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Franco Marucci, *George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil"*:
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After minutely deconstructing “The Lifted Veil” (hereafter LV) and comparing it to George Eliot’s entire *oeuvre* and to various external references and sources of inspiration, Franco Marucci, a leading figure in English Studies and a versatile essayist, assesses the central position of this novella in Eliot’s canon, bringing about meaningful adjustments to the prevailing critical view.

In Marucci’s perceptive reading, LV, first published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1859, acts as a ‘lynchpin’ between the earlier and later phases of Eliot’s work. All thematic, structural, and semantic aspects of LV are considered by Marucci and related to corresponding traits in Eliot’s macrotext, as well as in other authors relevant to her writing, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Marucci highlights new perspectives and recreates a kaleidoscopic vision for the reader, who is thus expertly guided through the intricacies of textual, historical, and biographical details.

In Eliot’s era, the veil motif is recurrent in both European and American literature, to which her two greatest models, Poe and Hawthorne, belong. This metaphor is employed, with different modulations, by outstanding poets and essayists, such as Shelley and Carlyle. The latter adds metaphysical meanings and prophetic ultimate truths to the Victorian search for what is hidden under multiple layers, using, for example, the trope of clothes in his *Sartor Resartus*. The veil motif is connected to the idea of a poet-seer, a figure not so far away from a prophet, responding to the romantic stereotype of an inspired individual who is able to pierce the mysteries of a universe in which philosophical truths and aesthetic conceptions come together. This motif is also closely intertwined with that of blindness, embodied by a poet or prophet capable of deep mental visions in spite of his impaired physical skills. In Eliot’s text, Latimer, the protagonist/narrator of LV, affected as a child by a transient blindness, is visited in his youth by insurging paranormal visions, which he ascribes to his poetic vocation. This inclination for poetry is experienced by him in terms of ineffectual bursts of inspiration matched to inertia of mind or “rapt passivity”. Latimer’s clairvoyance also presents mesmeric nuances, placing LV in a literary current inspired by the lively scientific debate of the time, as recorded for instance in many of Poe’s tales as well as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Marucci considers Latimer from all possible angles, including the onomastic one. In LV the names of persons, as well as dates and place names, are often left unsaid or incomplete, in keeping with a diffused vagueness of reference which gives the novella

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a fluctuating quality. Marucci elucidates the obscure origin of names by tracing them back to various fictional isotopies. For instance, the name ‘Archer’ points to the full/empty dialectic, but also to the French ‘arracher’, or to historical sources. Latimer, too, has at first glance a rather opaque name. Two main traits emerge here. The word ‘Latimer’ – from Anglo-Norman French – originally referred to ‘a clerk who knows Latin’: quite an apt connotation for the well-read Latimer, the scholar of classical languages. A historical Hugh Latimer also existed. He was an Anglican bishop burnt at the stake by Mary I (Bloody Mary), Queen of England, for heresy. Despite his apparent disregard for religious matters, Eliot’s Latimer could thus be included among her prophetic figures, from Dinah Morris (*Adam Bede*) to Savonarola (*Romola*) and Daniel Deronda.

That Latimer might be viewed as a *reversed* prophetic figure – both looking back on and anticipating one of Eliot’s recurring themes – is the captivating *fil rouge* of Marucci’s analysis. The understanding of Latimer as a prophet is supported by his powers of insight and visions, but is apparently contradicted by his nihilism and his lack of positive expectations, which makes him quite a gloomy figure. His only upsurge of elation is elicited by his infatuation for Bertha, a Lucrezia Borgia-like figure, who tries to poison him.

Nevertheless, Latimer’s alleged prophetic powers aptly support the central hypothesis of LV acting as a keystone in Eliot’s macrotext, which pullulates with characters in search of a religious and racial identity. In his penetrating analysis of the epigraph written by Eliot twenty years after the first publication of LV (“Give me no light, great Heaven, but such as turns / To energy of human fellowship; / No powers beyond the growing heritage / That makes completer manhood”), Marucci argues that she wanted to add a clue for readers to grasp the wider implications of her search for the nature and function of poetry, which would further blossom in her subsequent writings. Even if Latimer might be seen as the ideal Romantic poet, he lacks the creative energy which should serve altruistic aims, as Eliot eventually realised and as she underlines through the epigraph. Latimer actually renounces his vocation under the pretext of a frail physical constitution.

Marucci carefully shows – unveils – the composite nature of this character, whose thoughts recall Eliot’s reflections on poetry in the first part of her career. The Victorian author Matthew Arnold greatly contributed to this elaboration of ideas, especially through his support of constructive action as an antidote against morbid states of mind. This was a position which Eliot reinforced by emphasising the ethical implications of aesthetic catharsis.

In Latimer’s manifold facets, Marucci also detects a mixture of aesthetic pronouncements about poetry, derived from British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, as well as from the contemporary cultural debate. Echoes of Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge are present in Latimer’s tentative definitions of poetry. Besides, Emerson’s conception of a poet gifted with divine vision who lifts veils for the benefit of others is reflected in the “rapt passivity” – the attitude of effortlessly waiting for poetic inspiration – of Eliot’s character. On the other hand, fragments from the life of British poets (Arnold), or especially German ones (Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin), also contribute to defining the figure of the ‘unpractical poet’, mainly passive, unable to direct his readers towards human fellowship.

The oxymoronic expression ‘rapt passivity’ epitomises Latimer’s inner attitude. He is indeed poised on many brinks, susceptible to developing opposite trends: action and inaction, belief and disbelief, and also a wish for life versus a wish for annihilation. As for other characters in Eliot’s production, the spectre of death by water, another recurring motif, looms over him. In *LV* there are borderline situations – a boat going adrift or someone falling from a bridge – in which the temptation of letting go aptly represents the thin threshold between life and death drives.

The narrator’s voice is sometimes overshadowed by Eliot’s, allowing us to appreciate the degree of her identification with her character and ‘avatar’. Marucci, who is thoroughly committed to unveiling hidden nuances and profitable insights, manages to trace back endless links connecting the *ensemble* of Eliot’s characters. There is a whole map of analogies and oppositions, deeply entangled in her macrotext, which bear on the elaboration of moral ideas and on defining the social function of the arts. In *LV*, agnostic pessimism prevails. Even an ancient auspicious symbol like the rainbow, which in both the Old and New Testament is the sign of God’s salvific intentions towards humanity, remains incomprehensible for Latimer. Eliot’s character is blind to the rainbow’s metaphysical significance, and also missing the hint which points to his hypothetical Jewish provenance, in Marucci’s opinion. In keeping with the then prevailing trend to interpret it as a mere optical phenomenon, he regards it as the by-product of a smashed glass.

The analysis of the connections of Eliot’s novella with the Gospels also proves very fruitful. Latimer is a minor Christ figure, reflecting a frustrated aspiration to discover the secrets of the afterlife or the key to defeating death. In *LV tout se tient*: the pattern of the *Imago Christi* applied to Latimer’s vicissitudes intersects the mesmeric strand, giving it an occult vitality, nourished by religious undertones. There are strong similarities between Jesus’ supernatural faculties and those only sought after by mesmerists: reading others’ minds, prophecy, healing by laying on of hands, and even reviving the dead. Most of these are the prerogative of Latimer, who, however, does not control them. For instance, the reanimation of the dead is performed by his double, a doctor Meunier who had studied with him in Geneva, this being a tell-tale place that connects him to Mary Shelley’s Doctor Frankenstein. This storyline culminates in the vivification experiment practised on Latimer’s wife’s dead maid, who thus reveals the attempted crime of Bertha.

These powers, intermittent as they are, do not alleviate in any way the protagonist’s unaccomplished and unresolved state of mind. Like Christ, Latimer foresees his own death, but is granted no option of resurrection. The only episode of the kind – the brief return from the dead of Bertha’s maid – does not remove any significant veil from ultimate truths. It simply reveals a trivial, murderous intent in human nature. Like Christ, Latimer is warned against the sinister outcome of his union with Bertha, a temptation which he does not resist. Light and darkness remain irreducible opposites, and salvation is denied to this luckless, unassuming hero, set up by Marucci against other figures in Eliot’s novels. Amongst them, Daniel Deronda is the author’s last and most complete achievement. For his part, Latimer vicariously shows the enactment of certain aesthetic inclinations of the author, which will be subsequently exorcised and dismissed in favour of a healthier poetic ideal, based on ethical and social commitment.

