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# Human-animal elision: a Darwinian universe in George Eliot's novels

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The triumph of the Darwinian theory of evolution was by no means a foregone conclusion. On the first publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) the scientific community was not immediately convinced by this apparently overly sweeping “speculation” (Bellon 395). It took further and more modest publications by Darwin, which enabled fellow naturalists to defend his credentials as a practitioner of painstaking induction, to gain him advocates within the establishment by the end of the 1860s. Even then, nominal acceptance or even celebration of Darwin's breakthroughs was not necessarily the same as full-scale assimilation. As Peter J. Bowler has compellingly argued, non-Darwinian forms of evolution continued to predominate through the rest of the nineteenth century, as scientists seized on elements of Darwin's theories and grafted them onto a progressive narrative (Bowler 76–90). Even his “bulldog” T. H. Huxley, and his popularizer Herbert Spencer, championed some aspects at the expense of others: Spencer's famous coinage “the survival of the fittest” implies an upward teleology quite absent from Darwin's own idea of species as fit for (current) purpose and environment. Such distortion is clear to see in Ernst Haeckel's famous tree-diagram of the “Pedigree of Man” (1879), which at first glance adopts Darwin's branching structure, but which is rooted in the medieval ideal of the Great Chain of Being: it shows Man's ancestors rising up through the great trunk of the tree, holding firm as other species deviate from this ideal, to emerge triumphant at its crown (Haeckel 188 facing; Bowler 89).

George Eliot's first record of reading the *Origin* displays a similar blindness to its mechanism of random mutation and adaptation to circumstance, describing it in a letter

merely as “an elaborate exposition of the evidence in favour of the [pre-existing] Development Theory” (Haight 214). Eliot is nonetheless notable for her growing recognition of the implications of Darwinian theory, and her immersive engagement with its language and structures – what Gillian Beer (1983) has influentially termed *Darwin’s Plots*. The plot it most disturbed was the relationship between the individual and history. In a world of infinitesimal mutation and invisible selection that encompassed all species indiscriminately, and was both constant and unstoppable, what agency or significance could any one individual have? As Beer puts it, “Darwin drew on familiar narrative tropes” (*Darwin’s Plots* xxiv) and discussed “old problems” in new lights (*Darwin’s Plots* 17). In this article, I will draw attention to the strange and often surprising parallels drawn between human and animal (and occasionally plant) species in *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72). By the time she was writing these novels, Eliot seemed to feel that there was no getting away from Darwin’s theory and its ramifications. It had to be acknowledged in any forward-thinking writer’s view of the world.

Eliot’s novels are notable for their particular pre-occupation with the period of the 1832 Reform Act, on the cusp of what we might see as the “long” Victorian era. Although both *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* were written in the wake of the Darwinian controversy, both are set back in time to that Reform moment, and both depict provincial Midland communities. This distance between Eliot’s characters and her readers – as well as the two parts of herself, her provincial childhood as Mary Ann Evans and her metropolitan novelistic career as “George Eliot” / “Mrs Lewes” – is the subject of considerable irony. Eliot is often thought of as a strictly, even sometimes overly serious realist writer, but in her elision of human and animal species she does something quite disconcertingly comic in these novels. This article will consider the vexed question of *why* she does it, and what the implications might be.

In his magisterial *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003), Alex Woloch suggests that in her famous image in *Middlemarch* of the “roar on the other side of silence,” Eliot “simultaneously registers the imperative to look at the masses of ‘ordinary life’ and anxiously worries that the sight might be too much”(32). He characterizes Eliot as “caught between idealism and anxiety, between including and distorting minor characters, in the double pull of democracy and inequality” (32). I propose that Eliot’s invocation of a profusion of animal species in her novels, including elision between humans and animals, has a twofold significance. First and most obviously, it is a self-conscious recognition of the Darwinian framework in which all scientifically engaged thinkers were forced to view the world by the 1870s. Eliot was living in a post-Darwinian universe, and she is very aware of this gulf that separates her from her blissfully ignorant 1830s characters. Secondly, it is inextricably part of her novels’ engagement in history-writing. Their precise temporal location within living memory sets them at a distance that is both rich with potential ironies and unnervingly proximate: a “double pull,” to adapt Woloch’s phrase. These novels are thus an intervention in contemporary history writing.

The unnerving proximity of the period within living memory results in part from its inherent multiplicity. Our experience of the present is made up of constant and infinitely varying sense impressions, which are impossible to distil into any singular generalization. And this individual experience is exponentially exacerbated if we try to write a historical narrative, characterizing the experience of a living population beyond ourselves. As I have shown elsewhere, this was a particular source of discomfort for Victorian historians (Kingstone, “Victorian Historiography and the Recent Past”; Kingstone, *Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past*). In a period that sought grand teleological narratives, many historians avoided writing about the contentious recent past: as Thomas Macaulay

described it, “there are great and obvious objections to contemporary history” (Trevelyan, II, 13–14). Filtering “historic” individuals who deserve commemoration from those whom Eliot provocatively terms “unhistoric” is much more difficult when those people, or others who remember them, are still alive. In the Victorian period, therefore, the impulse to write history of the period within living memory was dispersed into other genres including the novel, which could engage more easily with the experience of unmanageable multiplicity.<sup>1</sup> One way in which Eliot creates such a heightened sense of multiplicity, as I will demonstrate, is through human-animal elision.

The first half of this article shows Eliot adopting Darwinian paradigms to highlight the proximity between humans and animals, and thus – once humans step down from their Biblical plinth – the lateral profusion of the organic world. The second half shows the tangles this Darwinian thinking causes for Eliot the humanist. The multiplicity of contemporaneous sensory experience is multiplied exponentially if Eliot’s famous call for interpersonal sympathy is expanded across species boundaries. As a result, she ends up suggesting that despite Darwin, we have to maintain lines of demarcation. Despite the clamoring voices of other organisms, we can only function as human beings – and sympathize with our fellow humans – if we block them out.

### **Animals and social hierarchy**

Scientific discourses pervade Eliot’s work. As Sally Shuttleworth has shown, “*Middlemarch* is the first novel in which science is treated as an explicit theme,” and it is also present in many more implicit ways (143). As early as their trip to Ilfracombe in 1856, when her partner G. H. Lewes was researching his *Sea-Side Studies*, Eliot was using zoological analogies for human processes: looking down over the town from the top of a nearby hill, she mused that “one cannot help thinking of man as a parasitical animal – an epizoon

making his abode on the skin of the planetary organism. ... we begin to think of the strong family likeness between ourselves and all other building, burrowing house-appropriating and shell secreting animals" (*The Journals of George Eliot* 265).

Beer has delineated how Eliot's novels were pervasively – even frustratingly, for her first readers and reviewers – saturated with scientific allusions and imagery (*Darwin's Plots* 139). We can see this particularly in *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. From its subtitle onwards, it announces itself – perhaps unprepossessingly for novel-readers – in the form of a scientific "study." The Prelude continues in this vein, from the opening question that proposes to subject "man" to "the varying experiments of Time" to the statement "the limits of variation [among women] remain much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite stories in prose and verse" (25–26). This detached rhetoric helps facilitate Eliot's masculine persona, though it requires an awkward direct article – "the favourite stories" – to avoid the problem of whether to say "their" or "our." This satirical comment on blanket essentialisation of women also evokes Darwin's theories in its reference to "the limits of variation," to challenge those who would see women as homogeneous. The parallels between Darwin's and Eliot's use of evolutionary narrative tropes have been compellingly traced by Beer. One element she does not discuss, however, which sheds valuable light on the question of how writers judged the limits of historicity and personhood, is Eliot's habit of eliding humans and animals. This Darwinian conception of the human race as merely one among other species was perceived by many of his readers as a demotion, as the many contemporary cartoons of him as an ape remind us (*The Hornet*; *Fun*; *Punch*). Darwin's removal of species hierarchy heightened the sense of multiplicity already manifested in contemporaneous experience, and removes one possible criteria by which to sift for significance.

This sense of potentially overwhelming multiplicity is immanent in Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Two of the most memorable images in his treatise depict an "entangled bank" (Darwin 74, 490). This appears to present a chaotic spectacle for the biologist, as the entanglements of contemporary experience do for the historian. However, as Darwin stresses, although "when we look at the plants and bushes clothing an entangled bank, we are tempted to attribute their proportional numbers and kinds to what we call chance ... how false a view is this!" (74). There *is* regularity and reasoning underlying these proportions, even if it is not laid down by humans. In the midst of the book, he repeatedly emphasizes the complexity and opacity of his subject-matter:

Throw up a handful of feathers, and all must fall to the ground according to definite laws; but how simple is this problem compared to the action and reaction of the innumerable plants and animals which have determined, in the course of centuries, the proportional numbers and kinds of trees now growing on the old Indian ruins! (75)

In the first part of this comparison, Darwin draws on the Galilean precedent that disproved expectations about relative weights and velocities by dropping a feather and stone (or hammer, or brick) from the Tower of Pisa; but he turns it into a much more homely action, that of a pigeon-fancier or a keeper of chickens. In the second half of the comparison, moreover, he contrasts this straightforward physics experiment with what he suggests are the more complex studies of natural history. Here he elides his subject not with physics but with human history.

At the book's conclusion, by contrast, this embattled Christian is much keener to reassure his readers that his theories are compatible and commensurate with religious faith. As such, he gestures towards a God who had "originally breathed [life] into a few forms or into one" (490). This hint, insufficient to prevent furore, was amplified in the second edition with an inserted "by the Creator," and an additional comment from an anonymised Charles

Kingsley that divine creation of a single original form offers “just as noble a conception of the Deity” (Darwin 481; Kingsley). In 1859, at least, Darwin was keen to reassure readers that there was order at the base of both animal and human life.

This is something of which Eliot seems much less sure. As Karen Mann has traced through *Felix Holt*, the eponymous would-be demagogue repeatedly makes comparisons between people and animals, only to reject their applicability to himself: he “thank[s] Heaven” he is “not a mouse” like Esther Lyon who minds the smell of tallow (Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 140). He looks scathingly back on the period of debauchery when he “was making a hog of [him]self.” (142) And he describes self-interested election candidates as “cod-fish” unlike himself (238). Mann comments, “One is tempted to remark that it is his very condemnation of the animal nature of man which brings about Felix’s downfall” (208). It is his “attempts to separate his animal nature from his thinking nature (and so deny the former)” that lead to “repressive behaviour” and a compromising lack of self-awareness (Mann 208–9). In Mann’s examples, where Felix is making the comparisons, we know clearly who is human and who is animal. But when we widen our net to examine free indirect discourse and narratorial commentary, the distinctions become much more blurred.

The narrators of *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* repeatedly employ transferred imagery – using equivalents from elsewhere on the evolutionary scale – to allow them (and us) to laugh sardonically at the petty struggles of Eliot’s characters. In *Middlemarch*, the eternally prevaricating and hopelessly outmoded scholar Mr. Casaubon hopes that when he finally finishes his magnum opus *The Key to All Mythologies*, he will be able to snub “his old acquaintance Carp,” “the author of that depreciatory recension which was kept locked in a small drawer of Mr Casaubon’s desk, and also in a dark closet of his verbal memory” (314). This initial choice of appellation might by itself simply be a Dickensian kind of naming, a



wordplay on the notion of “carping” critics. On the next page, however, the free indirect discourse returns to reflect on Casaubon’s planned monograph:

[T]here was to be a Latin dedication about which everything was uncertain except that it was not to be addressed to Carp: it was a poisonous regret to Mr. Casaubon that he had once addressed a dedication to Carp in which he had numbered that member of the animal kingdom among the *viros nullo ævo perituros*, a mistake which would infallibly lay the dedicator open to ridicule in the next age, and might even be chuckled over by Pike and Tench in the present. (315)

As Keith Thomas, David Salter and others have traced through medieval and early modern literature, animals’ proximity to – but difference from – humans have long made animal analogies a powerful means for considering what makes us human (Thomas; Salter). Eliot’s choice of fishy names can be seen as belonging to this age-old tradition of caricaturing or archotyping character types through animals, what John Berger describes as “putting on a mask ... to unmask” (18). This fishy naming, however, does not show animals “fading away” (Berger 18), but in its play on taxonomy, seems to expose Eliot’s anxiety at their (our) omnipresence. The marvel of Eliot’s work is that we cannot know – and never know – to what extent this is a joke. Is Casaubon himself making this joke? Or – more plausibly – is the narrator making this joke at his expense? If so, our trust in his solidity as a realist character (with an “equivalent centre of self”) is momentarily shaken, as he briefly becomes a caricature (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 243). Why would Eliot, famed as the creator of three-dimensional, fleshed-out characters, choose to reduce Casaubon to caricature here? Perhaps to show that this is how he views others. The technique identifies him as someone so absorbed with his own self-aggrandizement that he can forget the equal consciousness of his fellow humans.

In a similarly unsettling passage in *Felix Holt*, Eliot makes a more explicit link between animals and evolutionary ancestry. In her description of the tragic aristocrat Mrs. Transome's preoccupation with family lineage, she substitutes humans with animal equivalents:

[G]enealogies entered into her stock of ideas, and her talk on such subjects was as necessary as the notes of the linnet or the blackbird. She had no ultimate analysis of things that went beyond blood and family – the Herons of Fenshore or the Badgers of Hillbury. (494)

The first two animals (linnet and blackbird) function in a conventional simile. The second, however, is rather stranger: are they humans with animal names, or (imaginary) animals being set up as humans? This strange elision pulls in two different directions: it animalizes humans (Mrs. Transome as much as those imaginary “Hérons” and “Badgers”) but it also humanizes animals, “destabilizing boundaries in both directions” as Denenholz Morse and Danahay describe the Darwinian effect (2). Beer offers a useful description of Eliot's tone when referring directly to the idea of natural selection, as a “faintly facetious orotund style ... to which she is driven by ideas that cause her deep disquiet and which she cannot yet repudiate” (*Darwin's Plots* 147). The “facetious orotund” nature of these allusions make them hard to pin down to any single implication. Such images as that of the “Hérons of Fenshore” and “Badgers of Hillbury” remind Eliot's first readers of the fluid and even artificial nature of the division between humans and other organisms. It even suggests that our actions might be biologically determined.

We can see both the familiarity of Eliot's metonymy and its radicalism by comparing it with a superficially similar moment of novelistic mockery towards characters who emphasize lineage at the expense of self-awareness. In Gaskell's novella “My Lady Ludlow” (1858–59), set similarly back in time (here into the 1800s), our protagonist's mother claims a measure of social worth from a treasured “pair of ruffles ... which could not

be bought new for love or money” (9). These “showed, as she said, that her ancestors had been Somebodies, when the grandfathers of the rich folk, who now looked down upon her, had been Nobodies – if, indeed, they had any grandfathers at all” (9–10). Locating her personal value in the past, she shares an approach to genealogy with *Felix Holt’s* Mrs. Transome. Both characters approach the issue of inheritance so fixated on personal validation that they fail to notice that the possession of forebears is a trait common to all living beings.

Gaskell even makes her aristocrat compare herself with animals. Lady Ludlow attempts to disassociate herself from animals as a mark of her good breeding, but the attempt is surreptitiously undermined in its narration. In a discursive passage about her superior sense of smell, Lady Ludlow expresses distaste for musk, because

no scent derived from an animal could ever be of a sufficiently pure nature to give pleasure to any person of good family, where, of course, the delicate perception of the senses had been cultivated for generations. She would instance the way in which sportsmen preserve the breed of dogs who have shown keen scent; and how such gifts descend for generations among animals, who cannot be supposed to have anything of ancestral pride, or hereditary fancies about them. (46)

Like Mrs. Transome, who unconsciously associates herself with animals in her attempts at genealogical pride, Lady Ludlow unwittingly associates herself with hunting dogs to bolster her claim to superior qualities: were her ancestors really bred for their sense of smell? In its narration here, her claim is implicitly subverted. By reminding us that dogs are innocent of “ancestral pride, or hereditary fancies,” our narrator suggests that Lady Ludlow *does* have both these traits, with “fancies” in particular suggesting that this superhuman sense of smell may be merely illusory. Gaskell, however – writing, pre-*Origin*, in 1858 – is not really eliding her aristocrat with those dogs: merely suggesting that she is deluded in the claim to

superiority she makes through them. Eliot's post-*Origin* novels, by contrast, introduce an unsettling fluidity between humans and animals.

In *Felix Holt*, we also catch a glimpse of how characters' deluded self-aggrandizement can be passed on to the next generation: not by biological but by material inheritance, and by the upbringing that comes with it. At the end of the scene in which Felix's mother and the little boy she cares for appear uninvited at Transome Court, the infant heir Harry raises a protest against "the threatened departure of Job, who had seemed an invaluable addition to the menagerie of tamed creatures" (546). This momentary insight into the mind of the toddler reflects badly on the pampered but isolated upbringing he has had from his father. Harold Transome's relative disregard for his son, leaving him overseas to arrive belatedly at Transome Court in the care of a servant, has stunted Harry's emotional development, leading him to believe that other human beings exist simply to serve in his "menagerie." Eliot's choice of the term "menagerie" – the preserve of royalty and aristocracy – adds a critique of class relation too, eliding the dehumanizing effects of both species and class division. Those from the working underclass are perceived as sub-human playthings just as much as other animal species are. Here, therefore, Eliot highlights how those who think of other humans as animals tend – fallaciously – to exempt themselves from their own categories.

This social commentary is something for which Eliot is famous, but the comic dimension of this is rarely acknowledged, nor its propensity to be expressed through cross-species elision and even substitution. Eliot is often seen as a highly moral, even moralizing writer, and even during her lifetime her writings were often treated in a rather worshipful, almost ossified way. This is nowhere better epitomised than in *Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse: Selected from the Works of George Eliot* (1871), the book compiled by her devoted fan Alexander Main. He took chosen passages out of an often

ironic context, to transform them into aphorisms (see Main). One classic example of this is her avowal, in *Felix Holt*, that “there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life.” However, this is followed by a rather strange example of this doctrine:

... from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare. Even in that conservatory existence where the fair Camelia [*sic*] is sighed for by the noble young Pineapple, neither of them needing to care about the frost or rain outside, there is a nether apparatus of hot-water pipes liable to cool down on a strike of the gardeners or a scarcity of coal. (129)

Although the full quotation was included in Main’s book, that second half is unsurprisingly not often used as an aphorism. Why does Eliot choose to undercut herself like this? The passage opens with another discussion about class and status, and an admission of the practical and instrumental relationships between humans and other species. The “primeval milkmaid” exploits her cow, but is also in thrall to its instinctive actions; gardeners (who might go on strike) are necessary to maintain the hothouse atmosphere required for the growing of camellias, pineapples and the young ladies and gentlemen whose lives are lived among such things. At this point the transferred imagery also becomes complete elision: we cannot know with certainty whether Camelia and Pineapple are standing in for humans, or if human characteristics are being assigned to fruit and flowers.

Elision between humans and animals can serve to minimize the reality and equivalent value of those humans – as when Harry Transome sees other lower-status humans as part of his “menagerie” – or in corollary to raise the status of the animals in question. Those who campaigned on behalf of animal rights in the nineteenth century often did so through a fear of facing similarly brutal treatment themselves. As Coral Lansbury has shown, for example, the anti-vivisection movement was fueled by an analogic fear for the

ways that working-class patients could be used for experimentation by middle-class doctors, and from women who saw their repeated physical abasement at the hands of men echoed in the repeatedly vivisected “Old Brown Dog” (Lansbury). G. H. Lewes, by contrast, a notable proponent of vivisection, included both human and non-human species in his *Physiology of Common Life* (1859–60), but cautioned in *Sea Side Studies* (1858) against the self-projecting “anthropomorphism” of reading either one into the other (Lewes 255, 365; see Richardson 143).

Much of the power of recent human-animal studies research comes from its insistence on the need to take material animal existence seriously.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, its scholars have questioned whether animal rights are fundamentally aided by elision with those of marginalized human groups (Lansbury; Fudge; Ortiz-Robles). Does this kind of elision subsume and eclipse as much as foreground? Erica Fudge affirms that the field of human-animal studies cannot be “the history of animals; such a thing is impossible. Rather, it is the history of human attitudes towards animals” (Fudge 6). As Wittgenstein highlighted in an oft-repeated phrase, even if a lion could speak, we would not understand what it said.

To what extent is Eliot’s elision about “real” plants and animals? Real animals of course also populate these novels: the leveret whose poaching by young Dagley exposes the uncomfortable limits of Mr Brooke’s landlordly benevolence; the horses whose practical and symbolic importance have recently been highlighted (Linley); the pet dog with which Sir James attempts to woo Dorothea, only to be told (with perhaps unintentional candor) that she risks “treading on it. I am rather short-sighted” (*Middlemarch* 53; see Auerbach). Nonetheless, the interrelationship between the “real” and the figurative is much more permeable than any binary might suggest. Harriet Ritvo, for example, has shown not only how much the treatment of animals in the nineteenth century can illuminate social concerns, but also how our perception of “real” animals is shaped by their changing taxonomy and

categorization (*The Animal Estate; The Platypus and the Mermaid*). Steve Baker's work highlights just how pervasive, and flexible, animals are as cultural signifiers (especially for comic purposes), in cartoons, advertising and beyond: they "can apparently be used to mean anything and everything" (4). He insists, therefore, that "the representational, symbolic and rhetorical uses of the animal must be understood to carry as much conceptual weight as any idea we may have of the 'real' animal, and must be taken just as seriously" (10). As Akira Mizuta Lippit has described it, following Berger, "the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal" (Berger 7; Lippit 165).

It is nonetheless worth being precise about the nature of the figurative language at work in Eliot's usage here. There *are* animal metaphors in Eliot's work, of course, and Chase Pielak (using Lippit's term) has recently traced the "animetaphors" that pervade *Daniel Deronda*, as Gwendolen gradually shifts from a Lamia-esque "serpent," via a horse that Grandcourt seeks to break, to a "kitten" and a "lap-dog," to a "white doe" after Grandcourt's death (Pielak 99; *Daniel Deronda* 12, 375, 547, 697). As Beer encapsulates, "Metaphor is pre-occupied with likeness in the unlike. It eschews origins. It marks out connection, not descent" (*George Eliot* 117). In my analysis, however, metaphor is not the most apt term. The crucial thing here is the elision: we do not know which is being described in terms of the other. Are "Camelia" and "Pineapple" primarily fruit and flowers, or pampered aristocracy? Thus we can best view this as metonymy: animals (and occasionally fruit and flowers) standing in for humans, to an extent that we do not know which to privilege. While metaphor often highlights the distinctness of the objects being compared – they have only one point of similarity – metonymy acts to elide the two sides of the equation.

At certain points in *Middlemarch* those metonymic animals and some real ones do come into contact. This marks the apogee of human-animal elision, in the scene near the end

of the novel that precipitates Dorothea's night of anguish about her love for Will Ladislaw. This scene, in which Dorothea goes for tea at Mr. Farebrother's house, is associated with natural history from the outset by a comparison of Farebrother to "White of Selborne" (842). He

had just set up a pair of beautiful goats to be pets of the village in general, and to walk at large as sacred animals. The evening went by cheerfully till after tea, Dorothea talking more than usual and dilating with Mr Farebrother on the possible histories of creatures that converse compendiously with their antennae, and for aught we know may hold reformed parliaments; when suddenly some inarticulate little sounds were heard which called everybody's attention.

"Henrietta Noble," said Mrs Farebrother, seeing her small sister moving about the furniture-legs distressfully, "what is the matter?"

"I have lost my tortoise-shell lozenge-box. I fear the kitten has rolled it away," said the tiny old lady, involuntarily continuing her beaver-like notes." (843)

The lozenge-box was a gift from "Mr. Ladislaw", and Mrs. Farebrother explains the depth of her devotion to this gentleman with the comment, "If Henrietta Noble forms an attachment to any one ... she is like a dog – she would take their shoes for a pillow and sleep the better" (843). As the realization grows in Dorothea's mind that she might not be the only person who loves Ladislaw – indeed, that she is the only one of Ladislaw's devotees who has *not* expressed her love for him – she finds "her heart ... palpitating violently" (a repeated term, as we will see) and succumbs at last to her grief (843). Throughout this passage, the emphasis is on the interchangeable nature of the hierarchy between humans and animals: any confidence we might have in being loftily superior to the animal kingdom is misplaced and foolish. Animals can be "sacred"; the political state of insect society might be more advanced than that of Britain in May 1832; an elderly woman can sound like a "beaver" and behave like a "dog". This is not an equal relationship, because a "tortoise" can be



transformed into a gift from Germany; but a “kitten” can nonetheless take this treasured possession away.

This is figured as a moment of crisis, of imminent breakdown, precisely through the profusion of animals. As Pielak has characterized it, in Eliot’s novels, “Animal imagery appears at the edge of the human, the point at which humanity gains and loses subjectivity .... Images of animals stand in the linguistic gaps – in the places words fail – to figure the subject. Animals appear at the end of the ability of language to mean” (99). Inarticulacy has long been one of the markers used by philosophers to distinguish animal from human species (see Midgley). But elision, not differentiation, is visible in the above scene. In line with Pielak’s analysis, Dorothea and Henrietta Noble’s anxiety and pain is exactly what prevents them from being able to articulate it. This also mirrors writers’ sense of inadequacy in trying to express the multifarious texture of lived – and living – history. “[T]he end of the ability of language to mean” could be a description of that sense of the overwhelming multiplicity of contemporaneous experience.

### **All organisms, or just all humans? Darwinism vs. Humanism**

A profusion of animals, therefore, means trouble. Eliot might question the superiority of humans to other species, but her narrative voice oscillates between profusion and singularity, humanism and cross-species communion. The very next scene – arguably one of the most famous in *Middlemarch* – seems to demonstrate that engagement with other living selves is both necessary and valuable. This scene follows a night in which Dorothea has come to realize, with agonized lament, that she loves Will Ladislaw, and depicts her eventual epiphany.

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back

and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (846)

In this passage, Eliot insists that all individuals, however insignificant or unsung, contribute to an organic unity, namely “life” in “the world,” which ranges across both class and species boundaries. Dorothea’s revelation stems from recognizing that she is “part” of this unitary life: it is a revelation of interpersonal sympathy in the broadest sense.

What is not commonly noted in readings of this passage is how Eliot’s choice of adjectives – “involuntary” and “palpitating” – mirrors the equally famous earlier passage that reflects on finding Dorothea “in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 226). Here, the narratorial voice comments:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. 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 stupidity. (226)

Few actions are more “involuntary” than the growing of the grass; and what better illustrates the term “palpitating” than the beating of a squirrel’s heart? By the end of the novel, therefore, Dorothea has achieved what the narrator had earlier claimed to be impossible: to be conscious of the “roar which lies on the other side of silence,” but to withstand it and use it for “the growing good of the world” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 896). When Eliot describes the “diffusive” actions of unsung individuals as “unhistoric acts” in the novel’s final sentence, she both foregrounds and negates her own point (*Middlemarch* 896). By their very

frequency and ordinariness, such actions – and the creatures who enact them – are decidedly part of history.

This pair of passages seems to suggest that an organic view of life on Earth, which refuses hierarchies between humans, plants and animals, can be liberating. Such an organicist doctrine, however, is presented in Eliot's writings as raising as many challenges as it solves. Its problems quickly become apparent once we examine the broad intertextual antecedents of the "roar on the other side of silence." Neil Hertz has shown how the image echoes John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). However, while the *Middlemarch* passage has often been taken as a condemnation of the narrowly blinkered and callous sympathies of human society, Hertz glosses Locke as "prais[ing] the aptness with which the human senses are scaled to Man's position in the hierarchy of creatures" (40). The seventeenth-century philosopher muses that

If our sense of hearing were but a thousand times quicker than it is, how would a perpetual noise distract us. And we should in quietest retirement be less able to sleep or meditate than in the middle of a sea-fight. ... [The individual of acute hearing] would be in a different world from other people: nothing would appear the same to him and others. (Locke 403)

As Hertz points out, "Locke's language converts a scaled continuum into a binary opposition" (41). What could be deemed a biological or social advantage – acute hearing – is rendered a handicap, forcing the individual suffering from this malady into a position of social alienation, unable to identify with his fellow men.

The most direct source of Eliot's intertextuality was probably not Locke's *Essay* but an article "On the Physical Basis of Human Life" by T. H. Huxley, published in February 1869 as Eliot was just beginning to write her novel. Huxley himself clearly drew on Locke for his depiction of "the wonderful noonday silence of a tropical forest," which

is, after all, due only to the dullness of our hearing; and could our ears catch the murmur of those tiny Maelstroms, as they whirl in the innumerable myriads of living cells which constitute each tree, we should be stunned, as with the roar of a great city. (Huxley 132)

The intertextual echo through the three passages extends beyond ideas to specific imagery: all three referring to the sense of “hearing,” and Eliot picking up on Huxley’s term “roar” that closely echoes Locke’s “noise.” Hertz uses Immanuel Kant’s distinction between the “dynamically” and “mathematically” sublime to illuminate Eliot’s anxiety about “that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (Kant 78). The “dynamic” is that conventional Romantic sublime of huge, awe-inspiring scale: landscapes, storms, etc. The “mathematical sublime” results by contrast from overwhelming multiplicity, in Hertz’s words “a sort of cognitive overload, a losing track of what one is taking in” (1). This is none other than the problem already highlighted as a particular concern of post-Darwinian experience: that of filtering and distilling the multiplicity of contemporaneous experience into any singular narrative.

So can interpersonal sympathy come from a closer attention to the suffering of others? Even within that famous “squirrel” passage, the answer is not so straightforward. In the first place, does that famous “roar on the other side of silence” signify suffering? (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 226) Eliot evokes it in the context of “tragedy,” specifically the tragedy of “frequency,” but it would be difficult to argue convincingly that the life and growth of squirrels and grass equates directly to suffering: if anything, they imply a pastoral idyll. Secondly, does it signify an extension of sympathy to all species? The animal simile might seem to suggest it, but any such reading is instantly undermined by Eliot’s specific use of it to illustrate ‘all ordinary *human* life’ (226; my italics). Such is the power of Eliot’s work that it can move and compel us even when its nuances are so diffused as to self-contradict.

What is more, even though *Middlemarch* is often read as advocating heightened attention to the suffering of others, comparison with Eliot's 1859 novella "The Lifted Veil" challenges any such reading. Its main character, Latimer, suffers from a terrible and destructive malady, namely the uncontrollable ability to read other people's minds. This he describes, in strikingly similar terms to those used in the *Middlemarch* passage, as "like a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness" ("The Lifted Veil" 18). It becomes increasingly clear over the course of the text that being "preternaturally" sensitive to the minutiae of human suffering – and human selfishness – is actually counterproductive, inducing inertia, "weariness and disgust," rather than constructive action (18). After his first extended prophetic experience, Latimer comments, "Already I had begun to taste something of the horror that belongs to the lot of a human being whose nature is not adjusted to simple human conditions" (12). Far from equipping Latimer to interact more fruitfully in human society, it serves to alienate him from those around him.

An example of microscopic sensitivity being similarly counterproductive can be seen in Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). The scene in question starts with an admission that Daniel was in the

sort of contemplative mood perhaps more common in the young men of our day – that of questioning whether it were worth while to take part in the battle of the world: I mean, of course, the young men in whom the unproductive labour of questioning is sustained by three or five per cent on capital which somebody else has battled for. (185)

This is another subtle undulation between different perspectives: first, a sympathetic alignment with Daniel's predicament; then a satirical undercutting, revealing Daniel to be just as disingenuous as the artificially sheltered Camelia and Pineapple. On this particular evening, rowing on the Thames in a "contemplative mood," Daniel spends a few minutes

forgetting everything else in a half-speculative, half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he was looking at, thinking how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the landscape, – when the sense of something moving on the bank opposite him ... made him turn his glance thitherward. (189)

What he finds is the destitute Mirah, believing that no-one in the world cares for her, and about to try and kill herself. As Rebecca Mitchell has argued, for all Eliot's focus on altruism, in fact what her characters require is not a complete identity or elision with those around us, but a recognition of their otherness, their alterity (312). The "veil" that is lifted for Latimer is necessary to keep us all on an equal footing with those around us. Without it, we become like Locke's hypothetical man of acute hearing, who is cut off from his fellow human-beings. This is a bodily as well as an intellectual veil: it is partly the physiological difference between us and those Lowick parsonage ants that prevents us knowing about their community's proximity to "reformed Parliaments."

Thus, a wider examination of Eliot's late fiction evokes both the proximity and the alterity of humans and animals. Eliot recognizes our propensity to anthropomorphize through self-projection, just as she had argued for God as a self-projection of humanity in her translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1843; translation 1854). However, she effectively rejects as impossible any extension of sympathetic union to animals. My analysis suggests that this results not primarily from any intellectual deficiencies of theirs, but through ours. While Eliot has often been read as condemning that "wadd[ing]" of stupidity, I propose that, in a way now being productively challenged by modern human-animal studies, she views some calibrated "dullness" of our emotional hearing as essential so that we may prioritize communication with fellow humans and function in the world. She ultimately suggests that although humans may desire a

relationship between the individual and their surroundings (whether that be contemporary history, or other animals) in which there is no alterity between the two, our own sympathetic limitations are such that it would be unbearable.

When animals appear in uncanny profusion in Eliot's fiction, it is generally a sign that characters are following the wrong path. The presence of animals in such carnivalesque, topsy-turvy positions evidently shows Eliot struggling with a post-Darwinian universe. But although she uses Darwinian rhetoric in ways that recognize the biological proximity between humans and animals, she ultimately advances a humanist philosophy that refutes her one-time confidant Herbert Spencer's celebration of the "survival of the fittest." It argues that what marks out humans from other species is that they have a solemn duty towards one another. Fudge reminds us how history is intrinsically founded on setting ourselves apart. She and others in human-animal studies seek to conceive a new historical mode that takes Foucault's destabilizing insights further by "go[ing] beyond the human" (Fudge 14). A century and a half earlier, by contrast, Eliot recognized the proximity of humans and animals but could not fit them into history. In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874) a few years after *Middlemarch*, Nietzsche would write of how the placid cow is lucky because it lives solely in the moment, with no memory and thus no "chain" of history to drag around in its wake (61). He suggests that one of "man's" problems is that "he refuses to be like an animal" (60). For Eliot, however, our historicism is what makes us human.

The implications of Darwinian theory are manifold and potentially conflicting, which is why so many Victorian intellectuals, even those who would claim the new label of "scientist," resisted or remodeled it in their own image. His non-directional, constantly diffusive plots were too horrifying for some to countenance. Eliot, by contrast, going beyond the all-connectedness traced by Beer, hones in on and gives expression to one of its

most discomfoting aspects, overwhelming multiplicity. This arises, I would argue, from her fascination and concern with representing her society's recent and rapidly changing past, and shaping it into the comprehensible narrative of what we would call contemporary history. The multiplicity of contemporaneous experience is multiplied a thousand-fold when we expand our perception to include other species.

## Notes

[1] These include Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849; set 1811–12); Elizabeth Gaskell's "My Lady Ludlow" (1858-9; set through a series of bracketing narrators in the 1780s, 1790s and 1800s), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863; set in the 1790s) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866; set in the late 1820s and early 1830s). For further discussion of the divergence between history and novel genres in narrating the recent past, see Helen Kingstone, *Victorian narratives of the recent past: within living memory* (Palgrave, 2017).

[2] For example, Donna Haraway lambasts Deleuze and Guattari's vision of 'Becoming-Animal' because of what she sees as their disregard, even 'scorn', for 'all that is mundane and ordinary' in 'actual animals' (Haraway 27; Deleuze and Guattari).

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