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**BRUISING THE HEART: MEANING IN
GEORGE ELIOT'S "THE LIFTED VEIL"**

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George Eliot has earned her reputation as one of the great Victorian novelists through the creation of such works as *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch*, to name just a few. Curiously, though, her short work titled "The Lifted Veil" has only garnered mild attention from the critics,¹ despite the fact that George Eliot has stated quite clearly that "The Lifted Veil" is her attempt to embody some truth—or truths—about life and that there are things with-
in the story that she would 'willingly say over again.'²

This remark, made almost fifteen years after the initial publication of the work, has prompted others interested in the story to agree that there must, therefore, be something to the only first-person narrative Eliot constructed.³ The problem is that most critics cannot reconcile the George Eliot who created her longer novels, filled with passion and social mores, with the George Eliot who created "The Lifted Veil" a short story—or a novelette—whose main focus is the upcoming death of its narrator, Latimer, a misogynist who has been cursed with the ability to see into the future, and who therefore knows the exact date of his own death. To make matters worse, Eliot included at the end a scene of revivification wherein Latimer's only friend in the world, Meunier, injects his own blood into a dying servant woman bringing her back to life long enough for her to reveal that Bertha, Latimer's wife, has been trying to kill him.

In Elliot L. Rubenstein's essay "A Forgotten Tale by George Eliot" he admits:

At first glance, this tale would appear to have little affinity with George Eliot's novels. Its concern with the supernatural is unique in her work. Its scene is not the familiar society of an English village, but rather the wasteland of a diseased mind. With its penetrating, subjective analysis of an abnormal mental state, it seems more characteristic of the author of *Notes from the Underground* or (perhaps more pertinently) of the author of *Villette* than of the author of *Middlemarch*. (177)

Yet, Rubenstein is quick to point out, more would be gained by looking for similarities than by stating obvious differences, including examining the "scientific care" (177) with which Eliot develops her characters and their pasts. Most of his arti-

cle is devoted to a critical analysis of the methods she uses to develop Latimer, and the meaning that development has for the story. In the end, though, Rubenstein states: “To say that “The Lifted Veil”

has the power to shed light upon the rest of the George Eliot canon is not to say that it continues to live as a readable work of fiction” (182), and with that remark, it seems he successfully relegates the work back into its dusty cubby hole, and in effect, negates his entire argument.

Others, too, have addressed “The Lifted Veil” as significant—but only, it seems, because it is unworthy of George Eliot’s greatness. Carroll Viera, in ““The Lifted Veil’ and

George Eliot’s Early Aesthetic”, says that “in writing “The Lifted Veil” George Eliot may have been attempting to synthesize her evolving critical precepts by transmuting them into fictional form. The failure of the attempt was perhaps inevitable, for George Eliot’s richly complex—sometimes ambiguous and even contradictory—aesthetic eludes easy reduction to a simple formula” (750).

That may well be, but what if—perhaps—it is *our* failure to grasp what Eliot so valued in “The Lifted Veil”? Surely she was not suggesting that she valued Latimer’s attitude toward life; surely she was not suggesting that her readers go out to practice revivification. But just as surely, she *was* saying there was something she felt was worthwhile in the story—something she would cling to because she believed in its inherent value. “Shortly after completing ‘The Lifted Veil’, Eliot defined [her] artistic position with even greater forcefulness in a

letter to her friend Charles Bray: ‘If Art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures’”⁴ (Shuttleworth xiii).

The irony, of course, is that even today “The Lifted Veil” is not seen as art at all, but rather as an aberration,⁵ separate from Eliot’s other works, one to be dissected and used as a reference towards her other works, but one that is not viewed on its own merits. Yes. *On its own merit*. Not as a comparison factor to Eliot’s novels, not as a viewing of methods of creation, but as a work that has enough meaning to allow Eliot to claim that the work had significant value. If we are willing to take Eliot’s claim at face value, and not assume she was trying to defend a work that was less than stellar, the best way to approach this idea is, of course, by a close examination of lines taken directly from the text—lines chosen based on the significance of their meaning to ‘struggling erring human creatures’—spoken/revealed by Latimer, whose hard-earned life has given him nuggets of wisdom to impart to us—the people/readers for whom he has written his dying account.

One of the first lines that should catch readers’ attention occurs early in the novel. It is Latimer who states: “While the heart beats, bruise it—it is your only opportunity” (Eliot 4). On the surface, it appears that Latimer is merely being sarcastic here, but it is his very excess of details on ways to bruise the heart that should give the reader pause. ‘My God,’ the reader thinks. ‘I would never...’.... And that, precisely, is the point. One learns through Latimer what one *should* do while the heart is beating because it is our only opportunity. After death is too late.

Curiously, George Eliot’s short work “The Lifted Veil” has garnered mild attention from the critics, despite the fact Eliot has stated it is her attempt to embody some truth about life.

There are other clues that Latimer, in his great unhappiness with his own life, still has wisdom to give to us. For example, when Latimer writes of his distress at being schooled in the sciences as opposed to the arts, he says:

I read Plutarch, and Shakespere, and Don Quixote by the sly, and supplied myself in that way with wandering thoughts, while my tutor was assuring me that ‘an improved man, as distinguished from an ignorant one, was a man who knew the reason why water ran down-hill.’ I had no desire to be this improved man; I was glad of the running water; I could watch it and listen to it gurgling among the pebbles, and bathing the bright green waterplants by the hour together. I did not want to know *why* it ran; I had perfect confidence that there were good reasons for what was so very beautiful. (Eliot 7)

Perhaps this was Eliot’s way of commenting on her own times, of revealing her own well-documented curiosity about the relationship between science and art—fact and imagination.⁶ But it also stands on its own as a commentary to the reader: there is value to be had in beauty for beauty’s sake alone.

This same sort of idea is presented many times throughout the short work, revealing Latimer’s hope (which must still be burning, despite his negativity about life in general; otherwise, why should he speak of it so often?). When Latimer states: “A poet pours forth his song and believes in the listening ear and answering soul, to which his song will be floated sooner or later” (Eliot 7), he is indicating his belief in the necessity of poetry for humankind to exist. This idea is especially apparent when Latimer demonstrates through his very existence that without this belief the artist, like Latimer, is left stunted and uncertain.⁷

Other instances occur where the reader must take the line out of Latimer’s context and think about the

underlying meaning of the words. Examine the following lines: “...don’t we talk of our hopes and our projects even to dogs and birds, when they love us?” (Eliot 8). Or: “...I had begun to taste something of the horror that belongs to the lot of a human being whose nature is not adjusted to simple human conditions” (Eliot 12). Or: “...such is the madness of the human heart under the influences of its immediate desires” (Eliot 20). Or: “The fear of poison is feeble against the sense of thirst” (Eliot 20).

Or: “It is a dreary thing to live on doing the same things year after year, without knowing why we do them” (Eliot 28). The careful reader, concerned with finding meaning as opposed to comparing “The Lifted Veil” to Eliot’s other works, will find a wealth of significance. They may even learn, as Latimer states, that “There is no short cut, no patent tram-road, to wisdom: after all the centuries of invention, the soul’s path lies through the thorny wilderness which must still be trodden in solitude, with bleeding feet, with sobs for help, as it was trodden by them of old time” (Eliot 21).

One of the most interesting aspects of reading “The Lifted Veil” as a search for meaning is Eliot’s references, time and again, to the necessity of combining both physical states and emotional states if one is to discover the best way to live life. Even Latimer, sad and doomed, was “...in search of something—a small detail which [he] remembered with a special intensity as part of [his] vision” (Eliot 23). And what was this ‘small detail’ that had such ‘intensity’? “There it was—the patch of rainbow light on the pavement transmitted though a lamp in the shape of a star” (Eliot 23). If ever there was a sentence designed to combine both science and emotion, it is displayed in what Latimer remembered.

Latimer knew, too, that the human soul cries out for mystery, not simply for cold, hard facts. He writes:

So absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond to-day, the interest of mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between; we should pant after the uncertainties or our one morning and our one afternoon; we should rush fiercely to the Exchange for our last possibility of speculation, of success, of disappointment; we should have a glut of political prophets foretelling a crisis or a no-crisis within the only twenty-four hours left open to prophecy. Conceive the condition of the human mind if all propositions whatsoever were self-evident except one, which was to become self-evident at the close of a summer's day, but in the meantime might be the subject of question, of hypothesis, of debate. Art and philosophy, literature and science, would fasten like bees on that one proposition which had the honey of probability in it, and be the more eager because their enjoyment would end with sunset. Our impulses, our spiritual activities, no more adjust themselves to the idea of their future nullity, than the beating of our heart, or the irritability of our muscles. (Eliot 29)

Clearly, Eliot knew that the arts and the sciences together were what created humankind's ability and desire to think and muse and reason. In fact, Peter Garratt makes the point that, for Eliot, science "enliven[ed] her thinking about central issues of literary narrative (perception, perspective, representation) and about the fundamental uncertainty which characterizes the world inhabited by the scientist and the artist alike" (para. 19).

There are, of course, other references to this throughout "The Lifted Veil", including the often-quoted line: "We learn words by rote, but not their

meaning; that must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves" (Eliot 34). This combination between words and meaning is an echo of the combination between science and art—and both are revealed in Eliot's ending to "The Lifted Veil" when Mrs. Archer is brought back to life through 'science' only to speak the words of hate that were 'printed in the subtle fibres of her nerves'. Ironically, "this is not a scene that critics have dwelt on with any comfort—if, indeed, they have chosen to confront it all"⁸ (Flint 462). But it is, when viewed as an example of finding meaning between art and science, essential to the overall story; one could not conceive of understanding the story—of finding complete meaning—without that scene. Furthermore, for those who fail to see why Eliot had to include her gruesome ending scene, the meaning should be painfully clear. Like Meunier, for whom "life for that moment ceased to be a scientific problem" (Eliot 42), we should all hope to reach that moment of clear understanding: life is not a scientific problem to be worked out and solved; it is a continual reconnecting with other human souls.

Yet, as Malcolm Bull states: "It is precisely this sense of human solidarity that Latimer self-defeatingly refuses at the end" (260). But that doesn't mean the reader, too, must follow in Latimer's painful footsteps. "Latimer's tragedy is that the knowledge derived from his double consciousness has finally deprived him of the trust in human beings that would allow him to benefit from it. His weakness may have been compensated by insight into the strong, but that insight has also produced a revulsion that leaves him helpless once more" (260). Prevision—Latimer's 'gift' of foreseeing the future—one that countless others have wished for throughout life—turns out to be no gift at all. It truly is the curse that Latimer knows it to be, and his deathbed confessional story is his way (Eliot's way) of embodying a moral point about life.

Bull concludes his article by referencing Eliot's

Bruising the Heart

epigraph for the story, written and placed within the text fourteen years after its initial publication:

Give me no light, great heaven, but such as
turns
To energy of human fellowship;
No powers beyond the growing heritage
That makes completer manhood. (Eliot
epigraph)

A ccording to Eliot, this epigraph contains the moral meaning hidden with “The Lifted Veil”; it seems she had no desire

to explain or defend the text, but rather wanted readers to ‘lift the veil’ for themselves and discover exactly what makes a ‘completer manhood’. Once we discover that which ‘turns to energy of human fellowship’, we will be able to see and accept Latimer as one of us—a man whose life was filled with sorrowing and suffering—but whose life was not lived in vain because at the end—by bruising our hearts when he had the opportunity—he helped us to lift the veil and understand our growing heritage.

END NOTES

¹ According to Beryl Gray, in the “Afterword” to the Virago edition of “The Lifted Veil”: “The view that *The Lifted Veil* is an aberration has prevailed ever since [the story was first published], with Henry James, for example, summarizing it as ‘the jeu d’esprit of a mind that is not often—perhaps not often enough—found at play’; Marghanita Laski condemning it as ‘a sadly poor supernatural story’; and Christopher Ricks dismissing it as ‘the weirdest fiction she ever wrote’. On the whole, though, the critical (and editorial) tendency has been tactfully to overlook its existence” (69-70).

² This statement can be found directly in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, but is also referenced time and again in various critical essays regarding “The Lifted Veil.” See: Rubenstein, Elliot L. “A Forgotten Tale by George Eliot.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 17.2 (1962): 175-183. Gray, B.M. “Pseudoscience and George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil”.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 36.4 (1982): 407-423.

³ In Elliot Rubenstein’s article “A Forgotten Tale by George Eliot” the author points out that “The narrative method is unique in George Eliot’s work: “The Lifted Veil” was to remain her only published attempt at the first-person singular technique, clearly necessitated by the matter of the tale. Notwithstanding the depth of George Eliot’s sympathy for the characters in her novels, her close identification with her spiritually-starved heroines, she never before or after “The Lifted Veil” described them in any way other than from the outside, nor did she ever fail to fit their stories into a comprehensive treatment of the society in which they lived” (177). If this is true, then it stands to reason that Latimer, too, would be representative of a ‘spiritually-starved’ character that Eliot would closely identify with, and furthermore, that Latimer’s story—like all the other Eliot stories—represents a ‘comprehensive treatment of the society in which he (and we) live’.

⁴ This quote was taken from *Letters*, III, III; 5 July 1859 and used in the “Introduction” written by Sally Shuttleworth for the Penguin Classics edition of *THE LIFTED VEIL AND BROTHER JACOB*.

⁵ See Note 1.

⁶ See in particular: Menke, Richard. “Fiction as Vivisection: G.H. Lewes and George Eliot.” *ELH* 67 (2000): 617-653.

⁷ Carroll Viera, discussing “Three Months in Weimar” writes: “Here George Eliot expands an idea introduced in *Poetry and Prose* and to be more fully scrutinized in “The Lifted Veil”: the source for the highest art lies in the sentiment of the artist; if his feeling is untrue, his productions will also be false” (757-758). As Latimer expresses, the true poet longs to find a compatible soul to hear his song—and by contrast, a poet who is not ‘true’ will find no response to his/her work.

⁸ Flint quotes Terry Eagleton in her article as follows: “‘The blood transfusion incidence is a piece of tawdry melodrama, a grotesque and infelicitous flaw, a fiction,’ writes Terry Eagleton, stating further that ‘we can’t believe it; and yet of course we must, for this is a ‘realist’ tale, and within those conventions what Latimer as observer says goes. It must have happened—Bertha must therefore be guilty—and yet, somehow, it didn’t’ (p. 58). Eagleton wriggles out of this problem by suggesting that here we have nothing less than the theoretical problem of realist fiction to ponder upon: how do we know what Latimer writes is ‘truth’?” (462). I would argue that the scene is meant to represent something other than a literal fact.

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