

**‘A *Jeu de Melancholie*’: George Eliot’s Reflections on Dejection.**

Simon Calder, University of Minnesota

Abstract: This article reassesses George Eliot and Baruch Spinoza’s ideas about the ethical salience of two modes of sorrow: anguish and *melancholia*. Although Eliot finished translating Spinoza’s *Ethics* in 1856, one year before publishing her first work of fiction, the only book-length account of the influence of Spinoza’s moral treatise on Eliot’s ethical fiction remains Dorothy Atkins’s *George Eliot and Spinoza* (1978). This article challenges Atkins’s thesis that Eliot ‘dramatizes’ the process of *total liberation* from the passions that Spinoza ‘describes’.

Spinoza distinguished between three kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the first kind, which includes all knowledge afforded by the passions and is the sole cause of falsity; rational knowledge, which concerns the eternal structure of reality; and intuitive knowledge, which concerns the unchanging essence of things *apart from their relations*. Once it is understood that passion-ideas are only fallible because they – and they alone – concern *the relation between particular bodies*, it becomes evident that the same thing that makes them ‘inadequate’ in an epistemological sense makes them necessary as a means of working out how to live. The object of this article is to compare Spinoza and Eliot’s responses to this fact.

In Section I, an analysis of Will Ladislaw’s passions in Chapter Seventy-Eight of *Middlemarch* (1871-2) enables us to recognise how Spinoza and Eliot anticipated neurobiologist Antonio Damasio in acknowledging that the passions provide the foundation for all subsequent moral reasoning. In Section II, the work of Spinoza scholar Michael Lebuffe sheds light on the means by which Dorothea Casaubon distinguishes ‘good’ from ‘bad’ passions in Chapter Eighty of *Middlemarch*. Finally, in Section III, a turn to *Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story* (1857) and a critical assessment of Spinoza’s ideas about intuitive cognition enables us to trace the discrepancy between Spinoza and Eliot’s ethics back to a fundamental difference in their thoughts about that most problematic passion, *melancholia*.

In March 1859, George Eliot informed John Blackwood that her next work of fiction, *The Lifted Veil*, was to be ‘a slight story of an outré kind – not a *jeu d’esprit*, but a *jeu de melancholie*.’<sup>1</sup> Later Eliot would defend that same ‘painful story’ on ethical grounds, as the

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gillian Beer, ‘Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and “The Lifted Veil”’, in *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch*, ed. by Ian Adam (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 91-115 (p. 95). For an extended comparative analysis of Spinoza’s *Ethics* and *The Lifted Veil*, see the author’s ‘George Eliot, Spinoza and the Ethics of Literature’, in *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, ed. by Beth Lord (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

embodiment of an idea that ‘justifies its painfulness’.<sup>2</sup> This process of oscillation – between attending to, and acknowledging the peril of attending to, sorrowful conditions and characters – pervades Eliot’s writing. In this article I demonstrate how Eliot’s ethical interest both in sorrowful passions and in reflective knowledge concerning sorrowful passions can be traced back to a moral treatise, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, which Eliot translated in the early 1850s. As we explore the relations between Spinoza’s treatise and Eliot’s fiction, we will have cause to question Dorothy Atkins’s claim that Eliot’s fiction merely ‘dramatizes’ the condition of human bondage and the process of gradual liberation from ‘inadequate’ knowledge that Spinoza ‘describes’.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, much light will be shed on Eliot’s depictions of dejection in *Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story* (1857) and *Middlemarch* (1871-2) by a closer assessment of Spinoza’s idea that power and virtue are synonymous (E IVDef.8.)<sup>4</sup>; of Spinoza’s declaration that knowledge is ‘the primary and only basis of virtue’ (E IVP26); and of Spinoza’s interpretation of the melancholic individual as a being that has become absolutely ignorant/ powerless/ devoid of virtue due to the influence of external forces (E IIIP11S; E IVP20S).

In *George Eliot and Spinoza*, Atkins asserted that Spinoza promotes a ‘three-stage process of understanding’, wherein humans liberate themselves from bondage by proceeding ‘from inadequate perceptions based on imagination or opinion, through adequate ideas based on reason, to ultimate understanding based on intuited knowledge of the fundamental essence

---

<sup>2</sup> George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil & Brother Jacob*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza* (Salzburg: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1978), p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. by George Eliot (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981). Rather than citing page references, I use Edwin Curley’s referencing system to cite the Book (in Roman numerals) and proposition/ axiom/ scholium (P/A/S, in Arabic numerals) of all excerpts from the *Ethics* (*E*).

of things’.<sup>5</sup> According to Atkins, ‘we can see this process at work in George Eliot’s novels’, which reveal how ‘successful’ characters, like Dorothea Casaubon,<sup>6</sup> come to be determined ‘solely by their essential human nature’,<sup>7</sup> whilst ‘unhappy and sinful’ individuals, like Rosamond Lydgate, ‘remain stuck in situations formed by ideas based on inadequate knowledge’.<sup>8</sup> Atkins thus captures some important features of Spinoza’s complex account of the way to salvation, which is, indeed, premised on a distinction between three kinds of knowledge: imaginative knowledge (including passionate knowledge); rational knowledge; and intuitive knowledge (E IIP40S). Ultimately, however, Atkins’s unwarranted assertions about Eliot’s characters are a product of her misunderstanding of Spinoza’s notion of the ‘inadequate’ idea.

Whereas Atkins assumed (and assumed that Spinoza and Eliot believed) that all knowledge derived from the passions is inferior to ‘adequate’ – rational or intuitive – knowledge, I will reveal that more light can be shed on both Spinoza’s and Eliot’s ethics by a comparative analysis of their ideas concerning three further distinctions: that between joyful and sorrowful passions (explored in Section I); that between good and evil emotions (explored in Section II); and that between passionate and non-passionate emotions (explored in Section III). This process will enable us to assess Spinoza’s and Eliot’s ideas about the genesis and effects of two types of sorrow, anguish and melancholia, in light of Spinoza’s claims about the ethical salience of each of the three kinds of knowledge. In different ways, Spinoza and Eliot reveal that that which makes ‘inadequate’ ideas inadequate as vehicles for acquiring perfect knowledge (i.e., their having to do with *particular relations*) is the same

---

<sup>5</sup> Atkins, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

thing that makes them necessary, though by no means sufficient, when it comes to the business of working out how to live.

## I

In Part III of the *Ethics*, ‘On the Nature and Origin of the Emotions’, Spinoza separates all passive transitions or *passiones* into two categories: modes of *laetitia* (interpreted by Eliot as pleasure) and modes of *tristitia* (interpreted by Eliot as pain). (E IIP11S). The former are elations or ideas about one’s transition ‘from less to greater perfection’ and the latter are dejections or ideas about one’s transition ‘from greater to less perfection’ (E IIIDef.Aff.2-3).<sup>9</sup> For Spinoza, all that we know about the power of particular things to affect us, we know by virtue of these passions, or by passions that are ‘derived from’ or ‘compounded of’ *laetitia*, *tristitia* and *cupiditas* (desire) (E IIP56). As the neurobiologist Antonio Damasio has recently posited in *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, Spinoza recognized that ‘the cultural construction of what *ought* to be considered good or bad’ depends on foundations laid and maintained by the passions, conceived as ‘ideas of the body in the process of manoeuvring itself into states of optimal survival’.<sup>10</sup> As Damasio explains, it is by recognising and categorising certain types of internal transition as modes of *laetitia* or *tristitia* that beings equip themselves with ‘maps of joy and sorrow’, and it is these maps that mark the way to states of ‘greater functional harmony’ or to states of ‘functional disequilibrium’, respectively.<sup>11</sup> It would be hard to find a clearer demonstration of the virtue

---

<sup>9</sup> Amelie Rorty offers *elation* and *dejection* as translations of *laetitia* and *tristitia* on the grounds that these terms ‘better capture Spinoza’s view that ... [the passions are] expression[s] of a *change* [...] in the body’s powers or vitality’ in ‘Spinoza on the Pathos of Idolatrous Love and the Hilarity of True Love’, in *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, ed. by Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 352-371 (p. 371).

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 137-8.

of forming these maps and of ‘stamping’ them with ‘appropriate saliences’<sup>12</sup> than can be found in Chapters Seventy-Seven to Eighty of *Middlemarch*, to which we will now turn.

As Will Ladislaw registers the fact that the woman that he loves, Dorothea Casaubon, has discovered him addressing another woman, Rosamond Lydgate, ‘with low-toned fervour’<sup>13</sup> in the Lydgates’ dining-room, Eliot enables us to see how a being’s ‘decision-making space’ might be fruitfully ‘narrowed’ by the cognitive work performed by its passions.<sup>14</sup> As Damasio asserts, our passions prepare the way for more complex deliberative processes by conferring ‘positive or negative signals’ on present ‘events’ and possible ‘options’ before any ‘nonautomated’ mental activity occurs.<sup>15</sup> Thus, as Dorothea departs and Rosamond ‘lays the tips of her fingers on Will’s coat-sleeve’, Eliot’s narrator begins to chart the evolution of Will’s earliest, ‘inadequate’ judgments

“Don’t touch me!” he said, with an utterance like the cut of a lash, darting from her, and changing from pink to white and back again, as if his whole frame were tingling with the pain of the sting. (*M*, 777)

This being’s observation that its ‘whole frame’ is stinging with pain is its first recognition that a dejection of considerable magnitude is occurring; and its marking of Rosamond’s fingertips as the source of that sting is its earliest effort to add appropriate salience to its ‘inadequate’ idea of that dejection. By this point, if the being has acquired the habit of recognizing all modes of *tristitia* that involve ‘the idea of an external cause’ as cases of hatred, it will have inferred that it here hates Rosamond (E IIP13S). Having done so, and having recognised also that he is affected by ‘a horrible inclination to stay and shatter’ the object of his hatred (*M*, 778), Will is able to recognize the transition that he is undergoing as

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. 165; pp. 178-79.

<sup>13</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 777. Subsequent citations from this edition will be referenced, in parentheses, as *M* followed by the page number.

<sup>14</sup> Damasio, pp. 147-8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 147-8; 167.

a mode of anger, conceived as dejection accompanied by ‘the desire to inflict injury on an object of hatred’ (E IIP40S). Ultimately, it is only because Will ‘acknowledge[s]’ some ‘law’ against this emotion, that - though pacing around with ‘the restlessness of a wild animal’ - he compels himself to ‘vent [...] his rage’ indirectly, ‘snatching up Rosamond’s words ... as if they’, and not her finger-tips, ‘were reptiles to be throttled and flung off.’ (M,778). In order to appreciate Spinoza’s and Eliot’s ideas about the genesis and virtue of such ‘repressive law[s]’, we must shift our attention to Part IV of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza endeavours to develop ‘dictates of reason’ that could be warranted by an ‘adequate’ understanding of the cognitive limits of the work conducted by each particular passion-type.

## II

Given his belief that power is virtue (E IVDef.8.), Spinoza might be expected to promote all power-enhancing (i.e., joyful) *passiones* and to oppose all sorrowful *passiones*. As Spinoza scholar Michael Lebuffe has recently argued, however, he rather ‘conceives of the passions, both forms of joy and forms of sadness, as bad for people just because they create a kind of imbalance.’<sup>16</sup> To make sense of Spinoza’s idea that some forms of disempowerment can be good, we must consider a distinction that he draws between two modes of *tristitia*: *melancholia* and anguish/*dolor* (E IIP11S). Having asserted that the term anguish applies ‘when one part of [a being] is more affected than the rest’ and that the term *melancholia* applies when ‘the whole being’ is affected, Spinoza deduces that of all possible transitions to lesser perfection only *melancholia* is necessarily evil (E IVP42). As such, there is a sense in which Spinoza acknowledged that it is possible for all types of passive transition *but melancholia* to be good.

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael Lebuffe, ‘The Anatomy of the Passions’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. by Olli Koistinen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 188-222 (p. 221).

Spinoza's distinction between a species of sorrowful passion – anguish – that might sometimes be trusted, both as an interpreter and as a guide, and a species of sorrowful passion – *melancholia* – that must never be trusted closely coheres with the difference that Eliot invites us to observe in Chapter Seventy-Eight of *Middlemarch*. There, when Will curses Rosamond, her body merely registers 'a bewildering novelty of pain' (*M*, 779). As a result, Rosamond 'almost [loses] the sense of her identity'; by the end of the chapter, she is 'tottering in the midst as a lonely bewildered consciousness' (*M*, 780). If this radically passive transition can certainly be said to be 'bad' for Rosamond, this is only because it is epistemologically useless. Meanwhile, however, Will's relatively active sorrowful transition is relatively good. As Spinoza would assert and Eliot intimates, it is good insofar as it enables him to recognise how central a role his 'good' relation to Dorothea has been playing in his attempt to maintain a particular 'equilibrium of life functions'.<sup>17</sup> As a mode of anguish, it enables him to see that he 'never had a *preference* for [Dorothea], any more than [he had] a preference for breathing' and it enables him to associate the idea of his loss of her with the idea of having 'dropped into hell' (*M*, 778).

An analysis of Dorothea's shifting conceptions of the salience of her relation to Will will now enable us to refine and revise our ideas about the virtue of the passions. By recognising and analysing three clear transitions in Dorothea's thinking over the course of Chapter Eighty, we will be able to recognise how that chapter tentatively dramatises the way in which ideas afforded by three distinct 'kinds' of knowledge might radically change one's conceptions about one's *passiones* and their objects. Since the first of Dorothea's three transitions is effected by a particularly discriminating, *anguished* assessment of her relation to Will, it will be fruitful to approach that transition via Spinoza's account of the conditions under which modes of *tristitia* can be virtuous, as presented in the forty-third proposition of

---

<sup>17</sup> Damasio, p.174.

Part IV of the *Ethics*. Explicating Spinoza's argument, Lebuffe asserts that if 'one affect (pleasure, at 4P43) acts on one part of the body in such a way that it outstrips (*superet*) the others', then the passion that Spinoza conceives as its opposite '(pain, at 4P43)' can function as a corrective for the excessively-affected part, bringing it 'back into the service of the whole body's striving.'<sup>18</sup> Below, an analysis of Dorothea's initial, *indignant* response to Will will help us to recognise how a complex derivation of dejection and desire – Spinoza's *indignatio* – might fruitfully 'outstrip' the excessive approval of a love-object (*favor*) that Spinoza conceived as its opposite (E IIP22S).

As any reader of *Middlemarch* will know, Dorothea has a propensity (and, indeed, a conscious desire) to believe in a neighbour's innocence, 'even if the rest of the world belie[s] him' (*M*, 734). As she conceives Will's 'low-toned' address to Rosamond, however, the narrator informs us that she 'never [felt] animated by a more self-possessed energy' (*M*, 775):

It was as if she had drunk a great draught of scorn that stimulated her susceptibility to other feelings [...] She had never felt anything like this triumphant power of indignation [...] and she took it as a sign of new strength (*M*, 775-6).

It is not until the eightieth chapter of *Middlemarch* that the idea that Dorothea has experienced a pain-induced *increase* in power is put to the test (*M*, 786). Initially, the 'excited throng' that Dorothea's emotions underwent in Chapter Seventy-Seven seems to have been outstripped by concomitant increases in Dorothea's susceptibility to a disempowering concatenation of *passiones*, including 'jealous offended pride'; an 'anger [that flames] out in fitful returns of spurning reproach'; and 'despair' (*M*, 786-7). Ultimately, however, as Dorothea emerges from 'the waves of suffering' and once again acquires some 'power of thought', the result is clearly not entirely evil (*M*, 786).

---

<sup>18</sup> Lebuffe, p. 217.

From an ‘inadequate’ perspective, Dorothea’s indignation does her a great deal of good, since of all the passions only this one can outstrip her propensity to confer favourable interpretations and afford her a truer/ more empowering understanding of her past and present relations to Will (*M*, 734). As Dorothea oscillates between conceiving Will favourably, as ‘the bright creature whom once she had trusted’, and conceiving Will indignantly, as ‘a changed belief exhausted of hope’, her anguish informs her that she “‘did love him!’” (*M*, 786). Thus, as Dorothea ‘discover[s] her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of despair’, ‘the mysterious incorporeal might of her anguish’ empowers her with ethically-salient ‘inadequate’ knowledge (*M*, 786).

It is only later, however, when Dorothea stops ‘wrestling with her grief’ and ‘make[s] it a sharer in her thoughts’, that she is able to ‘live through that yesterday morning deliberately, forcing herself [...] to think of it as bound up with another woman’s life’ (*M*, 787). As Dorothea now endeavours to conceive Rosamond as ‘a woman towards whom she had set out with a longing to carry some clearness and comfort’ (*M*, 787), she undergoes a second and – from Spinoza’s perspective – far more virtuous transition. Indeed, now that Dorothea’s deliberations are informed by rational ideas about the nature and effects both of her ‘jealous indignation’ and of her antecedent ‘longing’ (now conceived as instantiations of the abstract passion-types that we have here been discussing), she is no longer capable of conceiving her indignation as ‘good’ (*M*, 788). In the words of Eliot’s narrator, ‘the dominant spirit of justice’ within Dorothea here reveals ‘the truer measure of things’, ‘[just] as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance’ (*M*, 788).

Crucially, Dorothea is still considering nothing else besides the homeostatic function of her passions, but now she is conceiving her passions not only as parts of herself, but also as parts of the broader ‘social organisation’ (E IVP40). As such, her ‘second attempt to see

and save Rosamond' (*M*, 790) might be conceived Spinozistically, as the necessary result of her renewed commitment to 'just' rules of behaviour (E IVP37S2). Because of the general susceptibility of human beings to 'terrible collapse[s] of illusion', such as that which Rosamond undergoes as an object of Will and Dorothea's scorn (*M*, 780), Spinoza theorises that it is both good and right for humans to construct, and then consent to abide by, rules that will insure each one of them against the condition of complete disempowerment that he calls *melancholia*.

Judging from this 'adequate' perspective, Spinoza concludes that 'whatever we desire as a result of being affected by [...] emotions related to hatred' is 'evil', not because it necessarily diminishes our power but because it necessarily elicits 'discord' in the state (E, IVP45Coroll.2.). Ultimately, however, precisely because Dorothea does *not* experience this law against anger as 'repressive', her decision *does* empower her directly. As such, our final task must be to assess whether the joyous vision of herself as 'a part of that involuntary, palpitating life' with which Dorothea now becomes blessed can be interpreted as a sign of her having undergone a further (and final) transition, to Spinozan salvation (*M*, 788). In order to address that question, we must first familiarise ourselves with Spinoza's distinction between conceiving oneself 'inadequately' (i.e., as related to other beings) and conceiving oneself intuitively (i.e., as one is in oneself, *qua* part of Nature/God/Substance) (E VP29S).

### III

The final proposition of the *Ethics* asserts that the blessedness afforded by intuitive cognition is 'not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself' (E VP42&Dem.). This is because to have an 'adequate' idea of oneself is not only to *conceive oneself as*, but also to *become motivated by*, nothing but one's inalienable desire to thrive. According to Spinoza, to conceive oneself 'adequately' is to stop being affected by 'passive' (because relational)

elations, dejections and desires, and to become affected by an active desire to thrive that precedes all relations and the active relation that follows from desiring to be what we are (E IIP58-9). Now, when Dorothea decides that ‘the objects of her rescue [are] not to be sought out by her fancy’, she effectively decides to conceive herself in this second Spinozan manner (*M*, 788). At least temporarily, she stops being motivated by her newly-acknowledged passion for Will (or by the confused idea that her capacity to thrive is inextricably bound up with the preservation of a certain relation to that particular being); and becomes motivated, instead, by an active desire to remain a virtuous and empowering rescuer of objects, no matter what those objects are or what her antecedent relation to those objects happens to be. It is not that Dorothea stops having ‘inadequate’ ideas, for her thoughts about what to do in the present still concern her relation to other beings, such as Rosamond. Now, however, Dorothea’s ‘inadequate’ ideas about herself and her relations have been illuminated by her intuitive understanding that every ‘individual’ is just ‘part’ of a universal web, all (relatively functional) parts of which have the power and pleasure of liberating other (relatively dysfunctional) parts from their sorrowful conditions (*M*, 788).

In Spinoza’s parlance, it could be said that by virtue of experiencing a qualitatively distinct mode of pleasure and conceiving her intuitive conception of herself *as part of* an involuntary palpitating life *as the cause of* that pleasure (*M*, 788), Dorothea experiences the ‘intellectual love of God.’ (E VP32Dem.) The key thing to note here is that, for Spinoza, Nature and God are different names for the same infinite and indivisible Substance (E IP14), which can be conceived ‘under the attribute of Thought’, as the sum of all ‘thinking things’, or ‘under the attribute of Extension’, as the sum of all ‘extended things’ (E IIP1-2). It is because he believed that that part of God’s mind which is the reader’s mind might liberate itself from its passions by acquiring an ‘adequate’ understanding of its real nature that Spinoza composed such a highly abstract moral treatise. Now, because Eliot’s

fictions concern concrete individuals, in contradistinction to Spinoza's abstract 'lines' and 'planes' (E III Pref.), it is evident that Eliot did not desire to effect so radical a departure from the first kind of knowledge as Spinoza did. At the same time, however, our analysis of Chapter Eighty of *Middlemarch* has given us cause to conclude that something akin to the intellectual love of God *did* maintain *some* role in Eliot's moral thought. In order to appreciate what that role was, we must shift our attention to one of the *Scenes of Clerical Life* that Eliot composed immediately after she finished translating Spinoza's *Ethics* in 1856. As we will see, those same Spinozan ideas that have illuminated the elations, dejections and desires of Dorothea in just one chapter in *Middlemarch* can likewise shed a great deal of light on the transitions undergone by Caterina Sarti over the twenty-one chapters of *Mr Gilfil's Love-Story*.

In the third chapter of *Mr Gilfil's Love-Story*, as Caterina reflects on the 'purgatory' that is her transition from the life of a Milanese orphan to the life of a lady at Cheverel Manor, she comes to associate the 'new dispensation of soap-and-water' that accompanies that transition with 'the sofa in Lady Cheverel's sitting-room' and proceeds to categorise her pain, appropriately, as a mode of 'initiatory anguish.'<sup>19</sup> Later, however, when Caterina's childhood sweetheart, Captain Anthony Wybrow, endeavours to kiss her, despite being engaged to Miss Assher, Caterina 'has just self-recognition enough left to be conscious that the fumes of charcoal will master [her] senses unless [s]he bursts a way for [her]self to the fresh air' (*MGL*, 135). Because Caterina is unable (or does not desire) to establish 'whether pain or pleasure predominate[s]', she soon loses sight of the 'clear rigid outline of painful certainty' that once informed – and ensured the success of – her inalienable endeavour to thrive (*MGL*, 135). Thus she becomes infected by 'fierce palpitations of triumph and hatred'

---

<sup>19</sup> George Eliot, 'Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story', in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 77-194 (p. 110). Subsequent citations from this edition will be referenced, in parentheses, as *MGL* followed by the page number.

(*MGL*, 130). Ultimately, as Caterina conceives that Anthony was, in fact, dying of a heart attack, when she was hurrying towards his location, ‘dream[ing] [...] in the madness of her passion, that she [could kill him]’ (*MGL*, 164), her desire to be is absolutely outstripped by a desire ‘to confess how wicked she *had been*, that [others] [...] might punish her’ (*MGL*, 170; my italics). This is Dorothea’s journey in reverse. Whereas Dorothea joyously ascends from sorrowful ‘inadequate’ knowledge, via rational knowledge of the genesis and virtue of the passions, to intuitive knowledge of the fundamental nature of particulars, Caterina joylessly yields from a state of active yearning, via bondage to *passiones* that are derivations of hatred, to *melancholia*.

Were Eliot merely endeavouring to reveal the universal truth and applicability of Spinoza’s ascent and descent narratives, we might expect her ‘successful’ characters to inform their more salvageable neighbours that their passionate loves and ambitions are truly ‘species of mania’ which ‘retain the mind in the contemplation of one object alone’, greatly increasing their susceptibility to the condition of total ignorance, disempowerment and self-loss that is *melancholia* (E IVP44S). Within *Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story*, we do, in fact, encounter a reading of Caterina’s condition that is Christian in form, but Spinozan in spirit. When Caterina confesses that ‘no one was ever so wicked’ as she, Eliot’s protagonist, Maynard Gilfil, endeavours to persuade her that she errs in associating herself with the ‘bad passions’ that contingently affected her (*MGL*, 185): ‘our thoughts are often worse than we are’, he explains: ‘we don’t see each other’s whole nature. But God sees that you could not have committed that crime’ (*MGL*, 185). If we bear in mind that Spinoza conceived the act of understanding oneself in light of one’s intuitive knowledge as the elation of one part of Nature/God accompanied by the idea of that same part as its cause, or as God loving Himself (E VP32), then it is clear to see that Eliot is seizing upon her first opportunity to make a revised version of Spinoza’s moral wisdom palatable to a predominantly Christian readership.

Ultimately, however, Caterina's return from the clutch of inescapable *melancholia* only lasts long enough to grant her new husband, Mr Gilfil, 'a few months of perfect happiness' (*MGL*, 192). Indeed, in the story's final paragraphs, Maynard's own, potentially 'plenteous' nature is 'crushed and maimed' by his passionate assessment of the salience of Caterina's death (*MGL*, 185; 194). As Eliot's narrator reflects, 'love meant nothing for [Maynard] but to love Caterina': with the loss of this object 'it seemed as if all pleasure had lost its vehicle.' (*MGL*, 178)

Meanwhile, in *Middlemarch*, it is Eliot's narrator who tempts us with a neat Spinozan moral, that 'we are on a perilous margin when we begin to look passively at our future selves' (*M*, 783). At the end of Chapter Seventy-Nine, Will Ladislaw is said to be 'arriving' at that margin: he imagines that 'the cruelty of his outburst to Rosamond has made an obligation for him' and (believing himself to have lost Dorothea) he dreads 'his own distaste for his spoiled life, which would leave him in motiveless levity' (*M*, 783). As these reflections on Will's 'pleasureless yielding to the small solicitations of circumstance' are so very closely followed by an account of Dorothea's joyful 'yearn[ing] towards the perfect Right' (*M*, 782-3; 788), Spinoza's association of activity both with virtue and with a qualitatively distinct mode of pleasure can hardly be considered irrelevant. At the same time, however, it is impossible to square Atkins's claim that Dorothea completes Spinoza's pilgrimage (a process that involves *becoming and remaining* unaffected by one's love for particular beings) with the narrator's testimony that Dorothea ultimately became a mother and acquired a reputation for getting overly 'absorbed into the life' of her second husband, Will Ladislaw (*M*, 836).

At this stage we *can* recognise a kind of success in Dorothea and Maynard's final descent, from a state of *active yearning* to assist abstract others to a state of *passive yielding* to their love for concrete others. Confronting that perilous margin between (potentially virtuous) anguish and (certainly vicious) melancholia, Spinoza was prepared to insure his

readers against loss by creating two fictions: one of a totally active transition to the perpetually-recurring act of becoming what we each always already essentially are; another of a totally passive transition to a state of total alienation from one's essence. Through presenting such episodes as Will's return from 'hell' and Caterina's descent from, then return to, 'purgatory', Eliot presents us with a more porous picture of different gradations of sorrow and with a clear sense of the virtue of oscillating between that knowing awareness of 'the largeness of the world' that affects the best of us (*M*, 788) and a loving acknowledgment of such 'small solicitations' as affect us all (*M*, 782-3). Ultimately, Eliot's own loving acknowledgment of the virtue of her protagonists' perilous investments is a testament to her refusal to embrace Spinoza's fictions.