some have just knocked over the water pitcher,

etcetera—only one such taxonomic scheme exerts a grammatical effect upon the English language: gender. But it is plain weird, if one is prepared to unlearn the fact in a conspicuously naïve way, that the English language uses gendered pronouns at all, as though we required different prepositions to describe all the ways in which objects can be in contact with a tea table rather than a writing table.

Since the notion of a “trans Eliot” has become controversial in recent years—partly, I should admit, because of my own publications on this topic—some clarification on this point might be prudent, though I will suggest that such wariness is occasioned not by any ambiguity in the terms I’m using, but by the extraordinary lengths that scholarship has gone to neutralize, arrest, and curtail gender nonconformity in Eliot’s novels. These might sound like strong words, but they are sometimes used quite self-consciously. For Gillian Beer, for example, Eliot was a writer who “sought to slough off the contextuality of her own name and enter a neutral space for her writing.”⁵⁷ Henry Alley prefers “the quest for anonymity” as a name for Eliot’s vibe, and associates the novelist’s labor with the “hidden life” and “unvisited tombs” of *Middlemarch*’s unhistoric number. I realize of course that Beer does not think Eliot completes this “escape from gender,” or believe such an escape possible, but even as a description of fantasy her account only tells the less important half of the story: the fantasized liberation of a self from a disenchanting (and gendered) body into a data stream of liquid indexicality, apparently as free of gendered particularity as “reality” itself. But a trans Eliot would subordinate that (negative) notion of writing as the erasure of gender to its converse, the (positive) proliferation and conspicuous manifestation of genders, against and apart from those with which we conventionally work.

A second discrimination: “George Eliot,” I contend, was something less than an identity but more than a name for the person whose first given name was “Mary Ann Evans.” As readers of Eliot’s work we are asked, for whatever reasons and with whatever degree of subjective investment, to treat that work as produced by a masculine author-function, an invitation that a large majority of Eliot’s readers have chosen to decline. We have done so for a variety of reasons, some of which (it goes without saying) are very good. Some have limited their speculations to the field of the literary text and choose their gendered pronoun based on an interpretive claim about the narrator (to take two of the best examples of either choice: Robyn Warhol uses “she” for the narrator; D. A. Miller uses “he”), others (Kathryn Bond Stockton is particularly self-conscious about this) problematize their own references to Eliot as *her* in

the name of a feminist politics, and many have concluded that Eliot's masculine self-presentation was merely a tactical disguise designed to fox her publisher, William Blackwood, requiring no particular deference from a readership that considers itself in the know. Even if so, however, the implied distinction between an "authentic" and a "tactical" deployment of masculine or feminine pronouns strikes me as pretty shaky, insofar as no expression of selfhood could, entirely, divest itself of social interest, especially in relation to gender; nor could an attempt to access social or institutional space ever fail, entirely, to symptomatize an interior condition. That problematic provides the setting for what I take to be an antitransphobic approach to Eliot. I ask us, then, to forget the familiar premises with which we are accustomed to approaching this question: centrally the premise that, generally or always, female authors have published under male names in order to obtain social recognition under the conditions of patriarchal oppression—a premise that, while obviously true in many cases, always obscures as much as it reveals (why do we refer to "George Eliot" but not "Currer Bell"?) and, more importantly in the case of Eliot, will tend vastly to oversimplify the psychic motivations for and consequences of such survival strategies.

In the middle of *Middlemarch*, towards the end of the final chapter of the fourth book, Dorothea Brooke rages, for the first time, at a man's "unresponsive hardness."⁵⁸ Her rage takes the form of an interior monologue thick with pronouns: "What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything I do? He wishes he had never married me."⁵⁹ These *he's* refer, obviously, to Dorothea's husband, Edward Casaubon, but Dorothea has not spoken the name "Edward" yet in the novel—she will not do so, indeed, until fifty pages later when she begins their *final* conversation with the question "Are you ill, Edward?"⁶⁰ Literally speaking, then, this masculine pronoun does not replace a proper noun ("Edward" or "Mr. Casaubon" or even "my husband"), but substitute for one. It could only be Edward, but the reader is left to infer this fact because we understand that Edward is the salient *him* in Dorothea's life; the biographical particularity ascribed to Casaubon retreats to make room for a vivid formulation of the symbolic relation between *him* and *me*; "Now she said bitterly, 'It is his fault, not mine.'"⁶¹ If this moment is consequential, for Dorothea or for the novel, it is because she has successfully unlearned the content of her relationship with her husband and grasped it in its purest form, stripped of equivocation and euphemism. Eliot elevates Casaubon's pronoun, in other words, *above* his proper noun, both in the aesthetic sense that the word "he"

means more here than would Edward's name, and in the psychological sense that the "he" enables Dorothea to work through a cathexis that, the novel has taken pains to tell us, has been inhibiting her spiritual and intellectual growth, no less than her erotic development. Later, in another interior monologue, Rosamond Lydgate comes to a similar conclusion about her own marriage, but her use of her husband's proper name—"it was Lydgate whose intention was inexcusable"⁶²—makes clear how little she has grasped about their real symbolic relation, how estranged from him and from herself she has allowed herself to become.

Taken as a discourse on the relationship between character and type, the above analysis might seem merely to contradict, in pedantically linguistic terms, a famous observation of Gallagher's about *Middlemarch*, that the novel's tension between typical signification (that signified by the *he* and *she*) and fictive particularity (that identified by the *Edward* and *Dorothea*) is generally resolved in favor of the latter. Yet, as I have been thinking about this problem, I have been increasingly returning to the French structural linguist Émile Benveniste. In the essays collected in *Problems in General Linguistics*, Benveniste developed a powerful and persuasive theory of language as a vehicle for the communication of subjective experience. At the root of this explanation is an account of the personal pronoun as the logical and psychic foundation of linguistic communication, an avatar exported from consciousness into the world, where it both speaks for interiority and, somehow, reports back to it: "Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to 'me,' becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me."⁶³ Communicative language exists in the crevice between the *I* emitted by one person and the *you* by which it is met; on the other side of that *you* is a person untouchable by language, and on the other side of this *I* is a soul that will never find its way *into* language. This set of conditions demarcates the discursive limits of the branch of linguistics Benveniste calls "pragmatism"—a usage quite distinct from the Peircean mode I discussed above.⁶⁴

Middlemarch indeed draws its readers' attention to many such utterances of *I*. Met by the unwelcome news that her husband is in debt to the tune of three hundred and eighty pounds, Rosamond Lydgate asks, "What can *I* do, Tertius?" to which the narrator appends the observation:

That little speech of four words, like so many others in all languages, is capable by varied vocal inflexions of expressing all states of mind from

helpless dimness to exhaustive, argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamond's thin utterance threw into the words "What can *I* do!" as much neutrality as they could hold.⁶⁵

Here, "neutrality" means inert, spiteful coldness. Rosamond's *I* is sent into the world to delimit her sphere of responsibility, stipulate her dissent from her husband's affective condition, and protect her own subjectivity from contamination by whatever radiation that condition is transmitting back at her. The pronoun as ambassador; the pronoun as prophylaxis. For Benveniste, this entire universe of subjective expression can only exist in the space between two words—the *I* and the *you*. And, like Benveniste, Eliot distinguishes between the rhetorical work of the first- and second-person pronouns and the work of the third-, but reverses the values. When Dorothea comes to her husband to begin what will be their last conversation, we again encounter a discourse thickly populated with pronouns—in this case, *I* and *you*. (In a novel possessed of such lexical largesse as *Middlemarch*, our attention is drawn the more keenly to the passages of simplicity.) Yet where "it is his fault, not mine" enabled Dorothea, however contingently, to surpass a blockage and find a way out of her claustrophobic state, the *I* and *you* that pass between husband and wife stultify, ossify, and fix the two participants in the discourse in their unhappy places.

"Are you ill, Edward?" she said, rising immediately.

"I felt some uneasiness in a reclining posture. I will sit here for a time." She threw wood on the fire, wrapped herself up, and said, "You would like me to read to you?"

"You would oblige me greatly by doing so, Dorothea," said Mr. Casaubon with a shade more meekness than usual in his polite manner. "I am wakeful; my mind is remarkably lucid."

"I fear that the excitement may be too great for you," said Dorothea, remembering Lydgate's cautions.

"No, I am not conscious of undue excitement. Thought is easy."⁶⁶

As though resentfully following the letter, but not the spirit, of advice from a marriage guidance counselor—"use *I*-statements!"—the Casaubons address each other lovelessly through the intermediaries of *I* and *you*. If the passage entails anything like hope, it is administered by a third-person narrator that can say "she" and describe what Dorothea did, "threw wood on the fire,"

without requiring the deadening self-positioning that the dialogue so excruciatingly ekes out. But that is hypothetical: what is punishingly clear is that the ballet of *I* and *you* fails even to achieve the respect for the alterity and personhood of the other that, the imaginary marriage counselor thinks, it has been choreographed to secure. It is precisely through pronouns that Edward Casaubon launches his most outrageous assault on the autonomy of his wife, in the form of his last wish: “It is that you will let me know, deliberately, whether, in case of my death, you will carry out my wishes, whether you will avoid doing what I should deprecate and apply yourself to do what I should desire” (449). In *Middlemarch*, as the *I* seeks to expand its domain over the *you*, the *he* retains the capacity to function independently.

We have been watching a debate take place over how Dorothea should absorb an object—Casaubon—into the world of her own consciousness, not as a mere auxiliary to her ego, but as a constituent and determining *component* of that ego itself. In psychoanalysis, this absorption is called “introjection,” and although best known now through the hyperbolic idea of “incorporation” that Freud describes in *Mourning and Melancholia* and *Instincts*, introjection was first theorized by Sandor Ferenczi in 1909 as a name for the “growing onto” objects that enables people to feel anything about anybody else at all.⁶⁷ Indeed, for Maria Torok, the logic of introjection runs quite counter to that of incorporation, since while the latter idea induces a mode of relation organized around the consumption of a taboo object, an “eminently illegal act,” the former works to unleash repressed libidos that are inaccessible to the ego.⁶⁸ “Thus,” Torok writes, “it is not at all a matter of ‘introjecting’ the object, as is all too commonly stated, but of introjecting the sum total of the drives, and their vicissitudes as occasioned and mediated by the object.”⁶⁹ The *unconscious drive* and the *regime of objects* are far more alike to each other than either resembles the cognizing ego.

Which is not to say such moments are always felt as mourning. When, later, Dorothea bids Will Ladislaw goodbye for the second and final time, the narrator remarks: “It was in her nature to be proud that he was blameless, and through all her feelings there ran this vein—‘I was right to defend him.’”⁷⁰ Here the “him” that serves as a proxy for Dorothea’s “nature” is a positively, rather than negatively, invested object, but again the narrator makes clear that the vitality of the psychic relation depends on the transference of a certain portion of selfhood onto an object relation. The consequence, at this point, is that Dorothea is exhibited to the reader in one of her more aloof, priggish aspects, yet what might appear as one symptom of secondary narcissism (the treatment of other subjects as mere objects) is in fact, Eliot has taken pains to show us,

a symptom of something like its inverse: Dorothea's increasing equanimity concerning her own objectlikeness, her burgeoning capacity to forego her self-righteousness in favor of the erotically, ethically neutralizing condition of being—in this moment at least—relatively free from her more self-examining instinctual neurosis.

A subjective condition becoming referential, ceding authority over its selfhood to lines of social relation: such is the porous condition that, in its more optimistic modes, we are used to thinking of as Eliotic sympathy. But there are much more menacing modes of address too, including a nightmarish version of the same idea as the threat of *rumor* that attaches at different points to Ladi-slaw (over his parentage), Casaubon (over his putative cuckoldry), Rosamond (over her faithfulness—the cheeky twist being that Dorothea, whose moral narcissism thrives on feeling misunderstood, becomes the mistaken *observer* of a scandal), and chiefly to the two brothers in ruin, Bulstrode and Lydgate. Despite the general anxiety over reputation and, therefore, reference that suffuses the mental lives of each of our focal characters and governs most of their choices, for good and ill, Eliot delays until chapter 71 a full representation of actual gossiping, in the form of a chorus of minor characters divided into the gendered spaces of the Green Dragon and Dollop's to pore over the fortunes of the professional class. It has been observed that *Middlemarch* is at its most Dickensian when it thematizes rumor most directly—critics have detected something fishy in the naming of Mrs. Dollop, Raffles, Joshua Rigg, etc.—as though the bringing into discourse of a *vox populi* could not be achieved without doing the voices of “Mr. Popular Sentiment” himself.⁷¹ Yet while these parabolic stagings of reference extort from Eliot a performance of genre not entirely the novelist's own, the interior monologues of characters anticipating being talked about incorporate far more smoothly the generic tropes of Eliot's trashier contemporaries. The first and perhaps most dramatic of such occurs in the tale of Mme. Laure, Lydgate's murderous French paramour whose very theatricality appears itself metadiscursive, the tale oscillating between diegetic and metadiegetic spaces like an echo: “Paris rang with the story of this death: was it a murder?”⁷²

The novel's smooth absorption of an otherwise squalid tale from far beyond the provincial life of the Midlands attests to one of the genre's most celebrated features—its rough, patchwork polyphony. Yet where Dickens delights in such polyphony as its own aesthetic and political end, in *Middlemarch* it is one of a number of techniques for querying relationships between experiencing subjects (in this case, Lydgate) and the referencing social world (in this case, not merely Paris but the melodramatic genre). So, it is not precisely that

Middlemarch is preoccupied with rumor, but that the novel repeatedly rehearses the ambivalent excitement and dread entailed by the fantasy that one is going to be talked about. Perhaps inevitably, the aftermath of that ambivalence, when it is represented at all, turns out to be quite different from the fantasies that preceded it. At the end of chapter 70, Lydgate nervously plots a new beginning after having been helped out of a tight spot by Bulstrode: “I shall set up a surgery . . . if Rosamond will not mind, I shall take an apprentice.”⁷³ Yet as well-founded as are Lydgate’s doubts about his professional prospects, and about his wife, within a couple of pages he has been drawn into a scandal involving murder and grand larceny on a scale previously unimaginable; he is no longer being referred to as a callow neophyte with a maniacal taste for cadavers, but as a paid accomplice in the murder of John Raffles. Bulstrode, too, expedites Raffles’s death in order to suppress rumor (“the judgement of his neighbours and the mournful perception of his wife”⁷⁴), and having catalyzed the alcoholic’s demise by brandy, believes himself free of rumor: “his conscience was soothed by the enfolding wings of secrecy.”⁷⁵ The law of genre dictates, as no reader of *Middlemarch* will have failed to predict, that Bulstrode will be denuded of these wings: what is striking though is how *quickly* he is plucked from them, and how little direct representation Bulstrode is able to make in his defense, whether at the town meeting where he is challenged, or in the profoundly moving encounter with his wife that passes largely in silence. Despite its reputation for loquacity, *Middlemarch* has no taste for litigation: if you’re explaining, you’re losing.

Which is surely the lesson to draw from Casaubon’s unfortunate, if comical, self-cuckolding-by-proxy—“one of his freaks,” Mr. Brooke calls it, being, Sir James Chettam chimes in, to have “framed” a “codicil . . . so as to make everyone believe that [Dorothea wanted to marry Ladislaw].”⁷⁶ Somehow through Casaubon’s bungling, even the word “codicil” acquires a pronominal quality, as though it were not merely both a rhyme and a synecdoche for “Will,” but additionally an echo for “Ladislaw”: he whom Casaubon would have designated the “lad I slew,” made, rather, the symbolic beneficiary of his “lady’s law.” The profusion of alveolar laterals in Ladislaw’s “slippery name,” as Raffles calls it to himself when trying to retrieve a word “almost all *L*’s” a few chapters later,⁷⁷ may or may not have been among the aspects of his characterization that Henry James saw as glitchy: “[Ladislaw] is, we may say, the one figure which a masculine intellect of the same power as George Eliot’s would not have conceived with the same complacency; he is, in short, roughly speaking, a woman’s man.”⁷⁸ But the narrator of *Middlemarch* (or perhaps George Eliot)

deploys Ladislaw as a self-surrogate in sometimes surprising ways. Shortly after the details of Casaubon's will have generated gossipy rumors about his cousin, Will, among the Middlemarchers, the narrator generates one of the novel's most stereoscopic constructions of free indirect discourse: stereoscopic because, unless one is following the pronouns quite carefully, it isn't easy to subordinate the various consciousnesses being represented. Lydgate has unknowingly mentioned Ladislaw to Dorothea as "a sort of Daphnis in coat and waistcoat," not knowing the rumor concerning the codicil and having forgotten his wife's tattling about Will's crush on Mrs. Casaubon:

Happily Dorothea was in her private sitting-room when this conversation occurred, and there was no one present to make Lydgate's innocent introduction of Ladislaw painful to her. As was usual with him in matters of personal gossip, Lydgate had quite forgotten Rosamond's remark that she thought Will adored Mrs. Casaubon. At that moment he was only caring for what would recommend the Farebrother family, and he had purposely given emphasis to the worst that could be said about the vicar in order to forestall objections. In the weeks since Mr. Casaubon's death he had hardly seen Ladislaw, and he had heard no rumour to warn him that Mr. Brooke's confidential secretary was a dangerous subject with Mrs. Casaubon. When he was gone, his picture of Ladislaw lingered in her mind and disputed the ground with that question of the Lowick living. What was Will Ladislaw thinking about her? Would he hear of that fact which made her cheeks burn as they never used to do? And how would he feel when he heard it? But she could see as well as possible how he smiled down at the little old maid. An Italian with white mice! On the contrary, he was a creature who entered into everyone's feelings and could take the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance.⁷⁹

Clearly the first sentence locates Dorothea and describes, if not her state of mind directly, at least the conditions of possibility for her state of mind. The following two sentences, with only a shade more ambiguity at that initial "him," draw us into Lydgate's thoughts. From there on it gets trickier, since while "he had hardly seen Ladislaw" feels defensive in a characteristically Lydgatean manner, "he had heard no rumour to warn him" could not, being a negative formulation, refer to anything happening within the doctor's head. We become more aware of the breathlessness of the narrator's alliterative aspirations, too; what Eve Marie Stwertka writes about as the "oral tradition" dimension of the narrator's voice.⁸⁰ Lydgate's *H*'s are supplanted, then, by a set

of *L*'s, the narrator gallantly passing the conch from one character to the next with phonic as well as semantic cues, "when he was gone, his picture of Ladislav lingered . . . that question of the Lowick living." Note, too, that in order for that transition to take place, we need to emphasize the "her" in "lingered in her mind" more than initially feels intuitive, since "Mrs. Casaubon" had appeared in the previous sentence merely as a prepositional object and is now, via a pronominal reference, elevated into the syntactical position of subject. The passage's coup de grace, however, is to associate this very facility of consciousness-hopping with Will Ladislav himself: "he was a creature who entered into everyone's feelings, and could take the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance." Ladislav's low-key sexy passivity merges with the novel's own structure of reference; a structure Eliot constructs not merely from themes, but through a complex psychic syntax that takes in both pronominal reference and, weirdly, the letter *L*.

Now, nobody likes Will Ladislav, from Sir James Chettam through Henry James to any number of contemporary readers for whom the little Daphnis's brittle charisma withers into dry vapidity in the stately shade of the grand widow Casaubon.⁸¹ It would probably be cheap—and, in any case, kind of obvious—to remark that his very inadequacies as the hero of a marriage plot are precisely the qualities that make him a powerful surrogate for a trans masculine author figure: his capacity to "enter into everyone's feelings" without tarrying inside them for long; his effeminate, playful creativity that neither fully hardens into a *künstlerroman* plot nor gets negated by a professionalization narrative; the familial history compiled piecemeal from various accounts.⁸² But it might be worth briefly reflecting on Ladislav's unique position in the composition history of the novel. *Middlemarch*, as we know, was the result of a synthesis and expansion of two stories on which Eliot had been working in 1869 and 1870: "Miss Brooke" (the Dorothea plotline) and "Middlemarch" (the Lydgate/Bulstrode plotline). Since Ladislav is the only character in the novel that plays a major role in both stories, there circulates around his emplotment a somewhat irritatingly magical air: as Jerome Beaty puts it, "that Will Ladislav, his first wife's grandson, should appear in [the Midland town where Bulstrode remarried] is coincidence enough. That Bulstrode's second wife (née Vincy) should have a relation (Peter Featherstone) whose illegitimate son (Joshua Rigg) had a stepfather (Raffles) who had been an associate of Bulstrode's in London and had indeed helped Bulstrode keep Will's mother from her rightful inheritance, is surely an incredible multiplication of coincidence which operates on a level of reality quite different from

that of the rest of the novel.”⁸³ Beaty observes, reasonably enough, that “the complicated plot contrivance is an attempt to tie the two stories together”⁸⁴—and goes on to treat Ladislav, again credibly, as a prototype for Daniel Deronda. But not only is the rumor of Ladislav’s Jewishness not, in fact, instantiated by what we know of his ancestry, what Beaty’s explanation undersells is the gendered work that Ladislav does for the novel as he shuffles between the masculine plot of professional ambition and its tragic collapse, and the feminine plot of marriage and remarriage, belonging comfortably to neither and playing the role of spoiler in both. Will Ladislav: *Middlemarch*’s trans hero/ine.

“the may-beetle dream”

She called to mind that she had two may-beetles in a box and that she must set them free or they would suffocate. She opened the box and the may-beetles were in an exhausted state. One of them flew out of the open window; but the other was crushed by the casement while she was shutting it at someone’s request.⁸⁵

This dream is one of the three with which Freud illustrates “the work of condensation,” perhaps the most important technique by which, he held, the mind transforms fantasies beyond the reach of consciousness into the content of dreams.⁸⁶ It is the most important because, as many of Freud’s readers have emphasized, the condensation of multiple elements of fantasy into a single image—that a beetle may simultaneously represent disgust, compassion, and sexual desire—is a procedure without fixed limits. Condensation respects no economy of scarcity; more and more meanings may always be discovered to have been condensed within a single image, and consequently not merely is the interpretation of a dream an interminable procedure, as Freud has acknowledged from the start, but even the interpretation of any particular element of a dream is inexhaustible. This account of interpretation showcases Freud at his most broadminded and the project of psychoanalysis at its most utopian: the unconscious mind he depicts is limitless in its resources and capacity for creativity. A claustrophobic narrative about two fragile junebugs, meanwhile, has violated the no less fragile sense of infinite possibility even before one of them has been killed. Indeed, the stupefied cruelty of the may-beetle dream possesses a bathetic force that seems to push Freud onto the defensive; uncharacteristically, he remarks that he will offer only “part of the analysis” of this particular dream; that he will “not be able to pursue the

interpretation of the dream to the end” and that consequently “its material will appear to fall into several groups without any visible connection.”⁸⁷

So it does. In most respects, the thematics of the dream turn out to be epiphenomena of bourgeois heterosexuality’s stock repertoire, as the concern for an animal derives from two sources: (1) the dreamer’s having read a book in which “some boys had thrown a cat into boiling water, and had described the animal’s convulsions”;⁸⁸ and (2) the action of her fourteen-year-old daughter, with whom she was in bed and who had observed, but not remedied, a moth having fallen into her glass of water just as they were falling asleep, so both dreamer and, perhaps, daughter lay in guilty anticipation of a bug’s death. Her unhappy marriage had taken place in May and was beset in a tedious sort of way by her husband’s “aerophobic” sleeping habits, which chafed with her own “aerophilic,” which tension appears in her dream as the ambivalent outcome of closing the window.⁸⁹ The closest thing Freud offers to an explanation of the whole, however—“the wishful thought concealed by her present dream”—is rather strange, since it interprets the slamming window as a peculiar presentation of penis envy.⁹⁰ Crushed beetles, like that mechanically produced by the slamming of the casement (in line with her husband’s aerophobia), are the primary ingredient of the aphrodisiac known as Spanish fly, and so what might otherwise have appeared as a castration image has been transformed into its formal opposite: “the wish for an erection.”⁹¹ Strachey retains the German construction “may beetle” as a translation of *Maikäfer* in order to maintain the connection to the diurnal rhythms of the dream; nonetheless, the Anglophone reader learns from his footnote that the “commoner English equivalent . . . is ‘cockchafer.’”⁹² A footnote of Freud’s own, meanwhile, refers to Heinrich von Kleist’s play *Penthesilea*, about the sexually insatiable Amazon queen who devours her discarded lovers—the only moment in the entire *Interpretation of Dreams*, according to Didier Anzieu, where the association between oral sadism (biting) and castration anxiety converges on a woman, rather than a man.⁹³

The interchangeability of fear (of castration) and desire (for a penis) is a well-worn psychoanalytic theme; indeed, in Sarah Kofman’s influential reading of these phenomena, the female patient’s desire for a penis serves the theoretical purpose of assuaging or deferring the fear of castration. Reading between Freud’s papers on fetishism and Medusa, Kofman observes: “Woman’s penis envy thus . . . provides man with reassurance against his castration anxiety; the horror inspired by Medusa’s head is always accompanied by a sudden stiffening (*Starrwerden*), which signifies erection.”⁹⁴ Yet the possibility of literally switching one of these complexes for another, a possibility latent in Freud’s

interpretation of the may-beetle dream, is unusual, not just in Freud's own work, but among the many trenchant critiques of psychoanalysis that have focused on penis envy as mere male wishful thinking. This idea returns forcefully, however, as a rhetorical pairing of castration complex and penis envy in the final paragraphs of Freud's final technical paper, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," published in 1937, many years after the *Papers on Technique* were first assembled and published: "At no other point in one's own analytic work does one suffer more from an oppressive feeling that all one's repeated efforts have been . . . 'preaching to the winds,' than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis on the ground of its being unrealizable or when one is seeking to convince a man that a passive attitude to men does not always signify castration and that it is indispensable in many relationships in life."⁹⁵

"These two themes," Freud holds, comprise "some general principle"; accordingly, "in spite of the dissimilarity of their content, there is an obvious correspondence between the two. Something which both sexes have in common has been forced, by the difference between them, into different forms of expression" ("A," 250). Sure that the fear of castration and penis envy constitute the "bedrock . . . the rock-bottom" of the analytic, Freud morbidly concludes that the bedrock is, after all, natural and occluded from the ambit of technique and that consequently "the repudiation of femininity can be nothing else than a biological fact, a part of the great riddle of sex."⁹⁶ It is not that these particular mythopoetic framings (castration complex and penis envy) are, exactly, true; rather, they have become names for the asymptote of sexual difference towards which analysis of both men and women grinds interminably on.

Yet Freud's explicitly melancholic assessment obscures a complexity in his response; the admission of a sense of defeat in the face of sexual difference ("the oppressive feeling" that one is "talking to the winds") was in one sense remarkably performative, specifically in his decision to adopt Alfred Adler's term "masculine protest" to describe men's "struggle against [their] passive or feminine attitude towards [an]other [male]."⁹⁷ Adler had developed that term in 1910 to describe the "ramified feminine traits carefully hidden by hypertrophied masculine wishes and efforts" that he had observed among male neurotic patients.⁹⁸ Since which time, Freud loathed Adler and this "reactionary and retrograde" theory: "one has the impression that somehow repression is concealed under 'masculine protest.'"⁹⁹ Adler died in the same month that "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" was published, prompting Freud to write cruelly to Arnold Zweig: "For a Jewish boy from a Viennese suburb . . .

a death in Aberdeen, Scotland is an unprecedented career and a proof of how far he had come. Truly, his contemporaries have richly rewarded him for his service in having contradicted psychoanalysis.”¹⁰⁰ In the paper itself, Freud had allowed himself to produce a more evenhanded assessment of both the value and the limitation of his old colleague’s nomenclature: “It fits the case of males perfectly; but I think that, from the first, ‘repudiation of femininity’ would have been the correct description of this remarkable feature in the psychological life of human beings.”¹⁰¹

Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of course, before the castration complex and penis envy were fully articulated theories, although after rearranging the manuscript of *The Interpretation of Dreams* into the chronological order of its composition. Anzieu is able to date the discovery of castration anxiety to autumn 1898, “almost certainly” the period in which Freud heard about the may-beetle dream.¹⁰² And in one sense, the dream does seem to precipitate the fuller articulation of the theory in the *Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and the *Analysis of a Case of Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy* (1909); the image of the window crushing the bug subsumes both the desire for a penis and the fear of losing one, in a cycle as infinite as, though far less cheerful than, condensation itself. To be possessed of a penis is to be permanently in fear of losing it, which (if it happened) would assuage the fear but create anew the unquenchable desire to possess one. To lack a penis, likewise, is to organize one’s desire around gaining a penis, which if achieved would immediately create the urgent problem of defending it against the threat of castration. We are accustomed to seeing the system of sexual difference that structures Freud’s thinking about fear/desire, as a binary division demarcated by a firm line. But the line in the may-beetle dream—the window—is an agential object possessed of its own force. The dream analysis stumbles into the queer polysyndeton of sexual difference, imagining a fear of castration stemming from the nonpossession of a penis, or a desire for the penis of which one is already possessed.

So much for the crushed beetle: both sloughed-off penis and germ of an erection to come. But what of the beetle that escapes? It is surely the relation between the two ostensibly like objects (beetle and beetle) that prompts the irruption into the analytic scene of, who else but, the Victorian novelist George Eliot. It is difficult to track exactly how that irruption takes place:

The patient reflected over this contradiction. It reminded her of another contradiction, between appearance and character, as George Eliot displays it in *Adam Bede*: one girl who was pretty, but vain and stupid, and another

who was ugly, but of high character; a nobleman who seduced the silly girl, and a working man who felt and acted with true nobility. How impossible it was, she remarked, to recognize that sort of thing in people! Who would have guessed, to look at her, that she was tormented by sensual desires?¹⁰³

The patient is struck by the “contradiction between appearance and character.” But is the *Adam Bede* association the dreamer’s or Freud’s? That is, it isn’t clear whether the dreamer has herself associated that second contradiction with Eliot’s novel or whether Freud is riffing on or glossing her initial association, either for the reader’s benefit or for the dreamer’s. The same ambiguity exists in the German: “*Er erinnert an einen anderen Widerspruch, den zwischen Aussehen und Gesinnung, wie er in Adam Bede von der Elliot dargestellt ist*”¹⁰⁴—in which Anglophone readers encounter another complexity, the parapractical interpolation of an additional *L*, about which there is no reason not to observe that the interpolated letter sounds the same as the principle syllable, “El[*l*],” nor that it is formed by a single, straight stroke of the pen, endowing thereby a name, already notoriously unstable with respect to the phallus, with an additional, albeit ornamental, appendage. Freud, we know from his correspondence with Martha Bernays, did read two of Eliot’s other novels and took both to heart: *Middlemarch* as a guide to their developing romance, and *Daniel Deronda* as a strange and possibly suspicious repository of knowledge about the things Jewish people “speak of only among ourselves.”¹⁰⁵

I can put off no longer the inevitable admission that I have been trying to bring out, or at least to imagine worlds in which have been brought out, two authors: one, an Austrian doctor obsessed with the psychic ramifications of castration; the other, a Victorian novelist whose masculine pseudonym has, unlike “Currer Bell,” stuck around—though nobody really bothers to explain the difference.¹⁰⁶ There is perhaps no need to do so.¹⁰⁷ Eve Sedgwick describes the queer theoretical position as oscillating between the poles of universalism and minoritization; trans criticism seems likewise to find itself pulled between a claim about interior identity (“this is who I am, underneath”) and a theatrical negation of gendered convention (“I want to be irreferable, for language to slip off me as rain off a window”). Yet there is, I think, a certain pleasure one senses in Eliot, especially, contemplating the incognito of pseudonomized authorship, albeit a pleasure that Eliot sought to regulate among readers of the book who believed they could identify the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. To one such, Charles Bray, Eliot wrote, “There is no undertaking more fruitful of absurd mistakes than that of ‘guessing’ at authorship; and as I have never

communicated to any one so much as an intention of a literary kind there can be none but imaginary data for such guesses.”¹⁰⁸ Yet Eliot annotated such guesses, both general (“a clergy-man, a Cambridge man,” a party at Helps’s) and specific (“Eliot Warburton’s brother,” William Blackwood) in detailed journals, in which it is impossible not to sense a livelier feeling when Eliot had been thought to be a man than when thought to be a woman:

[Blackwood] came on the following Friday and chatted very pleasantly—told us that Thackeray spoke highly of the “Scenes,” and said they were not written by a woman. Mrs. Blackwood is sure they are not written by a woman. Mrs. Oliphant, the novelist, too, is confident on the same side, but both have detected the woman. Mrs. Owen Jones and her husband—two very different people—are equally enthusiastic about the book. But both have detected the woman.¹⁰⁹

Eliot’s glee when passing, and mild concern when not, have countless pragmatic explanations: the fear that a conservative publisher would jettison a writer living in sin; the impropriety of women writing about clerical matters; that patriarchy, in all places and at all times, organizes itself to the benefit of the creatures it designates as men. One might respond that Eliot simply did not like female authors and did not want to be associated with them. That would be a reasonable assessment of the author of an essay entitled “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” which, while it elicits a good degree of delight in what it calls “feminine fatuity,” is nonetheless steeped in antifemme contempt—or, indeed, of the author of an essay on Madame de Sablé that takes biological difference between the sexes as the root of differences between masculine and feminine literary styles.¹¹⁰ On the feminine side of that equation are more or less the same femmy qualities that in “Silly Novels” comprise “the most trashy and rotten kind of feminine literature.”¹¹¹ But there is also the pleasure and the radical encounter with the dysphorically sexed body that underpins their formulation of their aesthetics. By way of concluding, I will simply observe that it is unusual to align a literary writer with an analyst; psychoanalytic literary criticism invariably places itself in that position and the author (or, in the post-structuralist visions of psychoanalysis, the text) as the patient.¹¹² My decision to do so here does not derive from, or gesture towards, a new theory of psychoanalytic criticism. It simply extends from my own acceptance, after a couple of decades of reading, teaching, and trying to write about Eliot, of a truth that I cannot put any less vulgarly than this: one cannot top Eliot any more than one can fail to top James.

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