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## University of Adelaide, Seventeenth Australasian Victorian Studies Conference Report

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**UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE,  
SEVENTEENTH AUSTRALASIAN VICTORIAN STUDIES  
CONFERENCE REPORT  
by Rosalind De Sailly**

The seventeenth conference of the Australasian Victorian Studies Association was held at the University of Adelaide in February 1996. The conference theme 'The Victorians and Science' inspired several papers on George Eliot's relation to matters scientific.

Barbara Garlick (Senior Tutor, University of Queensland) examined passages from *Daniel Deronda* in her paper 'George Eliot's Optics and the "Solidity of Objects"'. Dr Garlick premised her account of Eliot's optics on Lewes's theory of vision as a psychological act which interiorizes the external world according to intuitions and ideas. Vision was used to demonstrate how ways of seeing structure the narrative as they do the self, and how, according to Eliot, the role of the novelist is to 'make ideas incarnate'. The world of *Daniel Deronda* seems predicated on right seeing, and it is dominated by visual metaphors. Chapter 54 alone contains more repetitions of the word 'image' than anywhere else in the novel. What Dr Garlick called Eliot's 'highly developed pattern of techniques of seeing' is especially vivid in the metaphors used in Chapter 23, where Gwendolen is 'undeceived' in her ambitions to take to the stage by Klesmer, who brings together Gwendolen's surroundings which she thinks she is master of, and her inward chaos. At the chapter's end the physiological condition of Gwendolen's eyes allows her to see mnemonic aspects of her being as if they were objects, part of a 'departing fair'.

In 'The Message of a Magic Touch: *Middlemarch* and the Ether' Thomas Hoy (PhD Candidate at La Trobe University) explored the epistemology of *Middlemarch*. The characters all fail in their attempts to find unitary theories of knowledge, yet the narrator wants to attain a suffusive sense of interconnection. Hoy reads Eliot's 'troublous, fitfully embroiled medium' in terms of nineteenth-century ether theory, which satisfied the Victorians' desire for monisms. It was an imaginative construct which allowed continuity between material and non-material order. It is an arduous invention like Lydgate's. Like the scientific theory of ether, Eliot's web is an imaginative fiction, a working theory uniting the psychological and physical structure of the world.

My own paper 'Adam Bede and Lewes's *Physiology of Common Life*: Is Hetty the Missing Link?' considered the novel as Eliot's testing ground for the 'development hypothesis' months before the publication of Darwin's *Origin*. Eliot applied an evolutionary scale to moral intelligence. Lewes's moral psychology is anchored in his *Physiology* where he establishes a physiological theory of feeling in humans as sharing a common basis with the behaviour of more highly developed animals. By this collapsing of the distinction between some animal and human behaviours, Eliot can describe Hetty Sorel in the ambivalent terms of a primitive consciousness. Hetty's egoism, her irrationality, her lack of cognizance of symbolic ideas and language, – in short, her primitive, animal nature, –

set her at odds with Eliot's progressive model of social and moral growth. Hetty has no place within a community based on Eliot's ethic of feeling. Because of her lack of a moral sense, and the impossibility that she can form one, she is expelled from the novel's community – and so effectively from the novel itself – and banished to a fate only slightly better than death, New South Wales. This unsatisfactory removal of the primitive from the novel only foregrounds the problems which beset Eliot's investment in a society based on altruism.

Professor Sally Shuttleworth (University of Sheffield) delivered a special lecture 'Memory in the Victorian Novel and Psychology'. Henry Holland's early defence against double consciousness emphasized the recollective faculty of the will to resist external and internal pressures that would fragment mind and identity. The will's vigilance over undirected urges underpinned the Victorians' anxious approval of 'duty'. Memory functioned to unite the triumvirate of powers: will, identity and a rational mind.

George Eliot focused on change as the essence of character, therefore she needed to emphasize the unity of consciousness. What Shuttleworth calls Eliot's 'secular philosophy of social organicism' in which sympathy operates as a social 'glue' is inverted in Eliot's story 'The Lifted Veil' (which Professor Shuttleworth is editing for republication). Latimer's power of presentiment functions as memory, which ruins his future and blights his hopes. Memory here is a curse; and leads him to greater horror rather than greater integration with his fellows. Latimer's 'double consciousness' causes him to live only in the present. He marries the beautiful Bertha and remains under her spell even after discovering her plot to kill him. Such wilful self-destruction is the ultimate unpinning of evolutionary theory.

Latimer's fascination for Bertha is owing to the fact that she is the only person whose consciousness he can't penetrate. However, her cruelty makes her scarcely human and places her mind beyond Latimer's divination; for as Eliot observed in her characterizations of Dinah and Hetty, 'It is our habit to say that [...] the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower' but the primitive consciousness, such as Hetty's and Bertha's, is beneath rational, and even scientific knowledge.