Incalculable Diffusion: 
Riparian Topographies & Textual Material in the Finale of Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

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“Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive…” - *Middlemarch*, Finale

George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* explores the relationships between intention and effect – and effect and affect -- within the liminal space of human experience. The novel’s status as itself a novel – and thus, potentially, an engagement of intentions, effects, and perceptible affects – necessarily draws particular attention to the issue of textual production: What, if anything, can a text be saying – and meaning – and how? In Eliot’s words, “who shall tell what may be the effect of writing?” Anxieties about the makings and markings of meaning(s) permeate the scene of *Middlemarch*, and the text cannot, in a sense, be other than self-reflexive. Narrative and metanarrative modalities coexist in a strange miscibility in *Middlemarch*, defying easy delineation or distillation of meaning. Yet the mechanics of meaning are not, for Eliot, an esoteric intellectual exercise: Within all of the analytical abstractions that the novel engages, Eliot attempts to situate the matter firmly “on the ground” – even as that textual “ground” threatens to give way. Eliot strives to maintain a fierce commitment to the critical relevancy of these concerns to the characters’ lives. The anxious question for them, for Eliot, for the self-reflexively fissuring, even self-effacing, tenuous text seems to be the same: What, finally, has meaning? – what matters? – and how?

The final two paragraphs of *Middlemarch’s* Finale emerge as an important focal point for these concerns. Here, the novel appears to reach a point of resolution, extolling the enduring merits of the “unhistoric acts” and largely unseen “effects” of a “hidden life” and implicitly

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asserting the possibility of a correlation between intentions and effects. This final gesture outside of “the Dorothea whose story we know” toward the unhistoric, unnamed, and hidden challenges the primacy of textual production. The final passage of the finale, articulated metaphorically in the figure of “incalculably diffusive” watery channels of influence, seems to subvert the dominance of public texts. Yet even this claim is subject to -- and object of -- its own making in words, and the textual character of Middlemarch – some eight-hundred-and-thirty-plus pages of it – remains. Can the ostensive claim of the finale be sustained within this inscrutable, perhaps paradoxical, mass of text? Can this final, exceedingly naturalistic imagery of “incalculably diffusive” streams dispersing across the terrain of Middlemarch be uniquely, reductively, and reliably said to logically “claim” anything?

In attempting to explore these questions, a close examination of the novel’s final paragraphs reveals a complex and generative textual moment in which Eliot’s imagery, diction, rhetorical structure, and intertextual resonances complicate even as they construct the narrator’s transparent declarations. In attending to all of these facets to Eliot’s craft, a number of important questions quickly emerge: How does Middlemarch contemplate itself as a text, and how is that engaged in the novel’s closure? How can the alleged praise of a largely anonymous life lived outside of the traditionally epic domains of historic, literary, artistic, and religious public indelibility be sustained from within the pages of a published, highly canonically allusive work of literature? In all of these questions, what is at stake?

The Finale bears profound, and arguably complex and unresolved, implications for Middlemarch’s characters, the affected, implied narrator, and Eliot's sense of what matters, what remains, and what, ultimately, has meaning. In the same moment, the nominally conclusive site of Middlemarch’s terminus deploys another possibility: Here, we cannot help but wonder about
Middlemarch's, and Eliot's, place within the metaphorical scene of the final two paragraphs, and thus to the implications that this bears for the very text that inscribes it. This self-reflexive potentiality, in which a contemplation of this vision of the Middlemarch landscape becomes a vision of the Middlemarch landscape, prompts an important question: Is this final scene a figure for writing itself? Is there a metaphorical potential within the imagery in these final paragraphs for the scene to be a figure for writing, and if so, what are the implications?

Within this possible reading of the scene as a metaphorical landscape of textual proliferation, the epic depths central to a sublime and conventional system of encoding enduring meaning are not to be found. Rather, “diffusive” “effect” occurs primarily horizontally, not uniquely vertically, as with a river of depth, and occurs not in a singularity of line as with a mapped river but in multiple – even “incalculable” – dispersing, spreading, and effectively blurry outlets. If the imagery in the closing paragraphs can be aptly read as a metaphor for writing, what are the implications? Does the shallow, largely nameless, asymptotically dispersing – and possibly, perilously disappearing diffusion of water across the landscape model, enact, imagine, or at least allow for a different vision or version of writing than classical conceptualizations perceive?

**Casaubon: Figurations of Scholarship**

The tensions that comprise and compromise the novel's stated “end” draw attention not only outside of the “story we know” but back inside of it in seeking any kind of resolution. The Finale’s culminating passages do not exist in isolation, and a closer look at the ponderous balance of the novel may facilitate an approach to its attempt at an end. Anxieties about having an effect pervade Middlemarch. At the same time, anxieties about textual production emerge
and recur along with – and perhaps inseparable from – these more general anxieties. Eliot's depiction of the force of these fears, along with their problematic interactions with one another and with the project of depicting them in the first place, is striking in the character of Casaubon.

Early in the novel, the character of Edward Casaubon emerges as an important figure in the progression of the plot as well as in establishing thematic concerns about authorship, inscription, and the status of the written. Eliot’s figuration of Casaubon in relation to his ever-present – yet ever-deferred and arguably unattainable – “Key to All Mythologies” introduces a yearning for a definitive and totalizing coding and decoding of meaning in myth. Here, the intersecting domains of the mythological, religious, historic and literary are posited as spaces within which communally shared meaning can faithfully be made, stored, found, and, importantly, encoded and inscribed. Casaubon first appears with the superlative “a man of profound learning” (11). Rarely described without some explicit mention of his coding as a “scholar,” Casaubon’s character ascribes value to the literary canon, the historic lens, and the mythological paradigms that subtend the text of the novel in its copious quotation, allusion, and discussion of learning.

Eliot draws attention to the persistence of literary, historical, and mythological analog in framing both perception and representation in the narrator's approach to Casaubon. Upon first catching sight of Casaubon, Dorothea perceives him as resembling Locke (16); after their first encounter, she visualizes him as Milton (24) and soon afterwards, as Pascal (29). This figuration of the other in relation to prescribed – and pre-inscribed – figures within literature and history attests to the prominence that these traditions hold in human experience, subjectivity, and perception.

Dorothea also conceives of Casaubon in relation to his written, published work,
remarking to Celia, “Everything I see in him corresponds to his pamphlet on Biblical Cosmology” (20). Here, then, Casaubon’s affect and identity are inscribed in his authorial persona, and, more precisely, within his published writing. Dorothea then attempts to situate herself within the literary, historic, and Biblical (28-29), as if attempting to find a prior analog; at this point in the narrative, she envisions an effective, if somewhat vicarious, position within these fields of public influence through her support of Casaubon’s work. Even then, she continues to seek a more specific historical and literary precursor for herself in this role, finding it, eventually, in the figure of Milton’s daughters (63).

Even the couple’s honeymoon in Rome reveals the value that both ascribe to the claim of enduring traces of effective, meaningful action allegedly preserved within the dominant domains of public history, religious tradition, and artistic canonicity. Casaubon consistently seeks meaning among the remnants and ruins of a problematically absent past, seemingly at the expense of the present, yet Eliot is sympathetic to his struggle with this impulse. This privileging of the publicly recognized remains of allegedly meaningful actions of antiquity within these apparatuses - literary, historic, mythological, and what might be called “artifactual” or archaeological – parallels the tendency of the text of the novel to situate itself within these various, related traditions. Allusion, quotation, and analogizing characterization to figures within these cultural dominants pervade the novel, prefiguring the reader’s conceptualization of character. With regard to Casaubon specifically, his constant pursuit of a definitive “Key to All Mythologies” introduces a particular disposition and set of beliefs about linguistic and literary meaning that clearly establish the tensions about text and textuality that permeate the novel.

Casaubon stakes his life on finding a “Key” – the “Key” - to break the code of the entirety of human myth. His “central ambition” (417) reveals a number of related concerns that
establish the dynamics and stakes of meaningful writing that Eliot seems constantly to explore and challenge. First, the reification of the process of decoding, and, by implication, of maintaining and first encoding the code, is reflective of an overall disposition toward privileging the written and the linguistic. Classical and Romantic understandings of the potential of canonical writings to faithfully, universally, absolutely, and eternally encode meaning seem to figure prominently in Casaubon’s efforts. One aspect of this system for Casaubon seems to be the totalizing, exhaustive, and absolute nature of his pursuit of his elusive “Key to all Mythologies.” This seems a particularly overt manifestation of the claims about linguistic meaning within conventional critical theory that deconstruction and other movements seek to challenge: Casaubon’s obsessive pursuit of a single, totalizing "Key to All Mythologies” arguably enacts a classical, structuralist conceptualization of univocal, absolute determinacy in language in which signifier and signified exist in a hierarchical one-to-one correlation, unambiguously, universally, and singularly tethered in a unique and immutable semantic system. The notion of a singular “Key” to the code of myth precisely captures this system of singular substitution between perceptible sign and transcendental meaning. Further, Casaubon’s project matches the implicit premise of this traditional, transcendental signification process in that words, and thus allegorical figure, are seen to be a highly regulated code within the phenomenal world quite separate from the noumenal world of meaning and thus requiring deciphering to be intelligible. The totalizing nature of Casaubon’s Key – its impulse toward a totalizing control through decoding and attribution of proper meaning – bears implications in light of structuralism and post-structuralist revisions within literary criticism. This impulse toward definiteness in denotation reflects an ideological phenomenon at work in traditional linguistic use: the Key – that which links myth to meaning, and, it may be said, signifier to signified, word to meaning –
is, for Casaubon, a finite -- and thus attainable -- project. Casaubon effectively seeks to reduce the particularities of human mythology to their lowest common denominators in a mathematically exhaustive determinacy. For deconstruction, however, there is no single, unified Key, but possibly many – or, necessarily, none, in an absolute sense: that is, there is no one absolutely, as the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary. As such, the radical possibility of a multiplicity of meanings articulated in deconstructive critiques argues against the totalizing, univocal relationship of language and metaphor to meaning so central to Casaubon’s understanding. Yet what, we must ask, is Eliot’s understanding? Casaubon's ultimately futile pursuit of an elusive cypher that might illuminate otherwise arbitrary, lifeless signifiers and otherwise inaccessible meaning serves as an important engagement of Eliot's sense of language, figure, and determinacy of meaning. Within the conventional linguistic system to which Casaubon so completely ascribes, the idea of textual production as a means of faithful representation of meaning that remains –materially, even – emerges as a force within which and against which the novel unfolds. For Casaubon most particularly, the related beliefs in the fidelity and durability of meaning in textual material become all-essential: Finding and recording the “Key” is a matter, quite materially, of life and death. Eliot’s sensitivity to Casaubon’s struggles emerges with striking poignancy in observing his faith – and creeping doubt – in the capacity for textual material to serve as material replacement for the human corporeal in the face of mortality.

In addition to persistent characterization in relation to scholarship and writing, Casaubon is also often figured in relation to death. Characterized with a constantly potential, posthumous presence not yet actualized in the early part of the novel, Casaubon occupies a strange space: Posthumous publication is an active concern before death and is ostensibly the admitted aim of
the aging cleric and scholar. Curiously, Book Three is titled “Waiting for Death,” yet the preceding two books are effectively fraught with that same activity with regard to Casaubon. The fact that the title could plausibly refer specifically to Casaubon as well as to Featherstone within the plot sequence serves a dual purpose: The ambiguity not only elevates dramatic tension within the progression of the plot but also forces a recognition of the universal applicability of the title; the implied, reasonable follow-up question becomes “[Who is not] ‘waiting for death’?” Characters confront mortality in various ways; for Casaubon, avoiding complete obliteration seems entirely dependent on textual production and proliferation through publication. The moment of Dorothea’s recognition of this is a strikingly intimate moment of shared understanding between the two:

“[Dorothea] could understand well enough now why her husband had come to cling to her, as possibly the only hope left that his labors would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world. At first it had seemed that he wished to keep even her aloof from any close knowledge of what he was doing; but gradually the terrible stringency of human need—the prospect of a too speedy death—” (478-479).

Truncated narration and caesura here reflect the nature of the death itself—a sudden, unfinished stop—and also reflect a hesitancy or inability of the narrative voice to finish the thought. This is not a trailing off punctuated with ellipsis but an abrupt cutting off of speech, a sudden silence, as if struck by the horror of what might be said. This is one of many instances of withheld speech, silence, and potential ineffability within the novel.

Eliot’s careful crafting of this scene reflects a number of underlying concerns. Her economic employment of punctuation, fragmentary sentence structure, and the abrupt internal progression from “gradually” to “speedy” in her diction not only results in an effectively naturalistic approximation of internal thoughts—halting, escalating, and arresting as the onus of the thought—death—approaches. Eliot’s craft also reflects an appreciation for the arguably real significance of this moment to her characters’ lives—“significance” in every sense. In a way,
the reader witnesses the narrator witnessing Dorothea witnessing her husband’s terror of futility, failure, and final disconnection from others, as if a moment of shared consciousness occurs within the figurative compression and collapse of time. However, the epiphanic, empathetic moment actually occurs in narrative time, such that Dorothea, the narrator, and the reader arguably share the status of a “belated historian” (141). In addition to mimicking, as realistically as possible, this apparently unspeakably intense moment not only of Dorothea’s apprehension of Casaubon’s death but of Casaubon’s earlier apprehension of it – and Dorothea’s sudden understanding of Casaubon’s experience – Eliot’s narration reveals an apparent disconnect between representation and experience. The narration breaks off abruptly, as if inadequate to its task, and this disconnect is exposed. At the same time, the affective sudden stop to the narrative at this point reflects another concern: Narration of this thought terminates precisely after the word “death,” effectively drawing attention to the way in which death prevents further expression or revision – literally, with additional, particular relevance in the case of an unpublished author, and perhaps figuratively: For Casaubon, who seems to view his value and vitality as being inscribed in the publication and preservation of his writing, his sense of ultimate “death” would be, essentially, the failure of his work to ever appear within the public text of canonicity. The constant awareness of this possibility – this horror of erasure in death – drives his work as a potential author. In appreciating the force of his concerns, the possible stakes of writing and [im]material remaining become starkly apparent. Is this the same awareness that drives Eliot? What of the Finale’s vision of anonymity, unhistoricism, and the “vanishing” perceptibility of an unwritten, unrecorded life that diffuses, largely unseen, without a trace? Eliot’s confrontation with these questions suffuses the text of the novel and demands further investigation. Yet for Casaubon, and for the novel, is everything lost? Does exclusion from the
published, immortalized authorial elect leave room for any other meaning for Casaubon? Eliot offers glimpses of Casaubon that importantly complicate an otherwise reductive caricature, and these moments, however subtle, deserve attention.

Casaubon’s growing, unsettling sense of possible, total failure – with its implication of totalizing loss – surfaces in a moment that resonates metaphorically and thematically with the closing scene of the Finale:

“But Mr. Casaubon was now brooding over something through which the question of his health and life haunted his silence with a more harassing importunity even than through the autumnal unripeness of his authorship. It is true that this last might be called his central ambition; but there are some kinds of authorship in which by far the largest result is the uneasy susceptibility accumulated in the consciousness of the author -- one knows of the river by a few streaks amid a long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud. That was the way with Mr. Casaubon's hard intellectual labors. Their most characteristic result was not the "Key to all Mythologies," but a morbid consciousness that others did not give him the place which he had not demonstrably merited--a perpetual suspicious conjecture that the views entertained of him were not to his advantage-- a melancholy absence of passion in his efforts at achievement, and a passionate resistance to the confession that he had achieved nothing” (417-418).

Casaubon: Uncomfortable Mud

Here, Casaubon ruminates over his attempted authorship in the wake of his diagnosis with a serious, potentially fatal, heart condition that threatens to destroy the chance of completing his life’s work. Eliot figures his “morbid consciousness” in this moment within a carefully deployed metaphor of an absent river and its meager, muddy trace, beginning with a curious rhetorical move in the statement that “one knows of the river by a few streaks amid a long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud.” This vision of Casaubon’s authorship offers a somewhat startling array of possibilities that critically complicate and enrich his character, and a careful attention to the imagery, diction, and rhetorical construction of this moment reveal it to be unexpectedly resonant and revelatory for many other moments in the novel, including the culminating scene of the Finale.
This passage clearly identifies two separate but related dynamics over which Casaubon is said to be “brooding,” and thus at least two ways in which the muddy river metaphor operates: First, Eliot concedes the “autumnal unripeness of his authorship,” his “central ambition” as a source of considerable “haunting” in view of his illness – that is, the “still unwritten,” unrealized potential of the Key itself, and the unexpected, quite literal, approaching deadline. Second, Casaubon bemoans the reception of his work, even in its early, written components, among his peers and critics. In effect, he is tortured not only by this vision of the failure of his work to materialize in his lifetime but also by the way that that failure separates him from the scholarly community – and perhaps the larger, Middlemarch and human community. These two sources of persistent, “harassing” distress converge in the figure of the river’s muddy remains, and both become deployed in ways that resonate with one another and with other moments in the novel. Attending to the imagery carefully reveals a radically candid, compromising, and humbling glimpse of a fuller person, of a briefly exposed complexity, and of deeply sympathetic vulnerability in Casaubon – a radical departure from the self-commissioned caricature of Aquinas in Rome.

With regard to the first, more frequently narrated consideration of the unrealized completion and publication of the Key, his “central ambition,” Eliot’s agrarian metaphor of “autumnal unripeness” is compelling in a number of ways. “Autumnal unripeness” clearly evokes the trope of fruitlessness, barrenness, and impotence, which engages both issues of sexuality as well as the recurrent question of progeny – disseminated issue – the “copy demanded”(412) – whether genetic or textual. The fact that the “unripeness” is occurring in autumn, most directly a reference to Casaubon’s advancing age, and, specifically, to a negotiation with the imminence of winter, the season of death, also presents a secondary
cruelness: This isn’t a trope of rotting, overripe, belatedly gleaned or overlooked fruit but of fruit that never thrived, never ripened, never approached actualization in the first place. This subtler source of despair recalls Dorothea’s apprehension of her husband’s dubious scholarly output as “food for a theory which was already withered in the birth like an elfin child.” (478).

In both cases, the subtler, additional flaw of his work involves not only its failure to be actualized but its failure to have ever been potential, being “already withered in the birth,” already unripe in any season and in any lifetime. This figuration of his doubly flawed scholarship in terms of unviable fruit evokes the trope of infertility, which prefigures the doubling of “passion” a few sentences later. Yet “passion” is doubled for a reason. Eliot’s repetition of the term and quick, syntactic construction of the sentence to align “absence of passion” with its presence in “passionate resistance” draws attention to it. “Absence of passion” also creates a link to an earlier passage in which Casaubon observes his attempt to muster “masculine passion” in his somewhat perfunctorily undertaken courtship of Dorothea as revealing a “shallow rill” instead of the “stream of feeling” he sought:

“Hence he determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. As in droughty regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge which his stream would afford him; and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion” (70).

All of these layered, intratextual resonances add substance to Eliot’s sense of “passion,” expanding it beyond exclusively and explicitly sexuality to other forms of passions or to passion more broadly; it also imbues the term with a rich multiplicity in its many iterations for Dorothea and other characters, and for the Finale.

Eliot is very deliberate in differentiating the tortured vision of the Key’s unwrittenness, the unachieved “result” desired, from the second aspect to this moment, a tortured vision of
exclusion and derision from the scholarly community of his day, even as the two are related. This second, explicitly emphasized aspect of his “brooding” is wrought with similarly provocative potential and detail from the “uncomfortable mud.” Casaubon’s sense of rejection and ostracizing from the community invokes another, particularly apt connotation of mud. “Mud” carries a political idiomatic valence as well: “Mud-slinging,” “Mud-raking,” and the general murkiness with which a suspicious public views political activity and character all bear mentioning. Even Eliot’s descriptions of Mr. Brooke’s ridiculed foray into Middlemarch politics contain a diction of muddy terms. Mrs. Cadwaller observes that “Mr. Brooke is going to make a splash in the mud”(387); Dagley “had also taken too much in the shape of muddy political talk, a stimulant dangerously disturbing to his farming conservatism, which consisted in holding that whatever is, is bad, and any change is likely to be worse” (395).

Subjected to the consternation of peers and critics and denied a place among them in his “morbid consciousness,” Casaubon here is aware of a local, contemporary community of potential readers in a way that is rarely exposed at earlier points, when, for instance, he compares Dorothea with the “that chilling ideal audience which crowded his laborious uncreative hours with the vaporous pressure of Tartarean shades”(87), referring, it would seem, to idolized, deceased literary forebears. Earlier, as well, he prickles at Dorothea’s questioning, characterizing his work as “not to be measured by the facile conjectures of ignorant onlookers….”(206) and inwardly dismissing Dorothea’s input as belonging to “that shallow world which surrounds the appreciated or desponding author”(206). For all of his attention to being accepted by and becoming a part of the “ideal audience” of canonicity and enduring presence in his textual remains, Casaubon in this moment displays a yearning for a more local, contemporary, present, living community even within his own lifetime. This change in his
character – or at least its revelation - is striking. Does Casaubon, for all his consternation for the “shallow world,” seek the “warm activity and fellowship” that his wife and others so ardently seek? This startling, candidly humble and human vision of Casaubon bears contemplation in its own right. Within the particular, explicit context of the passage as an examination of authorship, it also raises the question of the function of authorship within a particular, contingent, local, and contemporary moment: Here, Eliot effectively draws attention to the community of readers, to their proximity, and to the question of the relationship of textual material to a particular author, reader, and community, and to the possibility of a more proximate, more contingent faculty of meaning in writing. Additionally, a persistent lexicon of “shallowness,” “superficiality,” and, by contrast, “depth” continue to engage even linguistic, connotative privileging of verticality, and Eliot’s navigation of these spatial dimensions in this muddy, nuanced metaphorical depiction of authorship invites a continued attention to topographical features as they relate to textuality. All of these dynamics continue to play out throughout the narrative, and their emergence in this scene of Casaubon’s “brooding” prompt a more thorough examination of this subtly generative scene of mud.

Idioms of thwarted movement model, if simplistically, Casaubon’s humbling figuration of inhabiting “uncomfortable mud” in his authorial drive: one can imagine him being “stuck in the mud,” laboring to gain traction and purchase to no avail; Eliot’s own terminology in a later description of Casaubon’s scholarly movement as “as in all else, …slow and hesitating”(509) models his troubled progress. Additionally, Eliot’s characterization of Casaubon’s struggle with “the sense of moving heavily in a dim and clogging medium”(509) is a startlingly apt description of the “uncomfortable mud” of this earlier moment. This resonance between the passages is particularly engaging in considering this vision of mud in relation to “a dim and clogging
medium.” If Casaubon’s proper “medium” is the “dim and clogging” mud of this earlier moment, rather than the absent river, what are the implications, especially in a novel so invested in the desire for a fitting “medium” for ardor and activity? What can be made of the miscibility of earth and water that comprises mud, particularly as a “medium,” and what does the messiness, the dynamic of muddying the waters, do for our sense of Casaubon’s authorship? One thing is clear: Casaubon is not moving. This prompts an important question in approaching the Finale: what are the implications of moving water? Stasis, not movement, pervades the various figurations of Casaubon and his work, and this seems particularly important in exploring the scene in terms of its spatiotemporal construction.

The unstated premise of the metaphor here is that the river is long gone – absent, as, otherwise, one would “know of the river” by the river. Instead, the necessity of deducing the river’s postulated existence in the past from what remains—a few streaks in the mud—reveals the river’s absence. This generates a critical exploration of the trope of rivers as invested with the capacity to leave a trace, a metaphorical element that recurs and reaches its fullest expression and engagement in the Finale.

In this moment of Casaubon’s pained apprehension of his life and its problematically inseparable, yet failing, work, Eliot’s explicit description of the process of inferring the river from its trace is conspicuous in its phrasing as a given, general postulate: “One knows of the river by a few streaks…” The epistemological focus here warrants attention: Casaubon’s distress in beholding the metaphorical “few streaks” marks a growing awareness of the potential failure of his efforts to inhabit the epic depths of literary and religious progenitors of antiquity. One imagines that Casaubon bemoans the absence of the river in multiple ways: First, was the river ever there, or did his “passion” always suffer from a meagerness and a draught that meant that
the effective, let alone affective, metaphorical river was never there in the first place? In other words, if his intellectual labors had “absorbed and dried him,”¹ how aqueous could they have been in the first place? Second, supposing that there was at one time a river, as implied, this moment highlights Casaubon’s emphasis on studying the trace of his work and his life. He isn’t, in a way, looking for the river directly, but for evidence of it, as his teleological disposition and constantly posthumous, projected perspective of what will remain dominate his understanding of himself. Certainly this anxious vision of an unfavorable, few-streaked, messy trace could be due to the fundamental fact of the river’s absence, in the sense that the trace, however small and negatively imbued, still marks an absence, effectively pointing to an inaccessible original, as in post-structuralist formulations, and engaging a dialectic of presence and absence that Freud and Lacan identify as fundamental to language. Yet in any case, Casaubon is highly attuned to what will be, what will remain, and what will encode and give access to what was -- rather than what is. This moment anticipates the imagery in the Finale in critical, complicating ways. In approaching that final scene, this vision of Casaubon’s authorship in the mud draws attention to the Middlemarch landscape as a potential medium itself, and necessitates an examination of its relevancy to Eliot’s sense of textuality.

Here, Casaubon’s authorship is knowable and perceptible only in the form of “a few streaks amid a long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud.” Essentially, the only available, perceptible trace of Casaubon’s authorship is figured as “a few streaks” in the mud, with the postulated river implicitly absent. Eliot’s particular phrasing in presenting these “streaks” in the mud as the way that “we know of the river” emphasizes the role of the mud-markings as a

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perceptible trace in the landscape. Casaubon’s authorship, then, remains only in the form of these “streaks” in the “long-gathered [mud] deposit,” which introduces the paradigm of the river not only leaving a trace but being a trace; of a river cutting a trace into the ground. The word “deposit” is already invested with the potential to be a material remnant that withstands and gestures to corporeal absence in death in its deployment in an earlier passage:

“…the difficulty of making his Key to all Mythologies unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind; and the pamphlets--or "Parerga" as he called them--by which he tested his public and deposited small monumental records of his march, were far from having been seen in all their significance” (379).

This is the effective mark, the “deposited small monumental records of his march”(379) – a few streaks in the mud. Thus the “long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud” becomes the perceptible mark within the terrain, such that the hypothesized, yet absent, river and its trace in the mud are invested with the potential to mark – and effectively inscribe – the medium of the ground. In this way, the absent river and its remains becomes an inscription of sorts within the topography, and a paradigm of geological, elemental inscription in the Middlemarch landscape emerges, improbably, from “uncomfortable mud.”

Key physical properties of this scene and related images of Casaubon’s troubled habitation in the Middlemarch landscape continue to suffuse related imagery elsewhere in the novel: stasis and immobility; loss of transparency; indiscernibility; miscibility and loss of contrast between earth and water, ground and river, between background, medium, and effective ink; erosion, sedimentation, and continual geological repurposing of material; disappearance and textual trace; and the liminality of water, river, and connective or dispersing outlets all anticipate Eliot’s momentously subtle, staying yet diffusing, possibly dissolving final imagery in the Finale.

“Who shall tell…?”
The metaphorical conflation of Casaubon’s authorship with the muddy trace of an inferred, absent river effectively potentiates the fictional, physical landscape of Middlemarch as perhaps the textual landscape of *Middlemarch*, and a number of “fine issues” emerge. The idealized river of Casaubon’s imagination is figuratively invested with an inscriptive potential, yet the actual trace is muddy, messy, and the imagined river is effectively missing, such that the idealized trope of inscription is itself muddied. Inscription becomes blurred, liminal rather than subliminal, indistinguishable from the blankness of a background, unintentionally “uncomfortable,” and demarcating absence and a murky lack of transparency. In this sense, the muddiness is a figure of indiscernibility, imperceptibility, and the messy miscibility of the trace and the thing traced, an inextricable mixture of water and ground, that is reminiscent, perhaps, of Miller’s sense of “figure and ground.” Miller, in his discussion of the linearity of narrative, postulates that the apparent structure of representation that dichotomizes origin from representation, “figure” from “ground,” within language is prone to a kind of “collapse” in the textual. A metaphorical “collapse” within the terrain of *Middlemarch* occurs in considering that *Middlemarch*, as a text, is itself written material – and thus itself an artifact of inscription. The metafictive sense in which *Middlemarch* becomes situated within its own textual landscape in this moment continues to complicate Eliot’s sense of textuality, and with it, the questions of authorial intention and control that trouble Casaubon in the mud. With the figurative river invested with the potential of inscription, a cutting and carving into and out of the landscape, a closer attention to the faculty of inscription becomes important in navigating *Middlemarch*’s complex terrain.

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An attention to the metaphorical possibilities of rivers and geological material as topographical inscription forces a closer attention to inscription more generally. While depictions of inscription and engraving abound within the whole of the novel, especially surrounding Casaubon, a particularly critical engagement with the apparatus of inscription and dispositions toward its presumably ascribed potential occurs contemporaneously with Raffles’ arrival on the Middlemarch scene. This moment occurs, perhaps tellingly, at Stone Court. Two related, directly textually tethered, passages precede Casaubon’s apprehension of “uncomfortable mud” by a mere few pages, and these passages together effect a pivotal moment in the novel’s grappling with intentionality, control, meaning, effect, and affect in the textual. Situated nearly precisely in the middle of Middlemarch’s narrative march, a growing “uncomfortability” with writing surfaces suddenly. Here, Eliot’s narrator quite self-consciously, in an instance of blatantly marked self-reflexivity in the form of first person narration, constructs a “lofty comparison” that links a historically monumental stone inscription with a seemingly innocuous, ephemeral artifact of writing appropriated as a “stop-gap.” The narrator’s succinct and direct confrontation with authorial control serves as the beginning of the chapter – and of a growing, perhaps, like Casaubon, “morbid” consciousness:

“Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing? If it happens to have been cut in stone, though it lie face down-most for ages on a forsaken beach, or "rest quietly under the drums and tramplings of many conquests," it may end by letting us into the secret of usurpations and other scandals gossiped about long empires ago:-- this world being apparently a huge whispering-gallery. Such conditions are often minutely represented in our petty lifetimes. As the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labors it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions, so a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stop-gap may at last be laid open under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe. To Uriel watching the progress of planetary history from the sun, the one result would be just as much of a coincidence as the other” (412).4

4 The unmarked allusion to Milton’s Paradise Lost in the character of Uriel somewhat subliminally recalls the literary disposition toward transcendental, and in Derrida’s terminology, “logocentric,” vertical meaning and meaningfulness that Milton emblematizes, at least in Casaubon’s imagination,
Here, the writing in the stone inscription and the writing on the “bit of ink and paper” are explicitly posited as subject to the same indeterminacy of outcome and susceptibility to “coincidence;” they undergo parallel processes of external shaping, de- and re-contextualization, and contingency on readership and interpretation through time and space. Eliot’s keen sense of the effective, indeed perhaps affective, intractability of the epistemological and the ontological with regard to writing is masterfully succinct in the brilliantly subtle interrogative “who shall tell…?” The doubling of “tell” is easily missed in the face of the familiar rhetorical structure of the interrogative “who…?” in the narrative voice; within the seemingly simplicity of the narrator’s plain question, the ambiguity and multiplicity of “tell” are understated yet undeniable: “Telling” as knowing and “telling” as narrating are blurred together, effectively gesturing to the problematic intractability of the act of reading from the act of knowing within the textual; further, does the act of telling, qua narrating, alter or determine, the act of knowing, or does knowledge determine the representation thereof? The doubling of “tell” becomes messy in several ways, in the sense that language suffuses conceptual frameworks of cognition, in the sense that representation and narration may alter – and thus determine – the origin, the knowledge – in short, that which it seeks to represent. And how can one tell, in either sense, the effects of writing, when writing is already a “telling” in both senses?

such that this moment of indeterminacy of meaning is subtly situated in contrast to that tradition. Even so, Anna Nardo’s extensive discussion of this section points to another work of Milton’s, Areopagitica, which Nardo characterizes as Milton’s “paean to the varied effects of books.” Nardo notes that a study of Eliot’s notebooks reveals that Eliot transcribed a section of Areopagitica in which Milton contemplates writing as suffused with “a potencie of life in them.” (Nardo, 18-20). As Nardo recognizes, Eliot engages both the ultimate “Miltonic” disposition toward authorial intention and effect traditionally ascribed to Paradise Lost and the kind of uneasy appreciation of the disconnection between authorial intention and actual, eventual effects that Nardo – and Eliot – identify in Areopagitica.
As if not already sufficiently riddled with problematic questions and paradox, the line becomes even more inundated with an attention to uncertainty in asking “what *may* be the effect of writing?” At a transparent level, the verb conjugation “may be” denotes an indeterminate future, yet “will be” would have sufficed for this express purpose. Instead, Eliot invests a line already imbued with multiple levels of uncertainty with more uncertainty, with “may be” revealing the “effect of writing” to be still more uncertain and indeterminate: even in the future, any effect “may be” – and also may *not* be.

Further on in the chapter, Eliot explicitly describes the sequence of events whereby Raffles grabs and reappropriates an errant scrap of paper to physically secure his whiskey flask within its casing, unaware of the paper’s contents or intents. At the close of the scene, Eliot writes:

“He played this part now with as much spirit as if his journey had been entirely successful, resorting at frequent intervals to his flask. The paper with which he had wedged it was a letter signed Nicholas Bulstrode, but Raffles was not likely to disturb it from its present useful position” (415).

The scrap of paper here is the “stop-gap” introduced in the opening of the chapter. Here, it is not the linguistic or "significant" meaning – that is, the language on the page - that matters, most directly, to the page's function as a “stop-gap,” but rather the most essential physical materiality of the paper, printed or not. Materiality, here, is paramount, and textual material is exposed as an essentially physical substance, devoid, in a certain sense, of transcendent significance. In the same moment, the page is literally repurposed as a “stop-gap,” and Eliot’s diction gestures to an important consideration: To what extent is written material – and language itself- always essentially a stop-gap, desperately, even awkwardly and confusedly, wedged within an absence? This Freudian-Lacanian sense of language as most fundamentally a confrontation of presence and absence within subjectivity posits the veritable "stop-gap" potential of language as its most
primal, fundamental function. Language is always an attempt to stop the gap inherent in subjectivity, shoring up the distances that threaten to divide and isolate individuals, seeking full presence in the face of absence, separation, and loss. This resonance in Eliot’s diction, however seemingly peculiar within the context of shoring up Raffles’ flask, remains an important consideration as the novel continuously confronts the threat of loss, absence, and isolation. A closer examination of the diction of the second sentence may, in fact, reveal it to be less peculiar in this moment than initially supposed.

Two fairly quotidian, in Eliot’s self-reflexively ironic phraseology, “insignificant” words stand out: “present” and “useful.” “Present,” within the context of the sentence, denotes the temporal sense of the “present” time, yet “present” also indirectly connotes the spatial, local, situational sense of a presence in space. “Useful” raises the question of the utility of the inscribed page, and in conjunction with “present,” an emerging sense of variability and transience to “use” comes into play. Essentially the “useful” status of the inked page is modified by “present,” such that an attention to the particular, spatiotemporally “present use” of textual material becomes essential to the determination of meaning – and significance. At this point, the novel seems to begin to appreciate a pragmatic sense of linguistic meaning, in which meaning is not absolute, immutable, or determinate but determined by and in its use. Yet here, the “use” seems wholly out of control, detached from efforts at signification, and entirely subject to “coincidence.” Is written material essentially meaningless, meaning nothing beyond its material identity as particles of ink and paper?

The narrator’s observation that the paper is not “likely soon” to be “disturbed” further plays at the problematically uncertain omniscience of the narrator evident in this moment, as well as introducing a sense of probability, rather than actuality, to the narrative. Here, the
concession to probabilities and the introduction of unknowns serves to further play at the
unpredictability of writing that Eliot seems to be proposing in various ways. In a way, the
writing on the page here occupies a paradox: on the one hand, the writing is subject to
meaninglessness in the material repurposing of the paper for a purely physical use, such that the
writing becomes, figuratively, immaterial, just as it becomes exclusively material. In this sense,
the text is shown to be meaningless, like the stone inscription on the beach earlier in the chapter,
in its “present use”. At the same time, the writing on the page remains, regardless of its “present
use,” such that, later, the intransience of the words, regardless of their use, contain an
immutability that does, effectively, allow them to become highly meaningful in later “use,” just
as the stone inscription might well reveal, or seem to reveal, some hidden truths in its capacity as
a preserved artifact subject to later interpretation. Yet even the writing on the letter could easily
be lost, effaced, even dissolved by exposure to water, being, in Eliot’s description, “a bit of ink
and paper.” In this way, Eliot is still pondering the strange indeterminacy, uncertainty,
uncontrollability and potential for loss that characterizes writing. This pairing of immutably
preserved meaning in the sense of encoding a name in exact, preserved characters with the
vulnerability of meaning to use and to potential, material decay and reappropriation, continues to
complicate Eliot’s sense of textuality.

The juxtaposition of Raffles’ repurposing of the letter with the face-down stone
inscription on the “forsaken beach” further amplifies the subversion of expectations that Eliot
effects at this point in the novel: Here, the presumably ephemeral, seemingly inconsequential
letter intended, importantly, for private, temporarily, limitedly, and specific use is infused with a
potential and eventually becomes meaningful, far-reaching, and somewhat more intransient in its
effects, at least in terms of its bearer’s eventual death in the wake of its as-yet-undiscovered
“use” in disclosing knowledge. Conversely, the materially resilient, seemingly timeless, immutable, literally “written in stone” inscription is occluded, obscured, temporarily hidden – and even “forsaken” in its resting place on the beach. The stone inscription is covered, interestingly, in a deposit of sand, recalling, perhaps, Casaubon’s mud deposit. In its “present” “position,” it is vulnerable to the gradual erosion of sand, salt, water, and the ceaseless movement of the waves. This reversal of expectations between the historically significant, permanent solidity of stone inscription and the immateriality of the ink on the apparently ephemeral, purely physical paper wadding of the “stop-gap” is a stark and striking moment: If Eliot is so uncertain about the effect of writing, what can be made of Middlemarch?

Does Middlemarch bury itself, with the stone tablet, in the ground on a forsaken beach, or slip into the casing of one who will put it to untold use once loosed from its “present, useful position” – one who reappears, in one view, as “an ugly black spot on the landscape at Stone Court…inseparable even from the vision of his hearth?” (531). An attention to the text’s self-inscription and self-effacement in all of these moments forces a renewed attention to the strangely doubled textual and material grounding of Middlemarch – to its effective and affective trace. Yet how can we locate the novel’s trace within its own landscape? Where in its own troubled space does the novel come to rest?

In spite of profound, disruptive, and threatening uncertainties, the narrative persists; indeed, this moment is only, perhaps aptly, the middle. Yet to what end? To what effect? And who shall tell – or how?

The Finale – Dorothea & Middlemarch’s “Fine Issues”
George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* culminates in a scene of startling paradox. The novel’s curious Finale begins “Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.” (832). Together with the Prelude that opens Eliot’s work, the Finale section literally book-ends the vast expanse of narrative that painstakingly, even self-effacingly dedicates itself to the fullness of the “particular” in “this particular web.” In spite of the exhaustively self-complicating, meticulously detailed vastness of *Middlemarch*’s narratological middle, a space of profusion, the Finale’s succinctness seems somehow abrupt and alien – only to yield, in its own final lines, to a scene of “incalculable diffusion”:

> “Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother’s burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know.

> Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (838).

These closing paragraphs are riddled with conflict. Dorothea’s “fine issues” are cast as “hidden,” “unhistoric,” largely imperceptible, unknown - and otherwise-unwritten. Yet they exist and emerge from within Eliot’s massive, published, allusive, and canonical text – a text that does not, and perhaps cannot, desist from relentless confrontation with its own textuality. The triumphant, unwavering vision of Dorothea’s persistent meaningfulness is rendered metaphorically in the effluence and influence of expanding rivulets, such that the final gesture of the text cuts a watery figure into Middlemarch’s already self-reflexively fissuring ground. The inscribed trace of frustrated, uncertain, uncontrollable, muddied, troubled waters throughout the novel makes for tenuous, rough terrain in which to situate this final scene. Can this final,
ostensive claim of quiet triumph, resiliency, and enduring, meaningful effect be sustained in the narrative’s wake?

An attention to Eliot’s diction in this moment reveals a densely packed collusion of terms fraught with ambiguity and resonance within – and without – the novel. Interestingly, the “mixed result” recalls Casaubon’s mud, particularly in the sense of an “impulse struggling,” as does the characterization of “the determining acts of her life” as “not ideally beautiful.” Are Dorothea and Casaubon so different in their traces, their “aspects of error [or] illusion”? The parallels seem specifically tied in this sentence to the trace, the palpable, perceptible residue available to outward appearance, yet the notion of both “struggling amidst…” externalities of imperfection and even internal conflict offers a moment of parity in their lived experience. Yet Dorothea’s channels, however meandering, indistinct, shallow and thinly spread, are not the parched, immovable mud of Casaubon’s “few streaks.”

From the opening of the novel in the Prelude, Dorothea is prescribed and ascribed as constantly seeking outlet for her characteristic ardor. Dorothea’s figurative journey within the narrative landscape evokes the sense of partial determination by externalities, as streams reroute around solid obstacles and inclines, splitting into smaller outlets that effect an overall diffusion. Yet the imagery here captures something else in Dorothea: just as her meandering, constantly rerouting, and self-dividing course is “largely determined by what lies outside of it,” Dorothea’s agency is also at work. Her search for productive, altruistic, generative outlet for ardor is constantly frustrated, complicated, and pulled in various uncertain directions, yet Dorothea is remarkably willing and able to readjust, reconcile, - effectively, to continue to move, to work around, even to recollect herself, as with multiple river-branches rejoining after an earlier split, reconciling, re-integrating, and fiercely, obstinately, even in extreme loss, uncertainty, and loss of
control, pressing toward something that is constantly redefined and redefining – a greater good, a wider current, even in the unknown. Her misinterpretation of Rosamond and Will’s exchange is devastating, yet Dorothea seeks, somehow, to make good of the situation, even in the wake of an unspeakable loss that she cannot help but contain, eventually, in the powerfully empathic scene of a silently shared, nonverbally communicative moment with Rosamond.

The apparent waywardness and aspect of error perceived and ascribed to her is in fact somewhat accurate, even as Eliot seeks to point out the limitations of the perspectives of onlookers. Her initial self-figuration as Milton’s daughter typifies her early attempts to situate herself within dominant modes of “significance” – in every sense. Even the narrator seems lost for a precise textual figure for Dorothea at the opening of the novel, considering that she evokes and bears the potential to embody any or all of them; the narrator uncertainly casts her in a parataxis of textual material from various domains – religious, literary, publically newsworthy – the narrator cannot decide:

“…her plain garments… gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,--or from one of our elder poets,--in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper” (1).

Nonetheless, all of these are textual. The contrast to her anonymous, inscrutable, “incalculable” network of largely unseen, otherwise unrecorded, and leaky, blurred channels of “effect” across the landscape is striking. The paradigms of aqueous and stony inscription into the simultaneously textual and material topography of Middlemarch throughout the novel forces an important question: Can the imagery of the ultimate and penultimate paragraphs figure not only the effect of Dorothea’s life but a final figure for writing itself?

The imagery of a horizontally diffusive, wide-reaching and shallow body of water in the concluding paragraph of the finale becomes a figure for an alternative form of influence: Neither directly political nor literary, religious nor historic, the percolating, silently permeating rivulets
of effect model an existence that is nevertheless posited as exerting appreciable influence and fertile with effect. Whether or not we accept the ostensive claim of the narrative voice here in its seeming endorsement of this form of existence, the image, initially picturesque, is teeming with complexities and possibilities. A “diffusive” delta of unseen, subterranean influence and miscibility intersects, blurrily, with other bodies of water, persists across the terrain, irrigates the ground, and resists discernibility and definition.

The dissembling, unnamed network of connected streamlets do not create a topography of depth; in this way, they do not model a verticality of line, chasm, and sublimity that is consistent with a vertical and transcendental conception of signification.5 Deconstruction’s notion of the hierarchical structuring of transcendent meaning and Kristeva’s characterization of the symbolic as ‘vertical’ would be modeled as a river of great depth.6 Here, then, do we have the horizontal semiotic in Kristeva’s schematic and the associative and multiple horizontal ‘play’ of meaning that deconstruction imagines? (Kristeva, 113).

Neither, here, do we have the tendency of the water to cut into the landscape with great force – to inscribe and engrave and endow the topography with a visible line and trace. Thus the inscriptive impulse within existence is absent, and we are left with a superficial, soft impression on the terrain – a scratching of the surface - perhaps more akin to a painted brushstroke than to a chiseling carving-into-relief. Interestingly, painting appears earlier in the novel in the very diction of this alternative model for language. Kristeva writes:

“The thetic permits the constitution of the symbolic with its vertical stratification


(referent, signified, signifier) and all subsequent modalities of logico-semantic articulation...no singifying practice can be without it. Though absolutely necessary, thethetic is not exclusive: the semiotic, which also precedes it, constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice called ‘creation’. Whether in the realm of metalanguage (mathematics, for example) or literature, what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic” (113).

Kristeva’s term for the associative semiotic mode of expression, the *chora*, appears verbatim in *Middlemarch* in reference to Dorothea:

“… and he [Will] painted to himself what were Dorothea's inward sorrows as if he had been writing a choric wail” (360).

Some of the more profound moments surrounding Dorothea actually escape narration: here, a “choric wail” erupts around Will; later, Celia, too emits a “wail” in contemplating Dorothea being a mother. The exchange between Dorothea and Rosamond elapses largely in silence, with Dorothea instinctively reaching for Rosamond’s hand and with the color and pallor of their faces, along with their habit of dress, interchanging and exchanging in an evocation of largely nonverbal meeting of consciousness. Additionally, precipitous moments in Dorothea’s life are not directly narrated, with her discovery of Casaubon’s death – itself dominated by silence - and her giving birth both mentioned after the fact and not directly narrated. While a thorough attention to the numerous, varied silences and instances of nonverbal interchange is beyond the scope of this discussion, the multifaceted resistance of the narrative to narration bears mentioning, particularly in contemplating Eliot’s confrontation with textuality. This recurrent resistance amplifies, as well, the multifaceted gesturing of the Finale to the “unhistoric,” and to those “whose story we” –effectively and affectively7 - do not “know.”


Flint attends to the centrality of physical materiality to Eliot’s sensibilities in the novel, including some discussion of the phenomenon of affect and affectation. The emerging field of “affect theory” would likely yield a provocative array of possibilities within *Middlemarch*, considering Eliot’s persistent attention to effect and its attendant – or perhaps quite separate – affect,
If indeed the Finale plays at a semiotic sensibility in writing, what becomes of the pervasive signification of the novel? “We insignificant people…” is ponderous. This diction of “insignificance” within the penultimate paragraph recalls an earlier mention of a marked, named river in a way that plays at the interdependence of conceptions of “significance” and “signification”: “The Rubicon, we know, was a very insignificant stream to look at” (808). The historical significance of the Rubicon, much like the “river of which Cyrus broke the strength” in the Finale, is well established, yet here, Eliot points to an “insignificance.”

Earlier, Will contemplates the connotative “ring” to his name in the wake of gossip surrounding Raffles’ revelations and the scandal of his death, musing “…what does it signify now?” (782). Will’s question aptly complements the “present” “usefulness” of Raffles’ stop-gap, and becomes a startlingly apt condensation of Eliot’s concerns. Unlike the conventional question that ensnares Casaubon’s attempt to decode, once and for all, the mythic hieroglyphics, “what does it signify?” the question becomes, “what does it signify now?”

Signification persists, quite subtly, even into the final two words of the novel, which ends, somewhat surprisingly, in “unvisited tombs.” The earlier occlusion of the stone tablet, actually buried under sand, effects a final self-effacement to Eliot’s text in the “unvisited tombs”; even the unvisited tombs are prone to burial and obscurity. Perhaps, though, the narrative has run its course. Was the narrative a temporal event, which, once completed, erases itself? Perhaps a further understanding of this image is to be found in considering Dorothea and her including her discussion of “aspects.” The presumptions of individuality and subjectivity within the novel are complicated, in Flint’s appraisal, by Eliot’s sustained awareness of the physical body, seemingly the grounding of subjectivity yet itself prone to affective interview. This fits with Eliot’s appreciation (or prioritization) of interpersonal –and perhaps intrapersonal – exchanges that transcend, subvert, coopt fixed identities.
“diffusive” effect: Dorothea is situated within the watery channels of the scene, not in the stony inscriptions of the “unvisited tombs.”

In this sense, the tombs are unvisited because they are already irrelevant, not the true resting place, vault, or truest inscription of identity – and not the locus of residual effect. The “effects of her being” have been “spent” – diffusing the substance of ardor, the flowing water, intersects, irrigates, achieving effect that transgresses definable limit – incalculable – one effect effecting another, as Dorothea’s efforts touch other lives in her presence. Her efforts, however disparately diffused, do not, in this sense, disappear ontologically, as with the obliterating “gulf of death” Lydgate observes for Raffles, but are recycled, repurposed, and namelessly infused into the material of the ecosystem. A teeming, agrarian irrigation occurs, and the tombs have little to do with the “final” resting place of the identities inscribed.

In this way, the text, too, becomes a part of the ground, material, contingent dependent, and fragile. Intertextuality is aptly modeled in this way, and it is no wonder that Eliot’s text is so suffused with allusion.8 Dorothea’s proper effects, aptly denoting, as well, the personal “effects” of material property of the dead, are elsewhere – as perhaps are the novel’s.

Written effect does not occur in isolation but intractably with reading. Indeed, Eliot actually inscribes the reader into the final scene: The employment of the second person in the line “we insignificant people…” effectively situates and inscribes the reader within the text alongside the narrator. Middlemarch becomes repurposed, then, in the act of reading, contingent and “partially dependent” on its “present” “useful” engagement.

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8 Nardo draws attention to a curious metaphor in Eliot’s personal letters: Eliot’s sense of accumulating a “mental sediment” of eclectic, aggregate ideas and texts in her own reading captures the geological intertextual layering of Middlemarch’s textual ground.
Eliot’s ultimate and penultimate paragraphs teem with possibilities, conflicts, uncertainties, and paradox. Yet a persistent claim emerges, however problematically, in the final, humble panegyric to Dorothea’s “diffusive” “effect.” For Eliot, in writing and in experience, meaning occurs relationally – messy, thwarted, passionate, frustrated, imperfect, blurry, and “struggling” – but not, as with Casaubon’s “still unwritten” “tomb,” in isolation.
Bibliography


