

The Rise of the Private Self in Genesis One-Three

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Introduction

Deep within the narrative of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* there is a vision and a passage that haunts me. The vision is of Mr. Causabon: a self-proclaimed scholar with blinking eyes, an empty voice, and a weak bodily frame. He is alone, hunched over, and tormented by his perpetually unwritten "Key to all Mythologies". Despite my protestations, I recognize myself in Mr. Causabon and this vision excites some of my deepest sentiments, fears, and self-loathing: Frustration with my inability to gaze steadily at the objects I most want to embrace, fear of my desire to reduce the world's mysteries to a singular rational explanation, and sadness at the thought of life ending unshared and incomplete. Nonetheless, it is Eliot's explication of Mr. Causabon's melancholic life that haunts me the most. She writes: "For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self ---never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted." ²

What induces Eliot's sympathy and my fear, is Mr. Causabon's inability or unwillingness *to be present* in the world, *to be fully possessed* by the world, and to translate the various facets of the insular consciousness within him into things outside of himself; Mr. Causabon is *shivering*, he is *hungry*, and he is *dim-sighted*. I do not want to be Mr. Causabon. But how do I avoid being in the world as Mr. Causabon is? To answer this question there are further, more pressing questions I must ask: What does it mean *to be present* in the world? What does it mean *to be fully possessed* by the world? And what sort of hunger and shivering can possess us? Although Eliot does not give clear answers to these questions, she does provide a way to start thinking about them: Mr. Causabon's uneasy lot and all that it entails has as its cause the fact that he remains un-liberated from a self. But what does this mean? Does it mean that present-ness and full possession in and by the world require that we no longer conceive of ourselves as selves? Will we remain spiritually and intellectually hungry as long as we think of ourselves as selves? To be living, vibrant, and happy human beings must we give up belief in the self? But what would this look like and is it even possible? These are the questions that haunt me. And these are the questions that form the axis around which this paper revolves. In the remaining part I will not attempt to provide full and satisfactory answers to them. Instead, I propose that this way of thinking about the self, thinking that self-ness is the cause of our melancholy, our distance and dispossession of the world, and our failures as scholars is not a modern way of thinking but has ancient roots. We confront this way of thinking head on in the book of Genesis. In general, the narrative action of the book is propelled forward by acts of completion and separation, by the emergence of wholes and their degradation into parts and pieces. Nowhere is this more clearly laid out than in the first three chapters. There, we witness not just the origins of heaven and earth and all the things that inhabit them, we also witness the emergence of the "self" and the self-oriented way of being in the world. This self has a touch of the monstrous, the gross afterbirth of man and woman's eating of the tree of knowledge of good and bad; self-ness, it appears, does not befit our nature but is the tormented state of a fallen man.

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² Ch. 29. pp. 243-244. All references to *Middlemarch* come from George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. Ed. Gregory Maertz. Toronto, Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd, 2004.

I will explore this interpretation by looking at the nature of creation, including that of man and woman, as it is presented primarily in Genesis One. I will then examine the way in which man and woman diverge from this nature after they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad. I hope to show that prior to digesting the forbidden fruit, man and woman lived in the world as integral parts of a whole that constituted their identities and shaped their experiences of the world. After eating from the tree of knowledge of good and bad man and woman emerge as discrete, inviolable selves that experience the world in personal and private ways. In turning away from the interdependent network of relations and beings that defined them, man and woman turned inward, became distinct objects of reflexive action, and each understood his or her experiences as his or her own. Unfortunately, the rise of this private self did not bear a life of fullness, but a life that, like Causabon's, is full of loneliness, hunger, and lack-luster vision.

Genesis 1: The Way of the Creation, the Way of Wholeness

What is the nature of God's creative act? And what is the nature of the world that follows from it? To explore these questions, let us, so to speak, begin at the beginning. "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, "Let there be Light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness." (Genesis 1:1-4)³ This passage first draws our attention to the being and presence of God. And yet almost immediately we are moved to think that God was not the *only* being. In fact, as soon as we are aware of God, we are also aware of many more things. There is space, unformed material, water, an emanated wind, and darkness. More interestingly, these "things" do not appear to be *merely* present; they appear to be present as materials for God's creative activity. Light emerges into being in its separation from primordial darkness; God separates the primordial water and from it, the sky is birthed; and by a gathering together of this same primordial water the dry land and seas "appear". So, God's creative act is not an act of creation from nothing. Rather, when God begins to create heaven and earth he uses rudimentary material as a common background from which he will call forth the entirety of creation. But what is the nature of this act of "calling forth" creation? In Genesis One, every act of creation involves God both speaking and seeing. If sight and speech are essential to God's creative activity then his creative act is best understood as an act of articulation: the act of fitting together or jointing things into a coherent whole. For both seeing and speaking are activities in which "wholes" are brought into being. Sight begins with discrete, cognitively meaningless materials such as light, rays, photons, and neuronal signals. The act of seeing assimilates these visual components into a meaningful and integrated whole. The act of speaking is similar. Speech begins with materials such as letters and phonemes. In the uttering of a word these materials are integrated and take on new significance as parts of a whole. At the more advanced level, words become the material and speaking involves fitting them together into a coherent expression that not only has its own meaning but also imparts new meaning to the words that make it up.

So insofar as God's creative activity involves both sight and speech, it is an activity in which a whole is brought into being. He begins with an act of speech: "Let there be light" or "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." In these moments of creation, I understand God to be simultaneously engaged in elementary and advanced levels of speaking; he is simultaneously forming words *and* forming the larger coherent expression of which they are a part. His elementary act begins with a rudimentary alphabet composed of water, emanated wind, unformed material, and darkness. And just as a speaker combines and separates letters to form words, God variously separates and gathers his primordial letters to form new wholes: Light, Sky, Earth, and Seas. But these newly created wholes are not independent units, intrinsically disparate from one another; their meaning is contextual and their natures are constituted of one another. The nature of "Light" is constituted of primordial darkness; "Earth" is that which has its beginnings in water; the "Sea" can only be understood in the context of the water above and the Earth from which it is separated. This suggests that God's elementary act involves a more sophisticated act of speaking in which God utters his words in the context of a larger expression that determines their meaning and binds them intrinsically with one another. It is as if the words "Light", "Earth", "Seas", and "Sky" are said as part of a meaningful sentence that is never explicitly uttered but bound up in the very words he speaks.

³ All Biblical references come from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

So, when God calls forth light, sky, earth, and seas, he calls forth the whole of creation and brings these things into being *as* integral parts of this whole. But if through speaking God creates things *as integral parts of a whole* then what role does seeing play in God's creative activity? For insofar as seeing is also an act of articulation it appears to be a redundant component of the creative act. While I believe that seeing emphasizes the idea that God's creative act is one in which a whole is brought into being, I also believe that it provides further information about the nature of this whole. First, it seems to me that the "wholes" that are brought about in speaking are different in kind from those brought about in seeing. The whole that comes to be in speech is akin to a harmony or the wholeness we attribute to a musical composition. In these cases, wholeness comes about *over time* through an arrangement of disparate musical sounds and the nature of this whole is principally constituted of the arrangement of its parts. But the whole that seeing brings into being is *immediately* present and appears to exist both with the parts that compose it and in isolation from them. This suggests that in speaking *and* seeing creation, God creates a whole that exists both *at once* as a meaningful whole and as a whole whose nature is intrinsically and reciprocally constituted of the parts of which it is composed. Second, the activity of seeing indicates that God is immediately present with creation. Literally speaking, seeing requires proximity between the see-er and the object seen. More interestingly, seeing seems to involve a reduction of the metaphysical distance between the see-er and the object. When we have a visual perception we are mostly able to determine its source and, in doing so, we give form to our visual perception. Understood in this way, when we see something *we* determine its nature and thereby entangle it metaphysically with our own. Likewise, when God sees creation, he is not only near to it, but also entangling himself intrinsically within every part of it. Because God's creative act involves sight, speech, and the use of common material, the created world is *at once* a whole whose parts are bound together in ties of material *and* formal kinship. As we read further on in the text this wholeness of creation is deepened and the interdependency of its parts is enriched and extended:

Genesis 1:20

"God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky."

Genesis 1:24

"Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind."

Genesis 1:26

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Like earlier passages, these verses indicate that God does not create *ex nihilo*: He directs the *waters* to bring forth swarms of living creatures, the *earth* to bring forth wild beasts, and *God* to make man. And yet here, God explicitly calls forth his creations from materials that are *fit* sources for them. Water, which initially gave rise to both the sky and the sea, is the appropriate source of buoyant creatures whose natures allow them to inhabit these places; dry earth is the fit source of heavy animals that graze the land; and God is the fit source of man, who will rule creation. So insofar as light, earth, sky, and seas are intrinsically bound up with one another, and insofar as from these things God calls forth more of his creations, entangling them intrinsically in bonds of fitness, all of creation is kin and every part is essentially linked to every other part. Hence, no part of creation stands alone as an isolated and independent unit. This is equally, if not especially true of man and woman. In Genesis One, man and woman are simultaneously *called forth* from material that is suitable for their particular creation. Because they come to be through God's speech, they, like the rest of creation come to be as parts whose identities are constituted of the whole of creation. But more interestingly, they are called forth simultaneously. The simultaneity of their creation portrays man and woman as a mysterious "twone" *and* suggests that they are substantively undifferentiated beings. In fact, there appears to be no qualitative or numerical difference between them: man and woman are that which is called forth from God.

And yet, in being the only creatures that are called forth from God, man and woman are differentiated from the rest of creation. God says "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Here, the word 'image' is used to translate the Hebrew word 'selem' which is best translated as 'counterpart'. 'Selem', it should be noted, is different from other Hebrew words that are also often translated as 'image'. For example, 'semel', which means a resemblance or likeness, or 'maskith', which means a picture or representation. With this in mind, God's words can be re-conceptualized as: "Let us make man and woman as our counterparts."

Envisioning man and woman as God's counterparts has interesting implications. First, 'counterpart' is a relational term and a counterpart is something whose identity is defined in terms of something else. If man and woman are created *as* God's counterparts then they are created as relational beings whose identities are constituted of God and defined in terms of their relationship with God. This is further confirmed by the fact that God is both the creator *and* the material fit for the creation of man and woman. Second, if man and woman are God's counterparts then it would seem that their identity is essentially linked not just to God but also to the rest of creation. After God says, "Let us make man and woman as our counterparts..." he offers an explication: "They shall *rule* the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."⁴ According to this explication, man and woman are God's counterparts because they will rule creation. At first glance, the underlying idea seems to be this: God rules the entirety of creation. As God's counterparts, man and woman will play a similar but circumscribed role, ruling only the earth and living creatures. The problem with this interpretation is that it is not obviously supported by the text. In Genesis One, there is no sharp metaphysical divide between the earth and the rest of creation. But more importantly, in Genesis One, God creates, makes, speaks, and sees but he is never described as ruling creation. So in what sense are man and woman, who rule creation, God's counterparts?

Although God is never described as 'ruling' and man and woman are never described as 'creating', the language of 'counterparts' suggests that ruling and creating are analogous in some respects. So, if we can decipher a conception of ruling that is analogous to God's creative activity then we can arrive at a clearer understanding of the sense in which man and woman are God's counterparts. As a result, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of the sense in which man and woman are essentially linked to the rest of creation. For starters, we know that God's creative activity is one in which a whole is brought into being. So if ruling and creating are analogous then, the least we can say is that ruling involves wholes. Fortunately, we also have some textual indications of what man and woman's rule is **not**. Man and woman's rule is not an act of organizing or bringing order to chaos *because* God creates the world as an ordered whole. Man and woman's rule is also not an act of domination because the Hebrew text differentiates "the rule" of man and woman and "the dominion" of the sun and the moon. The two great lights are said to dominate in the sense that they *overlook* the earth and, in conveying information about days, nights, and years, they are the most important aspects of the sky.⁵ Therefore, when God creates man and woman as beings that rule creation, he does not create beings that overlook creation from a distant and elevated position nor does he create beings that exist independently as the most important aspects of creation.

If man and woman's rule is neither dominating nor ordering and if it is analogous to God's creative activity, then their rule seems best understood as an act of maintaining or tending creation. When God created the heavens and the earth and all the things that inhabit them he created a world whose nature includes motion, change, and growth: the sun and moon exchange positions in the firmament, the earth sprouts vegetation that bears seeds, and the swarms of watery and dry living creatures reproduce, fill, and consume the earth. If in the midst of these incessant changes, the world is to continue as a whole then something or someone needs to maintain it as a whole and to provide those things that allow it to survive as a whole. This, I propose is the task of man and woman: to maintain creation as a whole. Understood in this way, man and woman's rule *is* analogous to God's creative act because it is something like a perpetual re-constitution of the whole of creation. Hence, we now have a clearer understanding of the sense in which man and woman are God's counterparts. God brings wholes into being. As God's counterparts, man and woman play a similar role, maintaining creation as a whole through its incessant motion, change, and growth. We are now in a better position to see the way in which man and woman's identity is essentially linked to the rest of creation. If man and woman's rule is an act of maintaining creation as a whole and if they *are* an intrinsic part of creation, then man and woman's task to rule is essentially a task to rule themselves and man and woman relate to creation as a part of themselves. This is a difficult point to digest because we often want to think of identity as personal and the self as an inner reality that is distinct from the external world that it observes, experiences, and rules. In this case, however, man and woman are porous and unbounded; they exist "out there", so to speak, in a cosmic order that constitutes who they are.

⁴ Genesis 1:26.

⁵ Genesis 1:14-19.

Therefore, man and woman's relation to the whole of creation is one of reciprocal entanglement: just as they are constituted of the whole of creation, the created world is what it is because of man and woman.⁶ This helps to explain why, after creating man and woman God does not distinctly recognize them as being good. Instead, following their creation, "God saw *all* that he had made, and found it very good."⁷ This lack of distinction suggests, first, that man and woman's identity is constituted wholly of the world to which they belong. But it also, more interestingly, suggests that man and woman constitute the wholeness of creation. Earlier, I proposed that man and woman are created as rulers whose task is to maintain creation as a whole through its incessant changes. The wholeness of creation that man and woman *maintain* is a metaphysical wholeness that is attributable to God and his creative activity. But the wholeness that *proceeds* from man and woman's rule is a temporal wholeness, a wholeness through time. Understood in this way, man and woman constitute the wholeness of creation because their existence extends its metaphysical wholeness into and through time. If man and woman constitute the wholeness of creation and if their identity is constituted of creation then man and the world are entangled intrinsically and reciprocally with one another. Any attempt to distinguish them destroys not only each of them but also the whole which they form and that of which they are a part. Hence God's behavior after creating man and woman is understandable: in creating them God sees all of creation, whole and complete.

Together, all of these observations of Genesis One reveal that man and woman are interdependent beings whose identities are constituted of God, one another, and the whole of creation. Despite its differences, Genesis Two provides essentially the same picture. There, man and woman are not created simultaneously: man is formed from the dust of the earth, God breathes his spirit into him, and woman is created from man. Insofar as man is formed of both the dust of the earth and God's breath, he is entangled intrinsically with every part of creation. For the "Earth" is that which has its beginnings in water; and water, in turn, is that which forms the nature of the firmament. If we were to go on and unravel the entire thread that knots together all of creation we would see that man contains all of it essentially within him. Furthermore, although man and woman are not created simultaneously they are still portrayed as a reciprocally entangled "twone". After God fashioned one of man's ribs into a woman and brought her to him, man said: "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, for from man was she taken. Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh."⁸ The name that man, *hadam*, gives to woman, *hadamah*, is a descriptive name that connotes woman's essential sameness with man and is visually represented in his depiction of her as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". If woman is literally made of the same flesh that forms man then man and woman are qualitatively and, in some sense, numerically identical. Moreover, man and woman are one flesh not only as a result of woman being formed of man but also as a result of man clinging to woman. This suggests that man and woman are reciprocal and equivalent sources of their existence and, as such, are essentially undifferentiated beings that are equally bound up with God and the whole of creation.

Because man and woman are intrinsically interdependent beings, the same things that constitute their identity form their experience of the world. In other words, man and woman do not have distinct consciousnesses that give rise to essentially personal experiences of the world; they experience the world *as or with* God, one another, and the rest of creation. In the last verse of Genesis Two, we are told that man and woman were naked but felt no shame.⁹ Shame is an essentially public emotion: we feel shame when our defects are exposed to others and when we evaluate ourselves negatively in the eyes of others. Moreover, our attempt to hide when we feel shame is an attempt to remove ourselves from its perceived source in something external to us. Man and woman are uncovered, naked, and feel no shame not because they have been positively evaluated by one another but because they are *incapable* of feeling shame. They are incapable of shame because they are constituted of the world, God, and one another, and relate to each as to parts of themselves. Therefore, there is no external public that could serve as the source of their shame. And, man and woman experience the world as a singular whole. This explains why woman knows not to eat of the tree even though God never gave her a direct command. If man and woman are undifferentiated beings then they have one consciousness and are subjects of the same thoughts, feelings, experiences, and commands.

⁶ As a side note: I believe this understanding of man and woman's rule goes a long way in helping to explain the idea that freedom is an essential and unique characteristic of man and woman. According to this understanding of man and woman there is nothing external to them that can compel their actions; they are essentially free.

⁷ Genesis 1:31.

⁸ Genesis 2:23-24.

⁹ Genesis 2:25.

So to the extent that man is aware of the prohibition against eating from the tree, woman is identically aware of the same prohibition. For similar reasons, man eats the fruit woman gives to him. "When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes and that the tree was a desirable source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate."¹⁰ At first, it seems surprising and inexplicable that man would eat of the fruit so readily without any prior act of deliberation. But if we think of man and woman as an intrinsically entangled being that experiences the world as a singular whole then man sees the fruit as woman sees it and no separate act of deliberation is needed or possible. In fact, the knotted nature of man and woman suggests that when woman eats the fruit man has also eaten the fruit. But man and woman experience the world not only *as one another*, but also *as the world and as God*. When God first plants the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and bad he describes them as "pleasing to the sight and good for food."¹¹ Later, when woman is confronted by the serpent she sees that the "tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes". It is striking that such similar words are used to depict both God and woman's awareness of the tree. It is as if woman (and man) experiences the tree as it is and with the same consciousness as God.

If their consciousness is this intimately and intrinsically bound up with God's then we can begin to make sense of their eating of the tree of knowledge of good and bad. "The serpent said to the woman, 'You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad.' When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate."¹² On the one hand, if "being like a divine being" is not synonymous with having wisdom then woman is unmoved by the serpent's promise of divine similarity. She is unmoved because she is constituted of God and experiences the world as God. On the other hand, if "being like a divine being" is synonymous with having wisdom then woman is moved by the serpent's words and is conscious of herself as being different from God. And yet, if woman hears the serpent's promise of divine similarity as the promise of being wise then woman has some sort of knowledge of the divine. But how does she know that divine beings are wise beings? Perhaps she *believes* that divine beings are wise because the serpent described them as having knowledge. But, woman does not just believe that the tree is a desirable source of wisdom, she *sees* that it is a desirable source of wisdom. So there is a sense in which woman sees that God is a wise being with the certainty and immediacy characteristic of a sensory perception. The immediacy of her experience suggests that woman's consciousness is so intimately bound up with God's that she is as aware of God's nature as she is of a tree in front of her. Therefore, while it may not be the case that man and woman and God have *identical* conscious experiences, they are so bound up and immediately present with one another, that man and woman's experience of the world is an experience of and with God.

That being said, the question still remains: why do man and woman eat the fruit? I am not quite sure why (this is a topic a bit beyond the scope of this paper) But, my understanding of the text leads me to think that woman eats the fruit for the same reasons we are all often drawn to eat: to maintain her nature. Generally speaking, not all food is equally fit for maintaining the particular nature of a living being. When we function according to our nature we instinctually desire food that allows us to flourish and to actualize that nature. Woman appears instinctually drawn to the fruit and to have a non-propositional awareness that it is food that is good *for her*. This suggests that the fruit is suitable for woman's nature and provides her with the means to maintain and flourish as the being that she is. If this is the case then woman is or has the potential to be divine and she has a nature that includes knowledge of good and bad or, at the very least, the capacity to know it. Hence man and woman eat because the fruit is beautiful, tasty, and provides them with the means to maintain their divine nature. Whether or not one accepts this analysis of man and woman's reasons for eating the forbidden fruit, the depiction of them as interdependent beings that are constituted of a world that shapes their experience remains strongly supported by the text. In fact, the way in which they are portrayed after they eat from the tree provides powerful support for this view. A couple of questions about the context of man and woman's transgression provide a good starting point for making this clear. Why is the dire act depicted as an act of *eating*? And what is the significance of the fact that man and woman eat from a tree in the *middle*?

¹⁰ Genesis 3:6.

¹¹ Genesis 2:9.

¹² Genesis 3:4-6.

With regard to the former question: When we eat we bring the outside, in, and then break it up into parts and fragments. This suggests that an act of *internalization and disintegration* is the fit source of man and woman's postlapsarian natures. If the nature of a source indicates the nature of that to which it gives rise then postlapsarian man and woman are internalized and fragmented beings. It is as if, in eating, their prior identity "out there" in the cosmic order is brought in and transformed into an internal reality that becomes the source of order. This is why, after eating from the tree of knowledge of good and bad, man and woman are portrayed as offering explanations of their actions. Their explanations exhibit a new need to order the world and to do so from their own inner resources.¹³ Furthermore, man and woman provide *separate* explanations and each is given in terms of personal feelings of fear and anger at being manipulated.¹⁴ Hence, in eating, man and woman not only internalize the whole that constituted their natures, but also disintegrate it. As a result, they fall out as distinct, shattered remnants that are detached from the world in which they live. A similar idea underlies the depiction of man and woman eating from a tree in the middle of the garden. The fact that the garden has a middle reveals that it is a whole of some kind. And, a middle is often thought of as a source of wholeness and that in reference to which things are related. Taken literally, man and woman eat something from the middle. In doing so, man and woman internalize the source of wholeness and disintegrate their intrinsic bond with the rest of creation. Therefore, the location of the tree, in addition to the act of eating, portrays man and woman's transgression as the simultaneous internalization and disintegration of wholeness. On both accounts, they emerge as independent wholes.

After man and woman eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad, "the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths."¹⁵ If seeing is an act of articulation then after man and woman eat from the tree each brings him or herself into being as a newly articulated, independent whole. They are also conscious of themselves as *independent* wholes because they now see themselves as naked and experience shame. Their experience reveals that a distinction between the internal and the external, self and other, has emerged. For each, the other has become a distinct external subject that is the source of shame. And, insofar as each experiences shame and each contrives to cover his or her body, each has become conscious of his/her experiences as his/her own and each has become an object of reflexive action. Their new awareness of one another as distinct and separate selves is revealed in their actions when God confronts them. When God asks man if he ate the forbidden fruit, he replies, "The woman you put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate." And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate."¹⁶ Although both man and woman admit to eating the fruit, each is reluctant to take responsibility for his or her action. Man appears to blame both God and woman for his action and woman appears to blame the serpent for hers. In being portrayed as placing blame, man and woman are each portrayed as having an experience or awareness of self-ownership. But the experience of an action as one's own is wrapped up in being conscious of oneself as an independent and autonomous being. Moreover, insofar as man blames woman and woman blames the serpent, man and woman perceive woman and the serpent, respectively, as distinct beings that are also capable of independent and autonomous action. Furthermore, man no longer perceives woman as part of himself as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". Instead, he now perceives her as the being God put by his side not the one God formed from his side.¹⁷ His description reveals their newly disjointed natures and their new awareness of one another as separate selves. Because they are now essentially separate, the names hadam and hadamah are no longer fit; woman needs a new name that does not connote her essential sameness with man. So man re-names her, Eve.¹⁸ But if man and woman disintegrate the whole that used to constitute their natures then they become distant and disentangled not only from one another but also from God. After they covered themselves, "They *heard* the *sound* of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God..."¹⁹

¹³ This makes the serpent's promise of divine similarity strangely truthful: they are now like diving beings in creating the world in which they live. And it is true that their eyes are now opened: they are now in possession of their own eyes as opposed to seeing the world with the eyes of the world and God.

¹⁴ Genesis 3:8-12.

¹⁵ Genesis 3:7.

¹⁶ Genesis 3:12-13.

¹⁷ Genesis 3:12.

¹⁸ Genesis 3:20.

¹⁹ Genesis 3:8.

In the midst of an account that emphasizes vision, the appearance of “hearing” is surprising. Unfortunately, the text does not provide a precise account of the way in which man and woman perceived God prior to the act of eating. And yet, if man and woman were constituted of God and created as his counterparts, then they were probably visual beings that saw God. This is perhaps why woman refers to the forbidden tree in visual terms, as the tree in the middle, as opposed to the tree of knowledge of good and bad. Hence, I propose that man and woman’s “hearing” the sound of God is a new experience. Unlike vision, hearing can happen at a great distance, without significant proximity between the hearer and the source of the sound. In fact, when we hear something it is often difficult to locate its source. So insofar as man and woman are now described as *only* hearing God, they appear distant from God and less familiar with his presence. The text even describes man and woman as hearing the sound of God at the breezy time of day. If a breeze is blowing then sounds more likely become muffled and confused. Therefore, man and woman not only have difficulty locating God but also hearing the sound of him, at all. This new distance and separation is exhibited in their attempt to hide from him. Just as man and woman’s attempt to hide from one another reveals that they now perceive one another as separate selves, man and woman’s attempt to hide from God reveals that they are now separate from God and perceive him as a distinct, unrelated being. This is why, I believe, both man and woman are for the first time portrayed as having a direct conversation with God. Conversations happen because the participants perceive one another to be separate beings and, therefore, need some means to traverse the metaphysical distance between them.

Finally, God’s punishments reveal that man and woman are now also distant and disentangled from the rest of creation. “And to the woman, He said, ‘I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’. To Adam He said, ‘...Cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground---For from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust shall you return.’”²⁰ Every punishment God pronounces involves separation, distance, isolation, and enmity. The pain of childbirth presents an obstacle to woman’s urge for man and to her quest for immortality; man and woman are separated by conflicting desires and a new hierarchy of power divides them. These conditions make it difficult, if not impossible, for man and woman to see one another as second selves and to have similar conscious experiences of the world. As a result, they are alone and each is isolated in a world that cannot be shared. Man is also now at enmity with the earth that once constituted his nature; thorns and thistles keep him at a distance from it; his toil keeps him distant from his wife. For man, the earth has become a distinct source of pain, an object that can only be confronted, worked, ordered, and feared. When God’s punishments are understood in this way, as punishments of isolation, distance, and separation they do not appear arbitrary. Instead they appear to be *fit* punishments for man and woman’s transgression and their postlapsarian natures. If their transgression is the internalization and disintegration of wholeness and if, as a result, man and woman emerge as distinct, independent selves that experience the world in essentially personal ways then a fragmented world bearing loneliness, desire, and distance is a fit world for them, a world made for beings who are no longer a cohesive whole but heaps of dust.

Concluding Remarks

Mr. Causabon is a modern portrait of postlapsarian man. In the chapter from which I quoted earlier, Eliot refers to Causabon as an inadequate helpmate and uses the term ‘self’ more than five times to describe him. Unlike Dorothea, who thinks of the human being as “ a wonderful whole, the slow creation of interchanging influences”, Causabon is a man of intense self-consciousness who conceives of himself in atomistic terms: he is an individuated, inviolable, and un-translatable self. His enthusiasm for monographs and his desire to provide a *singular* key to the world’s mysteries are symptoms of this conception. And its effect is Causabon’s experience of a distant world from which he remains impassably aloof.

²⁰ Genesis 3:14-19.

He is incapable of sharing Dorothea's world and more often than not transmogrifies it according to his own principles of explanation; his intellectual life is derivative and he refuses to take on the hard task of translation; he evaluates himself with the eyes of his critics; and, like expelled man and woman, for whom the true world remains shrouded in darkness and guarded by cherubim, Causabon does not walk in his garden but observes it from the dusty windows of his study. In general, because his vision is dimmed by the shadow of a self, Causabon's world is a lonely world that he perpetually fails to behold. He shivers because he lacks the warmth concomitant with a sense of belonging and because he is terrified of 'otherness' that threatens to destroy him. He is hungry because his self-reflective explanations of the world fail to sate him and he never appears to draw any closer to the objects he desires. Causabon, Adam, and Eve haunt me because while I recognize how an atomistic conception of the self gives rise to the conditions of a melancholic and unfulfilled life, I do not have a clear vision of how to avoid being in the world as such a self. I can say things like 'I must live the world, not experience it as a stage for my actions or an object of my intellectual curiosity'. Or I can say, 'action not being'. Even though each of these "feels" right, I do not know what they mean, what they look like in practice, or if there is any sort of training for living in the world as an interdependent whole. And yet, just as Eliot provides us with the means for thinking about the cause of Causabon's melancholic life, she also appears to provide us with the means for conceptualizing a non-self oriented way of being in the world. One of the many things that 'Middlemarch' is, is a story about *love*. Perhaps the closest we get to our interdependent, intrinsically entangled nature is when we engage in the activity of loving, when we behold the world with the eyes of another or with the eyes of that mysterious third being that emerges in loving. Perhaps love is also the best prescription for us as learners. To avoid Causabon's failures and the hunger and shivering that possesses him, we must attempt to cross the distances that presumably separate us and take on one another and the world as parts of ourselves.