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Rosalind De Saily

Fact and Feeling: Baconian Science and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Jonathan Smith (University of Wisconsin Press, 1994)

One of the latest developments in the history of ideas is the history and philosophy of science, and its increasing relevance to readers of Victorian literature is evinced by this work. There is now a school of thought within George Eliot scholarship devoted to the scientific elements in her work, established by U. C. Knoepfelmacher and consolidated by Gillian Beer and Sally Shuttleworth. The use of the philosophy of science as a tool to examine literary texts entails the meeting of two not antithetical disciplines, and offers a new viewpoint on Eliot that is peculiarly appropriate to a writer who was so well versed in the scientific revolutions of her era.

Smith examines science as part of cultural discourse rather than as in an antagonistic relation with literature. It is evident that the Leweses were not party to such a dualism, Eliot and Lewes being equally concerned with finding a legitimate basis for knowledge, which involved them in the Victorian debate over scientific method. Smith sees this debate in terms of a revision of Bacon's careful inductive method to fit the needs of an era of expanding knowledge. Now we can recognize that the characterization of nineteenth-century 'scientific method' as one of objectivity is incomplete.

Lewes and Eliot sought to legitimize the workings of the imagination in the formation of knowledge. Lewes wrote about hypothesis and the scientific imagination: 'the experiments by which the problem may be solved have to be imagined; and to imagine a good experiment is as difficult as to invent a good fable'. This might be compared with Eliot's description of the scientific imagination in *Middlemarch* Chapter 16 as 'the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy'. As literature sought to reach the authority of science, scientists moved closer to claiming the use of the speculative imagination. According to Smith, the Victorians regarded science as characterized by its distance from sense impressions. However, the increasing awareness of the subjectivity, and consequently the partiality of the observer transformed forever the paradigms of scientific methodology. Whewell's criticism of Baconian empiricism that observations are necessarily inaccurate is illustrated in Eliot's concrete metaphor of the pier-glass.

In his chapter on Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* Smith takes Lewes's explicit statements on science for evidence of Eliot's position, especially her opinion of Lyell in the 1850s. While their philosophical positions tended to cover much common ground, Smith acknowledges their differences when evidence is available. Lewes's *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (1853) asserts the evidence for progressivism in biology in contrast to Eliot's comment that 'Natural Selection is not always good'. And in *The Mill on the Floss* Bob Jakin puts reason and his broad thumb – 'that difference between the man and the monkey' – to use for immoral ends, which suggests that man may have evolved from the monkey.

Smith focuses on the flood at the novel's conclusion as a trope for the realistic narrative as well as a natural phenomenon subject to scientific interpretation. For the *Mill's* confident narrator, the flood can take part in complex meanings, operating as a metaphor that yields higher meaning within a realist narrative. Smith disagrees with Sally Shuttleworth who regards the flood as undercutting an otherwise uniformitarian narrative. He sees Eliot as negotiating between Lyell and Darwin to affirm uniformitarianism. At the time Eliot was writing Lyell's strict uniformitarianism stood in opposition to all versions of the hypothesis of development, including Darwin's. Maggie's struggle to find her way between local demands and global desires parallels Eliot's difficulty in giving tragic force and meaning to the 'unwept, hidden' tragedy. Eliot's uniformitarian narrative casts the flood as uniformitarian – an example of actualism – because it is recurrent and therefore normal. However, as a resolution it seems to devalue the very lives the narrator has been at pains to unearth and expose to sympathetic view. Hence the uniformitarian's desire to have it both ways: to claim an event like the flood as the source of unexpected death and terror, while also making it represent a conservative principle essential to stability. Smith concludes that reader dissatisfaction is with these tensions within the uniformitarian model rather than with authorial intrusion.

The novel's conclusion surveys the ravaged 'face of the earth' but the emphasis is on 'the eyes that have dwelt on the past' that see evidence of the human tragedy. Perhaps this multi-layered 'reading' of the landscape encapsulates the ideal position of the observer mid-century, uniting fact and feeling. Art's expression of fact as feeling is based on science's knowing and the two modes of knowledge can be seen as interrelated. What may have appealed to Eliot's sense of irony is Bacon's Casaubon-like failure to complete his system; ultimately any scientific method, as with any knowledge, is provisional.