Unbelievable Realism:

The Impossible Narrators of George Eliot

by

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For my parents, who taught me to love reading

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Abstract

This thesis examines and explains the strange and seemingly inexplicable characteristics possessed by the narrators of George Eliot's fiction. My account attempts to address two insufficiencies in the scholarship on Eliot's narrators: first, a lack of attention to Eliot's consistent creation of narrators whose natures defy rational understanding, despite the apparent realism of the works they appear in; second, a failure to treat the inexplicability of these narrators as a significant quality in and of itself, rather than the byproduct of another authorial choice. I argue that Eliot's narrators are constructed explicitly as beings who do not make sense, who are necessarily fictional and could never be real. Their presence produces a particular reading experience: by recognizing the narrators as fictional entities who cannot represent real people, readers are encouraged to contemplate the relationship between the story and the external world, between a mental construction and the reality it represents. This aspect of the reading process emphasizes a related theme: the way that our thoughts about the world inevitably clash with its actual state. This theme is fundamental to realism as a form, to the creation of fictional works that represent and inform us about the real world. Eliot's narrators, by evoking this theme, imply a claim about the limits of realism, limits that preclude the representation of this very theme within a fictional story. Eliot's strange narrators, therefore, are a way to *demonstrate* an important feature of realism that cannot itself be *represented*.

In the first chapter, I examine the strange and interesting features of narrators who appear in four of Eliot's works: *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch*. In the second chapter, I consider four existing scholarly accounts of Eliot's narrators and argue that they do not satisfactorily explain the strangeness of these narrators, and therefore that my own account is necessary. In the third chapter, I argue that the inexplicable qualities of Eliot's narrators cause readers to think about the way fictional stories exist as mental constructions, a fact that is emphasized further by the opening scene of *The Mill on the Floss*. In the fourth chapter, I link this reading experience to the theme the narrators evoke: the way in which our ideas diverge from and run up against the reality they seek to represent, a phenomenon with particular relevance to realism itself. In the conclusion, I turn to Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, which seems to challenge my account in its claims about the relationship between ideas and the external world. I argue that while *Daniel Deronda* rethinks the theme that underlies the earlier narrators, its claims ultimately add to rather than contradict this theme: the novel examines how our engagement with realist fiction shapes and is shaped by our understanding of the limits of reality.

Keywords: narrator, realism, omniscience, ideas, reality

CONTENTS

Short Titles

AB: Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. 1859. Open Road Media, 2015. *ProQuest Ebook Central,* ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=2095246.

DD: Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. 1876. Open Road Media, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central,* ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=4728442.

MM: Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. 1872. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962. *HathiTrust,* hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015000350655.

MF: Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. 1860. Open Road Media, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central,* ebookcentralproquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=4729031.

SCL: Eliot, George. *Scenes of Clerical Life*. 1857. London, Cassell and Company, 1909. *HathiTrust,* hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951002047688a.

Introduction

In the opening chapter of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss,* readers learn a lot about the story's narrator, and very little of it makes sense. The novel's first scene initially seems perfectly reasonable: it begins with a description of a river, and a first-person narrator who stands on a bridge watching the water flow. The narrator observes a mill situated along the bank, horses leading a wagon, and a girl playing with a dog. At that point, however, the chapter comes to an unexpected conclusion:

> It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge….
>
> Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlor, on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of. (*MF* 7)

Despite initial appearances, then, this novel is actually not about the narrator's experience: they mean to tell us a story of the Tulliver family, and that is exactly what we find if we turn the page. In fact, the novel's protagonist, Maggie Tulliver, seems to be the girl the narrator sees by the river in the opening scene, as she was playing there "on that very afternoon." As the narrator begins to tell us about the Tullivers, it quickly becomes clear that the story is told from an omniscient perspective: the narrator knows every detail of the Tullivers' lives, including their private thoughts and feelings. How does this narrator, this person sitting in a chair and describing these events to us, possess omniscient knowledge about other people? Why does the narrator seem to remember the novel's events in this opening dream when, as far as the novel indicates,

they were never present to witness them? How could the sleeping narrator describe their dreams aloud as they dream them, all the while thinking they are describing reality?

The novel does not answer these questions, or even explicitly acknowledge the strangeness of the narrator's situation. As I will explain in the first chapter of this thesis, Eliot's other works also contain narrators with different yet equally inexplicable qualities. These qualities cause the narrators to fall under what is termed the "unnatural" in fiction, a category that, according to Jan Alber, includes "physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones . . ." ("Impossible Storyworlds" 80). Eliot's narrators, as I will detail in the first chapter, possess various sorts of physical impossibility: they are beings who can exist only in fictional worlds, and not in reality. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* could never be a real person, sitting in a chair and narrating to us the actual inner thoughts of other people, or memories of real events they did not experience, or scenes from a dream they do not know they are dreaming: their act of storytelling could only occur within an imagined world.

In fact, this concept of impossibility, as I use it, has an additional important dimension. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* is noteworthy not just because they cannot plausibly be real, but also because the text implicitly indicates that readers *should* interpret them as plausibly real. The narrator appears within a novel that seems, in all other respects, to attempt a realistic portrayal of the world. Indeed, George Eliot is widely viewed as a quintessential practitioner of Victorian realism: as Caroline Levine writes of Eliot, "No other nineteenth-century British writer seems so indisputably, so thoroughly, so canonically realist" (63). There is nothing within the novel to disconnect the narrator from the background of realism, no acknowledgment that the narrator is a strange exception within an apparently realistic world. The other characters in the

novel are fictional people who we can imagine as living in the real world: the narrator who appears alongside them, however, does not fit within most readers' conceptions of reality. An impossible narrator, therefore, is defined by contradiction: they are a being who cannot be real, located in a fictional world that claims to represent the real one. The tension between these two facts is what makes the narrators strange and interesting, and therefore worth examining,

My thesis begins with the premise that the choice to write such impossible narrators requires an explanation. I am not claiming that Eliot's narrators are completely unique, or wildly divergent from the standard Victorian omniscient narrator; in fact, in the first chapter I will address questions about whether Eliot's narrators are truly distinct from any other case of fictional omniscience. However, I am asserting that there is something noteworthy, intriguing, and puzzling about these narrators, and about Eliot's consistent use of narrators who exhibit different forms of impossibility. By explaining this choice, I hope to come to a deeper understanding of Eliot's work, and of the ways she thinks about and interrogates realism. Indeed, I believe that something important is missing from our conception of Eliot's fiction if her impossible narrators remain unaccounted for: we cannot fully comprehend these works if her portrayal of the narrative act itself, a central structural feature of the text, seems inexplicable. An examination of these narrators raises questions about the expectations we hold for realist works, the degree to which we view fiction as corresponding to the external world, the ability of a story to inform us about reality: these are all questions that Eliot is interested in, and that she uses her narrators to explore.

The central goal of this thesis is to explain Eliot's use of impossible narrators, to analyze their significance and account for their presence. There are three criteria that I believe a satisfactory explanation of Eliot's narrators should meet, and these criteria will form the basis of

my thesis. First of all, it is important to explain these narrators in a unified way: though they differ in many respects, the narrators all share the quality of impossibility. Second, an explanation should address the specific ways that narratorial impossibility manifests itself: of all the strange things to put in a novel, why put these particular strange things? Finally, the goal should not be to rationalize or explain away the strange qualities of the narrators; rather, we should accept that on a literal level these narrators defy rationalization, and proceed from there. In fact, I will argue that the narrators are specifically designed to evade a reader's attempts to make sense of them, that their impossibility is a deliberate creation rather than the result of some other authorial choice. Each of these criteria will be justified further in the second chapter of this thesis, where I examine and evaluate existing scholarly accounts of Eliot's narrators.

Finally, it is worth noting that in this thesis I discuss Eliot's use of narratorial impossibility as a matter of authorial intent, arguing that the strange nature of the narrators points to a clear goal on Eliot's part. This framing is useful because Eliot's apparent commitment to the construction of impossible narrators is one of the primary reasons we should be intrigued by them, and this repetition on her part should discourage us from simply dismissing their strange qualities. However, the endpoint of my explanation is a claim about reader experience, about the way we react to and confront the impossible features of Eliot's work. Therefore, while the notion of authorial intent is a useful way to think about the issue, it is not technically essential: my account can be read as either an explanation of Eliot's choices or a purely interpretive argument about the meaning of narratorial impossibility.

The narrators that I will analyze come from four of Eliot's works: *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch*. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will detail the various forms of impossibility that occur in these texts. To justify the importance of my

investigation, I will consider and respond to several potential objections to the uniqueness or noteworthiness of Eliot's narratorial choices. I will then examine the link in *The Mill on the Floss* between the narrator's impossible state and the novel's themes in order to demonstrate how critical understanding the narrator is to our broader comprehension of the novel.

In the second chapter, I will examine the work of several scholars who offer interpretations of Eliot's strange narrators. Some explain Eliot's choice by appealing to thematic motivations: Alicia Mireles Christoff argues in *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis* that Eliot's narrators move between various states to represent the fluidity of the human mind, in *The Mill on the Floss* (Christoff 61-62), or to create a sense of dynamic energy, in *Middlemarch* (Christoff 156-59). Cristina Richieri Griffin writes in *Omniscience Incarnate: Being in and of the World in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* that Eliot creates omniscient narrators with physical bodies to make a claim about the link between sensation and knowledge (24-25). Other explanations are structural: in "The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot's Novels," K. M. Newton claims that the omniscient narrator of *Middlemarch* is represented as a historian to make the novel seem more realistic (100); in "Eliot and Narrative," Monika Fludernik argues that Eliot uses narratorial impossibility to immerse readers in her novels (22-23). I will draw upon elements of these explanations in my own, but I will argue that none can completely explain the nature of Eliot's narrators, as they do not sufficiently meet the three criteria I established above: explaining the shared impossibility of the narrators, addressing the particular ways impossibility manifests itself, and recognizing impossibility as an authorial goal in and of itself.

In the third chapter, I will establish the initial steps of my own explanation. First, I will examine the effect that narratorial impossibility has on the immersion of readers in a text. Although Fludernik, as mentioned above, claims that Eliot uses impossibility to draw readers

into her novels, I will argue that the effect Eliot produces is more complex than that. To explain how Eliot's narrators affect the reading experience, I will introduce the work of Miranda Anderson and Stefan Iversen, who examine the way authors can produce a dynamic reading experience by manipulating different aspects of a reader's perception of the text (572). Building on both this idea and the work of W.J. Harvey and Debra Gettelman, I will argue that Eliot's narratorial impossibility both focuses her readers on the fictional world and reminds us of the reality that lives outside it. I will also explain that Eliot's use of impossibility specifically highlights the status of fictional stories as mental constructions, and that each of the various forms impossibility takes are ultimately related to this notion of mentality. To demonstrate this point, I will analyze Eliot's portrayal of dreams in *The Mill on the Floss,* drawing on the work of Christoff and Beth Tressler to do so.

In the fourth chapter, I will link this focus on mentality to the particular thematic role that impossible narrators play in Eliot's fiction, arguing that the narrators illustrate a claim about the fundamental divergence between mentality and reality that is central to our interactions with fictional worlds. I will begin by drawing on the work of Christoff, Tressler, Simon During, and Ian Duncan to analyze the presence of a particular theme in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*: the way that the desires and agency of characters are opposed and limited by their social and psychological contexts. I will argue that Eliot uses narratorial impossibility to represent a distinct but related claim about the inevitable clash between our conceptions of reality and its actual state. I will then build on the work of Tressler, George Levine, and Rebecca Gould to suggest that the claim made by Eliot's narrators has important implications for realism as a form. Eliot's impossible narrators, I will argue, point to the shortcomings of realist fiction

while also overcoming them, *demonstrating* an opposition between mentality and reality that a fictional story cannot truly *represent*.

In the conclusion, I will examine a work of Eliot's that seems an outlier under my account: *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot's final novel. The narrator of *Daniel Deronda* is not strange or impossible, and the novel's plot seems to question the separation between our mental contents and the external world, reversing the very theme that, in my account, underlies the construction of impossible narrators. I will argue that while *Daniel Deronda* takes a different perspective on the questions that the impossible narrators raise, the claim the novel advances is related to and builds upon the themes of narratorial impossibility. As I will explain, *Daniel Deronda* considers the ways in which our representations of reality can influence our experience, and examines the role that fictional worlds play in shaping our understanding of what is real and what is impossible.

Chapter 1: Impossible Narrators

Given George Eliot's reputation as a preeminent writer of Victorian realism, readers likely approach her work expecting a realistic story. Many of Eliot's works, however, diverge from this expectation in strange and interesting ways, confronting readers with narrators who defy rational understanding. In this chapter, I will identify three ways in which Eliot's narrators exhibit impossibility: they possess knowledge they could not truly have, or interact in inexplicable ways with the world of the story, or narrate seemingly unnaratable aspects of their own experience. I will also examine the thematic link between the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* and the novel as a whole to support the claim that coming to terms with narratorial impossibility is essential to understanding Eliot's work. Finally, I will respond to several potential objections to my classification of Eliot's narrators as impossible beings.

1. Impossible Omniscience

The first type of narratorial impossibility in Eliot's work, and the most universal, is the paradoxical knowledge her narrators possess. These narrators speak from a third-person omniscient perspective, informing readers of the thoughts and feelings of various characters. As Maximilian Alders writes, any omniscient narrator has a "truly unnatural familiarity with the intellectual and emotional interiority . . . of each individual character," an ability that is "downright magical and surely anything but 'realistic'" (345). Therefore, an omniscient point of view is one that no person could actually possess. As we will see, however, what makes Eliot's narrators truly strange is that they *are* described as individual people, leading us to wonder how such a person could have omniscient knowledge of others.

To illustrate this point, let us turn to Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. The novel is primarily narrated with third-person pronouns, by a narrator who knows what characters think and feel: for example, "Maggie thought this sort of knowledge was very wonderful,—much more difficult than remembering what was in the books; and she was rather in awe of Tom's superiority . . ." (*MF* 30). However, the narrator also appears to be an individual person: they interrupt their description of the novel's opening scene to declare, "Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair . . ." (*MF* 7). As Cristina Richieri Griffin describes it, the narrator's possession of "embodiment" seems to clash with their omniscience (*Omniscience Incarnate* 9). The narrator is not exactly a character, as they do not appear in any of the story's events and are not even named. The only instance of their existence is as storyteller, sitting in their chair and narrating the story to a listening reader.

The question this raises, of how the narrator could possibly have the knowledge of other people's thoughts and words, is never answered in the text. The narrator implies that the events of the novel are related to their own memories: "I remember those large dipping willows," they say as they describe the backdrop of the novel, and "I remember the stone bridge" (6). However, the narrator could not plausibly remember the events of the novel because they did not witness them: they never mention being present during the story, and many scenes take place in private homes where a strange observer would be noticed. More bizarre explanations also fail: we might think the narrator is secretly one of the novel's main characters, relating the story without disclosing their identity, but no character is present for every scene, and no character can read minds. The only conclusion is that the narrator's existence is simply impossible: no person should be able to tell the story as they do.

A similar narrator appears in several of Eliot's other works. In *Adam Bede,* the omniscient narrator is also a person: at one point they relate a fact that they "gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age . . ." (*AB* 291). This narrator has a different level of interaction with the story than the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss*: they are still not a named character, but they have met the novel's protagonist, and therefore exist in the same physical world as the characters. The omniscient narrator of *Middlemarch* claims to belong to a category of "historians," and notes that they themself "have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven . . ." (*MM* 137). Both novels imply that their narrators obtained the information they are relating through some process of interview or research, although no such process would be a plausible source of their omniscient knowledge.

A narrator of a different form exists in Eliot's story "Janet's Repentance," from the collection *Scenes of Clerical Life.* This omniscient narrator appears as a person at a character's church confirmation: "I remember the eyes seemed very dry in Milby Church that day," they say, and add that "Ned Phipps, who knelt against me . . . I am sure made me behave much worse than I should have done without him . . ." (*SCL* 279). This is not simply a narrator telling a story, or a historian reporting events: for this one scene, the story is an eye-witness account. However, the rest of the story cannot be explained in the same way, as it often takes place in private locations and contains descriptions of characters' thoughts. The fact that the narrator is not a named character makes it strange that they appear suddenly in one scene; if they were present for this moment, one wonders what they were doing during the rest of the story and why they were not involved in its plot.

2. Impossible Interactions

The second type of impossibility appears in the strange interactions between the narrator, the readers, and the story. This impossibility is identified by Monika Fludernik, who writes in "Eliot and Narrative" about the way the narrator of *Adam Bede* "magically project[s] the reader into the fictional world" (Fludernik 22). According to Fludernik, this occurs in cases where the narrator describes the reader as capable of sensorily interacting with the story, such as in the line "you see that his hair is not thick and straight" (*AB* 7; Fludernik 22). Fludernik also points to stranger cases where the narrator and reader seem to walk into characters' houses: "Let me take you into that dining-room . . . We will enter very softly and stand still in the open doorway, without awaking the glossy-brown setter who is stretched across the hearth . . ." (*AB* 85; Fludernik 22). Fludernik describes this as a case of "metalepsis" (22), and applies the same term to the moment when the narrator meets Adam (23) or the way Eliot's other narrators appear as physical people ("Scene Shift" 385). Metalepsis refers to a technique detailed by Gérard Genette in which narrators or readers leave their high-level perspective and, in a physically impossible move, become part of the story the narrator is telling (Fludernik, "Scene Shift" 382). This bizarre interaction with the fictional world is widespread in *Adam Bede*: the narrator talks to the reader about "putting our eyes close to the rusty bars of the gate" so that "we can see the house well enough" (*AB* 112), notes that "I think I taste that whey now" as a character eats (352), and claims to hear "the twittering of a bird outside the wire network window . . ." (352). This is quite different from the scene in "Janet's Repentance" when the narrator watched the confirmation as it took place: here, the narrator physically exists in the story when they are telling it, not when it happened, and they are able to make the reader physically exist in the story as well.

Similar uses of metalepsis occur in "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton," another story from *Scenes of Clerical Life*. As one character examines a note, the narrator says to the reader, "We will look over his shoulder while he reads it . . ." (*SCL* 28). At another point, the narrator asks the reader to "accompany me to Cross Farm, and to the fireside of Mrs. Patten . . ." (*SCL* 15). Once both narrator and reader have apparently entered this character's house, the narrator states, "now that we are snug and warm with this little tea-party, while it is freezing with February bitterness outside, we will listen to what they are talking about" (*SCL* 17). Like the case of tasting whey in *Adam Bede*, the most interesting aspect of this situation is the degree to which the narrator can *feel* the world they are speaking about, the way that they and apparently the reader can sense the warmth of a fire. The level of interaction the narrator and reader have with the text is variable: in *Adam Bede* the narrator was worried about disturbing a dog, but in other cases characters apparently do not know that we are walking into their homes. The narrator and reader are in a strange liminal space between observer and participant, like a kind of diorama where we can walk around and observe characters but they cannot notice us.

3. An Impossible Dream

The final type of impossibility in Eliot's work is unique to *The Mill on the Floss*, and it relates to the ambiguous relationship in the novel between narrator and reader. The opening scene begins with the narrator standing on a bridge, describing the river flowing below, and ends with an unexpected revelation: "Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill . . ." (*MF* 7). The first chapter, then, was all just the narrator's dream. After waking up, the narrator talks directly to readers: "Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what

Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about . . . on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of" (7). The narrator speaks as if in direct contact with us, as if we sit in a room together as they tell the story. Their phrasing implies that the text of the novel should be interpreted as words spoken by the narrator, or at least physically written down by them and metaphorically told to us. However, this would make the opening chapter essentially impossible: if the narrator only wakes up at the end, how were they narrating before? How could a sleeping person relate their dreams aloud as they occur, and only realize upon waking that they had been describing a dream and not reality?

As we have seen, the most intriguing aspect of Eliot's narrators is that their inexplicability is not due to a single, uniform feature: rather, it is a series of impossibilities piled on top of each other, appearing again and again in different forms. Stranger than the choice to write one impossible narrator is the choice to write several, repeatedly crafting new states for them to inhabit. The importance of investigating these narrators is demonstrated not only by Eliot's repetition of the technique, but also by the prominent role these narrators have in Eliot's fiction: for example, *The Mill on the Floss* immediately confronts readers with a confusing narrator whose very act of telling the story is impossible. The surprising opening chapter sets up the rest of the story as the words of an impossible narrator, suggesting that the only way to understand the novel is to make sense of its beginning and the narrator that resides within.

The importance of this narrator is further highlighted by the connection between their impossible state and the novel's themes. The fact that the narrator remembers the details of the opening scene implies that the entire story may be an impossible memory full of events that the narrator can't possibly recall. One of the central thematic concerns of *The Mill on the Floss* is the way that people are shaped by, confined by, or anchored by memory: as the narrator speculates,

"heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things; if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory" (*MF* 113). Perhaps this should be interpreted literally, in the case of the narrator. They seem to only have physical existence as the teller of this story: memory provides the "deep immovable roots" that lends them their being. The narrator is not a person, exactly, but an outgrowth of these memories, a being who exists only as a rememberer. This link between the narrator's state and the novel's themes suggests that in order to understand the broader issues the novel examines, it is essential to develop an interpretation of the narrator and their impossible existence.

4. Objections to Impossibility

My claim that these narrators are noteworthy due to the impossibility they exhibit can be further justified and developed by addressing potential objections to it. The first argument to consider comes from K.M. Newton's "The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot's Novels," where Newton writes that the narrator of *Middlemarch*, who as I noted describes themself as a historian, should be taken literally: that is, Eliot's narrators are characters writing historical accounts of events that happened in their own world, presumably reporting knowledge they gained from research or observation. Reading the narrators this way explains the source of their information, challenging my claim that they are impossibly omniscient. The problem with this account, however, is that taking the narrator's claim at face value ignores its blatant implausibility. Historians do not know people's thoughts, and would not have records of every word each character spoke. Even if, for example, the narrator of *Adam Bede* interviewed the characters and asked them to describe their thoughts during the story's events, there are several

characters who die during the novel and therefore could not have later told the narrator what they were thinking. The idea that the narrators are only historians does not provide a plausible avenue for avoiding the conclusion that they are impossible beings, especially considering that the historian explanation cannot account for the other two types of impossibility: the strange interactions and strange dream.

However, perhaps proceeding along such a line of analysis is simply establishing too high a standard for what it means for a novel to be realistic. As Fludernik points out, some cases of impossibility in fiction are generally overlooked, such as the way that a first-person narrator claims to remember every word that was spoken in their story ("Scene Shift" 393). In fact, Fludernik argues separately that the association of the omniscient narrator with a historian is adapted from "the real-life schema of historical narration," although the omniscient narrator "has access to knowledge from which a real historian is barred" ("New Wine in Old Bottles?" 624). Therefore, we might think these narrators are acceptable departures from strict realism because Eliot employs them in an imitation of historical narration. However, even if such narrators are generally accepted, Eliot's choice to emphasize the physical existence of her narrators reminds readers of the impossible nature of such an omniscient historian, impossibility that is more easily overlooked when the narrators are allowed to fade into the background. Certainly the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss,* who apparently remembers the world of the novel, or the narrator of "Janet's Repentance," who was present for some of the narrated events, do not seem to be standard cases of historical narration. My classification of Eliot's narrators as impossible does not result from an extremely stringent standard of realism, but simply from the way in which Eliot emphasizes her narrators' impossible qualities.

The final objection I will consider is that Eliot's narrators are not particularly noteworthy because impossibility is an inherent quality of omniscience, making Eliot's works no stranger than any other story with an omniscient point of view. Earlier in this chapter, I noted Alders's claim that omniscient storytelling in general is "downright magical and surely anything but 'realistic'" (345). Alders concurs with Jan Alber's claim that omniscient narrators are "unnatural" (Alber, "Pre-Postmodernist" 142), a term that refers to "physically, logically, [or] humanly impossible scenarios and events" that appear in fiction (Alber 139). Indeed, Alber characterizes all omniscient narrators as "superhuman, supernatural, or telepathic" (142). If all omniscience is, as Fludernik calls it, an "imaginative transfer into the impossible" ("Scene Shift" 393), then perhaps Eliot's use of it is not so strange: perhaps a story told by a person with omniscience is no stranger than a story told by an omniscient voice belonging to no one. It is important to recognize, however, that Eliot's choice to make her narrators individual people makes the impossibility of omniscience far more salient, far harder to simply dismiss as a strange fictional convention. When we read a novel told from an omniscient point of view, we don't generally think about the strangeness of such a perspective; when reading Eliot's works, however, we are confronted by the impossibility of her omniscient narrators.

Eliot also clearly eliminates one of the ways that the impossibility of omniscient narrators might be explained, which would be to appeal to the omniscience of the author. In "The Myth of the Omniscient Narrator," John Morreall notes that "what has often passed for a narrator's omniscience is really a kind of omnipotence the author has in creating the story" (434). If we view the omniscient voice as the author's, the impossibility is easily explained: in fact, Newton writes that "[a]lmost all readers of George Eliot's novels tend to identify the narrator with the author herself" or with some fictional version of Eliot (97). However, Newton criticizes such a

view, arguing that the link between the narrator and Eliot is disproven by the presentation of her narrators as people within the stories (97-98): their presence establishes them as individuals separate from the author or some form taken by the author. The fact that the voice telling the story seems to come from a particular person makes the narratorial omniscience in Eliot's work far stranger than standard omniscience.

Given this, we can conclude that the impossibility of Eliot's narrators is truly noteworthy, and therefore that any understanding of Eliot's works is incomplete without an explanation of her choice to write and foreground impossible narrators. A failure to account for this central fact of impossibility, as I will argue in the next chapter, is the reason why existing scholarship does not adequately explain her narrators. The comprehensive examination of these narrators that I have engaged in here is essential because explaining their presence requires recognizing that it is impossible to understand the narrators themselves: they are constructed not to make sense, but rather to be fundamentally inexplicable.

Chapter 2: Evaluating the Scholarship

The strange characteristics of Eliot's narrators that I detailed in the previous chapter have not gone entirely unaddressed by existing scholarship. In this chapter, I will consider the work of four scholars who seek to explain these narrators, and I will evaluate the degree to which they satisfactorily account for Eliot's construction of impossible beings. While these accounts contain important insights that will be incorporated into my own analysis of Eliot's narrators, I will argue that none of them provide a truly complete explanation. The central issue is a matter of approach: these accounts attempt to explain particular aspects of Eliot's narrators in terms of her broader goals, rather than treating Eliot's construction of impossibility as an authorial goal in and of itself. In examining and responding to these scholars, I will demonstrate the merits of my own approach and provide the first steps toward building a more exhaustive and unified account of Eliot's narrators.

1. Impossibility as Theme

The first two accounts I will examine hold that features of Eliot's narrators serve specific thematic purposes, that Eliot uses their strange features to represent a particular idea or claim; I will briefly explain each one, and then respond to both. The first is presented in Alicia Mireles Christoff's *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis*. Christoff characterizes the narrators of *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* as variable, changing beings. The narrator of the former novel is "strangely positioned . . . as neither fully personified nor fully omniscient, neither fully inside nor outside of the action, but rather shuttling between first-person and third-person narration, between gendered embodiment and . . . free-floating consciousness . . ." (Christoff 62). This mirrors the "fluid relations" of the mind itself, the way

our experience traverses various conscious and unconscious states (61). The impossible dream with which the novel opens embodies the same theme, as Eliot creates a set of "fluid relations between the imagined psyches of narrator, character, and reader" (Christoff 61-62). The narrator of *Middlemarch* is similarly defined by "*mobility*," as they possess "the privilege of moving in and out of subject positions and degrees of personification . . ." (Christoff 158). Instead of attempting to "stabiliz[e] . . . [Eliot's] narrative voice," Christoff argues that we should reckon with the "strangeness, in terms of ontology and fictionality alike, of narrators 'themselves' . . ." (158). The *Middlemarch* narrator's strange movement between different states, their ambiguous and multifaceted nature, creates a feeling of motion and excitement that resists the suffocating dreariness of reality, which is one of the novel's primary thematic goals (Christoff 156-59). Therefore, the paradox of being both an omniscient being and a person is reframed in terms of an impossible movement between states, and understood in terms of the themes of Eliot's novels.

An alternative thematic explanation is offered by Cristina Richieri Griffin in *Omniscience Incarnate: Being in and of the World in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Griffin's account seeks primarily to explain the narrators' "embodiment," their physical existence that leads to the metaleptic state of being both narrator and person (9). According to Griffin, Eliot constructs narrators whose omniscient knowledge is framed as a consequence of their physical presence in the world. Embodiment provides the narrators with the ability to feel sensations and sympathy: these are essential sources of knowledge according to Ludwig Feuerbach, a philosopher who greatly influenced Eliot (Griffin 24-25). Therefore, the narrators' impossible states imply a claim about the origins of knowledge.

Both of these accounts have compelling elements, but neither can definitively explain why Eliot would create such strange narrators. There are two primary ways in which these

explanations are incomplete. The first is a matter of scope: neither applies convincingly to the entire continuum of cases I identified in the previous chapter. Christoff's focus on the way the narrators change between states paints too broad a picture, subsuming all of the narratorial impossibility under a single description. Much of the impossibility of these narrators comes from the specific states they occupy and the way these states interact, not just from the simple fact of their variability. That is, the narrators are certainly changing form, but they are also doing a lot of other strange things, and Christoff's account leaves out those details.

On the other hand, Griffin's analysis is too specific for our purposes. Some of the cases of impossibility, such as having impossible memories or dreams, do not relate directly to embodiment. Other cases combine embodiment with additional strange features: for example, the physical existence possessed by a narrator who walks into someone's house while telling the story is of a very different sort than that of a narrator who claims to have been observing a scene when it occurred. Additionally, many of the cases of embodiment don't involve the narrator physically interacting with others or experiencing emotion, which limits the effectiveness of the association Griffin draws between embodiment, sympathy, and knowledge. For these reasons, neither account is wide-reaching enough to cover all cases of narratorial impossibility. Of course, neither of these scholars is trying to provide this all-encompassing picture: their accounts are not necessarily wrong, but they have a more limited goal than my own project.

The second reason these accounts are insufficient is the inherent limitation of a purely thematic explanation of Eliot's narrators, the inability of such an analysis to contend with the true scale of the narrators' impossibility. There are many ways for an author to enact any particular theme, some of which wouldn't require creating such strange narrators: simply identifying the thematic motivation behind a narratorial choice leaves the issue of impossibility

open. In other words, even if Eliot's embodied narrators are used to make a claim about, for example, the dependence of knowledge on physical existence, this does not explain why Eliot would choose to illustrate this theme in the particular way that she does: that is, by creating impossible narrators who potentially undermine the story's plausibility. The appeal to Eliot's thematic intent can explain narratorial embodiment, but the simple fact of embodiment is less striking than the impossible being that results from that embodiment. The latter should, in my view, be the starting point of a systematic account of Eliot's narrators.

However, there are elements of both of these accounts that do point in the direction I have advocated, treating impossibility as meaningful or perhaps intentional on Eliot's part. Christoff suggests that Eliot's changing narrators produce a sense of energy not just because of their shifting nature, but because of the strangeness of that nature. The strangeness makes the narrators more interesting, more appealing to readers: Christoff refers to a claim made in Catherine Gallagher's essay "The Rise of Fictionality" about a reader's tendency to, as Christoff describes it, be "drawn to literary characters because . . . they are ontologically distinct from us" (158). Perhaps under this interpretation impossible narrators are constructed to produce this particular reaction in readers. However, I think Christoff's analysis underestimates the bizarre qualities of the narrators. The scope and repetition of narratorial impossibility, as I illustrated in the first chapter, demonstrate that the narrators have taken a step beyond simple strangeness and ended up in a far more extreme category. Strange beings might attract readers, but impossible beings are more likely to baffle them.

In a different way, Griffin also presents an interpretation of the meaning of narratorial impossibility by suggesting that the metaleptic nature of the narrators is itself symbolic. The narrators who metaleptically move from disembodied judgment to interpersonal experience,

from outside the story to inside it, encourage metalepsis of a different kind in which sympathy metaleptically moves from inside the story to outside of it, from the fictional world to the real (Griffin 60, 64). In other words, there is something metaleptic in the effort to transform the emotions readers feel for fictional characters into emotions felt for real people. Griffin's description of the connection between these two sorts of metalepsis is limited, however, and it is unclear whether the link Griffin sketches is meant to be an actual claim about how Eliot's works affect her readers. Such a claim would entail that the impossible nature of Eliot's narrators is meant to be identified by readers as metaleptic and then connected in their minds to the sympathetic metalepsis Griffin describes: recognizing such a relationship would then allow readers to understand Eliot's intent, which is that they turn their sympathy to the real world. Although this would ascribe a particular purpose to the impossible nature of the narrators, it is doubtful that Griffin is actually making this claim: there is certainly an interpretive leap required to connect these very disparate phenomena, and Griffin presents it more as an interesting observation of parallels than an actual account of Eliot's choices. Regardless of the plausibility of this claim, it does not apply to non-metaleptic cases of impossibility, or explain the particular varying ways in which Eliot uses metalepsis. Therefore, neither of these accounts offers a complete explanation of Eliot's choice to write impossible narrators.

2. Impossibility as Structure

Other scholars have characterized the impossible qualities of Eliot's narrators as elements of literary technique that serve a purpose in shaping the presentation of her fiction. In this section, I will consider and respond to two of these accounts. The first, which I briefly addressed in the previous chapter, is K. M. Newton's "The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot's Novels."

As I explained, Newton proceeds from the dubious premise that the description of Eliot's narrators as historians is a plausible one (Newton 98). However, Newton's argument goes beyond that point and makes important observations that are worth considering. Newton's central claim is that Eliot's narrators should be viewed as structural elements of her novels that reinforce their realism (97-98, 100). According to Newton, every realist author faces a fundamental challenge: novels contain a coherent artistic structure that the world does not have, so readers will never view novels as truly realistic (100). Rather than explaining this form as the creation of an author, which would mean admitting the story is fictional (103), Eliot crafts the narrator into a historian who writes the text: the artistic form is therefore explained within the world of the novel (100). Newton argues that "in making the reader aware that the narrator is constructing a particular picture of reality and interpreting it, George Eliot allows the reader to recognize" the way in which "the reality created by the narrative of [the] novel and reality as such" diverge (102). By acknowledging this, Eliot prevents her novels from unrealistically claiming to literally portray reality, making them more believable (Newton 101).

In my view, Newton is right that Eliot's narrators have an important relationship to the difficulties of writing realist fiction, but wrong about the details of that relationship. Newton presents two options for a realist author: acknowledge that their story is fictional, or explain the story's form within the text while preserving the pretense that the story is real. Although Newton claims Eliot has chosen the second option, the first also fulfills one goal Newton attributes to Eliot: that of acknowledging the gap between fiction and reality. In *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*, George Levine discusses the problems of realism in similar terms to Newton, and suggests that realist novels often choose the second route (189-193): in order to truly fulfill its goal of portraying reality, "the realist novel has got to

face the fact that it is a fiction . . .” (190). Newton’s claim that Eliot has not gone down this path only makes sense if the depiction of the narrator as a historian is believable. If we reject that, but accept the rest of Newton’s argument, we can conclude that Eliot has chosen the second of Newton’s options: the narrators, in all their impossibility, point to the fact that they must be only fictional beings, and indicate that the stories they have written are fictional as well. The primary difference between this account and Newton’s, between attributing a novel’s form to an author on the one hand or a narrator on the other, is the degree to which Eliot is willing to disrupt her own works. Newton characterizes Eliot as qualifying her story by admitting the falsity of its artistic form; instead, I think Eliot is advancing a broader argument about the inability of fiction to mirror reality, an issue I will return to in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Attributing form to a narrator points to the unreality of the text, but it does so only within the illusory space of the novel. Acknowledging a text’s fictionality, on the other hand, disrupts the reading process by undermining the pretense of truth that a fictional story relies on. I believe that Eliot, with her impossible narrators, has taken the more radical route.

The final account of Eliot’s narrators that I will examine is offered by Monika Fludernik, whose analysis was discussed in the previous chapter as well. In “Eliot and Narrative,” Fludernik focuses primarily on *Adam Bede*, and argues that the metalepsis of the novel’s narrator is meant to immerse readers in the story. When the narrator and reader walk into characters’ homes, Eliot “put[s] the reader on the scene” in a way that “deepen[s] the reader’s involvement in the fiction” and increases our sympathetic connection to the characters (Fludernik 22). The narrator’s conversation with Adam Bede, which is only made possible due to their metaleptic physical existence, contributes to the story’s appearance of realism: it “authenticat[es] the reality of the fictional world [and] transform[s] the invented events of the novel into the supposed factuality of

the narrator's personal past" (23). According to Fludernik, although we may generally expect the paradoxical nature of metalepsis to jar readers out of a story, the opposite actually happens in Eliot's case: "The logical contradiction this entails fails to bother the reader . . . [who] reinterprets this logical irritation as a corroboration of the credibility of the narrator persona" (23). The impossibility of the narrator is therefore a result of the way Eliot produces an immersive reading experience, and supports rather than disrupts Eliot's constructed illusion.

Of course, if Fludernik is correct that narratorial impossibility is simply ignored, this would undermine my claim that this impossibility is meant to draw attention to itself, intended to be noticed as strange. I think Fludernik is partially right, but that there is more going on than the creation of immersion. First of all, the simple frequency of narratorial impossibility, in the various forms it takes, suggests that Eliot is interested in constructing impossibility rather than just immersion. Secondly, the effect on the reading experience that Fludernik describes is not purely immersive. It is true that the narrator of *Adam Bede* "put[s] the reader on the scene" (Fludernik 22), but it is not a particularly realistic scene: rather, it is one in which the reader wanders through the past, unobserved, watching the events of the story play out. When the narrator claims to have spoken to Adam Bede, it may "authenticat[e] the reality of the fictional world" (Fludernik 23), but it authenticates a strange world in which omniscient beings can become people. Two opposing forces are acting on the reader at the same time, one that makes the story seem more real and one that makes that reality impossible. Fludernik claims the former overcomes the latter; instead, I suggest preserving both, allowing the tension between the two forces to remain. The result of this tension that Eliot produces, and her reasons for doing so, will be examined in the next chapter.

This overview of existing scholarship demonstrates that a complete explanation of Eliot's narrators is still necessary, that there is much more to the story than these accounts can provide. The previous chapter raised the central question of this thesis: why would Eliot construct the series of impossible narrators that fill her fiction? After considering several potential responses, this question remains unanswered. Creating impossibility disrupts the reading process by reminding readers that the text before them is a fictional story. The choice to do so again and again requires a compelling justification, and is best accounted for by a comprehensive explanation that unifies each instance of impossibility in terms of a central authorial purpose. The unity, as I have suggested, is the impossibility itself, which is constructed to continually remind readers that they are only reading a fictional text. In the next chapter I will elaborate on the ways Eliot creates this sense of fictionality and explain why Eliot would want her readers to remember that her novels are not real.

Chapter 3: Immersion, Fictionality, and the Mind

In the previous chapter, I concluded that existing accounts of Eliot's narrators cannot fully explain their consistent impossibility or the particular forms that their impossibility takes. In this chapter, I will provide the first element of my own explanation: I will argue that the paradoxical qualities of Eliot's narrators emphasize the fictional nature of her novels and stories and highlight the fact that any fictional narrative exists only as an imaginary construct. My analysis will begin with the issue of immersion brought up in the previous chapter and the way Eliot's use of metalepsis shapes a reader's understanding of the text as a fictional creation. I will then link Eliot's focus on fictionality to the way she emphasizes the status of her works as mental creations, turning to *The Mill on the Floss* in particular to examine the relationship between fiction, the mind, and impossible narrators. Rather than provide a purely structural or thematic account of Eliot's narrators, I will combine the two in my explanation. This chapter details the way Eliot's impossible narrators create a particular reading experience and gesture towards the concepts of fictionality and mentality, while the following chapter will explain the deeper thematic justification behind Eliot's focus on these ideas.

1. Immersive Reading

In my discussion of Monika Fludernik's claims in the previous chapter, I suggested that Eliot's use of metalepsis affects the reader in two opposing ways: it immerses them in the text, as Fludernik argued, but it also reminds them they are only reading fiction. When the reader and narrator interact sensorily with the story in impossible ways, or the narrator gains physical existence to interact with characters, the world in which the novel takes place becomes more *vivid*, but less *real*. Although these two effects might seem to undermine each other, I will argue

that they do not: their combination results in a tension but not an outright contradiction. In order to understand this tension and the ways Eliot uses it, we must first gain a broader understanding of immersion to account for the reading experience Eliot produces.

In "Immersion and Defamiliarization: Experiencing Literature and World," Miranda Anderson and Stefan Iversen challenge the standard view of the reading experience that assumes readers are either immersed in a story or, on the contrary, reminded that they are reading fiction (571). Instead of this one-dimensional account, Anderson and Iversen propose an interpretation of reader experience that involves two axes, two separate factors that can interact. The first factor is "suspension of disbelief," the degree to which a reader treats the events of the story as true, while the second is "direction of attention," the degree to which a reader focuses on the world of the text or the real world (571). In their view, neither of these factors is necessarily correlated with immersion: for example, they claim that a reader with a low suspension of disbelief can still be immersed in a story, or that being immersed and thinking about the real world are not mutually exclusive (572). Authors can combine suspension of disbelief and direction of attention in different ways, and can shift between different combinations, producing a variable reading experience rather than a static one (572).

With this new framework in mind, let us return to Eliot's use of metaleptic narrators. Consider one example of metalepsis from *Scenes of Clerical Life*: the narrator says to the reader, "now that we are snug and warm with this little tea-party, while it is freezing with February bitterness outside, we will listen to what [the characters] are talking about" (*SCL* 17). Upon reading this, we may imagine ourselves feeling the heat of the fire and hearing characters converse around us: the world seems more lifelike, more immediate. Using Anderson and Iversen's terms, we can understand this as affecting the direction of our attention: the metalepsis

focuses our thoughts on the fictional space being described and its sensory properties, so that we feel as if we are really in the world of the story. At the same time, we know that being in the world of the story is impossible: realistically, we cannot actually feel the fire's heat. Our suspension of disbelief is therefore lessened as we recognized that the narrator must be describing a fictional world. This combination—a focus on the world of the story and a low suspension of disbelief—is characterized by Anderson and Iversen as "offer[ing] a form of immersion, not by bracketing out knowledge of the artificiality of the invented but by diving into the very process of invention, into the process of making and unmaking perception, staged by the work of art" (582). Therefore, Eliot's use of metalepsis reminds us that the text is an authored creation by employing narratorial techniques that could not be used to describe reality.

However, this picture must be complicated further, as Eliot's technique goes beyond this straightforward description: Eliot focuses the reader's attention not only on the story, but on the real world as well. In "George Eliot and the Omniscient Author Convention," W. J. Harvey argues that "the 'illusion of reality' aimed at in [Eliot's] fiction is not that of a self-contained world, a fictional microcosm intact and autonomous . . . but a world coterminous with the 'real' world, the factual macrocosm" (90). Eliot therefore wants her readers to always think about her fictional worlds in terms of the way they refer to and apply to reality (Harvey 90). Harvey claims that the commentary of the narrator is central to this effort, as they can speak from an outside perspective but also exist within the story, such as when they talk to Adam Bede (Harvey 89, 99-100). Along similar lines, Debra Gettelman argues in "Reading Ahead in George Eliot" that Eliot uses her narrators to encourage readers to think about how their own experiences relate to her novels: Eliot "develop[s] the wishful reader's capacity to sustain continuities between the fictional and 'real' worlds" (Gettelman 34). Both scholars view the narrators as a vehicle for

Eliot to connect fiction and reality; I believe the narrators' impossible existence is also essential to this process, due to the way it emphasizes their fictional status. To recognize a text as fictional is to think about its relationship to reality: an impossible narrator reminds the reader of the external world, of the reality that the novel diverges from in its impossibility.

These additions provide a more complete understanding of Eliot's metalepsis. In a single technique, Eliot both draws our attention to the fictional world and reminds us of the reality that lives outside it. The reader's focus ends up on neither the fictional nor the real but the relationship between them, the representative act itself. We are immersed in the story, but immersed in it *as a story*, as a fictional world that we know cannot match reality. Certainly there is a tension present in this sort of immersion, but it is a tension that is fundamental to the reading process, and it is in some sense present every time we read a novel while pretending its events are real. In "*Middlemarch*: January in Lowick," Andrew H. Miller writes about the ways that Eliot plays with the concept of immersion, allowing characters and readers to become absorbed in the act of interpretation and then jarring them out. In a similar way, I think that Eliot's metalepsis does not just create a particular reading experience, but explores the way that authors can affect the experience of readers. This does not produce immersion or its opposite but a dynamic contrast between the two. The result leaves the reader in a sort of lucid dream, vividly experiencing a world they know is not real.

2. A Novel in a Dream

Having demonstrated the way Eliot's use of impossibility points to her works' fictionality, I will now explain how that fictionality, in turn, relates to the *mentality* of a story, to its existence as a mental construct. In order to better understand this link, it is useful to introduce

the work of Jan Alber, who writes in "Impossible Storyworlds—and What to Do with Them" about "unnatural" features of fiction (80). As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Alber defines the *unnatural* as any elements of a novel that cannot represent anything real, either because they could never physically exist or because they are logically incoherent (80). According to Alber, when readers are faced with unnatural fiction they use various strategies to "naturalize" it, to transform the incomprehensible into something that makes sense (81). One of the strategies Alber identifies is that a reader can assume the unnatural elements are actually occurring within a character's mind: for example, a particular scene that contains impossible events may be read as the dream or hallucination of one of the novel's characters (82).

I believe this is exactly what Eliot's narratorial impossibility leads to, although my explanation goes beyond what Alber has in mind by naturalization. The narrators, as unnatural and impossible beings, cannot be understood as realistic and therefore must be viewed as only imaginary, as the creations of someone's mind. However, it would make little sense if the narrator was only imagined by a character: after all, we only know about the characters from the narrator's storytelling. The most logical conclusion for the reader to reach is the literal truth: the narrator exists only in the author's mind. Since the entire novel depends on the narrator, whose voice we hear the story through, the narrator's status as a mental creation entails that the entire story is a mental construct as well.

Reading a novel as a mental object is especially salient in the case of *The Mill on the Floss*, as several scholars have pointed to the central role that dreams play in the novel. In *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis*, a work I discussed earlier, Alicia Mireles Christoff examines the role of the unconscious mind in Eliot's novel, interpreting its presentation of dreams in relation to psychoanalytic theory: "In the novel's opening, the narrator

dreams of standing across the flowing water from Maggie at Dorlcote Mill. And then the narrator wakes up. But, as if true to [Wilfred] Bion's [psychoanalytic] theory . . . the narrator wakes into dreaming" (61). In Christoff's view we can think of the whole novel as related to dreaming: "Reverie encases dream encases reverie, in a cycle that points to the fluid relations between processing experience in dream and waking" (61). Similarly, in "Waking Dreams: George Eliot and the Poetics of Double Consciousness," Beth Tressler argues that *The Mill on the Floss* is a novel about double consciousness, the ambiguous state in which people are partly awake but not fully conscious (484). The novel emphasizes the way that realist fiction is a type of waking dream, as it is the product of an author's mind mixing with the external world in conscious and unconscious ways (490): Tressler writes that Eliot, "much like her narrator, wanders in the fundamental reverie of realism's waking dreams . . ." (495). Eliot's novel is ultimately a sort of two-level mental construct: an author imagines a narrator, who dreams of a story and narrates it. Or, more accurately, the novel is a mental object encoded in a textual one that in turn evokes a mirrored mental object in the minds of readers. In the opening scene, the narrator turns their dreams into words, creating a scene that the reader can experience; likewise, Eliot turns her constructed world into language that will allow readers to imagine the story for themselves, while constantly reminding them of this very process.

To clarify the link between *The Mill on the Floss* and mentality, let us return to the opening scene. The narrator realizes at the end of the first chapter that they have fallen asleep: "Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about . . ." (*MF* 7). It sounds as if they are resuming a conversation they were having with the reader, picking up where they left off. However, no such conversation exists: the novel began with the dream, and this is the first direct address from the narrator. As far as we know—and as far as the

novel indicates—the conversation before the narrator's dream does not exist: if there was such a conversation, why didn't the novel open with it? Cristina Richieri Griffin points to the importance of the link between the last sentence of the narrator's dream and the first sentence after they wake up (*Omniscience Incarnate* 63): while describing the dream the narrator says, "It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge," and then adds, "Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming . . ." (*MF* 7). According to Griffin, in this moment "[i]t is . . . the sense of touch," the narrator feeling their own arms, "that both establishes and blurs the divisions between the narrator's past memory and present remembering . . ." (*Omniscience Incarnate* 63). In fact, I think the relationship between these sentences can be extended further. The narrator dreams of feeling their arms and then wakes up feeling their arms: the latter seems to arise from the former, as if the narrator's physicality in the "real" world of the story is a result of the physicality they dreamt of.

The combination of these two details—the reference to a non-existent conversation, and the waking world that grows out of the dream—produces a narrator whose existence in reality seems to be a product of their existence in their own dream. The novel begins with the dream, not with the narrator: there was no narrator before their dream, no being to speak to us until their physical body grew out of their imagined body. In fact, it is not just the narrator's existence that has this quality, but the existence of the entire world of the novel. Upon waking, the narrator begins the story of the novel by telling us "what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about . . . on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of" (7). Therefore, the apparent reality that we do learn about—the reality in which the story takes place—is *the world of the dream*. Perhaps there is no external reality at all until the narrator wakes up into it. Rather than say that "the narrator wakes

into dreaming" (61), as Christoff does, we might instead claim that the narrator wakes into a reality that has grown out of their dream. The narrator possesses impossible memories of a story they never witnessed because there was no story to witness at all, only their own imaginings.

Whether or not we accept this as a literal reading of the novel, it is a potential frame through which the novel can be viewed, and through which it encourages us to view it. The various forms of impossibility that become clear in this opening scene—the dream that a sleeping person could not possibly narrate, the memories that they could not possibly remember, even the physical body that an omniscient narrator could not possibly possess—all lead back to the issue of mentality, of the novel's form as a mental creation. This issue is also clearly related to another case of narratorial impossibility. Consider again the metaleptic instances of the narrator walking into characters' homes, tasting their food, or being warmed by their fire. These actions are not possible if they are telling a story about the real world: they cannot actually interact with objects in the narrative as they tell it. However, they are perfectly capable of doing these things in an imaginary world, walking through a space they have created in their mind. They bring the reader along as well, telling us we can feel the fire with them: the reader and narrator therefore occupy this imaginary space together, engaging in a "shared reverie between reader and writer," to use Christoff's description of *The Mill on the Floss* (68). This draws the reader's attention to the process of joint imagining by reader and author involved in any narrative. These instances of metalepsis therefore remind the reader of both the fact that the text is fictional, and the fact that fictional stories are inherently mental items: that the worlds of novels are not concrete realities, but structures produced by the minds of authors and pictured in the minds of readers.

Of the several cases of narratorial impossibility I identified in the first chapter of this thesis, only one has not been directly accounted for here, and that is perhaps the most prominent case: the paradox of physical embodiment, of omniscient narrators who are also people. We saw in *The Mill on the Floss* that the narrator's physical body is linked to their dreaming state, but the connection between embodiment and the mental is not immediately obvious in Eliot's other works. The importance of physical existence will be returned to in the next chapter, but here it is worth noting one way that embodiment relates to the mental, in order to demonstrate the degree to which Eliot's different forms of impossibility consistently point us towards the same conclusion.

The link between embodiment and mentality arises from the effect an embodied narrator has on a reader's interpretation of the novel. When we read realist novels, we acknowledge that the characters are fictional, but in suspending our disbelief we accept that they *could* be real: we offer these imaginary people a sort of provisional existence, bringing them from the world of the novel into our own world. If these stories have omniscient narrators who are not people, who exist only as a voice telling a story, we are generally content to leave them in the novel, to not assign them any existence outside of their narratorial role. On the other hand, when the narrators seem like people, when they talk about themselves and have physical bodies, our instinct is to treat them as we do the other characters and imagine them as living in the real world. However, their omniscience makes this impossible. They do not correspond to any person that could truly exist, and therefore must be left in the world where we find them: the novel's world, the fictional world, and therefore the *mental* world. Their embodiment simultaneously encourages us to interpret them as real and draws our attention to why they cannot be, to the contradiction that relegates such narrators to the mental spaces in which we can picture and create the impossible.

With this final piece in place, we can see that the theme of mentality links various inexplicable qualities of Eliot's narrators, whether their impossibility consists in dreams, memories, embodiment, or metaleptic walks through the world. Eliot uses these instances of impossibility to create a tension between fiction and reality and to shift the reader's focus from one to the other. This emphasis on fictionality encourages a reader to think about the existence of the story as a mental object: this fact is reinforced in *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel whose world and narrator may exist only within the narrator's mind. Narratorial embodiment in general points to mentality by creating a clash between our instinct to convert these narrators from imaginary to real existence and our inability to do so. The emphasis on fictionality and mentality is the first step of my account of Eliot's narrators; the second and final step is detailed in the next chapter, which will explain the thematic importance of the relationship between mental objects and real ones.

Chapter 4: Mentality, Reality, and Realism

In the previous chapter, I concluded that Eliot's narrators draw a reader's attention to the existence of fictional stories as mental entities. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the significance of Eliot's focus on the mental qualities of fiction, a focus that is central to her creation of impossible narrators. In the first section, I will draw on several scholars to identify a theme that appears in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*: both novels examine the divergence between the way characters desire the world to be and the way it really is. In the second section, I will argue that the meaning of Eliot's impossible narrators is related to, yet importantly distinct from, this theme of divergence: the use of impossibility reveals a more fundamental interest in the relationship between mentality and reality, and therefore between fictional stories and the real worlds they seek to represent. The impossible narrators gesture towards, and ultimately overcome, the challenges of using a world of ideas to represent the relationship between ideas and reality.

1. Wishes and Limits

In this section I will introduce several claims made by scholars about themes that appear in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch,* themes that I will argue are various incarnations of the same fundamental idea. The first claim appears in Alicia Mireles Christoff's *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis*, a work I discussed in previous chapters. Christoff characterizes *The Mill on the Floss* as a novel about characters whose desires extend beyond what the world can satisfy or what their society will allow (46-47). Christoff describes Maggie, the novel's protagonist, as "constantly wishing for more" (46) out of her family, her community, and her social position (46-47): ultimately, she wants "things to be different than they are" (47).

Christoff notes that the novel's ending can be viewed as "wish-fulfillment," since the great flood that washes over the town allows Maggie to be with her brother in the final moments before their death and provides "an escape from the difficulties of her life . . ." (50). Of course, the fact that this escape involves Maggie's death makes it a very complicated form of wish-fulfillment, and Christoff draws on feminist critics such as Virginia Woolf to argue that Eliot's ending frames the unrealistic flood as the only satisfying way to conclude the novel (50-51), "reveal[ing] that a proper resolution of Maggie's difficulties simply is not possible within the confines of the conventional plots and forms of nineteenth-century fiction" (50). Therefore, insofar as the ending does offer wish-fulfillment, it does so in a way that demonstrates the implausibility of such a convenient conclusion, reinforcing its central claim about the seeming inescapability of the restrictions imposed on Maggie's life by the social world.

In "George Eliot and the Science of the Human," Ian Duncan points similarly to *The Mill on the Floss*'s focus on the confining nature of sociality. According to Duncan, "The novel's capacity to move sympathy is founded on its attention to the lives of individuals within the 'social medium'" (476). The effect of the social medium is largely one of restriction: "the organic social medium['s] . . . dragging, thwarting force predominates in *The Mill on the Floss*" (476). Like Christoff, Duncan points to Eliot's particular focus on the way the social world limits and harms female characters: "To suffer is to be human; still more . . . it is to be a woman, entangled more deeply than men are in the thickets of custom" (Duncan 477). Both interpretations can lead to an understanding of the novel as an examination of the way personal desire and agency are frustrated by the external world. Beth Tressler writes that Maggie struggles with a divergence between mind and world, an "agonizing impasse" caused by "the incongruity of her aesthetic inward impulse and her dreary outward fact . . ." (495). Tressler illustrates this

with a quotation from the novel's narrator about Maggie: "No wonder, when there is this contrast between the outward and the inward, that painful collisions come of it" (*MF* 176-77; Tressler 495).

This theme can be further illuminated by turning to a particular illustrative passage that Duncan points to (477). The narrator is describing ruined homes that stand along a river, and notes the way the "angular skeletons of villages . . . oppress me with the feeling that human life—very much of it—is a narrow, ugly, groveling existence . . ." (*MF* 202). They continue:

> Perhaps something akin to this oppressive feeling may have weighed upon you in watching this old-fashioned family life . . . It is a sordid life, you say, this of the Tullivers and Dodsons, irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith . . . .
>
> I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie,—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. (*MF* 202-203)

The phrase "oppressive narrowness" contains an interesting ambiguity: the narrator is "oppress[ed]" by "the feeling" of the "narrow[ness]" of these characters' lives, and "this oppressive feeling" also "weigh[s] upon" readers, but it is also the characters themselves who are "acted on" by "oppressive narrowness," by the constricting external world. The "sense of oppressive narrowness" closes in on the novel's characters, the narrator who speaks about them, and the readers who listen: and indeed it is the narrator's stated goal to facilitate this spread, to let readers not just think about the narrowness but "feel it" as well.

The narrator implies that this narrowness may make the characters seem unfit to have literature written about them, as this "most prosaic form of human life" (*MF* 203) lacks that "which gives its poetry to peasant life" (202-203). A similar idea appears in *Adam Bede*, in which the narrator takes a chapter to address what they assume will be a common criticism of the novel: the fact that its characters are flawed or uninteresting, and that it would be better to have characters who said "beautiful things . . ." (*AB* 284). The narrator's response is that the world is full of flawed people, and that "[t]hese fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are . . ." (*AB* 286). The narrator's goal, they explain, is to encourage the reader to feel sympathy for the people around them, not to "create a world so much better than this . . ." (*AB* 286). In a less explicit form, the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* suggests the same thing: perhaps we don't like to read about the narrowness of life, but it is important to do so in order to understand the lives of others. The theme that Eliot examines in this passage is therefore linked to issues of realism and artistic portrayal, to the question of what it means to accurately depict the world, a point I will return to in the final section of this chapter.

The identification of this narrowness with the social circumstances of the characters connects this passage to the novel's broader concern with the limitations of the social world. This narrowness is described in the above passage as holding characters back, arresting the motion by which they are "ris[ing]" and moving "onward." In light of Christoff's analysis, we can read this motion as a product of desire, as a wish to escape the limits of one's social position. However, this passage adds an important complication: if the characters are metaphorically seeking upward motion, one of the things that holds them back is the fact that they are "tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts" to "the generation before them." The characters' agency is constrained not

only by the limited possibilities the world offers them, but also by their own feelings and obligations.

The complexity of this notion of narrowness is made clearer by the ways it interacts with other important themes in the novel. As I noted in the first chapter, *The Mill on the Floss* is highly interested in the role that memory plays in people's lives. In one important passage, the narrator is discussing the way people "striv[e] after something better and better in our surroundings" and notes, "heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things; if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory" (*MF* 113). Similar to the passage about narrowness, the narrator suggests here that those who strive and wish and dream are held back by sentimental attachments, in this case to the objects and settings of their past. The novel's focus on moral duties expresses a similar point. Morality is repeatedly described using metaphors of physical restriction: duty is a "tie" (*MF* 358) or "ties" (353, 356) that "bind" (356) characters. A different but related metaphor is used by Maggie in her claim that "if I had been better, nobler, those claims would have been so strongly present with me,—I should have felt them pressing on my heart so continually . . ." (*MF* 357). Maggie's moral obligations are framed as a physical pressure that shapes and limits her actions. The forces that reduce people's agency are therefore more nuanced than the straightforward connotation of "oppressive narrowness" would imply, and it is the complexities of living within a restrictive world that Eliot wants to examine.

In *Middlemarch,* Eliot returns to similar themes in a modified way. Christoff describes the novel as "attempt[ing] to document the subtlety of failure, telling the story not of ardor but of its limits," emphasizing the pervasive, universal tiredness that inevitably fills our lives (154). One of the illustrative passages Christoff cites is the narrator's claim that looking into the

interiority of characters such as Casaubon will show us "with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours . . . with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him, and bring his heart to its final pause" (*MM* 83; Christoff 154). This produces, in Christoff's description, "an inevitable fatigue," the result of a person constantly fighting against the dreariness of the world (154). Both this passage and Maggie's comments about moral duty describe something that weighs on the heart and physically limits an individual's actions. Although Christoff does not make this point, I believe these two novels can be read as interrogating a common theme: both frame life as a clash between our hopes or desires or wishes and the harsh reality of the world that holds us back, limits us, tires us out.

Christoff points to *Middlemarch*'s comparison between Dorothea and Saint Theresa as an important aspect of the novel's examination of the limited nature of life (Christoff 153-54). In *Middlemarch*'s "Prelude," the narrator asserts that not everyone with lofty dreams ends up achieving great things the way Theresa did: many people end up living "perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity . . ." (*MM* 7); that is, people's ideals may not be aligned with external reality. The metaphor of physical restraint returns in the description of "tangled circumstance" challenging people's aspirations (*MM* 7). Like *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch* portrays people as limited by "the conditions of an imperfect social state" (*MM* 794), and is especially focused on the way the social world limits the agency of women. Ultimately the narrator praises Dorothea's accomplishments as examples of the achievements that are possible even within societal constraints, celebrating the limited acts that still have an impact even when "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (*MM* 795).

As we have seen, both *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* examine the opposition between characters' minds and the external world, using similar metaphors of limitation and restriction. Christoff notes that the passage from *Middlemarch* about the world pressing on Casaubon's heart frames this limitation in terms of "[g]ravity or something that resembles it . . ." (154). In my view, Eliot's portrayal of this theme is best encapsulated in terms of a metaphor of *friction*, of a person's desires coming into contact with the external world and, to use Duncan's terms, its "dragging, thwarting force . . ." (476). This idea is perhaps expressed most clearly in Simon During's "George Eliot and Secularism": writing broadly about Eliot's work, During describes the way Eliot portrays characters who attempt to become better spiritually but never completely succeed because "in history the real constantly tests the ideal," as "reality is what turns aspiration into mere fantasy and our interpretations of one another into misinterpretations. In Eliot, reality, then, is conceived not so much as the realm of objectivity but as what resists desire and will" (438). This mirrors Tressler's claim that Maggie's "painful collision" between internal and external "alludes to the structure of the novel as a whole" as an examination of the opposition between "the aesthetic and its opposing, hard, and unyielding reality" (495). Both *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* portray reality in this way, as the force that holds back the ideals and imaginings of characters.

2. Friction and Impossibility

The theme that Eliot's impossible narrators draw our attention to is distinct from the theme I have just described, but they are conceptually linked such that understanding the latter will make the former clearer. We can imagine Eliot as posing a broad question, with various facets and components: a question about the relationship between our thoughts of the world and

its actual state, and the way this relationship affects and constitutes our experience. The clash between characters' desires and their circumstances is an answer to one form of this question, given one understanding of reality—that is, the characters find themselves in opposition to contingent social forces, to a reality constructed by other people or by circumstance. An alternative answer to the question frames it in terms of psychological reality: characters are limited by emotional ties, by moral duties, or by the tiredness that fills all life. The reality confronted here is not necessarily unchangeable either, but rather the result of particular societal contexts and ways of conceiving the world. The reality that prevents an impossible narrator from existing, on the other hand, manifests itself in the laws of physics, a barrier that, to use During's terms, "resists desire and will" (438) in a very different way than a social or psychological constraint.

It is for this reason that impossible narrators evoke a third answer to the question of the relationship between thought and reality, one that runs deeper than the others. Narratorial impossibility points toward limits that are ontological rather than social or psychological, suggesting the existence of a fundamental rather than contingent gap between our ideas and the external world. The divergence that Eliot imagines in this case is not between people's desires and the social structures that oppose them, or between people's agency and the psychological forces that limit it; rather, it is a divergence inherent to the act of thinking, to the imperfect correspondence between our mental items and reality. This divergence is not dependent on a particular social or psychological context, but it underlies the cases from *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* insofar as they all involve the same experience of friction between the mental and the real; they all portray the limits that we run into when thinking about a world outside of us that is not always the way we imagine (or want or wish) it to be. As I will explain in the next

section, this theme is highly relevant to Eliot's realism and to the use of imaginary worlds to inform us about the real one.

3. Realism and Impossible Narrators

To understand the significance of Eliot using impossible narrators in a realist context, it is useful to first examine Eliot's particular understanding of realism. As many scholars have noted, one of the central issues that faces any realist author is the question of whether realistic representation is even possible, whether a fictional text can accurately portray reality and whether authors should even try to do so. In "Surprising Realism," Caroline Levine asks, "Is realism best understood as a struggle for mimetic immediacy, an attempt to make us feel as if we inhabit the same world as the characters? Or is it quite the opposite: are realist novels in fact highly self-conscious about the limits and artifices of representation?" (62) In *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*, George Levine argues for the second option, writing that the notion of realism is essentially contradictory given an author's inability to represent a reality that transcends individual perspective (187). Levine argues that realist authors often address this by acknowledging the fictionality of their work within the text:

> If the world of the novel is to be represented as real (itself, of course, an oxymoronic condition), the first thing that has to be got straight is the difference between "reality," whatever we decide that is, and a work of literature, and the degree to which what is represented is being shaped by the author. That is to say, the realist novel has got to face the fact that it is a fiction . . . (Levine 190)

As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, K.M. Newton made a similar point, arguing that novelistic form makes a story inherently unrealistic and that Eliot admits this by "making the reader aware that the narrator is constructing a particular picture of reality and interpreting it . . ."

(102). Both scholars suggest that realist writing involves both representing reality and gesturing towards the act of representation in a way that implicitly recognizes its limits.

Two other scholars argue similarly that Eliot's realism both represents external reality and acknowledges the internal mental states that shape her representation. Tressler writes that Eliot's portrayal in *The Mill on the Floss* of the relationship between inner mental states and the limiting external world is mirrored in her realism itself: "it is on account of art's ability to mingle with one's consciousness through reverie that constitutes Eliot's realism as the interpenetration of art and life" (495). Rebecca Gould makes a similar point in "*Adam Bede*'s Dutch Realism and the Novelist's Point of View," arguing that Eliot's realism allows readers to see and understand the world while letting them know the text is only an intermediary. Gould and Tressler both point to an illustrative claim from the narrator of *Adam Bede,* who tells readers that "my strongest effort is . . . to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused . . ." (*AB* 284; Gould 415; Tressler 488). As Gould suggests, the notion of mirroring admits that the novel can only portray a flawed representation of the world and not reality itself (415).

These accounts indicate that the opposition between mentality and reality is central to realism itself, which is a mental representation that attempts to forge a link to reality. In *Adam Bede*, the narrator imagines the reader criticizing the realistic aspects of the text and stating, "The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed entangled affair" (*AB* 285). To portray the world realistically, in Eliot's view, is to portray it as a "mixed entangled affair": that is, a place full of limits and ties that hold people back, and of friction between our ideas and reality. This thematic opposition is part of

realism's content, an element of the real world that Eliot seeks to portray; but it is also fundamental to realism's *form*, to its claims to portray the world at all.

However, complications arise from the conclusion that this thematic opposition can be viewed as an issue of representation itself. A realist novel is in some sense fundamentally incapable of portraying the gap between our mental representations of the world and its actual state: as a work of fiction, it is itself a mental representation of the world. The facts of the real world do not exert power over the world of the novel, in which the imaginings of an author have only self-imposed bounds and characters run up against only the limits created by the novelist. When Eliot portrays the divergence between the minds of characters and the real world, it is actually a divergence between the minds of characters and Eliot's representation of the real world.

Eliot's use of impossible narrators works to overcome this issue of representation. The embodiment of the narrators can be viewed, following Christoff's claims I discussed in the second chapter (61-62), as an impossible degree of fluidity: the narrators shift between physical states in a way only imaginary beings can, ignoring any limits the real world imposes. That is, this type of narratorial impossibility is defined by the lack of any friction between ideality and reality. As I suggested in the previous chapter, reading a narrator who has a physical body encourages us to think of that narrator in the way we think of all fictional characters, imagining that they could really exist and pretending that we are reading about real people, temporarily bringing them into the real world. However, it is this impossible fluidity that prevents a reader from interpreting these narrators as real beings: we cannot fit someone both omniscient and embodied into our vision of the world. In this way, we see that the narrators do run into limits after all: the limits of possibility, or rather of what we are willing to accept in a representation of

the world. These are not limits arbitrarily imposed by an author within a represented world, but rather restrictions produced by our understanding of physics that rules out such impossible beings. These limits are a means by which reality, or our knowledge of reality, enforces its rules upon even our ideas and fictions.

Therefore, lacking the ability to fully represent this theme of friction within the space of her novels, Eliot *creates* it in the minds of her readers, staging a clash between these narrators, whose impossibility makes then quintessentially and necessarily mental items, and our most basic beliefs about how reality should function. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* tells us, "I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it . . ." (203). Eliot does not only want us to observe the friction, but to *feel* it as well, to perceive the tension that arises from our attempts to carry these narrators into the real world. Eliot's use of impossible narrators accomplishes this task in a way that draws attention to itself, that creates a sense of confusion and curiosity in search of explanation: in doing so it foregrounds both this theme and the ways in which realist fiction is incapable of truly representing that theme, or the real world.

This thesis began with a question: why would Eliot choose to write such strange and impossible narrators? The answer, as we have seen, has two parts. The first is that the various types of impossibility Eliot employs emphasize the fact that we are reading a fictional story existing only in the mind of the author and the readers. The second is that Eliot is highly interested in the relationship between minds and reality, in the divergence between our ideas about the world and its actual state. Narratorial impossibility is a way to illustrate this divergence, to create friction between purely imaginary beings and the real world we try to incorporate them into. Eliot uses impossibility to reveal some of the constraints of realist

representation, constraints that she cannot transcend but that she can—in a limited way—reach beyond.

Conclusion

I have argued in this thesis that Eliot's impossible narrators are deployed for thematic ends: they emphasize that fictional stories are mental creations distinct from the objects they represent, and they remind us that our ideas about the world will inevitably clash with the corresponding reality. The narrators also identify and overcome the limits of fiction by evoking the very sense of friction between mental items and reality that is unrepresentable within the space of a novel. In this conclusion, I will turn to Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, a text that rethinks the relationship between mentality and reality and in this way stands apart from the works that I have examined in this thesis. In the first section, I will examine the significance of Mordecai's strange powers in the novel; in the second, I will detail the novel's broader interest in the role of the ideal; in the third, I will explain how the novel fits within my explanation of Eliot's use of impossibility. Although *Daniel Deronda* challenges the framework through which I have interpreted Eliot's other works, I will argue that this final novel does not reject so much as build upon the implications of the earlier novels, deepening Eliot's examination of the way we use fiction to try to understand the reality that lives outside us.

1. Ideas Becoming Real

In *Daniel Deronda*, the thoughts and hopes and wishes of characters do not always clash with reality; instead, they often shape and change it. Simon During, who I cited earlier as claiming that Eliot portrays "reality" as "resist[ing] desire and will," argues that *Daniel Deronda* upends this framework because its "politico-spiritual aspirations . . . lapse into fantasy" with Deronda's plan to create a Jewish nation (438). In addition to this broader idealism, however, there is also a narrower literal sense in which the ideal takes on new power within the world of

the novel, appearing in what Brooke D. Taylor calls the "[g]hostly visions and uncanny premonitions [that] pervade the novel . . ." (121). My analysis here is focused on these latter cases, on the strange way that the mental items of characters interact with external reality.

The novel's portrayal of this issue centers around the character Mordecai, whose hopes and visions of a student to whom he can pass on his knowledge manifest themselves in real life. Upon meeting Deronda, Mordecai "feel[s] in that moment that his inward prophecy was fulfilled," as "[o]bstacles, incongruities, all melted into the sense of completion with which his soul was flooded by this outward satisfaction of his longing" (*DD* 349). Here, reality does not contradict desire at all, and the narration explicitly points to the harmony between inward and outward states. However, there is an important way in which the exact nature of Mordecai's power remains ambiguous. It may be that his visions give him "alternative modes of knowledge," as Taylor describes it (121), or it may be that "[w]hen Mordecai wishes something, it happens," as Adela Pinch writes (146). Both possibilities—that Mordecai's visions show him the future, or let him change it—are encompassed by Mordecai's own descriptions of his abilities. He tells Deronda, "my expectation was there, and you are come. Men have died of thirst. But I was thirsty, and the water is on my lips!" (*DD* 356) There is a tension between "expectation" and "thirst," between the idea that Mordecai simply knew that Deronda would come or actually wished it into being.

Indeed, the novel seems particularly interested in cultivating this ambiguity, in complicating our understanding of the link between Mordecai's visions and the corresponding events. In "The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*," Cynthia Chase writes that the events of *Daniel Deronda* often defy or reverse a linear interpretation of cause and effect, leaving open multiple interpretations of their underlying logic (215, 217).

Chase notes that Mordecai's vision of Deronda comes true in a somewhat paradoxical way: "on the one hand, Mordecai's identification of Deronda is presented as a recognition . . . On the other hand, Deronda's assumption of the identity of Mordecai's prefigured friend is shown to be a consequence of Mordecai's act of claiming him. He becomes what Mordecai claims he is" (221). In "The Science of Fiction in *Daniel Deronda*," Taylor writes similarly that "[t]here remains a paradox of premonition and self-fulfilling prophecy that *Daniel Deronda* never quite resolves" (131). Mordecai tells Deronda, "You would remind me that I may be under an illusion—that the history of our people's trust has been full of illusion. . . . *So it might be with my trust, if you would make it an illusion. But you will not*" (*DD* 355). His power is not an illusion, but only as long as Deronda believes in it.

In fact, the ambiguity of Mordecai's abilities runs deeper than this. The narrator, commenting on such abilities, states the following:

> "Second-sight" is a flag over disputed ground. But it is a matter of knowledge that here are persons whose yearnings, conceptions—nay, traveled conclusions—continually take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power; the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type; the event they hunger for or dread rises into vision with a seed-like growth, feeding itself fast on unnumbered impressions. (*DD* 334)

Here, the narrator offers three descriptions of Mordecai's abilities: his "conceptions . . . take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power," his intended "deed . . . starts up before [him] in complete shape," and his desired future "rises into vision." Each phrasing describes a mental item that produces some effect, and each effect is characterized in perceptual terms: an idea produces an image, an intention appears to him, a desire enters his vision. In none of these

cases does the narrator explicitly say that the effect manifests itself in reality: each can be read as a statement not about how the world *is*, but about how it *seems* to Mordecai. He wishes for an event, and then he sees it: but does his wish change the world, or does it change his interpretation of the world?

This question, or some form of it, is key to *Daniel Deronda*'s examination of the relationship between the mental and the real. Mordecai evokes a version of it when he tells Deronda, "I see, I measure the world as it is, which the vision will create anew" (*DD* 352). Does he see the world, or create it? Do his visions represent reality or shape it? The answer, according to this passage, is that they do both: the novel's broader argument is that the dichotomy offered by the question is a false one. The novel cannot quite decide which power Mordecai has, that of seeing the future or changing it, because it is interested in conflating the two, in interrogating the way that an image can shape the object it portrays. Deronda describes the way a stone sculpture of leaves led to his appreciation of the actual thing, and asks "whether one oftener learns to love real objects through their representations, or the representations through the real objects . . ." (*DD* 299). The novel is focused on the first of those options: on the ways that our experience of reality is shaped by our representation of it.

2. Interpreting and Inventing the World

In my explanation of Eliot's narrators, I described the contrast between ideal and real as an opposition, a dichotomy between an internal mental world and the external physical world. *Daniel Deronda*, however, often blurs the distinction between the two. In *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, Pinch argues that *Daniel Deronda* contains instances where "the vividness of mental persons" exceeds that of "actual humans . . ." (149).

For example, Pinch discusses how Gwendolen's relationship with Deronda is defined more by her thoughts about him than their actual contact (148), or how Mirah views her late mother as "just as really with me as all the other people about me" even though she is present only in Mirah's thoughts (*DD* 331; Pinch 149). More generally, the novel considers the way mental items can seem to supersede external reality. Gwendolen experiences "miserable memories which forced themselves on her as something more real and ample than any new material out of which she could mould her future" (*DD* 566). Deronda, entering a room he has not visited for a long time, considers how "[t]he familiar objects around him . . . seemed almost to belong to a previous state of existence which he was revisiting in memory only, not in reality . . ." (*DD* 541). In the first case, an idea appears to have more reality than the physical world; in the second, the physical world appears to be only an idea.

Eliding the barrier between the mental and physical world is part of *Daniel Deronda*'s broader examination of the impact that characters' ideas can have on reality. In "Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief," Moira Gatens argues that *Daniel Deronda* portrays the importance of the imagination as a tool for acquiring knowledge. Gatens cites a passage from Eliot's final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, about the role of "*non falsi errori*" (Eliot 157) or "not false errors" (Gatens 84), a phrase that Eliot borrows from Dante's *Purgatorio* (Eliot 156) and that refers, in Eliot's words, to "the revelations of true imaginative power" (157). Along similar lines, Taylor points to a passage where Gwendolen's imagination of a horrible event is compared to "a dream that she would instantaneously wake from to find the effects real though the images had been false . . ." (*DD* 474). Taylor argues that "[t]he effects are the consequences of the moral truths Gwendolen tried to ignore" (125): that the false images—or, in Gatens' terms, the "not false errors"—convey truths that lie beyond

empirical corroboration but still impact reality through those who think of them (Taylor 125). For both Gatens and Taylor, Eliot's claims are ultimately about the power of fiction, about the way a story constructed of images can uncover truth, especially concerning moral facts (Gatens 74; Taylor 125).

Daniel Deronda is not purely interested in false images and mental inventions, but also in truthful representation: in the choices we make about which ideas we use to understand the world. Deronda, for example, can "easily find poetry and romance among the events of everyday life," whereas nothing could "make poetry for a mind that had no movements of awe and tenderness . . ." (*DD* 148). The epigraph preceding that passage is an excerpt from Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* that gestures towards the subjectivity of experience: "I pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba, and say, ''Tis all barren': and so it is: and so is all the world to him who will not cultivate the fruits it offers" (qtd. in *DD* 148). In "*Daniel Deronda*: A New Epistemology," George Levine writes that Eliot's novel contends with the concept of objectivity, questioning "whether reality is out there like a hard determinate thing, or partakes of the nature of mind itself" (59). The novel's position, Levine asserts, is that our personal cares and motivations are an essential component of knowledge: "the world is out there to be known, but . . . knowing it entails the work and shape of human consciousness" (72). More generally, we might say that *Daniel Deronda* emphasizes the ways in which our ideas about the world are underdetermined by reality, leaving us space to shape our own experience.

Even so, we cannot, as the narrator says, "continuously escape suffering from the pressure of that hard unaccommodating Actual . . ." (*DD* 270). Gatens notes that Eliot advocates for the power of the imagination only when we are careful to remember the distinction between our ideas and reality (84). Likewise, the narrator of *Daniel Deronda* tells us that "the chief poetic

energy" consists "in the force of imagination that pierces or exalts the solid fact, instead of floating among cloud-pictures" (*DD* 270). Our ideas remain limited by reality, but within those confines we can still choose how we interpret the "solid fact." Of course, one of the ways in which we create particular interpretations of reality is through the invention of fictional stories. As I noted above, Taylor and Gatens both interpret Eliot's claims about the employment of the imagination as ultimately about the power of fiction to influence reality. A related point is made by Alicia Mireles Christoff, whose account of Eliot's narrators I have discussed in previous chapters. In that account, Christoff argues that *Middlemarch* portrays the way fiction can use language to bring life and excitement to an inherently dreary world, "posit[ing] the enlivening effects of highly mobile figurations and reconfigurations of meaning" (156). The same principle underlies *Daniel Deronda*'s claim about the "poetic energy" of "exalt[ing] the solid fact" (270), about our own control over where we "find poetry and romance . . ." (148). The implications of this point, the consequences of the way fiction can alter our interpretation of reality, will return in the next and final section of this conclusion.

3. Imagining the Bounds of Reality

If Eliot's impossible narrators emphasize the power of the real over our ideas, *Daniel Deronda* points to the opposite, to the ways in which ideas shape our experience of reality. This thematic change is accompanied by a narratorial one: the narrator of *Daniel Deronda* can hardly be called impossible, or even strange. They do not walk into the story, or assert their personhood, or tell stories from dreams: they are present only in their frequent commentary, and their infrequent use of the first-person. In a story that challenges our previous assumptions about the limits of our ideas, there is no impossible narrator to remind us of the discordance between

fiction and reality. In this way, *Daniel Deronda* does not fit with Eliot's previous novels: however, while its claims about reality in some sense challenge the concept of friction that I discussed in the fourth chapter, the argument it advances builds upon this concept, drawing on our understanding of impossible narrators while also rethinking their significance.

Daniel Deronda's narrator may not have impossible traits, but its characters arguably do. When readers come across Mordecai's apparent powers, they have two options. The first is to read the events as a claim about what is possible in the real world: this is essentially the interpretation of Taylor and Gatens, who argue that the novel demonstrates that knowledge does not only include empirical facts (Taylor 117; Gatens 74). The second option is to view Mordecai's powers as obviously unrealistic, and therefore to read them as a claim about the sorts of things that can only happen in novels: this is how I interpreted Eliot's impossible narrators. Mordecai's powers, which are never precisely described in the novel, now take on another ambiguity: do they encourage us to revise our understanding of reality, or of fiction? The interpretation we choose depends on exactly how implausible we think Mordecai's powers are: that is, on where we think the boundary between reality and fantasy lies.

This question of our expectations about reality appears in other forms in *Daniel Deronda*. For instance, it surfaces in Deronda's extended struggle over whether he should believe Mordecai can truly see the future. As Taylor argues, Deronda position is ultimately that of open-mindedness (130); the narrator tells us that "[Deronda's] nature was too large, too ready to conceive regions beyond his own experience, to rest at once in the easy explanation, 'madness,' whenever a consciousness showed some fullness and conviction where his own was blank" (*DD* 350). The question also appears in Deronda's frequent belief that reality will not live up to people's desires. While searching for Mirah's family, Deronda "had a presentiment of the

collision between her idea of the unknown mother and brother and the discovered fact—a presentiment all the keener in him because of a suppressed consciousness that a not unlike possibility of collision might lie hidden in his own lot" (*DD* 271). When discussing Mordecai's expectations for him, he notes that "[w]e must not lose sight of the fact that the outward event has not always been a fulfillment of the firmest faith . . ." (*DD* 355). Unlike Mordecai, Deronda is largely wrong in these "presentiment[s]," in his expectations that his and Mordecai's and Mirah's hopes will be dashed. Deronda always awaits the intrusion of, to use the narrator's terms, the "hard unaccommodating Actual" (*DD* 270), but it does not always affect his life in the way he expects.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the way that Eliot's impossible narrators allow readers to feel the clash between ideas and reality. When we try to imagine the narrators as real beings, we are stopped not by literal reality but rather by our most basic understanding of what constitutes the real world. For Deronda, at least in some cases, the Actual does not appear as a physical reality, but it still exists as an expectation that shapes his actions. Our interactions with reality are, of course, not always with the physical world; often they are just with our expectations of it, with the mental model of it that we have constructed. The narrator says of Mordecai,

> Suppose he had introduced himself as one of the strictest reasoners. Do they form a body of men hitherto free from false conclusions and illusory speculations? The driest argument has its hallucinations, too hastily concluding that its net will now at last be large enough to hold the universe. Men may dream in demonstrations, and cut out an illusory world in the shape of axioms, definitions, and propositions, with a final exclusion of fact signed Q.E.D. . . . [T]he unemotional intellect may carry us into a mathematical dreamland where nothing is but what is not . . . (*DD* 363)

These “reasoners” run into problems because they construct a model of reality, a “net . . . to hold the universe,” but we do the same in our everyday lives, navigating the world based on our ideas about it. Like these reasoners, we may find our models are only “illusory worlds” and “dreamland[s],” detached from any correspondence with reality. When we base our actions on how we think the world is, we can be limited by our ideas just as much as we are limited by the Actual.

With this in mind, the question I raised above about how we interpret Mordecai’s powers takes on a new dimension. On the most straightforward level, portraying a character with such apparent abilities encourages us to think about whether such visions are really possible; in doing so, it draws attention to the boundaries we draw around our idea of the Actual. Another thing it does, however, is raise a question about its own mechanisms, about the way that such a fictional representation affects readers. Suppose we read Mordecai’s powers as an argument, on Eliot’s part, for accepting such visions as possible in the real world, and suppose we are persuaded. We would then have to modify our existing beliefs about how reality functions to include such cases of “second-sight”: that is, we would have to update our model of the world. Mordecai’s presence, as a fictional character who influences our understanding of reality, leads us to wonder exactly how fictional stories have such influence. If our idea of reality is constituted by the mental models we build, it is also shaped by the models we encounter: and a fictional story is itself a model of reality, a system of representations that seeks to inform us about real life, a forum for generating and justifying a particular net that might contain our universe.

Therefore, as we saw in our investigation of impossible narrators, the questions that Eliot’s novels raise about ideas and representations are, in a sense, questions about fiction itself. In *Daniel Deronda*, these questions are a subset of a broader inquiry about how our experience

of the Actual is shaped by the way we think about, or imagine, or model reality. Sometimes our models limit us, or lead us astray; but sometimes they allow us to shape the world, as Mordecai does, or to see beauty in the world, as Deronda does. In this thesis I have only begun to explore these questions and their relationship to the creation of fiction; a more complete account of Eliot's perspective on this topic would be a worthwhile subject of further research and analysis.

Ultimately, *Daniel Deronda* does not refute Eliot's earlier claims about the clash between fiction and reality, but it qualifies those claims, warning us against the certainty that we know where the limits of reality lie, or the assumption that we have no part in shaping them. Indeed, as Taylor argued, the attitude that *Daniel Deronda* advocates for is one of open-mindedness: we should not lock ourselves into a specific mode of understanding reality, or believe that any particular model can truly represent its object. When I discussed the way Eliot wants her novels to be experienced, in Chapter 3, I compared the intended effect to a lucid dream: being immersed in a story *as* a story, engaging imaginatively while remembering that you are engaging with a fiction. The same principle underlies an open-minded form of reading: an author builds an image of reality and for the moment we accept it, explore it, investigate it, while remembering that it is an imagined model, a mental representation, a world where the impossible can live.

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