POWER AND KNOWLEDGE IN 'THE LIFTED VEIL' *

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It is always possible to undermine one kind of claim to ‘disinterested’ knowledge by asking why we should bother to find out anything in the first place. Since not much of our knowledge is directly relevant to physical survival – indeed ‘culture’ may be defined as all that is not – there must be some reasons, other than libidinal ones, for acquiring it. One plausible reason for science in the modern Western sense is that we need it, not so that we shall survive, but so that some shall survive better than others. Materialised in technology, science dominates Nature in such a way as to contribute to the reproduction of the social relations of exploitation in class-society. Power produces knowledge and knowledge produces power. Latimer’s father in The Lifted Veil considers a scientific education suitable for his son because he has recently acquired a connection with mining speculations.

In order for science to work efficiently, human subjects as well as Nature must be knowable and predictable; hence the birth of sociology. For a liberal bourgeoisie like George Eliot, however, this produces a severe ideological contradiction. For the transparency of the human subject demanded by bourgeois scientific ideologies is at odds with that doctrine of the mysterious inscrutability of such subjects with which capitalism helps to mystify its social relations. All knowledge, as Romanticism knew, contains a secret irony or incipient contradiction: it must at once master the object and confront it as other, permit it an autonomy it simultaneously subverts. The bourgeois fantasy of technological omnipotence conceals a nightmare: in brutally appropriating Nature, you risk eradicating it and thus appropriating nothing but your own acts of consciousness. Total omniscience keels over inexorably into solipsism. In a curious sense, if you knew everything you would know nothing, because subjectivity would inflate to such immense proportions that it would overwhelm and cancel its object, leaving nothing outside itself to know. ‘That the positive Method is the only method … on which truth can be found’, wrote George Henry Lewes two years before the publication of The Lifted Veil, ‘is easily proved; on it alone can preivation of phenomena depend. Preivation is the

* A paper delivered at the George Eliot centennial conference, Rutgers University, New Jersey, 1980. For those whose memories of The Lifted Veil are not as vivid as they once were, perhaps I should briefly summarize the tale. It concerns precognition: Latimer, its protagonist, begins the story by informing us of his impending death, and then reviews his life history as the timid, sensitive son of a domineering banker and a tender mother who died when he was a child. As a young man, Latimer discovers that he has the powers of prevision, able both to foresee the future and read others’ thoughts, and feels oppressed by this burden of excessive consciousness. He meets, and instantly dislikes, his elder brother Alfred’s fiancée Bertha Grant, and despite this dislike of her feels passionate attraction. Alfred is thrown from his horse and killed, and Latimer marries Bertha, though he is increasingly aware of what he sees as her contempt for his dreamy, supersensitive nature. The story ends with the deathbed revelation of Bertha’s medically revived maid, Mrs. Archer, that her mistress intended to poison Latimer. Latimer separates from Bertha, and spends his time waiting for a death whose date he has precisely foreseen.
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characteristic and test of knowledge’. The essence of scientifiability is predictability: once phenomena are predictable they are safely surrendered into the hands of the sociological priests. The problem with this, however, is that it threatens to abolish history. Science is what founds the great progressive narratives of bourgeois history, and what scuppers them too. Diachrony is unmasked as no more than the phenomenal movement of a secret synchrony. Bourgeois ideology, living history as enterprise and adventure, is in deadlock with the most privileged mode of bourgeois cognition. In order to safeguard the future you need to predict it; but in doing so you risk striking history dead, swallowing it into the solipsism of an eternal present. The future is secured precisely to the extent to which it is rendered uninteresting, known as ‘future’ only because it is secretly a present, and thus not known as future at all. The mechanism of the Eros of history is revealed as the Thanatos of science: the truth of life is the death of knowledge, as the life of knowledge is the death of history.

This contradiction never quite comes to fullness, but not for any particularly consoling reason. For the more social science manipulates its object, the more it uncovers its recalcitrance. The more it knows, the more it discovers it can’t control – such as, for example, the tendency of the rate of profit to decline as a function of the proportionate increase of fixed over variable capital. Science is a lie because it does not yield the omnipotence it promises; the very social contradictions which allow it to flourish simultaneously defeat it. As with Hegel’s great myth of master and slave, the master’s secure possession of the slave is confounded by the latter’s vestigial autonomy – by the ability to labour which makes him valuable to the master in the first place. If the slave is to be transparent to the master’s desires, he must also be to some degree opaque to them. Just the same is true of the social relations between proletariat and bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie must dominate the proletariat, shackle it materially and possess it as an object of reliable knowledge – but not to the point where it erases the proletariat’s ‘autonomy’, that is to say, its labour-power. Its sociological omniscience is thus self-molesting: the most it can hope for is to measure its own ignorance with some precision. In one sense it does not want omniscience, for this could only signal the death of that very ‘freedom’ and irreducible randomness which is integral to its exploitation; but in another sense it wants it badly, for what could suit it better than a social formation rendered by knowledge entirely pliable to its desires? Omniscience is at once its dream and its terror.

Bourgeois knowledge is self-defeating because unpredictability is the very dynamic of bourgeois history. The capitalist’s dream is to pre-calculate every competitor’s move while remaining impervious to such science himself; but since everybody would want this knowledge it would cancel itself out. The capitalist accordingly finds himself in the precarious speculative situation in which his own calculations modify the terms on which others calculate, and so risk throwing his own plans out of gear. This is what is known as freedom, to be mourned from the standpoint of an impossible omniscience and celebrated by contrast with a history self-transparent to the point of deathly stasis. Desire – economic or sexual – requires knowledge, but that knowledge would in turn be the death of desire. Knowledge is power, but the more you have of it the more it threatens to rob you of your desire and render you impotent. If the future can
be known it ceases properly to exist; and the present ceases to be present too, dwindles to a mere prolepsis which takes its meaning from elsewhere.

A solution to this dilemma might be sought in that alternative mode of cognition which is the aesthetic. Against the terrorism of positivist rationality may be pitted the responsiveness of imaginative sympathy, which seeks to enter its object without overwhelming it, holding appropriation and autonomy in tension. One of the gloomiest aspects of The Lifted Veil is its recognition that this is no real way out either. For if science is an urge to omnipotence constantly thwarted by the recalcitrance it discloses, so in a different sense is sympathy, which in passively possessing its object is powerless to affect it. Sympathy doesn’t get you anywhere. Like science, it tends to operate best on inanimate objects, at least according to Latimer’s cynical view that we have a chance of meeting with some pity only when we are dead. Pressed to the caricaturing extremes of telepathy and prevision, sympathy merely writes large science’s lethal drive to confiscate its object, sucking it into its own turbulent subjectivity while leaving it in reality outside and resistant. The epistemological imperialism of science and the self-diffusive motions of sympathy amount to much the same thing, opposites though they might appear: whether the object is introjected or the subject projected, the result is a fatal crippling of both. In science the object is at once cancelled and untouched, so that the subject, baffled either by its recalcitrance or evaporation or both, steadily disintegrates beneath its pose of transcendental unity. In sympathy the subject similarly risks collapse, whether this is seen as the sapping effect of projection into objects or the psychical disturbance of staggering around with them inside one’s head. ‘We must ponder the anomaly’, writes Fredric Jameson, ‘that it is only in the most completely humanised environment, the one the most fully and obviously the end product of human labour, production, and transformation, that life becomes meaningless, and that existential despair first appears as such in direct proportion to the elimination of nature, the non- or antihuman, to the increasing rollback of everything that threatens human life and the prospect of a well-nigh limitless control over the external universe’. If this is true of science, it is true of sympathy too: as Nature is rolled back and history remorselessly ‘humanised’, all that seems left is the sickening tautology of a cultic intersubjectivity in which, suspended in a void, consciousness greedily or wearily absorbs consciousness.

It would be a mistake, then, to read The Lifted Veil merely in Künstler versus Bürger terms, even though it interestingly invites such misrecognition. If this were so it would be difficult to account for the presence in the tale of Latimer’s scientific friend Meunier, with whom he feels a special affinity, and whose ‘large and susceptible mind’ is an image of his own. When Latimer listens dreamily to Meunier’s ‘bold conceptions of future experiment and discovery’, one has only to rewrite the phrase ‘future-experiment’ to describe Latimer’s own career. The science/art opposition tacitly deconstructs itself: ‘hungry for human deeds and human emotions’ as a youth, Latimer is nevertheless forced to study science, ‘plentifully crammed with the mechanical powers, the elementary bodies, and the phenomena of electricity and magnetism’. But what could be closer to his ‘imaginative’ apprehensions than electromagnetism? Latimer is more like his philistine father than he knows; art parodies the ideological dilemmas of science even as it seems to spurn them. The father
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may have the power and the son the knowledge, but power generates and is generated by knowledge, and Latimer's own knowledge is at times a form of power, a smug invulnerability. If they pulled together they could beat the world: imagine the outcome if Latimer trained his visionary powers on his father's investments. But of course their mutual antagonism is essential, since in this society power and knowledge, while deeply implicating one another, are also, as we have seen, at odds. Knowledge castrates power by stifling desire, and power flourishes through a life-enhancing ignorance. The trick of the tale is partly to repress its own disruptiveness by highlighting the differences rather than complicities between father and son. In this way Latimer can come to seem just monstrous, the poète maudit or bohemian drop-out from a society which may be predatory but is at least sane. By presenting him as a psychical cripple, one of English fiction's epicene offspring of an uncouthly virile bourgeoisie, the story can at one ideological level quarantine him without too much trouble, offer him as a blood-sacrifice to bourgeois normality. But the symbolic implications of his prevision are not so easily sealed off: in so far as science hinges on precognition, normality is contaminated by its apparent antithesis. Latimer has the abnormality of the Lukácsian 'typical', which is never the average: he is a dreadful image of where, given a little extrapolation, the whole of bourgeois knowledge could land up. His monstrousness, far from being confined to armchair clairvoyance, reproduces itself daily in the laboratories.

Caught between the 'miseries of delusive expectation' and the 'miseries of true prevision', bourgeois society hesitates between desire and death, between the exhilarating terrors of speculative enterprise and the paralysing consolations of science. If it can sneak a glimpse of fatality behind the veil of contingency, it is because contingency, in a market society, is indeed what determines your fate. In case the connection between prevision and the stock exchange is thought to be symptomatic of Marxist paranoia, I should perhaps point out that the story makes the connection itself:

So absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond today, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between; we should pant after the uncertainties of our one morning and our one afternoon; we should rush fiercely to the Exchange for our last possibility of speculation, of success, of disappointment; we should have a glut of political prophets foretelling a crisis or a no-crisis within the only twenty-four hours left open to prophecy.

As a good bourgeois banker, Latimer's father prides himself on punctuality; and it is the unaccountable fact of his unpunctuality which precipitates his son's most shocking early experience of precognition:

He was one of the most punctual of men and bankers, and I was always nervously anxious to be quite ready for him at the appointed time. But, to my surprise, at a quarter past twelve he had not appeared. I felt all the impatience of a convalescent who has just taken a tonic in the prospect of immediate exercise that would carry off the stimulus...
Suddenly I was conscious that my father was in the room, but not alone: there were two persons with him...

'Well, Latimer, you thought me long', my father said...

But while the last word was in my ears, the whole group vanished, and there was nothing between me and the Chinese painted folding-screen that stood before the door.

Disturbed by his father's lateness, Latimer manages to bring him there instead in imagination: provision compensates for the father's fault, plugging the minatory gap he has created with an imaginary image. Latimer's own guilt about having failed his father betokens a concern for the old man which leads him to protect him from failing himself, arriving late in violation of his strict standards. It is, of course, Latimer the shiftless younger son who has 'arrived late', and the provision is as much self-protection against the odd anxiety which the father's absence produces. Latimer is 'always nervously anxious to be quite ready for him', but he is in fact never 'quite ready' for him, and the 'absence' of this censorious patriarch is more than a quarter-of-an-hour affair. But if the scene underlines the son's subordination, it also secures his superiority: it is in the very gap created by the father's absence that Latimer's gift of provision is fully born — that a faculty beyond his father's reach is realised. Knowledge is born of castrated desire, but it can make up for it too. Punctuality is a suitable virtue for those to whom time is linear, to be consumed in chopped-up fragments: you only need to worry about turning up on time if you can't foresee whether you will or won't. If Latimer senior is doomed to purely diachronic sequence, his son can transcend that to the point of synchronic vision. In this precognitive flash, then, he confesses his anxiety about his tyrannical father at the same time as he achieves in fantasy a compensatory sort of divinity; provision is a 'supplement' in the double-sense of filling in for the father, repairing his absence, and yet exceeding him.

Art is born as the neurasthenic child of bourgeois power, crushed by its own pointless parasitism, but it has its revenge too: if it does not exactly strike the father dead (though Latimer, as we shall see, does the next best thing), it nevertheless attains a secret omniscience which can expose his inmost flaws, substituting esoteric knowledge for social dominance. Latimer, the incompletely oedipalised wretch whose 'natural' affections were thwarted by the premature withdrawal of an idealised mother's love, a withdrawal which abandoned him to the mercies of an oppressively masculine father, has lifted the forbidden skirt and received an enviable knowledge; but it is a terrible knowledge which strikes desire dead, as the knowledge of sexual difference and absence opens at a stroke the unconscious into which desire is repressed. For what he has glimpsed behind the veil is, precisely, nothing: the 'absence' of the future and so the 'absence' of the present which evaporates into it; the 'absence' of the father, marked by the sign of castration in his failure to come; the absence of the mother, that deliciously possessable imaginary object whose very brutal removal has generated these substitutive visions; and above all, consummating all of these absences in a single, stark metaphor, that absence which is his own future death, the non-being which is the ultimate ironic object of his knowledge. Foreseeing your own death is a striking figure of the tale's allegorical purposes, for there could be no sharper disjuncting of knowledge and power. The more your knowledge veers into determinism, the more it will
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negate historical desire and thus yield you a purely Schopenhaurian form of mastery, reduce you like the later Latimer to the opposite of the hysteric, who has ceased even to desire desire. This will grant you the negative power of invulnerability, but it is not easy to distinguish that in practice from simple impotence. It is true that in a way knowledge does bring Latimer power: the evil eye of prevision topples the hated elder brother Alfred from his horse, an event which is at once a displaced fulfilment of Latimer’s patricidal urge and a convenient way of scrambling into the empty space of his father’s affections. But it is not a power which will bring you any good result: apart from Meunier, there is no knowledge in this fiction which is not either useless or malevolent. Knowledge is either predatory power over others or consciousness of one’s impotence; prevision, that fantasical caricature of art and science, induces an ontological lassitude which taints whatever goods it may deliver.

Latimer’s empathy with other minds isn’t easy to distinguish from a mere projection of his own arrogance, anxiety and aggressivity into them. Alfred has only to show a touch of hearty sympathy for him to sniff in it an odious condescension; other minds oppress this mean, maudlin, indolent and egotistic spectator with their ‘suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meaness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts...’ One would dearly love to hear Bertha’s side of the story. Latimer, of course, knows well enough what she is from the moment he first sees her in prevision: a preying Water-Nixie, sharp, sarcastic and ‘fatal-eyed’. Bertha (an ominous name in any case) is the phallic woman, triggering all of Latimer’s repressed fantasies of the murderous female; she is unconsciously downgraded by contrast with the idealised mother, at the same time as the aggressive treatment of her may displace Latimer’s resentment towards that mother, who died and left him. Bertha is ‘keen, sarcastic, unimaginative, prematurely cynical’, mainly because she doesn’t instantly pander to his maudlin tastes in poetry. Coldly disillusioned about her, he nonetheless succeeds in remaining lamentably deluded, a contradiction which several alternative stabs at resolution can’t quite dissolve. Typically, he manages to blame her for this fatal fascination while quietly complimenting himself: ‘But there is no tyranny more complete than that which a self-centred negative nature exercises over a morbidly sensitive nature perpetually craving sympathy and support’. If only she weren’t so exasperatingly aloof and he so naturally affectionate. Since Latimer has already told us elsewhere that his natural affections are somewhat thin on the ground (he feels compassion for his father only when he has triumphed over him through Alfred’s death), we might be more inclined to attribute his fascination, as he does in part himself, to the fact that Bertha is the only person to evade his empathetic powers. She is a tantalising challenge to be conquered, not least because there is oedipal satisfaction to be gained in winning your brother’s fiancée. ‘Doubtless there was another sort of fascination at work’, Latimer adds later on in a casual aside, briefly touching on physical attraction; but even so he manages to suggest that he marries Bertha in part to please the dear old father he despises. Bertha does indeed like Latimer at first, to the point of secretly wearing round her neck a ring he gives her: when she shows him the ring to placate his beatings about being unfavoured, he tells us that the action ‘completely fooled’ him, as though it were she rather than he who was being emotionally manipulative. Perhaps he thought it was a
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hallucination. Once Alfred is dead, Bertha, with perfect decorum, behaves rather distantly to Latimer; but 'out of the subtest web of scarcely perceptible signs' he discerns the truth or constructs the fantasy that she has always unconsciously loved him more than Alfred. She would have chosen him, 'but that, with the ignorant fluttered sensibility of a young girl, she had been imposed on by the charm that lay for her in the distinction of being admired and chosen by a man who made so brilliant a figure in the world as my brother'. This last acknowledgement is a remarkably complex affair for conveyance by 'scarcely perceptible signs': by the time we reach the end of the sentence we are half-convincing that this is something Bertha must have said rather than suggested.

After their marriage, Latimer grows sinisterly aware of an increasing coldness in Bertha, at first 'only perceptible in the dexterous avoidance of a tête-à-tête walk or dinner to which I had been looking forward'. Since the whining, self-piteous Latimer is hardly the kind of man one would choose as a companion for a world cruise, the appropriate criticism of Bertha is less of her supposed frigidity than of her lapse of taste in marrying him in the first place. A crisis of 'clairvoyance' ensues: '...'I saw myself in Bertha's thought as she lifted her cutting grey eyes, and looked at me: a miserable ghost-seer, surrounded by phantoms in the noontide, trembling under a breeze when the leaves were still, without appetite for the common objects of human desire, but pining after the moonbeams. We were front to front with each other, and judged each other'. In a curious flash of esoteric knowledge, a preternatural power known only to the poetic few, Latimer sees that his wife rightly thinks him an idiot. The 'judging' is mutual only in so far as he naturally believes that anyone who defines him thus is a heartless ogre, even though he has just conceded the correctness of her judgement. It is difficult to square Bertha's 'cutting' clear-eyedness with her supposed 'petty artifice', though Latimer contrives to object to both; if Bertha is indeed 'petty', it is only because discerning the truth of another is less of a recherche talent, at least where the palpably unpleasant Latimer is concerned, than he himself would have. The worst blow is that he lacks a monopoly on 'clairvoyance'.

Even so, you might think, all of this hardly justifies poisoning the poor wretch. Surely Latimer's suspicions of Bertha are finally proved not paranoid but just, in the dramatic accusations of the miraculously resuscitated Mrs Archer? 'Miraculous', in fact, is the word: the blood transfusion incident is a piece of tawdry melodrama, a grotesque and infelicitous flaw, a fiction. We can't believe it; and yet of course we must, for this is a 'realist' tale, and within those conventions what Latimer as observer says goes. It must have happened – Bertha must therefore be guilty – and yet, somehow, it didn't. Latimer has rigged his tale to frame his wife, impudently concocting an event as he may have previously, perhaps more permissably, falsified perceptions. This, of course, is a wholly impermissible conclusion, unverifiable and unacceptable within realist hypotheses, and yet, knowing Latimer, who would put it past him? The aporia we stumble upon here forces us outside the frame of the realist fiction to ponder – as the story has surreptitiously done all along – the theoretical problem of realist fiction as such. For there is one compelling reason for Latimer's strange pre-marital fascination with Bertha which he cannot possibly disclose to us, namely that if this were not so then the narrative would come
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prematurely to a close. For the story to evolve at all, Latimer’s prevision must mysteriously fail, or at least cease to matter, when it come to his future wife. What is most striking is that it ceases to matter rather than fails: after Bertha’s initial seductive opacity, Latimer is allowed a glimpse of his gloomy domestic future but helplessly perseveres in his courtship. His determination to plough on even though the upshot will be unpleasant is thus a little like Beckett’s glum comment on the simultaneous absurdity and necessity of narrative: ‘You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on’. Carrying on regardless, narrating as though you don’t know the end, assuming an ignorance where you acknowledge a truth, is clearly a dilemma at the very heart of realist writing. For narrative and desire to prosper, knowledge must be put in suspension; if knowledge castrates desire, desire is the blindspot of knowledge, the unrenouncable fantasy which keeps history moving against the grain of positivist fact. Of course, in so far as narrative suspends knowledge only to recuperate it, it can furnish a conciliatory model of these contradictions. Narrative is at once a desire not to know, in the name of the libidinal gratifications of suspense, and a desire to know which will finally be satisfied in the triumphant restoration of whatever object or truth was temporarily removed for the narrative to generate itself in the first place. Ideally conceived, narrative represents as energising an interplay between freedom and determinism as does the ‘free’ market: there too, the temporary loss of both certainty and object which is speculative investment can be patiently borne because the object will return to you enriched and consolidated. Market society must work by fiction, speculative hypothesis, partial prevision, its insights as much the product of blindness as the visionary Latimer is the son of his benighted father. But in this society the reverse is also true: the muddle-headed Latimer is the child of his hard-headed father, blindness is born of knowledge, impotence of power. Knowledge is power but exposes what is intractable to it; desire gives birth to power but renders you its helpless prey; fiction is integral yet destructive, truth essential but unpalatable. Speculations in goods or other minds may go perversely awry, the cherished object may always not return. What generates Latimer’s narrative is the removal by death of an object – his mother – which only his own death – which is to say, nothing at all – will restore.

Narrative, then, is not quite the ideal solution it looks; and neither, more generally, is writing itself. For it is certainly tempting to see in realist fiction a reconciliation of these difficulties – a form of omniscience which renounces domination, subtly responsive to the ‘autonomy’ of its own creations. But this, of course, is ideological delusion, a whole fiction in itself. If the bourgeoisie is enthralled by its own knowledge – exhilarated and enslaved by it – so is George Eliot, whose ‘knowledge’ as author of The Lifted Veil consists, like Latimer’s possibly paranoid intuitions, in searching out that which she has created in the first place. There is a pointless circularity about fiction which mimics the unhealthy solipsism of a Latimer. The parody of omniscience (as author you can ‘know’ what you like, since you’re inventing it) fiction is thereby the parody of impotence, since what you ‘know’, like Latimer’s confrontation with that black hole which opens and closes the narrative, is precisely nothing. Fiction only ‘fictionally’ knows. If Latimer projects his own malevolence and anxiety into others, perhaps Eliot does the same with him; if it is undecidable whether Latimer is seeing the truth or ‘reading in’, inscribing himself in others,
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textualising sweet nothings into sinister meanings, perhaps this is the guilty aportia of all fiction. What follows The Lifted Veil is in this sense not The Mill on the Floss but The Sacred Fount. Nobody can gainsay Latimer just as nobody can gainsay Eliot, and this is the curse of omniscience, the epistemological circle of a bourgeois science which threatens to swallow the whole of Nature down its ravenous maw and so ends up knowing only its own innards. Fiction is a form of paranoia. Guilt-stricken by this insight, The Lifted Veil at once concedes and refuses it, offers us the adventures of a narrative which contains its own negation, opens by aggressively denying us our libidoal pleasure in suspense only to reinstate that stimulation in its lurid, spooky storyline, and then obstinately refuses the gratifications of closure. Whether you are really seeing the future, or whether such apparent precognition is merely a textualising of the present, doesn’t finally make much difference: in the first case you query the future’s real existence, in the second case you deny the objectivity of the present, its status as anything but text. Writing historical novels is no way out either: either you make the past present as it ‘really’ was, in which case you are as powerless before it as Latimer is before the future; or you recognise the impossibility of such an enterprise only at the cost of relativising the past to a fiction of the present. ‘Seeing’ either past or future entails an insuperable contradiction: if you do see them then they aren’t there, since their nature is to be elsewhere and invisible; if you don’t see them they aren’t there either. But both projects are in any case tropes of a self-contradictory cognition which is rather more contemporary: ‘knowing’ an object – Nature, society, history – in conditions where all knowledge seems either active domination or passive empathy, ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, blinding its object with science or smothering it with subjectivity. In the same way the historical or previsionary novel, which conjures presence from absence, merely writes large the secret practice of ‘contemporary’ fiction, which does exactly the same.

What is certain about this society, at any rate, is that the truth is unpleasant. Whether the artist is someone who penetrates through to it, or whether as Bertha believes poetry is false consciousness, hold equally cheerless implications: at the extremes, the choice is one between death and delusion. Meanwhile, of course, we get along as best we can: we recognise the necessity of fiction, which is to say the historical indispensability of ideology. And this, for a rationalist, is certainly a depressing conclusion. We shall have to wait for the later Henry James to ‘transcend’ it, in those great moments in which an enormous knowledge, precisely by being divorced from domination, can veer on its axis into the most salvific, transformative (or ultimately domonative?) act of all. And as if this conclusion were not bleak enough, there is worse to come. For what if death were not the end after all? What if medicine were to perfect its transfusive techniques and raise future Mrs Archers permanently rather than temporarily from their death beds? Is not this the true fantastic core of that bungled bit of melodrama? This particular narrative starts up again at the end, and why not, for there is nothing to stop it: Eliot has the empty freedom of prolonging it for another six volumes if she decides to. What if science were to reproduce that terrifying omnipotence, endlessly recycling its subjects, so that history, deprived of a closure, ceased to be narrative and became eternal recurrence? Then indeed would Eros be robbed of its last forlorn hope, Thanatos. In The Lifted Veil, the bourgeoisie dream their own death. Maybe

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we can help them out.

REFERENCES

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