Water Images in *Middlemarch*: A Note on George Eliot's Use of Metaphor

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The abundance of water imagery in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* has often been a subject of discussion amongst critics. J. Hillis Miller, in his illuminating essay on the novel, points out that each important metaphor employed by Eliot is closely intertwined with other metaphors and motifs found in the text. The most prominent one is probably the "web", and for Miller the "stream" or "current" is both a variation of and a complement to it:

> Collective or individual life in Middlemarch is not a fixed pattern like a carpet. The web is always in movement. The pervasive figure for this is that of flowing water. This figure is homogeneous with the figure of the web in that flowing water, for Eliot, is seen as made up of currents, filaments flowing side by side, intermingling and dividing. Flowing water is, so to speak, a temporalized web. (Miller 1986 [1968]: 101)

It may be considered inadequate therefore, to isolate a single metaphor and examine it as if it were independent of the whole complex network of figures found in the text.

Miller also suggests, however, that Eliot's metaphors are, in the final analysis, "multiple and incompatible"(ibid:109) and "jeopardizes the narrator's effort of totalization"(ibid: 110). Indeed, the innumerable figurative references to water in the text — streams and swamps, shallow and deep, with surfaces sometimes reflective and brilliant, sometimes blank and dead — not only form their own network, but also reveal contradictions and conflicts amongst themselves. Many important characters are each provided with a set of water images (or such images as are comparable to or associated with them) which can either confirm or contradict the way in which they are presented in other parts of the text. The relationships amongst the characters, too, are often described through the same device.

A close analysis of Eliot's use of this particular metaphor invites a reconsideration of her characters and their relationships, thus helping us better to perceive how the text represents the two sexes, and their ways of viewing each other. In this paper, therefore, I propose to conduct a focused study of the water images in *Middlemarch*, the richness and intricacy of which will, hopefully, justify my comparatively narrow scope in discussing this great classic.

The heroine of the novel, Dorothea Brooke, is doubtlessly the character who is most frequently and most significantly associated with water. As U. C. Knoepflemacher rightly points out, her last name is "interwoven with the countless allusions to currents and streams — of water as well as of feeling and thought — which recur throughout the novel" (Knoepflemacher 1975: 66). As we shall wee, Dorothea is repeatedly presented by the text as deep, beautiful water, sometimes sweeping others in its passionate and benevolent flow, and sometimes enwrapping herself sorrowfully in its calm stillness. To begin with, I would like to draw attention to an interesting episode very early in the story, which the narrator recounts as though in preparation for the whole series of "water scenes" we are about to plunge into.

In this episode, Dorothea and her sister, Celia, divide between them the jewels of their deceased mother. Unlike Celia, who busies herself determining which ornaments suit her own complexion best, Dorothea appears almost bored by the whole transaction, having little womanly desire to improve her looks. Immediately Dorothea sets eyes on a certain

item, however, she is fascinated by it and feels a "new current of feeling" (note the word *current*, for it is to come up time and again in connection with Dorothea's spiritual energy). It is a ring with "a fine emerald and diamonds"(Eliot 1998:12). Attracted particularly by the emerald, which she thinks "is more beautiful than any of them"(ibid.), Dorothea decides to keep the ring and a matching bracelet, while offering everything else to Celia. "She thought of often having them by her," we are told, "to feed her eye at these little fountains of pure colour"(13). Dorothea's sudden desire to possess the gems surprises Celia, as it is conspicuously inconsistent with the elder sister's puritanical nature, and her usual contempt for people's obsession with such extravagant superfluities in life. Dorothea herself, too, is dismayed by and embarrassed about her own spontaneous delight in the jewels.

This incident is actually never referred to by the narrator again, and therefore bears no visible influence on the plot. Yet, in the context of our present discussion, it has considerable significance, which is reinforced by the curious fact that no explanation is offered for Dorothea's uncharacteristic fascination with the emeralds. She obviously does not enjoy the jewels as Celia enjoys hers, that is, as an ornament. Instead, she simply delights in looking at the green stones, and wishes to keep them by her side. Considering Dorothea's attitude as such, is it not possible to presume that she is unconsciously identifying herself with the "little fountains", which resemble wells of clear and refreshing water, and whose colour suggests the life of nature? As a matter of fact, not much later in the story, we will see that blue-green is indeed a colour that is repeatedly and exclusively associated with Dorothea by the narrator; it is *her* colour.

Moreover, just as the resplendent "little fountains" are nevertheless imprisoned within transparent and lifeless stones, her own magnificent soul is to be contained, albeit temporarily, in her identity as a woman and wife, deprived of its natural vivacity. In other words, the little episode not only provides a primary water image for Dorothea (even though it is not explicitly specified as such), but also foreshadows her destiny, as we shall see presently.

Dorothea's idealistic view of life and her reverence for men's wisdom, which give her many virtues that are absent in narrow-minded Celia, also drive her to the kind of misfortunes that women like Celia will never let themselves into. Thus Dorothea accepts the hand of the aged scholar Casaubon despite everyone's opposition and, still unaware of the misery awaiting her, thinks admiringly of the man:

> "He thinks with me," said Dorothea to herself, "or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor two-penny mirror. And his feelings too, his whole experience — what a lake compared to my little pool!"(Eliot 1998: 21)

It should be observed that, in this short passage, Dorothea is contrasting herself to Casaubon by using two important metaphors: the water and the mirror. First, she considers herself only a cheap and inadequate mirror, which cannot reflect Casaubon's greatness properly. And second, her feelings are but a "little pool", whereas Casaubon's, enriched by his "experience", are a "lake". Her recognition of herself both as a "pool" and a "mirror" shows that she knows her own character to have a certain depth (though she grossly underestimates it), but is willing to disregard it, so that she can serve Casaubon as a mere mirroring surface on which he can find himself reflected.

It is significant that Dorothea herself juxtaposes the two metaphors, because they are indeed found to be closely interrelated throughout the text(1). The most prominent mirror image that appears throughout the novel is that of the pier-glass (beginning of Chapter 27), which is used as a parable by the narrator. To be precise, the pier-glass is not seen primarily as a mirror in that famous passage, but presented as a smooth surface, the random scratches on which are brought into an orderly pattern (concentric circles) by the optical illusion experienced by the beholder. The pier-glass stands for the external reality, onto which each individual's ego subjectively imposes a pattern.

As Miller points out, however, the pier-glass, when considered as a mirror, may be understood to stand not only for the external world but also for the ego itself.

While the ego imposes its own "selfish needs or desires"(Miller 108) on the gigantic mirror called the world, the ego itself becomes a mirror as well, and reflects, in a distorted way, the world around it. "Any two subjectivities" — be it two individuals, or an individual and the external world — ". . .will face one another like confronting mirrors"(ibid). The character to whom the narrator turns immediately after introducing the parable is Rosamond Vincy, for whom the pier-glass metaphor is doubly appropriate. For, not only is Rosamond, extremely fond of looking at the mirror, embodies the idea of "narcissistic self-reflection" (Miller 108) suggested by the parable, but herself becomes a mirror for her future husband, Tertius Lydgate. Only, she proves to be a deceptive, or even treacherous, mirror for the man. We will be discussing the web of water/ mirror images that enwrap this couple later.

Unlike Rosamond, Dorothea is entirely free from both narcissism and egotism. Rather, as we saw in the passage quoted above, she is ready to sacrifice her individuality for Casaubon's sake, and to be a reflector — however unworthy — of his magnitude. Dorothea's thought, however, is ironically counteracted by Casaubon's, when his feelings for her are described by the narrator in these words:

> ...(H)e determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. As in droughty regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, so Mr Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge which his stream would afford him; and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion. (Eliot 1988: 51)

This passage contrasts quite ironically with Dorothea's earlier admiration of his lake-like feelings. This is one of the many ways in which the narrator stresses the disparity between the couple by comparing Dorothea to abundant and clear water, and Casaubon not only to flaccid and scarce water but also to a dry land that sucks in water. Speaking of Casaubon's psychological state after marrying Dorothea, when his intellectual energy is swallowed up by ugly suspicions arising from an inner sense of failure, the narrator says: "(O)ne knows of the river by a few streaks amid a long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud"(342). Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's young cousin and protégé whose love for Dorothea makes him scorn their union, feels that "the husband's sandy absorption of such nectar was too intolerable" (179). But, until she finds all her initial hopes thwarted by the desolate reality of her marriage, the narrator continues to compare Dorothea to flowing water, and in such expressions as

> "Full current of sympathetic motives in which her ideas and impulses were habitually swept along" (70) and
>
> "a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow — the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good" (166)

we can see Dorothea's youthful energy and her natural generosity represented as lively streams.

In her marriage with Casaubon, once alluded to by the narrator as "an enclosed basin"(161), Dorothea gradually begins to feel a sense of imprisonment. The room allotted to Dorothea in Casaubon's estate at Lowick, which becomes a kind of prison-cell for her, is described as follows: "(T)he furniture was all of a faded blue. . . .A piece of tapestry over a door also showed a blue-green world with a pale stag in it"(161). The colour blue-green, we may note, is faintly reminiscent of Dorothea's favourite gem, emerald. On her honeymoon in Rome, Dorothea perceives with horror the shallowness of her husband's nature and the futility of his academic effort, in which she had hoped to aid him. When she returns to Lowick dejected, she already sees her room, thereafter referred to by the narrator as the "blue-green boudoir"(224, 305) or "blue-green world"(61, 225), in a different way: "The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world"(225); "Each remembered thing in the room was disenchanted, was

dead as an unlit transparency"(226). It is within the sea-coloured walls of this room that Dorothea is to spend most of her solitary time before and after Casaubon's death. Just like the "little fountains" were contained within the tiny stones, Dorothea is "enclosed" in her marriage, deprived of her freedom, and forced to keep her passion locked up in herself. Actually, she even comes to find herself consoled by the "pallid quaintness"(305) of the room, and it seems at such times that her presence almost blends into this "basin" that contains her being.

In the meantime, Dorothea's life begins to take a new direction when she meets Will Ladislaw. We have seen how the narrator uses various water images to illustrate the differences between Casaubon and Dorothea. The same kind of contrast is also drawn between Will and Dorothea through the same device, though far more subtly. One of the major characteristics of Will's appearance, pointed out by the narrator a few times, is a little "ripple in the nose," which is once called a "preparation for metamorphosis," suggesting the quickness and uncertainty with which his expression changes (171). Another thing about him that the narrator often mentions is the transparency of his skin. Both of these characteristics make Will, and particularly his face, reminiscent of a *surface* of water, and place him in contrast to Dorothea who is mainly represented as a *body* of water. We learn that his smile is like a "gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm"(168); that his "quick blood" would "come and go like breath in his transparent skin" (378); and that an amusing thought can make his face "break into its merry smile, pleasant to see as the breaking of sunshine on the water" (385). These images constitute an impression that Will is a pleasant but capricious character, which is more or less consistent with his presentation elsewhere in the text.

Before I proceed to examine in more detail the figurative illustration of Dorothea and Will as well as their relationship, let us turn to the other important couple in the novel, Lydgate and Rosamond, whose relationship is also richly adorned with the images of water. Lydgate, the somewhat arrogant though well-meaning new doctor in Middlemarch, is defined by the narrator as a man "whose better energies are liable to lapse down the wrong channel under the influence of transient solicitations"(123). The obvious similarity between this figurative description and those frequently applied to Dorothea reinforces the already existing parallel between the two characters who, though of opposite sexes, share a definite sense of righteousness and ambition that gives their minds a scope wider than those of most people in Middlemarch. They are also alike in that they both wish for, and fail to achieve, a power that should allow them to change the suffocatingly conventional society of Middlemarch.

Just as Dorothea's dream of building a colony for the farmers in town are swept away by the disillusioning reality of her marriage with Casaubon (and after), so is Lydgate's ambition to surprise the world with an epoch-making medical theory gradually diminished by the people and customs of Middlemarch. Although he initially regards its society with light-hearted condescension, his future despair is ironically predicted in the narrator's comment: "Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably" (126). Here, as well as in many other places in the text, Lydgate is depicted as a man who drowns in water (mark the word *swallowing*) and is swept away by the large, indifferent current named Middlemarch.

Lydgate takes the first step towards this fate when he becomes interested in Rosamond who, despite her beauty that seems to put her high above the town's standard, is nevertheless very much a Middlemarch woman at heart. We feel that the author enjoys enwrapping this particular pair in an independent and coherent set of water images, almost all of which derive from myths and legends. Rosamond is continually compared to mythical creatures of water, such as a "nymph"(78), "siren[s]"(246), "mermaid"(475) and "waternixie"(531). In consistency with these names, she sings prettily and plays well at the piano, often wearing a "pale-blue dress"(534). Rosamond, theses images suggest, is a monster who lures Lydgate with her beauty and her music, and then causes him to drown. At the

initial stage of their courtship, Lydgate is merely pleased with her prettiness of manner and appearance, without having any serious feelings for her. But the narrator once meaningfully pronounces that he then "had no sense that any new current had set into his life" (134); the man, the narrator is implying, is already beginning to sink.

It is therefore with no sentimentality that the narrator presents the decisive moment in their relationship when, they being alone in the Vincys' house, the sight of Rosamond's tears suddenly "shook [his] flirtation into love"(247):

> She felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else that let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would ... Remember that the ambitious man who was looking at those Forget-me-nots under the water was very warm-hearted and rash. (247)

The passage provides us with an interesting picture of Lydgate, by likening him simultaneously to two figures that belong to the realm of myths and legends. One is the knight who, wishing to please his beloved lady, tried to pick some flowers by a river and drowned, and after whose last words to her — "Forget me not" — these flowers were named[2]. This association links Lydgate with the tradition of courtly love, suggesting that he is to die for love and loyalty. It may be said, however, that this Victorian knight is even braver than his role model, because, in a way, he is sure to drown, his flowers being "under the water" from the beginning, and his lady being the monster she really is.

The other mythical figure whom Lydgate reminds us of is Narcissus. In the passage I have just quoted, Lydgate is (in the narrator's figurative language) looking into the water, that is, the tears brimming in Rosamond's eyes. He thinks that he sees pained love in those eyes, and therefore is moved into love himself. However, prior to this passage, the narrator once calls attention to Rosamond's eyes, and forewarns against the subjective "reading" of them. The following shows Rosamond in her everyday habit of gazing at the mirror:

> Mary Garth seemed all the plainer standing at an angle between the two nymphs — the one in the glass, and the one out of it, who looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite. (91)

The picture of the two Rosamonds, "the one in the glass, and the one out of it," are not unlike that of Narcissus and his reflection on the water (for she certainly in love with her own reflection), and indeed, she generally does exhibit narcissistic traits more obviously than does Lydgate. But on the level of imagery, Lydgate is clearly the one in the role of Narcissus. For this passage also suggests that Rosamond's eyes function in the same away as the fatal stream or spring into which Narcissus falls. What the narrator insinuates is that, whatever a beholder may believe himself to discover in Rosamond's eyes, he is quite possibly only projecting onto their surface his own self. Thus Lydgate is attracted by the beautiful surface of those eyes, which shows a reflection pleasant to his gaze — without knowing that he is soon to be drawn into the cold depth of a woman's egotism hidden underneath it.

Yet, Lydgate is not so much a so-called "narcissist" as a modern version of the original and mythical Narcissus who, tragically unaware of his self-love, dives into the water to embrace what he believes is his true love, and drowns . The pathetic heroism of this act is curiously reinforced by his likeness to the other mythical figure, the knight of forget-me-nots. The double myth-metaphor (Narcissus and the knight) applied to Lydgate is intriguing, and is illuminating for our understanding of his character and the cause of his failure with women.

The episode of Lydgate's brief infatuation with Laure, the actress who murders her husband "by accident" on stage, also confirms his character as such[3]. First it should be noted that the narrator introduces the incident as "an example of the fitful swerving of

passion to which he was prone, together with the chivalrous kindness which helped to make him morally lovable"(124), which again sounds consistent with Lydgate's image as the knight of the forget-me-nots. However, Laure, too, is a woman whose true nature belies her external beauty. When Lydgate, having made a great search for her after her disappearance from Paris, finally finds her acting in a country theatre, she receives him "with the usual quietude which seemed to him beautiful as clear depths of water"(125). There he is shocked by her confession that she had actually meant to murder her husband. He then goes back to his studies, with a resolve not to trust in women ever again.

This episode, which seems strangely isolated in the text, is effective as additional evidence of Lydgate's tendency to see women only as he likes to see them — that is to say, as being vulnerable, ignorant and in need of his guidance. While always seeing women as clear and deep water, Lydgate is in fact neither willing nor able to penetrate the depths of their minds. Instead, he merely wishes them to reflect, with love and reverence, his own magnitude. In other words, while believing himself to be a chivalrous lover, he is in fact in love only with himself.

It is not long after Lydgate marries Rosamond that he finds himself in what may be called a sea of troubles, and the narrator illustrates the deterioration of the marriage by repeatedly presenting him as a man who is lured into beautiful water, only to find it muddy and bottomless. Rosamond, whose expensive habits and egotism gradually undermine Lydgate's better motives, is once compared to a "swamp" which "tempts men towards it with such a pretty covering of flowers and verdure," and into which "he was every day getting deeper" (479). Also, his accumulating debt makes him "conscious of new elements in his life as noxious to him as an inlet of mud to a creature that has been used to breathe and bath and dart after its illuminated prey in the clearest of waters"(478). We may recall here that, in describing Dorothea's marriage, the narrator compares Casaubon to a "long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud" and to "dry sand" which threatens to "absorb" his young wife. The rather startling similarity in figurative representation between Rosamond and Casaubon, who are otherwise so dissimilar to each other, further emphasizes the parallel between Lydgate and Dorothea, as individuals trapped in the similar kind of marital tragedy, despite their good intentions.

But, as regards Lydgate, the narrator makes sure to remind us that there is a certain fault in his own nature, which is really responsible for having led him into his dreary situation. For instance, Lydgate, recalling the first days of his courtship with Rosamond, recalls how she appeared to him to be

> that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone. (475)

This can only make us feel that he more or less deserves his present sufferings; he is just too easy a victim for the man-devouring Rosamond. Furthermore, there is another passage in which Lydgate's attitude towards his wife is expressed in such terms as are of considerable interest. Lydgate, finding himself sacrificing most of his time and energy in trying to fulfill the ceaseless demands of Rosamond, feels that the worst part of his task is

> bearing without betrayal of bitterness to look through less and less of interfering illusion at the *blank unreflecting surface* her mind presented to his ardour for the more impersonal ends of his profession and his scientific study, an ardour which he had fancied that the ideal wife must somehow worship as sublime, though not in the least knowing why. (478; italics added)

Lydgate, then, not only wishes for a wife who would serve as a surface to reflect back his own image, without troubling him by revealing her own individuality underneath it; but for a wife who, on her part, would be satisfied with admiring his surface brilliance as well, lacking both the ability and willingness to explore the depths of either his knowledge or his motives. To put it differently, the

ideal relationship between man and woman is, for Lydgate, one in which they can dispense with being truly acquainted with each other's nature, while at the same time being perfectly loyal and affectionate to each other.

Despite all his faults, Lydgate is an attractive character, and the narrator's report in the finale of his mediocre career and early death can only rouse our sympathy. As I have already mentioned, his *hubris* ultimately lies in his arrogant slighting of Middlemarch. Both he and Rosamond, who at first is proud to find her marraige "visibly as well as ideally floating her above Middlemarch level"(478), are punished for not letting themselves go with the current called Middlemarch. Eliot contrasts this unhappy couple with Fred Vincy and Mary Garth (whose plainness causes Rosamond to disregard her worth completely), the typical Middlemarch couple, who are wise enough to know that the best way to behave when in water is not to struggle and to go with the flow[4].

Let us now go back once more to Dorothea and Will. As we have observed, Dorothea is the character who is most recurrently compared to or associated with water. When Will comes into her life, however, he brings with him a new image for the heroine. It appears for the first time when, having had an opportunity of conversing with Dorothea alone in Casaubon's absence, Will considers for a moment asking her to keep the meeting a secret. He then decides against it, thinking that "to ask her to be less simple would be like breathing on the crystal you want to see the light through" (302). Also, explaining why Will refrains from entertaining the idea of Casaubon's death and the consequential possibility of marrying Dorothea himself, the narrator tells us: "Will, we know, could not bear the thought of any flaw appearing in his crystal" (384).

The significance of this new metaphor for Dorothea is worth speculating about. The images hitherto applied to Dorothea have been those forms of water as give an impression of mobility, and of *life*: fountains, streams and currents, green or blue-green in colour. On the other hand, Will's idea of Dorothea as crystal suggests the kind of perfect purity that admits of no change, and therefore, no sign of life. It is also remarkable that, in a critical moment in her relationship with Will, the colour of Dorothea's aquarium-like boudoir appears to lose its significance as well. This occurs when she, mistakenly believing Will to be intimate with Rosamond and therefore unfaithful to herself, spends the entire night in her boudoir, suffering from both anger and sorrow. In this scene, which is more than two pages in length, neither the colour of the room nor its other water-related images are ever mentioned. And yet, we feel that Dorothea is "closer" to the room than ever, as she falls asleep on the floor crying, like a child in its mother's arms.

Next morning, Dorothea decides, with renewed courage and benevolence, to visit Rosamond, in order to convince the latter of Lydgate's innocence in the matter of the blackmailer Raffles' death. Yet when she actually faces Rosamond, she feels less sure of herself. The narrator then comments, as if now in reverence for Will's image of Dorothea:

> The clearness and intensity of her mental action this morning were the continuance of a nervous exaltation which made her frame as dangerously responsive as a bit of finest Venetian crystal. (648)

Let us recall the analogy between the emeralds and Dorothea. Now it is as though those "little fountains" were gone from within her, leaving her colourless and solid. We have seen how Casaubon's sandy presence threatened to absorb Dorothea's fluent spirits, and how her soul lost its luminous and mobile character and contained itself within her. But Will's idealization (or rather, idolization) of Dorothea is, in a sense, even more damaging, in that it causes her inner fountains to *freeze*. Crystal, in its solidity and transparency, resembles ice — an eternally frozen ice. Dorothea at this stage may be regarded, therefore, as being empty, a frame that has no life inside.

Is Dorothea then doomed to be a beautiful but lifeless idol forever? The answer, it seems, is no. She is resurrected in one of the novel's climaxes, by retrieving her spiritual currents. What immediately follows the narrator's "Venetian crystal" simile is Dorothea's

interview with Rosamond. There we suddenly find a wealth of water images again, as a feeling of mutual sympathy is born, and grows, between the two women. Rosamond at first acts cold and distant towards Dorothea since, on the previous day, she was not only rejected by Will, but vehemently accused by him of destroying the trust between him and Dorothea. However, her attitude is softened when Dorothea's kindly words "came as soothingly as a warm stream over her shrinking fears"(648). Then, trying to mitigate Rosamond's pain while keeping herself calm, Dorothea is forced to struggle against the "waves of her own sorrow" which "rushed over [her] with conquering force"(651). Finally, overwhelmed by the power of Dorothea's selfless compassion, Rosamond momentarily forgets her own petty interests and reveals that Dorothea is secure in Will's love — whereupon "the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck"(651).

Ironically enough, it is thus Rosamond, not Will, who causes Dorothea's frozen emotions to melt again, and allows them to flow out with renewed strength. Having thus restored her individuality, Dorothea is no longer to be affected by Will's masculine perception, which threatens to solidify her and to turn her into a transparent object for him to "see the light through". So we should not be surprised that, when Will and Dorothea find themselves double-bound by their love for each other and the prospect of poverty that their union will bring them, it is again "the flood of her young passion" that finally "bear[s] down all the obstructions which had kept her silent,"(663) bringing them together in spite of all.

At the end of the novel, we learn that Dorothea marries Will, who becomes an "ardent public man"(680) and lives contentedly, giving him "wifely help"(ibid.) in his work that she deems worthy. Many critics have wondered at this ending of the novel, not quite convinced that Will can be regarded as a substantial character, nor that he is capable of appreciating the potential of Dorothea's powerful character. The claim that he lacks "depth" compared to Dorothea is strangely in accordance with his representation as the surface of water, as opposed to Dorothea, the body of water.

But it will be rather hasty to dismiss Dorothea's marriage as another, albeit less painful, mistake. It is not to be forgotten that Will is the only major male character in the novel (other than Fred Vincy) who does not see his lover merely as a "reflecting surface" or a "mirror". In fact, Will himself is an ever-reflective surface, which can be illuminated both from inside, by his own "merry spirit", and from outside, by the "sunshine" — which latter, of course, may stand for Dorothea. In addition, while Lydgate wishes that Rosamond would worship his intellectual effort as sublime, "though not in the least knowing why"(478), Will is reported to have insisted that "he should prefer not to know the sources of the Nile"(66). If we understand "the Nile" to stand for Dorothea also, we can recognize how the gender roles are reversed in the case of this couple; just like Lydgate's ideal wife, Will is ready to reverence Dorothea without attempting to explore her magnificent character in its details. Finally, even Lydgate perceives in Dorothea "a fountain of friendship towards men", which he "never saw in any woman before" — and feels that "a man can make a friend of her"(629). In summary, Will seems to be a man who at least has the potential of becoming a worthy appreciator and supporter of Dorothea, who, in her turn, can be a great positive influence on him, in a way that clearly differs from the kind of servile worship she meant to aid Casaubon with.

By looking closely at the various water images in *Middlemarch* and the way they are organized, we can obtain new insight into the characters. In particular, the metaphor highlights the fundamental differences between the male and female characters in the novel, as well as the unique characteristics of each relationship. The character who is in the center of the network formed by these images is Dorothea, and the water metaphor can really be seen as a means of sketching out the history of Dorothea's psychological growth. And so it is quite appropriate that the ultimate image with which the author crowns the heroine should be one of water:

> Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus

broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. (682)

Notes

(1) As Miller argues, all the important metaphors in this text are interrelated. However, I note the relation of these two metaphors in particular, as it is especially significant in our present discussion

(2) This tale of German origin was well-known to the Romantic poets, who liked to sing about the flower as a courtly love motif (see Coleridge's "The Keepsake", line 12-3, for example).

(3) Interestingly, Rosamond is also a natural-born actress: "She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique; she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own"(96). In this ways, the author further emphasizes the parallel between the two women.

(4) As regards Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, the only examples of the water images are the references to Mary's "rippling under-current of laughter"(112) and a change of her expression which "was like a change below the surface of water which remains smooth"(204). Otherwise, the metaphor is conspicuously absent in the descriptions of this couple. This seems to suggest that the metaphor is effective in illustrating the differences and the resulting conflicts, rather than the harmony, between the sexes. It is also likely to be related to the fact that, unlike Lydgate or Dorothea, Mary and Fred are able to conform with the Middlemarch life, and are not prone to be "swept away" by their ambitions.

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