

Narrating Stories of Belief in *Middlemarch*

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Six weeks into marriage with Mr. Casaubon, the fusty clergyman and scholar of religious myth in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72), we find Dorothea seated in an inner room, contemplating her new situation, and "sobbing bitterly" (180). The narrator admits that "some discouragement, some faintness of the heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual" (182), but she goes on to explore the particularity of Dorothea's plight. As that account unfolds, we begin to understand how and why the marriage is not working out as Dorothea had hoped, and we see glimpses of the Casaubon that Dorothea now sees. The fact that the two of them are in Rome, "the city of visible history" (180), serves to increase the claustrophobia that Dorothea feels as she spends time with Casaubon and feels "with a stifling depression, that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither" (183). As is frequently the case in a novel with such a capacious philosophical vision, the scene invites readers to sympathize with the specificity of a relationship *and* think more generally about the nature of belief. In the essay that follows I want to follow suit by linking my reading of this novel with a set of larger reflections on the stories we tell about religious belief.

Although Eliot's narrator tries to avoid apportioning blame, there is little doubt that a major part of the problem with the marriage lies at the door of Mr. Casaubon. He is a man with few redeeming qualities, and most readers I speak to find him less likeable as they get to know him better. In many respects, Casaubon is an odd starting point for this essay.

There is nothing unusual in talking about a fictional character one does not especially care

for, but this is far from being the only reason why my interest in him merits further comment. I have written previously about not wanting to follow peers in looking to Eliot as a guide to nineteenth-century religion.¹ That reluctance stems partly from a sense that there is something almost Feuerbachian about the way so many scholars of nineteenth-century literature turn to Eliot as an exemplar of intellectual qualities they aspire to but do not possess. But the reluctance probably has more to do with my nervousness about the way in which Eliot so often ends up overwriting avowedly Christian stories of the world with her own more secular perspective.

If Eliot's fiction is a surprising place for me to begin an essay on belief, then the choice of Casaubon is stranger still. His struggles to believe—in God, in others, in the book he is writing—are often taken by those who specialize in Victorian literature as confirmation that the study of religion is going nowhere in the nineteenth century. Casaubon's life offers no more vitality than his scholarship, and I am not alone among readers of Eliot's novel in aspiring to be a very different person. Yet the more I have thought about my life in *Middlemarch*, to lean on the title and approach of Rebecca Mead's 2014 book, the more disturbed I am by how much I have in common with Eliot's fictional creation.² In the most general sense, all scholars of Victorian literature stand accused of living too much with the dead and dreaming of footnotes. But there are more specific points of connection to consider. Will Ladislav takes great delight in calling out Casaubon's inability to read German, and I feel compelled to confess that I failed that language exam at school, completed a PhD in theology without addressing my lack of knowledge, and became no more familiar with the language when I sat on the supervisory committee of a comparative literature student who had a chapter of her PhD on German literature. The parallel between Casaubon's linguistic limitations and my own might be dismissed as a sideshow. I might also

be able to set aside my recent realization that Casaubon is alarmingly close to me in age—when we first meet him, he is four years younger than I am now. And the increasing identification I feel when Mr. Brooke declares that “Casaubon has hurt [his eyes] ... with too much reading” (38) is a widespread affliction in our profession and not worth worrying about as a specific point of connection. More alarming is comprehending our mutual introversion, two middle-aged men who “talk very little” and sometimes compensate for their lack of ease with emotion by punctuating writing heavily with the hope of restoring some level of control over the interior life through doing so.³ The parallels get worse when I think about our shared struggles to work through doubts about our scholarship. I have never tried to write *the* key to all mythologies, and I have no wish to try and do so. But I have been involved with several introductions or companions to Victorian religion and literature, all of them offering an overview of sorts. In each case, and again as I write this essay, the work has been plagued by periods of procrastination and worries about why I am writing anything at all.

Many of Casaubon’s faults are rooted in his insular view of the world and corresponding failure “to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold ... but always to be scholarly and uninspired ... scrupulous and dim-sighted” (263). He is not the only inhabitant of Eliot’s provincial town to lack a wider vision, but his failures in this regard seem especially egregious given his vocation as a scholar. After all, this is a novel by one of the great intellectuals of the nineteenth century, told by a narrator who promotes an expansive vision of intellectual life. It is unsurprising, then, that readers are encouraged to feel disappointed by a scholar who seems incapable of thinking with ambition, breadth, or imagination. Although Casaubon has grand plans for the book he is writing, his search for the key to all mythologies is overwhelmed by caveats,

“minor monumental productions [that] were always exciting to Mr Casaubon” (264), and an obsessive need to justify starting points. As Will Ladislaw concludes, the pretentious figure of Casaubon is nothing more than an “elaborator of small explanations” (192). The weariness of thought that results from Casaubon’s insularity is the quality that Dorothea struggles with most during their ill-fated honeymoon. Her fear that a fanatical concern with making one’s work “unimpeachable” (262) will lead to a faded enthusiasm for saying anything at all finds support from the narrator of *Middlemarch*, who insists that Casaubon’s writing on religious myth has left the scholar “lost among small closets and winding stairs,” without “sight of any purpose which prompted him to these labours” (185). Investigations into where one should start, appropriate methods of study, and why others have focused on the wrong areas, become an imprisoning maze for Casaubon, and he finds himself incapable of articulating a line of thought that goes beyond negation.

We can see the affective consequences of Casaubon’s approach to scholarship at every turn. His preoccupation with method and scholarly procedure appears to make him miserable, arrogant, and intolerant of the work of others. For those of us who have a similar vocation, the characterization can make for an uncomfortable read. While most scholars in the humanities today have long given up on Matthew Arnold’s unconstrained optimism in the benefits of studying the best that is thought and known, we continue to hope that reading texts will help us acknowledge the limits of our understanding and, by extension, become better citizens of the world. It is a hope that I share. Yet my experiences in the profession leave me wondering whether Casaubon is as exceptional as I would like to think. Some of the smartest and best-read people I know work in Departments of English, but surprisingly few of them inspire me on a personal level by treating others in ways that I want to try and emulate. Good role models certainly exist, and I feel privileged to have

worked with some of them over the years. Yet their numbers are comparatively small, a worrying phenomenon given the talks we routinely deliver to potential students about the benefits of studying literature and learning to think critically. I do not think our discipline is full of inherently bad people, and I continue to believe that, somehow, the reading of literature has the potential to transform lives and reveal ways in which we might make a positive contribution to the world. But faced with a mixed experience of those who work in the profession, I am left to wonder what is going on. If the problem isn't the people or the books they read, might it be the case that there is something about our methods of working, and our willingness to fight about those methods rather than keep sight of the bigger picture, that is the problem?

A preoccupation with the why rather than the what of writing is widespread across the humanities and expressed through a variety of emphases: heated discussions about methodology, private anxiety about whether our words really matter, a preoccupation with epistemology, and an insistence that the most valuable transferrable skill we impart to students is the ability to penetrate appearances and see things as they really are.⁴ None of these emphases are the same, but I suggest they all spring, at least in part, from an underlying desire to justify our activity. That desire is shaped by the instrumentalizing pressures of modernity in our universities, which makes it increasingly hard to imagine types of knowledge that are not quantitative and do not foreground utility. As a result, those of us who work primarily with words rather than data, who spend as much time in the land of possibility as we do in the actual world, can be tempted to focus on the why rather than the what. We do so, I suggest, to convince ourselves and others that our professional activity rests on a solid foundation that legitimizes the work we undertake.

Scholars in the humanities are a broad church, and I appreciate that my reflections here may seem alien to some who work outside literary studies (and, most likely, some who work within the discipline). But I do not think the patterns I draw attention to in literary studies are unique. Religious Studies is famously concerned with methodological starting points, a trait that can be seen repeatedly across its books and syllabi. The study of theology, which often seeks to distinguish itself from Religious Studies, is a little less likely to dwell on questions of method. But since the Enlightenment, a sizeable number of works on systematic theology have given extended space to a prolegomenon. More recently, we can see how the philosophy of religion has become a particularly prolific area of theological study in the last few decades. Regardless of whether one identifies as a theologian or a specialist in Religious Studies, it increasingly seems that epistemology—the reasons that justify our religious commitments and the degree of confidence we can have in those reasons—is seen as offering the most appropriate way forward for the study of belief in a secular age.

Thinking about epistemology does not have to constrain our thinking, and I am acutely aware that there is more than a hint of methodological self-reflection in this essay. Distinguishing between questions of why and what is not always easy or helpful, but the bigger challenge is to stop the why from overwhelming the what. Linn Tonstad's work offers a compelling model of how we might maintain an interest in method *and* move on to other matters. Her writing wrestles with questions of method, but she manages to situate these concerns more widely by highlighting the personal and social stakes of our methodological reflections. Tonstad is especially good at pointing to how theology can look outwards and make a constructive contribution to the world. One of the tools she uses to help with this goal is to embrace the language of adequacy: "Adequacy, as I am using it, is not about the

full expression of something, but about a test that cannot be undertaken abstractly: it is an eminently personal and temporally indexed test. This is the test that truth-seeking must undergo in the context of the personal, social, perhaps also in the broadest sense religious lives that are the *place of truth*. ... Adequacy is a good-enough word..."⁵ In thinking about Tonstad's remarks, I am left to wonder whether acknowledging the value of adequacy might have helped Casaubon finish his book and make more space for the needs of others, including Dorothea.

If the language of adequacy is good enough, preventing discussions of belief from getting too caught up with preparatory matters, then the question arises of what we are moving on to. What would it mean to say more about the content of belief? The term belief is not unproblematic here, because of the propositional, individualistic, and cognitive framework with which it is typically associated. When belief is understood simply as intellectual assent to a set of propositions, it is likely to become dominated by epistemological scrutiny. This is because of modernity's pressure for scholarship to deal with public knowledge rather than faith, which is dismissed as a private concern.⁶ With this predicament in mind, I am sympathetic to Charles Taylor's efforts in the opening pages of *A Secular Age* (2007) to expand our talk of religion by moving away from an emphasis on propositions and attend instead to the conditions of belief, "the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other" (5). Taylor's approach expands the vista of what we might include when talking about the content of belief, and his insistence that the things we believe are inseparable from the conditions that give rise to them is convincing and a key feature of his seminal work.

The approach taken by Taylor owes something to late-twentieth-century developments in Religious Studies. These saw the emergence of interest in the concept of

lived religion and an awareness of the new stories of religion it allowed scholars to tell.⁷ Like Taylor, I find the concept of lived religion useful and revealing, but I also fear that focusing on this approach exclusively can lead us to overlook the theoretical contributions that doctrine makes available. Admittedly, when doctrinal accounts of belief are too propositional, they can prove limiting. But even then, second order reflections on a broad set of practices that are embodied, felt, and encountered before they are subject to any sort of formal rational scrutiny, does not mean that doctrinal approaches to religion should be ignored altogether. Doctrine is one way in which those who identify as believers make sense of everyday rituals and experience, and while I see that the study of religion should not belong exclusively to those who position themselves within communities of faith, I do not think it is any better to exclude those within such communities from scholarly conversations.⁸ We should acknowledge that interest in lived religion was facilitated by the emergence of anthropology and sociology in a secular age, and these disciplines actively sought to set aside doctrine, or dogmatics as it sometimes known, in an effort to view religion from a neutral vantage point. This brought certain advantages, but our understanding of religion benefits from being seen from the inside as much as it does from being seen from the outside. Hence the fact that some of the most insightful work on religion ranges freely between an attention to lived religion and a willingness to think about doctrine.⁹

Doctrine does not have to take the form of propositions. We would do well to widen our view of the forms available and acknowledge that they include liturgy, religious music, testimony, among others. Philosophical and credal expressions of belief become meaningful to individuals when they are fleshed out, and the stories we tell about ourselves frequently seek larger shared forms that can forge connections between and make provisional sense of

the particularities of religious experience. This is one of the main reasons why I prefer coming to theological matters through literary studies, particularly fiction. In narrative, the many points of connection between proposition and lived experience become attenuated. Discussion of narrative also makes space for methodological reflection, but it does so in a manner that treats questions of method as part of the story and its reading, not the point at which we must begin.

Theological interest in narrative reached a high point in the postliberal theology of the late twentieth century, and although that tradition continues to exert an influence on my thinking, I do not want to rehearse earlier debates here.¹⁰ Instead, I want to think about the implications of this tradition for the stories we tell in literary studies about religion. Those stories have become more prominent recently and improved considerably in their scope. These developments owe much to the general religious turn in the humanities, and there are now numerous venues in literary studies where the study of religion is taken seriously. But to my eye at least it remains noticeable how accounts of religion in literary studies are more comfortable with some versions of religion than others.¹¹ Take, for instance, the influential work of John McClure (2007), who posits the postsecular as a means of talking about spiritual experience without falling into the pitfalls associated with traditional accounts of religious belief. McClure's account of religion deals with a particular moment in history, and the subsequent scholarly appeal of his description of the postsecular owes something to our ability to see first-hand how, for many people in modern western countries, eclectic spiritual intuitions and glimpses of belief are increasingly fragmented and unmoored from recognizable religious stories. But the partial faiths he talks about also dominates the way in which many of my colleagues read Victorian literature. In the case of *Middlemarch*, it is more acceptable to be interested in Dorothea's fluid collection of spiritual

experiences and insights than it is to dwell on Casaubon's concern about how the study of religion should proceed or the evangelical pronouncements of Bulstrode. We might extend this observation by turning to other characters in *Middlemarch* and deciding which of their encounters with religion is more likely to attract the attention of literary scholars. You will have your own ways of answering that question, but it does not feel outlandish of me to speculate that colleagues are more likely to choose Mary Garth and Mr. Farebrother, two attractive reasons for attending to lived religious experience, than the character of Bulstrode, a man Eliot describes as exemplifying the dangerous uses to which an emphasis on explicitly theological discourse can lead.

In a novel with such a capacious vision and set in a century saturated by Christian belief, I find it strange that more "orthodox" expressions of belief are not readily available. That term orthodox is complex, and it probably deserves more scrutiny than I give it here. In short, I am thinking about those who clearly identify as Christian persons and/or explicitly make sense of their lives through reference to religious belief and practice; those who do so in ways that are broadly recognizable to a reasonable of those in other Christian communities. Perhaps I am looking for the wrong thing in a novel concerned with the organic nature of belief rather than matters of ecclesiology or doctrine. But ruling out certain religious possibilities before we begin is part of the problem I am describing. Where is the *Middlemarch* equivalent of Stanley Hauerwas, a strong-minded and avowedly "orthodox" contemporary theologian who articulates distinct narratives of belief without losing sight of the need to continue thinking in new ways. "I write," Hauerwas explains in *Working With Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (2011), "because writing is the only way I know how to think. That is not quite true. I am able to write, or I find I feel I have to write, because I read. Reading is also one of the ways I learn how to think" (ix). That

willingness to think, to read, to write, to reconsider, while still saying something distinctive about the Christian faith, is a more appealing version of religious life than the one we meet through Casaubon or Bulstrode. Hoping that an earlier version of one of our most accomplished contemporary theologians would reside in the town of Middlemarch may seem silly. Yet if we really are getting the nineteenth century's most ambitious novelistic account of provincial life, I don't think it is unreasonable to look for an amateur and less proficient equivalent, someone who takes the study of theology seriously and thinks about the world with charity and openness. Such people existed in the nineteenth century, but Eliot does not seem able to imagine them in *Middlemarch*.

I began this essay by admitting to reservations about Eliot's account of religion, and I have explained some of my reasoning here. However, I do not want to give up on Eliot entirely. If we are willing to stop treating her as the most authoritative guide to nineteenth-century religion, then it is still possible to read her work and narrate a more diverse set of stories about the Christian faith in the period. One way of doing this is by looking at how Eliot navigates different templates of knowledge in the novel, such as science and politics, and imagining how more theologically oriented talk of religion might be brought into the mix. Bruno Latour insists that religion, in all its forms, is another template of knowledge rather than an occultic form of understanding belonging to an entirely different realm, and he advocates thinking about how templates connect rather than letting them stand alone as our only way of understanding the world. Looking for a solution to the present religious wars, which can gather fuel from the fear that different parties have no hope of understanding one another, Latour invites us to consider new ways of "conceptualising the multiplicity of modes of existence" (36); to insist, in other words, on a "plurality of *templates* with which to measure the beings that are making us act and are thus holding

us—be they law, love, politics, religion, or many others” (30). Novels seems an ideal vehicle for thinking about how such multiple modes of existence are embodied, and even though there are notable religious gaps in *Middlemarch*, the other conceptual insights that this novel provides makes it relatively straightforward to imagine how certain religious gaps might be filled when we discuss the stories that hold us.

As I continue to think about the filling of these gaps, I want to conclude by going back to my apparently idiosyncratic reading of *Middlemarch*. Reading novels does not require us to focus on the same things whenever we turn to a text, nor is there a necessity to establish common starting points before we can go further. We are not compelled to follow in the footsteps of other interpreters, nor do we have to take the paths laid out for us by authors. Novel reading provides the freedom for readers to find their own place in the stories that are told. Recognition of this is a key part of *Middlemarch*'s appeal, a point captured in the famous moment when Eliot's narrator pauses to ask: “but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?” (261). That intervention is a timely prompt to return one more time to the question of why, in this essay, I am so interested in Casaubon, and what this might signify. By the time of his death, Casaubon's self-absorption and overwhelming sense of isolation are threatening to confine Dorothea to a similar state. He instructs her to continue his work, even though it is not going anywhere, and he adds a codicil to his will forbidding a future marriage to Ladislaw. These final sentences offer death, not life; they are in contradistinction to the larger vision of a novel which, as Summer Star puts it, “presents a view of what it means to become aware of reality in the sense of becoming aware of oneself as a given being, in a given world that is greater than one's individual conception.”¹² Eliot's novel favors stories of belief that look outward, and, in doing so, she makes space for those with very different experiences to find

their place. I have not always felt at home in Eliot's fictional worlds, but the story she tells in *Middlemarch* does encourage me to think about how I fit in. On this occasion, that has involved worrying about those points of connection with Casaubon; thinking about our similarities, and differences, and focusing on the very different type of scholar, husband, and representative of Christianity I hope to be. Reflecting on my life in *Middlemarch* has, in other words, allowed me to think anew about how I want to narrate religious stories of belief and to try doing so in a way that avoids getting imprisoned in an insular and labyrinthine view of the world.

¹ See Mark Knight, *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019), 16-21.

² Rebecca Mead, *My Life in Middlemarch: A Memoir* (2014).

³ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 19; also, see Casaubon's letter to Dorothea in chapter 5.

⁴ I agree with Helen Small's measured conclusion that critique retains an important role in the humanities so long as we modify our claims about it accordingly: "A defensible version of the 'critical thinking' claim can be reasonable modest but tenacious: though critical self-reflection is not unique to the humanities, and not all they do, it is indispensable. ... As with many defences for the humanities, the problems arise when one part of the characterization is made to stand for the whole" (26). For a wider discussion on the role of critique in literary studies, and the need to recognize the limit of this mode of reading, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (2015).

⁵ Linn Marie Tonstad, "The Place, and Problems, of Truth," 19.

⁶ For a detailed exploration of the relationship between faith and knowledge in modernity, and the problematic nature of this binary, see Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge."

⁷ See the work of David Hall, Robert Orsi, and Nancy Ammerman. Ammerman's collection appeared after Taylor's book, but she published several influential essays beforehand.

⁸ See Lori Branch's *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (2010) for an incisive account of how a Protestantism influenced by modernity struggled to understand the theological work undertaken by ritual. For a range of work on literature and religious experience, much of

which highlights the interaction with doctrine, see Caleb Spencer and Matthew Smith, eds., *Literature and Religious Experience* (2022).

⁹ The move to a focus on lived religion is indebted to the emergence of anthropology and sociology in the nineteenth century, and the ongoing benefits of thinking about religion in this way can be seen in books by thinkers such as Talal Asad and Danièle Hervieu-Léger. For further discussion on the relationship between religion and anthropology in the nineteenth century, see Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (2014), and Sebastian Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (2018). And for further discussion of proximity versus detachment as different ways of perceiving the world, see Knight, *Good Words*, Chapter 5.

¹⁰ For more on postliberal theology, or narrative theology as it is sometimes known, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984); Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (1996); and Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, ed., *Readings in Narrative Theology: Why Narrative?* (1997). To appreciate the implications of these postliberal developments for literary studies, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (1974) and, more specifically, Kevin Seidel, *Rethinking the Secular Origins of the Novel: The Bible in English Fiction, 1678-1767* (2021).

¹¹ Christopher Douglas argues that fundamentalism is the religious other that postsecularism plays down when it talks about weak spirituality. I am less convinced that weak spirituality is the only option available for postsecularism, or that religious fundamentalism is the only possible version of strong religion. Nevertheless, I take his point about the need to think more broadly when we talk about the religious and to ensure that we reckon with religion's more troubling manifestations.

¹² Summer J. Star, "Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*," *ELH* 80.3 (2013), 840.

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