Eliot’s *Mitwelt*: Productive Environments in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*

Eliot *et le Mitwelt*: environnement et productivité dans *The Mill on the Floss* et *Middlemarch*

Sara Thornton

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/9714
ISSN: 2496-4212

Publisher
SAIT

Electronic reference
Sara Thornton, "Eliot’s *Mitwelt*: Productive Environments in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*", *Polysèmes [Online]*, 26 | 2021, Online since 30 December 2021, connection on 22 April 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/9714

This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2022.

*Polysèmes*
Alwin Fill, a linguist working at the interface between linguistics and ecology, traces the use of the German word Umwelt or “environment” to the word Aussenwelt or “outside world”, used in the nineteenth century by Ernst Haeckel, “the German Darwin”, who coined the word “ecology” (ökologie in German, from the Greek oikos). Fill questions the image of a surrounding outside suggested by the word Umwelt (or around world, that which is outside and around us) because man stands, according to this word, in the midpoint of his or her environs, suggesting a relationship of dominant centrality instead of communal living, linked to the word oikos. Fill shows how the word Mitwelt (“with-world”), an antonym to Umwelt, was used in the field of ecolinguistics from the late twentieth century by Michael Haliday, who considers that language based on binaries and value judgement drove a shaft between man and other living creatures, and that language was key in changing that relationship. To displace man/woman from the centre of the living and non-living world was to make them just another element in the natural world and put them on an equal footing with all organic and inorganic components. Fill also draws on the work of Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich in Aufstand für die Natur. Von dem Umwelt zur Mitwelt: “The crucial idea with which change begins is that the other living creatures are not only around us but with us in the world” (Meyer-Abich 1990, 11, qtd in Fill, 309. My translation).

Fill also refers to Montaigne’s Essays written between 1572 and 1592 (read by George Eliot), particularly Apologie de Raymond Sebond which decries “the presumption of the human being, who thinks of himself as being chosen and set apart from the animals” (Fill 310). He says that Montaigne shows us a “with-world-thinking” or Mitweltdenken that is in contrast to the “surround thinking” or Umweltdenken of most people, both in
Montaigne’s time and in ours (Fill 310). What Fill sees as Montaigne’s Mitweltdenken is clearly present in the fictional universe created by Eliot and is part of a practice of sympathy and empathy noticed by many critics (see Ermath). Her diverse readings and translations included Strauss, Feuerbach and Spinoza whose Ethics helped anchor her work in the idea that being means being linked to other beings. Juliette Atkinson has shown that: “Empathy lies at the heart of Scenes from Clerical Life, which builds on Feuerbach’s statement that […] ‘Sympathy presupposes a like Nature’” (Atkinson xvii).

Eliot’s novels advocate sympathy as a basic component of successful human relationships and critics increasingly link this thinking to an ecological drive. Maria Tang, in particular, shows how twentieth-century re-interpretations of Spinoza’s Ethics form an ecosophy put forward by European philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Corine Pelluchon, and which is profoundly relevant to Eliot: “The focus is thus shifted away from the moral framework of ‘sympathy’ in which Eliot’s work is often cast, and onto an ethology of bodies that combine to form more or less harmonious communities or sociabilities” (Tang 20). Tang’s contention is that in Middlemarch characters’ attitudes towards the environment engage either sustainable or disastrous relations to what Guattari calls the “three ecologies” of nature, socius, and psyche (Tang 7). She shows that Eliot moves towards a decentering of the Anthropos which is deemed vital by present-day environmental philosophers for an “ecologically responsible and flourishing life” (Pelluchon 2018, 87, qtd in Tang 20; see also Menely and Taylor).

What I wish to show is how The Mill of the Floss (1860) and Middlemarch (1871), both set in the late 1820s and early 1830s, bring work and wider activities of production together with an ecological or “with-world thinking”. In doing this, they imagine how industry (making/producing things) might function if based on sympathy and being with the world rather than surrounded by it and dominating it. Eliot’s vision of production and working with others involves environments which, as well as natural, social or psychic, are also environments of production in which productivity is either sustainable for all humans, creatures and the organic and inorganic physical world, or not. The notion of Mitweltdenken, with its roots in Montaigne and early theories of ecology, will allow us to explore some of Eliot’s experiments with modes of working cooperation in her fictional world.

Some dream visions: Eliot’s oikos

The ancient Greek word oikos refers to the family, the family’s property and the house. Alwin Fill says that the coining of the word ökologie used oikos in its first sense of Wohngemeinschaft (home and society, a communal living). Eliot’s oikoi indeed involve a sense of home and of cooperative activity: work and production are shown to be a family affair, even on a large scale, and should refuse the domination of labouring bodies by the owners of the means of production. Eliot researched the world around her and the history of which she was a part and was able to critique her own times with tools gained from an array of disciplines, including political economy. Her thought was not utopian but contained a cautious optimism; she was able to put before her readers some best-case scenarios as well as worst case ones. I would like firstly to focus on two scenes which constitute what Walter Benjaman called wish-symbols, wish-images or Wünschbilder: an object or creation which translates a leap of faith or a dream of an
ideal future. Benjamin used the term in connection with the nineteenth-century
passages or arcades of Paris with their glass roofs, seeing them as the embodiment of a
desire for the future century’s architecture and modes of living (Benjamin). The
following descriptions are textual versions of these leaps of faith towards efficient and
cooperative systems of production.

6 The Mill on the Floss opens with a narrator, who is not part of the plot, describing the
fruits of the industries of wood, mining and agriculture through a nature morte or still
life of goods on the river. Chapter 1 of Book I, “Outside Dorlcote Mill”, offers a sense of
smooth productivity:

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the
sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous
embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships—laden with the fresh-scented fir-
planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal—are
borne along to the town of St Ogg’s, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the
broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river-brink,
tingeing the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this
February sun. Far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures, and the patches of
dark earth made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already
with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn. There is a remnant still of
last year’s golden clusters of beehive-ricks rising at intervals beyond the
hedgerows; and everywhere the hedgerows are studded with trees; the distant ships
seem to be lifting their masts and stretching their red-brown sails close among the
branches of the spreading ash. Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple
flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is, with its dark
changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the
bank, and listen to its low, placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and
loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge. (MF7)

7 The first thing we might notice is the soft tenderness of the language used to describe
the winter landscape’s richness, with some fields poised before being sown with seed
while others are already showing signs of growth. There is a sense of generous forms,
roundedness, child-like impetuosity and loving arms to enfold. This is followed by
what could be a fairly prosaic collection of sacks of seed, ships stacked with wood or
filled with coal but which becomes rich and magical under the author’s pen: the coal
glitters and the land and goods are given living qualities, cradled by the surrounding
pastures. We read the signs of the bounteous results of a functioning system which is
age-old like the “fluted red roofs”, a well-ordered fecundity which is linked with the
efficient and protective flow of the river which has become an older relative, wise, low-
voiced, presiding over the transport of the fruits of labour.

8 One might object that the work of miners hacking coal from the coalface, the sweat of
agricultural workers harvesting the grain and the toil in the sawmills with their noise
and danger has been erased from these commodities which have taken on the magical
gleam that Marx recognised as the fetishism of commodities (Marx 1976, 163-164). Yet
if goods without pain seem to haunt this description, it also harbours a sense of what a
Mitwelt or efficient oikos might do for men and women, flora and fauna. Rather than a
picturesque vision that both Maggie and Dorothea might have despised, this might be a
hymn to the possibility of potential peaceful cooperative labour. This vision is not part
of the plot but is a detached and wistful start to the strife and struggle of working lives
around the Mill that the novel proceeds to depict. It serves as a gleaming possibility, a
dreamt scape that has within it an ideal of productivity—in some ways the working
model of a *Mitwelt*. It is an incipit that the plot itself will then partly sweep away, dismantle and challenge.

9 It is interestingly mirrored or has its prequel in *Middlemarch* when Eliot in Book III, chapter 24, allows Caleb Garth to recount, through the narrator, a dream of productivity that could well describe the cooperative labour behind the goods stacked and waiting at St. Ogg’s:

Caleb Garth often shook his head in meditation on the value, the indispensable might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labour by which the social body is fed, clothed, and housed. It had laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shouts of the workmen, the roar of the furnace, the thunder and splash of the engine, were a sublime music to him; the felling and lading of timber, and the huge trunk vibrating star-like in the distance along the highway, the crane at work on the wharf, the piled-up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact work had to be turned out,—all these sights of his youth had acted on him as poetry without the aid of the poets, had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. His early ambition had been to have as effective a share as possible in this sublime labour, which was peculiarly dignified by him with the name of “business;” and though he had only been a short time under a surveyor, and had been chiefly his own teacher, he knew more of land, building, and mining than most of the special men in the county. (MM 235-236)

10 The wood, coal and grain described at St. Ogg’s are here reimprinted with the hand of the labouring body, echoing the image of the bakers handprint on the loaf whose absence Marx remarks upon in *Capital* as the sign of the erasure of human labour from the commodity. The language of political economy opens the scene with reference to the “social body” and then the various activities of smelting, smithing, the preparation of timber, the work of “land, building and mining” which Garth masters. There is a strong affect and a form of idealism signalled by the words “sublime music” and “sublime labour”, the varying facets of which are shown to be interlinked and part of an orchestrated whole. Garth sees the way these activities are co-dependent and happening simultaneously throughout the “county”. From this world of work, done in unison with the workers sending “signal shouts” to each other, Garth creates a doctrine that is also poetry, philosophy and even a religion. Later in the chapter he speaks of being “honourably decorated with marks of dust and mortar, the damp of the engine, or the sweet soil of the woods and fields” bringing together building, industry and farming. The same blending of different forms of work that is “myriad-handed” is repeated in later lines in which “land-drainage, solid building, correct measuring, and judicious boring (for coal)” (MM 236) are woven together in the sentence as if naturally co-existing.

11 This bird’s eye panorama of the production of goods based on use-value (goods made for immediate use by the maker and not as a commodity for sale) is offset against the more complex world of finance: “he knew values well but had had no keenness of imagination for monetary results in the shape of profit or loss [...] He gave himself up entirely to the many kinds of work which he could do without handling capital” (236). Such a lack of interest in exchange value and the vagaries of surplus value (Marx 1976, 130 and 138) means Garth charges little and sometimes nothing for his labour, thus, we might say, undoing the primary impetus of capitalism and primitive accumulation (Marx 1976, 873) which involves despoiling others of goods or labour. Garth only seeks
the honourable decorations of work with others. This is an ideal vision of industry and the beauty of work and the dignity of labour and production.

Both excerpts could serve as illustrations of political economy like those of Harriet Martineau who created stories and illustrated scenes as examples to help women and the working classes better grasp the economics that ruled their lives. Eliot’s two scenes in some ways reflect the way in which Marx and Engels readily admitted to the grandeur of the results of labour, the beauty and utility of commodities, but wished to empower those who toiled to create them, placing the means of production in their hands. The panorama of St. Ogg’s and Caleb Garth’s soaring vision of work are echoed by other smaller moments in the plot of *Middlemarch*. In Book II, chapter 22, the vision of world history—a Hegelian rise and fall of civilisations described by Ladislaw as the basis for a painting, is seen by Dorothea as “very grand, if it conveys so much”, and she asks if Tamburlaine is to “represent earthquakes and volcanoes?” Will answers that it will do this and also represent “migrations of races and clearings of forests—and America and the steam-engine. Everything you can imagine!” (*MM* 200). Ladislaw’s grand vista of the “tremendous course of the world’s physical history” (*MM* 200) is part of his ability to see and imagine bigger pictures, larger systems of work and cooperation, all of which lead him to his final career in politics. In Book VI, chapter 22, Dorothea’s own ideal of a world of cooperation is one in which she hopes to create a community in Yorkshire, which she explains with a vocabulary not unlike Garth’s: she wishes “to take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make it a little colony, where everybody should work, and all the work should be done well. I should know every one of the people and be their friend. I am going to have great consultations with Mr. Garth” (*MM* 517).

I will now consider the different ways in which work and production is shown to be defective and disappointing and in need of correction in the two novels.

### From water to coal, natural history to fast production

The scenes we have so far considered offer a sense of making something together and advancing with others. Eliot suggests to us that an environment is not a theatre set—pretty or picturesque like the pictures Dorothea despises in her uncle’s home—but should be both productive and sustainable and not destructive of flora, fauna or human bodies and minds.

Kathryn Hughes points out, concerning *The Mill on the Floss*, that the narrator’s opening description of the landscape “goes beyond simple scene-setting”: Hughes sees a “Riehl-like understanding of the relationship between the natural world and the men and women who inhabit it” (317). Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl’s ideas concerning the harmonious life and working practices of the German peasantry appear in Eliot’s essay *The Natural History of German Life* where she explicates *Die Bürgerliche Gesellshaft* (1855) and *Land und Leute* (1856). Eliot complains of the unrealistic and idealized depictions in art of the English peasantry and turns for a more culturally aware representation to Riehl, neither a “doctrinaire” nor a “dreamer” (Eliot 1856, 68) but one who lived with and studied different agrarian communities and the customs which underpinned the running of their homes and villages. The importance of local dialects, music and traditions are seen as being key to understanding these societies. Eliot paraphrases Riehl’s call for “the special study of the people as they are” and a “natural history of
the social ranks” (Eliot 1856, 70) rather than imposed doctrines based on studies of “factory operatives” (70) in urban France or Britain. Eliot describes Riehl’s work as “ethnographical” (75), studying the effects of physical geography and history on social relations rather than following revolutionary ideologies.

The opening pages of The Mill on the Floss indeed reflect this sense of a historical, land-based cooperation set within a pre-capitalist mode of production, part of what can be seen as Eliot’s conservatism and desire for gradual change rather than revolution. The threat to this particular oikos is what Andreas Malm has called the rise of “fossil capital” and its push for endless growth. The narrator remarks upon the activity of the mill wheel, “the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water” (MF 8), linking the power of the water to the “dark glitter of coal” and so underlining waterpower’s potential to drive an economy, however local, and to make value. However, as the narrative unfolds it is clear that water-driven machinery is no match for the faster spin of steam-driven capital. Many of the characters register a shift in their lives and offer insights into the experience of change as England moves further into the industrial revolution, and towards the obsolescence of many forms of agrarian organisation and production, as well as towards the 1832 Reform Bill which would give more power to the mercantile bourgeoisie. Book I, chapter 12 shows “Mr and Mrs. Glegg at home”:

Everywhere the brick houses have a mellow look, and in Mrs Glegg’s day there was no incongruous new-fashioned smartness, no plate-glass in shop-windows, no fresh stucco-facing or other fallacious attempt to make fine old red St. Ogg’s wear the air of a town that sprang up yesterday. The shop-windows were small and unpretending; for the farmers’ wives and daughters who came to do their shopping on market-days were not to be withdrawn from their regular well-known shops; and the tradesmen had no wares intended for customers who would go on their way and be seen no more. (MF 111)

St. Ogg’s is described here as having been protected from the full force of the commodity market so far, having no plate-glass windows to display new goods to tempt customers into buying them. The modern idea of the customer is replaced by the farmers’ wives and daughters who do not browse or “shop” but come to town to simply replace essential goods. Here Marx’s “use value” is in operation: the ephemeral and volatile customer tempted by the magical commodity, part of a process dictated by exchange value (Marx 138), is not yet part of the town. The danger to this slower rural community is shown to be imminent: Eliot emphasizes that all of this quietude and unchangingness is part of “Mrs. Glegg’s day”, which suggests that the facings, plate-glass and unpredictable customers are a present everyday reality at the time of writing.

The threat to the Mill itself is even more resounding and is recounted in a conversation between Tom and his uncle, Mr. Deane, in Book VI, chapter 5, “Showing That Tom Had Opened the Oyster”. Mr. Deane is talking about Tom’s trip to “smoky, unpleasant” Newcastle, to do business. As in Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South (1854), we are shown the split between the producing North and consuming South, since St. Ogg is where the “black ships”, seen in the opening passage, “unlade themselves of their burthens from the far North” (MF 109). Deane tells Tom that he wishes him to embrace the same business as himself:

“You see, Tom,” said Mr Deane at last, throwing himself backward, “the world goes on at a smarter pace now than it did when I was a young fellow. Why, sir, forty years ago, when I was much such a strapping youngster as you, a man expected to pull between the shafts the best part of his life, before he got the whip in his hand. The looms went slowish, and fashions didn’t alter quite so fast; I’d a best suit that
lasted me six years. Everything was on a lower scale, sir,—in point of expenditure, I mean. It's this steam, you see, that has made the difference; it drives on every wheel double pace, and the wheel of fortune along with 'em, as our Mr Stephen Guest said at the anniversary dinner (he hits these things off wonderfully, considering he's seen nothing of business). I don't find fault with the change, as some people do. Trade, sir, opens a man's eyes; and if the population is to get thicker upon the ground, as it's doing, the world must use its wits at inventions of one sort or other. I know I've done my share as an ordinary man of business. Somebody has said it's a fine thing to make two ears of corn grow where only one grew before; but, sir, it's a fine thing, too, to further the exchange of commodities, and bring the grains of corn to the mouths that are hungry. And that's our line of business; and I consider it as honourable a position as a man can hold, to be connected with it. (Mt 365)

19 As Deane sees it, commodities (here, clothes and corn) must be circulated faster to keep up with a demand based on a faster supply chain stimulated by faster production: the slow looms once made slow clothes that lasted longer (a concept which is again familiar to us today in discourses on deceleration and sustainable manufacture). What Deane is describing to Tom is the acceleration caused by steam, which drives the wheel of production “double-pace”, as well as that of fortune (the vagaries of chance now linked to those of productivity and the speedy gain and loss of capital). Deane’s vision of the need to invent new methods to provide food for the increasing population and to “further the exchange of commodities” is part of the exponential growth of capitalism described by Marx: “trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never known before” (Marx 1848).

20 Pushing his advantage, Tom asks if Deane’s firm would consider buying the Mill now lost to his family and owned by Wakem. Deane had once before tried to buy it, thinking it would be a good investment “especially if steam were applied” (367) and Tom says he could manage it: “I mean having it in my own hands and gradually working off the price” (368). Tom is represented here as trying to do two contradictory things: to wrest back the slower time of before, of ownership of the Mill and quiet personal running of it, as his father had done before him (following Riehl’s vision of inherited country culture and custom), and at the same time to accelerate the turn of the wheel with steam and push it into the speeded up present and future of the fossil economy. The glittering coal which drives the steam might then become real diamonds—wealth generated by growth. Tom also wishes to rectify his father’s bad luck and the present bad running of the Mill by Jetsome who was placed in charge: Tom describes him as “letting the business go down” (368). The name of Jetsome points to “flotsam and jetsam” which are nautical terms describing the aftermath of shipwreck. Jetsam is linked to jettison: to intentionally throw overboard or discard to lighten a load. It brings to light the way in which the Mill is in some way in the process of being jettisoned, along with its workers, so that the mighty ship of the economy can rush onwards. Jetsome seems to be drinking out of a sense of hopelessness as a “loose fish” ready to leave the sinking ship and swim to more productive seas. If water-power is seen as losing out to coal-fired steam then, as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has said, it was because steam engines “offered a release from the temporal oscillations of water which varied with the seasons and the weather” (89).

21 Both Deane and Tom dream, Caleb Garth-like, of a world in which mills are well run, steam engines well cared-for and goods well distributed by ships on the river and two ears of corn grow where once one did. This vision is interestingly split for both between
the-soon-to-be present of the 1860s when Eliot is writing and a past of “natural history” in which slower time and more fixed relations both in work and in family seemed to prevail and with which they both have affective ties. A similar split is apparent between the hoarding of stocks of linen and lace despite them going out of fashion and new forms of obsolescence and regular purchase of new goods to flout older forms of preservation. Yet the slower gentler time is not as gentle as it seems, for when Maggie attempts to spend the night in St. Ogg’s with a man to whom she is not married she is violently shunned. Suddenly the old St. Ogg’s looks less wholesome as an environment and less efficient in terms of the well-being of the members of the community. As Kathryn Hughes has said: “In the slow evolutionary crawl there is no place in St. Ogg’s for the female who refuses to be reconciled to her place in nature”. For Hughes, the evolutionary plot functions alongside Greek tragedy and the end of the novel sees a freak flood in which “huge fragments of industrial flotsam overwhelm them” (Hughes 319) and they drown together in an embrace. Juliette Atkinson points out that the environment in which Maggie develops is written with the language of “evolutionary thinking”: “The modern trade world of St. Ogg’s is pushing traditional mills such as Tullivers towards extinction” (Atkinson xxiii). Eliot’s novel reveals “a troubled sense that natural selection enables the survival of the fittest but not necessarily the noblest” (Atkinson xxii). We might say that unlike the snug familiarity of the juxtaposed wood, coal, grain of the opening paragraph of the novel, shown to be in productive relation with the landscape, humans appear to be less able to live in symbiotic harmony either with each other or the natural world.

Hughes also draws attention to the fact that in Book IV, chapter 1, the reader is taken to the villages on the Rhone and the castles on the Rhine to compare the two, to the detriment of the French villages. If we look at the passage we see that for Eliot the Rhone villages, flooded by former storms, their inhabitants swept way, lack the chivalric poetry of the Rhine, and exude a sense of “narrow, ugly, grovelling existence” (MF 252). The narrator even suggests that the readers may feel the same “oppressive feeling” as they have had “watching this old-fashioned family life on the banks of the Floss” (MF 252), yet she insists that this “oppressive narrowness” (MF 252) is important if readers are to understand the reality of the environments inhabited by the ordinary and everyday people she describes. The archaic manners of the slow “crawl” of history are therefore as potentially toxic as the fast turnover of industrial change, and both are responsible for the demise of Maggie and her brother and the world they lived in. 8

In the Mill on the Floss the Mitwelt of the opening pages is increasingly brought up against an Umwelt in which man is placed at the centre in a relation of power to all that surrounds. Similarly Caleb Garth’s dream of use-value productivity must come to terms with market forces and the power of commodities. It is this understanding of a complete embrace of contradictory forces in Eliot that paves the way for a larger vision and a better functioning.

Surplus value, primitive accumulation, extractivism

In Book IV of Middlemarch, entitled “Three Love Problems”, Brooke and his family and friends watch the mourners attending the burial of old Featherstone. Sir James says to Brooke that he sees “Vincy, the Mayor of Middlemarch; they are probably his wife and son”. Brooke replies that they are “a very decent family—a very good fellow is Vincy; a
credit to the manufacturing interest. You have seen him at my house, you know” (MM 307). The upper-class Mrs. Cadwallader then interjects the following: “And one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family look so fair and sleek” (MM 307). This astute political analysis is interesting in the mouth of this character who has a strong sense of the division of the classes and a certain snobbishness: she had wished to drive out to see the funeral to amuse herself with the “collections of strange animals” (MM 305) of the classes just below her, seeing it as an entertainment. Despite this Mrs. Cadwallader defends the true working people (who she finds authentic and plain) and prefers their company to the sycophantic middle classes (the Vincys for example).

25 The novel does not allow us to meet the handloom weavers who are exploited by the Vincys or to hear their voices. However a voice is given to another member of the lower classes—Dagley, Brookes disgruntled tenant farmer, who has just heard of the Reform Bill, soon to be passed, and understood that reform (which he mistakenly pronounces “Rinform”) might be a way for him and his family to get a share of the comfortable life led by his landlord. Dagley expresses his sense of being exploited by Brooke (the latter having come to complain to him of his son’s poaching) and corroborates the need for renovation of the cottages first expressed by Dorothea who knows that the tenants live in one room while the rest is left to the rats. The dilettante Brooke who is standing for parliament, this time as a Whig, is newly dedicated to reform. Political discussions in Middlemarch cast aspersions on Brooke’s sincerity: “Let Brooke reform his rent-roll. He’s a cursed old screw and the buildings all over his estate are going to rack” (MM 336). He is seen at best as inconsistent and at worst as hypocritical, needing to help his own tenants before preaching democracy to his peers and to his voters.

26 Dagley tells Brooke that his life on Brooke’s land, farmed also by Dagley’s father and grandfather, has given him nothing and no possibility of buying: “I’ve lived upo’ your ground from my father and grandfather afore me, an’ dropped our money into’t, an’ me an’ my children might lie an’ rot on the ground for top dressin’ as we can’t find the money to buy, if the King wasn’t to put a stop” (372). Dagley describes the depleted bodies of he, his family and ancestors, worked to exhaustion on Brooke’s land and having only their flesh to offer up at their death—having no more wealth than their own labouring selves which will become a sort of top soil, like a layer of fertilizer or “top dressin’”. The gaunt bodies of the handloom weavers sucked dry by the vampiric Vincys are recalled here: this reduction of humans to their labour and even to their bodily remains, evokes a form of slavery. This criticism of physical servitude is matched with Eliot’s horror of other forms of denial of human needs—that of education, for example. Dagley and family exhibit not only bodily lack but mental too—their minds have been starved of instruction, their faculties left to wither.

27 These images are powerful illustrations of some of the tenets of political economy which were expressed by Harriet Martineau but also by other political thinkers with whom Eliot was familiar such as Proudhon, Marx and Engels. Their theories are seen in the living dilemmas of her characters. In Middlemarch the productivity for the common good and for the pleasure of work well done is set against the extraction of human labour for the accumulation of wealth and property for the privileged. In Marx’s work on the production of absolute surplus value (Marx 1976, 320) we see that the worker must sell his or her labour for a low enough price to allow the production of a gain or a profit: if surplus value (value above and beyond the price of materials and the
human labour needed to transform them) is to be made, then it is thanks to the cheapness of labour. The gap between “what price the employer has paid for labour-time in the form of wages and the value created by labour” (Shapiro 77) is the difference which creates extra surplus-value, what “the worker has given to the employer for free” (77). The bodies of the peasants and city poor are therefore diminished to create the surplus value which underpins both capital and systems of slavery.

It is interesting to bring this vision of surplus value together with what Malcom Ferdinand sees as a drive for the preservation of elite groups and “their (in)actions and their ways of inhabiting the earth” (Ferdinand 210, my translation). In a section entitled “The Anthropocene’s colonial oikos” Ferdinand says that environmental catastrophe is reduced to a personal vision of a particular middleclass Western heimat in which personal comfort and privilege is shown to be uppermost in the life which must be preserved: the fear is of a collapse of a privileged way of life with its private property. As Ferdinand says: “History is told by threatened masters” (211, my translation), who risk losing a way of life which is white, privileged and heterosexual. Ferdinand’s “decolonial ecology” shows on a world scale what Karl Marx saw on a European level—that landscapes and human bodies have been and are being bled dry of their substance in order to create surplus value for a privileged few.

Surplus value is only possible if working in tandem with a desire to dispossess others and accumulate. The notion of primitive accumulation is in evidence in Eliot’s visions of work and production: it is the process by which the masses of direct producers (firstly the peasants) are dispossessed of their land and transformed into wage labourers, and the wealth they produce transformed into capital. Marx sees this as the process that came before the capitalist mode of production and was carried out by “bloody legislation” and “forcible expropriation” (Marx 1976, 896). Accumulation by dispossession is a concept taken up by the Marxist geographer David Harvey to define neoliberal capitalist policies that result in putting wealth and power in the hands of a few by dispossessing others of their wealth or land. Marx explains primitive accumulation as a historical (pre-capitalist) process of gaining private ownership of the means of production, so that the owners can make money from the surplus labour of those who, lacking other means of subsistence, are forced to sell their labour. This is indeed the situation of Dagley and the handloom weavers: both work for as little as their “owners” deem fit. In this light, the farm labourers’ fear of the Railway which would soon divide land in Middlemarch might be seen as a fear of a new power over the means of production which would replace Brooke and the landed gentry.

William C. Roberts in his work on primitive accumulation stresses that the concept should not be seen as pre-dating capitalism but as an integral and eternally repeated part of it. Traditionally primitive accumulation has been used to create the frontiers between capitalism and non-capitalism, but new accounts claim to locate primitive accumulation within capitalism itself. David Harvey’s formulation is indicated by Roberts to be representative of this newer trend:

Marx’s general theory of capital accumulation is constructed under certain crucial initial assumptions which broadly match those of classical political economy and which exclude primitive accumulation processes. [...] The disadvantage of these assumptions is that they relegate accumulation based upon predation, fraud, and violence to an “original stage” that is considered no longer relevant or, as with Luxemburg, as being somehow “outside of” the capitalist system. (Harvey 73-74)
Roberts also shows that primitive accumulation is ongoing and, according to Rosa Luxemburg, “marks the process of capitalism ingesting non-capitalism […] The prehistory of capitalism is being continuously re-enacted at the point of ingestion” (Luxemburg 26). Similarly, Silvia Federici claims that Marx “was deeply mistaken” when he “assumed that the violence that had presided over the earliest phases of capitalist expansion would recede with the maturing of capitalist relations, when the exploitation and disciplining of labor would be accomplished mostly through the workings of economic laws” (Federici 12). Finally, Glen Coulthard argues that, in order to be “relevant”, the notion of primitive accumulation must be “transformed” so as to include “the persistent role that unconcealed, violent dispossession continues to play in the reproduction of colonial and capitalist social relations” (Coulthard 9).

Eliot recognised and elucidated the daily violence of both capital and landed privilege; both the handloom weavers and tenants like Dagley seem to be forceful arguments in favour of recognising what the Owenite William Thompson called the “empire of force and fraud” of commerce (Thompson 1850, 255, qtd in Roberts) and Chartist Bronterre O’Brien’s claim that “profitmongers and landlords” exercised an “unlimited and irresponsible power of murder and robbery over the mass of mankind” (O’Brien 1885, 142, qtd in Roberts). Proudhon insisted that farm rent and lending at interest were vestiges of ancient slavery, a slavery which is clearly present in the relations of power and commerce in both novels.

If water with its slowness and need to respect seasons and human geography (communities living near water) might have been a better course for a slower sustainable production, steam power allowed the rapid movement of men and the means of production—a mobility which meant that labour could be found and used anywhere. Fossil energy meant extractivism: both of coal from the ground and energy from men’s bodies without renewal. When a seam of coal was exhausted industry moved on to new mines, when human bodies were exhausted newer sources of labour could be found. Hensley and Steer in their work on the “literary forms of coal” have seen coal as “the very engine of British global power in the nineteenth century, the indispensable fuel for the project of expropriation, reinscription and extraction” (64). Later in Daniel Deronda (1876), Eliot would look closely at the possible resolutions that state intervention might bring to the crises generated by the laissez-faire economy using the thought of philosopher and economist Henry Sidgwick (Kohlman).

This is true of Maggie in terms of her being swept away literally by the forces of nature as manipulated by man—a symbol of the waterpower which would be forgotten once fossil fuel took the stage. She is a victim both of the old conventions which crush her and of the new liberal economy, two tides meeting together but neither “loving” nor joined in an “impetuous embrace” as in the opening paragraph of the novel, but in a maelstrom of destruction.

**Small working communities and gradualism**

Eliot’s solution to destructive production is not to overthrow the systems of class or capital but to operate change on a modest level—to encourage a quiet re-weaving on a small and even individual scale, like Dorothea who, in the last lines of Middlemarch, is described as exerting positive pressure on those around her. It is through local, affective work that communities are shown to thrive. Eliot may even be said to
resemble Lydgate in Middlemarch: “In warming himself at French social theories he had brought away no smell of scorching” (327). As Kathryn Hughes says: “Apart from her brief flirtation with radicalism in 1848, she had always discounted political solutions imposed from above in favour of slow, gradual change pushing up from below” (Hughes 244). Eliot sees simple plans like those of Dorothea or Caleb Garth as the medium for change: slowness, consent and cooperation. Her conservatism and gradualism are clearly stated: “What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws [...] the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both” (Eliot 1856, 127). Interestingly, Imraam Coovadia has shown how Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments and The Wealth of Nations helped Eliot articulate the “ground up” quality of modern society, the way large institutions grow from simple, local exchanges between citizens. As Coovadia states, Eliot “reads Smith as an analyst of the forms into which human intercourse naturally crystallizes” (830).

This change from below includes Ladislaw’s ability to “take the pressure” (467) of the opinions of others, their imprint so to speak, what Maria Tang calls “the ties, claims, connections, and thoughts of others, in short the contingencies that constitute their milieu” (Tang 15). He creates a circle of exchange with his peers, creating community with Rosamund, Lydgate and Dorothea and also with the village children and Miss Noble. As Eliot says, “a wise social policy must be based not simply on abstract social science, but on the Natural History of social bodies” (Eliot 1856, 131). Tang quotes Deleuze to express this mechanism: “How can a being take another being into its world, but while preserving or respecting the other’s own relations and world?” (Deleuze 126).

This is what Félix Guattari calls the “new gentleness” (34), part of Eliot’s literary project and “ecosophical disposition” (Tang 19). Similarly, Davies shows “the strange psychological landscape of Middlemarch experienced in an alternating multiplicity of backgrounds and foregrounds, centres and peripheries, in shifting fields” which, although disorienting and challenging, leads to stronger relationality (Davies 321).

Eliot’s narrative strategy and her use of free indirect speech places us into the consciousness of the characters and allows us to make connections with sometimes unpleasant or alien characters. Likewise, Gillian Beer sees Middlemarch as a book that “draws attention to its own organisation; the naming of the individual books emphasises categorisation” but the process of reading “leads into divergence and variability” (Beer 143). These complexities are creative rather than destructive in Eliot. Isobel Armstrong explores the importance of characters coming into being and finding subjectivity through sometimes violent encounters with the other, mutual recognition as part of a Hegelian dialectics of relationality.

It is here that the Mitwelt described by Alwin Fill is at its clearest and can be discerned in the work done by certain characters in Middlemarch who create holistic, interactive and dynamic modes of living: Ladislaw, Dorothea, Mary and Caleb Garth are opposed to Rosamund’s narrow, repetitive consumption and Casaubon’s silo-thinking without connectivity and his will to totalizing systems such as “The Key to all mythologies”. Maria Tang discerningly shows that the genial Lydgate is in fact incapable of making links with his fellows—either with his family or with the medical community in Middlemarch. The clashes of good and bad production make a dialectical movement that pushes her thought and the narrative forward. Eliot’s writing meant that modes of
being and production are pitched one against another in her novels and are shown to be part of a collision of opposites which creates a sudden advancement and change (an **Aufhebung** or sublation, in French *la relève*), the moment of upward or onward movement of thought and process to new horizons.  

**Conclusion**

Part of the vision of the two positive productive environments we studied at the start is that they have a temporal dimension of *nowness*, that is living in the present with others but without blinkers as to the future. It is the time shared with others and the active and aware weaving community with them without a view to gain but according to contingency and present time and the needs of the social bodies around one. Seizing the moment now is what Dorothea envisions at a young age as part of a fruitful existence with Casaubon: although mistaken in the object of her affections, Dorothea sees her future clearly: “And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here—now—in England” (Book I, *Middlemarch*). She has the capacity to make links with others and dissolve herself in life around her, rather like Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway: “[...] life; London; this moment of June” (Woolf 5).

The *Mitwelt* in Eliot is the on-going attempt at creating community as best we can so “that things are not so ill with you and me” (*MM* 785) and so that production with others is bearable and sustainable based on intelligent connections and mutual profit. I would end this article with a related thought for Hubert Teyssandier, the French scholar to whom this essay is dedicated and whose love of George Eliot was clear in his teaching and research. He transmitted to his students an Eliot-like injunction to share and communicate their work. Following both Eliot and Forster, he asked us to “only connect”, to seek the friction between media (literature with music or image with poetry), or to simply connect with others in discursive and even conflictual exchange that produced the intellectual and affective links that still persist today, as this collection shows. What is a *Mitwelt* if not a local and global intertext, a constant affirmation of the links between animals, plants, writing, art, politics, and work?

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. George Eliot is recorded as having read Ernst Haeckel’s illustrated Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte (Berlin, 1868). See George Henry Lewes in an 1871 entry in his diaries (qtd in Fleischman, 23).

2. Haeckel meant by Aussenwelt the organic and inorganic Umgebung (surroundings, environs, vicinity, neighbourhood) of the lebewesen (living beings or creatures). Oikos has shifting meanings in Greek literature, variously the basic unit of society in the Greek city-states or in families, a line of descent or lineage. It could be simply everybody living in a given house such as the patriarch, his family and the slaves but could include farms as the basic productive unit of the economy.

3. Fill goes on to say that: “If this thought is pursued consistently, one comes to a language that is not anthropocentric but anthropomorphic, that is, that uses all human words in a way which also includes animals (and perhaps even plants)” (Fill 309, my translation).

4. Interestingly, in psychology and existentialism, Mitwelt is a term used to refer to an individual’s social or cultural environment in which they must find a balance between integration and individuality, harmony but also autonomy. Eliot shows the difficulty of this for Maggie Tulliver. The other existential dimensions are Umwelt (physical dimension), Eigenwelt (psychological dimension), and Überwelt (spiritual dimension).
5. I would like to thank Margherita Bedana (Ca’ Foscari, Venice/Université de Paris Cité) for her thoughts on webs of empathy and exchange in Eliot’s novels, and also Bérénice Nieto (University of Manchester) for her insights into the politics, temporality and rejection of Umwelt.

6. See Illustrations of Political Economy a series which ran monthly from 1832-1834 after which it was published in 9 volumes by Charles Fox. Martineau illustrates concepts from Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus.

7. Both Andreas Malm and Jesse Oak Taylor have dwelt upon this moment in history and literature when the rise of steam power accelerated climate change. The movement from water-to coal-driven steam engines was linked to a superior control of subordinate labour allowing capital to concentrate production most profitably for the owners of production.

8. See also Barrow, who looks at how The Mill on the Floss (1860) considers natural catastrophe alongside the disarray of female body: Eliot takes the work of Charles Lyell, Oliver Goldsmith, and Georges Cuvier, and stresses the interface of human and planetary events while feminising environmental catastrophe, harmonising the human and the geological and looking at the way industries upset the balance of nature.

9. Political discussions in Middlemarch reveal anger that Mr. Brooke as a member of the landed gentry should represent himself as a liberal (the equivalent of today’s centre-left) rather than as a Tory (right): “What business has an old countryman to come currying favour with a low set of dark-blue freemen [...] he means to take a very high ground on Reform” (336). Ladislaw on the other hand is seen as “foreign” and an “emissary”. Brooke sees him as a romantic like Shelley, with “enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation” (338).

10. Dagley believes the King is to bring in the Reform Bill and that Brooke (known as “close fisted” or mean with his tenants) will be sent “a scuttlin’”. Following this is the scene when Dagley drunkenly insults Brooke: “there’s to be a Rinform”, “I’m none afeard on you” (MM 373). Eliot sees ignorance and lack of learning as one of the evils of society creating the social divide, deploring “the facility with which mortals escape knowledge” (MM 373) and how persons in the “intellectual blaze of London” would be nothing if they had been educated as poorly as Dagley.

11. As Ernest Mandel says in his introduction to the first volume of Capital: “dialectics imply that every phenomenon has an origin and an end, that nothing is either eternal or finished once and for all [...] Within capital accumulation in contemporary everyday capitalist life, some aspects of primitive accumulation are reproduced” (Mandel 22).

12. Hegelian critics see Hegel’s contribution to dialectical thinking as being “a presentation of the dialectic as something energetic, exuberant, and confrontational—the dialectic was essential to the agon which moved History, consciousness, and knowledge forward.” https://hesiodscorner.wordpress.com/2018/05/17/hegels-dialectic-and-sublation/ (posted on May 17, 2018, accessed 22/01/21).

---

**ABSTRACTS**

This article shows that The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Middlemarch (1871), both set in the late 1820s and early 1830s, bring work and wider activities of production together with an ecological or “with-world thinking” (Mitweldendenken in ecolinguistics), a concept which has its roots in Montaigne, Spinoza and early environmental theories. Eliot is able to imagine how industry, in the widest sense of a collective making or producing of things, might function if based on sympathy and being with the world rather than being surrounded by it and dominating it. In her
fiction, she experiments with contrasting modes of production: we find ideal or dream oikoi as well as the darker realities of exploitation. The descriptions of goods waiting in ships at St. Ogg’s or Caleb Garth’s vision of working cooperation which position work outside of either feudal oppression or capitalistic gain are set against the often violent transition from water-driven energy to coal or “fossil capital” (Malm), from slow “natural history” to fast production. Avoiding the bucolic and the picturesque, Eliot shows how provincial lives are dictated both physically and linguistically by the forces of surplus value, primitive accumulation and extractivism and reveals that the answer lies not in revolutionary upheaval, but within close working communities and a gentle dialectics of change.

*The Mill on the Floss* (1860) et *Middlemarch* (1871), dont l’action se déroule à la fin des années 1820 et au tout début des années 1830, juxtaposent le travail et la production à un *Mitweltdenken*, une pensée écolinguistique “avec le monde”. Montaigne et Spinoza ont fourni à Eliot l’image d’un être humain qui vit en symbiose avec ses semblables, la flore et la faune qui partagent son monde. À son tour, Eliot nous livre une vision possible du fonctionnement de l’industrie (faire et produire avec les autres) basé sur une sympathie et une relation de coopération avec le monde au lieu d’une relation de domination. Elle expérimente dans ses fictions des modes de production différents, des oikoi idéalisés aussi bien que des visions plus sombres de l’exploitation de tout ce qui entoure l’homme. Si la description des marchandises (bois, charbon, grains) dans des navires amarrés à St. Ogg’s ou l’hymne entonné par Caleb Garth au travail et à la productivité coopératifs semblent loin de toute oppression féodale ou capitaliste, Eliot décrit néanmoins l’histoire violente du passage de l’énergie actionnée par l’eau à l’énergie du charbon ou « fossil capital » (Malm). Retraçant l’augmentation d’une production industrielle accélérée, ses romans révèlent à quel point la vie provinciale est réglée par les forces de la plus-value, de l’accumulation primitive et de l’extractivisme. La révolution n’est cependant pas considérée comme une solution ; Eliot semble prôner une évolution douce et dialectique à petite échelle.

**INDEX**

**Keywords:** Mitwelt, production, environment, ecolinguistics, oikos, coal, water, primitive accumulation, extractivism, work, industry

**oeuvcrete** Mill on the Floss (The), Middlemarch

**Mots-clés:** Mitwelt, production, environnement, écolinguistique, oikos, charbon, eau, accumulation primitive, extractivisme, travail, industrie

**AUTHORS**

**SARA THORNTON**

Sara Thornton is Professor of English at Université Paris Cité where she co-directs the “Cultural Intelligence and Innovation” Masters programme. She has published *Advertising, Subjectivity and the Nineteenth-century novel* (2009), *Persistent Dickens* (2012), *Dickens and the Virtual City: Urban Perception and the Production of Social Space* (2017) and *Comforting Creatures: Changing Visions of Animal Otherness in the Victorian Period* (2018), as well as 30 articles. Recently she co-authored a chapter, “Blyton’s ghosts: childhood receptions in India and Britain” with Tanvi Chowdhary (2022), and wrote “*A Tale of Two Cities* in an age of contagion, climate change and coloniality” for David Paroissien.