Reading the Animal Detail in *Middlemarch:*
Non-Narratability, Knowledge, and the Sympathetic Imagination

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Introduction: Mapping the Significance of the Animal Detail

Let us begin with a moment in *Middlemarch* when the detail effectively interrupts, disrupts, and erupts in the text, during a scene that is itself full surprise (Fred is surprised at the possibility that he is not Mary’s only suitor and Mrs. Garth at her behavior towards Fred):

[Mrs. Garth answered,] wanting to check unintended consequences—‘I spoke from inference only’…But she hesitated to beg that he would keep entire silence on a subject which she herself had unnecessarily mentioned, not being used to stoop in that way; and while she was hesitating there was already a rush of unintended consequences under the apple-tree where the tea-things stood. Ben, bouncing across the grass with Brownie at his heels, and seeing the kitten dragging the knitting by a lengthening of wool, shouted and clasped his hands; Brownie barked, the kitten, desperate, jumped on the tea-table and upset the milk, then jumped down again and swept half the cherries with it; and Ben, snatching up the half-knitted sock-top, fitted it over the kitten’s head as a new source of madness, while Letty arriving cried out to her mother against this cruelty[^1]—it was a history as full of sensation as ‘This is the house that Jack built.’ (MM 575)^2

The repeat appearance of “unintended consequences,” first in the realm of consciousness (Mrs. Garth’s anxiety about them), then in the realm of the physical (the kitten’s disruptions), and finally in re-enactment (the nursery rhyme), requires a reading of this interruption as more than merely rhetorical: an external manifestation of internal anxiety. But, the translation of anxiety in this moment of interruption—from the unintended consequences Mrs. Garth imagines to the unintended consequences that occur—stages a figurative undoing, the unraveling of an associational spool of narrative implications.^[3]

In “The Optic and the Semiotic in *Middlemarch*,” J.H. Miller points to the connection between a major governing metaphor within the text, weaving, and the derivation of the word

[^1]: The concept of cruelty with regard to animals was contemporary to Eliot, and the text of *Middlemarch*: in 1800 the House of Commons considered the first animal protection bill ever presented, and in 1824 the SPCA was founded. (Ritvo 127)
[^3]: While also joining the tradition of mythical unweaving: the kitten as reminiscent of Ariadne, or Persephone.
text itself from the Latin textus, a “literary composition, ‘woven thing,’ from the past participle of texteré, to weave” (J.H. Miller 68). But its antithetical counterpart must not be eclipsed: the unwinding of a thread or the unraveling of woven cloth, its undoing carried within evolution from the Latin evolveré.4 Through unweaving the narrative undoes, but through unfolding it produces (story): “the unfolding or progression of a series of events in orderly succession,” (OED Online, "evolution," def. 3a). Thus, “the kitten dragging the knitting by a lengthening of wool,” enacts both a material and figurative undoing of the semantic system of weaving as metaphor within (and for) the text, but is also productive origin of the string of reactions that follows—the physical string igniting and producing a copy of itself. The undercurrent of anxiety written in “unintended consequences” is the anxiety of what is possible. Unintended consequences are realized in the uncontrollable eruption of connected events, one after another, which marks the undoing of order (the kitten runs away with the knitting, the dog barks, the kitten jumps, the milk spills, the cherries too). But, this unfolding of unintended consequences produces a story, an order governed by connection: “this is the house that Jack built, this is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built, this is the rat that ate the malt that lived in the house that Jack built, this is the cat that chased the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built, this is the dog that worried the cat that chased the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack Built…”

The ambiguity and contradiction that characterize the kitten’s act of unweaving (the undoing of the knitting and the unfolding of events, and the undoing of order and the production of connection), mirrored in the generative interaction between textus and evolveré,

4 While evolveré is the very undoing of a crucial semantic system employed in Middlemarch, it is also the site at which various semantic systems in Middlemarch coalesce and are connected: to evolve, also means to study, to examine or consider in depth; the language of bloom within the text also originates from evolveré, as in to evolve foliage; and, the silk worm ‘evolves’ thread from its body to secure itself on a branch, not entirely inconsequential to the narrator’s “gossamer web.”
evokes Michele Riffaterre’s explication of “ungrammaticality” as “deviant grammar or lexicon” in his *Semiotics of Poetry* (Riffaterre 2). Riffaterre introduces three distinct semantic modes through which ungrammaticalities surface and are produced: indirection, displacement, and creation (Riffaterre 2). While Riffaterre focuses on the prosodic conveyance and production of meaning through ungrammaticality within the finite context of the poem, I am concerned with the focal foundation of ungrammaticality as embedded within the thematic presence of animality in *Middlemarch*. Rooted in the production of deviant ungrammaticalities that interrupt and erupt within textual continuity is the relation between the detail and the general—a connection that Naomi Schor delineates in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*:

> to focus on the detail…is to become aware…of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women. (Schor 4)

Dragging the knitting, the kitten drags an ornamental object and symbol of work produced within the sphere of feminine domesticity, but the implication of the feminine in relation to the detail is not an issue I will address here. The practice of reading in detail, “the active process by which details are singled out and read into significance,” is ultimately inseparable from the acknowledgment of the participation of the detail within the larger semantic whole: the Garths’ kitten irrevocably participates within the semantic network of weaving as metaphor that constitutes general continuity within the text (Schor 4). But, through the activation of the string within (and against) the knitting, the participation of the kitten (animal detail) is enacted through a disruption of the general—the undoing and unfolding of a semantic fabric. While the animal detail is not centrally figured in Schor’s project, it is the animal that lurks beneath Schor’s historical trace of the detail. In elucidating what she sees as the “bi-polar” relationship
to the detail exhibited by classical aesthetics, Schor notes Sir Joshua Reynolds’ response to
Ruben’s *Last Supper*: “under the table is a dog gnawing a bone; a circumstance mean in itself,
certainly unworthy of such a subject” (Schor 11). Reynolds’ reaction demands the equation of
the ideal with the absence of the particular (animal)—its presence problematic both within and
outside the frame of representation. 5

Scaffolding Reynolds’ reaction is the demand for the detail to be enveloped with the
general or dismissed and excluded from it. The particular schematic raised by Reynolds
partakes in and effects a model posited by D.A. Miller in his discrimination of the narratable
from the non-narratable in *Middlemarch*—an infrastructure motivated by the interpretive
production of the Garths’ kitten. Socially given reality, or the ideology of social routine, is a
non-narratable base from which deviations in the form of narratabilities—identified as
ideological threats—are isolated (D.A. Miller 122). Miller also expresses this “distinction of
relevance” between the non-narratable and narratable dimensionally: round characters are “full
of intriguing possibilities” while “flat ones” are “reduced to a proscribed gesture or function
which they cannot overstep” (D.A. Miller 141). The unraveling of unintended consequences as
an external staging of internal anxiety questions the dimensionality of the kitten as figure. But
positioning the kitten as the parabolic realization of human consciousness suggests that it
participates within, between, and beyond barriers of consciousness. By literally undoing the
semantic network of weaving causing a “rush” of unintended consequences, the kitten asserts
expressive significance independent from reference and representation and reveals an anxiety
surrounding *possibility*.

5 For Schor, Reynolds is illustrative of this “bi-polar” purview in that his response is founded upon
the “lucid recognition” of the detail—which he values, Schor argues, because of the use of
particularity with the rise of realism—while being declaredly anti-detail (Schor 11).
Demonstrating its capability of dismantling the cohesion of a semantic network—and of questioning thereby demarcations of consciousness—the Garths’ kitten becomes narratable. The narratable as deviation or deviant ungrammaticality poses a particularized threat to the stability of the general; “order and orientation” are maintained by a “well-policed periphery where narratabilites are nullified, reined in, or denied importance” (D.A. Miller 141). Accordingly, the potential narratability, or roundness, of the Garths’ kitten is effectively flattened. By placing the knitting on the kitten’s head, Ben’s “cruelty” effectively stops the action by physically reining in the narratable, thus rendering it non-narratable—its undoing of the knitting stopped by its very containment by the knitting—forcibly enacting the assimilation of the kitten into the whole which it was actively unraveling and undoing. But Ben’s containment of the kitten by the “half-knitted sock-top” only produces “madness,” intimating the possibility that “madness” originates in the action of such a translation that re-produces and projects delusion, effectively exacerbating instability (producing ungrammaticality).

Employing the practice of reading in detail vis-à-vis the core issue of animality, this essay will proceed to address and extend the interpretive foundation traced thus far: that is, we will engage the significant presence of the animal detail in Middlemarch within the relational modality of the detail and the general (paralleled by the narratable and non-narratable, ungrammaticality and textual continuity) through which two distinct registers of possibility unfold. We will consider a conversation between Dorothea and Farebrother which reveals the various modes of instrumentation of the animal in general as a literal and figurative container. To address the utilization of the representational animal in general to reflect, communicate, and re-establish human social values through anthropomorphism, we will turn to Mrs. Cadwallader’s demonstration of the anxiety embedded within the social ideology of classification within and between species (the undergirding practice of social troping produced
through anthropomorphic transference of value and mobilized as hierarchal justification between and within species): when a deviant particular from the order-ing system is identified by Mrs. Cadwallader, therefore becoming potentially narratable, it must be reined in or expelled from the ideology it threatens.

The translation of the potentially narratable to the non-narratable is extended as problematic within (and for) the narrative of *Middlemarch*. First, we will encounter the animal detail as potential ideological threat through the textual rendering of the Dagley episode: its potential narratability and subsequent non-narratability anticipated (and ultimately enacted) by the narrative. The dimensionality of the particular animal as flat is maintained in the encounter between Dorothea and the Maltese: employed as representation vehicle by Chettam and Dorothea, her rejection of the Maltese produces her own narratability thereby displacing the potential narratability of the Maltese. Finally, we will consider the figure of the animal detail manifest in the reaction to Joshua Rigg’s presence in Middlemarch as indicative of the proscribed presence of the animal in a process of other-ing. Rigg’s perceived animality marks him as a strange outsider (subhuman and semi-animal) becoming potentially narratable, but it is also the external association of Rigg with animality (seen at the level of Middlemarch community) which is mobilized to enact his expulsion as monstrous, and the denial of his importance through the narrative establishment of parable.

Vis-à-vis two episodes that delineate the presence of the particular animal within and between marginalia of consciousness (conflating the epistemological and ethical problem of knowing or relating to an-other), the effective disruption of the function of the general enforced through and imposed upon the animal detail manifest in general is broken. Through an imagined encounter between a princess and a four-footed creature, motivated as a conceit through which we can understand Dorothea’s feelings about Will, the animal detail figured as
representational mirror and parabolic vehicle is shattered by the encounter with and reciprocal attention to the particular other (mutually affecting and effecting each as particular). Momentarily, we will turn to J.L. Austin and Adam Smith to tease out the implications of the presence of the particular animal within and between consciousness marked by the imaginary communion with another: through love (Dorothea and Will, the princess and the four-footed creature) and suffering (Dorothea and Rosamond, and the creature in the darkness)—thereby revealing the narratable space in the social unconscious beneath the cultural production of the animal as non-narratable. Provoked by her fellow-feeling with Rosamond and Lydgate’s trouble, Dorothea is inspired to shoulder Lydgate’s debt, speak on his behalf to members of the community, and also to Rosamond. The feeling and experience of shared trouble produced by Dorothea’s visit to Rosamond draws out the inevitable, involuntary and unavoidable connection forged in such an encounter which draws us outside the limits of self and into the feelings and experiences of another carrying us beyond present trouble and giving voice and presence to the trouble of another—the “cry from some suffering creature in the darkness” is heard (MM 795).

The large scale of ungrammaticality produced between the distortion of the animal detail as representational surface and its displacement by the subterranean eruption of the particular animal in consciousness is reconciled by the emergence of the sympathetic imagination—its dual manifestation rooted in the potentially problematic encounter with the other. This essay will propose that the foundational framework of Middlemarch is sympathetic: that is, Eliot proposes that art is purposed to “awaken social sympathies” by leading the self “into that attention to what is apart from themselves….the raw material of moral sentiment” (Eliot 142-3). Applying (what I find to be) the methodological approach of experimentation proposed in Middlemarch, this essay will focus on several scales. First,
reading the topography of the animal as it figures in two ‘experimental’ moments which chart integral transformations of central characters (Lydgate and Dorothea) and animate the provocative dwelling of the animal detail as essential to the relationship between representation and the development (or failure) of the sympathetic imagination. Whereas the (parodic) “keepsake” story, Lydgate’s past with Laure, problematizes the dis-ordering place of the particular within melodramatic and deductive frameworks (showcasing Lydgate’s sympathetic failure as reactive to the collapse and interfusion between the representational and the real), the episode of Dorothea’s wedding journey problematizes the dis-ordering bombardment of details that cannot, or will not, be situated in a framework of atomization (ultimately leading to sympathy as a recuperation from chaos). The displacement of the Lydgate episode (first intended as part of the narrative’s main thread) by Dorothea’s narrative trace, climaxing in Rome as an epic exploration of traumatic (self) reconstruction, galvanizes the novel’s own generic and thematic transformation. Finally, this essay will extend to narrative threads and re-focus upon one specific moment of textual instruction (further echoing the experimental practice proposed in *Middlemarch*), both of which express, demonstrate and re-establish the thematic problems and resolutions which arise from the “woven and interwoven” web of details explored.

**Section 1: The Instrumentation of the Animal In General: A Problem of Ethical Relation**

“These perfect in their little parts, / Whose work is all their prize— / Without them how could laws, or arts. / Or towered cities rise?” (MM 399)

The figure of the animal is a site of the negative production of human identity: human is *not animal*, “It is so painful…that you will look at human beings as if they were merely
animals with a toilette, and never see the great soul in a man’s face” (MM 20). Yet, while the essence of humanity is sometimes distilled into the quality of being not animal, in *Man and the Natural World* Keith Thomas reminds us that the animal is also a site of projection for the reflection and reinforcement of socio-cultural values (Thomas 40). The animal in general is employed as a parabolic mirror and a lexicon, an instrument to produce and re-establish human cultural values and identity (while the particular animal is, of course, at the mercy of the very systems it is employed to produce). These various manifestations of the instrumentation of the animal in general arise in Dorothea’s “dilation” with Mr. Farebrother:

He had just set up a pair of beautiful goats to be pets of the village in general, and to walk at large as sacred animals. The evening went by cheerfully till after tea, Dorothea talking more than usual and dilating with Mr. Farebrother on the possible histories of creatures that converse compendiously with their antennae, and for aught we know may hold reformed parliaments; when suddenly some inarticulate little sounds were heard which called everybody’s attention. ‘Henrietta Noble,’ said Mrs. Farebrother, seeing her small sister moving about the furniture legs distressfully, ‘what is the matter?’ ‘I have lost my tortoise shell lozenge box. I fear the kitten has rolled it away,’ said the tiny old lady, involuntarily continuing her beaver-like notes. (MM 785)

The pair of goats play perfectly a double function: “in general,” as companions of the community; and “at large,” as a symbol of God (or “sacred animals”). Dorothea’s anthropomorphism of the “creatures that converse compendiously with their antennae” also carries the import of reflecting current political concerns, who “for aught we know may hold reformed parliaments.” The “tortoise shell lozenge box” is both a literal and figurative container. It is made from the shell of a tortoise, but its status as a gift from Will makes Dorothea’s heart ‘palpitate violently,’ causing her to leave. Again, the action of the kitten is of “consequence.” The removal of the physical presence of the animal manifest as container suggests such a movement of absence of the particular animal in its re-presentational use. The

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6 The alignment of anthropomorphism with the transference of ‘human’ qualities as well as the problem of knowing other minds is one we will return to in the next section.
absence of the particular animal at the site of its containment of function to literal and figurative container, also marks the involuntary association between the human and the animal: “the kitten has rolled it away,” said the tiny old lady, [Henrietta Noble] involuntarily continuing her beaver-like notes” (MM 785).

The connection between anthropomorphism and the projection of values, i.e. class structure, is sometimes inevitable. As accepted morality within human social and political systems changed, so did the cultural perception of and interest in animals. Both differences and similarities between the ‘animal’ and the ‘human’ were employed to establish and reinforce qualities that were classified as human or not human. If the “essence of humanity was defined as consisting in some specific quality, then it followed that any man who did not display that quality was subhuman, semi-animal” (Thomas 41). This degree of difference is invoked to justify the hierarchy of natural species as well as the hierarchy within species, most especially existing inequalities of gender, class, and race. Thus in Middlemarch, women are ubiquitously described as birds: Casaubon wishes Dorothea would observe “his abundant pen scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical eye of an elegant-minded canary bird” (MM 200); Rosamond is both a swan and water-nixie, or mermaid, a literal equation of the semi-animal and the subhuman (MM 89, 356, 437, 650). Raffles is as incongruous in Middlemarch as “if he had been a baboon escaped from a menagerie” (MM 416). And, Rigg is described as a “frog-faced” (MM 332) “fondling from Africay” (MM 339). 

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7 For example, increased emphasis in bourgeois work ethics paralleled seventeenth and eighteenth century obsessions with bees and ants; “a growing interest in cleanliness brought into favour such creatures as the badger, who, observed Pennant [eighteenth century zoologist], always left its quarters when obeying the call of nature” (Thomas 63).
8 In the early 19th century, naturalists studied birds for their “reassuring family relationships” (Thomas 63).
9 Eliot is equally guilty of the pairing of anthropomorphism with social troping: “The cultured man acts more as an individual; the peasant, more as one of a group. Hans drives the plough, lives, and thinks just as Kunz does; and it is this fact, that many thousands of men are as like each other in thoughts and habits as so many sheep or oysters, which constitutes the weight of the peasantry in
This mode of social troping figuring the gendered, racial, economic other as subhuman or semi-animal, is shouldered by the system of classification. Mrs. Cadwallader, mistaking the followers in Featherstone’s funeral procession for “rich Lowick farmers” is awarded the opportunity to express such an anxiety surrounding classification: “‘Your rich Lowick farmers are as curious as any buffaloes or bison, and I daresay you don’t half see them at church. They are quite different from your uncle’s tenants or Sir James—monsters—farmers without landlords—one can’t tell how to class them”’ (MM 326). By deviating from what is traditionally defined as “tenant” (the allusion to Tipton here suggests the equation of being tenant with ill-treatment and poor management), both the monstrous, meaning without master, and the un-classable pose ideological threats to the social routine of classification. But as potential narratabilities they must be “nullified, reined in, denied importance,” or “assimilated, expelled” from the sphere of concern (D.A. Miller 141). Chettam’s response to Mrs. Cadwallader’s chatty observation, “Most of these followers are not Lowick people,” does not resolve anxiety about class-ing them, but it does render Lowick farmers as non-narratable by denying their importance in the conversation (the subject immediately changes). Potential narratability is both opened up through and flattened by the figure of the animal; three additional moments can further our understanding of the role narrative complacence in these translations—the displacement of potential narratability of animality, by the narratability of another or through the narratorial establishment of parable.

The potential narratability of the Dagley’s, and their presence within the narrative, is dependent upon the subject of poaching. Though Dorothea makes an effort to influence Mr. Brooke to re-manage the estate, his response is dismissive: “‘there is something in what you

the social or political scale…in the cultivated world each individual has his style of speaking and writing. But among the peasantry it is the race, the district, the province, that has its style; namely, its dialect, its phraseology, its proverbs and its songs, which belong alike to the entire body of the people” (Eliot 147).
say, my dear, something in what you say—but not everything,”” but these “interrogatives”
“were addressed to the footman who had come in to say that the keeper had found one of
Dagley’s boys with a leveret in his hand, just killed” (MM 390). The subject of poaching not
only interrupts the conversation, but also completely precedes it: when Dorothea arrives, Will
and Mr. Brooke are “arranging ‘documents’ about hanging sheep-stealers,” so that the manner
of Dorothea’s arrival at Tipton anticipates the inevitable arrival of the conversation, the
unavoidable connection between tenants, poaching, and punitive enforcement (MM 387). We
meet the Dagleys because of the (anticipated) interjection of poaching—which translates
dismissal into concern—and not Kit Downes (whom Dorothea also mentions, “who lives with
his wife and seven children live in a house with one sitting-room and one bed-room hardly
larger than this table!” (MM 389)).

The laws which Brooke later addresses in regard to this concern, as a “matter of
prejudice, prejudice with the law on its side you know” (MM 393) refer to those which
mandated a property qualification for sportsmen, meaning that the landed gentry maintained
the privilege to hunt. This law also changed the status of the ‘leveret,’ or rabbits, in particular:
they were no longer considered game (as they were under the Game Act of 1605) but rather
‘private property’ unavailable to the tenant poor. The narratability of poaching is also
heightened by its contextual significance in Middlemarch: the Reform marked the repeal of
this statute (Munsche 5). Because the dominance over lower creatures was limited by class
status, poaching embodies a two-fold ideological threat to hierarchal dominance both within
and between species. The presence of animals within the Dagley encounter is metonymic of
the Dagley encounter’s within Middlemarch. Fag\(^\text{10}\) and Monk echo the actions and attitudes of
\(^{10}\)Fag is not only a clever name for a sheepdog (meaning sheep tick, or disease) but like the kitten
participates in the semantic network of weaving: fag as a “knot in the cloth” (OED Online, “fag,
n\(^3\),” def. 1, 2).
their masters, Dagley and Brooke (even the aural nature of their namesakes echo one another). For example, as Dagley fronts Brooke, Fag is at his heels growling (MM 396). Their echo within this scene is metonymic of their presence within the text, while also reflecting the problem of poaching as a problem of enforcing a hierarchal echo (the ‘highest’ controls the ‘lower’ by not allowing them to control the ‘lowest’). It is the disruption of this hierarchal echo, which poses a threat to the assumed social routine, as well as the disruption of the assumed status of the animal as echo (or ‘private property) that creates potential narratability.

Dorothea’s encounter with the little Maltese, made famous by Nina Auerbach,\(^{11}\) is a compact demonstration of how the animal as potential narratability remains on the “well-policed periphery” by which the “story is centered” and “order and orientation [are] maintained” between “round characters, full of intriguing possibilities” and “flat ones” reduced to a proscribed gesture or function which they cannot overstep (D.A. Miller 141). The Maltese is proposed by Chettam as a “little petitioner” marking the function of the puppy as symbol of marital courtship (MM 30). In what is difficult to discern as narrative voice, or free indirect speech, the puppy is classified as “one of nature’s most naïve toys,” a statement that prepares Dorothea’s objection to Chettam’s petition through the “little petitioner”:

‘It is painful to me to see these creatures that are bred merely as pets,’ said Dorothea, whose opinion was forming itself that very moment (as opinions will) under the heat of irritation…‘I believe all the petting that is given them does not make them happy. They are too helpless: their lives are too frail. A weasel or a mouse that gets its own living is more interesting. I like to think that the animals about us have souls something like our own, and either carry on their own little affairs or can be companions to us, like Monk here. Those creatures are parasitic.’ (MM 30)

\(^{11}\) The puppy plays a small, but important part, in Auerbach’s essay, she proposes not only that Dorothea’s rejection of the puppy is a denial of physicality and the body, but also that her rejection “withholds sympathy,” a problem that I will argue is paramount to understanding the encounter with the animal detail.
Through her tooling of anthropomorphic transference to express a social critique, Dorothea, like Chettam, utilizes the puppy as a symbolic figure of communication. The Maltese is an example of what David Marshall, in the *Surprising Effects of Sympathy*, articulates as an anxiety about the undesirable effects realized in the projection of representation upon (hence transformation of) another: that in viewing something as a representation, we may be in fact misconstruing what we see. In her use of the puppy to express her objection to the type of relation that empties the individual of all significance with the exception of their dependent status, she is inattentive to the reality that her rejection stages the very enactment she professes to find disagreeable and “painful.”

Through Dorothea, the Maltese is maintained as non-narratable, an action that also participates in the production of her narratability: “ladies are usually fond of these Maltese dogs,” but “since Miss Brooke decided that it had better not have been born”…“the objectionable puppy, whose nose and eyes were equally black and expressive, was thus got rid of” (MM 30). The surprise with which her rejection of the puppy was met distinguishes a degree of relevance between them. The puppy is restricted by Chettam and confined by Dorothea to function as a symbol, while Dorothea’s flattening and expulsion of the puppy showcases her intrigue, unpredictability, and possibility.

Where the detail of the animal is flattened to maintain order within the narrative, displaced by Dorothea’s narratability, it is the figure of the animal that appears in the narratability and non-narratability of Joshua Rigg. Rigg is immediately identified as a stranger and an outsider, a *strange outsider*:

In the morning all the ordinary currents of conjecture were disturbed by the presence of a strange mourner who had plashed among them as if from the moon. This was the stranger described by Mrs. Cadwallader as frog-faced: a man

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12 Perhaps, this is due to Dorothea’s “short-sightedness” (a concept I will return to later): she objects to Chettam’s praise of her ability to form an opinion, the power of discrimination, “I am often unable to decide. But that is from ignorance. The right conclusion is there all the same, though I am unable to see it” (MM 31).
perhaps about two or three and thirty, whose prominent eyes, thin-lipped, downward-curved mouth, and hair sleekly brushed away from a forehead that sank suddenly above the ridge of the eyebrows, certainly gave his face a batrachian unchangeableness of expression. (MM 332)

Rigg is depicted as “plash[ing] among them,” as though he splashes through water instead of walking on earth, as if he were “from the moon.” The ungrammaticality produced here points to the use of the frog to describe Rigg. A depiction, which is affirmed by again, what is difficult to discern as free indirect speech or narrative description of his specific physical qualities which “certainly gave his face a batrachian” quality. Amphibians, with reptiles, shared in the period’s animal taxonomies an anomalous status as hybrids: they neither lived exclusively in water, nor only land, but moved ambiguously through both, classified universally as other. The perception of Rigg’s “plashing” communicates confusion about his place, and his function, making him alien to the Middlemarch community. The anxiety expressed through the figure of the frog as a hybrid is in fact generally articulated in the text as an anxiety about the foreign other: Will is elsewhere described by Mrs. Cadwallader as “queerer than any of them: a little roundhead with bulging eyes—a sort of frog-face—do look. He must be of another blood, I think” (MM 328).

But the anomalous status of the hybrid goes beyond an anxiety of proper place and function; it also imports anxiety about mixing “blood.” Reacting in outrage to Rigg’s monetary inheritance, Solomon denounces Featherstone for leaving his money to “fondlings from Africay” (MM 339). The suggestion is that Rigg’s “frog-face” is a biologically inherited characteristic, which comes not from Featherstone but Rigg’s mother:

The copy in this case bore more of outside resemblance to the mother, in whose sex frog-features, accompanied with fresh-coloured cheeks and a well-rounded figure, are compatible with much charm for a certain order of admirers. The

Thomas cites a seventeenth century doctor’s description of frogs as inedible “excrements of the earth, the slime and scum of the water, the superfluity of the woods and the putrefaction of the sea” (Thomas 55).
result is sometimes a frog-faced male, desirable, surely to no order of intelligent beings. Especially when he is suddenly brought into evidence to frustrate other people’s expectations—the very lowest aspect in which a social superfluity can present himself. (MM 413)

Rigg’s undesirability, “to no order [emphasis added] of intelligent” beings, is rooted in the expression of his ‘impure’ origins. Though his mother’s “frog-features” are “compatible with much charm to a certain order [emphasis added],” her amphibian associations imply predetermined construction of her questionable nature as sub-human or semi-animal. It is the mixing of her blood with Featherstone’s which produces Rigg’s undesirability: the mixing of the construction of racial other as semi-animal and a member of the “order of intelligent beings,” which produces a hybrid bridging conceived categories such as human and animal, pure and mixed, superior and inferior. Rigg’s perceived status as hybrid thus threatens construction of “order” within the ideology of classification inter and intra-species per se.

Rigg’s presence as a “foreign body” is a shock in contrast to the “rural stock of the Waules” or “Powderdells” (MM 472). The articulation and construction of Rigg’s otherness—his “frog-face” was “not only alien and uncomfortable,” but a “shock to the order of things,” (MM 472)—perfectly articulates D.A. Miller’s definition of the narratable, which excites “an irritation that must be tranquilized, a foreign body that must be assimilated or expelled” (D.A. Miller 117). As a threat to the ideological order of classification, Rigg is ejected from it (“Fred, whom he no longer moved to laughter, thought him the lowest monster he had ever seen” (MM 340)); and nullified and denied importance through his description as a “social superfluity” (MM 413).

Ultimately, any potential narratability in the story of Joshua Rigg is underwritten by the narrator’s employment of parable: “since there never was a true story which could not be told in parables where you might put a monkey for a margrave, and vice versa—whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people, may be ennobled by being considered a
parable…thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader’s imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with Lords” (MM 341). “Low people,” and animals are reduced to performing a parabolic function: they are denied “moral elevation and the entitlement of inner lives,” as Auerbach suggests. Not only are particular low people, Dagley and Rigg, identified as non-narratable, “low people” in general only exist as a parabolic reference to the “high.” Not only are particular animals made non-narratable by narratable character’s denial of them (the Maltese and Dorothea) but the animal in general exists only as a parabolic reference. Thus, “order and orientation are maintained through [this] clear distinction of relevance” so that these general figures are reduced to the “level of patterns in a picture” (D.A. Miller 125).

Section 2: The Particular Animal in Problems of Consciousness: The Arrival of the Sympathetic Imagination

“But this power of generalizing which gives men so much the superiority in mistake over dumb animals…” (MM 592)

Whereas the detail of the animal in general is employed as a representational figure to construct, reflect, and communicate values, while the animal as such is denied entitlement to an inner life, the detail of the particular animal participates in the process of accessing inner life. The particular animal effectively destabilizes and interrupts the general, overstepping the boundary of the gesture and function which the animal in general is proscribed to perform. Briefly, let’s return to the Garths’ kitten as an example of this interruption. The kitten both stirs and performs Mrs. Garth’s internal anxiety by interrupting and making manifest her consciousness, shaped by and through an anxiety about unintended consequences. But, by
participating in, yet also undoing the semantic network of *weaving* the kitten is also part of the larger consciousness of the text, and of *text* itself. The imposition of the *general* fabric and containment of the kitten by it causes “madness,” suggesting that the reduction of the particular animal, sublimated into the function of the general is a delusion—that in its participation and disruption of consciousness, the kitten as animal detail destabilizes the function of the general.

The narrator, in an effort to articulate Dorothea’s longing to see Will, employs a story from “the days of enchantment,” through which we encounter a particular animal among the herd:

But her soul thirsted to see him. How could it be otherwise? If a princess in the days of enchantment had seen a four-footed creature from among those which live in herds come to her once and again with a human gaze which rested upon her with choice and beseeching, what would she think in her journeying, what would she look for when the herds passed her by? Surely for the gaze, which had found her, and which she would know again. (MM 539)

The emphasis on the undeniable particular, among the herd, answers the question “How could it be otherwise?” to say that in encountering the particular other, it is impossible to deny the other as particular, as apart from the herd or the general. “The human gaze which rested upon her, with choice and beseeching,” impresses upon the princess that she herself has been “found” and recognized by an-other as particular, which in turn causes her to recognize the other, “four-footed creature” as *particular*: she would search for the “gaze which had found her, and which she would know again.”

The problem of anthropomorphism here is not one of representation (identification of self through the other: the strategy by which the ‘human’ secures itself as non-narratable by subsuming the ‘animal’ into its symbolic order). The implication in the princess/four-footed creature passage is that to recognize, choose, and seek to know the mind of a particular other is *not* the corollary to “human gaze.” Through experience with the particular animal, its perception as parabolically human is disrupted, the pattern broken: “what would she look for
when the herds passed her by? Surely for the gaze, which had found her, and which she would
know again.” The function of the animal in general as mirror, achieved through the “human
gaze,” is transformed in the reciprocal attentions to and from a particular animal, “the gaze,
which had found her.” The exchange here is one of mutual acknowledgment of an-other as
particular, and the mutual desire to find, recognize, and know the particular other—affirming
the expressive significance of each.

The rhetorical turn to the employment and participation of the animal in questions of
consciousness, enacted by the narrator in Middlemarch, is an action contemplated by J.L.
Austin in his essay, “Other Minds.” The central organizing question that Austin addresses is,
“‘Do we (ever) know?’… the thoughts, feelings, sensations, mind, etc. of another creature, and
so forth,” as part of the subset of questions, ‘Do we (ever) know?’, ‘Can we know?’, and ‘How
can we know?’, the latter two of which the essay does not focus on (Austin 76). The first
statement he proposes for further examination is one “which seems simplest, and at the same
not, on the face of it…is such a statement as ‘That is a goldfinch,’” the likely response being
“How do you know?” (Austin 77). To answer this question, which subsumes the set of
questions, “‘How do you come to know?’, ‘How are you in a position to know?’, or “How do
you know?”” Austin turns again, this time to the bittern (Austin 79). For Austin, the animal
seems to be an unavoidable and inevitable part of the address and resolution of questions such
as: ‘can we know what exists outside of our selves?’, ‘how do we know what exists outside of
ourselves?’, and ‘how do you know?’, or, ‘how do I know that you know?’

In another encounter with the goldfinch, Austin proposes questions which address the
further challenge of “reliability” regarding the existence of knowledge and the knowledge of
existence:

(I) But do you know it’s a real goldfinch? How do you know you’re not
dreaming? Or after all, mightn’t it be a stuffed one? And is the head really red?
Couldn’t it have been dyed, or isn’t there perhaps an odd light reflected on it? (II) Are you certain it’s the right red for a goldfinch? Are you quite sure it isn’t too orange? Isn’t it perhaps rather too strident a note for a bittern? (Austin 86)

Though I think it is not his intention in the passage within the essay, Austin’s language of anxiety about the quality of the real with regard to statements of knowledge speaks to the limits of linguistic representation and communication in recognizing the other. This anxiety also speaks to concerns about seeing the goldfinch and hearing the bittern properly, as well as one’s ability to articulate them properly. Such an anxiety brings us back to the problem of representation in general and of the particular as both foundation and threat to that representational matrix: is it real or is it a dummy, decoy, mirror or mirage image, etc (Austin 87). Austin’s emphasis on reliability as it relates to questions of knowledge is subverted in the princess/four-footed creature passage by the presence and function of the imaginary in the narrator’s turn to “the days of enchantment.”

To answer the question, “How could it be otherwise?” in order to explain, or demonstrate, how Dorothea is feeling to the reader, the narrator turns to the world of enchantment and magic, to the realm of the imagination. The dip into this world of enchantment is purposed to help the reader imagine how Dorothea feels, how “her soul thirsted to see him.” Such a turn suggests that our senses, that is hearing or seeing, may not be capable of informing us about the reliability of the other, that it is only through the imagination that we can know the other. Adam Smith’s The Theory of Moral Sentiments expresses this necessity of the imagination, rather than the immediacy of sense, in the process and project of seeking to know and understand an-other: “our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations” (Marshall 4). Within the same chapter, but preceding the textual encounter between the princess and the four-footed creature, Celia
responds to Chettam’s statement that Dorothea should have been a queen by objecting to such “laborious a flight of imagination” (MM 536). The princess paralleled in this passage speaks to the perfect application of Celia’s language in a positive context. To practice such a “flight of the imagination” requires that we deviate from and move beyond the “regular course,” or “ordinary bounds,” of the self as well as the immediate materiality of what is real. The story is an exercise in the ‘imaginative labor’ through which we encounter, seek to know and recognize the particular other. We are carried beyond the self through this imaginative labor: through our successive encounters with Dorothea, the princess, and the “four-footed creature,” we experience, through sympathetic imagination, the longing felt by each to know and connect with an-other.

In such a situation marked by connection, it is shared trouble which moves Dorothea to act with fellow-feeling and sympathy towards Lydgate and Rosamond: “Because I felt so much for his trouble and yours. That is why I came yesterday, and why I am come to-day” (MM 795). Dorothea has offered to be Lydgate’s benefactor and champion, to speak to Rosamond to “carry some clearness and comfort into her beclouded youth” by speaking with her of Lydgate’s honor (MM 787). In her earlier encounter with Will, Dorothea speaks of the “unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak” (MM 545). Even though Dorothea does feel “unable to speak” when she and Rosamond meet, there is an involuntary and unavoidable connection that is forged through shared trials or “trouble.” Dorothea put out her hand and “Rosamond could not avoid meeting her glance, could not avoid putting her small hand into Dorothea’s” (MM 793); “involuntarily she [Rosamond] put her lips to Dorothea’s forehead which was very near her” (MM 797). The language of the involuntary and unavoidable suggests that when we encounter another whose
trouble we ourselves feel, and have perhaps experienced, it is impossible to stay within the limits of self, impossible to avoid connection.

Explaining her reason for visiting Rosamond, Dorothea’s utterance enacts the “conquering force” of the “waves of her own sorrow, from out of which she was struggling to save another” (MM 797):

‘Trouble is so hard to bear, is it not?—How can we live and think that any one has trouble—piercing trouble—and we could help them, and never try?’ Dorothea, completely swayed by the feeling that she was uttering, forgot everything but that she was speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond’s. The emotion had wrought itself more and more into her utterance, till the tones might have gone to one’s very marrow, like a low cry from some suffering creature in the darkness. And she had unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before. (MM 795)

The feeling which “sways” Dorothea and actively wrings itself “more and more into her utterance” is rooted in her own experience of trouble, which leads her to practice active sympathy. This statement, of course, speaks to the conversation in which it participates: because Dorothea “felt so much” for Lydgate and Rosamond’s trouble, she is moved to act.

But, in the moments of her speaking something uncanny happens: the feeling, and aural quality, caused by the conflation of utterance and emotion carry us beyond the present trouble, by making an-other’s trouble present: “till the tones might have gone to one’s very marrow, like a low cry from some suffering creature in the darkness.” Though our senses do not allow us to know the feeling or experience of others, it is our senses which alert us to the suffering of another, providing the opportunity for the practice of sympathy and the sympathetic imagination. As Dorothea recognizes Rosamond’s anguish from the experience of her own tribulation, the trial and suffering of another is heard, and given presence. An initial sympathetic act carries us further and further beyond the consciousness of self, but also perhaps into the realm of the social unconscious—the subterranean space beneath the threshold of the non-narratable—suggesting that the movement beyond the self also becomes an
involuntary action produced in the “darkness” of the unconscious. Then, through the relentless connection to what is outside the self, the life of the creature in the darkness is inevitably, and unconsciously, included in the ambiguous statement, that “this might be a turning point in three lives…in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress” (MM 795). ‘Hearing’ the “low cry” seems to unconsciously invoke Dorothea’s question to the reader, “‘How can we live and think that any one has trouble—piercing trouble—and we could help them, and never try?’” thus demanding the involuntary response to recognize, connect to, and sympathize with what is apart from the self.

Section 3: Experiments in Sympathy

“But it was open to another mind to say, have not these structures some common basis from which they have all started, as your sarsnet, gauze, net, satin and velvet from the raw cocoon?” (MM 148)

The reconciliation of these two modes of manifestation, the ethical problem of relating to another in general and the epistemological problem of knowing a particular other, is rooted in the practice of sympathy. It is no secret that Eliot was concerned with the production of sympathy as a desired and necessary effect of artistic representation. In her review of Rhiel’s work (Die Burgerliche Gesellschaft and Land und Leute), “The Natural History of German Life,” she articulates that art is, or should be, designed to contribute to the “awakening of social sympathies.” For Eliot, if Rhiel could have portrayed the “psychological character—they conceptions of life and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies” (Eliot 143). By throwing the action inside in Middlemarch, the text is driven by the desire to represent the “psychological character and conceptions of life and emotions,” so
as to create “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment,” (Eliot 142). Such a project seems to aim at the realization of the active sympathetic imagination through shared experience, as Adam Smith expresses in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel like in the situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations....By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. (Marshall 4)

For Smith, the imaginative labor which “carr[ies] us beyond our own person” inevitably produces the effect, and affect, of fellow feeling with and of another (specifically, through suffering). In *Middlemarch*, we are involuntarily drawn outside of ourselves through perspectivism, the direct access to a multiplicity of consciousness. The text enforces the consideration of “what is apart” from the self upon the reader, but also upon the characters within the text. The production of “the raw material of moral sentiment” rooted in the interaction between self and other requires that such a practice oppose the triviality of “selfish” egocentric purviews: that the “raw material of moral sentiment” is the foundation of sympathetic imagination—opening up the interfusion of the epistemological interaction and ethical relation to an-other.

My inquiry into the practice of sympathy as ethical and epistemological order within the text of *Middlemarch* will echo its experimental mode, by “continually expanding and
shrinking” between the telescopic and the microscopic (MM 640)—“there was fascination in the hope that the two purposes would illuminate each other” (MM 147). Claude Bernard’s articulation of the difference in presence and function of observational and experimental modes speaks directly to what I perceive as the qualities of the experimental mode in *Middlemarch*. Demonstrating the experimenter’s need for a guiding hypothesis that is either confirmed or denied by the results, Bernard pioneered and established the principles of experimentation in the life sciences, evidenced by his 1865 publication of *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (“Bernard, Claude”).

He emphasized that the “role of the experimenter” is “more active, organizing, and even disruptive” in the application of “methods of investigation, whether simple or complex, so as to make natural phenomena vary, or so as to alter them with some purpose or otherwise, to present themselves in circumstances or conditions in which nature does not show them” (Beer 159). Such disruptions for the experimenting novelist include narrative interjections which mandate a shift in perception or scale, parables (like the pier-glass) which illuminate and instruct, and narrative interruptions which bring self-awareness to the narrator’s mode of study: “I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe” (MM 141). At the microscopic level, I will focus on two scenes, which enact the importance of the experimental mode in the text—the galvanic shock administered within the story of Lydgate and Laure, and within the story of Dorothea’s wedding journey—while drawing upon the essential locus of the detail and the “suffusive sense of its connections” (MM 165).

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14 Eliot’s focus on the consciousness of the individual is reminiscent of Bernard’s research on the internal environment of the organism.
The galvanic experiment is the essential detail out of which the story of Lydgate and Laure begins, collapses, and is ‘resolved.’ The narrator claims that Lydgate’s “impetuous folly” with women “can be told without many words”: “it happened when he was studying in Paris, and just at the time when, over and above his other work, he was occupied with some galvanic experiments” (MM 150). Lydgate’s occupation with his galvanic experiments is the very setting of the story: action, which prompts Lydgate to go to the theatre of Porte Saint Martin, to see Laure:

One evening, tired with his experimenting, and not being able to elicit the facts he needed, he left his frogs and rabbits to some repose under their trying and mysterious dispensation of unexplained shocks, and went to finish his evening at the theatre of Porte Saint Martin, where there was a melodrama which he had already seen several times. (MM 151)

Lydgate’s desire to see a familiar melodrama is rooted in his perception of the experiment as melodramatic. He becomes “tired” with it because he is not “able to elicit the facts he needed.” The use of “elicit” implies an entirely deductive method of experimentation, suggested by melodrama: to “elicit facts” is to draw forth, and extract data necessary to prove an a-priori principle or concept. The failed experiment, making Lydgate “tired,” causes him to seek pleasure in the familiar melodrama. Leaving his frogs and rabbits to rest in the absence of his theatrical imposition, he goes to the theatre: it was his “only relaxation…to go and look at this woman, just as he might have thrown himself under the breath of the sweet south on a bank of violets for a while, without prejudice to his galvanism, to which he would presently return” (MM 151). But, it is his very “prejudice to his galvanism” which marks the failure of the experiment as the methodological failure of deductive melodrama. To have a pre-conceived idea about what will, or should, happen without consideration of what is to come, effectively guarantees that it will not happen. Just as the experiment fails to unfold according
a-priori expectations, so too does the performance of the familiar melodrama deviate from and defy Lydgate’s expectations.

The thought of Lydgate’s “present return” to galvanism is interrupted: “but this evening the old drama had a new catastrophe. At the moment when the heroine was to act the stabbing of her lover, and he was to fall gracefully, the wife veritably stabbed her husband, who fell as death willed” (MM 151). The interruption of action, by the very scene which attracts Lydgate to the theatre and which gives him the most pleasure, marks the second site of collapse of the deductive/melodramatic guarantee, as well as the collapse of the distinction between a spectacle of suffering and real suffering. In *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy*, David Marshall echoes Aristotle’s analysis of this phenomenon: “we delight in realistic representations of objects which would themselves be painful” (Marshall 17). Delight, or pleasure, occurs when reason prevails over sentiment, “safeguard[ing]” the spectator from the “pain we would expect to feel when faced with real suffering” (Marshall 21). It is the invasion of the real within the frame of the theatre that disallows Lydgate’s pleasure in his position as spectator, by nullifying the perception of suffering as anything but real, thereby translating Lydgate’s expectation of pleasure into shock.

Lydgate’s presence at the theatre marks a pause in his galvanic experimentation; but at the theatre, through the collapse of the melodrama by the unexpected and the collapse of the spectacle of suffering by real suffering, the galvanic experiments are galvanized. The very basis of the experiment anticipates its relationship to this other melodrama: to galvanize is to administer electric shock to a part of the body that has been separated from the whole, causing it to respond as if it was still wholly alive and functioning. Then, the action in the play re-animates the action in the experiment by continuing it, but also by reviving it in the after-life of its failure, as well as in the post-mortem existence of the animals. In the theatre, the
galvanizing action is itself inverted: no longer dispensing shocks in anticipation of expected results, Lydgate is himself shocked by the familiar melodrama’s deviation from expectation through which the real suffering of the frogs and rabbits is re-animated. And, through this inverted re-animation Lydgate’s perception of suffering as confined within the spectacle or melodramatic sphere is illuminated and forcibly disallowed in the text. What was always perceived as spectacle is invaded by the shocking presence of the real. This shocking quality of the presence of real suffering within the frame of the spectacle speaks directly to Marshall’s articulation of anxiety about misinterpretation. He suggests that there may be “surprising and undesired effects” in viewing someone or something as a spectacle, wherein we may be “misconstruing what we see” (Marshall 49), enacting a misinterpretation that “threatens to turn spectacles into life or death situations” (Marshall 48). The production of real suffering within the primary melodrama in this scene (Laure’s murder of her husband) re-animates what was always a “life or death” situation in the initial melodrama of Lydgate’s galvanic experimentation. The galvanic experiment is re-animated as it was intended, but not in the way that Lydgate expects. This re-animation corrects Lydgate’s misinterpretation of real suffering as spectacle by destroying the imagined theatrical frame of the experiment through the invasion of the real within the material frame of the theatrical spectacle.

But misinterpretation extends as well to the manner of reception of the surprising and undesirable event: the death, or murder, of Laure’s husband by her hand. Lydgate champions Laure’s innocence in Paris: the “notion of murder was absurd; no motive was discoverable…and it was not unprecedented that an accidental slip of the foot should have brought these grave consequences” (MM 151). The language used in Lydgate’s hope that the death was a fatal accident, “an accidental slip of the foot,” also bears consequence within the realm of galvanic experiments—or, muscular stimulation (shocking) caused by an electrostatic
machine and Leyden jar, a phenomenon that Luigi Galvani called “animal electricity.” At the end of the eighteenth century, a visitor to Galvani’s lab caused the severed legs of a skinned frog to kick when his scalpel touched the lumbar nerve while the machine was still activated—the slip of his hand caused a movement in the frog’s leg, or slip in the foot (“Galvani, Luigi”). While Lydgate hopes that the death of Laure’s husband is a fatal accident, an “accidental slip of the foot” (“it was a fatal accident—a dreadful stroke of calamity that bound me to you the more”), the entire foundation of his experiment relies on the opposite assumption, that the slip of the frog’s or rabbit’s foot is not just a fatal accident, an accident after death (MM 153). While his inability to discover the motivation behind his experiment, his failure to “elicit” facts needed to lead him to the primary tissue, makes him “tired,” it is the realization of purposeful intent in Laure’s action that interrupts Lydgate’s proposal and breaks his binding feeling to her, causing shock: “‘I meant to do it’…Lydgate, strong man as he was, turned pale and trembled: moments seemed to pass before he rose and stood at a distance from her” (MM 153). Lydgate is horrified by the discovery of these “hidden facts,” which dramatically alter the basis of their connection. He “groan[s] in horror” upon hearing that Laure killed her husband not because of some “secret” motivation (e.g. he was “brutal”) but because he was merely “disagreeable” to her. It is the lack of legitimate motivation to harm which is most jarring to Lydgate: Laure is no longer a woman whom “he had given his young adoration,” but a woman who stands “amid the throng of stupid criminals” (MM 153).

Laure’s action can be interpreted as horrifying to Lydgate along two very different registers. When Lydgate finds Laure in Avignon, during their conversation she is described as “looking at him with eyes that seemed to wonder as an untamed ruminating animal wonders”

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15 Giovanni Aldini, Galvani’s nephew, was his greatest champion: he toured England to demonstrate “galvanic action” which involved re-animating dis-membered bodies of executed murders, and dissected sheep, oxen, and chickens—transforming the galvanic experiment into a spectacle (“Aldini, Giovanni”).
(MM 152), staging a similarity to the implied rumination and wonder that describes the
galvanized animals: “he left his frogs and rabbits to some repose under their trying and
mysterious dispensation of unexplained shocks” (MM 151). Lydgate is also connected to the
“lover” in the play, who is mistaken for the “evil-designing duke.” These parallel connections
bear the interpretation that within the melodrama of the play is also an inversion of the
melodrama of the experiment: that by killing the lover, or “evil-designing duke,” Lydgate as a
potential lover to Laure, as the potential “evil-designing duke” of the melodramatic galvanic
experiment, is also annihilated. The lover is not only disagreeable to Laure, but, mistaken as
the “evil-designing duke,” he is brutal, just as Lydgate is not only disagreeable to the animals,
but potentially brutal through dis-memberment and shocking.16 However, his mistaken
identity also suggests that the real horror in Laure’s action is the lack of a “secret” motive or
transcendent purpose, which would justify the action, through such explanations as ‘he was
brutal’ or the belief that “human life might be made better”:

Three days afterwards Lydgate was at his galvanism again in his Paris chambers,
believing that his illusions were at an end for him. He was saved from the
hardening effects by the abundant kindness of his heart and his belief that human
life might be made better. But he had more reason than ever for trusting his
judgment, now that it was so experienced; and henceforth he would take a
strictly scientific view of woman, entertaining no expectations, but such as were
justified beforehand. (MM 153)

However, the credibility of this justification, “he was saved from the hardening effects by the
abundant kindness of his heart and his belief that human life might be made better,” is
questionable, as it directly follows Lydgate’s belief, “that his illusions were at en end for
him,” suggesting that the justification itself is another site of illusion and misinterpretation.
Though his experience with Laure does eliminate the “entertain[ment] of expectations,” that is

16 It is probable that Lydgate’s experiment is a product of vivi-section, for it was normative practice
at the time to dissect live animals for medical knowledge—articulated by Bernard as indispensable;
Galvani’s accidental discovery of “animal electricity” also appears to be the coincidental
consequence of live dissection.
deductive melodrama, in his newly forming perception of science and women it fails to
dissolve the final illusion: that Lydgate was saved from the “hardening effects” of real
suffering through the “kindness of his heart.” After all, it is easier to find “hidden act[ors]”
than “hidden facts” (MM 152).

Ultimately, the questionable nature of Lydgate’s justification for galvanic experiments
lies in the quality of deterministic plots, which emphasize the inevitable sacrifice of the
individual. This anxiety is paralleled in the imposition of melodramatic and deductive
methods of inquiry and the consequential inevitable devaluation of all evidence and
experience that deviates from expectation. The ungrammaticality produced through the detail
of “an accidental slip of the foot” marks a failure to allow the unexpected and particular
experience to penetrate our field of vision: “is it not rather what we expect in men, that they
should have numerous strands of experience side by side and never compare them with each
other?” (MM 589) The expectation of failure to make vital connections is anticipated and
forcefully corrected in the textual command to equate the spectacle of suffering with real
suffering thereby not allowing for a spectatorial position to another’s suffering. The invasion
of the real into the frame of the spectacle, or representational, demands the engagement of
sympathetic imagination: that when we see the suffering of an-other, we cannot and must not
experience it as a spectacle of suffering, we must experience it as our own. The collision
staged within (and between) the frame(s) of the theatre marks the enactment of a vital
connection between two spheres of concern: the concern with the effects and experience of art
is finally indistinguishable from a concern about relations between self and other (Marshall
40).

In exploring the textual experiment which galvanizes Dorothea, I will consider three
different scales of the textual instruction of sympathy—so that the very “eye of [my]
research” is purposed to “provisionally frame its object with more and more exactness of relation” (MM 165)—Dorothea’s transformational trace from crisis to resolution in her wedding journey to Rome; moments that participate in the yet broader textual continuity which reflect upon and resolve thematic issues which arise in the episodic experiment that is Dorothea’s honeymoon; and, a condensed moment of particular textual instruction addressed to the reader, located within the textual arc’s progression of Dorothea’s development. Where the failure of production of sympathy for particular animals is demonstrated through the enactment of Lydgate’s “impetuous folly,” the particular animal is crucial to the novel’s actual site of sympathetic instruction, which is Dorothea’s wedding journey. Where the galvanic quality is found in the particular detail underwritten in Lydgate and Laure’s story, the galvanic presence in Dorothea’s wedding journey originates from the overwhelming abundance of details, causing chaos and crisis. Where the shock of suffering is both administered by and turned on Lydgate through the collapse of the representational and the real, Dorothea is shocked into suffering by the very distance between artistic representation in Rome (its epochal history), and her lived experience in Rome (her wedding journey).

It is the “stupendous fragmentariness” of Rome which galvanizes and animates Dorothea’s crisis (MM 192). Her “trouble” is caused and expressed in the collapse of order occasioned by the disillusionment of her wedding journey: “for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view” of Mr. Casaubon and her relation to him “was gradually changing” (MM 194). The assault of an infinite abundance of trivial details and their “stupendous fragmentariness,” bearing no internal connection, causes Dorothea’s entire perception of her future and of her connections to others to evolve. But a “permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her [Dorothea]” (MM 194). The need for order
expressed through a transcendent overriding intention, characterized as deeply respectful and even sacred, suggests a reaction to the anxiety of disorder defined as trivial and fragmented, expressed in “stupendous fragmentariness” and “endless minutiae.” In the story of Lydgate and Laure, the text seemed to annihilate the “over-order-ing” nature of melodramatic expectations and deductive methods of inquiry through disorder, or deviation from expectation. Here, “dis-order” also requires that it is not the absence or presence of order that is of concern, but rather the correct manifestation of order.

Closing the chapter that depicts Dorothea’s arrival in Rome, the narrator charts Dorothea’s position in relation to this correct manifestation of order, as she reaches for and forward to it: “but in Dorothea’s mind there was a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow—the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good” (MM 202). The language utilized to describe this current present in Dorothea definitively echoes language used to describe St. Theresa in the Prelude: “her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond the self” (MM 3). The order implied in both is that of sympathy, “fueled” by the transportation of conscience by the sympathetic imagination beyond egoism into ecstatic mental and affective connection with an-other. “The reaching forward of the whole consciousness” reaches toward both an epistemological (“the fullest truth”) and ethical (“the least partial good”) reverent resolve achieved through sympathy. The stark contrast between Dorothea’s toward movement here, and the utterly overwhelming quality of the “stupendous fragmentariness” and “endless minutiae”—threatening the imposition of dis-order and atomization—that characterize her
arrival, suggests that the resolution of sympathy is a recuperation from chaos and crisis (mobilized by Dorothea’s reaction to the administered “electric shock” (MM 193)).

To combat atomization, and the manifestation within of the detail as endlessly trivial and without connection, the particular must be valued as a significant participant within the whole without being subsumed by it: so that “thought lapses from examination of a specific object into a suffusive sense of its connections with all the rest of our existence” (MM 165). 17 Dorothea attributes the “imperfect coherence” of Casaubon’s indulgence in the trivial or “questionable detail of which Dorothea did not see the bearing” to what seemed to be the “brokenness of their intercourse” (MM 196). But the “brokenness of their intercourse” is also defined by Casaubon’s ignorance of significant details, “the little histories which made up her experience” (MM 198). The narrator’s contextual introduction to the occurrence of Dorothea’s wedding journey commands the importance of the scale of the individual by placing Dorothea’s particular presence, and “little history,” within the “epoch” of history (MM 3): “When George the Fourth was still reigning over the privacies of Windsor, when the Duke of Wellington was Prime Minister, and Mr. Vincy was mayor of the old corporation in Middlemarch, Mrs. Casaubon, born Dorothea Brooke, had taken her wedding journey to Rome” (MM 188). 18

It is the very lack of cohesion between the epoch grandeur of Rome and Dorothea’s particular experience—“ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi…this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual”—“set in the midst of a sordid present…mixed confusedly with

17 An action which, unlike Dorothea and Casaubon, Will enacts perfectly: he enjoyed the “miscellaneousness of Rome, which made the mind flexible with constant comparison, and saved you from seeing the world’s ages as a set of box-like partitions without vital connection” (MM 212).
18 Just as the Prelude demands that the life of Theresa—a particular woman, like Dorothea—be considered and written into “the history of man,” and how “the mysterious mixture behaves under the experiments of Time” (MM 3).
the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation”—which “at first jarred her as with an
electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of
confused ideas which check the flow of emotion” (MM 193). The pain that Dorothea
experiences seems caused, not by the “electric shock,” but by the excessive satiation of
“confused ideas which check the flow of emotion,” suggesting that the origin of the “ache” is
in the divorce of ideas from feelings as well as the severing of the epoch from the particular,
the ideal from the individual. This gastronomical metaphor appears again when Dorothea
suggests to Casaubon that the “endless minutiae” and “fragmentariness” of the “rows of
notebooks” need “digesting” (MM 201). Casaubon possessed only a “lifeless embalmment of
knowledge” (MM 196): “there is hardly any contact more depressing….than that of a mind in
which years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or
sympathy” (MM 197). Dorothea’s continued uncertainty and disappointment disclose the
need for the digestion of knowledge through bodies; that is, knowledge must be married with
purpose, experience, and feeling—“‘But do you care about them?’ was always Dorothea’s
question” (MM 197).

From very early in the text, Dorothea is associated with the desire for intelligence that
is bred with purpose, feeling, and sympathy: “all her eagerness for acquirement lay within that
full current of sympathetic motive in which her ideas and impulses were habitually swept
along. She did not want to deck herself with knowledge—to wear it loose from the nerves and
blood that fed her action” (MM 86). Knowledge worn “loose from the nerves and blood” is
interchangeable with Casaubon’s “lifeless embalmment of knowledge.” Such a manifestation
of knowledge, which is entirely divorced from the body, feeling, experience, purpose, and
action is entirely antithetical to what Dorothea imagined she would find within her husband’s
mind. It is this realization that dramatically changes the topography of “the new real future
which was replacing the imaginary” (MM 194). It is impossible to dissociate embodiedness from action and “ideas and impulses” from the “full current of sympathetic motive” that sweeps them all forward within the same body and along the same current drawing forth Dorothea’s “whole consciousness to the fullest truth and least impartial good.”

The language of mazy imprisonment utilized to express Dorothea’s traumatic realization, contrasted with the freedom of “the whole consciousness” which reaches forward to something beyond her tragedy, illuminates Lydgate’s inability to engage the ultimate mandated modality of sympathy: crossing thresholds, as opposed to “exploring an enclosed basin” (MM 196) made of “ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither” (MM 195). The quality of Casaubon’s body of knowledge and his psychological orientation are marked by the lack of vital connection. He “forgets the absence of windows” as he forgets the necessary connections between thought and feeling, knowledge and life, and ultimately between minds and perspectives. Though perhaps ‘clever,’ Casaubon is “well-wadded with stupidity” (MM 194). The emergence from moral stupidity necessitates crossing thresholds as its founding practice. Sympathy is the thread that leads us out of the labyrinth structure of the self which denies threshold spaces. By dismantling the labyrinth both within each and between individual psyches, connection is mandated between minds allowing one to make the vital connection, recognizing the consciousness of another: Dorothea “felt the waking presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as her own” (MM 211).

The language employed by the narrator to chart Dorothea’s own emergence from moral stupidity as a movement of consciousness toward recognition of the consciousness of another—

we are all of us born into moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity but
yet...[could not] conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection
but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of
objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows
must always fall with a certain difference—(MM 211)

mirrors the language employed in the illumination of the philosophic/scientific parable of the
pier-glass:

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly
furniture by lifting it into the light of science, has shown me this pregnant little
fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by
a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions;
but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! The
scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles
round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere
impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a
concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection.
These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the
egoism of any person now absent. (MM 264)

The alignment of these two narratorial moments suggests that the emergence from moral
stupidity and the arrival at sympathy is equated with the recognition of the multiplicity of
perspectives. Requiring one to step outside of the singular perspective of self and into the
singular perspectives of others, the pier-glass is an aptly material metaphor for the
instrumentation of sympathy. To achieve this transformation is to communicate and connect
with an-other without speaking for the other: to imagine the mind of the particular other as
something beyond “material cut into shape” by the subjective imposition of self, thereby
allowing us to see that every candle produces an arrangement of “lights and shadows” which
only seem to emanate from the candle. The phenomenon of the pier-glass reveals the need to
transcend the enclosed and subjective vision of the egocentric self to see beyond it, a
perspectival shift that renders the scratches “impartial” and equatable to all other arrangements.
It is only by acknowledging the expressive significance of each particular other that we can
begin to imagine how the “lights and shadows” fall for an-other, thereby allowing us to evolve
beyond self-isolation, threading ourselves into the “woven and interwoven” complex of the “web.”

The practice of perspectivism put forth by the parable of the pier-glass, as well as the emergence from moral stupidity, is suffuse throughout the text. The multiplicity of consciousness is developed through the “open relationship” between the narrator and the reader, as well as through the “participation in immanent worlds of others” in the enactment of the pier-glass as textual practice (Beer 172). The structure and narrative technique of *Middlemarch* is itself built upon the assumption of access to a multiplicity of consciousness. The text itself performs the imaginative labor and leap of sympathetic imagination to present the reader with the inner life of particular individuals, and their inevitable connections and collisions with each other. Narrative interruption and interjection both support the practice of sympathy through perspectivism and deny the possibility of omniscience through egocentric vision: “but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort…” (MM 278). Such interjections make it impossible to sustain one single objective understanding of the real, foreclosing the possibility that any one perspective can exercise interpretive dominance. The repetition of “our” (in the sphere of concern and action) also marks an emphasis on the nature of the interjection instrumented to maintain recognition of a teeming otherness through the process of communal understanding, of attaining knowledge informed and created by multiple perspectives—purposed to mobilize “all our interest” and “all our effort” toward an-other.

By necessitating the recognition of unseen worlds beyond the limits of the self, the employment of microscopic and telescopic vision and scale performs similarly to the practice of recognizing multiplicity of consciousnesses.

Even with a microscope directed on a water drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens
you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swaller waits passively at his receipt of custom. (MM 59)

By continually “expanding and shrinking” the horizon of the mind, the instrument provides a means of perception that realizes the plurality of multiple unseen worlds, scales, and existences which are everywhere around us beyond the reach of our immediate senses (Beer 152). Ultimately, then, the use of the microscope is a manifestation of the imaginative labor that occurs in the engagement of the sympathetic imagination, which transports us beyond the immediate world of our senses. Such movements in consciousness and perspective suggest that the way we see, and what we see is shaped by our epistemological and ethical awareness of implicit alternative centers of attention.¹⁹

Just as the instrumental mechanism of the microscope expands the perceptual organ to see and acknowledge unseen worlds beyond the sphere of our immediate senses, so the narrator’s instruction of sympathy shapes an imperative to re-cognize the scale and significance of particular experience:

Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well-wadded with stupidity. (MM 194)

“Keen vision” requires the cohesion of all of our senses into the current of sympathetic imagination: “keen vision and feeling” make it possible to hear what is beyond our immediate

¹⁹ Perhaps Dorothea’s short-sightedness caused not only her fear of treading upon pets (MM 30) but her failure to exercise sympathy in her final rejection of the little Maltese, an episode which will be considered shortly.
sense, and to participate in other immanent worlds, like “hearing the grass grow,” or “the squirrel’s heart-beat.” It transports us outside of and entirely beyond the self into another universe in which it becomes impossible not to hear the “the squirrel’s heart-beat,” not to acknowledge the particular other—the roar on the other side of every silence. Sympathy requires that each particular other is significant and valued as connected to the roar, without being subsumed by it; it is a recuperation from chaos and a resolution against deterministic disorder. For, “there is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct-fellow feeling with individual[s]” (MM 619).

The threatening disorders of atomization and determinism are rooted in the crisis of egocentrism. To raise the particular into such significance with no reference to what is beyond and outside of it is to make the vision of one myopic to all others, condemning the self to feel only its own heart-beat, silencing the sound of all others and thus making one “well-wadded with stupidity.” The “other side of silence,” like the particular detail, has the potential to resound as a “roar” of “stupendous fragmentariness.” If we forget the value of the “squirrel’s heart-beat” as elemental to the “roar,” we suffer the defensive fate of moral stupidity, denying the particular because “our frames could hardly bear much of it…we should die of that roar.”

But to ignore “that element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency” equates with utter senselessness. The “coarse emotion of mankind” causes the “quickest of us to walk about well-wadded with stupidity,” suggesting again that it is the divorce between “coarse emotion” and “quickness” that renders them both stupid. It is the lack of attention to what is beyond the self that defines the ‘well-waddedness’ of moral stupidity: “will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self” (MM 419).
The narrator’s instructional demand for sympathy is underwritten in the subtle opportunity provided to defy ‘expectations.’ The reader is afforded the choice to participate in the deterministic discourse of tragedy, which erases the individual in the face of the overwhelming common frequency of catastrophe that surrounds us, or to actively engage in a discourse of sympathy which allows for and values the individual, the roar within each, but also the resounding roar that is omnipresent outside of the self. The emergence from moral stupidity and the arrival at sympathy marks a “metamorphosis” which causes the “stirring of new organs” (MM 490): “all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance” (MM 788). And at this threshold of an emergent sympathetic consciousness we find the particular animal: “who can tell what just criticisms Murr the cat may be passing on us beings of wider speculation?” (MM 36); “is there any yoked creature without its private opinions?” (MM 15). It becomes possible that Dorothea’s rejection of the Maltese—“the objectionable puppy, whose nose and eyes were equally black and expressive was thus got rid of” (MM 30)—is due to the limits of her perceptual organs, her “short-sightedness,” and thus, her inability to recognize an-other particular being: “the right conclusion is there all the same, though I am unable to see it’” (MM 31). Perhaps the right conclusion lies in shifting the epistemological and ethical measure for the self to the relational structure of self and other. The puppy’s eyes and nose are not equally expressive in relation to each other, but as compared with Dorothea’s eyes and nose: her inability to recognize the puppy’s expressive significance as equal to her own marks her “ignorance” through a failure of sympathy.

To recognize the particular roar within the resounding roar is to galvanize the detail as a part of the whole from which it has been dis-membered. To read the detail into significance
by recognizing its participation in a larger semantic body is in turn to re-member the order of
the whole body: a wholeness composed of many parts—a roar composed of the roar within
each of us. The instrument of sympathy that achieves communion of consciousnesses thwarts
imposition of self upon the general other by enabling the encounter with an-other particular,
whom we can only come to know by feeling with: “you would have to feel with me, else you
would never know” (MM 822). The function of knowledge that the sympathetic imagination
performs is purposed to affirm the value of the individual in order to combat the delusion and
cruelty of imposing the self upon another—a projection which succeeds in nothing but the
production of madness. But hearing the cry of “some suffering creature” ignites the relentless
electricity of sympathy: in recognizing the suffering of another, the suffering of an other is also
heard, so that the experience of each is bound up with the experience of an-other. By creating
an unconscious and involuntary response within the self to hear, recognize, and connect with
the particular other, the perceptual organ which is produced by the imaginative faculty of
sympathy makes it impossible not to hear the “squirrel’s heart-beat” and the “low cry of some
suffering creature.” Through sympathy, consciousness becomes an instrument capable of
breaking down barriers that distance the self from an-other, transforming such barriers into
threshold transports, or “folding doors” like the valvae of the heart (MM 144).

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