

Unassuming Positions:

Middlemarch, its Critics, and Positioning Theory

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The purpose of this essay is to introduce to literary studies a recent theoretical development in social psychology known as "positioning theory" through its application to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. *Middlemarch* is a text particularly well-suited to this task, for both positioning theory and Eliot's novel are concerned with the construction of social reality. However, this essay (like its genre) faces especial difficulties, as it can neither wholly do justice to the theory, nor can it be introduced in the context of a reading that takes into account the whole of the novel, let alone the mass of critical work that has accumulated since its publication. It therefore risks in both cases oversimplification and, at worst, negligence. Yet the effort is justified, if only because it is admittedly an initial foray into what could well be a fruitful interdisciplinary relationship between positioning theory and the reading and interpretation of "literary" texts. Its modest success, if achieved, will be to attract more members of each field to the possibilities offered by the intersection of the two.

Positioning theory, then, is the name given to recent attempts to articulate an alternate way of reading and understanding the dynamic of human relationships within a social constructivist paradigm. It is most readily understood as centering upon the replacement of the

metaphorical notion of "role" with that embodied in the word "position," with much of its insight and use flowing outward from this initial point of theoretical intervention. "Role," as used to describe social typification of recurring and instantive relationships, such as "mother-son," "clerk-customer," and "teacher-student," is criticized as being a relatively static concept to describe the way these relationships are actually experienced and enacted by their participants. For example, though a majority of people may be able to agree upon a certain set of characteristics that describe the "average" mother, it is questionable as to the degree to which this abstraction actually determines and represents the attitudes, beliefs, and responsibilities of an individual person who finds herself identified in that role. Further, given any individual, the application and interpretation of these general characteristics changes from moment to moment, exchange to exchange, based upon prior experience as well as the immediate context.

The "role" concept is, additionally, part of a larger theatrical metaphor, one that introduces other attendant baggage that does not seem to accurately reflect social life:

In the dramaturgical model people are construed as actors with lines already written and their roles determined by the particular play they find themselves in. Nor do they have much choice as how to play these roles in any particular setting. They learned how to take up a particular role through observation of others in that role. (Davies and Harré 41)

Not only does "role" fail to represent the fluid nature of social action and experience, but it further conceptually limits the possibility of individual choice, which in turn is a limitation upon the possibility of ethically-motivated change. As concerns the latter, history can be shown to bear out significant changes in the way certain "roles" have been enacted (the "student" role has become much more fluid, in that it can now be taken up publicly by almost any person). Further,

to accept "role" as such a highly determined factor is to accept the present social structure, inequities and all, as a given.¹

Positioning theory, on the other hand, attends to the problems inherent in the theatrical metaphor of "role" by working the much more dynamic metaphor of "position." Already, the spatial dimension of the term suggests its flexibility: one's position in space is ever-changing, even if only by degrees. Positions, such as sitting or standing, leaning this way or that, may be taken up or abandoned with relative ease. Extended into the social realm, the language is similarly applied; given an upcoming election, we inquire after candidates' positions on various issues; we discuss our own take on a particular position. Indeed, we often explicitly position ourselves in relation to a stated position. Notable in these activities is the fact that positioning typically takes place in a conversation; we explain our positions, defend them, alter them. Further, we often try to position others, as, for example: wrong, incompetent, misinformed; or, right, competent, knowledgeable. Finally, these positions tend to be taken up according to an unfolding narrative, as in a tale of a modest infidelity: the guilty party will try to position him or herself as weak-willed, perhaps, or as having been unfaithful in response to some wrong done by the other. These positions will be tried out and abandoned or maintained, depending upon the outcomes they generate. In short, "position" is very different from "role" because

'Positioning' and 'subject position,' in contrast, permit us to think of ourselves as choosing subjects, locating ourselves in conversations according to those narrative forms with which we are familiar and bringing to those narratives our own subjective lived histories through which we have learnt metaphors, characters and plot. (Davies and Harré 41)

Whereas roles, as noted earlier, imply a loss of choice, a scripted existence, positions provide

opportunities for individual action, the dynamic manipulation and development of social exchanges based on subjective experience. Indeed, we need look no further for an example of the significant distinction between role and position than Dorothea, who, in the moment she discovers the codicil to Casaubon's will, undergoes a dramatic change that could hardly be described as a change in role, but rather usefully elaborated as a shift in positions:

Dorothea by this time had turned cold again, and now threw herself back helplessly in her chair. She might have compared her experience at that moment to the vague, alarmed consciousness that her life was taking on a new form, that she was undergoing a metamorphosis in which memory would not adjust itself to the stirring of new organs. Everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her own duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them--and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw. (5.50, 519-20)

This “metamorphosis,” in which “everything was changing its aspect” conveys the dynamism of social relations, a dynamism not evidenced by the kind of visible, often titled shifts in role (i.e. from wife to widow, from husband to father), but rather through the subtleties of positions, of degreed and gradual shifts. Moreover, these shifts are specific to individual narratives; again, it is not that Dorothea has taken on a new role or roles, but that her positions in the narratives she shares with Casaubon and Ladislaw, as well as her positioning of them in those narratives, have changed.

This passage also demonstrates the fluidity of positioning in relation to time; as Langenhove and Harré note, “The distinction between past, present, and future does not go over neatly into psychological time, partly because the social and psychological past is not fixed. The social future can influence the social past” (15). Or, as they later explain, “. . . positions may

modulate as a conversation unfolds, forever retrospectively redoing the conversation that has already occurred" (28-9). Thus, in the moments following her discovery of the codicil, Dorothea's metamorphosis not only entails a new positioning in the context of her present and future narratives, but a sudden revisioning and repositioning of every micro-event in the larger narrative of her relationship with Casaubon. These narratives of the past, far from being fixed in material history, are recast in light of the new position she assigns to Casaubon, and the position she assigns herself in relation to his. Thus not only does she re-evaluate "her husband's conduct," but "her own duteous feeling towards him." Positions, one might say, are relational terms.

One critic of Eliot's works, Philip Fisher, makes several similar observations about this moment in the context of his own reading, one which emphasizes interpretive activity:

Elusive and complex as the signs of behavior are, the waywardness of interpretation might be moderate if it were not forced to deal with change. The turbulence of life and character demands not only interpretation but continuous reinterpretation that adjusts and sometimes reverses versions of experience. After Dorothea learns of her husband's will, she revises completely her interpretation of their life together. (177)

While Fisher's reading is certainly a reasonable use of the passage in question, and does well to advance his larger argument, it does not really capture the essentially social and dialectical nature of what is taking place. It is too broad, too generally applicable to all problems of interpretation, interpersonal and otherwise. Positioning theory, on the other hand, emphasizes that social interpretation takes place in a fundamentally narrative context; further, that the dynamics of the narrative are such that any change in the understanding of another yields a

change in one's own relation to that person, and indeed in one's understanding of oneself.

Having established, then, the inherent dynamism of position over role in terms of degree, relationality, and temporality, we may flesh out the narrative aspects of positioning alluded to above. These various features of positioning are instances, aspects of what is known in positioning theory as the position/speech act-action/storyline triad (Langenhove and Harré 16). This model emphasizes the fact that positions are taken up or assigned within the context of a narrative, and are produced through and by speech acts.² Or, as Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove put it in an essay introducing positioning theory, "The act of positioning thus refers to the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (17). They offer as one example of the "relatively determinate" aspect of positioning the act of voting; for at the ballot box, one must display a specific political attitude because there is a limited range of choices. In a larger sense, the positions that one may take up are limited in large part to those that are already known and accepted as positions within specific narratives. Thus, although positions are part of a more fluid concept than roles, they are not wholly unbounded. As Davies and Harré note: "Any narrative that we collaboratively unfold with other people thus draws on a knowledge of social structures and the roles that are recognizably allocated to people within those structures. Social structures are coercive to the extent that to be recognizably and acceptably a person we must operate within their terms" (42).³ In other words, we cannot create privately, from whole cloth, a new position, for a position must be acknowledged by others in order to function *as* a position. It would be like taking up a position that exists only in one's own culture in the context of another; one may perform the same actions, but they will not be understood as part of and participating in any specific structure beyond oneself. This is not

unlike the difficulty Lydgate faces upon his arrival in Middlemarch. The narrator offers to make him "better known" to the interested reader than he is to the Middlemarchers:

For surely all must admit that a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with, or at least selected as a future husband, and yet remain virtually unknown--known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbours' false suppositions. (2.15, 145)

What makes Lydgate merely "a cluster of signs," one might argue, is that those signs, taken together, do not conform to any position recognizable to the Middlemarchers. Further, whatever positions they attempt to impress upon Lydgate do not quite fit; he is, to some degree, recognizable as a future husband, as a doctor, and so on. But in the context of the narratives familiar to Middlemarch, his behavior is not commensurate with these positionings. Indeed, such is the inevitable outcome of his attempts to establish a new position and its attendant narratives:

He [Lydgate] went to study in Paris with the determination that when he came home again he would settle in some provincial town as a general practitioner, and resist the irrational severance between medical and surgical knowledge. . . (2.15, 149)

It is clear from the start of Lydgate's personal narrative that it is one unlikely to be readily understood or accepted by the residents of Middlemarch; his attempt to unify medical and surgical practice in one person stands out as among the likeliest rocks for any positioning attempt to break upon. His attempt to position himself as a scientist in the context of provincial life also presents difficulties. Perhaps the clearest evidence for Lydgate's incompatibility with Middlemarch positions and narratives is revealed by his own favoured narrative: Galen and Vesalius. Lydgate envisions the same ancient medical narrative playing out again; he positions

himself as the besieged but righteous Vesalius against the ignorant but dominant Middlemarch physicians, who are his followers of Galen (5.45, 482-4). Lydgate vainly tries to share this narrative with Farebrother (who does not acknowledge it) and Rosamond, with the latter's response culminating in the gently damning "I often wish you had not been a medical man" (484). Lydgate fails because the narrative and positions he is trying to take up are unknown and, perhaps, unacceptable.⁴

Naturally, positions and the narratives that provide for them may come from other cultures or times, as long as they are understood and have a place in the context of the present. For example, the narrative of courtly love dates to the medieval period, and is only fully coherent within that particular socio-historical context; yet it is perfectly suited, in general terms, to Rosamond as well as Ladislaw. Further, it is a narrative that is likely familiar to Middlemarch general, and is thus usable. So while Rosamond may not have understood or accepted Lydgate's Galen-Vesalius narrative, it is certain that Lydgate would have comprehended Rosamond's own narrative projection:

How delightful to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side—himself in fact a subject—while the captives look up for ever hopeless, losing their rest probably, and if their appetite too, so much the better! (5.43, 461)

Rosamond discovers that a distant narrative "inconceivable" in her "unmarried girlhood" may be well put to use in the present, with all the derived positions and benefits. The narrator, in fact, suggests that this narrative is so well known that it is near-universal: "The remote worship of a woman throned out of their reach plays a great part in men's lives, but in most cases the worshipper longs for some queenly recognition, some approving sign by which his soul's

sovereign may cheer him without descending from her high place” (2.22, 229). The narrator goes on to conclude “This was precisely what Will wanted.” What is presented then, is a narrative whose origins are distant in time, but which is nonetheless readily comprehended, at least implicitly, and accepted within the larger social sphere of Middlemarch. Both Ladislaw and Rosamond locate themselves in this courtly love narrative, and in so doing find ready-made perspectives on the world that guide them in their social interactions, however implicit or explicit the narrative may remain in the course of those interactions; further, as necessary, their behaviour can be understood by others via recourse to that narrative, whose explanatory power is a function of its common currency. Where, again, Lydgate may remain an unresolved "cluster of signs," Rosamond's and Ladislaw's behaviour are rendered transparently accessible. One might suggest that the narrator herself is utilizing this explanatory power to understand the actions and psychology of her subjects; it is certain that Eliot counted upon a ready reception of this narrative as a familiar one. Lydgate could only hope that the narrative of Galen and Vesalius were so well-understood.⁵

Positions provide for more than social recognition, successful or not; it is important to consider the perceptual apparatus that is attached to a position, especially as this apparatus is embodied in language. Davies and Harré observe that "Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned" (35). On a metatheoretical level, this is especially significant, as positioning theory is itself a positioned discursive practice, one that is principally constituted by a metaphor and its attendant narrative. Both positioning theory as a discursive practice, then, as well as the discursive practices it

analyzes place a good deal of weight upon metaphor as structuring principle. This is especially appropriate to literary analysis, and specifically to the reading of *Middlemarch*, where Eliot employs a number of metaphors to account for the dynamics of relationships. For example, Celia employs such a metaphor near the end of the novel; following Dorothea's announced engagement to Ladislaw, Celia reflects that she "had been used to think of her sister as the dangerous part of the family machinery" (8.84, 865).⁶ This metaphor clearly identifies Celia's perception of the family unit as not organic but mechanical, and further establishes her position within that machine; she is a safe, functioning part, unlike her sister, who, though still a part of the machine, is best avoided. However, as Celia is merely pondering this construction, rather than actively employing it in discourse, her sister has no opportunity to respond to this positioning act.

Celia's private metaphor highlights a distinction in kind among acts of positioning. Locating Dorothea within the metaphorical framework of a machine, considered as an act of positioning, is what Langenhove and Harré term a *first-order positioning*, which is essentially an initial act of positioning. If Dorothea had been able to respond to, and had resisted Celia's attempt to position her, she would have been engaged in what Langenhove and Harré identify as a *second-order positioning*, which "occurs when the first order positioning is not taken for granted by one of the persons involved in the discussion" (20). Subsequent first-order positionings may follow one another; it is only when one is contested that the act is second-order. It is through these positionings and repositionings that social relationships are negotiated; positions accepted determine the rules and moral space in which one will operate; positions refused or disputed may be resolved into new arrangements, or, if one party possesses/attains a superior position within that social context, positions may be imposed. As Langenhove and Harré observe: "Positioning always takes place within the context of a specific moral order of

speaking. What Jones can say to Smith and about Smith is relative to Jones's rights, duties and obligations within the moral order in which the discursive process occurs. In other words, the rights for self-positioning and other-positioning are unequally distributed and not all situations allow for or call for an intentional positioning of the participants" (23).⁷ As concerns Dorothea, though she may negotiate her position in relation to Celia, she has little effective ability to position herself in relation to Middlemarch society in such a way as to alter that society's collective act of positioning her.

Having established a general framework for positioning theory as a mode of analysis, it is appropriate to utilize that framework to investigate what is arguably the core problem of the novel. This problem, in essence, is the novel's juxtaposition of calls for an "epic life" in the context of a nostalgia for a lost society with a rendering of the present social dynamic, a rendering which would seem to resist any attempt to authenticate, let alone recall that better age. The prelude sets up the arena for this conflict, comparing the life of St. Theresa with the lives of contemporary young women, arguing that the time of the former permitted her ambitions to find a channel for realization, whereas the present age only frustrates would-be Theresas, who are unable to find suitable social roles through which to achieve their ends. Thus the central problem, in terms of positioning theory, concerns the positions available for women in a given society. Eliot's plaint, however, takes on a curious twist, one wrought by her nostalgia for a "coherent social faith and order." She lauds Theresa's time for possessing such coherence, as it enabled Theresa to claim a religious vocation and exercise her strengths through it. In the context of what is essentially a critique of the lack of positions available for women in the present, however, Eliot attacks the present "incoherence" for preventing the Theresas of her day from achieving a suitable life. Eliot thus privileges, at least in the prelude, the epic life over the suitability of the

available lives to the women who are to live them.⁸ In short, rather than using the present social incoherence to articulate and develop an ever-wider range of positions for women to take up, Eliot would rather there be fewer positions as long as they could enable (some) epic lives to be lived in an appropriately coherent context. This longing for coherence is arguably the more conservative strain in Eliot, though when pitted against the bulk of social episodes in *Middlemarch* and the ways in which they are portrayed, Eliot's understanding of social reality is clearly progressive.

John P. McGowan extends this conflict to issues of misinterpretation among characters in the novel, not least of which is Dorothea's misreading of Casaubon. Drawing upon the same phrase in the prelude, McGowan writes:

What Eliot portrays in *Middlemarch* is . . . the fragmentation of a modern world that offers the individual so many different and partial ways to understand his experiences. The characters' misinterpretations are not tied to any absolute necessity of misreading, but to there being 'no coherent social faith and order which could perform *the function of knowledge* for the ardently willing soul' . . .
 . (emphasis in McGowan, 149)

These "different and partial ways" may be read without much alteration as positions. Positions, as noted, embody ways of ordering and understanding social experience; they perform the "function of knowledge" through guiding narratives, metaphors, and images. In an incoherent, disordered society, a multiplicity of positions coupled with their inherent fluidity may be read as a signal symptom.⁹ Positions, in this view, demand negotiation; first-order acts of positioning are likely to be contested by second-order acts. In a "coherent" and "ordered" society, in contrast, there would be few, if any, any acts of second-order positioning, because first-order positionings

would rarely be contested. As Langenhove and Harré observe, the absence of second-order positioning is also characteristic of rituals, which by their very nature deny contest, unless it too is part of the ritual (in which case it is not a lived contest). It is perhaps not too much to suggest that the religious social world whose loss Eliot laments is one much more given to ritual and thus first-order positioning than the increasingly secular world that Eliot represents in *Middlemarch*.

Positions, then, fairly embody a focal issue for Eliot in *Middlemarch*. The fluidity of social experience that they represent results in a fragmented understanding of the world, yet their relative determinacy also puts limitations upon individual choice and social performance. In this we have both centrifugal and centripetal social forces; fragmentation pulls away from a highly ordered social structure, whereas the (necessary) relative determinacy pulls human experience and behaviour towards its limited positions, through which individuals function and frame experience.¹⁰ Among these centripetal forces, and also problematized by positioning theory, is the idea of the coherent individual self, manifested by grammatical indexicals. In other words, the consistent use of the first-person indexical "I" would seem to imply a similarly consistent referent. As Davies and Harré note, this observable behaviour leads to certain assumptions: "Because of the social/grammatical construction of the person as a unitary knowable identity, we tend to assume it is possible to have made a set of consistent choices located within only one discourse. And it is true we do struggle with the diversity of experience to produce a story of ourselves which is unitary and consistent. If we don't, others demand of us that we do" (49). Thus even while we take up various positions as they are made available for our use, and even though these positions may be contradictory or at least not fully congruent, we are expected to outwardly reconcile them; further, if we fail to, they will be reconciled for us, and generally to our detriment. If positions permit a certain flexibility, they also entail a kind of accountability.

This problem is one taken up several times over the course of *Middlemarch*, and Eliot depicts more than once the difficulties presented by people who appear inconsistent. One particularly interesting case arises over Lydgate's vote against Farebrother in the question of the chaplaincy.

As Lydgate dithers over whether or not to cast his vote for Farebrother as chaplain of the new infirmary, we are presented with a case of dual, relational, incoherent positionings, as Lydgate first attempts to resolve whom Farebrother is, and, recursively, to resolve whom he is. Initially, after reviewing Farebrother's kind reception of and conduct towards him, Lydgate positions Farebrother as having a character of "unusual delicacy and generosity," one of the few which "are so nobly resolute not to dress up their inevitably self-interested desires in a pretext of better motives" (2.18, 184). He further notes that this position is ratified by Farebrother's popular reception at and conduct in Church. Lydgate realizes, however, that he is expected to vote with Bulstrode, against Farebrother; so he defers thinking about the issue any further, until he receives notice that the vote is to be held shortly. Then, the conflict fully upon him, Lydgate realizes the awkwardness of his own position: "For the first time Lydgate was feeling the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity" (2.18, 187). In response to this crisis, Lydgate begins re-evaluating his positioning of Farebrother in an attempt to resolve his own position:

Certainly there were valid things to be said against the election of Mr. Farebrother: he had too much time on his hands already, especially considering how much time he spent on non-clerical occupations. Then again it was a continually repeated shock, disturbing Lydgate's esteem, that the Vicar should obviously play for the sake of money . . . (2.18, 185)

Lydgate goes on to lament that "One would know much better what to do if men's characters

were more consistent," a rather ironic plaint considering Lydgate's own apparent inconsistencies (2.18, 186). After he has established the ambiguity of Farebrother's position, Lydgate begins to reflect upon how he positions himself in relation to a decision for or against Farebrother.¹¹ He neither wants to "be a vassal of Bulstrode's," nor merely vote "on the side obviously convenient for himself"; further, he fears that others will see a vote against Farebrother as an attempt to curry favour with Bulstrode, rather than voting his own will (186, 187). Thus Lydgate considers both how he positions himself as well as how others may position him as a result of his vote; he is dissatisfied with every position, because all of them misrepresent him to one degree or another. This recalls the "relatively determinate" nature of positions; they set limits and guidelines as to how one may act and be understood socially. Lydgate cannot opt out of the position that will inevitably follow, and is a direct result of, his vote.

Even if positioning theory does not itself shed much new light upon *Middlemarch*, it provides a common critical language for the ideas arrived at and described independently by critics of the novel. The more insightful published readings generally conclude that society, as depicted by Eliot, is produced and maintained by the dynamic construction of narratives, collections of signs, and interpretations of the people perceived as those collections. Society is a process, as positioning theory explicitly acknowledges. People, identities, are ever in flux, ever being created and re-created via interpersonal exchanges. As Fisher observes, "Unstable, discontinuous, the life of *Middlemarch* is the life of becoming and process, not of being and place" (173). And McGowan: "A referent is not simply an object out there that is named, but an object always in process, always being created by virtue of its interaction with others in the whole context we call society and history" (145). Freadman observes *Middlemarch's* "evocation of society as a code-rich miscellany in which incidental forms of social fictionalising--gossip,

speculation, local mythology, fraudulence--converge in a rough and shifting consensus about the nature of 'reality'" (137). And where McGowan and Freedman, in their respective texts, address the novel in terms of codes (whether drawn from semiotics or classical communication theory), and Fisher in terms of interpretive activity, all three would benefit from the explicit and larger framework provided by positioning theory; it would also enable them to more effectively differentiate themselves from one another in terms of their particular emphases and interests.

Positioning theory can also serve as something of a corrective to flawed approaches to the novel. We need only look at John Kucich's review of *Middlemarch* in his study *Repression in Victorian Fiction*. Observing that the word "mixture" appears frequently in the text, and is applied to both "personalities as well as social conditions," Kucich presses this metaphor exclusively into service as a key to the novel (136). Among the many problems with this approach, not least is that "mixture" implies that the components comprising the mixture are innate, are commingled in what can only be for Kucich the container of the self. Indeed, this unfortunate metaphor leads Kucich to facile, destructively reductive claims, such as his notion that Lydgate's difficulty is that he is simply "divided" in interest between "science and beautiful women" (136). For support, he draws upon the relevant passage in 2.15:

He [Lydgate] had two selves within him apparently, and they must learn to accommodate each other and bear reciprocal impediments. Strange, that some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights, behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and awaits us. (157)

While it is clear that Eliot is addressing the notion of multiple selves in this context, it by no means commits her to the kind of formal theory that would support an extended metaphor of

selves as mixtures, at least in the conventional sense employed by Kucich. Fisher, in contrast, asserts that, in *Middlemarch*, “The self is the margin where it is in motion and transformation, just as the age is its transitions, and science is the frontiers of science” (192). In place of mixtures we have a margin, where a single self is constantly changing; and it is not too far out of joint to read these changes as alterations and assumptions of positions.

Thus Kucich's incoherent "mixture theory" needs to be supplanted by a more robust and thorough critical framework, and positioning theory would appear a viable candidate. It might have prevented conclusions like the following: "Significantly, George Eliot's differentiation of muddled and dynamic compounds follows the novel's instinct to minimize the importance of social relations to desire, for her ideal mixture appears most clearly in the model of love she creates for Will and Dorothea" (Kucich 140-1). Such a heavily internalist account, already evident in the innateness of the mixture metaphor, conflicts deeply with Eliot's consistent depiction of society as a negotiated construct, both enabling and constraining social behaviour and exchange. Indeed, the preface is, in essence, an argument that desire is highly *dependent* upon social relations for its articulation.

A perspective on the novel inflected by positioning theory might also provide for a better understanding of the role of the narrator in *Middlemarch*. Peter Garrett, in his survey *Scene and Symbol from George Eliot to James Joyce*, refers to a scene in which the reader is associated with “the narrator's superior point of view” and claims that

We may locate analysis, and other functions of the author's commenting voice, on a scale of increasing abstraction. At the most concrete level is dialogue and external description, from which we move to an internal view of the characters.

There is no necessary reason why this last should be any more abstract than

externals, but in George Eliot it usually tends that way. (22, 23-4)

This rather facile understanding of the narratorial function in *Middlemarch*, like Kucich's mixtures, makes a palimpsest of Eliot, such that the idea of reality as being socially determined is hardly in evidence. There *is* a necessary reason for the narrator's understanding of the characters' minds being more abstract than her understanding of material reality: both the narrator and the characters exist in and are the product of social worlds, and these worlds cannot be known in the way that material reality can be known. Minds, selves, and positions are constantly changing in response to other minds, selves, and positions. People do not have locable centers. Further, the narrator is clearly aware of her own positioning activities, and is constantly attempting to compensate for them, as when she cautions the reader against "a too hasty judgment" of either Casaubon or Ladislaw following her summary depiction of them (1.10, 83).¹² And as concerns the narrator's supposed "superior" point of view, Freedman usefully observes that the narrator's regularly shifting knowledge is a reflection of the epistemological predicament her characters are in; her frequent emotive interjections "establish the narrator as a beleaguered character in a benighted world" sharing the same life as her characters (138). It is clear that the narrator is implicated in the positions of the characters as they are presented to us, and therefore any attempt to cast the illusion that the narrator has a privileged knowledge would violate Eliot's representation of social reality, a representation that must of necessity participate in the ambiguities and dynamics of that which it models.¹³

The relationship between Eliot's model of society and society as a collective consumer of Eliot's novels is striking, especially when viewed in light of positioning theory. As with the courtly love narrative appropriated by Ladislaw and Rosamond, new positions and narratives may come from anywhere, so long as they are shared by the would-be participants. Eliot's own

novel, then, is itself a collection of narratives and positions made publicly available for use by the people who read her. McGowan comes close to realizing this possibility, but stops short:

George Eliot's later novels hold, as their rhetorical (read 'political' or 'moral') purpose, the desire to create that 'coherent social faith' by which the social realities of the future, the new referents of speech, might be constructed and understood. *The novelist cannot produce these changes herself, which is why her novels . . . are addressed to the society that must join her in building this envisioned future.* (emphasis added, 152)

Yet it appears that, given her communicative (popular) reach, the novelist can indeed produce these changes, simply by creating the narratives and positions within the mirror worlds of her own novels. Granted, in a certain sense society must "join" her, in that it must read and simultaneously ratify the existence of these positions, but the balance of responsibility and individual authority tips in the novelist's favour. Indeed, even if her readers did not want to accept the Ladislaw-Dorothea narrative, that they can recognize that narrative, that it has been added to the repertoire of narratives and positions of which they are aware, makes it usable simply because it is recognizable. One can imagine a Victorian girl of about Dorothea's age utilizing Dorothea's narratives in order to position herself as someone also in need of other positions; only in her case, the character of Dorothea provides one more position than those available in the world of *Middlemarch*. Eliot's novels, then, are not simply reflections of the social world she perceives, but are in fact part of that social world, producers of the narratives and positions that will define social opportunities for their readers. The effects, arguably, are almost that immediate. Once a narrative or character gains social currency, it is ready for instantiation by anyone willing (and able) to take it up. In the present day, similarly, it is not

uncommon for people to refer to movie narratives and characters in attempts to characterize their own or others' positions. Thus to see *Middlemarch* as anything less than an agent of the change it suggests needs be brought about, is to fail to see the real connection between positioning theory and the novel, between narratives in fiction and lived narratives. The only qualification is this: rather than increasing coherence of a "social faith," this multiplicity of positions will yield greater freedom, the kind sought by Eliot's Dorothea.

In closing, I would like to observe that *Middlemarch* and positioning theory seem to be a perfect fit, such that I find it a challenge to think of the novel without employing positioning theory in some way. It has become a protocol of reading so natural, it is difficult to untangle it from Eliot's text; each invokes the other. Robert Scholes, in *Protocols of Reading*, observes:

Reading has two faces, looks in two directions. One direction is back, toward the source and original context of the signs we are deciphering. The other direction is forward, based on the textual situation of the person doing the reading. (7)

Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that, in place of the Janus-metaphor, we might articulate the notion that reading is itself a positioned activity. That is, we position the text and ourselves recursively, such that every attempt to read a text involves a reading of our selves, our positions. I do not look forward and back, but rather from one of many positions, one which has been changed by the narrative and metaphors of positioning theory.

Notes

¹ The notion of scripts, attendant upon this metaphor, has served as a rather useful vehicle of inquiry and explanation in the social sciences; nevertheless, its limits are clear. While one may argue that many social engagements would seem to accord with a script, to accommodate the wide range of variation that can take place in the course of a script's execution, such scripts must sacrifice fidelity to reality in favour of explanatory structure.

Taken most grossly, this approach replicates the mistake of the behaviourists, neglecting to take account of internal shifts in attitude, perspective, and understanding that may not be manifested dialogically. This is, again, where positioning theory fleshes out the analysis of social exchange.

² While the fundamental “triad” of positioning theory appropriately emphasizes the role of speech acts and actions, as they constitute the means by which social positions are typically negotiated, positioning is by no means restricted to acts with a speech component; as was noted earlier, Dorothea’s re-positioning of herself, Casaubon, and Will in light of the codicil was not dependent upon a speech act, at least in the conventional sense.

³ That the term “role” is used here without comment is a testament to the difficulty of articulating a new idea without relying upon earlier constructions and to the tenacity of such a deeply ingrained concept as role.

⁴ Lydgate proves an interesting case in light of what may be described as a kind of positioning therapy. As F. M. Moghaddam observes:

Certain storylines and particular reflexive positions . . . may become more salient to a person than others. The respective narratives of the ‘former alcoholic,’ ‘orphan,’ ‘underdog,’ ‘struggling artist,’ or ‘future lawyer,’ and the accompanying range of positions these themes make available, may tempt the speaker into compelling narratives that fit so comfortably that they may even conceal possibilities of choice. In view of this, the goal of therapy might be better articulated as an effort to free clients from relatively ‘frozen’ narratives enabling them to construct new personal stories.

(78)

Perhaps Lydgate’s devotion to the rather romantic Galen-Vesalius narrative is unhealthy, in this sense, because rather than enabling him to take up or establish known positions within Middlemarch society, he takes comfort in an unknown and unrealistic position.

⁵ And it is fairly certain that Eliot knew her audience would have been much less familiar with the Galen-Vesalius narrative; whereas she can invoke the courtly love narrative by casual reference or allusion, Galen and Vesalius occupy a much more significant amount of expository text. Lydgate is at pains to explain his narrative to Rosamond and the reader at the same time.

⁶ To facilitate reading, all citations will provide both book and chapter information as well as pagination from the Knopf Everyman edition.

⁷ An instance of this arises in the exchange between Sir James Chettam and Mr. Brooke concerning the disposition of young Ladislaw (5.49, 512-515). Chettam desires for Brooke to send Ladislaw away, and attempts to position Brooke as responsible for and in agreement over the need for Ladislaw's departure. Though he is not wholly constrained in his argument, Chettam makes one statement "restraining his indignation within respectful forms" (512). Shortly thereafter, Chettam shifts the position of responsibility from Brooke to the more general "It's a pity this part of the country didn't do without him" (512). This is clearly a case in which "the moral order of speaking" limits positioning actions.

⁸ Although, as will be noted later, Eliot returns to this theme in the finale.

⁹ McGowan's use of "*his* experiences" is actually rather appropriate to the reality of Eliot's world, in which men clearly have a far larger share of available social positions.

¹⁰ Obviously, the description of these forces is not unlike Bakhtin's identification of centripetal and centrifugal forces within language itself; indeed, seeing as positioning theory is founded upon language as determinant of social reality, it only makes sense that the forces operating in language itself should be reflected in the construction of social reality.

¹¹ Fisher makes a similar observation at the scale of the novel as a whole:

Farebrother is revealed aspect by aspect, and along with interpretations from new points of view there is reinterpretation as time changes the meanings of events already complete. Every judgment is from a point of view and under the compulsion of action. No one in Middlemarch knows Farebrother; only the reader of the book, perhaps, has access to enough points of view to make a synthesis, but new events would make even that synthesis incomplete. (188)

Fisher is just a few words shy of making a statement in terms of positioning theory; his emphasis on the importance of points of view (positions) and the "compulsion of action" (the performative, action-based nature of positioning) renders his analysis quite complementary to the issues under discussion here. Indeed, his inclusion of the reader and extension of the limitations of understanding to the reader indicate how invested his analysis is in both the world of the novel and the world in which the novel exists.

¹² One would also do well to note the narrator's curious positioning of Will and Dorothea as Royalist and Queen near the novel's end, even though there is little implication that Will and Dorothea see themselves that way. Dorothea is described as receiving Will in a "queenly way," and immediately following, the narrator paints this

portrait: "He [Will] took her [Dorothea's] hand and raised it to his lips with something like a sob. But he stood with his hat and gloves in the other hand, and might have done for the portrait of a Royalist" (8.83, 858, 859). This latter narrative projection is clearly the narrator's own.

¹³ McGowan takes this relationship between representation and reality further, and suggests that

In a world of change, language should aim to mirror the process of change in its own processes; language must create novelties as the novelties of the world are created. In other words, the vision of reality found in *Middlemarch* calls for a metaphoric language that introduces new concepts and images into the social world in which language is used. (149)

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