

## Sympathy, Superstition, and Narrative Form; Or, Why Is *Silas Marner* so Short? A Response to John Mazaheri\*

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Towards the end of his article, "On Superstition and Prejudice in the Beginning of *Silas Marner*," John H. Mazaheri asks me two questions. The first is how I justify invoking G. H. Lewes's account of science and theology in my reading of Eliot's novella: "Trying to find Lewes in her [Eliot's] works because she lived with him," he objects, "is not only belittling George Eliot's original thought, but also leads to inappropriate and confusing interpretations" (254).<sup>1</sup> The second question is why I even bring up Lewes's objections to religious thinking given that Eliot's text distinguishes so clearly between superstition and true religion. My analysis, Mazaheri suggests, collapses Eliot and Lewes in order to turn religious faith into a straw man—superstition—which I then oppose to the supposedly more sophisticated thinking associated with science and secularism. To properly grasp Eliot's approach to religion in *Silas Marner*, his article concludes, we should read it (at least initially) independently of its philosophical and biographical contexts. These include Eliot's other novels, as well as the contingencies of her personal and intellectual life.

I shall respond firstly with some corrections to Mazaheri's account of my reading that show how we partly agree about George Eliot's depiction of religious sentiment. Eliot's intellectual relationship with Lewes enhances, rather than compromises, her account of genuine spiritual feeling and its difference from superstition. Moreover, like Lewes, she credits science with the kind of imaginative vision more

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\*Reference: John H. Mazaheri, "On Superstition and Prejudice in the Beginning of *Silas Marner*," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 238-58. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debmazaheri01913.htm>>.

usually associated with religious prophecy. I shall then propose that because it does not position the novella in Eliot's *oeuvre*, Mazaheri's highly formalist, new-critical argument for the independence of text from context necessarily ignores a very pronounced aspect of the story's *form*—namely its length. Eliot's shorter fiction, I will suggest, enacts the narrow vision and de-animation she associates with the failure of sympathy. In her longer novels, on the other hand, narrative form aims to represent as well as to activate the sympathetic fibers of a vast social organism. The characteristics of the narrowing mind—superstitious, prejudiced, inflexible, and (at its worst) cataleptic—portrayed in *Silas Marner* are best viewed against the expansive, imaginative, and spiritual vision that emerges in the dilatory, multi-layered narratives of the longer novels.

As Mazaheri rightly indicates, Eliot's concept of realism links the portrayal of "definite substantial reality" with what "compel[s] men's attention and sympathy" (Eliot, "Review of *Modern Painters*" 368-69). Artistic creation therefore involves more than the faithful reproduction of visible forms; the artist must discriminate among images and ideas to best express the complex web of human passions she seeks to represent (cf. "Notes on Form in Art" 232-34). Eliot's realism aims to reveal what many of her protagonists come to learn—namely that individual feeling is bound up with the wider social drama of which it is a part. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* puts it, "[t]here is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (821) In showing things as they are, literary realism has the moral task of "amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot" ("Natural History" 110).

The artist's attention to the relationship between part and whole parallels the work of the empirical scientist, for whom "knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction and combination, seeing smaller and smaller unlikenesses and then grouping or associating these under a common likeness" ("Notes on Form in Art" 232). Lewes's essay "Of Vision in Art" describes this transforma-

tion of sense perceptions into abstract knowledge as a “vision” that in both art and science “renders the invisible visible by imagination” (576), and gathers the “numerous relations of things present to the mind” (575). For Lewes, “the man of genius [...] whose sympathies are unusually wide” represents the most advanced stage of Auguste Comte’s theory of human social development: the positive stage (cf. Lewes, *Problems, First Series* 2: 122). When he predicts “the triumph of science over [...] theology” (the phrase that Mazaheri objects should not be associated with Eliot’s text), he refers to Comte’s first stage—the theological—in which imaginary beings determine human fortune (and which is therefore closer to “superstition” than it is to “religion,” in the sense that Mazaheri uses the term). Both Lewes and Eliot identify the positive stage with profound sympathy and its imaginative capacity to assemble individual concrete experiences into a portrait of the larger histories to which they belong.

In Eliot’s novels, the sympathetic mind belongs to the organizing vision of the narrator. Through the latter’s grasp both of the consciousnesses of often narrow, individual minds, and of the rich interplay of events that gathers towards a greater transformation of the social whole, she demonstrates a greater understanding of the destinies that both shape and await her characters. This larger vision enacts the moral force of art “molding and feeding the more passive life which without [it] would dwindle and shrivel into the narrow tenacity of insects unshaken by thoughts beyond the reaches of their antennae.” *Daniel Deronda’s* narrator announces that such vision is at once scientific and spiritual when she observes that the “exultation” of the prophet-seer is “not widely different from that of the experimenter, bending over the first stirrings of change that correspond to what in the fervour of concentrated prevision his thought had foreshadowed” (*Daniel Deronda* 493). Again it is helpful to turn here to Lewes, who in *Problems of Life and Mind* defines the “spiritual” as the influence of social medium on the human psyche, distinguishing it from the “material,” which refers to raw physical processes that produce a mental event (cf. Lewes, *Problems, Third Series* 1: 25). The highest powers of

sympathetic awareness, “wide-sweeping intelligence” and thus vision evolve, for Lewes, from within the collective experience and history that makes up the social medium (cf. *Problems, Third Series* 1: 27). In *Daniel Deronda*, such spiritual vision becomes a “prophetic consciousness” (529) whose

yearnings, conceptions—nay travelled conclusions—continually take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power: the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type; the event they hunger for or dread rises into vision with a seed-like growth, feeding itself fast on unnumbered impressions. [...] [S]ometimes it may be that their natures have manifold openings, like the hundred-gated Thebes, where there may naturally be a greater and more miscellaneous inrush than through a narrow beadle-watched portal. (471)

Here religious prophecy, emerging from the body of innumerable shared events and impressions, takes the form of animation golem tales of Jewish mysticism, where the visionary mind becomes the vessel of a culture’s accumulated wisdom. Yet the capacity to compress “unnumbered impressions” into a single insight also links the religious visionary with the realist “experimenter” whose inductive vision transforms everyday experience into wider and, in Lewes’s terms, more “spiritual” truths.

Eliot’s shorter fiction, however, does not achieve this sympathetic illumination of reality out of the manifold little histories that feed it. As Mazaheri points out, the narrator of *Silas Marner* has a greater social awareness than Eliot’s Lantern Yard and Raveloe characters. Yet the sympathy that pervades the free indirect discourse of the longer novels and allows the narrator not only to penetrate the minds of her characters but also to investigate the connections between private feelings and the social movements and changes that the novels record is frequently tested and found wanting in the shorter texts. In the article Mazaheri cites, I argue that catalepsy—the state of physiological arrest that represents the inverse of sympathy—infects the very medium of the narrative: the feelings and motives that drive the characters are often as obscure to the more sophisticated narrator as the

physiological origins of catalepsy itself. In order not to repeat myself unduly, I will focus here on a slightly different obstruction of sympathy in another of Eliot's short fictions—*The Lifted Veil*. Here the focal (and viewpoint) character sees too much into the minds of others, rather than too little, but the effect again is to show the complex human world shriveling to the insect-like dimensions of the single, narrow mind.

In representing sympathy as the means by which primitive organisms become more varied and intricate, Eliot often uses the figure of animation. This figure can appear ironic or ambivalent: in *Middlemarch*, Tertius Lydgate's Frankenstein-like search for the fundamental tissue that will reveal the key of life famously is never realized; his endeavor is as moribund as Casaubon's pursuit of the key to all mythologies. Yet despite the delusory nature of great schemes, they nonetheless contribute to broader movements of sympathetic animation. Lydgate's great reductionist idea does lead to "unhistoric acts" of kindness, by whose influence lifeless ambitions give way to the "growing good of the world" (*Middlemarch* 822). In *Daniel Deronda*, the "living warmth" of sympathy animates the prophecy of Jewish nationhood as abstract ideas become living sensations for the characters who embrace that nation. Both these novels teach that the animation of ideas depends upon sympathy. They are both also *long* novels, whose scope is itself indicative of animus, since it mimics the dynamic interrelation of manifold mental and social configurations that the stories describe. As George Levine points out, a narrative in which each individual impulse must be represented in terms of its relation to the movement of the social whole must lead to the multiplot novel (cf. Levine 11).

Suspended animation represents the inverse of such organic growth. Rather than allowing for increasingly complex configurations of diverse psychological or social components into new and more 'advanced' forms, episodes of dreamy paralysis or nervous arrest point to the retreat of sympathy. In *Silas Marner*, the cataleptic Silas withdraws completely from his social environment and, as a result,

becomes less human and more thing-like. In *The Lifted Veil*, on the other hand, the protagonist has a psychic gift that ought to accompany keen sympathy and an expansive vision. Yet Latimer's very ability to see into the minds of others is an unwanted talent whose psychic effects so exhaust his nerves that he begins to flee from anyone with whom he is familiar. His isolation then becomes so acute that he eventually exchanges his capacity for insight into the souls of his fellow human beings for a heightened, visionary relation "to what we call the inanimate" (*The Lifted Veil* 55),—"strange cities, sandy plains, [and] gigantic ruins mighty shapes unknown and pitiless" (55). Where, then, the story describes retreat from the social environment rather than a recognition of the enormous web of social relations that is either joyful (for Deronda) or painful (for Gwendolen), there is less for the narrative to see and say. Without the dilatory influence of sympathy, as Latimer observes when he rejects it, a narrator is constrained to "brevity" (52).

Paradoxically, there *is* one striking episode of animation in the story: Latimer's physician friend Charles Meunier achieves a marvelous revivification of the sinister servant—Mrs. Archer—through a combination of artificial respiration and blood transfused into an artery in the dead woman's neck. However, this grotesque experiment, which replicates Frankenstein's, reinforces Latimer's emotional and psychic paralysis, provoking in him a "horror" that "was only like an old pain recurring with new circumstances" (66). Mrs. Archer's restored narrowness and vindictiveness at the moment of her return to life only confirms what Latimer's alienating clairvoyance has already taught him: by intruding into others' "frivolous ideas and emotions," his consciousness has become like "the loud activity of an imprisoned insect" (19), giving him "microscopic vision" into all the most small-minded, indolent, and capricious habits of the mind. Second sight here *prevents* him from recognizing the greater movements of human history because it alerts him to the most fundamentally selfish, petty, and thus, for Eliot, primitive qualities of human nature. At the same time, this insight suffocates his own "yearning for brotherly love"—

the very passion that fuels creative genius, making him reflect that he will “leave no work behind [...] for men to honour” (4). In his fear that sympathy might trigger an episode of insight, he resists the higher, creative work of the mind and follows the impulses of its lower functions: the “irrational instinct” and “automatic gesture” (59) that determine his emotional retreat from others.

*The Lifted Veil* is thus an aborted story, mimicking the arrest of its protagonist’s creative faculties in its form. Rather than promising new and better growths, the great web of relations threatens to de-animate the sensitive and superior mind. Like Silas, whose “face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life” (*Silas Marner* 20), Latimer turns from the world of living minds to that of inanimate things. Mazaheri cautions that we should look at Eliot’s other writings (and those of her close contemporaries) only after a “preliminary reading of the text” of *Silas Marner* if we do not want to distort her representation of religion. I have tried to show that her novels represent spiritual vision in contrast not only with superstition, but also with the associated figure of catalepsy or de-animation. The significance of this contrast in *Silas Marner* is best grasped in terms of a theory of sympathy at least partly derived from ideas Eliot shared with Lewes as well as in the context of her more lengthy fictions.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Mazaheri is commenting on my “The Primitive Mind of *Silas Marner*.”

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