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Sympathy

For Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), the Victorian Angel in the House was dangerous. The Angel's injunction to women to 'be sympathetic' threatened the very existence of the woman writer – or, at least, those women writers who wanted to use their own minds and have their own say.¹ In Woolf's great interwar novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), such 'womanly sympathy' is at once Mrs Ramsay's domestic gift and her burden and the novel explores its extraordinary power as well as its costs for women. But while Woolf was right to diagnose sympathy as one of the constitutive elements of an idealized maternal femininity and a painfully restrictive domestic ideology, her target is narrow and consequently misses the plural and flexible roles of sympathy through the Victorian period. In particular, it mutes the importance of the attempt fully to secularize sympathy by making it part of the evolutionary account of species development. While the explicit evolutionary explanation of why and how we feel for others was largely in the hands of male scientists and philosophers, it was literature – and novels especially – that modeled and realized sympathy, and women writers who were central to this epistemological task. Indeed, sympathy was key to how women writers in the nineteenth century sought to configure both women's place in a changing world and, simultaneously, the expanding possibilities of fiction writing. Neither the Angel resplendent nor her slaying at the hands of her writing daughter fully captures how the concept and practice of sympathy developed and exerted effects across the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Beginning with why sympathy was such an important term for the Victorians, I first consider how it was mobilized as a response to the material and social challenges of industrialism. In the hands of Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), sympathy is a key medium for binding within, and reaching across, class and gender boundaries. Gaskell's complex rendering of sympathy is ultimately supported by the Christian principle of God's self-giving love. In sympathy's secular re-working, by contrast, new possibilities and unintended consequences emerge. George Eliot (1819-80) is the key figure here as she sought with great success to make sympathy the bedrock of the realist novel's moral and formal work in secularizing social contexts. By the 1870s, Eliot was hard against the implications of sympathy's relocation within naturalistic accounts. Charles Darwin (1809-82) had tried to ground the evolutionary rationale for sympathy by making it a quality shared by all social animals. Others, including the man who vied with Darwin for being first to describe evolution through natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), saw sympathy as fundamental to retaining human distinctiveness and thus the special social, intellectual, and moral qualities of 'civilized' human societies. These accounts contained versions of sympathy that readily fitted existing moral economies – but they also gave rise to striking alternatives. These included the imperative to sanction seemingly harsh action (such as withholding aid to the needy or using animals for experimentation) on the understanding that sympathy must facilitate long-term goals of social progress.² Sympathy was evoked and claimed by all side. Contested in this way and doing service in new moral economies, it was a burdened concept.

This moment of conceptual strain for sympathy helps shape Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Notoriously peculiar within Eliot's oeuvre, its genre-pushing experimentation and surprising gothic quality have much to do with these contemporary debates about sympathy's moral efficacy in the context of modern

European society. Eliot had long worked to solder together ethic and aesthetic in a realism that made deeply particularized human experience the material of moral consciousness and development. The decades following her death in 1880 saw a variety of attacks on this relation – including, for example, the avowedly *unsympathetic* narrator of the naturalist novel, neutrally observing and reporting what she sees. The critique of sympathy at the end of the century is contemporaneous with the ending of a distinctively ‘Victorian’ realism of which Eliot is often held as the greatest exponent. This essay argues, however, that in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot was already pushing to its limits sympathy and (and in) its relation to realist form.

Inherited sympathy

The Victorians inherited sympathy from the eighteenth century and it arrived heavily freighted, lodged amidst other important and morally charged terms such as sentiment and sensibility. For eighteenth-century philosophers and novelists like Lord Shaftesbury and Laurence Sterne, the capacity to feel vividly and spontaneously for another’s plight was fundamental to being human. The varied accounts of sympathy that proliferated in the eighteenth century were urgent ripostes, designed to counter the growing power of philosophies of self-interest.³ Challenging Christian and moral orthodoxy, self-interest was presented in these philosophies as not accidentally compatible with public good but absolutely necessary for it. Such alarming ideas gained traction amidst swiftly changing social and economic conditions, characterized by financial, agricultural, and industrial change, scientific and technical innovation, and accompanying social transformation. The political scientist, Ryan Patrick Hanley, sees sympathy as ‘a sophisticated philosophical response to a pressing practical challenge’ involving profound changes in social organization whereby ‘societies of strangers emerged alongside more traditional and familiar communities of intimates’.⁴ Against a post-Hobbesian view of the social contract as founded in and by fear of strife and conflict, sympathy promised to ground sociality in genuine and spontaneous fellow feeling, not necessarily requiring Christian injunction or sanction, and thus fitted for secular moral business.

This version of natural feeling was modified and popularized by one of the most influential philosophical interventions in eighteenth-century debate about feeling, Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). In Smith’s account, the mechanism of sympathetic fellow-feeling is imagination: we sympathize because of our ability to ‘chang[e] places in fancy’ with others.⁵ Bodily senses can only ever give access to the self, but imagination pushes extension out beyond that self towards others. It makes pity both human and social. Sympathy for Smith is a process of mutual emotional adjustment between people. This constant adjustment and sympathetic reciprocity is necessarily also a process of self-modification, tempering self in relation to the others who make up a wider sociality. Smith’s account resolves the moral opposition and allows for the conflation of self and social interests inasmuch as the pleasures and pains of the self are a necessary part of sympathy’s happiness-fostering propensity.

Smithian imagination also consolidated sympathy’s relation to artistic and literary sensibility: to feel sympathy for others in appropriate ways was a marker of taste. Those with the most exquisite taste and refinement, according to the new ‘cult’ of sensibility, felt most intensely – including feeling that might prompt benevolent

action in the world. Understood as a matter of taste and judgment, sympathy was readily ascribed class and gender value. According to the literary critic Jonathan Lamb, Smith overtly distinguished between propriety and humanity in the task of sympathizing, occasionally aligning the former with men and the latter with women. The ‘becoming use of what is our own’ – our own sensibly felt sensations – implies an agency and self-direction commensurate with propriety. Propriety is the foundational type of judgment in Smith’s system and, in contrast, ‘humanity’ requires ‘no great exertion of the sense of propriety’ because it consists in doing ‘what this exquisite sympathy would of its own accord prompt us to do’.⁶ In women, sympathy can simply occur, welling up from natural sources, unconstrained by the discretion and discrimination required by propriety, and thus nullifying women’s active moral agency.

Womanly sympathy and the condition of England

This imprimatur of naturalness made an adjectively modified ‘womanly’ sympathy central to the development of middle-class domestic ideology in the nineteenth century and the ‘separate spheres’ appropriate to men and women. John Ruskin’s celebrated Manchester lecture to ‘queenly’ women judged men ‘feeble in sympathy’ and open to a ‘misrule and violence’ that could be stayed only by women’s greater ability to ‘feel the depths of pain, and conceive the way of its healing’. Nevertheless, it is striking in ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ (1865) – especially its closing call to middle-class women’s wider social conscience – how insubstantial and inefficacious this ‘natural’ womanly sympathy actually seems to be. Socially privileged women are far too ready, Ruskin chides, to ignore social ills and the suffering of others, too content with their own narrow comforts, averting eye, mind, and imagination from the ‘wild grass’ and agony beyond their rose-bedecked garden walls.⁷

For Ruskin, as for many Victorians, it was still Jesus Christ’s compassion that modeled a world of sustaining sympathy.⁸ Christian precept was seen as imperiled, however, threatening to ebb away in a modern world riven with class conflict and bullish about the unassailable value of self-interest. From the Christian fortitude of Guy Morville in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) to the posturing of Josiah Bounderby in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), novelists of all kinds, both men and women, dramatized the moral implications of self-interest and its alternatives. But valuing feeling was not straightforward for the Victorians, with or without religious belief. Even Evangelicalism, the ‘heart religion’ that so valued feeling, was deeply concerned that untrustworthy and unchecked internal impulses might promote self-indulgence.⁹ Thomas Carlyle, for example, was a fierce critic of feeling in this respect.¹⁰ Dickens, by contrast, though thoroughly at one with Carlyle’s fulminations against the ‘machine’ sensibility of utilitarian thought, sought in his fictions and journalism to power up feeling, to translate sympathetic tears into social actions. In his novels, a dazzling mix of satire, melodrama, and realism was intended to make sympathy operative in tackling the grave ‘condition of England’, especially in the nation’s industrial heartlands and its inhumanly bureaucratic cities. Sympathizing conjoins here with the bodily manifestations of sentiment. Readers who laughed and cried at home should and must also be agents for change in the outside world. Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington, prophesied enthusiastically to John Forster on reading *The Chimes* (1844) that: ‘this book will melt hearts and open [the] purse strings’ that fund ameliorative actions.¹¹

But it was women who were more demanded-of and simultaneously more suspect because of their sympathy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was women novelists – some with similar aims to Dickens’ – who probed most deeply into it. Commenting recently on *Mary Barton* (1848), John Sutherland states that ‘one thing [Elizabeth Gaskell] had in huge supply was womanly sympathy’. None of the other (mainly male) social problem novelists of the period, according to Sutherland, had the same ‘overwhelming well of human sympathy which floods through Gaskell’s work’.¹² Gaskell’s Unitarian-inflected Christianity helped shape her intention, in *Mary Barton*, to show a working-class culture bonded by powerful human sympathies that are damaged and frayed by poverty, economic hardship, and brutalized living conditions. Gaskell aimed to humanize ‘labour’, transforming the calculus of its worth. Importantly, though, class unifies more powerfully than gender, even though a woman models sympathy most obviously. Mary’s sympathetic capacities are matched in the men with whom she shares her world, especially those of her increasingly damaged and damaging father, John Barton. Responding to the crisis into which typhoid fever tips an already impoverished family, Barton and his friend Wilson embed their practical help in the dank and unhealthy environment of the Davenport’s basement hovel in ‘heart-service, and love-works of far more value’ than material provision.¹³ *Mary Barton* thus dramatizes the distortion and damage done to internal impulse by external conditions.

A few years later, in *North and South* (1855), the depiction of class-based bonds fractured and strained by the conditions of urban industrialism is replaced by a different kind of investigation of sympathy, focused on the novel’s middle-class protagonist, Margaret Hale. At one level, the lesson Margaret has to learn about the industrial north parallels the hard work of sympathizing across class boundaries that the novel advocates as a means to improve inter-class relations. In this latter domain, the necessary expansion of experience that supports and is supported by imagination and fosters both feeling and ameliorative action takes shape in the experiment in mutuality that ensures John Thornton’s factory workers a decent dinner (445-6). But in Margaret Hale Gaskell also provides a complex portrait of a specifically ‘womanly sympathy’. The phrase is directly used in *North and South* (though not in Gaskell’s other major fictions) during the early days of Margaret’s life in the alien northern industrial city when she is still unsettled, even frightened, by the bold, noisy, and unrestrained crowds who go in and out of the factory gates. It is the girls she warms to first, especially their ‘simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress’.¹⁴ Sympathy here means affinity and, while the narrator assures us that Margaret is glad to respond to their sartorial queries and to ‘half-smile’ back to them, readers are clear that she does not feel genuine reciprocity with these young, fashion-conscious working-class women. The bar to identification, however, is not class but gender.

North and South famously begins with a scene in which Margaret stages ironic resistance to sartorial feminine stereotype, as she stands displaying the beautiful Indian shawls that form a part of her cousin Edith’s wedding trousseau. Everything about this scene works to distinguish Margaret from a gendered communality constituted by women’s ‘love of dress’. She enjoys the shawls for their sensory qualities and when she pictures herself wearing them her pleasure is likened to a child’s, delighted by dressing up. The entrance of a man, Mr Lennox, making the other women uneasily ‘half-ashamed’ of their feminine absorptions, prompts

Margaret to identify with him, not with them: she is only amused, ‘sure of his sympathy in her sense of the ludicrousness of being thus surprised’ (40). Whatever else sympathy may be, for Margaret Hale it is not a given and unproblematically natural quality of her womanhood. Instead, it is a process closely paralleling the efforts with which Margaret gains knowledge.

For, soon enough, Margaret will have little amusement in her life and the sympathy she must manifest in her new circumstances requires exertion, effort, and self-control. In this it is inextricable from the dictation of her religious faith and perhaps little comprehensible apart from it. Her father’s relinquishment of his Church of England living – an impulse of conscience that comes to him as if from outside to drive his action – mutes his paternal responsibility along with his will. Margaret has to step into this breach, learning to practice patience and fortitude within the close spaces of her family as she strives to shed prejudice and ignorance about the wider new world she inhabits. She must develop Smithian propriety, we might conclude. Margaret is a good daughter and churchwoman but, in the wearying period following her mother’s death when she struggles with the inner tumult of her confused feelings for John Thornton, her ‘womanly sympathy’ is far from the spontaneous ‘overwhelming well’ of feeling that John Sutherland detects in Gaskell herself. While Margaret and her father share grief – they draw ‘very close to each other in unspoken sympathy’ (363), for instance, on the first occasion they go out together following Mrs Hale’s death – Margaret is never in a position of unambiguous identification with the sufferings of either parent. In the midst of adversity she has to push herself out of ‘listless langour’ to ‘reward her father’ for his care of her: it is ‘unconscious piety’ that makes her his ‘ready sympathiser’, a broken-down ‘meek spirit of obedience’ discovered in the face of suffering (383; 424).

Womanly sympathy, in Gaskell’s depiction of Margaret Hale, is not a spontaneous and natural response – of affinity, identification, or reciprocated feeling – but a resource that requires great effort of conscious will and self-control, supported fundamentally by her religious faith. Her depiction in this respect implicitly challenges how women appear in the long and contested history of philosophical debate about the value of feeling. In the seventeenth century, Descartes and Spinoza were amongst the philosophers who promoted reason and cognition as the ingredients for self-integrity; they were suspicious of feelings as forces that ‘dictate’ or direct responses, rendering a person un-free, unable to act according to their own will, and therefore liable to be acted upon.¹⁵ One legacy of this division of reason from feeling is that those deemed weakest in reason – women, the working classes, the so-called ‘lower’ races – were habitually configured as more prone to feeling, more in danger of being buffeted by its effects. Writing in the same year as the publication of *Mary Barton*, a contributor to *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* acknowledges that while sympathy is ‘one of the noblest attributes of man, and seems, as it were, the mark of his Divine origin’, it is nevertheless dangerous when unchecked: sympathetic feeling uncontrolled can lead to overwhelming states of pity, contagions of mimicry, and all manner of ‘strange and fatal eccentricities’.¹⁶

This division of feeling from reason was woven into the fabric of debate about political and other forms of modernization. It fuelled anxiety about, and resistance to, the extension of voting right, for instance; and it was an especial feature of attacks against the prospect of women’s enfranchisement. Three years after the passing of the

Second Reform Act, in 1970, *Tinsley's Magazine* tartly reminded its readers that the weakness of sentimental people 'consists in delivering over their own self-sovereignty to a set of lawless and turbulent emotions'. There is 'good reason why women should be excluded from the franchise', the writer concludes, given the sex's 'essentially sentimental nature', governed by unrestrained sympathies rather than the calming force of reason.¹⁷ This was the reason, too, why novels were seen as suspect, particularly for women. In novels, sympathies are manipulated and allowed too free and pleasurable a range. Promiscuous in their reach and consumption, novels bypass or neutralize the forces of restraint and reason upon which, for commentators like James Fitzjames Stephen, railing against popular sensation fiction in the 1860s, social order depends.¹⁸

Evolving sympathy

It was, nevertheless, a woman novelist who, by this same period, had done much to reposition and reenergize sympathy as central simultaneously to secular ethics and to the moral function of the realist novel. In doing so, she also succeeded in promoting the novel as an aesthetic form. George Levine has described this novelist, George Eliot, as 'almost obsessed with sympathy's possibilities'.¹⁹ Eliot saw sympathy as the key to how the mystery of the moral law within might be reframed for a generation of agnostic, scientifically-oriented intellectuals. The career trajectory of the young Marian Evans, from youthful evangelicalism, through the 'Holy War' of her lost Christian faith and, via the freethinking Brays and Hennells, to the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, serves for a model of a distinctively Victorian intellectual upheaval where sympathy is the human face turned foremost against the rejected dogmas of Christianity. In a series of essays for the *Westminster Review* in the 1850s, Eliot attacked Christian teaching that substitutes 'a reference to the glory of God for the direct promptings of the sympathetic feelings'.²⁰ In these essays – though not always explicitly – she was also developing a theory of realism. For example, she lambasts the poet Edward Young for lacking '*genuine emotion*' and for substituting 'pedagogic moralizing' for 'moral, *i.e.* [...] sympathetic emotion' – the very qualities 'found in the details of ordinary life'.²¹ Those details are realist fiction's medium, as Eliot developed it.

Just months after publishing this critique of Young in the *Westminster Review*, Eliot began *Adam Bede* (1859), cementing her reputation on its appearance as a major novelist and promoting her realist creed, 'creep[ing] servilely after nature and fact' to give 'a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind'. The famous defence of realism at the beginning of Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* has sympathy at its core: Dutch painting delights the narrator because it provides 'a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence'.²² Eliot saw the novel as most appropriate to the facilitation of sympathy – stirring its working in readers' minds, hearts, and guts – because it deals in particularities rather than generalities. 'All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims', she wrote in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and elsewhere in the same novel she famously condemned the move from 'picture to diagram' that turns to 'offense' the 'aesthetic teaching' that strives to grasp life's complexities.²³ The novel's ethical task is 'the extension of our sympathies', and art's value inheres in 'amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'.²⁴

But what, exactly, is sympathy for Eliot and in her novels? By the 1860s and especially the 1870s, Eliot was part of an intellectual environment in which sympathy was being discussed and understood in new ways. As evolutionary ideas deriving from Charles Darwin's biology and Herbert Spencer's philosophy disseminated widely, diverse debate took place about its ethical implications. The origin and function of sympathy figured prominently. In 1864, five years after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), Alfred Russel Wallace questioned whether natural selection really applied to humans. Man 'is social and sympathetic', he argued, and because humans can control and change their environment and are connected by sympathetic bonds, they effectively disable the processes of struggle and adaptation that drive selection in nature.²⁵ In the *Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin acknowledged that sympathy was an important quality of evolved humanity but, while hedging bets about its origin, he insisted that it was shared with other social animals. Sympathy has adaptive use value and thus is a comprehensible manifestation of the natural mechanisms that drive evolutionary change, as Darwin explains:

With mankind, selfishness, experience, and imitation, probably add, as Mr. Bain has shewn, to the power of sympathy; we are led by the hope of receiving good in return to perform acts of sympathetic kindness to others; and sympathy is much strengthened by habit. In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.²⁶

In *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), Alexander Bain, the psychologist Darwin cites here, argued that humans have a tendency mimetically to assume the bodily states, attitudes or movements of others, actions that in turn imply accompanying internal states. But Bain is circumspect about the instinctual mimetic 'tendency' he hypothesizes, calling it a '*disposition*' merely to 'fall in' with the manifested emotions and actions of those around us, a disposition very often blocked by self-oriented energies and demonstrably facilitated by being in unusually unfocused and unabsorbed states of mind. His description consolidates a view of sympathy as antithetic to self-control and the exertion of will, leaving its ethical traction weak.²⁷ Elsewhere in the same book Bain underlines instead the intellectual component of sympathy, associating it not with automatic mimetic behaviour but reflective, cognitive, and 'civilized' human endowment. 'It cannot be too much reflected on that sympathy is an intellectual endowment, and flourishes only under a certain development of intelligence', he insists.²⁸

Sympathy thus toggled uncomfortably back and forth between instinctual body and 'advanced' cognitive consciousness. Such distinctions were at the heart of debate about where humans stood in evolutionary terms. Leslie Stephen was one of many who tried to resolve matters: on this occasion by making sympathy the natural bedrock of reason. "'Put yourself in his place" is not merely a moral precept', he insisted in *The Science of Ethics* (1882): 'it is a logical rule implied in the earliest germs of reason as a description of reasoning itself'.²⁹ But his assertion clashed with influential arguments that were unsettling the very notion of consciousness as the source of motive and action. Psycho-physiological theories posited an instinctual

reflex body-brain system reacting automaton-like to its environment.³⁰ The journal *Mind*, set up in 1876 in part to consolidate the new disciplinary field of psychology, discussed sympathy frequently without resolving these tensions. Indeed, making sympathy psychological intensified rather than solved problems of definition and understanding. Writing to one of Eliot's friends in 1873, George Henry Lewes admitted: 'sympathy is one of the great psychological mysteries – and as a psychologist I am bound to explain it, but can't'.³¹ Sympathy remained dogged by the possibility – celebrated and feared in equal measure – that it is merely a manifestation of the machine-like functioning of group survival.

By the 1870s the 'direct promptings of the sympathetic feelings' that Eliot advocated in the 1850s could easily refer to a physio-psychological system 'automatically' at work. *Daniel Deronda* was written in the decade that saw the most intense discussion and dispute about scientific naturalism's capacity to explain human mind and motive. In Eliot's final novel sympathy is no longer the medium animating the 'faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence' celebrated in *Adam Bede*. But nor is it the source of the 'incalculably diffusive' effect that is Dorothea Brooke's achievement in *Middlemarch*, an affective and cognitive sympathy hard-worked for and hard won.³² From the appearance of the novel's first published part in February 1876, attentive readers were struck by something strange and unfamiliar. Henry James' review for the *Nation* judged 'the threads of the narrative [...] not of the usual commercial measurement, but long electric wires capable of transmitting messages from mysterious regions'.³³ Subsequent critics have described the book as 'pervaded by ghosts and "spirits", by forecasting, foresight and "second sight"', as 'steeped in references to the fringe sciences', and as 'deviating entirely from the codes of domestic realism'.³⁴ Its gateway epigraph, repeated in each of the eight 'Books' that appeared between February and September 1876, warns of gothic terror: 'vengeance, footless, irresistible / As exhalations laden with slow death'.³⁵ Sympathy is surely implicated in what Roger Luckhurst has called the novel's 'strange occult economies'.³⁶ *Daniel Deronda* does not reject sympathy as the ground of ethical and aesthetic value – Eliot had no alternative – but it makes sympathy both 'automatic' and occult, associated with paralysis and with processes of transmission and transmutation. At the same time, the narrative culminates in a future that pushes over the edge of novelistic realism: a decayed English society is left voided and the woman protagonist who has played its rules is profoundly damaged, her own future uncertain and unresolved.

Occult sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*

Daniel Deronda is the novel's preeminent sympathizer. Like Dorothea in *Middlemarch* his sympathy has the quality of 'diffusiveness' but here it is associated with paralysis. Walking in Frankfurt's *Judengasse*, his curiosity fired by Mirah's history, Daniel is newly interested in the 'human types' he sees, an interest stirred by the 'fibre of historic sympathy' (304). The adjective leaves ambiguous whether the history belongs to Daniel or to the Jews, but the sympathy is certainly his and provides excuse for a lengthy parenthesis in which the narrator dissects and analyses the young man's current inertia and lack of purpose, 'traits' that derive from his 'many-sided sympathy' (304). Sympathy is Daniel's life problem, barring him from vocation: 'plenteous and flexible' it hinders his actions. 'A too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralyzing in him that indignation against wrong and that

selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force', the narrator asserts (305). 'Reflective analysis' had been fundamental to sympathizing in Eliot's novels: it is what brings Dorothea Casaubon, in the turbulent early days of her marriage, out of moral stupidity to see that her husband, as all humans, 'had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' (211). But in Daniel's case it is either excessive ('*too* reflective') or – in one of a long and echoing series of sentences about sympathy and reflection – 'neutralizing': '[Daniel's] [...] sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy' (305). In either version reflection has lost anchor in purposive and imaginative mental activity: more mirror than mind, it produces a sympathy that is morally useless.

Daniel will eventually be braced by his relationship with Mordecai and the discovery of his Jewish identity. Following the fateful trip to Genoa to meet his mother, he returns home impatient to be reunited with his newfound destiny:

It was as if he had found an added soul in finding his ancestry – his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man's best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird's-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance. (638)

In the second (and preferred) instance of reasonableness in this passage, the qualifier is unexpected – at least from George Eliot's pen. Surely for most Victorians, most of the time, the task of 'drawing shoulder to shoulder' with kin – or with extrapolations of kin, 'men of like inheritance' – is the obvious position to adopt, where generosity is *least* in need? Almost every account of sympathy sees it beginning with kin and widening from that point. It is precisely this task of widening sympathies that is the core value of Eliot's realism: 'There is nothing I should care more to do [...] than rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs'.³⁷ Equally as perplexing as this apparent retrenchment on the moral work of extending sympathy is what the passage suggests about the discovery of Daniel's soul, or his identity. To borrow Andrew H. Miller's pithy gloss: 'One might say that Deronda has found himself, but only if one also says that such a discovery was of someone else.'³⁸

Daniel's sympathetic relationship to Mordecai depends on a very different mechanism of affinity, characterized most frequently as transmission, transmutation, and transmigration. Mordecai welcomes his own approaching death at the novel's end as 'the divine kiss which [...] gives me full presence in your soul', saying to Daniel: 'Have I not breathed my soul into you?' (683). Earlier in the narrative, waiting on Blackfriar's Bridge, Mordecai has sight of the 'prefigured friend' at whose coming '[o]bstacles, incongruities, all melted' (416). Daniel arrives at the bridge as if conjured by Mordecai's wish. The occult resonance of this moment is intriguingly sanctioned under the imprimatur of scientific method since Daniel's coming is also likened to 'the first stirrings of change that correspond to what in the fervor of prevision [the experimenter's] thought has foreshadowed' (416). The reader is pulled backwards towards alchemy or, with the vantage of time, forwards a few years to the

formation of the Society for Psychical Research, which explicitly dedicated its work to the scientific investigation of paranormal and occult phenomena.³⁹ In this moment, Mordecai attracts the receptive Daniel even as Daniel feels himself resistant, ‘strangely wrought upon’ (417). Sympathy permeates the relation between the men but this sympathy is shorn of all affective, cognitive or intellectual force. It is barely recognizable as the sympathy with which Eliot’s ethics and her realist aesthetic is so closely associated. It is akin to the pull of the lodestone, and seems more at home in earlier classical and renaissance ideas of sympathy as a powerful type of affinity drawing like to like.

In the rule-breaking plot of *Daniel Deronda*, the discovery of his soul propels Daniel away from a morally and spiritually evacuated England and Europe. Gwendolen, the female protagonist set up from the novel’s first page as his likely mate, remains. Her story is dominated by antipathy, sympathy’s original twin, and her own versions of magical thinking and ‘second sight’ are associated with terror and dread. Many readers of *Daniel Deronda* have tried to make redemptive sense of Gwendolen’s plot, stranded as she seems at the novel’s future-looking close in the grammatical hesitancy of her last words, written to Daniel: ‘*It is better – it shall be better with me because I have known you*’ (682). This is a phrase Gwendolen has already voiced, several times, and as early as her encounter with Daniel in the Abbey library: ‘It may be – it shall be better with me’ (383). Between these two instances Gwendolen has moved from egoistic expectation that her imperious wishes will inevitably be fulfilled to a terrifying fear that her thoughts magically make things happen: ‘I knew no way of killing him there, but I did, I did kill him in my thoughts’, she famously confesses of her husband’s drowning (586).

Gwendolen and Mordecai both have second sight.⁴⁰ Mordecai’s is referred to a mysticism sanctioned in the novel: it proves successful for both him and Daniel. But Gwendolen’s is associated with vulnerability and terror. When Daniel urges that her ‘vision’ – her belief in the omnipotence of her thought – can be a ‘preparation’, and that her life can grow ‘like a plant’ towards moral regeneration, his words are likened to the touch of ‘a miraculous hand’, creating the ‘beginning of a new existence’ inside Gwendolen. But this power ‘stirring in her vaguely’ is itself the product of the ‘infused action of another soul’: ‘the new existence’, the narrator tells us, ‘seemed inseparable from Deronda: the hope seemed to make his presence permanent’ (648). Nevertheless, Gwendolen learns, with yet another staggering shock ‘in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck’ (677), that Daniel will leave. In the end, he can only promise that ‘I shall be more with you than I used to be [...] our minds may get nearer’, as he parts from Gwendolen for the final time (679). Is her trust in his thinking about her, and her own ability to think about him, enough to sustain the life possibilities of a young, badly damaged woman in a society the novel so savagely impugns?⁴¹ It is a lot to trust in, and to do so one may need, like Gwendolen, to believe in magical thinking.

In Adam Smith’s account of sympathy, self-modification in relation to a spectator helps weave together the fibres of a society composed of active agents. But women are uncertainly positioned in relation to these mirroring acts of propriety: potentially outside the mutually modifying work of sympathy that stabilizes the social world, they are expected ‘naturally’ to feel for others and their welfare, and they are deemed culpable if and when this feeling fails. By the mid-Victorian period, in the

industrial heartlands of the north, Gaskell shared in a widely felt distress about the 'condition of England'. She made women central to the depiction of working-class bonds in her fictions, figuring political hope modeled on domestic virtues of love and duty. The sympathy that permeates the domestic space, and is practiced so assiduously by Margaret Hale in relation to her flawed parents, is sustained by Christian principle: the need to be loving and to do loving actions grounds Margaret's sympathetic work. Eliot could no longer depend on such ground and so sought to make the detailed attentiveness of her realism an ethical resource. Her realist plots model the cognitive and affective processes of sympathizing that must be achieved and sustained by both character and narrator.

By the 1870s, however, the modern philosophical temper that Eliot had helped to craft had created the conditions for new versions of sympathy. The 'natural' swelling of sympathetic feeling (its 'direct promptings') could now readily be referred to an instinctual body system, working 'automatically' in response to environmental stimuli. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot provides her most finely textured portrait of a sympathetic woman in Dorothea Brooke. Whatever readers' response to the small-scale canvas of her story's close, the 'unhistoric acts' of a 'hidden life' (), there is no doubting Dorothea's agency as she confronts her great life crises. One of the worst, when she believes herself betrayed by Will Ladislaw after seeing him with Rosamond Lydgate, precipitates something like a blueprint of Eliotean sympathy as Dorothea forces herself to reflection ('she forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life' (787)) and is rewarded with an epiphanic opening to the world, a glimpse through her bedroom window of the 'involuntary, palpitating life' (788) of which she is part. Gwendolen, by contrast, has no agency whatsoever when similarly forced to think of another woman's life: confronted by Lydia Glasher at the Whispering Stones she is terrifyingly beset by 'some ghastly vision' as 'in a dream', saying "'I am a woman's life'" (126).

There is very little, in the breaking of Gwendolen's egoism, to suggest that sympathy could restore her to agency. By the end of *Daniel Deronda*, sympathy in its recognizably Eliotean form cannot mend the nation; and if it can help Gwendolen to become 'the best of women', it seems only able to do so through projections and infusions, through transmutation and materialized wishes (682). For Daniel the same forces, severed from reflective consciousness, propel him into new (if uncertain) potential beyond the limits of Europe and the novel. Gwendolen is left to trouble our confidence in both sympathy and realism, underlining the fact that women have always had a harder task with the former (not quite capable of it in its best versions, but condemned for its absence). The pressure of the scientific re-definitions of sympathy with which Eliot was so intensely engaged, and the decayed contemporary world her novel depicts, both work to push sympathy and realism beyond their limits. Although in 1931, Woolf still needed to recall the spectre of 'womanly sympathy' that had so threatened her own professional identity she was by then attacking a caricature that Eliot had already gone way beyond, one that was unsustainable by the time of her last, great novel.

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- ¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (London: The Women's Press, 1979), pp. 57-63; quotation at pp. 60, 59.
- ² For extended treatment of the evolutionary debate, see Rob Boddice, *The Science of Sympathy: Morality, Evolution and Evolutionary Science* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016).
- ³ For a detailed account, including the ways in which sympathy was incorporated into philosophies of self-interest, see Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).
- ⁴ Ryan Patrick Hanley, 'The Eighteenth-Century Context of Sympathy from Spinoza to Kant', in *Sympathy: A History* ed. Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 171-98; at p. 173.
- ⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D. D. Raphael and A. L. MacFie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), p. 10.
- ⁶ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 191; and see Lamb, *Evolution of Sympathy*, p. 85.
- ⁷ John Ruskin, 'Of Queen's Gardens', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 154-74; at pp. 171, 172.
- ⁸ In the scope of this short essay I must leave unexplored the distinction between sympathy and compassion. The model of self-giving love exemplified by Jesus Christ remained important for both terms.
- ⁹ See, on Carlyle, Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987); on evangelicalism, Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought 1785-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) and Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Carlyle's condemnation of 'the Sentimentalist' in 'Characteristics', *Edinburgh Review*, (Dec. 1831).
- ¹¹ Qtd in Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 124-5.
- ¹² John Sutherland, 'An Introduction to *Mary Barton*', 'Discovering Literature – Romantics and Victorians', British Library at <http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-mary-barton> [accessed 23 September 2015]
- ¹³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 68.
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 110.
- ¹⁵ See Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009).
- ¹⁶ Anon., 'Sympathy and Its Eccentricities', *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* 238 (22 July 1848), 59-61; at 59, 61.
- ¹⁷ Anon., 'On Sentiment', *Tinsley's Magazine*, 6 (July 1870), 707-11; at 710.
- ¹⁸ James Fitzjames Stephen, 'Sentimentalism', *Cornhill Magazine*, 10 (July 1864), 65-75; at 74.
- ¹⁹ George Levine, ['Review'] *George Eliot Review*, 45 (2014), (2014), 83-5; at 83.
- ²⁰ 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming', *Westminster Review* (October 1855), in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 158-89; at p.187.
- ²¹ 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: the Poet Young', *Westminster Review* (January 1857), in *Essays of George Eliot*, pp. 335-85; at pp. 371, 379.

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- ²² George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 177, 179.
- ²³ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 518.
- George Eliot to Frederic Harrison, 15 August 1866, in *Letters*, IV, p. ??
- ²⁴ George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review* (July 1856), in *Essays*, pp. 266-99; at pp. 270; 271.
- ²⁵ Alfred Russel Wallace, 'The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man', in *Contribution to the Theory of Natural Selection: A Series of Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1871), pp. 303-331; at p. 312. First delivered to the Anthropological Society of London in 1864, the essay was revised and widely reprinted.
- ²⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1879 edn; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), p. 130.
- ²⁷ Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1865), p. 174.
- ²⁸ Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, p. 87.
- ²⁹ Leslie Stephen, *The Science of Ethics* (London: John Murray, 1907), p. 221.
- ³⁰ The most extreme version of this argument was the theory that consciousness is 'epiphenomenal' and humans functioning automata. See, for this and the larger philosophical and scientific context, Roger Smith, *Free Will and the Human Sciences in Britain, 1870-1910* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013).
- ³¹ George Henry Lewes to Elma Stuart, 19 February 1873, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), V, p. 376.
- ³² George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 838. Further page references are given in the text.
- ³³ Henry James, 'Unsigned notice, *Nation*', in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 362-3; at p. 363.
- ³⁴ These assessments are to be found in Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 92 and Josephine McDonagh, *George Eliot* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p. 88.
- ³⁵ For the epigraph, see George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 1. Further page references are given in the text.
- ³⁶ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 43.
- ³⁷ George Eliot to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Letters*, VI, p. 302.
- ³⁸ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 74.
- ³⁹ The Society for Psychical Research was established in 1882 by men Eliot and Lewes knew well, including Frederick Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and Edmund Gurney, all of whom visited Sunday afternoon gatherings at the Priory.
- ⁴⁰ For detailed discussion of the differences between them, see Pamela Thurschwell, 'George Eliot's Prophecies: Coercive Second Sight and Everyday Thought Reading', in *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 87-105.
- ⁴¹ On the importance of holding each other in mind, see Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 139-69.