Standing as an Independent: Freedom from or Freedom of Attachments in *Middlemarch*?

Sur le banc des indépendants : liberté(s) et attachement(s) dans Middlemarch

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“If I went into Parliament, as I have been asked to do, I should sit on the independent bench, as Wilberforce did, and work at philanthropy”, proclaims Mr Brooke at the beginning of Middlemarch (18),¹ the second of George Eliot’s novels to be set during the polarizing years leading up to the passing of the Great Reform Bill of 1832.² The aristocrat is at once roundly rebuked by his sharp-tongued neighbour Mrs Cadwallader, for whom independence is synonymous with “nonsense”, if not downright betrayal of the landed interests of their class: “people of standing should consume their independent nonsense at home, not hawk it about”, she tells him (50). “I accused him of meaning to stand for Middlemarch on the Liberal side, and he looked silly and never denied it—talked about the independent line, and the usual nonsense” (53). Thus is the concept of “independence” in Middlemarch posited only to be immediately debunked, its benevolent associations with philanthropy and Wilberforce³ undermined by a character whose social perspicacity makes up for what she lacks in moral authority.⁴

“Independence” takes on a variety of conflicting meanings and values in Middlemarch; informing the novel’s political, financial, intellectual, professional, moral, and affective arenas, it is a concept that, rather like the wavering and “pulpy” Mr Brooke (65), will “run into any mould, but [it] won’t keep shape” (65). After a rapid overview of a representative sample of the thirty-nine occurrences of the word “independent” or “independence” that are woven into the uneven web of Middlemarch, this essay will consider how Eliot, drawing on Spinoza’s Ethics, uses the semantics of independence to explore the emancipatory potential of attachments as a means of releasing oneself from the skein of solipsism.
While the “independent line” (50) clearly suits Mr Brooke’s flabby and noncommittal personality, it can be said of almost all the main characters that they are enticed by the lure of independence, drawn as they are to the possibility of remaining aloof from the moral and political fray. Yet sustaining such lofty detachment is found to be increasingly difficult, and they inevitably become tainted by the compromising attachments they have either forged for themselves or had forged for them by others. Tertius Lydgate’s decision to set up his medical practice in the provinces instead of the capital so as to guarantee his professional independence is a case in point: “he would keep away from the range of London intrigues, jealousies, and social truckling, and win celebrity, however slowly, as Jenner had done, by the independent value of his work” (136). Throughout the novel Lydgate reiterates his “unmixed resolutions of independence” (169), boasting “so many times […] both to himself and to others that he was truly independent of Bulstrode” (637), despite the financial hold the banker has over him as the founder and main investor in the New Infirmary where the young doctor is given free rein to conduct his medical experiments. It comes as no surprise then that Lydgate will be scathing about Will Ladislaw’s apparently selling out to Mr Brooke, on whose discredited electoral campaign “the future independent member” (468) has engaged Casaubon’s young cousin to work. Lydgate casts doubt on the purity of Will’s motives, accusing him of “crying up men who are part of the very disease that wants curing” (437), despite Will’s objections that “[m]y personal independence is as important to me as yours is to you” (438). As will be seen, the two men have entirely differing notions of independence.

So do Mr and Mrs Cadwallader: although the vicar’s wife belittles Mr Brooke’s independent stance, her husband, on the contrary, endorses the very same quality in the land manager Caleb Garth whom he praises precisely for being “an independent fellow: an original, simple-minded fellow” (358). Mr Cadwallader’s approval flags Mr Garth’s moral integrity and professional competence, but the word “independent” takes on a more venal shade of meaning on the lips of the blackmailer John Raffles, who rejects Bulstrode’s offer to settle him in some line of business and prefers instead to extort from him “an independence to fall back upon. That’s what I want […] I want an independence” (495). Raffles is referring to financial independence, something that the other characters in the novel either covet or repudiate: if the young Fred Vincy looks forward to the financial independence promised by the wealthy inheritance he hopes to come into on the demise of his uncle Featherstone, for Dorothea financial autonomy is something that weighs like a burden on her after Casaubon’s death.

This overview of the differently inflected forms of independence in the novel would not be complete without mentioning Mr Farebrother’s cryptic warning to Lydgate that he should “not be too sure of keeping [his] independence” (164). In so doing he adumbrates converse forms of, specifically familial, “dependence” in the novel that may be either hampering or sustaining. The vicar’s somewhat counter-intuitive advice, which Lydgate misconstrues, is that independence may be attained not by eschewing “family ties” as Lydgate imagines, but by embracing them:

“You mean of family ties?” said Lydgate, conceiving that these might press rather tightly on Mr Farebrother.
“Not altogether. Of course, they may make things more difficult. But a good wife—a
good unworldly woman—may really help a man, and keep him more independent.”

(164)

Mr Farebrother has in mind, of course, the sustaining mutual dependence of Mr and
Mrs Garth’s married life. Somewhat ironically, Lydgate does attempt to act on
Mr Farebrother’s advice by bringing forward the date of his marriage to Rosamond,
telling her: “we are looking forward to a better sort of happiness even than this, being
continually together, independent of others and ordering our lives as we will” (330). In
reality, it is because he finds the “gossip, protracted good cheer, whist-playing and
general futility” (328) of his visits to the Vincys to be a “wretched waste of the
evenings” (152). But then, as Rosamond’s name suggests, the “Rose of the world” is the
antithesis of Mr Farebrother’s celebrated “unworldly woman”, and so independence for
Lydgate will remain elusive: even at the very end he is still “urging powerfully on
[Rosamond] that they should […] do with as little money as possible so that they might
weather the bad time and keep themselves independent” (713).

Freedom and independence, independence as freedom? The influence of Spinoza on Eliot’s fiction

In our liberal-minded societies, a high critical premium is generally placed on
“independence”, which is seen as a commendable state of freedom from outside control
or coercion, a quality of mind thought to be indicative of sound critical judgment,
unconstrained by the thwarting opinions of others. It conjures up a sense of intellectual
integrity and even perhaps of exceptionality or uncommonality. In Middlemarch, the
general impression of Lydgate as “something rather more uncommon than any general
practitioner in Middlemarch” (133) is due in no small part to the “new and independent
procedure” (641) which he brings to the treatment of fever. Independence here denotes
an attitude of radical impartiality; it appears as a pledge of truthfulness and
trustworthiness in the service of progress and the advancement of humanity.

Yet alongside these associations with enlightened knowingness and freedom from bias
or influence, other more critically inflected associations are also at work in the novel:
these emphasize detachment, separation, aloofness, and superiority, perhaps even
transcendence with a hint of arrogance. This is manifested in Lydgate’s somewhat
hubristic belief that it will be possible for him to avoid “the small temptations and
sordid cares, which made the retarding friction of his course towards final
companionship with the immortals. Lydgate was not blind to the dangers of such
friction, but he had plenty of confidence in his resolution to avoid it” (137). Such bids
for unfettered independence mostly end in failure or ridicule in the novel: Lydgate
succumbs to the “hampering thread-like pressure of small social conditions” (169), and
Mr Brooke, the “future independent member, who was to fetter himself for this
occasion only” (468), ends up roundly heckled at the hustings in chapter 61, thereby
fulfilling Mrs Cadwallader’s prophecy that “You will make a Saturday pie of all parties’
opinions, and be pelted by everybody” (49).

Tugging on the thematic thread of “independence” unravels a host of metaphysical
questions about freedom, free will, and determinism, which Eliot derived in large part
from her early translation of Spinoza’s Ethics into English before she turned to writing
fiction, although in Middlemarch she is careful to translate these metaphysical concerns
into the more pragmatic and socially recognisable idiom of political, professional, and financial independence. The independence that Lydgate imagines as the ability to act while being free from the “friction” of extraneous attachments closely resembles the Cartesian notion of autonomous “free will”, “the ability to govern oneself uninfluenced by others and the wider social context” (Armstrong, 46). This is the belief (Descartes’ rival Spinoza would say the “illusion”) held (or laboured under) by those who, in Spinoza’s words, “seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs rather than follows, the order of Nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself” (ElIIPref, 68).

Eliot is very much a Spinozist on the issue of freedom, as philosopher and Eliot scholar Moira Gatens has demonstrated (see Gatens 2003). In Spinoza’s deterministic philosophy, free will is a fiction produced by the defective imagination—the imagination being the first and lowest form of knowledge in Spinoza’s epistemology (below reason and intuition), having only a partial grasp on reality and registering only the affects of the body without understanding their true causes. However, for Spinoza as for Eliot, “the rejection of free will does not entail the denial of freedom”, as Gatens writes in Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza (5-6):

> The distinct freedom, or power, of human beings lies in our capacity to form adequate ideas and enhance our understanding of nature. [...] Freedom, to put it differently, is not the capacity to will whatever I desire but rather the ability to understand the causes that determine all things, including my desires. (Gatens 2009, 6)

Freedom springs therefore not from an aloof detachment from the order of nature or natural laws but from the acknowledgement of whatever constrains and attaches one to the “medium” (the term Eliot uses to refer to the social world that is man’s “natural” environment). Or, as the philosopher Roger Scruton puts it, “the free man is conscious of the necessities that compel him” (Loc 566). This Spinozist conception of freedom comes closer to Mr Farebrother’s understanding that independence is not afforded by a repudiation of ties but by the recognition and cultivation of attachments which impel one’s actions, something Eliot’s characters are often depicted as being blind to.

The notion of “attachment” in the title of this essay is inspired by recent endeavours undertaken by scholars such as Rita Felski to develop, within the field of literary criticism, a post-critical “theory of attachment” as an alternative to the prevailing doxa of critical detachment in understanding texts and other cultural phenomena. Working in the wake of Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, Felski seeks to foreground the effects of attachment over detachment, observing that “attachment is an ontological fact, an inescapable condition of existence”, and hence freedom is a function not of how attached or how detached one is, but of the quality of one’s attachments: “emancipation does not mean ‘freed from bonds,’ but well-attached”, she writes, quoting Latour, before continuing: “Critical thought often dreams of a subject without ties, of breaking free of restraints to achieve emancipation. The choice, however, is not between attachment and detachment, between determination and freedom, but between good and poor attachments, those that help us and those that seek to do us harm” (Felski 2015a, 738-740).

In Middlemarch, the extent to which characters are well or poorly attached is the index of their moral or ethical worth, and is measured by how accurately they construe the relations that pertain between themselves and other people, things, and situations. On
the one hand, there are those who woefully misconstrue or deny those relations, who in Eliot’s words “reason with an imperfect vision of sequences” (331), spuriously rationalising their way towards an elusive “independence”, while undermining it in the process. On the other hand, there are those who, in actively seeking to forge vital and true albeit at times compromising connections, revel in the multifarious collisions of life, and embrace the more encumbered forms of freedom or independence advocated by Mr Farebrother.

“Reasoning with an imperfect vision of sequences” (331): the skein of solipsism

Right from the start, Eliot dispels any idea that “independence” may be synonymous with epistemological soundness, knowingness or “truth”. It is Mr Brooke who first posits a parallel between independence and truth: “Your sex are not thinkers, you know”, he says to Mrs Cadwallader “—varium et mutable semper—that kind of thing [...] You ladies are always against an independent attitude—a man’s caring for nothing but truth, and that sort of thing” (50). Mr Brooke’s reasoning is undermined not only by his quite uncalled-for invocation of sexual difference in framing his case, but also by the abundance of vacuous phatic expressions punctuating his discourse, such as “you know”, “and that sort of thing”, which ironically replicate the very whimsicality and lack of intellectual rigour that he is berating in the ladies. As well as being blind to the performative contradictions of his argument, Mr Brooke is also blind to his true reasons for standing as an independent in support of liberal policies. These have less to do with a deep-seated concern for the social conditions outside his “park palings” (727) than with how he himself will be affected by the “machine-breaking and rick-burning” (24) which he has extensively documented as a threat to the landed classes. He claims to share Will Ladislaw’s “enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation—a fine thing under guidance—under guidance, you know” (338), but this sits uneasily with his “stinginess” (358) and failure to make even the most basic improvements to his own tenants’ farms. His motivations seem more driven by self-interest and the hope that a few limited concessions on the extension of the suffrage will allow the landed classes to nip any further social unrest in the bud and save their skins. In this respect, Mr Brooke’s self-styled “independence” can be seen as an affable manifestation of Spinoza’s “egoistic consciousness that imagines itself as the free centre of action rather than recognizing itself as a somewhat insignificant ‘particle’ connected to all else through complex webs of interconnected causes and effects” (Gatens 2012, 80). As such, Mr Brooke resembles Spinoza’s example of “the infant who believes he freely wants the milk” (EIIIP2Schol, 73) while being utterly unaware of the causes of his hunger.

The self-blindness that Eliot dramatizes in comic mode in relation to Mr Brooke, she unfolds in tragic mode in relation to Lydgate. Lydgate’s failure to keep himself “independent” is due to a similar mis-identification of the true causes of his actions, and a selective recognition of what really attaches him to the “petty medium” (175) in which he is embedded. Indeed, Lydgate mistakes his personal preferences for binding obligations, while overlooking other relations, such as “anything connected with this chaplaincy”: “What he really cared for was a medium for his work, a vehicle for his ideas; and after all, was he not bound to prefer the object of getting a good hospital, where he could demonstrate the specific distinctions of fever and test therapeutic
results, before anything connected with this chaplaincy?” (168). The narratorial shift into free indirect speech gets us inside the confined thoroughfares of Lydgate’s solipsistic thought-patterns to expose how, in Spinozistic terms, Lydgate is burdened with “inadequate knowledge” insofar as he fails to perceive, or wilfully blinds himself to, the true causes of things, namely, the fact that the medium he values for his independent work exists not by virtue of what he “prefers”, but of his alliance with Bulstrode over the chaplaincy. This is another of the many troublesome specks of self that “blot out” the world (392) for so many in the novel: “Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self” (392), deplores the narrator.

For a “scientific man”, Lydgate is oddly given to such “reasoning with an imperfect vision of sequences” (331), as when he suggests to Mrs Vincy that if the expensive dinner-service he has just purchased is not to be broken, “[o]ne must hire servants who will not break things”, prompting the narrator to observe sardonically: “Certainly, this was reasoning with an imperfect vision of sequences. But at that period there was no sort of reasoning which was not more or less sanctioned by men of science” (331-332). On another occasion, he admires Rosamond’s statement that “[o]f course [Dorothea] is devoted to her husband” for its “notion of necessary sequence which the scientific man regarded as the prettiest possible for a woman” (275). Unquestioned prejudices and assumptions such as these make up Lydgate’s “spots of commonness” (140) that will culminate in the fatal adulteration of his “unmixed resolutions of independence”. It is of course ironical that the doctor should be unable to bring to bear on his personal life the powerfully independent imagination and understanding of proper relations and sequences that he purports to bring to his study of pathology, the kind that “reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy” (154). This enlightening imagination might have been nurtured by cultivating instead of eschewing his early attachment to literature, which he has since come to regard as “rather vulgar and vinous”, “cheap inventions” that have nothing to teach him about “the complexities of love and marriage, these being subjects on which he felt himself amply informed by literature, and that traditional wisdom which is handed down in the genial conversation of men” (154).

Lydgate is not alone in having an “imperfect vision of sequences” (331), though. Other characters similarly fail to perceive the “non-apparent but nevertheless real connections and actual relations in the world that escape casual observation” (Gatens 2012, 83). Bulstrode, for example, sees his past life as “broken into little sequences” (580), which prevents him from seeing the true connections that seal his iniquity as instead he implores his God to observe his separateness, to appreciate “‘how loose my soul sits from these things […]’ Bulstrode found himself carrying on two distinct lives; his religious activity could not be incompatible with his business as soon as he had argued himself into not feeling it incompatible” (579). As for Rosamond, her confused idea that Will’s arrival in Middlemarch will somehow lead inevitably to her and Lydgate’s going to London is nurtured by her glib confounding of cause and effect: “she felt assured that the coming would be a potent cause of the going, without at all seeing how. This way of establishing sequences is too common to be fairly regarded as a peculiar folly in Rosamond” (724-725).
Such misreading of sequences and relations is responsible for the characters’ “total missing of each other’s mental track” (550) in the novel. What ensues is a sense of blockage and unyieldingness in the social fabric that is conveyed in the well-known image of the web—not the nurturing, organic web of connection and community as so often evinced about Eliot’s fiction, but rather the tightly-bound, hampering, constricting skein of solipsism. This striking image is found in relation to Bulstrode, for whom “the years had been perpetually spinning themselves into intricate thickness, like masses of spider-web, padding the moral sensibility” (579) but also as a metaphor for Rosamond’s “cleverness”, which Lydgate discovers to be a stifling, impervious, prophylactic thing: “he was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was—what was the shape into which it had run as into a close network aloof and independent” (550). Ironically the independence so coveted by Lydgate is here surrendered to his wife.

Clashings and collisions: in praise of impure mixtures

In contrast to Lydgate’s and Bulstrode’s efforts to find independence and freedom by repudiating “ties”, ignoring “friction”, and parsing the world into its professional and private spheres, other characters, such as Will Ladislaw, actively seek out connections, acknowledge claims, however burdensome, welcome collisions, and embrace the more encumbered form of independence adumbrated by Mr Farebrother. Will is, we are told, one of those “characters which are continually creating collisions and nodes for themselves in dramas which nobody is prepared to act with them. Their susceptibilities will clash against objects that remain innocently quiet” (180). This index of Will’s impulsive Shelleyan nature also makes him well suited to a world animated by atomistic forces and bodies in motion in which no one, especially two people in love, can “escape from ‘the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on’” (275). This quotation that Eliot borrows from the Roman poet Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura underscores the materialist ethos of her imaginary, as well as evoking Spinoza’s “geometric” account of human actions and appetites in the Ethics, in which he declares his intention to “consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies” (EIIIPref, 69).

In such a world of affecting and affected bodies, Will’s energy, or colliding and clashing, does not, in the words of Spinoza, “disturb” the order of Nature, but “follows” it insofar as he accommodates the friction and abrasiveness that Lydgate and Bulstrode would fain stand aloof from. “[M]ade of very impressible stuff” (363), Will has a great capacity for being affected, and the adheresiveness of “a creature who entered into every one’s feelings and could take the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance” (467). He delights in the sticky tug and pull of process, whether of politics or painting, without fearing for his independence. About art he says, “I suppose if I could pick my enjoyment to pieces, I should find it made up of many different threads. There is something in daubing a little one’s self, and having an idea of the process” (193). These very material images of strings and threads, daubing and process, express Will’s comfortable embeddedness in his environment, whose multiple threads he delights in exploring and weaving together without fear of ever becoming entangled in an inextricable skein.
Lydgate, by contrast, in a set of related images, resists the strings that come attached to his dealings with the world, complaining that “it’s uncommonly difficult to make the right thing work: there are so many strings pulling at once” (465). He is incapable of making the connections between his own “strand of experience” (552) regarding money and debt and the experience of others, which would enable him to understand and free himself from his financial predicament. Such blindness, or resistance, to the strings that bind is a weakness common to many, as the narrator observes: “has it not by this time ceased to be remarkable—is it not rather what we expect in men, that they should have numerous strands of experience lying side by side and never compare them with each other?” (552). Unlike Will, whose modus operandi is to precipitate “collisions and nodes” which will disclose the true nature of relations, the novel’s two scholarly characters, Lydgate and Casaubon, mistakenly pursue understanding through the opposite processes of separation or partition that divide the world into discrete taxonomical categories, whether social, sexual, or intellectual: hence, Casaubon’s research is conducted thanks to the segregating aid of “pigeon-holes, partly” (18), as he remarks to Mr Brooke, who observes, in one of his rare flashes of insight, that “pigeon-holes will not do [...] everything gets mixed in pigeon-holes. I never know when a paper is in A or Z” (18).

This, of course, is only a problem if “getting mixed” is deemed to be an impediment to epistemological soundness. Cross-fertilisation, whether it be the mixing of ideas or of genetic matter, is indeed actively resisted by the landed classes of Middlemarch. From the horror inspired by the “frog-faced” (308) Joshua Rigg to suspicion of Will Ladislaw’s “dangerously mixed blood and general laxity” (435), miscegenation—the “wrong” kind of attachments, whether they are inter-species, inter-class, or inter-racial—is a spectre that hovers over the novel’s inheritance plots, so that even the affable Mr Brooke contemplates cutting off the entail of his estate when he learns of Dorothea’s intention to marry Will, as a “precaution against any mixture of low blood in the heir of the Brookes” (783). As for Will, he refuses the tidy compartmentalisations and divides of the scientists and scholars, lending himself instead to an ethos of connection not separation, of cross-referencing not “pigeon-holing”, of attachment not detachment, of compromise not intransigency, of mixture not purity, of experiential immersion not aloofness. His wisdom is the “wisdom of balancing claims” which openly acknowledges the mixed motives an individual may have for action and is sceptical of the need for, or even existence of, the uncontaminated motive, or as he puts it, “immaculate men to work with” (438), as he retorts to Lydgate: “I am not begging the question we are upon—whether we are to try for nothing till we find immaculate men to work with. Should you go on that plan? If there were one man who would carry you a medical reform and another who would oppose it, should you inquire who had the better motives or even the better brains?” (438).

Given Will’s readiness to compromise and to recognise the unfeasibility of modes of knowing and acting based on purification, it is fitting that his blood should be “a frightful mixture [...] The Casaubon cuttle-fish fluid to begin with, and then a rebellious Polish fiddler or dancing-master, was it?” (768-769), sniffs Mrs Cadwallader. He has a “queer genealogy” of “cursed alien blood, Jew, Corsican or Gypsy” (676), although, as Will reflects, those Middlemarchers “who sneered at his Polish blood [...] were themselves of a breed very much in need of crossing” (567). In fact, being “rather miscellaneous and bric-à-brac” (410) attunes Will to the “miscellaneousness of Rome
[...] and save[s him] from seeing the world’s ages as a set of box-like partitions without vital connexion” (198). Although his instinct is to reject the familial connection to Bulstrode as an “inherited blot” (587) when it is revealed to him, he nevertheless faces up to it squarely: “Mr Bulstrode raised [his eyes] with an examining glance that Will met fully. Bulstrode shrank— [...] He was totally unprepared to have his advances met in this way” (585). Thus it is that Will’s impressibility, or in Spinozistic terms his “capacity for being affected”, enhances rather than diminishes his power of acting, and attests to his true freedom and independence.9

Will may instinctively reject, but he does not deny, the “claim” that Bulstrode rather confusingly insists the son of Sarah Dunkirk (Will) both has and does not have on him: “So far as human laws go, you have no claim on me whatsoever” (584), he says, while also asserting “you have a claim on me [...] not a legal claim, but one which my conscience recognizes” (584). The “claim” is a form of attachment that runs like a thread throughout Middlemarch and indeed all of Eliot’s work: Dorothea imagines her husband has a legitimate claim on her time in helping him bring to fruition his Key to all Mythologies, a claim that is activated by what Mr Casaubon rightly detects as his wife’s “tendency to immoderate attachment which she inwardly reproaches me for not responding to” (395). She is also intensely aware of Will’s “prior claim” (349) to her husband’s wealth, which she strives unsuccessfully to impress on her husband. Like attachments, the claims of others are, to reprise Felski, “ontological facts, inescapable conditions of existence”, for Dorothea and for Eliot. What matters is the quality of the claim or attachment, which will determine the nature of the independence it can deliver. For there is no denying that some claims and attachments can be toxic and designed to prevent independence and independent thinking in others, in no way leading to the paradoxical encumbered emancipation adduced by Mr Farebrother. Hence, the writing of legal documents—the codicil that Casaubon attaches to his will to prevent Dorothea from marrying Ladislaw, or the demand Featherstone makes of Fred to provide him with written proof from Bulstrode that he has not been raising money on his expectations of inheritance—is a socially sanctioned means to curtail the independence of others by applying pressure to the attachments that prevail between them. Casaubon’s codicil intends to curb the reasoning process whereby Dorothea has “wrought herself into some independent clearness as to the historical, political reasons why eldest sons had superior rights, and why land should be entailed” (349), as well as to punish Will’s free-spirit: “Casaubon didn’t like the independent position Ladislaw had taken up” (455). Similarly, it is because Mr Featherstone “secretly dislik[es] the possibility that Fred would show himself at all independent” (103) that he blackmails him with gifts of money and the request for a letter from Bulstrode. Yet those who seek to thwart the independence of others do not succeed any more than those who endeavour to secure their own independence through aloof detachment.

What is more, independence is far from being a virtue in and of itself. Financial independence, whether coveted (by Fred) or unsolicited (by Dorothea) threatens the sentimental or moral lives of the characters: Dorothea’s financial independence is worthless to her if it keeps her from Will, while Fred’s prospect of financial independence from Featherstone is precisely what will prevent him from attaining the kind of virtuous independence, which Mary calls “manly independence”, that is rated highly in the novel: “I will never engage myself to one who has no manly independence and who goes on loitering his time away on the chance that others will provide for him”, she declares to Caleb (242). “Manly independence” (or we could say virtuous
independence, from the common Latin root vir, man) is how Eliot expresses narratively the non-moralistic ethical consciousness she found in Spinoza’s philosophy. This posits the “good” in terms of the increased power (or freedom to act) that ensues when bodies enter into harmonious relations, compositions, or attachments with other bodies with which they agree. Gilles Deleuze glosses Spinoza’s ethology as follows: “That individual will be called good (or free, or rational, or strong) who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby increase his power” (Deleuze 22-23).10 Where Deleuze’s talk is of freedom, encounters and relations, Eliot’s language of independence, ties, and claims is proper to her realist fictional idiom. But her exploration of “that mysterious mixture”, Man, and how it “behaves under the varying experiments of Time” (3), is predicated on the same premise that Deleuze infers from his reading of Spinoza, which is that “you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination” (Deleuze 125). Eliot’s novel takes the same ethological approach, by observing the affects her characters are capable or incapable of “in given encounters, arrangements, or combinations”, and the nature of the attachments they forge, which determine whether their striving for independence will flourish or founder.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


1. All quotations are taken from the Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel (2019). Except where indicated, all emphases are mine.
2. The first novel in which Eliot thematized the Great Reform Bill was *Felix Holt the Radical* (1866).
3. William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the leader of the campaign for the abolition of slavery.
4. That Mrs Cadwallader considers Brooke’s bid for independence to be nothing short of diabolical is clear when she greets him with the words: “But talk of an independent politician and he will appear!” (359) in a distortion of the popular phrase “Talk of the devil and he will appear”.
5. Spinoza writes: “men are deceived in that they think themselves free [N.S. i.e., they think that, of their own free will, they can either do a thing or forbear doing it], an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom—that they do not know any cause of their actions” (EIIP35Schol, 53).
6. This is part of Felski’s ongoing research into the “limits of critique” (Felski 2015b) culminating in her latest work *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020.
7. The language of physics, of bodies, atoms, and molecules, can be found throughout the novel, as in Dr Minchin’s fawning acquiescence with Mr Bulstrode that “a man was not a mere machine or a fortuitous conjunction of atoms” (170), or the effect Dorothea has on Will like “an electric shock” as though “every molecule in his body had passed the message of a magic touch” (363).
8. Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) sees the erection of such artificially constructed barriers and partitions as symptomatic of the modern constitution which divorces the different epistemic spheres of science and facts from politics, the humanities, and the social.
9. Gilles Deleuze glosses Spinoza’s thinking in *Spinoza. Practical Philosophy*, thus: “the capacity for being affected is manifested as a power of acting insofar as it is assumed to be filled by active affections, but as a power of being acted upon insofar as it is filled by passions” (27; original emphasis).
10. See Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*: “It is impossible for man not to be a part of Nature and not to follow the common order of Nature. But if he lives among such individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged. On the other hand, if he is among men who do not agree at all with his nature, he will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without greatly changing himself” (EIVAppenVII, 156). Also: “It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships” (EIVAppenXII, 156).

ABSTRACTS

‘Independence’ takes on a variety of conflicting meanings and values in *Middlemarch*; informing the novel’s political, financial, intellectual, professional, moral, and affective arenas, it is a...
concept that, rather like the wavering and “pulpy” Mr Brooke (65), will “run into any mould, but [it] won’t keep shape” (65). After a rapid overview of a representative sample of the thirty-nine occurrences of the word “independent” or “independence” that are woven into the uneven web of Middlemarch, this essay will consider how Eliot, drawing on Spinoza’s Ethics, uses the semantics of independence to explore the emancipatory potential of attachments as a means of releasing oneself from the skein of solipsism.

La notion d’indépendance informe les dimensions politique, économique, intellectuelle, professionnelle, morale, et affective du roman Middlemarch. Mais tout comme Mr. Brooke, l’aristocrate évasif et « flasque » dont il est dit qu’« on peut le couler dans n’importe quel moule, mais il ne garde pas la forme », elle revêt une pluralité de sens et de valeurs parfois contradictoires. Cet essai étudiera un échantillon représentatif des quelques trente-neuf mentions du terme « indépendant » ou « indépendance » qui émaillent le roman afin d’examiner la manière dont George Eliot, à l’aide de l’Éthique de Spinoza, affirme la puissance émancipatrice des attachements qui permettent à l’individu de se libérer de l’écheveau du solipsisme.

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Mots-clés: indépendance, liberté, post-critique, théorie de l’attachement, hommage
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