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KNOWING TOO MUCH: THE BURDEN OF OMNISCIENCE IN THE LIFTED VEIL
By Melissa Raines

In the spring of 1859, not long after the success of her first novel, *Adam Bede*, George Eliot submitted a much shorter work to her publisher, John Blackwood, for his consideration. Blackwood’s eventual letter in response to the piece arrived more than a fortnight later and had to be prompted by Eliot’s partner, George Henry Lewes. Perhaps Blackwood’s belated reply was somewhat understandable: he must initially have been thrilled by the prospect of another submission from the rising new author, but the strangeness of this undeniably macabre new tale unsettled him. A story of supernatural power and science that pushed the boundaries of the acceptable was quite probably the last thing he expected from a recently acclaimed realist writer. While he praised the story for being ‘full of thought and most beautifully written’, he also added hesitantly, already being well acquainted with Eliot’s sensitivity to criticism, ‘I wish the theme had been a happier one, and I think you must have been worrying yourself and disturbing yourself about something when you wrote.’1 In spite of Blackwood’s concerns, *The Lifted Veil* was published in his magazine in July of 1859 — without George Eliot’s name, but with (at George Eliot’s insistence) the final transfusion scene. This was the scene which, out of all of the passages in the story, Blackwood objected to the most.

The objection, not just to the grisly transfusion scene but to the novella as a whole, has largely persisted. Until recent decades, it received scant critical attention, and as Beryl Gray expresses it, *The Lifted Veil* ‘seems to arouse embarrassment rather than interest, as if there were a general wish either that it had not been written at all or that it had been written by someone more appropriate’.2 George Eliot herself seemed rather troubled by the story’s place among her longer works, and when, nearly two decades after *The Lifted Veil*’s initial publication, Blackwood suggested that it be released again, the writer hesitated, and eventually said no … at least for the moment. She attempted to explain her mixed feelings to her publisher:

> I think it will not be judicious to reprint it at present. I care for the idea which it embodies and which justifies its painfulness […] But it will be well to put the story in harness with some other productions of mine, and not send it forth in its dismal loneliness. There are many things in it which I would willingly say over again, and I shall never put them in any other form. But we must wait a little.3

In light of wider reaction to the tale, George Eliot’s individual reaction comes as something of a relief — particularly to the seasoned George Eliot reader. For it is not just the transfusion scene, which many critics have cited as yet more evidence of Eliot’s intense interest in and engagement with nineteenth-century science, that is an issue. It is not just the menacing blankness of the central female character, Bertha, who has aspects of *Adam Bede*’s Hetty, *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond, and *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen. Nor is it just the haunting prescience and omniscience of the narrator. Indeed, in many ways, these are all comfortingly familiar details that tie beautifully with the rest of Eliot’s oeuvre. What unnerves us about the story is that in spite of these familiar things, it is still distinctly not what we expect from George Eliot: it is a strange distortion of those usual central themes in her work which becomes something much darker.
We sense this from the opening of the novella, in which the narrator, Latimer, explains that he knows exactly when and how he will die. He describes how the ‘horrible contraction will begin at [his] chest’, coupled with an overwhelming ‘sense of suffocation’. He instinctively moves to ring the bell to call for help, even as he informs us:

No one will answer my bell. I know why. My two servants are lovers, and will have quarrelled. My housekeeper will have rushed out of the house in a fury, two hours before, hoping that Perry will believe she has gone to drown herself. Perry is alarmed at last, and is gone out after her. The little scullery-maid is asleep on a bench: she never answers the bell, it does not wake her. The sense of suffocation increases: my lamp goes out with a horrible stench: I make a great effort, and snatch at the bell again. I long for life, and there is no help. I thirsted for the unknown: the thirst is gone. Oh God, let me stay with the known, and be weary of it: I am content.

What is perhaps most striking about this passage is its starkness: few other extended sections in George Eliot’s fiction are constructed so plainly. Simple sentence follows simple sentence with a pulsing certainty: we need only think of how ‘No one will answer my bell. I know why’. The syntax lies ominously beneath the darker certainty at the level of story – beneath the fact that Latimer’s heart is about to stop, or has already stopped. Even as the sentences gain dependent clauses, compound predicates, they retain a straightforward reportage style: indeed, Latimer’s revelation that his housekeeper has run away, hoping that her lover will believe she has drowned herself, almost hides the fact that Latimer should not know this about her within its basic syntax and lexis. The reader only begins to question this seemingly secret knowledge after the fact. Outward details are interspersed with inner thought-processes, so that both, in a very un-Eliot-like way, seem to gain equal weight, and build to the final section where Latimer reveals his own thoughts about his final predicament – his desperate desire for life, his promise to be ‘content’ with weariness. Even the progressive colons used in so many of the latter sentences are somewhat ominous, if we consider the causative implications of this kind of annotation. ‘I thirsted for the unknown’ simply becomes ‘the thirst is gone’, as if explanation for the change is unnecessary because it has come too late. Conflicted feelings are merely pushed forward by time, into what Latimer eventually describes as ‘darkness’ and what we identify as death.

The individual sentences of this passage seem weighed down with the exhaustion of existence itself: they almost belie Latimer’s claim that he wants to live. It is a purposely tired prose – so different from George Eliot’s generally more intricate and active grammar. And of course, this is only the beginning of the difference between what we as readers are processing and what we were expecting from a George Eliot text. For how does Latimer know what his servants are doing and thinking, and perhaps even more significantly, how does he know how he is going to die? Latimer himself explains it to us later in The Lifted Veil: after a serious illness, he develops not only an awareness of moments from his own future and an ability to see places he has not yet been, but also the experience of ‘the obtrusion on [his] mind of the mental process going forward in first one person, and then another’. He chooses to describe his premonitory visions and telepathic ability as his ‘double consciousness’, and indeed it is as if the kind of George Eliot omniscience from her other novels has spilled into this, one of her very few first-person narrators. Many critics, including Gillian Beer and Charles Swann, have argued that Latimer is a version of George Eliot, as well as a version of the George Eliot
Thus the supernatural – or perhaps more accurately, ‘preternatural’, as Latimer himself describes it – subject matter of the novella becomes intertwined with the mechanics by which the story is told.\(^9\)

Recent critics have addressed the subject matter and the intrinsically linked omniscient first-person narrative of *The Lifted Veil* in a variety of ways. Beryl Gray sees Eliot’s choice to give Latimer this strange power as evidence of her engagement not just with Victorian science, but with Victorian pseudoscience, including mesmerism and the very fringes of scientific thought.\(^10\) Helen Small builds on this idea, saying that the strength of the text lies in the fact that it is ‘a work of mid-Victorian realism’ which acknowledges that ‘scientific inquiry was making available in the 1850s a radical extension of what the real might be seen to include’.\(^11\) This blurring of the line between the real and the supernatural does seem to have been George Eliot’s aim, as well as something she convincingly achieved.\(^12\) If we also consider *The Lifted Veil* as part of the tradition of supernatural tales being written by other popular novelists of the period, such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, we are forced to admit that *The Lifted Veil* is just the kind of supernatural tale that George Eliot would write. For only George Eliot would carefully research the details of both mesmerism and transfusion in her commitment to reality within the surreal. Only George Eliot would see the full horror of Latimer’s predicament, which is, as Gillian Beer expresses it, ‘the nightmare image of the burden of seeing into other consciousnesses and foreseeing the future as a novelist must do’ (emphasis mine).\(^13\) And only George Eliot would take her own moral aesthetic so seriously that she would risk questioning it in so blatant a manner by bringing the reality of this ‘nightmare’ under the scrutiny of her readers. For the real horror of Latimer’s situation is what he becomes as a result of it – a man who lacks the ability to feel a sustained sympathy for any other human being.

Latimer’s painful life experience is, to a point, not unlike that of other George Eliot characters: it is even presented as necessary to moral and emotional development. Late in *Adam Bede*, the George Eliot narrator explains the transformative power of sorrow: ‘Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy – the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love.’\(^14\) The word ‘sympathy’ is at the heart of any work by George Eliot. It combines pity and compassion with something closer to our own modern conception of the word empathy or, as Brigid Lowe expresses it, it provides us with ‘an outside perspective on our own assumptions’, allowing for ‘real, personal human engagement – intellectual give and take.’\(^15\) Sympathy was, in George Eliot’s view, the vital purpose of art – something that she attempted to inspire through psychologically realistic portrayals of her characters. Latimer has no George Eliot narrator to guide him as he is George Eliot’s narrator in this story: the implication, however, is that his telepathic awareness of others’ thoughts and his own future will be enough – that this awareness will, in and of itself, bring greater understanding. Yet Latimer admits to us shortly after describing his own imminent death, ‘I have never been encouraged to trust much in the sympathy of my fellow-men.’\(^16\) Something transformative has failed to happen in Latimer, and the remainder of the story is a testimony to that simple fact.

Latimer’s visions into the future and into others’ consciousnesses do nothing to advance his own state of mind: indeed, after his first fleeting hope that his illness has enhanced his poetic power, he is forced to admit that it has heightened only his sensitivity, making him ‘framed for passive suffering’ but ‘too feeble for the sublime resistance of poetic production’.\(^17\) As a result, he consistently refers to his condition not as a potentially powerful source of good,
but as a sort of evolution of the illness that first brought it – calling it ‘my diseased consciousness’ or ‘my diseased participation in other people’s consciousnesses’, speculating on whether or not it is ‘a sort of intermittent delirium, concentrating [his] energy of brain into moments of unhealthy activity’. Near the end, he even hopes that his friend, Dr Charles Meunier, will possibly be able to cure him. Latimer sees himself as cursed, not gifted, and this perception leaves him seeking a kind of wearied, disengaged vengeance on life itself. Early on in the story he tells us that ‘the living only […] cannot be forgiven’, and that ‘While the heart beats’ we should ‘bruise it’ for ‘it is [our] only opportunity’:

while the eye can still turn towards you with moist timid entreaty, freeze it with an icy unanswering gaze; while the ear, that delicate messenger to the inmost sanctuary of the soul, can still take in the tones of kindness, put it off with hard civility, or sneering compliment, or envious affectation of indifference; while the creative brain can still throb with the sense of injustice, with the yearning for brotherly recognition – make haste – oppress it with your ill-considered judgments, your trivial comparisons, your careless misrepresentations. The heart will by-and-by be still […]. Then your charitable speeches may find vent; then you may remember and pity the toil and the struggle and the failure, then you may give due honour to the work achieved; then you find extenuation for errors, and may consent to bury them.19

It is no real surprise that Latimer instructs the reader to inflict pain at every possibility: it is a bitter attempt at empowerment – at turning a solely receptive experience into an inflictive one. It is the exact kind of brutality that Latimer himself feels he has experienced throughout his life.

The difficulty is that we can only tell ourselves ‘it is no real surprise’ that Latimer feels this way if we are not talking about George Eliot. Latimer’s angry list of instructions on how to deal with our fellow man openly attacks everything that George Eliot holds sacred as the heart and brain, the eyes and ears are all painfully, often physically assaulted. The syntax mimics this, belabouring the point with its heavy, list-like repetition, so that we as readers almost feel as if the words are being hammered into our own brains. The question that naturally arises is why does George Eliot give Latimer this heightened awareness, only to reveal that he is nearly incapable of feeling human sympathy (with the exception of one brief period in his adult life, when he does make a connection with his father)? In short, why allow sympathy to fail? This is where we find the source of the anxiety that Blackwood discerned running through the story: remember that he believed that something was ‘worrying’ and ‘disturbing’ George Eliot while she wrote. Eliot was strongly committed to the idea that knowledge of the workings of other minds made us better, more sympathetic people. But The Lifted Veil seems to argue that this conversion, through telepathy or literature or any other means, is not so straightforward, and it is this seeming admission of failure on the part of George Eliot that intrigues critics. Indeed, Carroll Viera argues that the story is one in which ‘George Eliot undoubtedly, consciously or subconsciously, was attempting to resolve ambivalent feelings about her own role as an artist’ and believes that by doing so, George Eliot ‘exposes the ambiguity of her aesthetic.’ Furthermore, Thomas Albrecht states that The Lifted Veil ‘tests the premises of Eliot’s ethics of sympathy through the conceit of Latimer’s telepath[y]’ – that the story predicts ‘the potential failure of Eliot’s ethical theory of art’ and ultimately ‘indicts [sympathy] as ethically deficient’.20

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The problem with such conclusions is that in spite of their logic in their specific consideration of the novella, they dismiss the central purpose of nearly every work George Eliot produced before and after *The Lifted Veil*. That Eliot experienced anxiety regarding her aesthetic is clear, but anxiety is not ambivalence, and I would argue that the last thing that George Eliot would ever argue is that an individual failure of sympathy is a sign that sympathy itself has failed. After completing her first full novel and receiving popular and critical acclaim, questioning the ethics of her aesthetic was perhaps a natural step for George Eliot – at least for such a writer as she hoped to be. She had achieved something of importance in *Adam Bede*, but the question was whether or not she could consistently create realist fiction that truly inspired sympathy – that made people think differently about the world and people around them. Telepathy provided the perfect pseudoscientific mechanism for transferring thoughts into other minds – a direct movement that she hoped to achieve through her prose – and George Eliot seized on it. What she may not have appreciated fully before she began to try to experience the world through Latimer’s mind is what she was asking of him, and in spite of her own experience of thinking through other’s minds and futures in the worlds of her fiction, it must have shocked her when the truth opened up before her in all its potential darkness. Perhaps the best example of why this is so comes in Latimer’s description of how the experience of his double-consciousness is intensified when it gives him access to the minds of those he loves:

> [T]his superadded consciousness, wearying and annoying enough when it urged on me the trivial experience of indifferent people, became an intense pain and grief when it seemed to be opening to me the souls of those who were in a close relation to me – when the rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds, which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as if thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap.22

Here is a consciousness in torment because it is George Eliot omniscience in the first-person. But what I want to focus on more specifically is the idea that Latimer is not just speaking in the first-person, but that he is a person. For a moment, we must forget that he does resemble a version of George Eliot narrator, a version of a George Eliot reader, and attempt to imagine what it must feel like to be forced to know everything not as a reader, not as a writer, but as a living human being. We must look at those we love and imagine what it would feel like to know the worst of them. But then we must also consider the idea that the knowledge would not be reciprocal: it would not be mutual communication that opens new pathways of understanding and growth, but a one-sided awareness that places the burden solely on the person who knows. The image of the microscope, one that appears again in *Middlemarch* in a more positive way when the character of Lydgate wants ‘to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy’,23 is key here in revealing not only the depth, but also the exhausting breadth of Latimer’s awareness. Entire previously unimagined worlds force themselves upon him, pushing his own sense of self aside both aurally (we must imagine that he has trouble hearing himself think) and emotionally, as he is forced to see how he is viewed by others. The final description of the ‘fermenting heap’ becomes the overwhelming one for Latimer and understandably so. Forced into this double-consciousness, he cannot see the good
of the surface for the assaulting pettiness within. Thomas Albrecht argues that George Eliot abandons Latimer as an unsympathetic and undeserving character. In the sense that she does not support him by becoming the narrator herself, perhaps she does abandon him. But when Latimer pleads for understanding by asking, ‘Are you unable to give me your sympathy – you who read this? Are you unable to imagine this double consciousness at work within me [...]?, it is impossible to imagine that her own sympathetic soul does not respond. As George Eliot, she knows what he is experiencing, just as she knows that she can retreat from her own double-consciousness into the self that is Marian Lewes, the name she was using by this point, and try to block out those other thoughts, those other futures. She knows that in a way, Latimer actually has it much harder than she does.

And so while The Lifted Veil tests the boundaries of human sympathy, it is also through The Lifted Veil that George Eliot comes to understand how much she is needed as a mediator in her novels. In ‘The Natural History of German Life,’ an essay that preceded her fiction-writing career, Eliot argued that ‘Art is the closest thing to Life’, but as she passionately defended the inherent power of creativity and commitment to truth in making the gap between literature and reality smaller and smaller, through the process of writing fiction she increasingly came to appreciate the importance of retaining the gap. It is significant that art is ‘closest’ – it is not life itself. Art must by necessity be separate from the responsive human consciousness: even as we absorb the most realistic text, we feel the thin veil of separation – a separation that allows for engagement and awareness to occur at the level of text and for those lessons to be applied in life, but which also allows for a very necessary emotional distance that Latimer is denied. In a book, we can be challenged to know that which we might not manage at the level of real life, but which can still affect how we respond to life itself.

But someone, of course, must create the art, must write the book. A normal human being knowing everything would be too much: it is an awareness that only a true artist can manage, and remember that Latimer is an artist who cannot create. He cannot even engage fully with other creations for as his double-consciousness overwhelms him, his books, which he seems to love early in the story, ‘[lose] the power of chaining [his] attention.’ He lacks not only the presence of George Eliot as narrator, but also the guiding force of any other creative impulse with a system of ethics. He rails against the ineffectiveness of words late in the story, ‘We must 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.’ Latimer lacks faith in his own ability to tell his life, and perhaps this is warranted: many readers do fail to react to Latimer with full sympathy. What is important is that George Eliot herself could see the unique pain of his situation – of a struggling artist-human stuck in life and unable to conceive anything from outside of it. Thus I would argue that the transformation that takes place in The Lifted Veil is actually George Eliot’s. It is the story through which she fully grasps the extent of what she asks of Latimer, of her readers, and of herself. In her future work we see her tempering her expectations, admitting the difficulty of what she is asking even as she continues to ask it. Only by giving a character ‘a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness’, as Latimer explains it, can she truly begin to appreciate what she would finally tell us in Middlemarch:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with
By putting an individual character through the experience of being a novelist, she becomes more forgiving of our, and her own, protective and natural human stupidity – even as she expects us occasionally to rise above it.

Notes

5. *Lifted Veil*, p. 3.
10. See Gray’s ‘Pseudoscience and George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil”’.

16 *Lifted Veil*, p. 4.


18 *Lifted Veil*, pp. 14, 17, and 12 respectively.

19 *Lifted Veil*, p. 4.


27 *Lifted Veil*, p. 34.

28 *Lifted Veil*, p. 18, and *Middlemarch*, p. 189.