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Judith Siford
‘DISMAL LONELINESS’:
George Eliot, Auguste Comte and ‘The Lifted Veil’

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‘The Lifted Veil’ is a curious novella from an author who made the organic form so much her own, focusing as it does upon actions which continually interrupt and fragment the narrative; with its emphasis on the supernatural, on bizarre pseudo-scientific experiments, attempted murder and gothic horror it seems out of place in the canon of a maker of ‘realist’ fictions. Yet bizarre though this tale undoubtedly is, it is not merely the mental aberration from an author under stress that Blackwood supposed it to be.¹

In 1859, the year she first offered it for publication, Eliot had been diffident about the tale, describing it to Blackwood as ‘a slight story of an outré kind – not a *jeu d’esprit*, but a *jeu de melancolie*’.² But fourteen years later, when he wrote asking for permission to republish it her reply shows a confident author defending her story with the determined statement:

I care for the idea which it embodies and which justifies its painfulness. A motto which I wrote on it yesterday perhaps is sufficient indication of that idea:-

Give me no light, great heaven, but such as turns
To energy of human fellowship,
No powers save the growing heritage
That makes completer manhood.

But it will be well to put the story in harness with some other productions of mine, and not send it forth in dismal loneliness.³

Written immediately before *The Mill on the Floss*, ‘The Lifted Veil’ lends itself to many different interpretations,⁴ but the main thrust of the narrative, the ‘idea’ which ‘justifies its painfulness’, lies in its exposure of the catastrophe which accompanies the egoistic rejection of humanity.

George Eliot’s journals and letters affirm a lifelong interest in Auguste Comte, the French Positivist philosopher whose Religion of Humanity was to provide a blueprint for the regeneration of society. In his humanistic philosophy she perceives a pattern of ideas with which she concurs, in particular the need to channel egoistic impulses into altruistic directions to foster the development of sympathy. The necessity of sympathy with our fellow beings was an integral part of the moral philosophy she wished to communicate. The aspects of Comte’s philosophy which appealed to Eliot were those in which a fragmented society could be made whole again by human interaction rather than the intervention of a doubtful divinity. Comte’s belief in an historical continuum also found favour with Eliot,

but her admiration was not unequivocal. Frederick Harrison's request that she should sketch 'the grand features of Comte's world'⁵ in fiction produced the now-famous reply that diagrammatic art was inferior to 'aesthetic teaching' which 'deals with life in its highest complexity,'⁶ indicating her reservations about his system.

Human interdependency is the cornerstone of Comtean teaching - an interdependency having its roots in the family, which plays a central role in the Positivist development of the sympathies. According to Comte, the love of a child for its parents is 'the starting point of our moral education',⁷ with love between siblings encouraging solidarity, while parental love demonstrates a concern for the future. Like Comte, George Eliot recognized the importance of the family unit as the organic basis of society: thus, it is primarily Latimer's denial of family bonds which seals his fate. Eliot uses him to articulate a nihilistic vision which all of her fiction, with its emphasis on the redemptive powers of human sympathy, is designed to resist.

In 'The Lifted Veil' George Eliot's use of a first person narrator allows her to explore the theme of alienation more fully. Nurtured in an 'uncongenial medium' (8) Latimer cannot be held entirely responsible for his stunted emotional growth: a frail, motherless child, deprived of company and educated against his natural bent, the seeds are sown early for his psychic dysfunction. Latimer sees himself as a Romantic idealist - a poet *manqué* who has 'the poet's sensibility without his voice' (8), enjoying from his childhood a special affinity with the natural world. The Romantics he loves linked heightened powers of perception with intensity of feeling, and for George Eliot, as for Comte, the function of art is to foster channels whereby egoism can be transformed into altruism. But Latimer's egoism hinders the development of the moral foundation required by the true artist, hence he is unable to develop his poetic potential. His enforced solitude leads to a self-obsession which produces the barren mental state which blocks creativity. For Auguste Comte, poetry carried the ability to 'modify our moral nature . . . Whatever the utility of other arts, material, physical, or intellectual, they are only subsidiary or preparatory to that which in Poetry is the direct aim, moral improvement'.⁸ An interest in art, states Comte, 'is the commonest symptom of the birth of spiritual life',⁹ but Latimer's 'poet's sensibility' (8) is stifled by the imbalance of his scientific education. 'Poetry,' says Comte, 'has a stronger affinity than Science with the principle Affection in our Altruistic system'¹⁰ and can nurture the sympathetic imagination, which leads to spiritual growth.

The paucity of Latimer's spirituality is an important element in the narrative, for George Eliot, like Comte, knew that man needed religion in order to evolve into full harmony with the world around him. Eliot, like Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* she had translated (1854), was intent on preserving the essence of Christian self-sacrifice through the apotheosis of human feeling, but like Comte, she believed this could only be achieved collectively. Altruism was to be fostered by the invocation of 'one comprehensive Church whose fellowship consists in the desire to purify and ennoble human life, and where the best members of all narrower churches may call themselves brother and sister in spite of differences'.¹¹ The description bears a marked resemblance to Comte's Religion of

Humanity; despite her repudiation of his 'system', for Eliot the appeal of Comte's philosophy lies in his acknowledgement of man's profound inner need to relate the world meaningfully to his own life.

Latimer's denial of any religious faith earns him further censure; like Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, he is condemned to the solitude of disbelief. The language used to describe his spiritual desolation looks back to Hetty's journey through the fields of Stonyshire:

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 be still trodden in solitude, with bleeding feet, with sobs for help, as it was trodden by them of old time (31).

Most importantly, Latimer suffers from 'a fatal solitude of soul in the society of [his] fellow-men' (9); such extreme misanthropy leaves no room for the development of altruism and therefore poses an anarchic threat to the organic unity which is the foundation of a Comtean utopia.¹² Central to the Positivist faith was a sense of solidarity with Humanity as well as continuity with the past and the future. For Comte, 'the only real life is the collective life of the race; . . . individual life has no existence except as an abstraction'.¹³ Comte's views on the need for mutual interdependence were unequivocal:

The man who dares to think himself independent of others, either in feelings, thoughts, or actions, cannot even put the blasphemous conception into words without immediate self-contradiction; since the very language he uses is not his own.¹⁴

In 'The Lifted Veil' George Eliot dramatizes in her strongest terms the destructiveness inherent in unchecked egoism. There is extant a Notebook¹⁵ into which she has copied various passages from Comte's works: it is noteworthy that most of them concern the channelling of egoism into altruism by submission, and the virtues which promote healthy organic interaction. For instance:

For supposing we know that the earth were to be shortly destroyed by collision with a star, yet none the less to live for others, to subordinate the personal to social feeling, would remain to the last the highest good & the highest duty. Those who can turn such thoughts to good account, from the deepest thinker to the most ordinary workman, will always regard these as tending not to decrease but to consolidate man's true happiness.¹⁶

Latimer's moments of joy are transient: he lies Rousseauvian-like in his boat communing with Nature, where 'the sky, and the glowing mountain-tops, and the wide blue water, surrounded me with a cherishing love such as no human face had shed on me since my mother's love had vanished out of my life' (9). Nature is seen to have filled the void left by the

abrupt withdrawal of maternal nurture, but his exclusion of Humanity from Nature feeds his egoism. According to Comte, 'The only point of view from which the facts of nature can be regarded as a whole, is their relation to Humanity'.¹⁷ Latimer's repudiation of human fellowship leads directly to a psychic disunity in which he is constantly plagued by the petty thoughts of others. But his ability to 'hear' other people's minds is questionable; he wonders if his 'importunate insight' (19) is merely a projection of his own ego which sees only 'all the suppressed egoism . . . [the] chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories and indolent make-shift thoughts' (19-20) of humanity. Yet all his better nature is not dead, for in later years he broods with 'bitter regret' that his egoism was not 'subdued into pity' (32).

Latimer suffers from 'an insight at war with passion' (32) but he chooses to follow his egotistical desire for his brother's fiancée. It is this element of choice which lies at the moral heart of the story: Latimer chooses to spurn humanity and 'follow the light of lost souls'.¹⁸ As Myers rightly argues, egoism and fantasy can only lead to a separation of the self from the world and other people in an illusory and selfish autonomy.¹⁹ Latimer's diseased psyche illustrates the necessity for the key Comtean characteristic of submission: 'Complete submission', writes Comte, is essential for a morally whole life; without it 'feelings would be ill-regulated . . . thoughts incoherent [and] actions a mere source of disorder'²⁰ - a pertinent description of Latimer's troubled existence. His failure to trust even his closest friend, Charles Meunier, shows a mind closed to the redemptive powers of human fellowship.

Latimer perversely mistakes his first vision for poetic inspiration: 'was it the poet's nature in me . . . now manifesting itself suddenly as a spontaneous creation?' (13) He cannot recognize that the barren landscape of his death-in-life vision of the city of Prague is an emanation of himself, the nihilistic vision of a neurotic. To him it is a 'new and wondrous scene' (11) - a manifestation of spontaneous creativity. He chooses to ignore the negativity implicit within the vision - the parched, petrified city with its 'blackened statues' and humanity reduced to visiting vermin. Latimer spends his last hours indulging in an extended confession hoping for the sympathy he has denied others, for, he says, 'we all have a chance of meeting with some pity, some tenderness, some charity, when we are dead' (2). But where Hetty Sorrel's confession is wrung from her and excites the reader's compassion, Latimer's alienates us by his constant whining rejection of humanity. His nemesis is inscribed in the self-absorption which epitomizes the senseless destructiveness of egoism. The transformative power of pity flickers briefly in him at his brother's death; he is for the first time stirred by suffering which is not his own and feels 'a movement of deep pity' (42) towards his father. This unexpected sympathy results in 'the happiest time [he] had known since childhood' (43), but after his father's death he makes no further attempts to establish bonds of sympathy with other human beings.

His obsession with Bertha, sharp, sarcastic and 'fatal-eyed' is a reflection of the selfishness which pushes him to desire that which is not rightly his. Even the discovery of the shallowness of this 'Water-Nixie' does not divert him from his path of self-destruction.

Latimer creates a web of fantasy in which he manages to delude himself that she had always loved him more than his brother. Moreover, with typical selfishness, he blames her for this fatal fascination: 'Out of the subtlest web of scarcely perceptible signs, she set me weaving the fancy that she had always unconsciously loved me better than Alfred' (45). But Latimer conceals from himself the real reason for his obsession with Bertha - 'she made the only exception, among all the human beings about' him, to his 'unhappy gift of insight' (21), and as long as this mystery remains she continues to tantalise him. Bertha is for Latimer 'an oasis . . . in the dreary desert of knowledge', holding 'the blessed possibility of mystery' (47).

'The Lifted Veil' writes large one of the major differences between Auguste Comte and George Eliot - the necessity of mystery to human nature. George Eliot believed that man should retain a sense of wonder at the vastness and complexity of reality; in December 1859, after reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* she wrote, 'all explanations of how things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes'.²¹ Even Latimer is aware of 'how absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of life' (43). It is no accident that the veil is first drawn aside when Latimer is at his most vulnerable. Watching by his dying father's bedside, his egoism has momentarily vanished, replaced by an awareness of 'a common nature and a common destiny' (48). Latimer, albeit briefly, has joined the human race, only to be returned in Bertha's 'cutting grey eyes' to 'a miserable ghost-seer, . . . pining after the moonbeams' (48). Ironically, it is his one friend, the 'scientific' Meunier, who precipitates the catastrophe of the final *dénouement*. Only after Mrs Archer has released her post mortem malice does Latimer recognize how 'absolute is our soul's need for something hidden' (43), for as he lifts the veil, his glimpse into the horror of the heart of darkness completes his alienation from humanity.

There is nothing left for Latimer but to join the sad procession of George Eliot's lonely wanderers; like Hetty Sorrel, he is condemned to wander 'in foreign countries' (66) until too weak to travel. Like Frankenstein's monster, he is occasionally drawn to seek human fellowship, but the recurrence of his 'old insight' drives a permanent wedge between him and the human race. The Comtean lesson, and George Eliot's too, that we are 'all are involved in the same miseries, and therefore stand alike in need of mutual help'²² is one Latimer learns too late, leaving him to end his days in 'dismal loneliness'.

Notes

1. Despite the fact that he recognized the merits of the story, his letter expresses concern that 'you must have been worrying and disturbing yourself about something when you wrote it'; *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), III, 67.
2. Ibid, III, 41.

3. Ibid, V, 380.
4. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), 445-475. There is also a very useful and full discussion of the tale in U.C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: the Limits of Realism* (Berkeley, 1968), 128-61, and a useful Afterword by Beryl Gray to the Virago Modern Classics edition (London, 1985) of 'The Lifted Veil'. Page references are to this edition.
5. *Letters*, IV, 289.
6. Ibid, 300-301.
7. Auguste Comte: *System of Positive Polity* (hereafter referred to as *Polity*), trans. J.H. Bridges et al, 4 vols, (London, 1895), 1, 75-76.
8. Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism* (hereafter referred to as *Gen. View*), trans. J.H. Bridges (London, 1908 edition), 318. Interestingly, all of the artists beloved by Latimer are included in Comte's Calendar of the Saints.
9. Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (hereafter referred to as *Phil.*), 2 vols, freely condensed and translated by Harriet Martineau (London, 1853), II, 217.
10. *Polity*, II, 67.
11. *Letters*, VI, 89.
12. I am not suggesting that George Eliot was ever a Positivist *per se*. Comte believed that once humanity had attained the Positive state, there would be no need for further development. Eliot, however, saw the necessity for the continuous moral evolution of humankind and did not believe in the possibility of attaining a utopia.
13. *Gen. View*, 404.
14. *Polity*, 1, 177.
15. This unpublished Notebook, which is in Nuneaton Library, is undated. However, from Journal entries we know that George Eliot read Comte's *System of Positive Polity* when the English translation appeared in 1875, and judging from the fact that the copied extracts are in English, it seems a logical conclusion that the Notebook dates from this year. I am grateful to Nuneaton Library for permission to quote from the Notebook.

16. Copied from George Eliot's Nuneaton Notebook, this quotation is taken from *Polity*, 1, 410. This late Notebook demonstrates not only the continuum of interest in Comte, but the consistency of subject matter which interested Eliot. The Positivistic motto of *The Lifted Veil* was included in the 1877 Cabinet Edition of George Eliot's Works.
17. Ibid.
18. Beryl Gray, Afterword to *The Lifted Veil*, ed. cit., p. 73.
19. William Myers, *The Teaching of George Eliot* (Leicester, 1984), p. 24.
20. *Polity*, IV, 34-35.
21. *Letters*, III, 227.
22. *Polity*, 1, 339.