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THE STREAM OF HUMAN THOUGHT AND DEED
IN ‘MR GILFIL’S LOVE-STORY’

By Melissa Raines

In George Eliot: The Emergent Self, Ruby Redinger explains that it was through the demands of authorship that the woman Marian Evans ‘evolved into another self, her writing self’, essentially becoming George Eliot.1 Literary biographies of George Eliot in the last few decades have all, to varying degrees, focused on this transformation of the woman into the author. When considering George Eliot’s first work of fiction, I think it significant that it is during the writing of the second ‘scene’ of Scenes of Clerical Life, ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, that Marian Evans first chose to write and sign a professional letter to her publisher with the name ‘George Eliot’.2 Obviously, it is only natural that with one story finished and another actively in the works, she began to identify with her authorial identity in a more definitive way.

But what is most interesting about the timing of George Eliot’s personal ownership of her pseudonym is the fact that of the three ‘scenes’, ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ is in most critics’ eyes the least typically George Eliot. Thomas A. Noble argues that in writing it, George Eliot was not attempting the realist prose we immediately associate with her, but was actively ‘experimenting in the creation of romantic fiction’ – even going so far as to call this attempt a ‘failure’.3 Whether or not we think the tale romance or realism, failure or success, I believe the issue is a bit more complicated. We must remember that the dramatic flashback about the orphaned Caterina is enclosed by a prosaic introduction and conclusion dedicated to the title character himself.4 Mr Gilfil is a kind gentleman and a well-liked clergyman, but he is also presented as essentially ordinary, perhaps even vaguely uninteresting – at least in the opening chapters of the story. Indeed, George Eliot hints at a possible more tumultuous past within a few pages of apologizing for his rather mundane tendency to sip gin in the evenings.5 And yet George Eliot chooses to make him the title character. Through my examination of why she made this stylistic choice, I hope to show that this atypical George Eliot story is still one in which George Eliot’s presence is unmistakable.

If on the surface, the character of Mr Gilfil does seem undeniably humdrum, then on the surface, the character of Caterina seems equally vital and interesting. The more striking aspects of her personality can be traced in later heroines in George Eliot’s work: for example, the sensitivity to music and devotion to an unworthy man that also manifest themselves in The Mill on the Floss’s Maggie, or the murderous thoughts seen in Adam Bede’s Hetty or Daniel Deronda’s Gwendolen. Caterina’s emotional intensity, coupled with her status as an orphan with a different nationality from the rest of the characters, serves to enhance her sense of loneliness and isolation. This is one obvious aspect of the story that allows George Eliot to introduce her most important recurring theme – that vital need for sympathy in a world where it all too often seems lacking. In Caterina’s view, her tragedy is the failure of a sympathetic response from her thoughtless and self-indulgent lover, Anthony Wybrow. But George Eliot is interested in something much more complicated than that kind of straightforward callousness.

We see this as the narrator describes Caterina walking in a beautiful garden with Mr Gilfil, crying about Anthony’s heartlessness. Amongst nature’s ‘happiness and brilliancy’, the narrator
tells us, ‘misery could find no sympathy’:

As [Caterina] wound among the beds of gold and blue and pink, where the flowers seemed to be looking at her with wondering elf-like eyes, knowing nothing of sorrow, the feeling of isolation in her wretchedness overcame her, and the tears, which had been before trickling slowly down her pale cheeks, now gushed forth accompanied with sobs. And yet there was a loving human being close beside her, whose heart was aching for hers, who was possessed by the feeling that she was miserable, and that he was helpless to soothe her. But she was too much irritated by the idea that his wishes were different from hers, that he rather regretted the folly of her hopes than the probability of their disappointment, to take any comfort in his sympathy. (p. 85)

It is that second sentence which breaks through Caterina’s observations of nature and reminds us of Mr Gilfil’s human presence and human sympathy. What is most interesting here is how George Eliot as narrator makes this careful switch from Caterina to Gilfil, from one mind to another. She essentially breaks away from Caterina’s thought-process – her contemplation of the flowers and resulting outburst of misery – and picks up Mr Gilfil’s mid-flow. This is why that second sentence begins with ‘And yet’ – with conjunctions, with words that generally come in the middle of a sentence. Gilfil’s thought in mid-process is one that is heavily weighted with the concept that theirs is a connection with an inherent incompleteness. He is ‘close beside’ Caterina, but not in the way he wants; his heart aches for her, but she aches for someone else. Thus the narrative shift to Mr Gilfil’s thoughts cannot lead to a responsive positive turn in Caterina’s feelings. So the narrator switches back from Mr Gilfil to Caterina with the third sentence, picking up her stream of thought midway through and beginning with yet another conjunction, this time the more openly stubborn and rebellious ‘But’. In that ‘but’ is Caterina’s pre-emptive denial of the human sympathy that is being offered to her. Ironically, what we see in these careful shifts from one mind to another within the paragraph – in this almost-mingling of their thoughts – is the inherent separateness of the characters. The conjunctions are signs of continuity within individual thought-processes, not between Gilfil and Caterina. Thus in this section of the narrative, there are two possible streams of thought at any given moment. George Eliot hints through the strength of Gilfil’s feelings that there is the chance for those streams to merge, or at least to touch, so that Gilfil’s love-story can become Caterina’s as well. Instead, Caterina deflects her own thought-process from Gilfil’s flood of softly critical compassion.

But we must look more closely at the issue of dual streams – Gilfil’s and Caterina’s – there in their individual separateness, running continuously through time. Through our acceptance of this simultaneity, we begin to understand that multiple streams of thought and feeling exist concurrently – not just at this moment and not just with these two characters, but throughout the narrative and with all the characters, even outside of the bounds of the story itself. Each character’s stream of thought becomes a separate internal storyline, in a sense, where the character in question is the central role – his or her own title character. George Eliot decides how and when different streams emerge through the narrative, but the simultaneous existence of all of the streams, even the ones which are not revealed, becomes as important as the separate streams themselves. For the streams, combined in their distinctness, become a larger human consciousness, with its own potential historical greatness as well as its own inevitable
sympathetic failings. George Eliot explains the reasoning behind the failure of this larger stream in reference to Caterina’s suffering:

While [Caterina’s] poor little heart was being bruised with a weight too heavy for it, Nature was holding on her calm inexorable way, in unmoved and terrible beauty. The stars were rushing in their eternal courses; the tides swelled to the level of the last expectant weed; the sun was making brilliant day to busy nations on the other side of the swift earth. The stream of human thought and deed was hurrying and broadening onward. The astronomer was at his telescope; the great ships were labouring over the waves; the toiling eagerness of commerce, the fierce spirit of revolution, were only ebbing in brief rest; and sleepless statesmen were dreading the possible crisis of the morrow. What were our little Tina and her trouble in this mighty torrent, rushing from one awful unknown to another? Lighter than the smallest centre of quivering life in the water-drop, hidden and uncared for as the pulse of anguish in the breast of the tiniest bird that has fluttered down to its nest with the long-sought food, and has found the nest torn and empty. (p. 113)

Nature is once again detached – ‘beautiful’ but ‘terrible’ in its inhuman beauty. But as George Eliot goes on to describe ‘the stream of human thought and deed’, we are shocked by a similar indifference. As with Nature, here also sympathy for Caterina is disturbingly absent – not just present but rejected, as with Caterina’s dismissal of Gilfil’s compassion in the previous passage. The difference, of course, is that Gilfil’s was an individual stream of sympathy. Here the multiple streams of individual thought and feeling and desire have merged into a species-wide stream, one that pushes for something greater than simple existence, ever ‘hurrying and broadening onward’. Thus we hear of ‘astronomers’, ‘great ships’, ‘commerce’, ‘revolution’, juxtaposed with that simple question: ‘What were our little Tina and her trouble in this mighty torrent, rushing from one awful unknown to another?’. The answer is that pathetic closing image of the ‘pulse of anguish’ in the heart of the bereft mother-bird. It parallels the bruised heart in the opening sentence. In both, Caterina in her grief-stricken state is reduced to an existence that is all painful, primal feeling. Like a pulse itself, the passage begins and ends in the same place – but here the cycle is one of failure. There is nothing of sympathy because Caterina’s stream is next to nothing amidst the larger ‘mighty torrent’.

This failure ends the paragraph, as well as the chapter. But it is interesting that in the original manuscript, George Eliot did not stop here. There was an additional paragraph:

But who can measure pain? Who can fix the value of a single human consciousness? If human thought in its attempt to grasp the universal, learns to think the anguish of one living being trivial, this is only because human love is feeble, and human wisdom narrow.6

These questions are openly combative – seeming to disagree with the conclusion drawn in the paragraph just before. In these demands is a George Eliot we know and recognize – almost. It is a younger, more frustrated version of that Middlemarch narrator, who can say with calm sorrow of Dorothea Brooke’s marital trouble, ‘The element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind’, holding all
her hope in that simple ‘not yet’. And it is also a more emotional version of that moment at the end of Daniel Deronda, when Gwendolen Harleth realises that the story that she has imagined for herself – her own stream of thought and feeling in all its hopeful projection – is not the one that will be. I am referring specifically to that moment when the narrator says, ‘[Gwendolen] was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving’. But this passage from ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ appears only in the manuscript. It was deleted by the time of the first publication in Blackwood’s Magazine. The only surviving page-proofs for the story are dated 1860, three years after the first publication, so they can shed no light on who initiated the deletion – the editor or the author herself. Thus the questions of who is difficult, but I believe an educated guess can be made after a careful examination of the question of why.

In Daniel Deronda, Gwendolen may be forced to endure that ‘terrible moment [...] when the great movements of the world’ take precedence over personal desire, pushing the self into a role of insignificance. But Caterina, for all her suffering, never comes to this. As George Eliot tells us, she likely lives and dies believing that ‘the earth stood still, and that the sun and stars moved around it’ (p. 99). In attacking the lack of human sympathy created by that larger ‘stream of human thought and deed’, George Eliot is defending a character who does not understand that she needs to be defended in such a way. Caterina only knows that she hurts, that she cannot have what she wants and that the world around her seems cold and unfeeling. Thus that impassioned defense in the manuscript could almost be seen as unnecessary.

But I believe that the choice to delete the paragraph is even more complex. There is a sense in those anguished demands that George Eliot is tackling her own philosophical problems – that she is writing what she is not quite ready to say. She may have been a mature woman when ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ was written, but she was still a young fiction-writer, struggling with that new kind of consciousness that comes with character creation and habitation. She was suddenly in a place to imagine those individual streams, and all the while, she had to be aware of the collective stream – the wider humanity that is willing to forget the horrible pain of one for the betterment of many. Because Caterina is never ready to know this, and because George Eliot is not yet ready to accept it, I believe that she herself decided against including the paragraph in the story. She preferred, in the end, to keep the dramatic flow from Caterina’s personal pain, opening the next chapter with her heroine waking after her horrible night. In this way she preserves Caterina’s stream of thought, subtly reminding us that Caterina never sees beyond it. Her own sympathy for her character, rather than being communicated directly in a frustrated narrator’s voice, hovers even more meaningfully in her decision to leave Caterina to suffer alone because Caterina feels alone.

We see this more clearly in an earlier moment in the same chapter, when Caterina slips away from the torture of watching the man she loves as he bestows his romantic attentions on another:

Outside she took a candle, and, hurrying along the passages and up the stairs to her own room, locked the door.

‘O, I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it!’ the poor thing burst out aloud, clasping her little fingers, and pressing them back against her forehead, as if she wanted
to break them.

Then she walked hurriedly up and down the room.

‘And this must go on for days and days, and I must see it.’

She looked about nervously for something to clutch. There was a muslin kerchief lying on the table; she took it up and tore it into shreds as she walked up and down, and then pressed it into hard balls in her hand.

‘And Anthony,’ she thought, ‘he can do this without caring for what I feel. O, he can forget everything: how he used to say he loved me – how he used to take my hand in his as we walked – how he used to stand near me in the evenings for the sake of looking into my eyes.’

‘Oh, it is cruel, it is cruel!’ she burst out again aloud, as all those love-moments in the past returned upon her. Then the tears gushed forth, she threw herself on her knees by the bed, and sobbed bitterly. (p. 112)

Caterina’s stream of thought seems nearly to be falling apart in this passage, desperately in need of something to come in and hold it together. The impassioned vocalizations with no one to respond, the interruptions of the paragraph breaks – all invite some kind of sympathetic voice to interrupt, to help her. But the sympathy here is in George Eliot’s strained absence. She wants to break in and does slightly, describing Caterina at one point as ‘the poor thing’. But ultimately, we are left with gaps and pauses, filled by only silence and space. As with George Eliot’s deletion of that paragraph of argumentative defence, we see her backing away in tacit acknowledgment of the truth that the greater human movements, the larger human consciousness, would care nothing for Caterina’s pain.

She thus leaves space for real human sympathy at the level of story, for finally, after the near-murder of her inconstant lover, Caterina turns to Gilfil. He becomes a kind of priest to her, taking her confession. Their relationship foreshadows not just the Janet-Tryan relationship in the next ‘scene’, but so many of the relationships of ‘broken confessions and answering words of comfort’ throughout George Eliot’s work, culminating in that of Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda. And as Gilfil listens, he shows an almost George Eliot-level of discretion in the need for some silence:

He would not speak long, lest he should tire her, and oppress her with too many thoughts. Long pauses seemed needful for her before she could concentrate her feelings in short words. (p. 159)

What we see here is two individual thought-processes cautiously merging into responsiveness. We do not get to know what each is thinking separately in all its complexity: instead, in the scene between them we are given only the thoughts that need to be voiced. The ‘short words’ come in to fill the ‘long pauses’ in a larger flow of compassion and understanding. In this way, Gilfil’s stream of thought begins to make sense out of Caterina’s again. Caterina has found the someone who can respond to her anguish, and Mr Gilfil has found that the someone he loves is finally ready to inhabit the space he has left for her in his life. It is a thematic parallel to the structure of the tale, where Caterina’s story slots between Gilfil’s present-day introduction and conclusion. And so Gilfil wins an intense gratitude and affection from Caterina that cannot match his love for her, but can at least accept what he offers.
Still one might see the title of this ‘scene of clerical life’ as a romantic non-event. After all, Mr Gilfil’s marriage to Caterina is a brief romantic development, without full and equal emotional engagement from both parties, and it happens only because the romantic development that Caterina wanted was impossible. But the title ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ is not about what does or does not happen: it is about what the title character feels. George Eliot emerges most prominently of all in what she tries to tell us with that choice of title. In calling our readerly focus to the quiet Mr Gilfil, we are made to see that for all his apparent ordinary-ness, he is the extraordinary one. He begins and ends the story because he has left that loving space for Caterina within his own ‘stream of human thought and deed’. Ultimately, the love-story is his because while are told that it is Caterina who has the great ‘talent for loving’, the love that is greatest here is Mr Gilfil’s for her (p. 99). In the consummation of this asymmetrical love-story, we see the one hope that George Eliot tells us we can hold on to – the idea that even if our individual story cannot be part of the bigger happy ending we desire, there is human sympathy available, if we are willing to accept it.

Notes

4 Noble discusses this issue in the introduction to the Oxford edition of the work, p. ix.
6 See the manuscript of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, in the manuscript of Scenes of Clerical Life, collected in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, manuscript number MA 722, p. 90.
9 See ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, p. 160.