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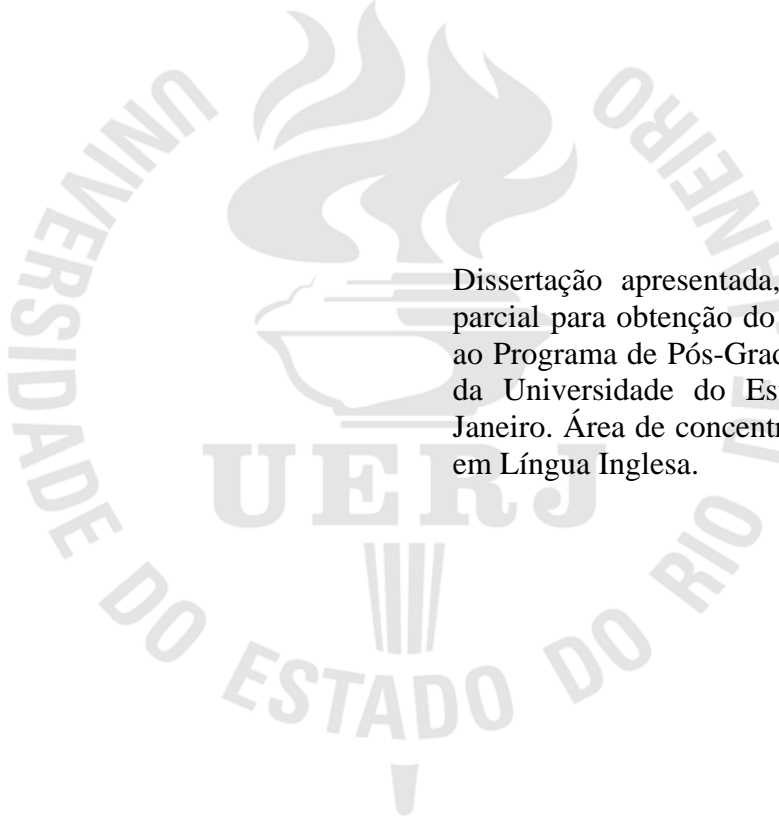
**Silenced angels: an obscure Saint Theresa  
in George Eliot's *Middlemarch***

Rio de Janeiro

2012

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas em Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof.<sup>a</sup> Dra. Maria Conceição Monteiro

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Data

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Rio de Janeiro

2012

## **DEDICATION**

To all of those whose journey is long and complex towards self-knowledge  
and the construction of a meaningful world.

To all silenced angels there ever were and ever will be.

To all women.

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I thank my family — about which any word I may say has already been said, and will always be a mere postponement of my true feelings.

And once more, as I have done in my monograph, I thank my friend Ana Paula, who is absolutely *always* there for me, and from whom I borrowed, in the first year of my History course, that first nineteenth-century English novel — *Pride and Prejudice* — which led me hither.

I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill.

*Virginia Woolf*

The blessed work of helping the world forward, happily does not wait to be done by perfect men.

*George Eliot*

## RESUMO

ROSA, Débora Souza da. *Silenced angels: an obscure Saint Theresa in George Eliot's Middlemarch*. 2012. 123f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) — Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2012.

A presente dissertação objetiva a comparação proposta no Prelúdio do romance *Middlemarch* por sua autora George Eliot entre a protagonista da obra, Dorothea Brooke, e a figura histórica Teresa d'Ávila. A partir de tal estudo, busca-se compreender de que modo a situação específica da mulher na Era Vitoriana é articulada no romance de modo a espelhar a crise ontológica e epistemológica do próprio ser humano diante das transformações consolidadas com o Iluminismo e as revoluções liberais do século XVIII — que culminariam na “morte de Deus”. Dorothea mostra-se uma cristã tão fervorosa quanto a Teresa quinhentista, mas faltam-lhe certezas e a resolução para concretizar as reformas sociais que defende, pois ela encarna o mito de feminilidade oitocentista batizado de Anjo do Lar — ideal de sujeição feminina à ordem falocêntrica cujas funções são a proteção e difusão da moralidade burguesa e a substituição de elementos cristãos no universo do sagrado a uma sociedade cada vez mais materialista e insegura de valores absolutos. As aflições de Dorothea representam as aflições da mulher vitoriana, mas o momento crítico desta mulher reflete, em *Middlemarch*, uma crise muito maior do Ocidente, que teve início com a Era da Razão.

Palavras-Chave: Anjo do Lar. Santa Teresa. Morte de Deus. Era Vitoriana. Moralidade burguesa.



## ABSTRACT

The present dissertation's purpose is the comparison proposed by George Eliot in the Prelude of the novel *Middlemarch* between its protagonist, Dorothea Brooke, and the historical character Teresa of Avila. Such study endeavors to understand in which way the specific situation of the Victorian woman is articulated within the novel as to mirror the ontological and epistemological crisis of the human being itself during the transformations consolidated by the Enlightenment and the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth century – which culminated in the “death of God”. Dorothea is as ardent a Christian as the fifteenth century Teresa, but she lacks the certainties and the resolution to concretize the social reforms she defends, because she incarnates the nineteenth century myth of womanhood known as the Angel in the House — an ideal of feminine subjection to the phalocentric order whose functions are the protection and diffusion of the bourgeois morality and the replacement of Christian elements within the imaginary universe of the sacred to a society progressively more materialistic and insecure of absolute values. The afflictions of Dorothea represent the afflictions of the Victorian woman, but the critical moment of this woman reflects, in *Middlemarch*, a much greater crisis in the Western thought, which began with the Age of Reason.

Keywords: Angel in the House. Saint Theresa. Death of God. Victorian Era. Bourgeois morality.

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*Stevenson Memorial* (1903), by Abbott Handerson Thayer

## PRELUDE

Had she been a contemporary historian, Mary Ann Evans<sup>1</sup> (1819-1880) would have probably produced what Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi consecrated in Italy and gradually throughout Europe as Microhistory — that is, the exhaustive historical examination of a microcosmic unit of research (a single event, the trajectory of a community, of a family or a person, all of them usually obscure and ignored by the traditional historiography) in order to concatenate and form a macrocosmic understanding of a definite period, with all its causes, repercussions, variables and perspectives (LEVI, 1992). Differently from historical novelists as Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas, History was not used by the authoress of *Middlemarch* (1872) as a structure to indulge heroic fantasies, in which kings and famous personages are given voice and ample action to represent official politics. In the specific case of the abovementioned novel, a distant historical setting works ideologically and aesthetically to satisfy the author's needs rather than to confirm, praise or condemn "real" characters and events.

*Middlemarch* is one of those complex works of art which can render itself to analyses from the most varied and exotic ideologies and points of view, because of its extension and also because of its universal implications, like Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), Honoré de Balzac's *The Human Comedy* (1830-1846), Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869) — all of them half philosophical treatises on human nature, and on the complicated dilemma between individual self-fulfillment and social harmony intensified by the bourgeois individualism of industrialist societies.

Before analyzing the structures and themes which compose the totality of *Middlemarch*, and before presenting the purpose of this dissertation and the steps in which it was developed, a brief exposition of the novel's overall plot and its manifold subplots is made indispensable — exactly because of the monumentality of the work.

All the action of the novel takes place in the imaginary provincial town located in the English Midlands called Middlemarch — the community which represents many English rural communities in its stern attachment to traditions, superstitions and conservative notions of every sort. Such local collective mentality contrasts deeply with the reformist energy which moves the novel onwards and is embodied by the characters of Dorothea Brooke, Tertius Lydgate and William Ladislaw. At first, George Eliot imagined the story of the ambitious young doctor Lydgate, his entering Middlemarch and becoming involved with the Vincy

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<sup>1</sup> The authoress of *Middlemarch*'s real name, since George Eliot is a pseudonym.

family and Mr. Featherstone; some time later around the year of 1869, she began to work on another story, that of Miss Brooke, and at some point in 1871 she decided to combine both in the large-scale novel we know, which was given the name *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. The reference to a “study” instead of a mere “story” elucidates the scope of Eliot’s pretensions with this work, and also the strong sociological perspective adopted here.

The story moves alternately from the landed estates nearby to the town itself, providing the reader with the observation of the customs of the landed gentry (as represented by the Bulstrodes, the Brookes, the Cadwalladers, Mr. Peter Featherstone, and, at its highest rank, the baronet Sir James Chettam), of the clergymen (as Rev. Edward Casaubon, Mr. Camden Farebrother and Mr. Tyke), of the middle-class businessmen like the farm manager Caleb Garth and the Garth family, the local doctors like Mr. Sprague and eventually Lydgate, the tradesmen like Mr. Vincy, the workingmen like Mr. Mawmsey, and even the free thinkers and liberal professionals like Ladislav.

Dorothea and Celia Brooke are the orphan nieces of Mr. Arthur Brooke, a buffoonish landowner whom despite being considered by the tenants and workers under his obligation the worst landlord in Middlemarch, attempts fruitlessly to stand for Parliament on a Reform platform — which highlights some tragically comic political and inner human contradictions, and which is “paid” accordingly with his utter humiliation before his people during his campaign speech, when he is outwardly mocked by a ventriloquist and becomes the laughing spectacle of the town. Still within the Brookes, while Dorothea is infused by passionate religious ardors and a good-intentioned desire to change the world, Celia is a commonplace girl which perfectly incarnates the myth of idealized womanhood of the nineteenth century.

The doctor Lydgate and the tentative artist and ultimately politician Ladislav cause disturbances when they enter Middlemarch because of their “revolutionary” views — any eccentric figure with different ideas may be deemed “revolutionary” in places like Middlemarch. Lydgate is a proud honest man who comes at the request of Nicholas Bulstrode to manage the old man’s newly-founded hospital for no payment. Ladislav is Mr. Casaubon’s cousin, and, as such, lives within the boundaries of the middle-aged clergyman’s economic favors, in a most disagreeable dependence which Casaubon does not leave unnoticed or unfelt. Ladislav’s purpose in the novel, since he falls in love with Dorothea, is — following the old traditional courteous love — to discover his own vocation and to work hard to become independent in order to deserve her respect and perhaps her admiration.

Will falls in love with Dorothea, however, during her honeymoon in Rome, when they accidentally meet and form a strong relationship based partly on the unhappy moment she is

facing there, when she is firstly introduced to her husband Casaubon's jealous and resentful nature. There are no villains in *Middlemarch*, however, and the reader is led to condole with both, as he/she progressively realizes that Casaubon's lifetime researches are outdated and fruitless—which makes his lifelong efforts as meaningless as his own existence, for it was sacrificed in the name of the failure.

The same redemptive attitude may be gradually adopted by the readers before the character of Nicholas Bulstrode, a wealthy banker married to Mr. Vincy's sister, Harriet. He is a strict Methodist whom seeks to impose his values and beliefs to Middlemarch society through some social favors, like the construction of the hospital. Tormented by a hidden past which explains the dishonest source of his fortune, he alternates between the religious necessity to employ his money generously amongst the needful and the egoistic impulses which often turn him into a tyrant to his people — like when he practically blackmails Lydgate into choosing Mr. Tyke for the chaplaincy of the hospital when the doctor would have freely chosen his friend Farebrother. Bulstrode is eventually unmasked by Mr. Raffles, an acquaintance from his obscure past, but then the destruction is already made and he even drags Lydgate to his social decay by having once acted nicely and lent his niece's husband money some time before the disclosure of his past.

The Vincys are a manufacturing family whose children, Rosamond and Fred, have received enough education to rise above their parents socially and economically, but who end up disappointing their parents in their marriages. Fred disappoints them even further by becoming Caleb Garth's apprentice in the management of farms, since he is enamored with sensible and practical Mary Garth, Caleb's daughter, since youth, and she severely disapproves his entering the Church without the true vocation only for the sake of gentility. Despite the social considerations, they prove to be the most successful of couples in the end of the book — perhaps the only example of people who chose their paths rightly according to the inescapable judgment of the author.

Rosamond, on the other hand, is a predominantly vain, shallow and ambitious character who marries Lydgate in the hope that he might reconcile with his genteel parentage and therefore raise her above her present station, taking her away from provincial Middlemarch and giving her the life of a lady. Nothing could be farther from the reality they encounter after the marriage, since, because of her excessive wasting of money and his proud inability to settle limits — because he himself had always been used to comforts and never even thought of some habits as superfluous —, they end up in severe debt up to the point of having part of their house furniture almost taken away by creditors. Facing so many practical

problems after marriage, Lydgate also loses his idealist spirit, and succumbs to professional ordinariness.

Dorothea acts almost as a literary device, helping people silently throughout the novel, making use of her station specially during her widowhood to accomplish some small good deeds, such as giving Farebrother a church living, counseling Lydgate and Rosamond, and supporting the young doctor at the moment he is accused by Middlemarch of having participated in the assassination through negligence of Mr. Raffles by Mr. Bulstrode. She also supports Casaubon's research exhaustively while he is still alive, and is ready to make a promise requested by him without knowing what it is, just before he dies. Will is perhaps the only one she feels she cannot help, especially after Casaubon's codicil to his will barring the inheritance of his properties in case she married his cousin is announced and makes it socially scandalous and jurisdictionally inappropriate that she helps her beloved economically. The very helplessness of Will turns him into a highly attractive suitor to the heart of a lady moved primarily by self-sacrifice as Dorothea. It is more or less a consensus amongst critics, nevertheless, that her marriage to Will represents a sort of refuge, an escape from her lack of resolution, of theoretical certainties — and, therefore, from her lack of an individual identity.

This crude summary which only underlines the main plots and some subplots of the novel is enough to confer the feeling of grandeur to the reader. Especially because all the descriptions here attempted tell nothing of the complexity of each one of these characters who are moved by the most varied human ambiguities, and are seldom predictable. It is still impressive nowadays how George Eliot managed to manipulate so accurately a literary macrocosm as the one constituted by the whole internal structures and movements of *Middlemarch*, and yet concentrate on the particulars, on the minimum details of each creation, of each psychological universe of a character. “It is as God of her little world”, says Susan Ostrov Weisser (1998, p. 116),

[t]hat [George Eliot] creates for us the mystery of the ‘free’ human will and its moral significance; it is in her role of Scientist that she dispels it. Yet as the student of natural science – and the metaphor recurs throughout her fiction – she also links all together in a new order, a Unity that both intellectually binds yet has its own peculiar sanctity.

Turning to the analysis of *Middlemarch's* structures, it is not because of its monumental scope alone that it is considered — among other things — an “organic” novel. The narrative's organicism is in the very philosophical basis upon which it was constructed, since George Eliot, who had deeply saddened her father by rejecting the Christian faith in



1842 — after reading Charles Hennell’s *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) —, was highly influenced by and enthusiastic about the possibilities afforded by Auguste Comte’s recent sociological principles of achieving a scientific understanding of society and of human evolution without the intervention of religious or metaphysical determinations. What enthusiasts like her called “natural history” of societies was a combination of Darwinian evolving principles with Positivist social concerns, and it “sought to supersede a history that concentrated on the isolated acts of great men, or decisions of rulers, to study the whole structure and interrelations of families and groups as though they were organisms.” (BYATT, 1990, p. XXI).

For George Eliot (1990, p. 232), then, works of art must resemble living organisms, and they “must be recognized as separate wholes before they can be recognized as wholes composed of parts, or before these wholes again can be regarded as relatively parts of a larger whole.” Still within her scrutiny of the formal aspects of poetry, Eliot (1990, p. 232-3) elects as

the highest Form [that which] is the highest organism, [...] the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena.  
It is only in this fundamental sense that the word ‘Form’ can be applied to Art in general.

Bearing such concepts in mind, one is much more clarified as to what her purposes have been while writing *Middlemarch*. As a competent surgeon, she sought to sew the most improbable plots and subplots together in a cohesive and logic whole, making large use of an omniscient narrator’s voice and ample eyesight in order to explore the minimum details of inner lives and dramas, never forgetting, however, the relation between this whole or compendium of dependent wholes sewn together with(in) the greater whole of History — even though a fictionalized Microhistory, a miniaturized History (or else a miniaturized series of intertwined historical processes) represented by “[t]he Reform Bill, the railways, cholera, machine-breaking: these ‘real’ historical forces [which] do no more than impinge the novel’s margins.” (EAGLETON, 1992, p. 38).

Eliot’s devotion to Comtean ideals was only partial, however: she found consolation in his scientific explanation of social phenomena, but she was rather skeptical of his conformist recipes for happiness, since, as A.S. Byatt (1990, p. XX-XXI) asserts,

Comte saw the laws of evolution of human society as laws of the same nature, once established, as those of physics—which makes the Positivist precept of ‘obedience’ to these unavoidable laws a somewhat slurred and irrational idea.

Transgressive as she has proved her mind to be through her life choices, it is not surprising that this liberal free-thinker would submit to no strict mathematical determinisms when concerning the human fate and evolution — as many would do by transposing Darwinian biological patterns to social history, and then establishing the future of so-called human “races”.

Suzanne Graver (1992, p. 97) ultimately argues that *Middlemarch* questions the very idea of an organic unity in society, affirming that it “disputes the unifying force of any single system.” Aesthetically, though, the novel would be unified in an organic whole exactly by the negation of the organicist principle applied to human societies. Three of the main characters who bring forth the reformist energy of the novel deposit their faith in images of organic wholeness: Tertius Lydgate, the young and promising doctor, believes in the living tissue as a principle of human oneness, whilst William Ladislaw, the itinerant artist, believes in the body politic. Dorothea Brooke, the rich rural heiress, whose formless “life brilliantly uncovers the absence of social structures to individual life” (GRAVER, 1992, p. 97), although lacking precisely a guiding principle with which to conduct a fruitful life, is obviously driven by a vague but powerful concept examined by Susan O. Weisser and derived from Eliot’s Feuerbachian allegiances: the *truth of feeling* mentioned by the authoress herself in a letter to a friend from 1843. “‘When we are just liberated from the wretched giants’ bed of dogmas,” she writes, “[...] speculative truth begins to appear but a shadow of individual minds, agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the *truth of feeling* as the only universal bond of union.” (WEISSER, 1998, p. 117).

This concept was borrowed by Eliot from Ludwig Feuerbach himself, and A.S. Byatt (1990, p. XXVIII-XXIX) exposes the ideals from which it springs:

[...] the Species is the true object of our moral and religious attention – but [Feuerbach] adds to this the idea that the essence of the species is contained in the relation between the sexes, in the recognition of the Other, and in the sensuous passion of the flesh. ‘Flesh and blood is nothing without the oxygen of sexual distinction. The distinction of sex is not superficial, or limited to certain parts of the body; it is an essential one: it penetrates bone and marrow.’ (Here, perhaps, among other interesting thoughts, is one possible reason for George Eliot’s conviction that the ‘woman question’ must not lose sight of the essential *difference* between the sexes.) [...] Love especially works wonders, and the love of the sexes most of all. Men and women are the complement of each other, and thus united they first present the species, the perfect man.’ ‘In love, the reality of the species, which otherwise is only a thing of reason, an object of mere thought, becomes a matter of feeling, a truth of feeling.’

As part of a large-scale project of investigation of a human society in a particular given time and place — to represent the yearnings, frustrations and dilemmas of humankind as a whole, in the general-singular/singular-general adjustment of lenses which pervades the

work both of fictionists and social scientists —, Eliot presents the reader with a conservative and traditionalist rural community from the English Midlands and with at least three reformist movements embodied by the charismatic triangle of characters mentioned above: Lydgate, Ladislaw and Dorothea — though one may also include Nicholas Bulstrode in the list, for he represents religious reform by being a Dissenter, a Methodist against his people's better judgment. In the beginning of the 1830's, Lydgate incarnates the medical reform and Ladislaw the political reform which each respectively defends and which had been at some measure accomplished up to the 1870's — the decade when the novel was written. Evangelicalism and Methodism, as religious alternatives emerged from the Dissention within the Anglican Church in the 1730's and frantically revived in the repressed Victorian England, had also gathered a consistent amount of followers, but George Eliot very clearly did not believe in such reform as the solution to the achievement of a unifying principle of human societies, or in Christianity altogether, since it was from the Evangelical bosom that she abandoned all religious faith in 1842. In Dorothea's diffusive truth of feeling, though, there seems to be a glimpse of Eliot's own reformist inclinations.

It is true that “[t]he fundamental epistemological tenet in *Middlemarch* is the relativity of truth to point of view, and the subjectivity, partiality and fallibility of human perception.” (McSWEENEY, 1992, p. 20). According to Eagleton (1992, p.37),

[t]he irony of *Middlemarch* is that it is a triumph of aesthetic totalisation deeply suspicious of ideological totalities. Each of the novel's four central characters represents such an historically typical totalisation: Casaubon idealism, Lydgate scientific rationalism, Bulstrode Evangelical Christianity, Dorothea Brooke Romantic self-achievement through a unifying principle of action.

Furthermore, he understands George Eliot as

the insertion of certain specific ideological determinations – Evangelical Christianity, rural organicism, incipient feminism, petty-bourgeois moralism – into a hegemonic ideological formation which is partly supported, partly embarrassed by their presence. (EAGLETON, 1992, p. 34).

“The problem which *Middlemarch* objectively poses, and fails to resolve,” asserts Eagleton (1992, p. 37), “is how ideology is to be conceptually elaborate yet emotionally affective” — to which he answers himself by quoting Ladislaw: what is required is “a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge.” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 186). And thus we go back to “Feuerbach's subjective, humanized Christianity” which

powerfully appealed to Eliot because it offered a way of healing the split between her intellect, which could no longer accept the existence of a supernatural god, and her deepest emotions, which were inextricably linked with the religious culture of her early life. Furthermore, it widened the channels of sympathy and fellow-feeling between the agnostic intellectual and ordinary humanity. (McSWEENEY, 1992, p. 20).

By such accounts of the miscellaneous ideological universe of George Eliot's mind — which is symbolically compressed in the prose of *Middlemarch* whose only unifying principle, it seems, is its total lack of any unifying principle —, one comes to the conclusion that, although a believer in reforms, she was telling the story of her own decade, and not of the 1830's in which the novel is situated. She was talking about a time when all ideologies had already been discredited as totalizing and all-encompassing, when two of the three Reform Bills (from 1832 and 1867) had passed and yet social inequality and misery have persisted, when Victorian England approached its closure economically rich and yet progressively poor of hope — proving that the greatness of the empire would not bring the solution of poverty and of all other kinds of human hunger. George Eliot had turned her back to religious self-fulfillment (Bulstrode), to hopes on political transformation (Ladislaw) and on human enhancement through scientific development (Lydgate). According to Suzanne Graver (1992, p. 104), Dorothea's heart beats in a faster rhythm than all existence around her and perhaps such was the case with her creator; perhaps Eliot, as many other visionaries, could not adjust to the slow, slow cadence of these respectful institutions' transformations (the Parliament, the Church, the Medicine, marriage itself). And because her want of social change was urgent, her faith — if one is allowed to assume she had any, with her “Thackerayan view of human nature” (WEISSER, 1998, p. 119)<sup>2</sup> — relied solely on individual moral reform, and in “the growing good of the world,” which is, as she acknowledges, “partly dependent on unhistoric acts.” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 688).

As Graver (1992, p. 103) points out,

Will's concrete accomplishments can but take second place to Dorothea's ‘incalculably diffusive’ effect. As represented in the novel, the principle of political reform constitutes only a single ‘channel’; Dorothea's ‘good’, innumerable ‘channels’.

This organic novel structured upon the basis of a negation of organic social unity is marked by dissention, by misunderstandings, internal disagreements and contradictions. Although no particular ideology seems to work in a global and cohesive way here, however, the reader is somehow softened by the acknowledgement of the existence of people like

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<sup>2</sup> According to Weisser, this was how Eliot's publisher, John Blackwell, called the too tragic tone of some of the conclusions in her collection of short stories *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857).

Dorothea Brooke in the world — something that contemporary readers would not be so sure about —, and even — if he or she is of an optimistic nature — afforded some hope that one day a collective inner transformation of individuals might actually change the overall state of things.

Although all Eliot's narratives aim at complex interrelations without an obvious guiding principle, some mechanisms and strategies remain visible and can at some measure be traced and knitted in some pattern of idealized behavior. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Friedrich Nietzsche (1990, p. 80) uses Eliot's moral patterns as a prejudiced — although relevant — generalization of English morality:

G. Eliot – They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality: that is *English* consistency, let us not blame it on little bluestockings à la Eliot. In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology, one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic. That is the *penance* one pays there.—With us it is different. When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality.

At some measure, such criticism can be applied to George Eliot, for this was precisely the effect of Feuerbachian views on her work and personal life: that of retaining Christian morality without the proper religious devotion and compromise. According to Kerry McSweeney (1992, p. 20), in *Middlemarch*, this “non-theological and non-metaphysical body of beliefs” is supposed to provide Eliot with a

basis for non-egotistic values [...] and of performing for gifted members of the modern social organism the same ennobling function that traditional religious ideals had performed for St Theresa of Avila, who lived in a society still in its theological phase.

Unfortunately for Dorothea, although she possesses all the emotional predicaments of Theresa of Avila, she lacks both the saint's unconditional faith — and that is why Doreen Roberts (2000, p. XIV) argues that Dorothea “is not really a Christian,” for “she would hardly be seeking a ‘theory’ if she were” — and George Eliot's moral certainties. Eliot's ability to work within the chaos of multiple dissonant voices and yet produce an amazing and organic work of art as *Middlemarch* is absent in Dorothea, who cannot transform the disorder of the “real” world into artistic meaning, who cannot otherwise exist as an individual within a recognized disharmonic world.

Thus Suzanne Graver (1992, p. 103) completes her argumentation by highlighting a fundamental question:

the price [Dorothea] pays [for her innumerable 'channels' of 'good'] is high — nothing less than the breaking and spending of her nature. Testifying not to organic wholeness, but to the incompleteness of women's lives, qualification and affirmation exist in the Finale, as in Dorothea's telos, side by side.

Although as Messianic in her desire of self-fulfillment through the active bettering of her fellow creatures' lives as Daniel Deronda, Dorothea — the epitome of Eliot's reading of Feuerbach's "truth of feeling" — is in many ways "crippled" when compared to the Jewish hero, for she is a woman. Therefore, one may safely say that, had she been an "entire" being, a true citizen, a whole political and economically independent being, had she been provided the education bestowed upon a man of her social rank, this vagueness of thought, this lack of focus and of self-confidence in her own knowledge, would have hardly represented a problem. And she would, as soon as she found her chosen path in life, have dedicated herself to it as passionately as Deronda was able to do in the end of the novel from 1876 which bears his name. Dorothea Brooke and Maggie Tulliver, from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), are usually the two female characters used by critics to debate George Eliot's controversial and inconclusive position concerning the "woman question".

As Graver (1992, p. 93) points out, "marriage for Dorothea, whether to a liberator (Ladislaw) or to an oppressor (Casaubon) diverts the strength of 'her full nature'." That is because marriage as an institution was permeated by an ideal of womanhood which was particularly constructed for nineteenth century purposes, for an emerging bourgeois supremacy — a supremacy which buried many ancient idols in order to assert itself, and therefore sought to replace them with a new sanctified "Angel" (the woman). Within the Law, very little was changed from the medieval condition of the married woman as constitutive part of her husband. Culturally, though, there were radical changes: whilst in the sixteenth century in which Theresa reformed the Carmel women served as nothing more than reproductive bodies — and went, therefore, quite unnoticed by their male peers during the greatest part of their lives —, the Victorian century elevated womanhood into sainthood, so that all eyes, minds and hearts turned to this newly-invented bearer of human morals and peace — both flagellated necessities since the declared war against religious superstitions left Western societies in general with a bitter feeling of mythological and moral vacuum.

It is the purpose of this dissertation to develop the comparison suggested by George Eliot herself in the Prelude and the Finale of the novel between her character Dorothea Brooke and the Baroque reformist nun known as Saint Theresa of Avila. While describing the unmentioned Miss Brooke, "the central reference point for the whole social analysis" (ROBERTS, 2000, p. VIII), the author declares in the Prelude that

[t]hese later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse. (ELIOT, 2000, p. 3).

George Eliot was a woman who led a most scandalous life by defying so many gender boundaries. She rejected the religion of her father, went to London to live among thinkers, poets and writers, and to be the secret editor of the influential periodical *Westminster Review*. She tried many unsuccessful and embarrassing love affairs (as the one with Herbert Spencer, who refused her because of her much commented unattractiveness) before deciding to enter an unofficial marriage — which lasted from 1854 up to his death, in 1878 — with the also writer, philosopher and literary critic George Henry Lewes, who was by the time they met already married and the father of three legitimate children, although openly estranged from his wife. Mary Ann Evans was a woman who defied all conventions up to the very end by marrying a man twenty years her junior, John Walter Cross, in the same year of her death, when she was 61 years old. Leading such a transgressive journey of life and stretching all the limits of social interdiction in order to find her own place in the world and lead a satisfying existence, it is no wonder that George Eliot knew so well all the limitations imposed upon her own sex. And although many feminists criticize her vacillating gender politics, her belief in an elementary difference between the sexes, and her valorization of a constructed “femininity”, they also incur in inner contradiction when they accuse her of emphasizing her “masculine” virtues (like the intelligence, the intellectual knowledge and the strength of character) in order to succeed within her male social circle.

George Eliot was an amalgam of a most varied combination of influences, and none of such ideological and emotional allegiances can be isolated if one is to understand her powerful literary imagery as a whole. According to Byatt (1990, p. XXXIII), in *Middlemarch* “Eliot’s intelligence combined thought and feeling in a new form of poetic but ironic realist fiction.” It is with sophisticated irony that the authoress of *Middlemarch* suggests the reason for Dorothea’s “loving heart-beats and sobs” never having centered “in some long-recognizable deed” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 4):

[s]ome have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women; if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine from the sameness of women’s coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse. (2000, p. 4)

Although convinced of some basic differences between the sexes, George Eliot recognizes in this fragment that much of what is deemed “natural” in such differentiation is actually culturally constructed, for she attributes it to the “Supreme Power” whose authority she disclaims — and, as a Feuerbachian, she disclaims God’s authority as a cultural construct itself.

The first step of this dissertation is, therefore, to study the historical processes which led to the construction of this peculiar sort of mythology centered on the angel-like woman — an idealization which exalted at the same time as it suffocated “real” women of flesh and bones who could never be the equals of a ghost. Other myths of womanhood which derived from the mainstream shall be briefly explored at the end of this historical chapter so that one is accounted with the fates expected from those women who could not adapt to such strict moral codes, as George Eliot.

After this historical investigation of the reasons why a Victorian Dorothea could never have been as successful as a Theresa, the two characters shall be put together to a comparative study which shall explore both the historically determined and the specific differences between them and their trajectories. It is important to note that it is not just to be compared with Dorothea individually that Theresa is presented in the *Prelude* by George Eliot: she is also a historical figure who illustrates the whole reformist atmosphere which pervades the book. And it is mostly through Dorothea, on the other hand, that Eliot aims to explore the changes from the individual that the Modern Era had produced — destined to “an epic life” — and the one, much more insecure and doubtful of fixed truths and institutions, which came to replace him from the nineteenth century on — destined, if lucky, to “the home epic” whose “great beginning” was marriage, according to Eliot (2000, p. 683). These perspectives highlight the nowadays discredited concept of evolution applied to historical processes: one is forced to acknowledge that although women’s situation was much ameliorated from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, there are particular aspects in which it had never been as oppressive as during the Victorian Age, exactly because of this exaltation of women — something which becomes quite clear in the comparison between the two personages and the challenges they faced which cannot be studied without consideration to gender.

Feminist theories such as those from Simone de Beauvoir, H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray shall be explored in this comparative section of the work so that the historically distanced characters shall be placed onto the common background of a virtually atemporal phallogocentric order. Such order and the discourse produced by it through time — official language itself, one may assume — shall be examined with the greatest intent of identifying



its alternatives and subversions — subverting mimicry being a transgressive field of knowledge unknown by Dorothea and executed by Theresa in her rudimentary writings (her biography and the narration of her spiritual experiences). Theresa is presented, therefore, as a woman who, just like George Eliot herself, stepped beyond the boundaries of traditional womanhood of all times and made ingenious use of the Father's discourse in order to subvert it from within to her own special needs, subtly defying authorities and spreading her beliefs and practices without restraint. Her focus was to please God and to do what she considered to be her spiritual mission; having such certainties in her mind, she struggled amidst a rigid patriarchal society and constructed her own individuality through her writing. Because George Eliot faced an even more elaborately complex society towards self-achievement, self-definition and self-fulfillment, she was wholly aware of the culturally determined obstacles imposed on women through a poor education and lack of active occupation — the evils suffered by Dorothea.

Eliot's new Saint Theresa was transgressive in her own way. Dorothea had an unconventional religious enthusiasm, an exaggerated devotion to the wellbeing of her fellow creatures, and, above all, she desired most ardently to enter in a spiritual communion with her husband in order to learn from him all the knowledge she supposed to be secreted from women, in order to contribute concretely to the world around her. Hers were not proper romantic female expectations, and her two choices of husband represent major transgressions in Middlemarch society, which supplies the whole community with much reason to gossip. She chooses Casaubon not out of love for him, but for the knowledge he might transmit her, and then she marries Will Ladislaw for love, but he is far below her social status and the living incarnation of progress and disruption in opposition to Middlemarch's traditionalist mentality, because of his artistic inclinations, his liberal political views, his mixed origins — his grandfather was a Polish — and scandalous past — he ends up discovering he is Bulstrode's wife's grandson, and that his mother had ran away from home, after which Bulstrode married the grandmother, promised to find the daughter, *did* find her, but did not tell, because all his wife's money would go to these descendants, and not to himself, as he wished and expected.

Despite her transgressive tendencies, Dorothea, for the lack of focus, never did consistently and radically deviate from a larger moral code imposed on women. Her exaggerations are mere maximizations of basic "feminine" virtues, such as solidarity, attention to others and self-sacrifice. That is why she is indulged in her whims by her closest friends, such as Sir James Chettam, who even adopts her projects for cottages and executes

them in his lands. She is treated as an eccentric “pet”, anachronistic in her faith and thorough innocence of human evil — deviating, no doubt, but in a positive way, like many a Messianic character. She does not possess the theoretical *means* to turn her anxieties and passionate expectations into real transgressions, for she lacks the very awareness of her potentials which can only be achieved by the exertion of the mind through proper education and substantial and useful work — those things define individuals, and, for the lack of them, Dorothea, as the greatest part of women in her century, lacked individual consciousness altogether.

Through the comparison with Theresa of Avila suggested by Eliot herself, this work intends to explore, therefore, the fate of Dorothea Brooke and the larger fates of many Victorian Dorotheas — a fate which persists up until our days in the form of oppressive ideals of marriage, because of reductionist notions of “feminine” and “masculine” that still determine at some great measure our everyday lives and behavior.

In the Finale, George Eliot (2000, p. 688) affirms that “[a] new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life [...] the medium in which [her] ardent deeds took shape is forever gone.” The reader is, then, poorly consoled by the conclusive recognition “that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

And Eliot’s Microhistoric perspective is confirmed by the acknowledgment that it is actually the whole compound of minor deeds performed by unofficial everyday (anti)heroes which sets the world in motion, which moves the heavy gearing wheels of History. And such deeds are the combined result of an apparently mysterious *truth of feeling* — the organic feeling within every human heart that humankind is connected and that we depend on each other — endowed or not with definite purpose. In the end, after discrediting all the organic unifying views of the world, all that remains to Eliot’s skepticism is Dorothea’s uncompromised emotional power. That is, while humanity has not yet reached a perfect organic system to bond all beings happily together — at least not one in which Eliot feels safe to trust —, there remains this insufficient, but still valid hope — very much determined by the author’s own humanized Christianity — in the good that comes from everyday small heroisms.

## 1. THE GENESIS OF A BOURGEOIS MYTHOLOGY

### 1.1 Preliminary considerations

Historians not always agree as to when exactly the so-called Victorian Era began. Some cannot conceive a Victorian Age without Victoria, and, therefore, establish the year of 1837 (the first year of her reign) as the dawn of the period. However, one cannot measure the extension of a collective imaginarium and multiple social, economic, political and cultural transformations by the life of one single being whose own actions have not interfered as much powerfully over the way things had been as were themselves influenced by what the world was becoming. Victoria was not responsible for the alterations or even for the *pax britannica*, the long period of relative peace with which England was blessed. Actually, the date from which this present work will count as the beginning of the era is the year when a great step was taken to diminish considerably the political power of nobility — and consequently of royalty as well — and to place it in the hands of the commons.

Politically speaking, the beginning of the Victorian Era was the beginning of a bourgeois democracy in England, with the Reform Act 1832. One of the determinations of this act was the extension of “the right to vote to all men owning property worth ten pounds or more in annual rent” (CHRIST; FORD, 1986, p. 920) — which means that it “enfranchised about half the middle class (mainly urban), but left a property qualification on voters which largely excluded the working class.” (ROBERTS, 2000, p. 689). The working class would have to wait until the Reform Act 1867 to be fairly represented.

Another fundamental measure of the Reform Bill was

the abolition in 1832 of an archaic electoral system whereby some of the new industrial cities were unrepresented in Parliament while ‘rotten boroughs’ (communities which has become depopulated) elected the nominees of the local squire. (CHRIST; FORD, 1986, p. 920).

By eliminating such archaic boroughs from parliamentary representation, the Bill greatly diminished the regional political power of lords, transferring it to the new industrial cities represented by bourgeois commons.

Because it broke up the monopoly of power that the conservative landowners had so long enjoyed (the Tory office had been in office almost continuously from 1783 until 1830), the Reform Bill represents the beginning of a new age. (CHRIST; FORD, 1986, p. 920).

So important such reform was that George Eliot chose this period of transition to set her novel, and directly attached it to the plot by the standing of Mr. Brooke, Dorothea's uncle, to the parliamentary election in 1831. He is an almost caricatured character who makes a fool of himself by defending the Bill in his candidature despite the irreconcilable fact of his being a landowner himself. The novel is thoroughly immersed in the reformist atmosphere, all characters feel in their everyday lives the consequences of this "new age" of railroads and political democracy, but it seems to be Eliot's utmost concern and regret that the main reform, that of human minds and spirits towards the common good — represented mainly by Dorothea — is even farther from being reached than before.

Returning to the Reform Act 1832, it was actually a significant advancement to the Bill of Rights from 1689, signed by William III and Mary II, and was succeeded by the two other Acts (from 1867 and 1884) which finally translated into official words many political changes suffered by England and the Western world at large during the Modern Age. After all, the Victorian Era was, as much as the Reform Bills abovementioned, the daughter of the Glorious Revolution which gave rise to the same transformations in England that all the Western world would feel abruptly at one time a hundred years afterwards, with the French Revolution. Although carrying the name of a noble — as eras usually do —, this was an age whose "most important development" was "the shift from a way of life based on the ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing" (CHRIST; FORD, 1986, p. 917).

## 1.2 A tale of glory

The social construct called bourgeoisie was born an outcast within the medieval society. The Catholic Church, which was then the sovereign of Europe, condemned severely commercial profit and accumulation of riches, two things without which there could be no consistent trade. Still, from the eleventh century on, merchants organized themselves in villas with the purpose of commerce, defying a theocentric system of values that proved to be gradually declining.

Despite the manifold resistances against them, the bourgeois came to support kings against the feudal landlords in the formation of national Estates, becoming rich in the process of colonization promoted by the recently conformed countries. During the Modern Age, this peculiar social class grew richer as the power of monarchy became stronger; yet, it was still an anomalous class that had no political representation whatsoever, since the many European

governments were ruled by crowned dynasties and administered by nobles. For some centuries these artful enterprisers must have suffered silently their well-earned money been driven away through taxes to groups of individuals who lived in privilege for the mere fact of their birth. It was the way things have always been; nobody has ever dared to think otherwise, to question the divine authority of landlords or kings.

Local rebellions grew within people's minds everyday, however — especially bourgeois minds, since these had more time and money than proletarians or peasants to think about the matter and unite their forces around a common cause. When the thirteen English colonies dared to declare their independence and fight against their crowned king for a democratic government, the claims of many a mind fed by the principles of the Enlightenment around the globe could no longer be kept in silence. The French Revolution eventually embodied the cries of a social formation that had been treated with political indifference for too long. This is a summarized version of the story retold up to this day of how the political power came to the hands of those who still retain it<sup>3</sup>, and how a “new” civilization arose from its war of independence: the winner's tale of immaculate glory.

### 1.3 The new *locus* of power

Whether or not one agrees with the benefits brought by the shift of power from the hands of landed nobility to the hands of the industrial bourgeoisie — which was operated in a long process that took the whole Victorian Age to be completed —, one has to acknowledge the many (sometimes rather subtle) transformations occasioned by it.

According to Michel Foucault (2005, p. 145), “[i]n a society like the seventeenth century one was, the body of the king was not a metaphor, but a political reality: his physical presence was necessary to the functioning of monarchy itself.” On the other hand, in the nineteenth century society,

it is the body of society that becomes [...] the new principle. It is this body that will need to be protected in an almost medical way: instead of the rituals through which the integrity of the monarch's body was restored, therapeutic recipes shall be applied, like the elimination of the sick ones, the control of the contagious ones, the exclusion of the criminals. The elimination through torture is, therefore, replaced by methods of disinfection: criminology, eugenia, the exclusion of the ‘degenerated’ ... (FOUCAULT, 2005, p. 145).

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<sup>3</sup> Representatively speaking, of course, for only in 1870 would the republican system finally be installed in France never to be disturbed and alternated by monarchist restorations or empires. Democracy was definitely not a medicine ingested at one single time in all Europe. In any case, all governments, whether monarchic or democratic, sought gradually to turn their economic policies to the bourgeoisie's interests instead of those of decaying landlords since the French Revolution.

In the age of Absolutism, there were, at one side, positions that could never be touched or altered and, at the other side, people who occupied them for a period. The king absorbed meaning and power from his throne as much as the throne, the system, absorbed meaning and power from his corporeal existence. This king's health had to be preserved because he momentarily represented the whole national State, whoever he was and whatever popular acceptance he managed to obtain from his people. This explains the famous egocentric sentence by Louis XIV: "*L'État c'est moi.*" His body may have been eaten by worms — and there is every reason to believe it was —, but, while he lived, he *was* at some great measure the State, and his material existence was preserved as such. He was the provisory owner of the *locus* of political power; nobody would look anywhere else for a source of power, for there was only one place from whence it could emerge: the throne.

The French Revolution ended this state of things, for the rebels cut the head of the king: they destroyed not only his body, but everything that he symbolized, that he incarnated. And, more importantly, they proved that the world does not come to an end when there is a shift in the *locus* of power.

The disciplinary power studied by Foucault, the power of all powers, the immaterial and invisible regulator of human lives that operates through complex and contradictory rules and never ends, but goes on changing as human transformations demand it – this power that evolved through corrective institutions developed in the nineteenth century is the very mechanism which surveys and corrects the social body, this new *locus* of power.

Any aspect of stability or social cohesion from the Modern Age — whether achieved by consensus or terror — derived its success from the fact that everyone knew where the power emanated from: the sociopolitical structures were fixed, immutable. Princes knew beforehand that they would become kings and that only premature death could prevent them, as well as the servants' children had their burdens traced from birth. Everything was decided through considerations of birth and every social stratus had its fixed function within society: the object of regulation of social relations was the ownership of land, and land is an infinitely more fixed property than money — the new era's "god".

All the confusion derived from these structural transformations of society can still be read in Jane Austen's novels. She lived in the Georgian Era (1714-1830), in the middle of the Revolution, and never saw its changes set their roots irrevocably in the Western world and establish new standards within people's minds. She lived in a period of frantic transition — so much that the shock of such convulsions reached her writing, even in a very subtle level, despite the fact that she lived secluded in the English countryside for her whole life. Many of

her characters' dilemmas center on the sociopolitical changes already felt by the power of the bourgeoisie. One is not in safe ground to determine solely by the reading of her books whether she condemned the hereditary noble rights to land and titles or merely the wrong use of it, since it seems to be the first case with characters such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Sir Eliot, and John Dashwood, and the second one with Mr. Darcy and Mr. Knightley — both characters belonging to the gentry which was a particular landed class of gentlemen in England.

In any case, when the power emanates from only one corner of the country, it is relatively easy to regulate it and protect it. When this same power, however, can emanate from anywhere in the social sphere, for it is chosen by election, by the will of people — and, with the Reform Bill of 1832, the mass of voters grew considerably —, then the entire social body must be monitored and “disinfected” so that nobody suffers great surprises of an oddity being elected for the office of Prime Minister, for example. Everybody is supposed, therefore, to be educated to vote and extraordinarily to properly represent (if ever elected) the newly created bourgeois democracy.

The bourgeoisie cannot count on guarantees of indefinite power like the inalienable hereditary possession of lands or titles which cannot be lost unless by felony and that can be transferred to the future generations forever, creating dynasties; neither is it in the position to claim the divine right of kings — the same ones it had just now deprived of political power and even killed. This victorious social class needs to find an element of stability to legitimize its power and neutralize the instable, flying nature of money — the uncertain ground above which its “castles” are founded. It happened that the great rulers of capitalist society at some point decided on the *family* to embody this element of stability. As “family” is not a given concept, the bourgeois articulators had to reinvent it, to construct a specific idea of familial bonds that could be respected anywhere around the globe — the model of which was so successfully accepted that was adopted everywhere in the Western world and is only recently being demystified. Foucault (1998, p. 108) understood that this family cell started to be valued in the eighteenth century and became the locus *par excellence* of affections and of sexuality.

The so-called nuclear family becomes gradually the unity and the foundation of the bourgeois society. It confers acceptability and respectability to this new ruling class in the world at large, it legitimizes the *status quo* and provides with new moral values a civilization utterly shaped upon new bases. As the unit, the center of the social body, the Victorian family becomes the main target of the disciplinary power.

It was not simply for the need of a new emblem upon which to construct a new society that the bourgeoisie was involved in such strategies. It was not only a question of legitimatizing the power, but also of maintaining it in a material level. And the maintenance of an industrial wealth depends on the education and taming of workers whose workforce is to be heavily explored and underpaid. As Foucault (1984, p. 173) explains,

[t]his political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection [...] This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology [...] it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and remain of a physical order. That is to say, there may be a “knowledge” of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body.

The political technology of the body, this “scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications, and rules” (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 170), served many different purposes, according to the social stratus involved. If its ascetic demands of moderation, sobriety and abstinence meant to domesticate workers and render undesirable and even medically inadvisable any appeal to their senses, feelings or thoughts that may divert them from work, the discipline imposed upon the ruling classes was not that lighter.

One must bear in mind that the most urgent need of this dominant class is to safeguard a political and economic stability that is not guaranteed by any external justifications or feudal privileges. Money is the only guarantee of power and it is quite a devious lord to be worshiped, for it may flee at the wink of an eye: its preservation, the Victorians soon discovered, depended on a great level of self-control and contrivance.

If the heir of a duke, an earl or a marquis chose to dissipate his family’s wealth in gambling, prostitution, opium and parties — and such is practically the model of aristocratic behavior —, nothing would yet prevent him from inheriting his estates and his title; even if he managed to declare his financial bankruptcy, nothing would deprive him of the power of his name, blood and birth, the respect of society and deference from his tenants<sup>4</sup>. He would probably end up marrying himself a fortune and keeping the same old track of life.

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<sup>4</sup> Two adequate literary examples of such dissipating behavior are Tom Bertram from Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), and again Sir Walter Eliot, from *Persuasion* (1818). Tom almost dies in the end of the novel thanks to his bohemian style of life, but is finally saved and the reader is given to understand that, without working one penny for the preservation or growth of his legacy, he will inherit it fully nonetheless. Sir Eliot is an old baronet who wastes too much money and is forced to rent his mansion and move to a fashionable lifestyle in Bath. None of the characters harm their reputations or close social opportunities because of such extravagances. Whatever money they possess is earned by the tenants who work their lands



On the other hand, the son of a wealthy industrialist would soon become a destitute if he chose to pulverize his father's legacy in a sensuous existence, for money has no definite owner; and he would not have self-respect preserved if such occurred, for nobody was bound to his position in any legal way, but only to the material properties which he managed to annihilate. And exactly because of the dangers of such behavior to capitalism as a system, it could not be tolerated in any way by his peers; on the contrary, it should be set as an example to be avoided and an individual to be execrated, since he so outrageously exposed the frailty of this new system which suffered great pains to reaffirm itself.

Power, in bourgeois society, depends on merit, talents of all kinds and personal charisma (for those attract money), whereas power within the circle of nobility depended just on birth. The dominant discourse determines (and people feed it by acting suitably and judging one another from its premises), therefore, that, in order to keep his wealth, the "honest" man must build a respectable public image of himself and to undergo the infinite journey of self-regulations, self-punishments and reconstructions demanded by the social body.

As the nineteenth century was the period of legitimizing the bourgeois authority in the world, life was separated in two spheres, the public and the private one, so that work could be maximized outside the home and men should not worry about corrupting their families with the various necessary immoralities he had to subject himself to in order to keep and further his fortune. Work was the word of order and anyone who seemed to give preeminence to anything else should be justly observed; the social order was maintained through work and pompous guards would go out in the streets at night to make sure that workers were not rambling around and losing their money and energy in useless entertainments that might damage the quality of their activities in the morning. Work maintained the cohesion of the social organism and gave each person a sense of belonging, of usefulness and dignity. Actually, the connection between work and dignity comes from a capitalist discourse.

One of the greatest preoccupations of the nineteenth century was the social organism and many authors dedicated their lives to understand the rules under which it operated and to try to conciliate its perfect functioning with the individual happiness of man. George Eliot and Charles Dickens were two examples of novelists who sought to reconcile a deep psychological depiction of characters with a broader understanding of the prevailing social

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and live there; the greatest value of their lifestyle is the fact that they maintain their profligate existence without ever working for it.

order. Furthermore, they tried to harmonize both instances of life within the boundaries of literature, for such questions must have truly moved them.

For no other reason than the preoccupation with the functioning of the social organism famous thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim advanced the social sciences during this period. The historical context favored their interests and their theories became ideologies that actually influenced the socioeconomic conformation of some countries — especially Marx.

The appeal of the social body's well-being hardly ever failed to arouse men's disposition to work. And if it did, discursive devices and many sorts of physical or psychological constraints were available to change their minds. After all, it was not respectable to avoid work, and nobody would want to be deemed unrespectable in a Victorian society, since many disciplinary institutions existed specifically to remind people of the importance of such values. Dickens never failed to explore the various disgraces that might befall a poor man's (or even a boy's) life if he was impelled by necessity or coercion to choose any other path but that of hard work.

#### 1.4 The surveying soul

*'Oh! Grandmother,' she said, 'what big ears you have!'  
 'The better to hear you with, my child,' was the reply.  
 'But, grandmother, what big eyes you have!' she said.  
 'The better to see you with, my dear.'*

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Since the Enlightenment and particularly after the French Revolution, men and women become hostages to the all-encompassing “public opinion” — a creation which they help to construct and to legitimize. In an interesting study of the formation of the public opinion, the post-war historian Reinhart Koselleck investigates the transformations occurred between the dawn of the Modern Age and the period of Enlightenment, respecting such theme, through two famous philosophers: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. This analysis is important since in very little cases in History has this unofficial power constituted by the social body as a whole played so relevant a role as within the Victorian Age.

Briefly exposed, in the reading of Thomas Hobbes one is confronted with the sixteenth century's atmosphere of turbulence and fear occasioned by civil and religious wars around Europe. Individual morals crashed into one another continually and intolerance disturbed

national peace everywhere. Before such awful prospects, Hobbes idealizes that all men should abdicate their individual morals in the public sphere and put themselves under the protection of the king, under the famous Hobbesian *raison d'État*. The State is now to be ruled by a moral policy whose only purpose is to end civil war and maintain peace; the individuals must obey the government, but they may preserve their beliefs privately. That is, “actions are submitted, without exception, to the law of the State, but conviction is free” (KOSELECK, 1999, p. 37).

The Modern Age is constructing, then, the idea of the *individual*, which had not existed as such hitherto. Man had been only what he could expose: it was extraordinary to suggest that he could preserve an interior existence apart from the public stage of society. But that is the central idea that our contemporary society owes to Hobbes and many other Renaissance artists and philosophers: that man is naturally parted in two, the private and the public sides.

According to Koselleck, Locke agrees with the separation of the individual in two parts and the Enlightenment actually fixes the notion of the individual “core”, or “essence”, that is indivisible and apart from his external self — a Renaissance construction. Locke believed, however, in a second form of power (other than the king’s), the so-called “public opinion”, which would be a collective transposition of inner beliefs to the public sphere. When the intimate considerations of an individual find echo in others’ considerations, they unite themselves to be heard and form the “public opinion” which proves its legitimacy by having political decisions taken by the power of its judgment.

Koselleck (1999, p. 52) summarizes:

Private and public spaces are in no way excluding. On the contrary, the public space emanates from the private one. The certainty that the moral interior forum has of itself resides in its capacity to become public. The private space enlarges itself by its own force in public space, and it is just in the public space that the private opinions are manifested as laws.

The public opinion is, in a certain way, the “soul” of the disciplinary power. It sets the directions that must be taken by the political forces. At the same time, it is driven at great measure by such power, as both live a symbiotic relationship. The power of coercion goes as far as it can to persuade society of the necessity of order — which is its ultimate goal —, but it is submitted to the frontiers established by the public opinion, since any power needs legitimacy within the society from which it derives, and this generalized opinion is the best thermometer. One regulates the other.

## 1.5 The severe voice

*‘But, grandmother, what large **hands** you have!’*  
*‘The better to hug you with.’*  
*‘Oh! but, grandmother, what a terrible big **mouth** you have!’*  
*‘The better to eat you with!’<sup>5</sup>*

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

In the nineteenth century, the public opinion was mostly regulated by two disciplinary fields of knowledge: religion and science — although, in England, an appeal to the vague but almighty “common sense” would have been more effective and incarnated both instances. Russell Goldfarb (1970, p. 22) argues that “[t]he stern religious attitude toward English morality” was formed not “by high Anglicans in the established church, but by low church Evangelicals and groups of Methodists who had been expelled from the State church in the reign of George III”.

These religious discourses may have had a powerful role in the construction of this Victorian morality, but the ascending social class which demanded this new imagery counted with many other discursive forces to overcome the difficult task of reeducating society within its own models. As Goldfarb (1970, p. 21) himself admits,

[r]eligious involvement was popular at least through the middle of the century when the combination of scientific findings (primarily by the geologist Charles Lyell and the naturalist Charles Darwin) and the religious findings of the Higher Criticism (Strauss, Renan) finally gathered enough force after years of coming together to make comfortable religious belief impossible.

From the 1850’s onwards, then, scientific discourse became the definitive order of the day. Except for the Evangelicals and Methodists, the majority of the capitalist English society had never thought seriously of religious devotion anyway. The church was a place to be attended periodically as involuntarily as many visits to rich and pompous benefactors were, for instance. One did not give much thought to it, but only performed it adequately. Those who actually cared for religion were struck by its inconsistencies or suffered the incompatibility of living such medieval life within modern society, like Dorothea.

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<sup>5</sup> The Bad Wolf is a metaphor for the disciplinary power at the service of bourgeois mythology. The Wolf’s eyes and ears are the public opinion, the silent judges, the surveying soul. The scientific discourse is like the hands of the system, producing disciplinary technology, and also its mouth, which pronounces the absolute truths, and may also “bite”, by condemning practices and attitudes and deeming them and those who endorse them immoral.

Concerning sexuality, the theme to be here discussed, however, both science and religion amicably shook hands along the whole century — for different reasons, of course. Whether human beings came from Adam and Eve or from prehistoric apes, it was certain that the temptations of the body should be kept on guard, for, according to recently born Biology, every impulse that men shared with animals was deemed primitive, barbarian, and, therefore, pernicious to society as a whole and to individual health. Science separated what was supposed to be “natural” from what was cultural, as much as religion has always separated body from soul. Culture would only be in its perfect condition if it were, though, subjected to this misty conception of “Nature” — an umbrella concept that embraced anything that the disciplinary power prescribed and the public opinion applauded. Actually, everything that a Victorian chose to call “natural” had been culturally constructed as such. A Victorian fellow wearing a lustrous top hat would accept, as much as his corseted lady, that there are thousands of different cultures around the globe: the only one, however, that truly respected the “nature” of human beings was their own.

It would not be accurate to say that sexuality was *repressed* in the Victorian Era simply because there is no aprioristic sexuality to be repressed or freed. There is no such divine or natural impulse — destined to manifest itself in human beings in a specific manner — that can be barred only by external forces. In the words of Foucault (2005, p. 114), “what is involved is the production of sexuality rather than the repression of sex”. What the nineteenth century did was to construct a new understanding of sexuality, a new pseudoscientific field of knowledge, and to do it with special minutia, trying to fill all the blank spaces and to delimit all the areas.

It was as if the disciplinary power sought to compensate with the exhaustive construction of all sites of human life the element of stability that the bourgeois dominion lacked; and so efficient was this extensive education that the century developed progressively the incredible device of individual self-control, coming to a state of things in which delimitations were no longer necessary. People were driven automatically by self-constraint, and, when they stayed out of guard, their sense of repentance was so acute as to conduct them to desperate measures, as thorough reformation and even suicide — which turned them into models to be avoided. Maggie Tulliver, one of George Eliot’s most independent heroines, for example, is impinged by the keenest remorse after running away with her beloved Stephen Guest, and goes back home despite the severe trial that such a stain in her reputation would bring to her life — in fact, she probably goes back *exactly* because of the trial which would

befall her, so attached was the Victorian public opinion to the individual's very self-recognition.

As the structures of this sexual morality were being constructed by scientific knowledge, the disciplinary power and the public opinion fulfilled their duties of checking and regulating practices — as much as they themselves set the norms to be followed, in a dialectic process.

The nucleus of production and reproduction of the bourgeois sexuality was, as one would predict, the *family cell*. The members of the family learned from youth to supervise one another's practices constantly, and it was in the name of this institution's wellbeing that the knowledge about the subject claimed to be produced.

The creation of the angel-like myth of womanhood seemed to have been as necessary as the taming of workers and any manipulation of minorities which might have damaged the industrial progress and the full development of the bourgeois imagery. After all, in the overly competitive capitalist world, the last thing Victorian men needed was to compete with their own wives for opportunities of work.

The entire population was educated to fulfill their duties to the nation, and the woman played an essential — although in every sense subjected — part in the process. The pragmatic separation of private and public spheres awarded woman with a domain, the Victorian home, from whence her power was supposed to be felt by society and her values spread. That is, the phallogocentric order determined the values women should propagate and, as they accomplished such task, the order proclaimed such values to be part of woman's nature and managed to bind her to them. Therefore, the myth seemed perfectly integrated in the whole cohesive and ordained social organism; myths, however, might fail sooner or later for their obvious immateriality.

However flawed, the reminiscences of such marble figure are distinguished even today when themes such as familial/sexual roles or taboos are brought forth. As Virginia Woolf perceived in 1931, it is such a colossal mission to kill once and for all this perniciously charming *Angel in the House*. And if ever murdered, the question remains of how to fully replace her omniscient presence — and what this presence means —, how to bury her eternally and finally forget her — or how to feel less disturbed by her previous existence — when her powerful selflessness is still evident in the silenced condition of all women.

## 2. THE TALE OF A GODLESS ANGEL

*Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.*

Coventry Patmore

After examining the process of construction of bourgeois morals, it is now to be explored the position women were supposed to occupy within such grand scheme, and why Virginia Woolf announces the urgent necessity of murdering the Angel so that women can truly express themselves in the stage of public life.

### 2.1 A capital crime

History as a discipline is not concerned with any cultural, political, economic or social phenomenon which does not represent any change from one period to another. What would be the use in affirming that our ancestors used to eat a hundred or a thousand years ago, that they wore some kind of clothes, that they walked, had children, and so forth? Nothing of such obvious assertions would contribute to a study of History, since this discipline is solely concerned with *change*, transformation — whether those which happen from a decade to another, or those — whose study was proposed by a great exponent of the *Annales School*, the historian Fernand Braudel — longer and more complex ones (*long durée*), which take centuries or millennia to shape themselves, and even set the tone of an age.

Nowadays, it seems diffused the conception of change or transformation as a structuring principle of all Humanities. If it has always been so to History — whose object of study is ever-changing Time —, though, it has not been a rule to the studies of Literature, for instance. The object of Literature being one of so escaping a definition, its structuring principles have also been escaping, difficult to fix. In modern times, however, after the hard efforts of constructionists and deconstructionists to prove that every discourse is subjective and fabricated by the shifting human mind — absent, therefore, of eternal validity — the fluid nature of literary principles have become rather justifiable and even desirable.

Instead of the rigidity of ancient and medieval studies which valued as geniuses those who could copy better the classics of their times, the Western imaginarium has from the Renaissance on understood change, transformation, innovation or originality as a proof of

human brilliant and infinite capacities, as a proof of his independence of God and His atemporal laws.

Change, which has always been part of all cultures in the shape of the sporadic conflicts between old and new generations, between tradition and modernity, is — as we understand it now — in the very essence of Art. It must be said, therefore, that, according to this recent evaluation of things, each one who was granted the classification of “artist” and maintained it throughout History was, at some extent and under some point of view, a *transgressor*. What one sees when one looks back at the renowned names of Literature, for instance, is a list of rule-breakers, of innovators, of defiant voices. All of them followed their historical traditions at some level, but also confronted them more or less directly.

That is what Virginia Woolf most sensibly understood and clarified in the most vivid and honest — because personal — way when she declared the crime she committed towards her legacy, her tradition, the myth of womanhood so powerfully constructed two hundred years ago: the murder of the Angel in the House. Because, after all, as Sigmund Freud would declare in his structuring Oedipus Complex, it is always required to “kill” an imposing mother or father in order to move on and to build an independent life — or else they might inadvertently “kill” you.

Woolf’s impetuous confession of her crime is fully transcribed here for its fundamental role in our Western culture and in this particular work:

She [the Angel in the House] was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it — in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all — I need not say it — she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty — her blushes, her great grace. In those days — the last of Queen Victoria — every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: “My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.” And she made as if to guide my pen. I now record the one act for which I take some credit to myself, though the credit rightly belongs to some excellent ancestors of mine who left me a certain sum of money — shall we say five hundred pounds a year? — so that it was not necessary for me to depend solely on charm for my living. I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must — to put it bluntly — tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in



the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures. But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer. (WOOLF, 1966, p. 285).

Few have managed to fully describe this phantom, this shadow, the perfect Victorian lady, the myth of womanhood<sup>6</sup> constructed in the nineteenth century which, in order to aggrandize an ideal of woman and place her in the highest pedestal imagined for mortals, squeezed her body in tight corsets and imprisoned her ideas, feelings, emotions, her entire manifestations of selfhood in a whole discourse produced by/for men which allowed her no representation or identification apart from that of the Other who reversely reflects the One.

Still, it is interesting how Woolf involuntarily endowed the Angel with a mind of her own. When the shadowlike creature urges the author to flatter, deceive and conceal from her readers that she has a mind of her own, and when Woolf herself acknowledges that the ultimate strategy employed by the Angel is to “tell lies if [she] is to succeed”, there is already an acknowledgement of independence of thought — even if hidden, undervalued, undesired. Woolf’s Angel is already too different from Coventry Patmore’s famous idealization<sup>7</sup>; Victorian men did not expect a woman to *pretend* to have moral perfection — she should truly possess it. An average Victorian gentleman would recognize Woolf’s Angel as a fake. And yet Woolf read these imposing angelic impulses as fake themselves.

To define what is supposed to be “fake” is necessarily to define what is supposed to be “true”, and our contemporary philosophical theories would never allow any absolute establishment of truth, for such is now interpreted as a subjective construction. It was not so for Victorians, though. They managed to annihilate God’s authoritarian truths only to replace them with their own — a multitude of controversial ones, in fact. Strict sexual differentiation and delimitation, regulated by science and religion, produced some of the most valuable truths which structured the Victorian world. The perfect womanhood was a sacred object of faith whose subversion was submitted to the hardest punishments.

And, thus, in a most successful re-creation of Biblical Genesis, Man created (a specific kind of) Woman in his own (reverted) image.

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<sup>6</sup> Turn to ANNEX B, page 110, Illustration 1.

<sup>7</sup> It was Patmore’s famous and largely applauded narrative poem called *The Angel in the House* (1854), made as a tribute to his own wife, which gave the perfect name to the myth that Virginia Woolf would kill in the next century.

## 2.2 Heretic voices

As has been discussed above, the French Revolution established a new *status quo* that would be legitimized and accommodated throughout the nineteenth century. Bourgeoisie, however, derived — and still derives — its power from money, and such is a flighty and tricky master to be relied on. Therefore, despite the long period of economic growth and political power experienced by England during the Victorian Age — rightly called *pax britannica* —, the obsession of the domineering social class with order and stability was never extinguished. It was “an exasperating time of transition, a time in which the impulse of change and the need of control could not be ignored” (GAY, 1990, p. 359). Furthermore, “the celebrated solidity of bourgeois life was as much a quickly erected defense as a purpose which in the greatest part of times was fulfilled” (1990, p. 360).

Peter Gay reminds the reader, however, that the Victorian stage was not only populated by bourgeois characters, and that many illustrious names sought to satirize and to openly criticize this new imposing morality whose constant fear of collapse turned into a cold, overly practical and materialistic tendency. Bourgeoisie was generally accused of “an incapacity of achieving this happy confluence [of the affectionate and the sensual aspects of love]” which proved to be “a neurotic symptom more devastating among men who suffered of psychological impotence: ‘Where they love, they do not desire, and where they desire, they cannot love’” (1990, p. 46). Freud himself, according to Gay, saw this inability to conciliate sex and affection as one of the greatest causes of neurosis in his time. For general thinkers, artists and politicians who condemned bourgeois morals, all of these deficiencies came from an utmost “incapacity of esthetic discrimination and of moral perception, and, above all, a failure in the supreme universe of more refined feelings” (1990, p. 46).

It was general opinion that the bourgeois, because obsessively concerned with the making of money, with work and production of material goods, had no brains for Art and no artistic sensitiveness whatsoever. For the Romanticists, the ability to perceive and specially to *feel* Art was inextricably connected with the ability to experience love. They could never conceive that love would spring out of a monetary transaction as marriage was understood by the dominant class. The Romantic ideal of woman could hardly be fabricated by a bourgeois family, for she should be highly educated, intelligent, spirituous and experienced in life — after all, Romantic love did not predict an endless union like marriage, but one which lasted as long as the fiery passion; *Love* was infinitely loved, not its human objects. This instability produced by the variable nature of Romantic love was positively absurd to bourgeois notions.

Respectable gentlemen in capitalist societies of this era would take years to reach a professional status that would financially enable them to ask their patient fiancées to finally marry them. This direct connection between bourgeois love, money, status and work was despicable to Romantic perceptions, and highly criticized in their works.

Those who Peter Gay chooses to call “cynics”, the more realistic minds of the century, also condemned bourgeois love as the fruit of institutionalized hypocrisy and the positive corruption of human relations. One of the strongest preoccupations of those who believed to imitate real life perfectly through art was the inescapable boredom of the upper and middle-class women which was certain to turn them to adultery. According to Peter Gay (1990, p. 61), for Stendhal, “instead of the stupid wax doll that the modern man seems to appreciate, a brilliant and educated woman does not need to leave home to achieve love, not even physical love, in order to find a small and pathetic happiness.” Furthermore, for Stendhal it was far more offensive to sleep with a man whom one has met only twice — for that was the ideal amount of time spent together between lovers, according to bourgeois practices, before they were ready to marry — than surrender to a moment of passionate sensuous pleasure with a man one has known and loved for years (GAY, 1990, p. 62). It is not to be said that Balzac, Proust or Stendhal did not believe in love, but it does seem that they judged such sublime combination of affection with sensuous satisfaction to be quite rare within a world dominated by Victorian practices.

Both tendencies agreed that bourgeois morality was flawed, even immoral when it propagated a form of marriage which privileged economic interests of families instead of inward feelings of lovers, and both agreed that the bourgeois lady, because uneducated and unoccupied, was utterly insufficient to produce a complete union between two separate beings.

## 2.3 **Fabricating a myth**

### 2.3.1 Bored to death

The Angel in the House was the product — as much as many other bourgeois ideological constructs — of a series of transformations that began with the process of industrialization. The technological development promoted by such revolution enabled the bourgeoisie to firm itself as the ruling social class in Europe. And one of the central

transformations promoted by the industrialization was the strict separation of work from home.

According to the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, there were many “domestic industries” or proto-industries before the definite transition of work to the public sphere, in which men and women worked together and earned both their share of money (HOBSBAWM, 2003, p. 277). The activities may have been divided according to sex, but they nevertheless granted women with an active economic role in society. Furthermore, women could support themselves without hurting the susceptibilities of their age’s morals.

“This separation of home from the workplace brought with it, logically, a pattern of sexual-economic division. For the woman, it meant that her role of domestic management became her primordial function” (HOBSBAWM, 2003, p. 279). Man became the *locus* of economic power within the family, and consequently salaries for women and children were lowered in comparison to his in the market, because his was the responsibility to bring money home — and the payment of any other member of the family was considered complementary. According to Hobsbawm (2003, p. 279),

[s]ince men, better paid, would have their salaries reduced by the competition of poorly paid women, their strategic logic was that of excluding, if possible, such competition, compelling women even more to domestic dependence and to perennially underpaid jobs.

Hobsbawm defines such new characterization of work as the “masculinization” of economy and of commercial businesses. The Reform Acts 1832, 1867 and 1884 progressively turned into laws the new political order, and it was definitely through economic supremacy that the bourgeoisie gradually dominated the *locus* of political power. Therefore, the masculinization of economy soon produced the masculinization of politics as well.

Thus, politics became essentially man’s business to be discussed in taverns and cafés where men gathered, or in the meetings to which they attended, while women remained confined to the private and personal sphere of life—to which nature had exclusively predisposed them (or so it was argued). (HOBSBAWM, 2003, p. 282).

Soon enough women were excluded from economy, politics and the greatest part of culture as well. Art should not concern them, since they were not supposed to understand it — except the amount of it necessary to musically entertain guests, to draw pretty sceneries, to dance tolerably in balls and to occupy their empty minds with customary needlework —; sports were generally improper for they excited the muscles, the body, and broke the equilibrium in which men sought to maintain women, urging on them desires that could never

be fully satisfied. The tiny socio-cultural sphere they were responsible for, though, was crucial to the continuance of bourgeois peace: the home.

According to Judith Flanders (2006, p. 17), “[t]he well-kept house directed men as well as women along the path of virtue, while the opposite led them irretrievably astray.” Moreover,

[t]he attractive, tastefully appointed house was a sign of respectability. Taste was not something personal; instead it was something sanctioned by society. Taste, as agreed by society, had moral value, and therefore adherence to what was considered at any one time to be good taste was a virtue, while ignoring the taste of the period was a sign of something very wrong indeed. [...] Conformity, conventionality, was morality. (FLANDERS, 2006, p. 18).

Not even within home, therefore, was woman allowed to employ creativity. Her house did not reflect her inner self, her individuality, but the role she represented in society, and everything that was expected from her and from the family whose morality she was supposed to safeguard.

The administration of the house, the perfect satiation of the husband’s needs and (theoretically) the moral and spiritual education of children were the only social tasks imputed to women — all of them consigned within the boundaries of the building. The Victorian house was not just the only sphere in which woman exercised some level of control and about which nobody would deem her ignorant: it was also her one acceptable *locus* of power, the one space which gave meaning to her existence and which was defined by the meaning of her womanhood — not of herself specifically, but of the ideal she tried to embody. Even there, though, she was only virtually the queen, for although she was usually allowed to move furniture and implement reforms according to her will, nothing inside the house belonged to her. She was herself little more than an adornment of the house, for not even as a mother her services were materially required — such was the concern of nannies and governesses.

In Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), it is Nora Helmer’s eventual realization of her meaninglessness within her own house and her absolute unawareness of herself that leads her to the final extraordinary decision of leaving home. She comes to the conclusion that she has always been nothing but a doll inside a doll’s house, and has treated her children as other dolls with whom she delighted to play; the only adult in the family was her husband, Torvald, and he himself was the only actual human being to play with such toys, for the enjoyment did not interfere with the individuality which he possessed and she lacked.

Legally speaking, the married woman did not even exist. Thus the jurist and Tory politician William Blackstone (1840, p. 85-6) acknowledged her situation in British law, in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, published during the 1760's:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs every thing [...] for this reason, a man cannot grant any thing to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself [...] If the wife be injured in her person or her property, she can bring no action for redress without her husband's concurrence, and in his name, as well as her own: neither can she be sued, without making the husband a defendant.

A woman could not even commit a crime without implicating her husband. And this eighteenth century state of things in which the common law — the British law based on medieval customs — still prevailed instead of legislative statutes only gradually changed during the nineteenth century. One good literary example of its anachronic persistence is embodied by Mr. Bumble's declaration that "the law is a ass — a [sic] idiot," when he is informed by Mr. Brownlow that he would be deemed guilty for his wife's stealing of some jewels because "the law supposes that [his] wife acts under [his] direction" (DICKENS, 2009, p. 277), in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838).

In the eyes of the Law, therefore, women were like children. A (generally considered) misogynistic Victorian philosopher had something to say about women's childishness that quite reinforced his negative fame. According to Peter Gay (1990, p. 76), Arthur Schopenhauer would cherish the notion that

only one glance at the body of woman is enough to reveal that she "was not made for great mental or physical accomplishments. She does not respond to the burden of life with action, but through suffering". Being an inferior sex, she is not interested in art or thought. She was made to breed and educate children, exactly because "she is herself infantile, foolish and unequipped of sight; in *one* word, a big child to the rest of her life".

This is the myth of purity to which alluded Virginia Woolf in her condemnation of the Angel in the House. Deprived of outdoorsy *experience* and *knowledge* of the world and its affairs, thoroughly controlled and monitored by her family, it is no wonder that the young women of this age displayed an exaggerated innocence of all things. And such was the model to be cultivated and desired by honorable Victorian men who were psychologically unskilled to deal with experienced and vastly educated women, or with their own uncontrollable sexual urges that such women might inspire.

Novels abound with naive and abnegated personifications of the myth, such as Dickens' Little Dorrit in the homonymous book (1855), his Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield* (1850), Madeline Bray in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) and Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), William Thackeray's Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair* (1848), George Eliot's Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* (1859), Romola in Eliot's novel with the same name (1862), and, naturally, Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* (1874).

One good reason why the Griselda-like myth<sup>8</sup> reached the highest degrees of angel-like innocence is that it was, as many other Victorian myths were, the result of a collective yearning for religious faith.

Friedrich Nietzsche has only given voice to a growing and dominating skepticism when he declared the "death of God" in his famous philosophical work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) — and, before him, Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant had already scandalized European societies with such a radical idea. After all, although it is confirmed that a Christian morality "left deposits of guilt and depression in many nineteenth century minds," (GAY, 1990, p. 50) it was also truth that bourgeoisie managed to "secularize" morality when it constructed its own. The first step towards such "profanation" was the Protestant Reform itself, which established a kind of Church — despite all its ramifications — totally adequate to bourgeois demands; it turned religion into a more private matter by translating the Bible and by liberating the financial profit and the accumulation of money from the stain of sin — allowing, therefore, that merchants earned their honest money without being excommunicated because of it. The greatest bourgeois empires from the seventeenth century on were all of them Protestant not by a mere coincidence. Such alliance was so successful as to inspire Max Weber's masterpiece *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), which sought to explain the association between the ascension of the former and the success of the latter.

The nineteenth century brought with it, however, an intensification of eighteenth century's Enlightenment which shaped the final rupture between religion and science. And of all scientific works produced in this age, it is not perhaps too daring to assert that none was as much groundbreaking as Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859).

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<sup>8</sup> Griselda is a folkloric female myth whose first appearance in printed literature is in Giovanni Boccaccio's last tale from *Decameron*. She represents patience and obedience, since she is deprived of both her children — as her husband, the Marquis of Saluzzo, tells he will kill them to test her wifely subservience —, divorced from her husband when he informs her he will marry another better woman, and then waits many years to be called back to prepare the Marquis' new bride — who, she discovers, is her own daughter, and not her substitute, since he wants her back because she was approved in the test of virtue imposed on her. The Griselda-myth — which is depicted in the works of great masters, like Petrarch, Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Perrault, Antonio Vivaldi, etc. — is reproduced abundantly in Victorian literature, since it reinforces the validity of the new bourgeois myth. (Turn to ANNEX C, page 111, Illustrations 2, 3, 4 and 5).

Darwinist theories scandalized traditional Victorian ladies and fed many discussions between scholars and common folks. It is probably impossible for us to conceive what it meant for a religiously educated society — even though religion had not been stronger in the shaping of English morals than the old “common sense” — to have the scientific proof that such a structuring myth as that of the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise has never been anything but a myth, and that, instead, the humankind fought its way out of evolution such as any other animal species against the same apes from which they had sprang as mutant individuals. It is ironic to imagine a polished Victorian lady tracing her ancestry back to the wild, primitive tribes of prehistoric *homo sapiens sapiens*.

After Darwin, Catholic and Protestant defendants would have to wander in the darkness of a blind faith. For the many others who claimed a religious bond or not, but whom were decidedly not satiated by them — as is the case of Dorothea Brooke —, the Victorian Age set its imagination to work in order to create new myths to replace the lost ones. Many of them were provided by Biology itself and proved their power of resilience by resisting time and the advancements of the field in the shape of outdated terms such as “race”, “savage” or “primitive” to describe marginalized ethnical groups.

One of the greatest myths born from such an age of religious orphanage — and possibly the most famous and everlasting — was the Angel, the myth of womanhood out of which other “distortions” were created — that is, “[s]he [who] stabilized the Victorian family, which was the single most important unit in preserving the order of nineteenth century England.” (GOLDFARB, 1970, p. 41).

The deep hole left by religious transcendent promises and stable truths was fulfilled by a goddess-like interpretation of womanhood which situated women high above mortals, but also demanded too much of their human capacities. After an exhaustive day of hard work, populated by earthly money transactions and haunted by the constant fear of economic decay, it was more than a relief for any typical Victorian man to imagine his reward in the shape of an ethereal wife by the warm hearth of his safe and cozy home, ready to attend to all his needs. Her sole function in the world — and he was educated to believe that it was also her innermost desire, as we read in Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* — was to make his life perfect and complete, and, although he might not have claimed such, he never actually doubted that he *deserved* this compensation for his strenuous public life. The profusion of depictions of clergymen as utterly mundane men in literary texts — such as Jane Austen’s — reinforces the notion that the Church was not there anymore to provide this Victorian man with the purer aspects of life. He would, thus, make his own home a temple to his faith and



adoration. A perfect Victorian lady became, therefore, a fair reward for a hardworking man — the many years men took to save money in order to marry being another evidence of it.

As the guardian of Victorian morality, woman was deprived, as has already been mentioned, of much experience and knowledge of the world — which would corrupt her “natural” purity and innocence, spoiling the domestic peace expected by men. And, after all, men would justify themselves, what would be the substantial use of women’s education if they were not supposed to work at all? And why *should* they work if their husbands were there to support them entirely and to offer them a comfortable home without privations? — the perfect scenario for boredom.

“To be bored,” professors George Ford and Carol Christ (1986, p. 1637) remind us, “was the privilege of wives and daughters in upper- and middle-class families in which feminine idleness was treasured as a status symbol.” Everyone recognizes, though, that a golden cage is still a cage.

In the section “Cassandra” of her *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers after Religious Truth*, Florence Nightingale gives a melancholy account of women’s dissipation of energy, intellect and time in useless pursuits. She recognizes that “[w]omen often long to enter some man’s profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring the intellect with others) and, above all, time.” (NIGHTINGALE, 1986, p. 1649) For the heroic nurse of the Crimean War (1853-1856), women dispersed their intelligence and time in futile activities that could always be interrupted by the urge of “higher” causes — such as any small demand of a child or a husband. She also calls “surprising” that so much love between man and woman can exist when it is never fed by any means of intelligent conversation, since woman is proudly ignorant of social, cultural, political questions of all kinds. Her saddest insight, however, is that, after the one career open for women — marriage — is finally achieved, it is woman’s path to gradually *dissolve* her every dream and hope of a future which can never come — and to dissolve her own self in such disillusion.

All their plans and visions seem vanished, and they [women] know not where, and they cannot recall them. They do not even remember them. And they are left without the food of reality or of hope. Later in life, they neither desire nor dream, neither of activity, nor of love, nor of intellect. (NIGHTINGALE, 1986, p. 1651-2).

Nightingale (1986, p. 1652) is not without the hope, though, that “at last there shall arise a woman, who will resume, in her own soul, all the sufferings of her race, and that woman will be the Saviour of her race” — a clearly Messianic and religiously-oriented hope which not surprisingly — considering the Darwinian widespread and misinterpreted theories

and the way these women felt as excluded from social and political rights as other ethnical minorities of their time — refers to women as members of a different *race*.

In her more practical approach of the matter, the writer Dinah Maria Mulock (1986, p. 1646-7) affirms that, in opposition to the boys,

“the girls” likewise finish their education, come home, and stay at home. [...] [Papa] delights to give them all they can desire — clothes, amusements, society; he and mamma together take every domestic care off their hands; they have abundance of time and nothing to occupy it; plenty of money, and little use for it; pleasure without end, but not one definite object of interest or employment; flattery and flummery enough, but no solid food whatever to satisfy mind or heart — if they happen to possess either [...] And so their whole energies are devoted to the massacre of old Time.

These are, therefore, two more examples of voices which defied the bourgeois idealization of woman. Nightingale and Mulock did not want to be exalted and adored by the men they had to serve without any pay for their whole lives; they did not want to be flattered, adulated and offered material compensations for their immanent existence. They wanted to *transcend* the suffocating boundaries of domestic circumscription and to enter in the symbolic journey of Odysseus which James Joyce employed as the metaphor for the long journey of self-discoveries — the long voyage around the wide world of real and imaginary adventures that leads to the one most important spot for anyone to discover and reclaim: one’s own self (or many selves, for that matter).

The knowledge constructed by men and their phallogocentric discourse would never fully satisfy women or correspond to the many expectations women have cultivated along the millennia of domination. It would be immensely helpful, though, and one must know really well the theories whose flaws and deficiencies one is supposed to unmask and confront. Perhaps self-knowledge is condemned to be forever an incomplete search, as it is still for men; these women longed, however, at least to be granted the right to begin their search.

In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea is depicted as a passionate and restless creature who could never adapt to the ideals of passive womanhood from her time — on the contrary, she represents the many victims of a sexually determined (and superficial) education for women that George Eliot and several of her contemporaries fiercely sought to combat. In the same novel, though, Eliot portrays Celia Chetham as an example of many “upper- and middle-class women [who] apparently found their leisurely lives fully enjoyable.” (CHRIST; FORD, 1986, p. 1638). Such individual depictions of the myth’s embodiment are really interesting because women’s own defense of their entrapment had much weight in the legitimization and propagation of the myth, since it reinforced the incredibly spread and unquestioned belief in

the passive, submissive, tender and innocent woman's "nature" — against which any manifestation was understood as social and biological aberration.

### 2.3.2 The workings of "nature"

*There is great happiness [...] in devoting oneself to another  
who is worthy of one's affection; still, men are very selfish  
and the woman's devotion is always one of submission  
which makes our poor sex so unenviable.  
This you will feel hereafter — I know;  
though it cannot be otherwise  
as God has willed it so.*

Queen Victoria

Very powerful was, indeed, the myth which subjugated even the greatest citizen of the British Empire during the Victorian Era: the Queen. And that was because the Angel in the House was justified by the prevailing bourgeois morality of the period as the will of God or, more specifically, the mysterious and irrepressible workings of "Nature".

In Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, the philosopher distinguishes what he calls "four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex" (FOUCAULT, 2005, p. 103). The first of them was the *hysterization of women's bodies*, that is, the imaginary construction of a female body saturated with sexuality. The idea of "woman" begins from then on to be associated with the vague concept of "nature" until one becomes the representation of the other within the Victorian imaginarium. Woman becomes "body" as opposed to "mind" — obviously represented by man.

There is little more "sexism" — used here in an anachronic context — in the following excerpt of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* than in any religious adoration of a more "natural" woman as complementary to the more "cultural" man:

Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman has one solution: pregnancy. Man is for woman a means: the purpose is always the child. But what is woman for man? A real man wants two kinds of things: danger and fun. Therefore, he wants woman as the most dangerous plaything. It is required that man be educated for war, and woman for the recreation of the warrior: all else is folly [...]  
**The happiness of man is: I will. The happiness of woman is: he wills.**  
'Behold, just now the world became perfect!' — thus thinks every woman when she obeys out of entire love.

And woman must obey and find a depth for her surface. Surface is the disposition of woman: a mobile, stormy film over shallow water.  
 Man's disposition, however, is deep; his river roars in subterranean caves: woman feels his strength but does not comprehend it. [...] 'Thou goest to women? Do not forget thy whip!' (NIETZSCHE, 1983, p. 80-2, emphasis added)

Woman is, therefore, described as mere body, a body which “naturally” yearns for maternity and which is driven by irrational emotions: a shallow and superficial being, passive to the will of its superior, of man and his “subterranean caves” of rational knowledge and higher purposes. So primitive is this animal called “woman” that her unreasonable —and therefore, dangerous — responses must be anticipated with a *whip*. Whether or not Nietzsche truly believed in and meant to disseminate such pearls of wisdom, it is certain that the culture in which he was raised took great pains to direct him to these conclusions. However, after Freudian theories on the primitive and selfish pleasure principle which begins during early infancy and is to be replaced by the reality principle in mature age (FREUD, 1989), it is quite tempting to question who the childish and animalistic one might be in the grand scheme of things when confronting the description of a creature whose only two purposes in life are “danger and fun”.

According to Susan Bordo (1995, p. 3) in her study of this precise dualism (nature/culture, body/mind), Western philosophy founded the premise of “[t]he body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects”. The obvious conclusion of it is that

if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death. (BORDO, 1995, p. 5)

Furthermore, the body, in opposition to the vital activity of the “spirit”,

simply *receives* and darkly, dumbly responds to impressions, emotions, passions [...] This duality of active spirit/passive body is also gendered, and it has been one of the most historically powerful of the dualities that inform Western ideologies of gender. (BORDO, 1995, p. 11)

The myth of womanhood diligently sewed by the skilful hands of Victorian mythmakers had much elasticity to encompass all that the age considered negative and repulsive in a man: to “effeminize” a man would mean to weaken him, to diminish him, to reduce him, to castrate him, ultimately to destroy him, for the “feminine” could only mean loss and final annihilation to the best materials of which a man was “made”. While man

strongly rejected “feminine” passivity, tenderness, subservience and innocence, a woman who could not manage to be considered “feminine” — the umbrella-like concept which covered all the desirable attributes of the Angel in the House — was deemed abnormal, a crime against society and “nature” itself.

As quoted by George Eliot in the author’s comparison of her ideas about women with Mary Wollstonecraft’s considerations on the same subject, Margaret Fuller would state that

[n]ature seems to delight in varying the arrangements, as if to show that she will be fettered by no rule; and we must admit the same varieties that she admits. [...] We are pleased that women should write and speak, if they feel need of it, from having something to tell; but silence for ages would be no misfortune, if that silence be from divine command, and not from man’s tradition. (ELIOT, 1986, p. 1643).

It seems that it was clear, therefore, for many a Victorian writer, that the term “nature” as attributed to what was expected of women was nothing but another authoritarian linguistic device operated to paint a bourgeois construct with the bright and ethereal colors of ahistorical truths.

### 2.3.3 The Feminine Philosopher

One of the most enthusiastic feminists — if thus he may be called — of the nineteenth century was the philosopher and political theorist John Stuart Mill. He wrote a greatly sympathetic essay on the situation of women, trying to deconstruct, among other things, this pervasive idea of woman’s “nature”. His is a work that deserves to be more meticulously analyzed, since it “was on behalf of women like Dorothea Brooke that Mill developed his argument” — that is, those who “find the traditional womanly dispensation as painfully frustrating as Florence Nightingale had found it.” (CHRIST; FORD, p. 1638).

His language is strong, full of powerful images, and direct in its purpose. It is also full of the authority which springs from the absolute certainty of an idea, its validity and social relevance. He was in all aspects of his political career a defender of liberty, of bourgeois liberalism — his concern with women’s subjection is the same concern he displays for any other form of slavery. Because rooted in the same discourse of freedom and democracy cultivated by the bourgeoisie, he tries to unmask what he considers the inconsistencies of thought of those who claim to represent the same ideas he does.

It is particularly interesting to investigate a text written by a bourgeois mind to confront a widespread bourgeois myth because such examination unfolds the complex nature

of this social class during the period of transition in which it ascertained its political power. One must bear in mind that the same dominant class which constructed the myth was the one which eventually destroyed it. As Peter Gay (1990, p. 359) providentially reminds us,

[t]he tortuous course and the ultimate triumph of the women's movement illustrate the capacity that many bourgeois had and have of reformulating their cultural defenses and of changing their social ideals. Influential men ended up perceiving that the angel in the house was not an angel and did not need to be confined in home.

The same bourgeoisie that became obsessed with order and stability during one of the most stable of all centuries is ironically the one which has only managed to survive the many changes, transformations and revolutions of our contemporary era (as the ruling class) thanks to its elasticity and its chameleonic capacity to reinvent itself. In no other century in History had so many minorities achieved so many previously unthinkable rights (the women, the Afro-descendants, the proletarians, at some measure the homosexuals, amongst others) as in the twentieth century in which bourgeoisie officially removed the last dangerous phantom of an aristocratic restoration — officially, because practically there was no phantom at all anymore — through the World War I and the subsequent fragmentation of ancient empires. This seems to prove this class's flexible nature, indeed.

Returning to John Stuart Mill, he begins "The Subjection of Women" (1869) with a rational introduction and certain indignation that *he* should be the one trying to prove himself right in his opinion, and not those who opposed him, for he recurs to bourgeois *liberty* as the structuring principle of his argumentation. He perceptively assumes, though, that such is not merely a question to be resolved with rational arguments, for it moves people's general feeling and confronts a generally accepted and unquestioned custom — an intelligent approach that reveals the irrationality in which his opponents found their principles, since he means to direct his opinions specially to men who consider themselves quite rational creatures.

After such expansion of ideas, he introduces the main point he is about to attack: the vague notions upon which the subjection of women is established:

It is one of the characteristic prejudices of the reaction of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth, to accord to the unreasoning elements in human nature the infallibility which the eighteenth century is supposed to have ascribed to the reasoning elements. **For the apotheosis of Reason we have substituted that of Instinct; and we call everything instinct which we find in ourselves and for which we cannot trace any rational foundation.** This idolatry, infinitely more degrading than the other, and the most pernicious of the false worships of the present day, of all of which it is now the main support, will probably hold its ground until it gives way before a sound psychology, laying bare the real root of much that is

bowed down to as the intention of Nature and the ordinance of God. (MILL, 1995, p. 97, emphasis added).

For Mill, this absurd female submission has never been thought of seriously or decided democratically; it has never been speculated if it actually represented and safeguarded somehow the general welfare of the world. Women's bondage to men began in prehistoric times, through the simple preponderance of physical strength — this is his supposition —, and was accepted as an indisputable norm even by what he would have called “civilized” societies. A “primitive” subjugation through violence is, therefore, gradually materialized in legal rights. He calls this form of subjection “slavery” and explains how women's “masters” united to construct institutions which guaranteed their possessions — including their “slaves”.

It is remarkable how Mill actually understood women's case as any other case of collective oppression in which the weak is overpowered by the strong. Therefore, he thinks of strategies through which women, as much as the African-Americans in the American Civil War or the Russian proletarians in the Russian Revolution, could achieve the power over their own rights. He mentions, for instance, that women cannot “buy off” their enemies by bribes, since “[i]n the case of women, each individual of the subject-class is in a chronic state of bribery and intimidation combined.” (MILL, 1995, p. 104).

Mill recognizes in his text that his comparison between “the government of the male sex” and the many other forms of subjugation which he exemplifies may cause indignation in his contemporaries, since these would be deemed arbitrary, while the former was generally considered, in his words, “natural”. To such indignation, he answers thus:

But was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it? [...] the theorists of absolute monarchy have always affirmed it to be the only natural form of government; issuing from the patriarchal, which was the primitive and spontaneous form of society, framed on the model of the paternal, which is anterior to society itself, and, as they contend, the most natural authority of all. Nay, for that matter, the law of force itself, to those who could not plead any other, has always seemed the most natural of all grounds for the exercise of authority. Conquering races hold it to be Nature's own dictate that the conquered should obey the conquerors, or, as they euphoniously paraphrase it, that the feebler and more unwarlike races should submit to the braver and manlier. (1995, p. 105-6).

Here Mill disputes deeply rooted Biological myths created by his era. He questions the absurd use that the imperial politics made of Darwinist ideas: that is, the natural evolution from Biology was absorbed by political discourse in order to justify imperialism by ascertaining that the “feebler races” of men needed and even *desired* the white man's supremacy as a means to “evolve” into “civilized” nations. Woman likewise would wish the male dominance to safeguard her frail “nature” and constitution, and to keep her in the path of

virtue, removing from her all temptations and vices which her passive mind would “naturally” cling to.

Trying to deconstruct such amalgamation of scientific and political discourses, Mill (1995, p. 106) sagaciously affirms that

so true it is that unnatural generally means only uncustomary, and that everything which is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural.

He remembers, though, that this custom elevated to the category of “nature” is, differently from other examples of submission, accepted willingly and not by force. He acknowledges that the greatest part of women would have tons of complaints of ill usage to accuse their husbands of, were they not afraid of retaliation, since, as Mill (1995, p. 108) indignantly informs, “[i]n no other case (except that of a child) is the person who has been proved judicially to have suffered an injury, replaced under the physical power of the culprit who inflicted it.”

Many women who had had the means to write dared to expose their dissatisfactions, their sufferings and longings that can never be fully resolved without a structural change in public minds and institutions. The greatest part of women remained in compliant silence, however, and Mill (1995, p. 108) points the major cause for it:

All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. [...] All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favorite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. The masters of all other slaves rely, for maintaining obedience, on fear, — either fear of themselves or religious fears. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to effect their purpose. **All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others.** All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others, to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. And by their affections are meant the only ones they are allowed to have — those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and indefeasible tie between them and a man. **When [we think] [...] that the principal object of human pursuit, consideration, and all objects of social ambition, can in general be sought or obtained by her only through him, it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character.** (emphasis added)

In his clear, unambiguous words, Mill explains how, why, when and where women’s “nature” is industriously *taught* them through a sexualized and superficial education. The cruelty of this brainwashing is precisely in telling a girl not what she is *supposed to be* or what is *expected of her* — which would at least confer her the possibility of asking “by



whom” or “why” —, but what *she is* by “nature” — which makes her failure an aberration of “nature”, of life itself, and makes of her a criminal against the almighty will of God. Woman materializes man’s secret wishes to *be* the God of creation, for in schools and inside his own home he seeks to create a loving slavish form of life whose greatest function is to worship and adore him.

Mill goes on saying that because women usually do not care about politics, economy, or any serious subject of “human” knowledge, this carelessness for the welfare of humankind is in their “nature”. “But in history,” he argues, “as in traveling, men usually see only what they already had in their own minds; and few learn much from history, who do not bring much with them to its study.” (MILL, 1995, p. 115).

Furthermore, he argues that the knowledge man have of woman is superficial, because her subservient position towards him does not encourage her to be open and sincere. He recognizes here the deceiving aspect of the Angel, judging that women *did* have many secret complaints that they would never confess under the penalty of destitution, physical aggression and even the possible loss of their children in the case of divorce. For Mill (1995, p. 118), “the greater part of what women write about women is mere sycophancy to men”; according to him, they have very little actual individuality and their minds are a compound of acquired knowledge from their “masters”. They only repeat what they are told, and many truly believe it all.

At the end of his text, the author exhorts men to be honest with themselves and with the world in admitting what fears compel them to keep the odious position of masters to their own wives and daughters whom they believe to love — and *can* one truthfully love another whom one knows so little about?

The general opinion of men is supposed to be that the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother. I say, is supposed to be, because, judging from acts — from the whole of the present constitution of society — one might infer that their opinion was the direct contrary. [...] if they are free to do anything else [...] there will not be enough of them who will be willing to accept the condition said to be natural to women. If this is the real opinion of men in general, it would be well that it should be spoken out. [...] ‘It is necessary to society that women should marry and produce children. They will not do so unless they are compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them.’ The merits of the case would then be clearly defined. (MILL, 1995, p. 120).

At last, Mill (1995, p. 121) conjectures that men are not afraid lest women should not want to marry at all,

but lest they should insist that marriage should be on equal conditions; lest all women of spirit and capacity should prefer doing almost anything else, not in their own eyes degrading, rather

than marry, when marrying is giving themselves a master, and a master too of all their earthly possessions.

Thus John Stuart Mill discloses the same indecorous aspect of bourgeois marriage that Stendhal had deflagrated: a union that completely annulled one of the two parts involved, depriving one of them of all her material property and dissolving gradually her individual self in an endless succession of meaningless activities or distractions which did nothing but reinforce, within her, the certainty of her non-existence. Marriage deprived women of individual meaning — even though there had never been much of a conscious individual self during her previous single life. As Florence Nightingale perceived in her *Cassandra*, woman would, after marriage, incarnate the Angel in the House, the mother, the wife, the guardian of bourgeois morality, until so many embodiments, so many social disguises would increasingly drain every little hope or dream, every vague glimpse of individual consciousness that she might have once possessed — until nothing discernible remained, but the mixture of other people's dreams, opinions, feelings and desires.

And against all the political strategies and discursive practices that have for so many centuries denied women their rights and misappropriated them of any possibility of self-knowledge, self-identification — in short, of selfhood —, John Stuart Mill (1995, p. 114), called “The Feminine Philosopher” in a caricature<sup>9</sup> by the magazine *Vanity Fair*, in 1873, declares solemnly:

Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. [...] What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing — the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.

#### 2.3.4 Chaotic lives

The bourgeoisie led a very nervous and anxious life, indeed. The obsession with social order and political-economic stability required of these people superhuman capacities of self-control and self-regulation. The disciplinary power that at a first moment surveyed men and women's routines and exercised its global control through public institutions of all kinds did not take long to be integrated in people's obsessive minds and to turn them into their own self-regulators.

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<sup>9</sup> Turn to ANNEX D, page 112, Illustration 6.

The same order and stability that the bourgeois wished for society, they wished for themselves, since, indeed, they depended on each other. A good example of such extreme cautions is the profusion of scientific and pseudo-scientific treatises produced in the century which meant to teach Victorian society, especially judicious mothers and fathers, how to behave towards their bodies and how to educate their children concerning their bodies. A sample of this sort of discourse is an essay called *Intermarriage* (1838) by the influential Victorian anthropologist Alexander Walker.

According to Walker's theories, puberty is a time in which the peculiar superabundance of life "is employed in the reproduction of itself" (WALKER, 1995, p. 16). Such impulses must be surveyed carefully, therefore: those who are too robust must be submitted to a more sedentary life and even diets containing little or no meat at all. Chocolate and "spirituous drinks" must be avoided as well; retention of urine or constipation represent danger, for they "attract the blood towards the parts whence it is desirable to withhold it" (1995, p. 17).

Those who are feeble must not be left to read whatever they like and then cultivate emotions and aspirations out of the common sense. For them, the reverse is prescribed: exercise and activity. Walker prescribes many other little precautions, as the avoidance of very warm clothing and of the proximity of the thighs, the prohibition of two young people lying together on beds, and so on. Too soft couches or chairs are also dangerous: children must sit on hard materials, so as not to be too relaxed. Physical comfort means automatic invitation of sexual thoughts or actions. He even adverts mothers against tickling, using as argument the comparison between such caress and what the "effeminate Indians", the possessors of a "degrading sensuality", called "shampooing — a kind of pressing and kneading of the naked body when they come from the bath" (1995, p. 18). Flowers' odor is also to be restrained, for it "infuses throughout the body a voluptuous feeling" (1995, p. 19). Anything that provokes, that *appeals* to the senses must be controlled under the danger of exciting the sexual organs.

Books, especially those who depict, according to him, "exaggerated sentiments", must be avoided by sensitive persons. Novels, especially Romantic novels, were surely in his black list. Even the Holy Scriptures were the target of Victorian morality on account of their overabundant sensuality and impetuosity. One may conclude by such strict measures why there would never be a prominent Saint Theresa in the nineteenth century: in her first manifestations of Christian ardor, she would inevitably be diagnosed with fanaticism, and, under not too much insistence, with hysteria. Young people as Theresa was in her youth, too

imaginative, impetuous and passionate, were the kind that Victorian moralists sought to avoid at all costs.

On the other hand, as incredibly as it may seem, “every occupation of the mind likely to produce or foster emotions ought to be proscribed” (1995, p. 20). And he goes on to confirm openly the concrete interdiction to ardent devotees like Saint Theresa within the accepted and desirable Victorian patterns of behavior:

[t]here is danger, as an able writer observes, even in austere religion, for daily experience shows but too well, that, in the exclusive worship and love of a superior being, the young girl looks for nothing, and finds nothing, but food for tender emotions — with her, love of God is still love. (WALKER, 1995, p. 20).

The whole discourse is, therefore, structured upon the undesirability of emotions: after all, they render human relations unpredictable, and unpredictability is not something that the Victorian man is psychologically equipped to face. Even nineteenth century expeditions to distant countries were meticulously prepared so as to avoid surprises, so as to limit inconveniences and to create an atmosphere of “civilized” order to the European traveler. Such nervous obsessions even inspired Eça de Queiroz’s declaration that

[t]he Englishman falls on foreign ideas and customs as a block of granite falls on water. There he stays, with his Bible, his clubs, his sports, his prejudices, his etiquette, his self-centredness [...] Even in countries where he has lived for hundreds of years, he is still the foreigner. (QUEIROZ, 1970, p. 159-60).

The Englishmen — as described, mind, by a Francophile Eça —, or, more specifically, the British bourgeois, was not used to or desirous of attracting the unknown. And that appears to be a natural consequence of emotions. The universe of social relations becomes a game progressively more complex as the century comes to its closure; a very specialized game destined to a select number of tough and cold conquerors and rulers of empires. Extravagant emotions are definitely not the order of the day.

Another point is love. As understood by Walker’s words, such feeling is pernicious as it creates an atmosphere of expectations in the minds of young women that are never to be fulfilled. If he believes in any sort of love at all, it is surely not the one described in Romantic novels. Victorian “conjugal love” involves a series of duties and, in its nicest form, a healthy fraternal companionship — nothing of the fervent passion that either Theresa of Avila or Eliot’s Dorothea were likely to experience. The love of God is dangerous, therefore, so far as it is a fuel to strong emotions that may sooner or later attract material (carnal) correspondence. After all, for these neurotic minds any untamed yearning may inevitably lead

to sexual yearning. Sex and love are the greatest riddles, far within the universe of the unknown, far out of Reason's dominium.

If one thinks how powerful the medieval aristocracy still was in the Victorian imaginarium, one may well understand why it became a demand the bourgeoisie imposed upon itself to retain power and to preserve it no matter at what cost, such as their predecessors were unable to. Very proud of itself, the bourgeoisie wanted to be *perfect*, to suppress all its vices and animal needs in order to manage its sources of economic power (the factories) better than the nobles had managed their lands, and to do politics more seriously than the nobles had done before them. It was a question of precaution and reaffirmation against all of those who made ridicule of bourgeois' stupidity, of its blindness to all sensitiveness, but who had been supplanted by or aspired to dethrone it. The bourgeois could never be too careful, according to their own standards.

And they could never fulfill all their own self-demands. So much self-discipline produced an incredible abundance of medical records — and medicine developed greatly to attend to their new pathological needs. Peter Gay opens his book *Tender Passion* with two impressive cases of brilliant young men haunted by two “inventions” of the century: neurosis<sup>10</sup> and neurasthenia.

Otto Beneke was a successful public servant who took a couple of years to ask his beloved to marry him — even though his financial circumstances were ideal and the girl's father fully approved of it — simply because he could not believe that she actually loved him, although she spread proofs of her retribution to everyone who might be interested to see — and everybody saw them, except him. Walter Bagehot, on the other hand, was a charismatic writer who took too long to finally fall in love and marry because he felt bound to his mad mother — whose neurasthenia he was forever afraid to inherit, since pathological inheritance was another powerful myth of the age. Frankly neurotic or psychologically repressed, Bagehot and Beneke were only two amongst thousands of examples of potential patients to Freudian psychoanalysis. Such was not an option, however, since this science had not been propagated yet, and even less socially accepted by their time: these deeply distressed Victorian minds had to treat themselves as they could, and the greatest part of them were never treated. They repressed their wishes, desires, ideas and doubts for their whole lives, as much as women repressed their bodies within their suffocating corsets.

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<sup>10</sup> “Neurosis” was actually a term coined by the Scottish doctor William Cullen, in 1769, to refer to nervous disorders, but its usage was definitely widespread in the nineteenth century, and its definition was famously defined and developed by Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud.

Even with Freud, though, the method was much more concerned with a solution which would restore peace to the patients' families and order to society as a whole than with the free liberation and exploration of the unconscious. The extreme self-discipline produced monsters that Victorian science insisted on treating with even more regulations. No wonder Mr. Hyde's and Frankenstein's literary monsters panicked Victorian readers: Victorians were shockingly confronted with the ambiguous and partially sensual nature of man, here represented dualistically and separately by Robert Louis Stevenson's and Mary Shelley's doubles (man/monster, rational/irrational, culture/nature, body/mind). As in literature, bourgeois obsession with self-control successfully created its own grotesque nervous disorders, and there was nothing Victorians feared more than their own inner monsters.

The greatest example of all pathologies is that which Foucault (2005, p. 103) presents as the first to be combated by the "four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex" — that is, hysteria.

#### 2.4 **Fallen angels**

When Nina Auerbach thought of the myth of womanhood in the Victorian Era, she did not bear in mind only the idealization of the Angel in the House diffused by the bourgeoisie as the model, but also the aspects of womanhood much explored by painters and especially by literary authors that the ruling class sought to shut, to erase, or at best to recognize as thoroughly negative because contrary to its perfectly rational and practical world.

Auerbach (1982, p. 7) begins her book *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* by stating that

[w]hile right-thinking Victorians were elevating woman into an angel, their art slithered with images of a mermaid. Angels were thought to be meekly self-sacrificial by nature: in this cautiously diluted form, they were pious emblems of a good woman's submergence in her family. Mermaids, on the other hand, submerge themselves not to negate their power, but to conceal it. [...] The mermaid is a more aptly inclusive device than the angel, for she is a creature of transformations and mysterious interrelations, able to kill and to regenerate but not to die, unfurling in secret her powers of mysterious, pre-Christian, prehuman dispensation.

Auerbach illustrates her analysis with the seductive picture by Edward Burne-Jones called *Study of a Girl's Head*<sup>11</sup>. Burne-Jones, as much as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Evert Millais, John William Waterhouse and others, was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite

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<sup>11</sup> Turn to ANNEX E, page 113, Illustration 7.

Brotherhood, an artistic school founded in 1848 which sought to break with Renaissance styles of painting which they considered too mechanical, too conventional and too restraining for imagination. Highly influenced by Romantic ideas, these painters idealized woman as anything but angelic. Theirs are always powerful female characters taken from Literature and mythology, such as Rossetti's *Proserpine*, Millais' *Ophelia* and *Portia*<sup>12</sup>, F. Leighton's *Flaming June*. All were exuberant representations of womanhood, usually red-haired and dressed in brightly colorful clothes. Imposing in the center of their majestically mythological scenario, they emanated an enthralling power that no Victorian housewife would imagine to possess.

In Literature, the central object of her study, Auerbach gives the examples of Bram Stoker's Mina and Lucy, George du Maurier's *Trilby*, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and even George Eliot's Rosamond and Gwendolen as literary characters who were crucial to the construction and permanence of this quite different myth of womanhood — all of them sagacious mermaids who “[found] their greatest triumphs in displacing male authorities.” (AUERBACH, 1982, p. 8).

This myth of womanhood, unsanctioned by bourgeois morality and expectations — but which coexisted as powerfully within the Victorian minds as the Angel — sprang directly from the result of bourgeois obsessions. After all, each one of these were what conventional Victorians would call “hysterics” at some level or other: each of them presented fits of passions and outbursts of emotions, besides the sudden instants of manipulative cleverness and manifested sexual impulses which could not be thoroughly explained by science, accepted by religion or conformed in superficial common sense. They reinforced and were themselves the fruit of the belief in a female body saturated with sexuality. Mina and Lucy's thirst for blood, in *Dracula* (1897), for example, hardly ever failed to evoke the numerous real Victorian women who could never be satiated, satisfied, who underwent unaccountable mood transformations and changes of desires — there were as many conflicting selves within them as to drive crazy the most respectable gentlemen<sup>13</sup>.

According to Catherine Clément (1996), woman is a *double* creature, since she submits to a regular order of things as the Other — when she fulfills her duties as mother and wife —, but also to another order of cyclic nature, derived from her periods — which impose

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<sup>12</sup> Turn to ANNEX F, page 114, Illustration 8, a typical Pre-Raphaelite painting of a Shakespearian character, in this case Portia, gifted with the most mysterious, instigating and mermaid-like gaze, and dressed in a vibrant red. Portia seems to be the perfectly chosen character as well, for she disguised herself as a man and saved Antonio from an awful death through her extraordinary rhetorical abilities — represented in the picture by the piece of parchment in her hand.

<sup>13</sup> Turn to ANNEX G, page 115, Illustration 9, which suggestively depicts a female vampire after her having satiated her lust with her male prey.

her transformations of all kinds, from the texture of her skin to her moods, and which do not conform to the linear logic imposed by the *status quo*. This periodical order of things within woman is not contained within culture or translated to the phallogentric order. “Thus,” says Clément (1996, p. 8), “women are all decked-out in unrealizable compromises, imaginary transitions, incompatible syntheses”.

Respectable Victorian gentlemen recognized that woman’s “nature” was necessary to man in the production of children and in the relief of his own sexual tensions; man should, however, restrict as much as he could the powers of such nature whose origins and extension were unknown<sup>14</sup>. Superficially, they repeated the doctrine of woman’s frailty, dependence and feeble “nature”; what many doctors as Jean-Martin Charcot<sup>15</sup> and Freud found out, though, was how much powerful women could be to terrify their husbands, fathers and other male relatives, and compel them to admit their impotency and to cry for professional assistance. This was one more province of the “unknown” mentioned by Eça de Queiroz which the Victorian Englishmen would not dare to penetrate. The terror it provoked in them can only be measured by the severe exclusion and internalization they imposed on women who incarnated it.

Charlotte Brontë’s madwoman from *Jane Eyre* (1847), Bertha Mason, was as much a result of such myth — probably the most propagated one — as a means to crystallize it within Victorian minds. Interestingly enough, Bertha becomes the Gothic element of terror in the novel, but she is no ghost, vampire or serial killer. Although the intention of the novel — it seems — was to make of her a typical lunatic whose gender was indifferent to the understanding of her disease, neurotic minds such as Walter Bagehot’s — which trembled at the mere mention of the word “madness” — would not take long to associate her to the myth of the woman whose violent “nature” was not properly controlled. “Madness” being the synonym of “chaos” and then the obvious opposite of “order”, it was the greatest manifestation of the unknown, and it was “feminine” by definition — as anything which was contrary to man’s own positive Self.

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<sup>14</sup> Turn to ANNEX H, page 116, Illustration 10, which depicts a siren whom seduces an intoxicated man whose eyes are pure fascination and impotency before her. It is interesting to notice the double nature of the siren whose strange mythical nature can only be revealed under the surface of the water, out of which she is very much angel-like. This image quite illustrates the unknown womanly powers hidden under the surface of rational intelligibility which Victorian men dreaded so much.

<sup>15</sup> Turn to ANNEX I, page 117, Illustration 11, which is a realistic depiction of a demonstration by the famous psychiatrist Charcot of the efficiency of hypnosis when applied to his hysterical patient “Blanche” (Marie Wittman). All doctors observe with fascination the power emanated by the slightly uncovered body of the young woman whose diagnosed illness destabilized the moral foundation of a whole civilization.



For Auerbach (1982, p. 7), it is precisely from this myth of woman as “a creature of transformations and mysterious interrelations, able to kill and to regenerate but not to die, unfurling in secret her powers of mysterious, pre-Christian, prehuman dispensation” that women learned to obtain any small parcel of power. They learned how to manipulate man’s fear of disorder, of chaos, of all instability. Thus has Rosamond Vincy managed to marry a resistant Lydgate and then to achieve everything she wanted from him: it was the mixture of a bourgeois fear of ridicule before society and the fear of a “nature” so unlike his own — whose reactions proved to be unpredictable and the inner operations undistinguishable — that moved him to accede to her every whim. Before such enigmatic power, the Victorian gentleman had not much to do but to resign.

“Victorian women,” concludes Auerbach (1982, p. 34), “were an essential part of a complex and capacious milieu, not a separate and beleaguered class or nation. As such, like all citizens, women were fortified by the dreams of their culture as much as their lives were mutilated by its fears.”

Besides the myths of the Angel and the mermaid, there was also the myth of the so-called *fallen woman*<sup>16</sup>, who represented any woman who was involved in sexual relations out of the wedlock, who committed adultery or who sold her body. For Victorian morality, “loss of virtue” was not much different from “moral corruption”. Such was the stain to be feared by Dorothea after Casaubon’s codicil to his will which declared that she would only inherit his property under the condition of never marrying Will Ladislaw. Sir James Chettam’s scorn of Casaubon in discovering such legal scheme was quite justifiable, for it gave ample reason to the public opinion to believe she had had an affair with Ladislaw during her marriage, or — which was not much better — was just about to have one after her husband’s death. Any such confirmation of dangerously placed desire might deem her a fallen woman — the measure of her sin being irrelevant.

This myth pointed to the decadence of Victorian morality, since, more than revealing the actual “nature” of some women, it confirmed the repressed desires of men. After all, “[i]t is a commonplace about Victorian society that values of the home were distinct from values of the thoroughfare, and that, while a man might marry for comfort, his passions drove him

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<sup>16</sup> Turn to ANNEX J, page 118, Illustration 12, which represents the “awakening” of a fallen woman, according to bourgeois mythology, since all scenery portrayed and the lack of a wedding ring in her hand indicate that she was the gentleman’s mistress, and her gaze through the open window indicates she is having an epiphany, a revelation of freedom from what Victorians considered an immoral life.

elsewhere for pleasure.” (REED, 1975, p. 58) The fallen woman was, therefore, the personification of a confused attempt to unite sexual passion and spiritual love.

If she regretted her misdeeds and sought to return to the path of virtue, she was granted the aura of a Magdalene, and submitted to the doom reserved to her kind, which involved not much less than the treatment dispensed to Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Within a society regulated by an all-encompassing disciplinary power represented in the most attentive and merciless public opinion, the disgraceful mark of moral crime was as visible and intense as Hester’s purple “A”. Condemned to social ostracism, involuntary exile in the faraway colonies or public physical and moral aggression, many such women committed suicide with the hope of finding refugee and mental peace in the afterlife.

Although public opinion implacably censured such misconducts, fallen women’s sympathizers progressively sprang from bourgeois rigid moral codes to defend them. The myth was, as the others, emphasized by fictional characters that were dialectically influenced by it in return, such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth in the homonymous novel, Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles, and Dickens’ numerous Magdalenes, such as *Oliver Twist*’s Nancy, *Dombey and Son*’s Alice and specially *David Copperfield*’s Little Em’ly. They were usually depicted as kind-hearted and good-natured girls whose loss of virtue appeared to be much more the responsibility of a wicked seducer than of their own “natural” inclinations. Whether or not it was intentional, though, the loss of sexual virtue reserved no earthly happiness for Victorian women — in the best cases, a secluded existence, such as Little Em’ly’s or Ruth’s.

The mermaid herself scared men even more than the fallen woman who, because she had “fallen”, usually returned to the path of virtue with a pitiful self-loathing and much more submission to men and their restorative institutions<sup>17</sup>. The mermaid was not afflicted by remorse and might operate her transgressions silently, discreetly, under the disciplinary power’s blind spot, ruining society’s structuring moral values from within.

Therefore, it has been seen that, through the ambiguous myths of the fallen women and the mermaid (who could be presented as a disrupting coquette or a really destructive

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<sup>17</sup> Institutions such as the Magdalene asylums which grew out of an Evangelical rescue movement in the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century and which spread to other countries such as the United States and Canada. The Magdalene asylum was an institution meant to restore the spiritual health of former prostitutes and it employed them in hard physical work and prolonged moments of prayer. Its alleged purpose was to rehabilitate these “fallen women” back into society, but it ended up turning into a punitive and carceral establishment by the beginning of the twentieth century.

*femme fatale*<sup>18</sup>, amongst other menacing personifications), Victorian men gave voice to their innermost desires and sexual yearnings, and also to their innermost fears. These chameleonic or thoroughly dominating women threatened not only men's position in such strictly sexually divided world, but the very solidity of Victorian institutions, the very stability of bourgeois power. The completely fabricated knowledge of women that men possessed led them to the interesting notions of a hidden sphere of woman's "nature" which contained an illimitable power of destruction. In truth, it seems that the repression alone which the official angel-like myth condemned women — imprisoned at home, largely excluded from any company except that of children and servants, thoroughly ignorant and indolent by force of segregation from public places, restrained in their emotions, wishes, dreams, in their own imagination by lack of much information, squeezed within their corsets and entrapped in their useless bodies, totally deprived of any independent thought and of the necessary independence to act upon it, deprived altogether of her body and soul — it seems that *this* might have been a strong reason for the uncontrollable outbursts of passions and unintelligible desires that Victorian men called hysteric, and not a mystic and enigmatic womanly power.

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<sup>18</sup> Turn to ANNEX L, page 119, Illustration 13. Gustav Klimt was an Austrian Symbolist painter, already detached from the greatest part of 19<sup>th</sup> century artistic tendencies. He portraits Judith, a Biblical character very commonly associated with the figure of the *femme fatale*, just like Salome (the two of them being imputed the decapitation of male leaders). In the painting, she carries the head of Holofernes, the Assyrian leader whom she cut in order to save the Jewish people, as it is told by the Book of Judith. She is a typically beautiful and proud Judith, dressed in exotic clothes and wearing a thick golden necklace that very much evokes the image of her own victim's lost head. Yet, in the middle of her victorious moment, her eyes seem lost, hallucinated, intoxicated by the power which, according to puritan Victorians, would never bring her any happiness. It is important to remind that the Biblical Judith never married, although she received many proposals.

### 3. AN OBSCURE SAINT THERESA

Having examined how the Angel was carefully constructed and how it operated within bourgeois structures of power, it is now to be understood, by the comparison between Saint Theresa of Avila and Dorothea Brooke, why this new and anonymous Theresa of George Eliot's fiction could never equal her model, and how the same religion which oppressed human behavior in the medieval times represented a meaning of existence for men and women alike, as much as a source of power, and how the degradation of such metaphysical certainties led to women's absolute dispersion of energies, of self-fulfillment and self-knowledge. With the "death of God", women become even more alienated from the phallogocentric order — such alienation much more elaborate by the authority and minuteness of scientific discourse —, and women's estrangement from knowledge works within *Middlemarch* as an insightful representation of the human being's general alienation from epistemological convictions. Theresa's reforms can never be as faithfully carried out by men as before — much less by women, as George Eliot knew so well.

#### 3.1 Theresa's sublime pathos

Religious devotedness was not an easy choice for Theresa of Avila. It is rumored and retold by Rosa Amanda Strausz (2005, p. 37-41) — although merely suggested in Theresa's autobiography (JESUS, 1984, p. 12) — that she did run away from home with her youngest brother Rodrigo when she was about six/seven years old in order to cross many lands and the sea towards the Isle of Rhodes which had just been invaded by the Turks so that she could die heroically as a martyr of Christ and have her name forever immortalized in History — and perhaps some basilica erected in her honor<sup>19</sup>.

This impetuous urge was the combination of many equally relevant reasons apart from a great religious yearning, though, such as the many stories of chivalrous and celebrated saints, told by servants, and a volume entitled *Lives of the Saints* (STRAUSZ, 2005, p. 35) which was available in her father's private library — both the book *and* the library were two rarities inside the house of a non-scholar as her father, in early Modern Spain — and which she supposedly read more than once. Other fair explanation would be Theresa's intense need of and clever understanding of how to achieve people's approval and admiration —

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<sup>19</sup> Strausz mentions that there was a beautiful basilica in Avila in honor of three martyrs, Vicente, Cristeca and Sabina, who were children when they were killed.

something she herself acknowledges many times in the beginning of her autobiography and which can be partly explained by a paternal and maternal love shared among a dozen of siblings.

The religious fervor and her personal understanding of religious duties and faith would take long to be assimilated and accepted. She would choose the secluded life of a nun after numerous hesitations and personal trials that would materialize in the goriest bodily tortures through the course of years. She first enters the Cloister of the Augustinians of Avila — and spends a year and a half there — not to adopt the religious life, but just to isolate herself from the “vicious” influences of outside, and study, as was the common practice. Alonso, Theresa’s father, wanted to have her away especially from an elder relative (whose name is never mentioned) who had become a closer friend after the death of her mother and was said to be an undesirable companion. Besides, it was urgently required that she leave a “vain” youth centered on beautiful dresses, jewelry, suitors and general appraisal — a life that was beginning to harm her and her family’s reputation. During this long stay she came to the inevitable conclusion that there were only two respectable destinies for women: the religious or the married life. According to herself, marriage frightened her (JESUS, 1984, p. 18) — the minimum that can be expected from the example of a mother who “suffered many tribulations while she was alive” (JESUS, 1984, p. 12), led a tedious existence that had to be fulfilled by the adventures from books of chivalry, and died at the age of thirty-three having spent half her married life giving birth.

Religious seclusion did not quite include Theresa’s former yearnings for transcendence on earth, but it must have ultimately seemed a less inadequate choice for one who already displayed an independence of mind and resolution beyond what could be expected of a marriageable lady. As she herself recognizes (JESUS, 1984, p. 14-15) when mentioning the miseries of her poor father whom she deceived and manipulated to have what she wanted, Theresa was irrepressible. Another astounding example of this is when she finally decides — although still hesitating within herself — to become a nun, faces Alonso’s strict opposition and leaves home against his will to the Cloister of Incarnation (JESUS, 1984, p. 19-20) — where she is to live for many years and in which she is supposedly going to begin her mystical experiences of communion with God.

### 3.2 “Dodo”<sup>20</sup> lost in Never Land

As for Dorothea Brooke, one is at the very beginning of *Middlemarch* greeted with the powerful notion that

[s]he could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences, with a keen interest in guimp and artificial protrusions of drapery. [...] she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter she had not sought it. (ELIOT, 2000, p. 6).

Although the reader is not acquainted with her past reasons, the sort of education she received or anything that might have led her to such extraordinary path, it is clear that her innermost desire was to *be* a Theresa. On the other hand, Theresa herself desired to be something else (or many different things) before forcibly becoming Saint Theresa. But then Theresa was far more self-conscious than Dorothea; it is noteworthy from reading her confessions that she understood herself at some great extent, that she investigated her own reasons and was in constant inward conversation. By the observation of her many questionable choices at least in the first half of the novel, it is clear that Dorothea barely knows herself.

Theresa acknowledges those which she considers her imperfections, like vanity, at the very beginning of her life — when she goes to the first cloister in order to reflect upon her life and make pressing decisions — and, therefore, manages to domesticate them very well throughout life. She never aims at very great earthly achievements beyond her scope — perhaps because she did not freely choose her path and had to adapt to it and learn how to accommodate her needs and passions to what she had at the moment. Aiming at relatively short distances — when concerning this “material” world, at least —, she managed to reform her religious order (the Carmel), enhance the mystical studies within Catholicism, and found seventeen new cloisters — amongst them the one which she inhabited for the last twenty years of her life, the Cloister of St. Joseph.

Dorothea may not be a vain character — although Celia does find some inconsistency in her otherwise humble sister in the first scene of the novel, when they debate on whether or not they must wear their deceased mother’s jewels and Dorothea is enthralled by and consents to keep a combination of emerald ring and bracelet. However, she is certainly very ambitious

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<sup>20</sup> “Dodo” is how Dorothea’s younger sister Celia motherly calls her, which both highlights Celia’s maternal qualities and the childish way Dorothea is seen by her family and close friends on account of her passionate feelings and vagueness of thought.

in her schemes to “interfere with political economy” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 11) and carry out social reforms by herself. She is unaware of her limitations and even of the extraordinary scope of her ambitions since, for her, they mean nothing else but the natural consequences of a proper Christian attitude. Her religious fervor — based on ancient and medieval Christian models which are positively incompatible with Victorian demands — totally drives her life. She cannot find religious contentment in “village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of *Female Scripture Characters*” or “the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 23).

In her study on the perfect Victorian lady, Martha Vicinus (1973, p. XI) mentions a widely accepted opinion that, in the Victorian Era, “religious fervor was often an unconscious form of sexual sublimation, whereby the most enthusiastic religious women found a suitable outlet for their passions”. She is referring, though, to the petty religious charity encouraged by bourgeois *status quo* as a means to, at one time, soothe women’s restlessness and exhibit men’s economic power. She expands the topic thus:

[w]hile women were encouraged to ‘do good’, they were positively prevented from effecting real change. Women were expected to dabble in charity and to remain free from excessive zeal or commitment. Indeed, some identified the absurdity of the more impractical philanthropic schemes with the relinquishment of traditional female ‘duties’[...] (VICINUS, 1973, p. XI).

Dorothea wants far more than this. Her religious devotedness has no limits whatsoever. It ideally combines plans of a better social existence with the individual fulfillment which should result from Christian behavior towards others. Only she recognizes the poorness of her religious education and yearns for more, far more than what is subscribed to women of her time, in order to turn abstract information into useful practice, into social improvement. Her obvious conclusion is that such wider understanding could only be provided by a bright man who cherished her religious fervor. It never occurs to her that women may be ignorant of such “high” knowledge not because they do not search for it, but because it is denied them or it communicates nothing special to them (once it excludes them). It never occurs to her that the world does not *want* to be changed — and neither do many people, for that matter. Large-scale social transformations are not just a combination of excellent ideas materialized: they require much revolutionary or reformist will and hundreds of previous transgressions that end up turning into a “new” order. There seems to be no way to conciliate revolutionary intents with general applause from society. George Eliot’s life is a great example of such incompatibility.

The novel abounds in hyperbolic descriptions of this “prohibited fruit” from the Tree of Life which Dorothea so persistently chases. “Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly,” Eliot defines. Dorothea’s ultimate target is — through such “extraordinary” knowledge —, “to arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian,” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 52) to assimilate the “binding theory which could bring her own life and doctrine into strict connection with that amazing past, and give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 71).

A deeper study on numerical data would give rise to the amazing quantity of extreme words and expressions used to distinguish the realm of men from that of women in the novel<sup>21</sup>. Only Dorothea is unable to realize that those distinctions are not the result of her own personal insignificance, but of a large-scale construction of meaning which makes it seem so.

Dorothea does not know herself and does not realize what she needs. She marries Casaubon, “a dried bookworm towards fifty” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 18), for his knowledge, believing she would be able to acquire some self-knowledge through him, because “she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband; she wished, poor child, to be wise herself” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 52).

According to Simone de Beauvoir, woman may aid man with their works and pursuits, but she cannot expect him to share the laurels of his accomplishments with her or even less to fulfill her personal needs of transcendence through him (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 493). Furthermore and even more importantly, Dorothea is rather innocent in expecting her husband to provide her with some self-understanding, because, as Beauvoir fully exposes, *woman*

[i]s simply what man decrees; thus she is called “the sex”, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is the sex — absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 16).

Woman is sex, purely sex, because *that* is the category established through discursive machineries to distinguish the “owners” of discourse or — as John S. Mill would call — the “masters” from her. Her sex, her sexualized condition, therefore, precedes any information about her: everything she does, the way she does, what she does not do, how she thinks, feels and does not feel — everything is primarily explained through her sex, through her culturally established “nature”. There is no “masculine” literature, for instance, for the compound of all

<sup>21</sup> Some of them are “grand”, “great”, “truth”, “whole”, “complete”, “wide”, “wise”, for men, and “trivial”, “petty”, “ignorance”, “narrow”, “poor”, for women.



that has been written by men is *the* literature itself, the absolute concept according to which the “rest” (literature produced by women) is relative. And such rule can be applied to all areas of social life, of human existence — that is the reason why it is possible to talk about a global discursive order sexually determined which is virtually timeless, since its origins cannot be traced.

The feminist Hélène Cixous (1996, p. 65) echoes Beauvoir’s assertions by stating that “[p]hilosophy is constructed on the premise of woman’s abasement”. For her, phallocentrism and logocentrism shape and legitimize each another.

In the “phallogentric” order of things, woman is, therefore, a mirror to reflect man’s accomplishments, to prove them their virility, authority, strength, activity, and all the other usual attributions included in the culturally constructed notion of “masculinity”. According to the Freudian concept of “phallus envy”, woman ultimately serves to prove man he has *phallus* — his very reason of existence, the symbol of action and transcendence in the world, the decisive signifier of everything that “being a man” means. As Cixous (1996, p. 89) quite provokingly puts it,

[...] men are structured only for the feathering of their shafts to let us know they have a hard-on; so we will assure them (we, the motherly mistresses of their little pocket signifier) that they are something, that they still have them.

Returning to Dorothea, the case is not closed by the conclusion that she can neither reach any level of transcendence through her highly educated husband nor derive any self-acknowledgement from the life shared with him. In her case, it is not just a structural impossibility. *He* is an obstacle in himself. Casaubon’s demeaning self-esteem castrates his wife. Beauvoir (1997, p. 25) evokes the particular tendency underlying his attitude by affirming that

[...] men profit in many more subtle ways from the otherness, the alterity of woman. Here is a miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed **no one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility.** (emphasis mine)

Dorothea’s so-called “masculine” impetus and passion are assimilated by his obsessive mind as a defiance against his will; they “effeminize” and diminish him. It is in their honeymoon trip to Rome that she begins to understand that there is no place within the phallogentric discourse for a married woman’s individuality.

According to Alison Booth (1986, p. 208) in her comparative analysis “Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History”, the geographic space elected by George Eliot for the beginning of Dorothea’s “awakening” to her new condition in the world is highly evocative in itself. Located in the center of one of the most splendid and aggressive empires of the Ancient times and at the same time in the center of global Catholicism — from which she inherited much of her primitive Christian devotion —, she is magnified within the minds of her observers. For Booth, it is in the contrast with the extremes of sensuality — like when she is examined by the German painter Naumann in comparison to the voluptuous sculpture of Ariadne<sup>22</sup> (ELIOT, 2000, p. 157) — and of the sanctity of cathedrals, statues of saints and angels, religious paintings and music, that the sober nun-like English lady grows in hyperbolic proportions within the minds of Ladislaw — who from then on sanctifies her — and of Casaubon — whom demonizes her.

In their first quarrel in Rome, the object of dispute could not be more demoralizing for Casaubon: the work of his whole life, the “Key to All Mythologies”. She dares to criticize his methodology and to urge him to begin writing the book, instead of dispersing himself with endless annotations and preparations. At that moment, she is not aware yet of the fruitlessness of his researches, of the obsolescence of his theories; she could not foresee how her words, even though kindly meant, would affect him. His reaction is violent and changes forever the course of their relationship.

At this moment, she somehow reveals his weaknesses and dares to suggest that he has been passive throughout life, losing time in an immanent existence — like women, doomed to perpetual inactiveness. The work that would leave his trademark upon History proves to be nothing but a monumental shadow. Her words materialize his own worries, they serve as a slap on his face, they denude him, humiliate him before the world and his own conscience. She draws back afterwards, but it is too late. She had in one second “cut” his manhood, his phallus: there is nothing left of him but an old failure.

In fact, the nineteenth century world neither needs Casaubon’s “Key to All Mythologies” nor Dorothea’s sainthood as she desires it. The Victorian Era does not need a new Saint Theresa or at least not a Romantic version of her. It is not practical, it is not bourgeois.

Dorothea’s cottage plans work in Sir James’ property because they are restricted, located, and hardly ambitious — although quite extraordinary for any Victorian lady. However, aiming at a fulfillment that is outside herself, within the world of language, in order

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<sup>22</sup> Turn to ANNEX M, page 120, Illustration 14.

to justify her existence, her meaning in the world, she crushes violently into the phallogocentric discourse of the Father that closes women *out*. Her success is limited to a certain extent and she only begins to clearly understand it in Rome, when the series of misunderstandings between her husband and herself start and Ladislav's enjoyable presence highlight them by contrast.

Casaubon is not a villain, as much as men in general are no villains. As Betty Friedan (2001, p. 521) affirmed in *The Feminine Mystique*, referring to American life in the fifties, “[m]en weren't really the enemy — they were fellow victims suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill”. George Eliot herself reinforces it by admitting, in the end of the abovementioned scene, that Dorothea “was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 167). This is a problem of misinterpretation added to some portion of obsession by the same notions and too high a level of self-centredness on his part. As Beauvoir (1997, p. 483) acknowledges, “[m]arriage incites man to a capricious imperialism”.

This misinterpretation is not a local problem, though. It is at the core of the very system of signs used in communication: the “problem” is language. Man cannot understand woman because they only understand her through himself, through the one and almighty Self. Woman cannot understand man fully because, according to Beauvoir (1997, p. 483),

[e]xperience has not held them [women] to strict reasoning; for them thought is an amusement rather than an instrument; even though intelligent, sensitive, sincere, they are unable to state their views and draw conclusions, for lack of intellectual technique. That is why their husbands, even though of comparatively mediocre ability, will easily dominate them and prove themselves to be in the right even when in the wrong.

Dorothea cannot communicate her feelings accurately because she does not “know” the language. Her manner of speaking is too vigorous, she is overemotional and recurrently even cries during speech — the Angel imposed upon her always massacring her attempts of lucid expression. These are codes that men are not culturally prepared to grasp, to understand, to identify (they identify them as “feminine” and that is quite enough). Since the Enlightenment, man was programmed to listen to Reason and nothing else. Unreasonable thoughts or attitudes do not concern them, are unimportant, convey no relevant meaning to their lives.

Betty Friedan's “masculine mystique” and Beauvoir's “intellectual technique” are at some measure manifestations — or perhaps other names for — an specific all-encompassing language, environment, *Zeitgeist* that Foucault (1995) better describes as “order of things” in

his homonymous work. Luce Irigaray (1985, p. 85) defines one aspect that may have pervaded all the “orders” throughout Western History — what Cixous calls “phallogentrism”, for that matter — by shaping itself according to every “new” order:

[w]omen’s social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to “masculine” systems of representation which disappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women. The “feminine” is never to be identified except by and for the masculine, the reciprocal proposition not being “true”.

Using Economics’ terms that she learned from Marx’s *Capital*, Irigaray argues that women are “products”, “commodities” that are merely exchanged by men and, therefore, can have no voice in the economic order, no voice in politics or in language itself, for that matter. She and Cixous agree that language is a masculine property and therefore cannot offer any real self-fulfillment for women besides illusions. The very elements of language can be said to be “corrupted”. For instance, the apparently innocent verb “to effeminize” used above to describe Dorothea’s action towards Casaubon has its roots in “feminine”, “female” — “woman”, ultimately —, and, when applied to a man, could be easily understood as “to weaken”. If one “blackens” another one’s name, one is maculating it, corrupting it. And it happens because women, Negroes, Jews, Asians, are all of them “colonized”, because they are not the One, the Self, the proprietor of discourse.

Therefore, Dorothea was not alone in being deceived by the marvels of phallogentric discourse and the phallogentric order altogether. It is poignant because it belongs to the Master, the one whom all Others see from downstairs. It is supposed to be desired and never reached. It draws its respect from such admiration; moreover, it remains intact because it is fed by both colonizers and colonized.

When Dorothea tries to make herself understood by Casaubon, though, she feels she lacks something and believes it is her fault. She is forever “at the threshold”, as Cixous (1996) poetically puts it, but then all women are.

### 3.3 **And the Angel defeats the Saint**

According to Theresa (1984, p. 73),

a spiritual master is fundamental. But if he is not a scholar, it is a great inconvenient. And it will be much helpful to deal with scholars if they are virtuous. [...] you must avoid any

masters until you can find a competent one. The Lord will provide you as long as your wish is founded on humility and desire to do right.

This is one of many passages of her *memoirs* in which Theresa insists on the importance of “spiritual masters” who can guide mental prayer. She does read a lot on the subject and consult with many priests. In the end, though, the manner she explores advice and reading is entirely subjective, entirely her own to decide. She does establish rules and steps to be undertaken for mental prayer practitioners in her book, but the whole procedure is very intimate, a solitary pursuit with solitary risks and accomplishments. The stages of *jouissance* that she repeatedly describes are only hers, and, although it *does* confer her some power within the religious community (the respect from her peers and the many honors she is given posthumously are evidences), it is the quality of her discourse which guarantees it, the way she defends it, not the experience itself whose effects are felt and witnessed only by herself. It is, thus, a solitary experience with a solitary self-fulfillment which depends on nobody else but oneself.

Dorothea assumes that she needs somebody else — a man, a scholar — in order to learn what she needs to transcend the everyday limitations and shape a better world. She bases her actions, the very purpose of her life, on a knowledge exterior to herself, an abstract notion that cannot be attained. Although her very purpose is transgressive, the means through which she intends to achieve it is quite traditional. She idealizes a union “that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 23). Her “Charming Prince” would be a Milton, a “living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 20). Summing it up, at the beginning of the novel Casaubon managed to impersonate all Dorothea’s ideas of “a man who could understand the higher inward life, and with whom there could be some spiritual communion; nay, who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge” (2000, p. 18). Certainly not the rich and loving gentleman with which other girls dreamed, but as much idealized and doomed to be broken.

Even more transgressive than such girlish dreams is her desire to explore men’s mysterious knowledge on God and religion in order to *defy* their social order. Her pretentiousness is rather naïve, however; she cannot see her limits. Ultimately, she wishes to use men in order to defy men’s structures.

While Dorothea seeks the dependence and guidance of a man in order to become intellectually independent herself, Theresa never establishes any compromising human bonds and remains wholly independent to the very end.

Even though Theresa shows reverence for her “spiritual masters” — as she calls the priests whom educated her —, she manages to criticize some of their assumptions openly, as in the interesting case when she defends human corporeality as an inescapable and necessary means to a communication with God. “It seems from the scholars that, being contemplation a whole spiritual work, anything corporeal can disturb it and impede it,” (JESUS, 1984, p. 121) she says. Then, she defends Christ’s “Divine Body”, his divine “Humanity” in order to prove her point. What her mental prayer achieves is not, according to her methods, the reduction of bodily functions to nothing in favor of the soul’s preeminence, but rather the body’s drainage of every memory, thought and imagination that can hinder its perfect conditions for the uses of God.

When talking about her experience with mediocre confessors, she makes the following judgment:

I saw by experience that if they are virtuous and good, it is better that they should have no knowledge at all, because neither did they believe themselves without asking those who actually had it, nor did I believe them. And an educated clergyman never deceived me. The uneducated ones did not mean to deceive me either; they only knew very little. I thought so, and I thought that my duty was to give them credit [...] (JESUS, 1984, p. 26).

Although she respected her spiritual masters, she did not feel intimidated by their authority and judged their lessons according to her own mind. One must bear in mind that this is a sixteenth century woman affirming clearly that there are supposedly educated clergymen who do not know what they say, and that all that is left her is to *pretend* she believes them, as Virginia Woolf’s Angel in the House would have advised. She treats them with complacency, like a merciful mother, like someone who observes from a higher degree, with a superior distance and understanding, excusing them for their *ignorance*. Despite this brilliant reversal of sexual roles, such pearls of wisdom are found within the text amongst dozens of apologies, of recognizance of her own ignorance, of her wickedness, weakness, vanity and all other typical female sinners’ faults. In chapter 23, for instance, Theresa mentions how great women’s weakness is and how fundamental it is that men protect them from the influence of the devil (JESUS, 1984, p. 133). At another moment, she falls in direct contradiction with the former quotation by stating that she will not speak against what has been said by her masters since “they are literate and spiritual, and they know what to say, and many paths lead the

souls to God” (1984, p. 121). She only says that, though, to defend the path she chose, the way God chose to act upon *her* — a different path from that recommended by her masters.

Her body of work is, therefore, a mosaic of paradoxes — just as could be expected from the Baroque influence of her time. What is clear by reading her ambiguous memoirs is that she was a woman who, like all the others, was absolutely and consciously sure of men’s superiority in relation to women; in practice, however, when she felt moved to judge a particular situation, she tended to do so by herself, without obeying to pre-established rules or to earthly authorities. The consciousness that she had been chosen by God gave her the necessary courage to transgress male laws and customs. Furthermore, it was natural that she should position herself as an individual in the world since it was part of her mission the propagation of her practices: her examples should, therefore, come from the authority of lived experience, and serve as models to the followers of her mystical practices.

In the end, Theresa always said what she liked and did what she wanted. She does not find fulfillment and the many stages of *jouissance* she talks about in canonical texts. She finds all the material which she transforms and improves in other transgressors like her — the mystics which constituted an unofficial branch within the Catholic Church and that were being burned in the fires of Inquisition at her time. One of them — John of Avila —, according to Strausz, wrote from the prison his work *Audi filia*, in 1559, in which he affirmed that women *could* communicate with God (STRAUSZ, 2005, p. 118).

Outwardly, Theresa respected the “order of things”, the sixteenth century’s order of *representation* (FOUCAULT, 1995, p. 223) according to which it may be said that women either represented the immaculate virginity of Mary or the sinful deceitfulness of Eve. She recognizes women’s feebleness and all the other adjectives usually attributed to women from her time. Although she publicly adopts the “language of the father” in its numerous implications, what is peculiar about her is that her relationship with God — or one may say with herself, with her bodily sensuousness and her unconscious — is private, intimate, silent (the prayer is called “mental” for no other reason) and, therefore, virtually isolated of the weight of phallogocentric order. She preserves her experiences from conservative Christianity, but she also defends them by making use of conservative means, for she writes about her methods in order to give her own testimony of things, to try to legitimize them and make an example of them. One could argue she was a successful hysteric<sup>23</sup>, because she experienced her own stages of intense and unexplainable *jouissance*, announced everything in her *memoirs* and even disseminated her methods.

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<sup>23</sup> According to STRAUZ (p. 192), Freud called Saint Theresa the “Patroness Saint of Hysterics”.

The success of her enterprise depended mainly on her writing. According to Strausz (2005, p. 192), Spanish Literature historians point out Saint Theresa as “the most expressive feminine voice of Spanish Baroque”, and her other translator Marcelo Musa Cavallari (ÁVILA, 2010, p. 31) asserts that Theresa was “one of the first masters [...] of Spanish language”, since the greatest literary monument written in Spanish, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605-1615), would be published only fifty years after her autobiography. From such information one may appreciate the experimental nature of Theresa’s writing: she found no great example of prose or of autobiography to use as a model. She was not, therefore, just a “transformer” of discourse, but also a *former* of it to some extent.

Her writing is at one time transgressive and historically located. She amazingly uses phallogocentric discourse to talk of herself, of her own experiences with God. Instead of wholly submitting to the silence within which women have long been entrapped — especially at an Era as hers, haunted by the Holy Inquisition —, Theresa used the discursive recourse of *mimicry* and, therefore, subverted the order from within. Her transgressions may not be recognized by her own self, but they are in the gaps of her whole discourse.

As Irigaray (1985, p. 76) defines:

[t]o play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself [...] to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effort of playful repetition, what is supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine language.

Humbly recognizing her insignificance and lack of merit to talk about the affairs of her God, Theresa continually proves how capable she is of articulating the official discourse, conveying her own individual ideas and even contesting those with which she disagreed.

Theresa *did* suffer persecutions, and had to fight against the opposition of the unreformed Carmelites and their defenders when she decided to found a new cloister. She was even accused of heresy, in 1575, and had to defend herself against the Inquisition (STRAUSZ, 2005, p. 191). For everything she had suffered before — the terrible bodily pains inflicted by herself in her flagellation rituals and, according to herself, by the angel who frequently visited her and by the Christ Himself, besides natural illnesses which were aggravated by severe fasting and all else —, these new challenges were not the worst to face. And nothing can be too difficult to face for one who, differently from Dorothea, fought first and foremost for herself and for her personal pursuits. Her purpose was to preserve the unique



experience she began to live in the Cloister of Incarnation. She may be said to have abandoned this place because, although only populated by women, it was very much “corrupted” by the phallogentric order in that it was a convent full of servants that attended to the nuns who came from nobility, and where all the social interactions were regulated by class and blood. She herself chose this convent because of its liberality at first, but regretted it along the years and finally decided to leave it forever.

Not only Theresa moves to another cloister ruled by herself, but she also goes so far as to renounce every right to property, and to abdicate Rome’s funds — that are theoretically destined to churches all over the globe. The nuns under Theresa’s strict new order were to live solely of alms. It is clear by all her renunciations that she wanted the complete isolation from a world that she acknowledged she could not change alone, but with which she could not agree. Her efforts towards autonomy were many and ultimately successful, but then they were palpable — which does not happen with Dorothea’s.

It can be concluded that Dorothea wants martyrdom almost just for the sake of it — such as Theresa wanted it at the beginning of her life, when she supposedly fled to Rhodes with her brother. The self-sacrifice undergone by Theresa in her more mature age, though, was required to maintain her freedom. She did feel tempted to succumb to human passion at least twice, according to Strausz (2005, p. 110), but resisted because her choice had been made and any human “illusion” must have seemed pale when compared to the “celestial madness” that she experienced. In any case, her self-sacrifices were merely the renunciations of life aggregated to every choice one makes. Dorothea’s, on the other hand, offer no earthly reward: it is a blind and all-encompassing renounce of all she had before and could ever have afterwards. Surely she expects gratification in marrying the scholar — the abstract “knowledge” she so much desires. In that, however, she proves to be far less perceptive than Theresa — who very soon recognized that marriage was the greatest entrapment amongst her scarce options. Dorothea proves, thus, how unconscious of herself she is, of her place in the world and the real things she can achieve. She is insatiable and her mind is always on the next object, the next purpose, the unreachable dream. At many times along the novel — especially those scenes among her relatives whose conversations escape her interests — Dorothea is absent while being bodily present at a scene: her mind is usually elsewhere, in a position she cannot occupy. Under the excuse of Christian humility and self-denial, her thoughts are hardly ever centered on herself and her own needs.

One very relevant example of Dorothea’s lack of self-understanding is a moment when she is melancholically talking to Will about lost hopes and then says that she “used to despise

women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 447). She proves by this sentence that she cannot recognize herself as a woman, identify herself with other women (she has no female models); she *despises* other women — and that is a harsh word to be employed. Ultimately, she despises womanliness itself, the limited conditions of being a woman, the artificial imposition of an angel-like female behavior under the name of “nature”. Of course that this fragment is supposed to be a confession of past thoughts (that are presently changing), but it only reinforces how deluded she had been of her own condition in the world. Another delusion is that, as she herself seems to acknowledge from this sentence, she ended up being the one who did not shape her life more and was confronted with her impossibility to “do better things” because she never really learned to *know* herself (or selves).

On this matter, Cixous (1996, p. 68) tests her free poetic prose on this matter:

[w]omen haven't had eyes for themselves. They haven't gone exploring in their house. Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized. Woman is disgusted by woman and fears her. They [men] have committed the greatest crime against women: insidiously and violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense power against themselves, to do the male's dirty work. They have committed an antinarcissism in her! A narcissism that only loves itself if it makes itself loved for what is lacking! They have created the loathsome logic of antilove.

Denying other women is denying one's own condition as woman, denying self-identification, self-realization, self-fulfillment, and, finally, self-love.

Theresa is continuously criticizing herself and sometimes encompassing all women in her personal faults. At a given moment, she is so much shocked at the notion that God has chosen her among so many better people that she calls herself “so vile, so low, so weak and miserable, and so valueless”. Further on, she admits: “Therefore, I am woman, and not good woman, but bad” (JESUS, 1984, p. 95). Her condition of woman is not degrading enough: she herself is (supposedly) one of the worst of her kind.

One may conclude that she hates herself by statements as this. However, Rachel de Queiroz feels the necessity to alert readers twice during her translation of the saint's *memoirs* that Theresa exaggerates her faults<sup>24</sup>. As a creature of God, though, Theresa could not have “hated” herself as a principle. There are other arguments, however, that count for the conclusion that she never actually despised herself. One of them is the mere fact that such self-degradation was stylistically very common at medieval and early modern times. Baroque writers committed verbal self-flagellations when confronting the practical impossibility to live

<sup>24</sup> Rachel de Queiroz does so in the footnotes of pages 14 and 35.

a purely spiritual life in a material world full of “temptations”. Shakespeare himself was not immune to such discourse: his sonnet 146<sup>25</sup>, for example, abounds in expressions such as “sinful earth” and “fading mansion” to refer to the body — and many others which exalt the soul.

Such remaining medieval discourse cannot be absolutely taken into account, then. Instead, Theresa’s own recognition of her vanity as one of the greatest faults against which she had to battle throughout life is alone an indication that she never really detested herself — even though she might have desired to. And she may say what she likes, but a woman who dares to call Christ “my Spouse” — even though the language used by the mystics to refer to their relation to God was, indeed, highly erotic — cannot possibly loathe herself. She even discards her father’s and mother’s name (Ahumada Sanchez y Cepeda) and begins to sign “Theresa of Jesus” from 1563 until her death (STRAUSZ, 2005, p. 188). Furthermore, the mere fact that she accepts from the priest García of Toledo the commission to retell her odyssey towards God, that she feels she has something valuable to transmit and never hesitates doing so, even though misinterpretation might seem dangerous in the religious context of her time — all of it is quite revealing of the high opinion she must have had of herself. She never seems to have feared saying what she thought. Her lonely path of contemplation and mental prayer — unadvised and unassisted as it was at least at the beginning — reassured her of her own autodidactic capacities.

Theresa’s narrative mentions many other people, and she does praise others *a lot* — and such attitude is usually attributed to the confident ones —, but they are nothing but extras in her self-centered plot. She is main character, director and screenwriter. Christ may be her muse, her inspiration, her motif, but she is dominant in earthly matters. Theresa seems to believe in what she writes, to believe in herself, to actually *love* herself most part of times (because she feels she can always improve and never gives up, because she feels forgiven by God whenever she errs, and also really proud to have been chosen by Him to give her testimony of His magnificence). Surely she is a fragmented being that alternates between states of mind and opinion: the general trend is apparently this one, however. Her life is herself and Christ: the only place outside her own body that she wants to inhabit is heaven, at His side.

Dorothea, on the other hand, would have been delighted in inhabiting the body of a man. Her fascination is in their world and their toys; her garden is never enough. No one can

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<sup>25</sup> Turn to ANNEX A, page 109, Poem 1.

blame her: she is entrapped in her body, by an absolute (biological) “nature” confined to immanence. No wonder she aims at “masculine” transcendence. Only she cannot find her own personal means to transcend without the approval and assistance of men. The only independence she experiences (her widowhood) is the one she consciously gives away to another marriage.

Since she does not understand women, she only fancies she can understand men. Rosamond Vincy is far cleverer than her at this point, because she learns how to manipulate men by acknowledging that, concerning women, they are the same: their target is always the virginal lady, and, for them, woman’s function is to alleviate their sexual tensions and to reproduce the species; once woman is done with her “jobs”, she is free to play in the “garden” with other “playmates”.

Dorothea loves individually, she is blind to what men as a whole expect from her, to the imposing Angel at her threshold — even though it is such construction of womanhood which ultimately subjugates her transgressive tendencies. She is even unable to realize Ladislav’s feelings for her until he exposes them directly (ELIOT, 2000, p. 523). And it happens also because of her lack of self-knowledge. At some crucial moments, she is hardly able to predict people’s feelings for her. Her own husband’s suspicions and jealousies never enter her mind until she confronts the codicil to his will which utterly clarifies them. Dorothea is so lost within herself that she is very often taken by surprise.

Theresa was only so much confident in resisting her two passionate suitors because she recognized their feelings for her — and her own for them, for that matter. Dorothea, on the other hand, constructed a whole relationship with Ladislav without consciously knowing it.

By denying her condition as a woman, she reaffirms the phallogocentric order. Self-knowledge — at whatever level one may venture to achieve it — seems to be the first step towards freedom, after all. When Dorothea becomes a widow, she gives up too easily her plans for her land because, having confronted the hardships of her female condition, she chooses to assimilate the order of the father according to which she cannot accomplish such ambitious enterprises by herself.

Hers is the situation thus described by Simone de Beauvoir (1997, p. 21):

[...] along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it — passive, lost, ruined — becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road: on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. [...] Thus, woman may fail

to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the Other.

Both saints — the old and the new one — are intellectually gifted and hungry for knowledge. Up to this point, they both transgress and defy the order of things. Theresa, however, discovered early in life that women's road towards self-gratification was one of loneliness, and thus she accepted the challenge (not without hesitation). Gradually she came to understand that she had to assimilate and outwardly mimicry the phallogocentric discourse in order to remain free to explore her own self. Dorothea may intuitively feel these things, since she embodies the mythical angelic wife in order to achieve her goal, to enter into a "spiritual fellowship" with her husband and draw the necessary theories from him so that she can change the world according to the will of God. This goal, though, the "sacred" knowledge of men, is at one time unreachable and insufficient to women, as it has been exposed above. It was not by becoming the Angel that Dorothea would find God and the answers she longed for: actually, both purposes were incompatible. The Angel, as it has been analyzed, was a divine creature idealized by man to replace God and to subject God to man — an ingenious inversion of values —, like the monster Dr. Frankenstein created to praise his own human power, but which ended up turning his back against him. The price the angel-like woman paid for her divinization was precisely the substitution of her spiritual master, God, for an earthly one — the one who invested every day on her deification, her husband and proprietor.

It is not woman who is insufficient, therefore, but phallogocentric order — which fixes women as the primeval Other, casts them away from discourse and reduces the world into a huge piece of land entailed on male heirs forever by the "dead hand" of an ancestor whose remains are too ancient to be traced by archeologists. The very gentlemanlike behavior towards women — which presupposes their "natural" frailty and dependence — resembles up to this day the courtesy dispensed to visitors — only women have supposedly been "visiting" the entire world for thousands of years.

Dorothea transgresses by aiming at prohibited horizons. She defies public opinion and her family's wishes by marrying Casaubon. Only she displays more naiveté than proper rebellion in doing so.

She is more defiant within the marriage state, though, when she begins to acknowledge her many limitations and then reacts to her husband's absurd selfishness. Her conjugal life is peopled by little transgressions, subtle instants when she is unable to suffocate her passion and controversial opinions — the rest of the time she is suppressing and silently

struggling. Interestingly enough, the only cause in the name of which she continually fights against her husband is Ladislav's right to the inheritance enjoyed by Casaubon. Dorothea manages to silence her innermost desires and displeasures of everyday life, but the rights of a man who did not receive his share of his grandmother's inheritance must prevail — after all, it is the prerogative of *men* to fight for their causes. If Ladislav cannot fight for himself — or else he would damage his honor as a gentleman —, she is there to do it for him. Never for herself, however, as the Angel would selflessly dictate. After all, it is every wife's duty to obey her husband; it is woman's *raison d'être* to reflect man's thoughts, feelings and all. She must submit her life to Casaubon's will, but his cousin cannot possibly be expected to surrender his money. Little by little, her ardent impetus and transgressive yearning for transcendence are — because confounded by her compulsory exclusion from such spheres of human existence — replaced by the angelic subjection and dispersion into her hero's needs. Her flag becomes *his* flag: the war is over before it even began. No wonder she cannot be supposed to understand herself, recognize herself, much less fight for herself or for her grand causes: she is defeated by her own hands.

### 3.4 The new order of things

George Eliot was not wrong in pointing out that the historical context contributed to “sainthoods” like Dorothea's remaining anonymous. Indeed, the nineteenth century hardly needed women who founded new cloisters, reformed religious orders and insisted on a fantastic communion with God. As it has been argued so far, the Victorian century was not interested in God, but else in getting rid of Him. Of course, there were revivals of Christian ardor like the Evangelicalism and the Methodism which reformed the Church of England, and women never stopped cultivating Christian virtues all over the (“civilized”) world. The century's trend, though, the order which governed the era's transformation, was supposedly very scientific. Biology may be said to have gloriously decided the battle between science and religion. The social order did not need to be explained through the whims of a capricious God anymore, but it had now to submit to the (as much pervasively powerful) natural selection.

At the root of every new dualism (for dualisms remained, as Cixous emphasizes), is the most basic and structuring pair of the (symbolic) universe: man/woman. According to nineteenth century Biology, man is culture, civilization, the apt and strong gene which survives and defeats all others; woman is “nature”, the colonized side of the world, the weak

gene whose specificities subdue and remain silenced, incubated in the organism of humanity, far from being released.

A world which goes on well under its own evolutionist principles has no need for archaic religions. Traditional religious discourses still exist, invade and are imposed by White men on African and Asian colonies, but, at home, in Europe, they had already fulfilled their task and are now just protocol to be followed mechanically. Man has other pursuits and many of them are quite distracted by religious considerations. God as absolute and primary concern has never been a good business for bourgeoisie anyway — think of the Middle Ages, in which Church persistently condemned economic profit. Therefore, let women cultivate such backwardness; they need it more. For Marx (1977, p. 131), “religion is [...] the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again”; “it is people’s opium”. But who needs opium? The colonized, of course. Like women — who could be occasionally found within a church for prayer or in a nearby community for petty charity, whenever their religious duties of wife and mother were for some reason or other dismissed. They must be constantly intoxicated in a state of continual lethargy not to perceive their awful condition, not to “awake” — as Cixous says, evoking a long tradition of sleeping princesses. Nineteenth century women must never wake up — always trapped in one religious discourse or other — under the risk of a whole civilization’s destruction (or deconstruction?).

For Theresa, it was easier — at least from the point of view of a less complex social structure —: either she was left in peace in her “divine” madness (as eventually happened) because she was just a “harmless” woman, or she was burned alive for corrupting other people’s souls with her “feminine” deceitfulness. The Inquisition did not admit much else. Had Theresa been born in the nineteenth century, she would have probably been imprinted the mark of hysteria by contemporary doctors. She would have hardly been physically murdered or left in peace by her family — one must preserve one’s own name; the English family must be, above anything else, respectful. Severe — perhaps perpetual — internalization would most likely be Theresa’s destiny.

See the example of Dorothea herself: at the very beginning of the novel, George Eliot describes her for contemporary public, elucidating how she was interpreted by Middlemarchers and the possible prejudices that would haunt her anywhere she went in moralist Victorian England:

A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles — who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them. (ELIOT, 2000, p. 7).

According to Goldfarb (1970, p. 23),

John Wesley had advised his followers to avoid all manners of passions, and this led in the early nineteenth century to the inhibition of spontaneity and the suspicion of all emotional expression which was not explicitly directed to church service.

Only passion seems to be an all-encompassing feeling which naturally pervades all the aspects of a person's life — Dorothea being a good example of it. So openly she exercised her religious passions that they ultimately ruptured the surface of British respectability in the most crucial moments of her life, as when she got carried away with it in Rome and ended up affecting Casaubon's susceptibilities miserably.

Furthermore, Goldfarb is talking about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, a dissension of the Church of England which encouraged people to experience a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. For Anglicans like Dorothea and her peers, though, the rule was an artificial involvement with religious matters that would enable one to act first and foremost according to the stern principles of morality and discretion. After all, as it was quoted before, there was “an absurdity of the more impractical philanthropic schemes with the relinquishment of traditional female ‘duties’” (VICINUS, 1973, p. XI). Women could, therefore, make use of their “opium” as much as they liked, but, in the end, their primary allegiance was undoubtedly to their families — their very *raison d'être*.

Indeed, George Eliot was right: the nineteenth century was the one which began celebrating the “death of God” — bourgeoisie required so, since He spoiled businesses. There was no place for Saint Theresas or any so openly charismatic saints. Dorothea was probably lucky not to have “discovered” God fully or “understood” Him as she wished and as Theresa was said (and said herself) to have done. In any case, it was not a question of choice: the order of things had changed and she felt the power of it. After all, according to Beauvoir's analysis of the invention of a “conjugal love” (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 456) in the nineteenth century — that was supposed to transform spontaneous feelings into conjugal duties —, anything a woman might wish in this age she was supposed to find within the “happy” and indissoluble



union with men — even religious aspirations, for that matter. One must bear in mind that religious celibacy — a path as respectful as marriage in the sixteenth century Spain — was not an option to a Victorian English lady. Here, a solitary woman was pejoratively called a “spinster” and “all social forces combined to leave [her] emotionally and financially bankrupt” (VICINUS, 1973, p. XII). A plentiful of examples of this social peculiarity can be found in Jane Austen’s six novels (and in her private life as well).

While Dorothea wished to reform society, Theresa ultimately meant to reform herself in order to please her own God and her conscience — not a limited human mind.

Theresa and Dorothea had both the necessary passion and appreciation of self-sacrifice that is usually required from saints. However, Dorothea lacked that which overflowed in the Baroque saint: a strong resolution<sup>26</sup>. Resolution is focus, it is practical. Passion is all-encompassing, pervasive, and easily dispersive. George Eliot nicely describes its diffusive nature in the Prelude, when her intention is exactly to establish the differences in historical contexts between Theresa’s religiously agitated sixteenth century and Dorothea’s scientific age:

Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognisable deed. (ELIOT, 2000, p. 4).

As has been discussed here, Dorothea lacked self-knowledge. Her self-denial was denial of nothing at the beginning of the novel, for it was grounded on nothing intelligible. She never actually acknowledged that she had a free conscience and an independent will until she lost them. And even when she recovered it, in widowhood, they proved to be insufficiently strong to resist (a character whom not coincidentally was named) Will. She is the passion, *he* is the will; she feeds him and he transcends. She remains immanent, untouched and unrealized by herself. “The happiness of man is: I will. The happiness of woman is: he wills,” (NIETZSCHE, 1983, p. 81) declared Zarathustra.

There is a very relevant moment in the narrative in which these notions prove how symbolically powerful they are. Dorothea and Ladislaw are gaily talking about art, when she confesses that she “could never produce a poem,” and he immediately answers that she *is* a poem (ELIOT, 2000, p. 186). She is, thus, the passive object operated by an agent (the poet, a male poet, preferably). A poem is a human construction as much as woman is constructed

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<sup>26</sup> Strausz has a chapter dedicated to the saint’s “determination” and her strong resolution to become a saint — not in the canonical term, but in terms of Christian behavior. It is chapter 10 (p. 79-86).

through discourse by the phallogocentric order (by men) — the freshest poem on womanhood being, back then, that of the Angel.

And such is definitely not an isolated case in Eliot's work, but rather a trend. Her best female characters are as intelligent as vacillating. Although evidently smarter than her brother Tom, Maggie Tulliver generally submits easily to his will, in *The Mill on the Floss*. Gwendolen Harleth is no less passionate and bright, but she needs Daniel Deronda to point out, to "illuminate" her path. The dependence on male guidance and approval is, therefore, a constant in the author's body of work. It is, after all, the "order of things".

Three hundred years before, Theresa found joy within herself, within her powerful mind and imagination. Whether she actually saw God and entered in spiritual communion with Him or merely imagined it, whatever one lives outside the others' surveillance is one's own, like a fictional world invented by a child: it is a projection of one's needs and desires. It is like the concept of "Lie" itself, which may be said to be inexistent — to everyone but the liar — when never found out. Therefore, Theresa's secluded world is hers and she rejoices in it. Dorothea, on the other hand, cannot find comfort — even less joy — in solitude; she has to submit, then, because the world she insists on occupying — a very fair cause which is just not as persistently fought for as one would expect from a martyr — is not hers and not even translatable to hers.

### 3.5 **The mysterious ways of the Father**

The scarcity of women like Theresa accounted for her widespread fame. In the sixteenth century Spain, literate women were, indeed, a very rare article to find. Even more so one who dared to disclose her life in a (as much rare) sort of journal in a time when any little confession was sufficient excuse to send someone to the fire. Above all, however, the highly erotic tone of her experience with divinity (or ultimately with herself) and the way she disposed of language to approximate people from her practices and defend them from the religious persecution of her time made her unique.

Strausz (2005, p. 135) reserves a specific chapter of her book to expand on the notable eroticism found in the descriptions of the saint's autobiography. She defends the spiritual voluptuousness of Theresa this way:

Because it must be said — the mysticism presents a strong erotic component. By the very nature of the meditations — impregnated of the idea of Christ's body and His humanity, by the state of exalted surrender that it demands from its practitioners, by the inner flight it

provokes, by the consciousness that what one pursues is an act of love which transcends the reality of the senses, the mystical experience must cross the barrier of flesh in order to be wholly fulfilled. On the other hand, though, what can be expected from its practitioners, all of them men and women, who have as ideal of love the earthly passion?

Afterwards, she insists that, although the experience evokes sexual images, it means exactly the opposite. She explains that the serious practitioners had to eliminate what she calls “natural appetites” and, therefore, to avoid bodily consciousness (STRAUSZ, 2005, p. 136-8). Indeed, according to Georges Bataille (2004, p. 101), transgression is as much subjected to rules as interdiction. By reading Theresa, though, what comes to the mind is the notion that, in order to achieve the greatest stages of the mystical experience, one must clean the body of everything so that Christ may fill it. Therefore, what remains in the end *is* the body and its sensuousness, in perfect surrender. All the descriptions are highly physical. Ultimately, it is only through the body that one can experience the communion with God — human language is too imperfect to communicate the sensations, as Theresa acknowledges.

For Bataille, eroticism is the human means of transcendence, the only means of experiencing still in life some measure of the utter continuity represented by death. In describing it, he describes the mystical experience itself, only without God — because God must be surpassed so that the erotic experience can take place; God’s interdictions are saints’ concerns. He states clearly, though, that he does not mean to say that eroticism and sanctity are of the same nature, but only that they have the same extreme intensity. For him, the erotic experience is a solitary and silent one, while sanctity approximates one of others, the community (BATAILLE, 2004, p. 398). Since for Christianity what Bataille calls “transgression” is nothing else but “sin”, Christians are just in accordance with their peers if they deny that which frees them, the violation (transgression) of all interdictions — those very cultural and historical devices which maintain the coherence of societies (2004, p. 414).

The interesting point here, though, is that, once interdictions are social constructs, they are variable. For instance, Strausz mentions a pious woman named Piedrahita who had the fame of being a saint but who was violently persecuted by the Inquisition, in 1511. Another pious Franciscan, Isabel de la Cruz, was the first one to be condemned, in 1529; she was severely whipped in a public square in Toledo and then sent to perpetual prison (STRAUSZ, 2005, p. 124). Theresa did the same things — and even more —, but, although persecuted and accused of heresy by the Inquisition, she survived and was never actually injured by the authorities.

The argument here is that she was saved, above all, by her writing. Her processes before the Inquisition were dropped, in 1576, thanks to the several letters she sent to King

Philip II of Spain for many years, pleading absolution. Although many were against her efforts to reform the Carmelite Order, many others followed her willingly and she was eventually given the permission to build two houses for men who wanted to adopt her reforms, the first one of which was the convent of Discalced Carmelite Brethren, founded in 1568. By reading the confident and clearly stated narrative of her life, one comes to the conclusion that it must have been difficult, indeed, to contradict that woman.

Therefore, Theresa's experience may have been highly transgressive to others, but seemed to have been successfully defended by herself, keeping her safely on the side of sanctity — at least in the eyes of her community. Not *that* safely, though, for the winds which threatened to throw her down proved how tenuous the line between interdiction and transgression is — how she could have been deemed either privileged by God or deceived by Satan, as she herself acknowledged the possibility more than once along her narrative<sup>27</sup>.

The following descriptions may clarify the understanding of the dubious nature of such experience, as described by Theresa:

It is like someone who has a candle in the hand: one is close to die of a death one desires; one is experiencing *jouissance* in agony, with the greatest delight that can be expressed. It does not seem to me to be anything but almost dying for everything in the world, to keep experiencing the *jouissance* from God. [...] The soul does not know whether it speaks or remains silent, whether it laughs or cries. It is a glorious folly, a celestial madness in which one learns the true wisdom, and, to the soul, it is a delicious way to *jouir*. [...] Oh! God bless me, how a soul is when it is in this condition! All of it wants to be tongues to praise the Lord. It says many follies, always trying to content one who has it this way. I know a person<sup>28</sup> whom, without being a poet, used to improvise very sincere strophes, declaring her burden; she did not make it with the understanding, but just to keep experiencing the glorious *jouissance* that so delicious a burden conferred her [...] She wanted her body and soul to tear apart so that she could show the *jouissance* that she had suffered. How many torments she could face that would not be deliciously suffered for the Lord! (JESUS, 1984, p. 86-7).

Her experience of *jouissance*, although still within the realm of sanctity, can be directly compared to Bataille's definitions of eroticism in that it overtly has, "in a fundamental way, the sense of death". According to the author, "[t]he one who apprehends for an instant the value of eroticism realizes immediately that it is the value of death" (BATAILLE, 2004, p. 412-3). Such is clear in the marble statue by Bernini called *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, or *Saint Theresa's Ecstasy*<sup>29</sup>, which depicts the well-known episode narrated by the saint in her memoirs in which an angel is prepared to pierce her heart with a spear. The eroticism of the image cannot go unnoticed, for the spear easily suggests the phallus which penetrates the virgin's body, causing both pain and pleasure. Furthermore, it evokes the image

<sup>27</sup> For instance, when she says that "as at this time women have had great illusions and deceits from the Demon, I began to fear the great delightfulness and lightness that I felt, many times without being able to avoid" (JESUS, op. cit., p. 128).

<sup>28</sup> She refers to herself, as Rachel de Queiroz informs, and, therefore, the "person" will be referred to as "she".

<sup>29</sup> Turn to ANNEX N, page 121, Illustration 15.

of an orgasm, because, by representing the moment of contact, of fusion between heaven and earth, it communicates an experience of death in life — the “little death”, as the climax of sexual activity is lyrically called.

Many Christians, however, have undergone gory self-flagellation rituals — and then probably come to a closer “understanding” of death — without ever experiencing this miraculous and mysterious ecstasy, since such were typical practices within medieval monasteries and convents. After all, as members of a religion enormously influenced by Neo-Platonism, these Christians more than the others assimilated Plato’s notion that the body “rivets us in a world of material things which is far removed from the world of reality; and it tempts us away from the virtuous life”, whereas “[i]t is in and through the soul, if at all, that we shall have knowledge, be in touch with reality, and lead a life of virtue,” because “only the soul can ascend to the real world, the world of the Forms or Ideas” (SPELMAN, 1999, p. 34). Therefore, the sensuous experiences were only a means to experience what Bataille would call “continuity” and the mystics called *transverberation* — or the contact between matter and spirit, the much awaited communion with God.

So, it is argued here that once mystical experience touches the limits of sensual eroticism so tenuously, those which Bataille calls “interdiction” and “transgression” cannot mean anything fixed — much more because each age reformulates these notions. Even within one age, though, one may be said to have comparatively transgressed and, for a combination of reasons, not been punished like the others. It seems to have been the case with Theresa. And she was heroically saved by herself, by her own defense of her practices, by the brilliant and daring use she did of phallogocentric discourse in order to convey her ideas. She — whether consciously or not, it does not matter — used masculine systems of discourse and thought, manipulated the very order of things of her time against this same order and discourse. She accomplished the mimicry that Irigaray encourages in her work: she imitated traditional discourse in order to subvert it, denounce its flaws and convey new meanings, new possibilities of self-definition for those who had for so long been silenced by History. She acted as Auerbach’s mermaid by displacing male authorities and by exercising a power which in the name of any other devotion but that of official religion would have been persecuted and finally exorcized by men and their institutions. But then the Father still worked in mysterious ways, and “mysterious” encompasses a great amount of possible linguistic signs for men and anti-signs for women — nothing like the environment of post-Cartesian nineteenth century, in which God must be tamed by Reason if He cared for survival, in which Dorothea Brooke

needed *understanding* in order to *believe* — and in which none would light the candle to the dark labyrinth of her ontological crisis.

### 3.6 The Word was made flesh

*And the Word was made flesh,  
and dwelt among us,  
(and we beheld his glory,  
the glory as of the only begotten of the Father)  
full of grace and truth.*

John, 1:14

The God of mysteries to which Dorothea clung and which was being murdered by every field of human knowledge of her century was never meant to serve any Saint Theresa, new or old — even though the historical nun managed to benefit from the gaps of His power.

The Word mentioned in the epigraph *is* God Almighty, His language, His content, whatever He is and means. “I am that I am,”<sup>30</sup> (BÍBLIA, 1990, p. 72) He answered when Moses asked His name. Because no human being can *see* God and much less *understand* God or the (i)material substance of which He is made, He has to *translate* Himself into Flesh, into Form — into Christ, His beloved son.

God is materialized so that man can *know* Him better. “Man”, of course, because woman cannot wholly penetrate His mysteries — or so History has it. And it does not mean just that women cannot be the priests of God, although this rule is at the root of the greater reason. Priests *represent* God on earth; they are the means through which He spreads His Word. The very reason why woman cannot penetrate Him is that He was translated into a Man — the natural conclusion of which would be that He is “he”; He is *male*.

In the imaginarium<sup>31</sup> of Jewish communities, He had always been male before translating Himself into Christ — Jewish symbolic discourse would never have it differently —, but then nothing was absolutely certain. After all, “I am that I am” is anything but unambiguous.

The first inescapable Jewish-Christian symbolic construct is dualism itself. It may not be possible to trace the origins of such omnipresent notion, but it has certainly been

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<sup>30</sup> Exodus, 3:14.

<sup>31</sup> The discussion is of a symbolic order, and no one can escape the fact that all symbolic order in the Western History has been at some great measure based on Jewish-Christian mythology, whereas Jewish-Christian mythology had drank in many other religious sources, such as Mithraism and Zoroastrianism — just to mention two.

established as norm and thus perpetuated by Jewish monotheism — after all, if there is only one god and model, there has to be an anti-god and an anti-model; all other doubles flow from this single principle of perfection. Western civilization has for thousands of years been populated with such pairs: light/darkness, good/evil, right/wrong, man/woman, among infinite others.

As the “Word” that must be translated to become intelligible, God’s opposition would be “Silence” (spoken word) or “Vacuum” (written word). And these are both — as all feminists here studied affirmed or suggested — constitutive of the realm of women.

If anywhere at all, it is in silence that woman is supposed to *find* God more easily, for speech sexualizes Him, draws her back, pushes her aside. Or else it diminishes her, reduces her to that which she lacks. Dorothea, for example, cannot understand that man’s knowledge — if taken as a token of salvation for women, and not as a mere means to transcend phallogocentric discourse — can only confound her, exclude her or push her farther from herself, from her plural selves.

As stated by Saussure, “[w]ithout language thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (SAUSSURE, 1966, p. 112). That is, language precedes thought. Therefore, it is at the root of human interaction amongst them and even within themselves. And this world, the realm of “language”, ultimately *the* Word (God), is masculine *par excellence*. The “form” it acquires is the translation of a phallogocentric order. This is a reformulation of what Cixous – who explored dualisms deeper in her work — calls “this solidarity between logocentrism and phallogocentrism” (CIXOUS, 1996, p. 65).

Dualism may not have played a great part among the ancient Greeks and Romans, with their rich variety of gods — each one impersonating many different human particularities. From the beginning of Jewish History to nowadays, though, the Word is masculine. Whether or not one kills God, his Word is spread and translated in Western thought through dualism. Indeed, killing God is not enough.

Because this is so fixed in Western thought, Irigaray – and postmodern theorists at large — emphasizes that there is no way “out” of it but “through” it, through mimicry. Languages have to be used, no one can escape them, but they may be (re)arranged variably, in order to respond to women’s needs, anxieties and silences. *This* is where transgression is possible. Inventing anything completely original, breaking the barriers of phallogocentric discourse entirely has not yet proved successful. Especially by women, who cannot even think

of cutting men *out* of anything perpetually — although some radical feminists have considered it their only escape.

Because woman is, according to Clément (1996), partly a “linear” being and partly a “cyclical” one, there is always a (more or less) considerable portion of her that does not find an echo, a proper translation within (far from) all-encompassing phallogocentric discourse. Since form and content are virtually inseparable, anything of merely “human” with which she can identify is automatically male, because it communicates at one time humanity and maleness. A good example of the inconsistency of this symbolic order is given by Susan Anthony, one of American most famous feminists, who disclosed it by quoting the Constitution of the United States and firmly arguing that the “men” who “are created equal” referred to by this document are not automatically male, but inherently “human”. She delivered this speech after being convicted for illegally voting in the 1872’s presidential election<sup>32</sup>.

Once the phallogocentric order is still unavoidable, it must be subverted from within, as Theresa can be said to have done. She allegedly obeyed the Christ, *the* male Flesh itself, but obeying only one (male or female) who is above anyone else is not actually a prison, but even some sort of freedom<sup>33</sup>. After all, men and women *do* submit to weather and to the very limitations of their physical bodies — to give a couple of examples.

Three hundred years after Theresa communed with her God through the experiencing of a “celestial madness”, derived self-realization and self-fulfillment from it and even managed to defend her rituals and reforms from the disciplinary eyes of the Holy Inquisition, Dorothea tries to *comprehend* God, to grasp his meaning, to decode his divine unifying principle, to unveil the mysteries of the spiritual world in order to turn them into useful action. She yearns for the knowledge of men which — she believes — will free her (of doubt, of fear, of uneasiness). What she fails to understand is that this “Word” is not for her. It never was for any woman — at least not directly, in a positive way. It has for countless ages been a “message” for somebody else. After all, “visitors” do not receive mail. They do not even have mailboxes.

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<sup>32</sup> Susan Anthony was United States’ most famous suffragette in the 19th century. She fought both for women’s suffrage and against slavery. Here is a strong fragment of her celebrated 1872’s Stump Speech, in which she defends that a passage addressing a virtual “we”, in the American Constitution, encompasses women as well as men: “It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people — women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government - the ballot.” (ANTHONY, 1999. p. 321)

<sup>33</sup> One interpretation of the word “freedom” could be the submission to all that is not culturally determined, shaped by human interests.



She is, after all, a daughter of her own time — an age in which strict scientific discourse combined with moralizing bourgeois myths seek to replace religious doctrines in the imaginary arrangement of a cohesive social reality, and in which the failure of such endeavors within many a promising mind (like hers) resulted in the same sort of self-dispersion to which the indolent lives of all women condemned them.

#### 4. FINALE

*It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing  
while we are thoroughly alive. There are certain things  
we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger after them.*

George Eliot

In “Professions for Women”, Virginia Woolf fictionalizes what she considers to be the first steps towards the construction of a solid career for female writers. In “Women and Fiction”, the discussion continues and she focuses on what literature produced by women was, is and should be, according to her standards.

It has been exposed above how, in “Professions for Women”, the novelist and essayist not only brings back the phantasmagoric Angel in the House from its nineteenth century pedestal, but also how she manages to kill it — or else, how she narrates the execution she committed at the moment she had to write her first critical essay on a work written by a man. Her argument is that no woman can write anything — much less critical works — and at the same time be genuine and true to herself and her opinions and feelings if she believes she does not have the right, that her only purpose in the world is to please, and smile, and condescend — especially with men and their deeds. She encourages her female public to think for themselves and not accept preconceived ideas, to exercise their intellect by questioning, arguing, defending their views of things. She also mentions how crucial it is for women to be able to talk about their bodies, for it is clear that, for her, body and mind are different instances which must both be explored genuinely in literature by women. She places the intellect above the body, however, and ideas above facts; in “Women and Fiction”, poetry is pictured as a higher form of art when compared to prose, and “the wider questions which the poet tries to solve — of our destiny and the meaning of life” are somewhat *beyond* “personal and political relationships” (WOOLF: 1979, p. 51). There is a clear hierarchy between these subjects within her mind, and she seems to understand them as separate instances to be polished and perfected, in a purist way. The quality of someone’s work would be measured, therefore, by his/her ability to detach its art from his/her own socio-economic conditions.

In “Women and Fiction”, Woolf proposes an investigation of the ordinary women so that one is to understand the extraordinary ones — here represented by the four great authoresses Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. If one understands what personal and social conditions they had to overcome, one must understand what made

them special and, therefore, what has already been conquered by ordinary women and what is left to be achieved. She suggests that nineteenth century women had more leisure and more education than their female ancestors (1979, p. 45); that might be why these four geniuses succeeded here and not before. They had little time to engage in writing between their house demands, for they lived more or less under the subjugation of the mythical Angel which they had to incarnate. That would be why they wrote novels, not poetry; the latter would require more time and dedication, for its inspiration comes from the depths of human soul, whereas novels require much observation of society and people's characters and behaviors for description — which women abounded with, secluded as they were in drawing rooms always full of visitors.

The problem for Woolf, it seems, was that — with the exception of Emily Brontë and Jane Austen —, in reading literature written by women in general, “we are conscious not merely of the writer's character [...] but we are conscious of a woman's presence — of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights” (WOOLF, 1979, p. 47), and such produces what she calls a “distortion” which “is frequently the cause of weakness” (1979, p. 47) and makes their work — which becomes too masculine or too feminine — “lose its perfect integrity and, with that, its most essential quality as a work of art” (1979, p. 48). The individual human being is a whole in itself, and that is what must be imprinted on any work — its greatest artistic value. As we understand better by reading her novel *Orlando* (1928), being woman or being man is not being human — which is an idealized neutral, androgynous entity. Men and women must be stripped of their gender issues in order to see reality clearer — that is, philosophically, at some distance and yet without mediation. Although seeing reality politically is better than seeing it personally, for the reader must not hear the echo of the author's voice, but only of his/her discursive subjects. This is not to say that women should not talk about women, for she insists that authoresses should even abandon phallogocentric discourse and the type of sentence which is established by men — “too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use” (1979, p. 48) —, but that they must overcome their own “tales of woe” and talk about women as a whole, in the pursuit of one day being able to explore the human existence as a whole.

Woolf perceived the same “distressing effect” of the “desire to plead some personal cause or to make a character a mouthpiece of some personal grievance” in the writings of “a working-man, a Negro, or [any]one who for some other reason is conscious of disability” (1979, p. 47). It is not hard to understand why she mentioned Charlotte Brontë as one propagator of such aesthetic distortion, since the latter's social complaints and defense of

useful occupation for women in novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) are anything but subtle.

Including George Eliot in such a list of authoresses who committed themselves artistically as defenders of women's rights on the basis of personal experiences is another matter, however, since feminists up to this day are at such pains in trying to define Mary Ann Evans' position in regard to the Woman Question, and some have given up any hope of aggregating such illustrious figure to the honorary members of the movement. After all, although she believed as much as Woolf in the perfect form of art as that of wholeness and organic coherence, the unifying principle which structures every organism — real or representative, in life or in art — should, for George Eliot, take in consideration both intellectual and emotional demands. There would be no use in reshaping reality as a perfectly cohesive whole which responded marvelously to the senses but poorly to the feelings, to human sensibilities: there was no use in making art that would not be affective, that would not help the individual to construct a healthy bond with reality, with the society of his/her time and place.

Woolf's aesthetic project which privileged the excellence of literary form in detriment of social critique, philosophical questions above political and social demands — in one word, the universal instead of the particular —, might have sounded too individualistic, elitist and idealistic for Eliot's purposes. After all, Woolf's ideal of a universal writing in "Women and Fiction" is highly phallogocentric, since the only social group justifiably excluded from what she classifies as "disabled" would be those who — because never faced with political or any sort of limitations — never tinged their discourse with resentment, and, therefore, had a "cleaner", undistorted aesthetic style — that is, White, Western economically independent men. Writing neutrally — and, therefore, *artistically* — would be the same as writing without personal complaints, writing from above every petty human quarrels, from the position of the gods, as Greek *aoidos* would have themselves, and using the divine language of the Father — since, as has been stated in the chapter above, Jewish-Christian tradition would allow only one, and a male one —, the language of authority which is the incarnation of the phallogocentric order itself.

When Woolf advocates a language for women, she considers how pompous and heavy masculine writing was, and how women emphasized what men considered trivial and trivialized what men overvalued: her counsel was to work formally women's speech in order to differentiate it from men's, but then from where did she think that spring so many differences? From "natural" differences between men and women? But had such castrating

Victorian concept not been strangled in the famous killing of the Angel in the House? The only origins we are left with, thus, are cultural and historical — that is, women write differently from men because of their different collective experiences, a collection of which is constituted of common personal testimonies. Therefore, the *what* is inevitably behind — or simultaneous to, fused to — the *how*, and women's mode of communicating is a communication in itself — and such is personal, and collective if one thinks of the common experience of women.

In any case, even after asserting that whatever it was that George Eliot wrote, her writing sprang from personal experiences — many of them common to other women's experiences, as would be the case with any woman —, the questions remain of what such experiences sought to communicate and in what measure such communication echoed the feminist claims of her time. After all, a closer reading of *Middlemarch* disables any attempts of fixing her opinions on virtually any subject, for her intellectual and emotional loyalties were numerous, and her conclusions — if ever there was one —, ever ambiguous. As Gillian Beer asserts, “[George Eliot] needed and sustained contradiction, and, even more multiplied positions than contradiction” (BEER: 1992, p. 169).

Eliot's personal experiences and points of view play each one an important part in the understanding of *Middlemarch*, but it is not the purpose of any of such personal ideologies — Christian morality, feminism, scientific rationalism, political liberalism, etc. — or even of the amalgam of them to answer any question aroused by the text. *Middlemarch's* position regarding the greatest part of the themes it approaches is that of asking questions, and not of offering solutions. It is an open text in which the articulation of all discursive elements seems to be drawn in a manner to nullify one another, as every truth proclaimed by characters, by the narrator, by the epigraphs and the many metaphors are employed to deconstruct what has been previously stated as absolute truth.

The greatest answer to Eliot's insistence on opening so many possibilities of interpretation might be, indeed, her own obsession with literary realism. In an era in which Balzac, Flaubert and Machado de Assis translated such literary tendency into the convergence of the bitterest narrative alternatives, she seems to have understood reality not very differently from what postmodernists propose — that is, more of a tedious and senseless, but affective purgatory than of a romantic paradise or a cynically detached pit of fire. Her sense of realism, therefore, directs her to the blend of many tendencies and the establishment of neither too happy nor too depressive endings — more of mild ones, which can be read as peaceful as much as fastidious, but which inevitably fix nothing, leaving doors as open as they were when

the novel began. “The journey never ends,” she seems to assert, “it has not up to our days, the 1870’s; it has not for me yet.” After all, would she compromise her own feminist position for the sake of a more realistic description of the conflicting reality she encountered at her time? Would it not be more plausible to suppose she combined paradoxical positions herself?

It is usually highlighted how she managed to sustain this ambiguous position in her own personal life, by living with a married man and yet retaining the radical Christian morality used ironically by Nietzsche (1990) to represent the English contradictory morals. Had she employed her literature to expose her personal resentments, she might have chosen to put into question the validity of the institution of marriage, for instance — which she does not do, at least not as openly as one would expect when confronted with Virginia Woolf’s opinion of her work. The fact is that *Middlemarch* never compromises, and this lack of commitment — which is not born from alienation or neglect, but from extensive studies and strong intellectual yearnings — may be considered its greatest communication to the reader. The novel sounds as though it had made great efforts to commit itself to specific ideas and feelings, but could only commit to Eliot’s own idea of realism, which foresees the impossibility of adhering to only one discourse when trying to understand humanity and the ways it might find happiness and self-fulfillment in the material world.

The comparison between Saint Theresa and Dorothea at the beginning of the novel is crucial as it points to the very phenomenon which is communicated by the diffuse configuration of the narrative. During Theresa’s lifetime, there was certainty and meaning to every human experience, a sole set of beliefs which nurtured the relationship between individual and community, and individual and his own self. God was the soul of the social body, the only truth and the only language employed by people. The divine authority imposed virtually no intellectual or hierarchical barriers, so much that even exceptional women like Theresa could become the propagators of His word — after all, He *did* seem to work in mysterious ways. Provided that she did not maculate her own body with the stain of carnal sins and did not defy so openly her male superiors’ authority, her practices could be legitimized and she could implement practical and doctrinal reforms and write books which became sacred manuals of religious behavior. Having God speak through them endowed some women with extraordinary powers — powers which were not to be seen during the nineteenth century. Theresa’s words incarnated the Father’s authority, and, therefore, she herself became a major authority, an expert, a respected figure regardless of her gender — her gender was pretty much overlooked, it had to be if she was to be followed by the religious community from then on.

It has been argued in this dissertation that the ascension of bourgeoisie as the dominant social class in Europe managed to gradually annihilate the political power of religion and the institutions which represented it. The technological advances which made the Industrial Revolution possible explained innumerable phenomena whose inexplicability had for millennia been monopolized by religious discourses which turned superstitions into source of power. As God had been the one and only unifying principle of human lives and conducts so far, His extinction might have meant radical anarchy and the dismantlement of society<sup>34</sup> had not the rising bourgeoisie replaced it with other moral values — such as respectability — and replaced His myriad of angels and saints with one angel, *the Angel* every man could turn to every day in the cozy protection of his own house — the new sacred sanctuary of male devotion —, the highest depository of bourgeois morality. The price women paid for such adoration was the entrapment within the golden cage, as birds imprisoned for the closer admiration of their singing. Their gains with such trade — as if they had had any option in the transaction — were clear: luxuries, devotion, protection and respect before the community. The cost was high, however: they were sinners no more, had lost their right to be. They were allowed no faults, for they represented the divine on earth, they were the last spot of religious attachment men's minds could come up with; to sin was to commit heresy towards the myth which sustained the new social order, and any little sin echoed the fall of Lucifer and of mankind, rendering the woman sinner the opposite role of Eve or of the demon himself.

Dorothea is a Saint Theresa in many ways, her own passionate Christian faith dates back to Theresa's historical setting, but her rug has been pulled from under her feet and she never comes to fully realize it. *God* has been pulled from under her feet, her own manner of adoring Him and trying to pursue His path is outdated, as it is clear by Casaubon's own traditional attitude towards religion — even as a clergyman, religion is understood by him as a separate sphere in the organization of his life, a merely ritualistic one, and a subject to his philosophical divagations. There is no safe ground for Dorothea's search for truth, she does not even know how to begin, for her education had been limited and the whole symbolical universe she tries to access functions in a foreign language — there simply is no language which does not bear the dualistic order of the Father, for God remains mainly in the discourse of irrefutable authority. This language she is confronted with presents no elements with which she can identify and no bridges with her inward reality.

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<sup>34</sup> One of the grounds under which Darwin's theory was fiercely attacked was that it could mean the destruction of society through the lack of a cohesive morality. (BARLOW, Nora. *The Autobiography of Darwin Charles, 1809-1882*. WW Norton & Company: New York, 1958.)

Casaubon's is the most evidently fixed and imposing discourse; therefore, it is most clearly idealistic and disconnected with reality. Lydgate's and Ladislav's propositions (science and politics) seem more palpable since they aim to change material reality and people's lives — they make their defenders more sympathetic and charismatic. As they are absolutely sure of the efficacy of their theories and of their fields of knowledge as the fittest to reform society, nevertheless, they are still foreign to Dorothea, who never considers such abstract concepts along the novel. It is the rational authority of such theories, the intangible quality of the debates which legitimize them, it is the language which never translates itself into action, the platonic divagations of men who decide the destinies of many inside isolated rooms in grand institutions or inside fully equipped laboratories — it is the detachment from common human life and its most basic needs which keeps Dorothea away from phallogocentric discourse and the vague "knowledge" she so desperately seeks as a means to effectually transform reality.

After all, such authoritative discourse has been reshaping itself to Cartesian principles since the death of God has been declared, and reason had promoted an era of scientific detachment which goes directly against the full attachment of Christian communities through the authority of God, from the age of Theresa. This new conformation of things separated women from knowledge, for now there are no mysteries, no shelters for thought. Now everything is explained to exhaustion, but through a limited mode of speech. It may be said that the alienation of women from knowledge, according to *Middlemarch*, is that women extract knowledge through experience, while men lose themselves in ineffectual thoughts.

While Casaubon loses himself in his own archaic theories, Lydgate and Ladislav try to prove themselves right through many abstract discussions and Bulstrode never ceases to attempt his community's conversion to his dissident religious doctrine, Dorothea is never satisfied while she cannot help her nearest neighbors in their most urgent needs, Rosamond only feels her success through the manipulation of her husband's actions, Mary Garth's sense of justice and righteousness is quite traditional and she never hesitates in abstract considerations, accomplishing success from the immediate experiences supplied by the following of her moral code. Was such differentiation intentional? Did Eliot mean to say that such differences spring from natural causes or are determined by social impositions (like women's estrangement from the ideologies of their time and their education concentrated on small practical accomplishments which would never be put into productive work for society)? The second theory is far more plausible, but it still contains a multifold of questions in itself, like what the solution would be and to which level the emancipation of women should be



achieved, according to Eliot. No reassuring solutions are offered, as it has been argued before: *Middlemarch* is supposed to be a realistic work, after all, and even today no theory has been offered to conciliate individual and society in a harmonious and satisfactory way.

It seems that Virginia Woolf's exclusion of George Eliot from the meager list of authoresses who did not write mainly out of resentment with regard to her female condition and its historical limitations — only Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, it seems — might have been a little precipitated and restricted. Eliot's ability to survive chaotic paradoxes is not a privilege of hers, for Virginia Woolf herself seems to have established as norm in "Women and Fiction" a detached writing attitude which she herself most ingeniously and meticulously transgressed in her own fiction — for it is certain that *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) or even *Orlando* would have been entirely different novels under the pen of one who had never experienced personally whatever it is that being a woman means.

Whatever George Eliot's feminist project was with *Middlemarch*, it seems as vague and inconclusive as Dorothea's plans of social change and her ultimate fate. The reader is never acquainted with her posterior deeds, she loses any fragment of autonomous identity she might have had and dissolves into thin air through her marriage to Ladislaw, as much as her contributions to the world — which have from then on been part of her husband's dominant projects.

The imprisonment of women in their sexually saturated bodies promoted by the inspired angelic myth of womanhood from the nineteenth century may represent a more encompassing entrapment: that of the human mind in itself, or of the human mind in the fragile material existence, or of the human mind from the truths of being. Women could not participate in politics, in economics, in social reforms and in a great amount of cultural manifestations as much as human beings in general cannot participate in the many mysteries which surpass the limitations of rational thought, in the phenomena which range beyond the frontiers of space-time, in the very meaning of existence, of life, and of human life or its purpose on the earth — *if* there are any such meanings and explanations. Dorothea's dispersion of herself is a perfect image for the modern individual's self-dispersion within a world without God and His authority. The ontological crisis of this new Saint Theresa who has all the passion, but no direction, is a reflection of the individual's ontological crisis in a world of multiple ideologies, interpretations of reality, paths to be followed and no cohesive principle. Not even the individual is itself indivisible anymore, as the origins of the word imply and as George Eliot seems to suggest herself by addressing so variable subjects through her novel and by trying not to give only one the preponderance over the others.

Women's potentiality is wasted in trying to understand themselves through phallogocentric discourse, but men only understand themselves through a language created by them for them — any other language is beyond their catching, the language of emotions being, for instance, still a mystery to any rationalization. The only human potentiality fully incarnated in *Middlemarch* is the activity of writing, as if George Eliot's Wagnerian virtuosity would only be achieved by the expense of her characters' dissipation. And, indeed, the power of the novel lies in its impossibilities, in its postponements, in the suspension of pleasure and self-fulfillment of both characters and readers, in whatever there is in individual failure and irresolution that bind humanity together and favor our identification, just as climatic catastrophes tend to reinforce local bonds in human communities. Perhaps that is George Eliot's intended effect and her greatest success in turning feeling into thought and thought back into feeling: that we may identify with these characters' failures and conclude that there is no definite answer, that all search for absolute truth is vain, and that at least here, in the vastness of our ontological loss, we meet and unite in the common frailty of human existence.

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**SONNET 146**

By William Shakespeare

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth —  
My sinful earth these rebel powers array —  
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,  
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?  
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,  
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?  
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,  
Eat up thy charge? is this thy body's end?  
Then soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,  
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;  
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;  
Within be fed, without be rich no more:  
    So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on  
men,  
    And Death once dead, there's no more  
dying then.

## ANNEX B — Illustration 1



A typical Angel in the House is depicted as a passive young girl with a thoroughly innocent countenance, a very delicate constitution and a clearly passive position, probably in expectation of her beloved, the one she dreamingly reminds through the many love letters scattered on the table near her and on her own lap. (From my personal archives, without references).

## ANNEX C — Illustrations 2, 3, 4 and 5

2



3



4



5



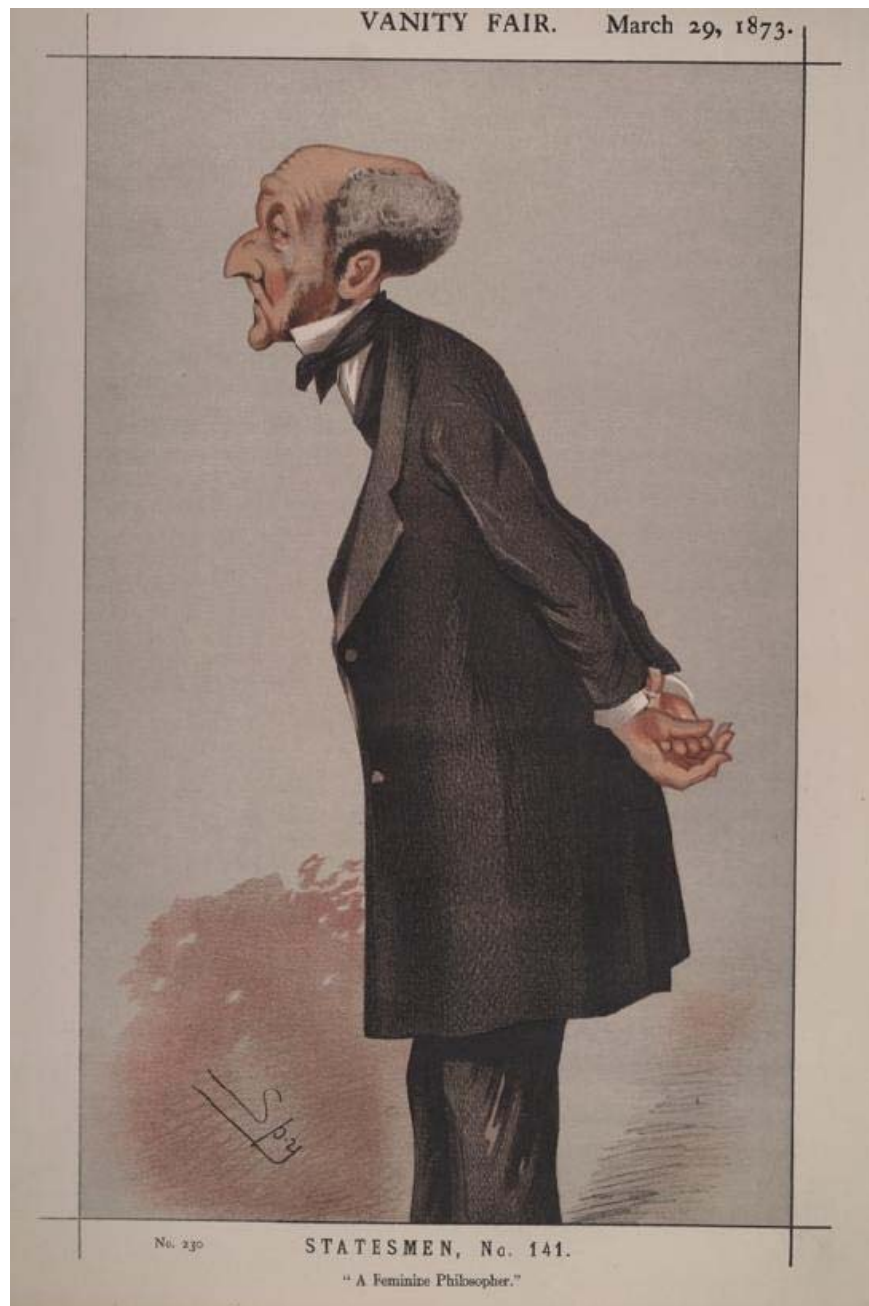
2 - *Griselda's First Trial of Patience* (1848), by John West Cope. Available at: <http://www.parliament.uk/worksofart/artwork/charles-west-cope/griselda%27s-first-trial-of-patience-canterbury-tales-/2882>. (The four of them accessed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 2011.)

3 - *The Story of Patient Griselda* (circa 1494) Part II of three works by the unknown "Master of the Story of Griselda". Available at: [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Spalliera\\_Panels\\_The\\_Story\\_of\\_Griselda\\_Part\\_II\\_Exile%28detai%29.jpg](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Spalliera_Panels_The_Story_of_Griselda_Part_II_Exile%28detai%29.jpg).

4 - *Patient Griselda* (1906), by Frank Cadogan Cowper. Available at: <http://goldenagepaintings.blogspot.com/2008/02/frank-cadogan-cowper.html>.

5 - *The Proposal (The Marquis and Griselda)* (circa 1850), by Frederic George Stephens. Note her subservient posture. Available at: [http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=13820&searchid=9490&ta\\_bview=image](http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=13820&searchid=9490&ta_bview=image).

## ANNEX D — Illustration 6



*Feminine Philosopher* (1873), a caricature of John Stuart Mill by British artist Leslie Ward, better known as "Spy". Available at: <[http://ookaboo.com/o/pictures/picture/21524750/A\\_Feminine\\_Philosopher\\_Caricature\\_by\\_Spy](http://ookaboo.com/o/pictures/picture/21524750/A_Feminine_Philosopher_Caricature_by_Spy)>. Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.

## ANNEX E — Illustration 7



*Study of a Girl's Head* (1883), by Edward Coley Burne-Jones. Available at: <http://my.opera.com/Rime%20De%20Bran/albums/showpic.dml?album=335795&picture=1265260> Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.

## ANNEX F — Illustration 8



*Portia* (1886), by Sir John Everett Millais. Available at: <<http://classicartblog.blogspot.com/2010/08/john-everett-millais-1829-1896.html>>. Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.

## ANNEX G — Illustration 9



*The Vampire* (1897), by Edward Coley Burne-Jones. Available at: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Burne-Jones-le-Vampire.jpg>>. Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.

## ANNEX H — Illustration 10



*The Siren* (1900), by John William Waterhouse. Available at: <<http://exploringfemmesfatales.blogspot.com/2011/06/sirens.html>>. Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.



## ANNEX I — Illustration 11



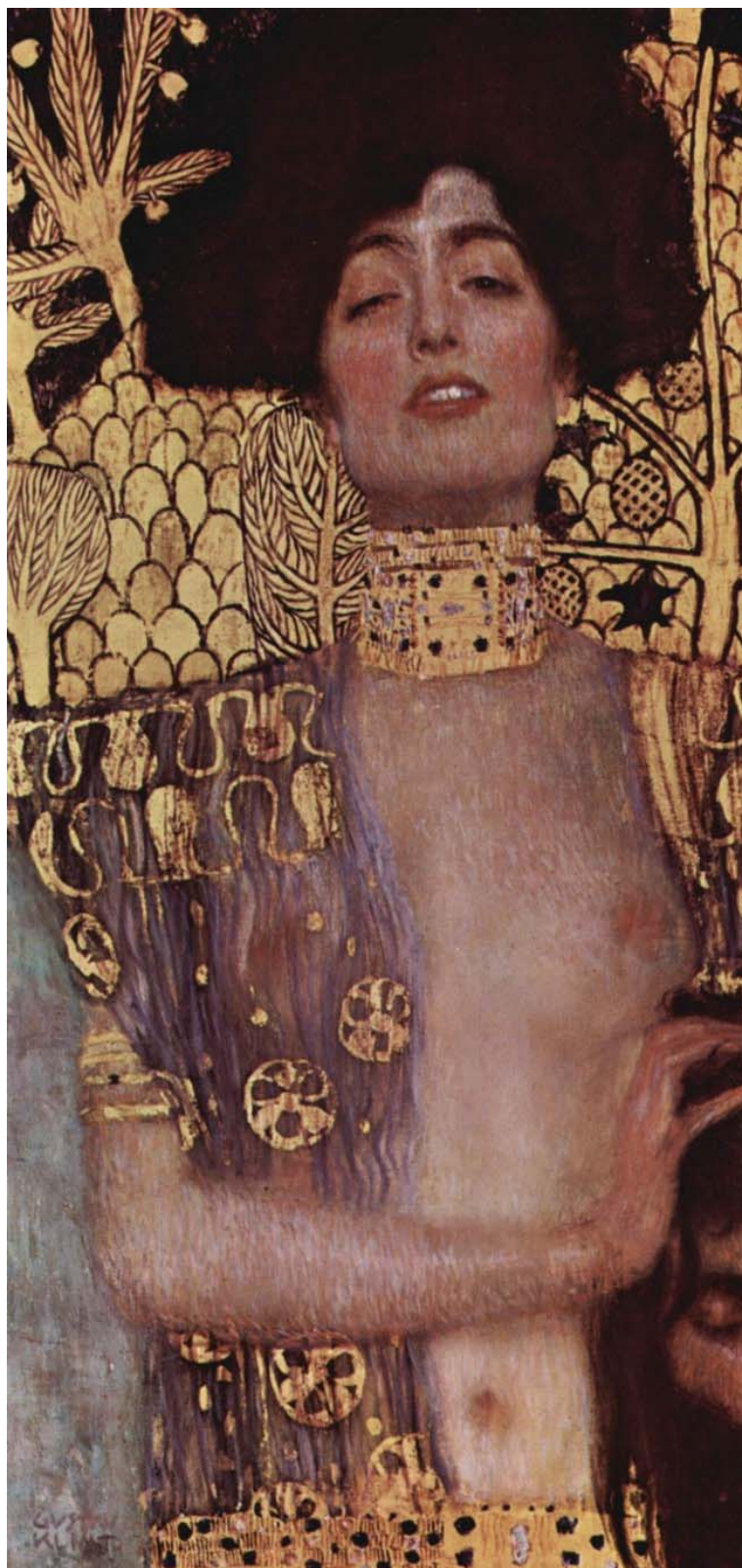
*Une Leçon Clinique à la Salpêtrière* (1887), by André Brouillet. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Une\\_le%C3%A7on\\_clinique\\_%C3%A0\\_la\\_Salp%C3%AAtre\\_02.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Une_le%C3%A7on_clinique_%C3%A0_la_Salp%C3%AAtre_02.jpg). Accessed in the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2011.

## ANNEX J — Illustration 12



*The Awakening Conscience* (1853), by the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt. Available at: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William\\_Holman\\_Hunt\\_The\\_Awakening\\_Conscience\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William_Holman_Hunt_The_Awakening_Conscience_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)>. Accessed on the 23th of August, 2011.

## ANNEX L — Illustration 13



*Judith* (1901), by Gustav Klimt. Available at: <[http://www.nelmezzodelcammin.es/?attachment\\_id=1478](http://www.nelmezzodelcammin.es/?attachment_id=1478)>. Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.

## ANNEX M — Illustration 14



*The Sleeping Ariadne*, a Roman Hadrianic copy of a Hellenistic statue from the Pergamene school of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, is one of the most renowned sculptures of Antiquity. Because of her snake bracelet, this erotically depicted Ariadne was initially thought to be a representation of *Cleopatra* — the reason why she is still called thus. Available at: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sleeping\\_Ariadne\\_2.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sleeping_Ariadne_2.jpg)>. Accessed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 2010.

## ANNEX N — Illustration 15



*Ecstasy of Saint Theresa, Saint Theresa in Ecstasy or Transverberation of Saint Theresa* (1647-1652), by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Available at: < <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Teresabernini.JPG>>. Accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011.