

# The Limit of Realism and the Scope of Sympathy: Visuality and Embodiment in “The Lifted Veil”

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**Abstract:** Embedding George Eliot’s story “The Lifted Veil” in the broader transition of visual models in the 19th century from detached reason to embodied perception, this essay argues that Latimer’s detachment from embodied perception aligns with the camera obscura model of visuality, which leads to a loss of the corporeal foundation for sympathy – the ability of stepping out from his self-absorption to accept the participation of others. With a close examination of the so far ignored scene where Latimer encounters Lorenzo Lotto’s Portrait of Lucrezia, this essay discusses the affinity Eliot draws between Latimer’s mindset and the visual mechanics closely related to the ontological valence of paintings, which points to the adaptation of the notion of realistic representation in art history. By juxtaposing Eliot’s literary experiment with artistic ones, this essay undertakes to reconsider Eliot’s reflection on the scope of sympathy in light of her revision of literary realism.

*Keywords:* George Eliot, “The Lifted Veil”, visuality, sympathy, realism

In the motto of chapter 21 of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Eliot describes how an exclusive vision may give rise to the destruction of a soul:

And looking at life parcel-wise, in the growth of a single lot, who having a practised vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of means whereby sequences may be compelled — like that falsity of eyesight which overlooks the gradations of distance, seeing that which is afar off as if it were within a step or a grasp — precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction? (190)

This passage touches upon several key notions that Eliot values much in her career: by looking “parcel-wise”<sup>1</sup>, one relinquishes the connection with others, hence the renunciation of the foundation of sympathy; the loss of “the gradations of distance” implies a disembodied and metaphysical evasiveness from practical life; and the underlying visual metaphors indicate the affinity between visuality, reality, and sympathy. Curiously, all these constituents have been anticipated seventeen years earlier in Eliot’s most extraordinary fiction, “The Lifted Veil” (1859). It is one of the few stories Eliot has ever written, and the only first-person narration except for the experimental essay-novel *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879). Early scholarships on this story mainly focus on two perspectives: how it reflects Eliot’s engagement with pseudoscience such as Spiritualism, mesmerisation, and phrenology, and how the story contributes to the application of Eliot’s aesthetics to her fiction writings; more recent studies comment on the ethical defects of Latimer and their relation with contemporary pathology.<sup>2</sup> Despite the attempts to account for the frequent visual allusions in the story, few critics have noticed the pivotal scene in which Latimer encounters Lorenzo Lotto’s painting of Lucrezia and how the story is embedded in the transition of models of visuality which influences Eliot’s understanding of sympathy as well as her improvement of realism. In this essay, I argue that by relinquishing embodied perceptions, Latimer relapses into the visuality modelled on

camera obscura and thus loses the foundation of sympathy – the ability of stepping out from his self-absorption to accept the participation of others.

Wandering in the Lichtenberg Palace, Latimer declares himself the captive of a portrait of Lucrezia Borgia, fascinated by the “terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face” while at the same time feeling “a strange poisoned sensation” as if he has been “inhaling a fatal odour” (“Veil” 19). Considering the painting’s clear allusion to the Roman heroine Lucretia who suffers the rape of Sextus Tarquinius and kills herself, critics usually deem the indication of Latimer’s fascination obvious enough and leave few comments: it is an ominous foretelling of Latimer’s obsession with the “Water-Nixie” (“Veil” 11), Bertha Grant, and of their uncanny marriage that will ultimately end up with the bizarre revelation of a murderous attempt from Bertha. But the ominous indication apart, the question why Latimer is at the same time fascinated and revulsed by the painting even before he sees the prevision of his unsuccessful marriage remains a question. With a poet manqué’s aesthetic eyes, what does he see in the picture that affects him so much? Or is Latimer’s reaction simply another signature of his creator’s “deep misgiving” (Knoepflmacher 139), displaying what Terry Eagleton proclaims as “the epistemological imperialism” of realism (54)? Only with a closer examination of the painting itself can Latimer’s struggle with the solipsistic immergence in himself be understood. The picture, long misattributed to Giorgione, is in effect a portrait by Lorenzo Lotto (figure 1).



Figure 1. Lorenzo Lotto, Portrait of a Woman inspired by Lucretia

The young lady rendered to be Lucrezia wears a gold wedding band, holding in one hand a drawing in which Lucretia is about to stab herself with a dagger, and pointing to a note writing “NEC VILA IMPVDICA IVCRETIA EXEMPLO VIVET” with her other hand. The note is supposed to be the last words of Lucretia, meaning roughly “Nor shall any immoral one lives as an example”, implying that by committing suicide Lucretia deprives any unchaste women a possible excuse for living (“Description”). In other words, in this painting Lucretia is not lamented but praised for her suicidal preservation of marital chastity, despite the contemptible rape she suffers. Thus, the painting forms a conversational gesture between the Lucretia holding the drawing and the Lucretia holding a dagger,

pointing to what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the ontological valence of the picture: how a picture transcends the conception of a copy which merely imitates and represents, and achieves a separate existence that in a state of semi-detachment relates to the present. The first and foremost important fact of this conversational gesture between the two ladies is that Lucretia does not treat the drawing simply as mere a copy of Lucretia to contemplate or admire: with her left hand holding the corner of the painting and her right hand pointing to it, she treats Lucretia not as someone suffers in the early sixth century BC but acknowledges her as the blessing and the guardian of her own marriage. On the other side, the Lucretia in the drawing leans forward towards Lucretia, her neck stretching woefully and her face bearing a deplorable expression, longing for understanding and compassion. The angle of the two ladies’ torsos being almost parallel, the outreaching hands of both seeming to be referring to each other, the portrait thus creates a liminal space of “semi-detachment” in which “the crux of an aesthetic experience is imagined, or depicted, or understood as residing neither in complete absorption in an artwork nor in critical detachment from it, but in the odd fact of both states existing simultaneously” (Plotz 1). Built upon David Summer’s notion of “doubling distance” of paintings –

that is, viewers are to encounter paintings both as material objects and as representations of a virtual world (Plotz 9), Plotz emphasizes the interactional gestures between the painting and the viewer, as exemplified in the case of Lucrezia and Lucretia. What makes the double encounter in a semi-detached state possible is Gadamer's idea of ontological valence. According to Gadamer, a painting, and especially a portrait as the intensification of representative paintings, is not simply a copy of the original. A copy, like a mirror image, exists "only for someone looking into the mirror, and is nothing beyond its mere appearance", and fulfills itself only in self-effacement (Gadamer 133-4); but painting transcends copying and achieves "an autonomous reality" (Gadamer 135) that forms the groundwork for interaction. It is essential to note that for Gadamer, autonomy of artworks does not mean the Kantian disinterestedness – on the contrary, it requires "being present", which means "to participate" (Gadamer 121), and the participation rather than something teleologically outside a painting is what constitutes the ontology of artworks:

the being of the work of art is play and that it must be perceived by the spectator in order to be actualized (vollendet), so also it is universally true of texts that only in the process of understanding them is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living me. (Gadamer 156)

Gadamer's idea helps reveal an implicit significance of the conversational gesture in Lotto's painting apart from Lucrezia's wish for a chaste and happy marriage: the drawing of Lucretia is only actualized and achieves its living meaning when Lucrezia points at it. In other words, only with the presence of an Other person who participates in the actualization of meaning can the ontological existence of a painting be secured. The gesture of Lucrezia fulfils the meaning of the drawing she holds, and the same can be applied to Lotto's portrait of Lucrezia: it also needs an Other presence to be actualized, as is insinuated by the empty chair which is supposed to symbolize the absence of Lucrezia's husband, and taken now by Latimer with his fascinated vision.

When Latimer gazes at the painting, he must have realized how his presence may actualize it, a capability enchants and appals him at the same time. The empty chair invites him to engage with the virtual space the young lady occupies. Her cunning eyes look neither towards the place where her absent husband is supposed to be sitting, nor at Lucretia who bears the deploring face, but directly towards the viewer outside the frame – Lucrezia's is a gaze firmly directed to Latimer's vision, a gaze that projects the realities she sees and meets Latimer's eyes, reflecting his own consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the "terrible reality" ("Veil" 19) Latimer notices in the painting is not the result of representational copying but what Gadamer calls the autonomous reality, involving the participation of Latimer's consciousness. The sensitivity Latimer possesses as a poet manqué makes such engagement so strong that, understandably, pictures affect him so much that usually "one or two exhaust all my capability of contemplation" ("Veil" 18). Yet, because of the previous disconcerting experience, on this specific occasion of viewing Lotto's painting, Latimer is especially alive to his contemplative ability that receives another's vision while reflecting and projecting his own at the same time. Once in a moment of "peculiar bitterness" against his brother, Latimer reveals what his prevision shows him and forestalls some words his brother is going to say to him, "as if it were something we had both learned by rote", thus causing annoyance and disturbance on both sides ("Veil" 18). Despite his admitted magnification of the influence of his deeds, Latimer is deeply troubled by his "diseased participation in other people's consciousness" ("Veil" 17). The "superadded consciousness of the actual" ("Veil" 18) that Gadamer regards as the essential constitution of an artwork's ontological valence is, to Latimer, an ominous demonstration of his wickedly supernatural ability to merge his horizons with the others'. As a result, it would be natural for him to feel "a strange poisoned sensation" ("Veil" 19) when he notices the apparitional shadow on the left margin of Lotto's painting – a half-split figure surrounded by rectangular light. Though technically speaking, it is the shadow of Lucrezia cast by the light from a window put slightly higher on the unseen righthand side of the frame, from Latimer's point of view, the split shadow half within the painting, half stepping outside the frame may as well be the projection of his own body, and more unsettlingly, his own iniquitous consciousness.

But why, one may ask, does Latimer detest such a convenient ability so much? What troubles Latimer most is the unreconcilable dividedness of his “double consciousness [...] flowing on like two parallel streams that never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue” (“Veil” 21) – that is, the split of himself into “a self-centred negative nature” and “a morbidly sensitive nature perpetually craving sympathy and support” (“Veil” 15). In other words, the intrusive visions from other individuals’ minds overwhelm Latimer’s self-consciousness, with the resulting sickly omniscience stemming from a “morbidly” developed mental faculty. His attempts to block out these intrusions appear negatively self-centred, which proves to be equally detrimental. Latimer’s diagnosis of himself as mentally unhealthy may be deduced from contemporary understanding of how mind works. In A. L. Wigan’s *A New View of Insanity* (1844), he argues that “the wayward cerebrum might overpower the higher organ situated the individual at the borders of criminality, immorality, or insanity” (Tressler 485), followed by the elder John Addington Symonds who in his *Sleep and Dreams* (1851) claims that double consciousness is a “fatal and unethical tool” that reduces others’ human complexity to fragmented characters or figments (Tressler 486). The connection between the health of one’s mind/brain and one’s dangerous moral tendency made by Wigan and Symonds is disturbing enough for Latimer to disavow Adam Smith’s moral instruction that pleasurable sympathy can be achieved by opening oneself to the others:

The man who indulges us in this natural passion, who invites us into his heart, who, as it were, sets open the gates of his breast to us, seems to exercise a species of hospitality more delightful than any other. No man, who is in ordinary good temper, can fail of pleasing, if he has the courage to utter his real sentiments as he feels them, and because he feels them. It is this unreserved sincerity which renders even the prattle of a child agreeable. (399)

The “plain, open, and direct” (Smith 47) visions of others’ minds are never pleasing for Latimer, as this “unpleasant sensibility” hinges upon his senses in an annoyingly uncomfortable way, like “an importunate, ill-played musical instrument, or the loud activity of an imprisoned insect”, or like “a fatal odour” (“Veil” 13, 19). The physical disturbances Latimer detests will ultimately result in his relinquishing the active use of his senses and his relapse into a disembodied solipsism.

Moreover, Symonds not only relates double consciousness to cerebral and moral defects but accuses creative artists of “falsely masquerading [objects] for his audience under the guise of an unbiased and truthful objectivity” due to their discontentment with mere imitation (Tressler 486). This justification of imitative arts – or in other words, mere copies – against the engaging arts derived from creator’s double consciousness appeals to Latimer’s fear and detestation of his own mental penetrability, leading to the deliberate maiming of his aesthetic sentiments. Probably horrified by the apparitional shadow in Lotto’s picture, Latimer moves away from the painting, blocking both his sensitiveness to art as well as his connection with the real world: “I followed them dreamily, and was hardly alive to what occurred till they had all gone up to the gallery, leaving me below; for I refused to come within sight of another picture that day.” (“Veil” 19). Despite the attempt for disconnection, Latimer is not fortunate enough to block another ominous clairvoyance that shows how Bertha despises him in their future marital life. It is essential to note that when Latimer views the prevision, his physical senses no longer function – they are displaced by disembodied projections that recall Descartes’s radical division of body and mind. Before he is immersed into the vision, Latimer feels “a strange intoxicating numbness” and “[t]he gardens, the summer sky, the consciousness of Bertha’s arm being within mine, all vanished, and I seemed to be suddenly in darkness” (“Veil” 19); his senses are only to be retrieved when the clairvoyant vision is over: “Then I had a sense of my eyelids quivering, and the living daylight broke in upon me; I saw gardens, and heard voices” (“Veil” 20). Expectedly, what he sees in the trance does not bear any embodied impression: they remain to be “a dark image on the retina” (“Veil” 20). In other words, Latimer is looking without seeing in his trance-like daydream, and the impressions he gets have never penetrated deeper than the surface of his retina to be actively reflected under the scrutiny of his capability of judgement. The split of the

function of a mind's eye and bodily mechanisms is very likely endorsed by a popular doctrine of vitalism which believes that there is a life force independent of bodily organism (Small xxv). George Henry Lewes refutes vitalism as scientifically implausible in his *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859) while George Eliot recognizes its antithesis in contemporary observation of microscopic particles. Botanist Robert Brown has observed "a very unexpected fact of seeming vitality" during his examination of pollens under microscope, thus discrediting the view that particles are inert mechanics (Brilmyer 48–49). An obvious Eliotian allusion to Brown's discovery would be Tertius Lydgate's ambitious research on particles in *Middlemarch*, but in "The Lifted Veil" Eliot has also insinuated the noxious effect of the split spiritual and physical vitality. Earlier in Latimer's narrative, he describes the process of his clairvoyance as being "thrust asunder by a microscopic vision", which leads to venomous demonstrations of "intermediate frivolities", "suppressed egoism", "struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts" ("Veil" 14). According to Brown's observation, the microscopic vision would be concomitant with physical vitality, but in Latimer's case he decides to suppress the particle movements: for him, "human words and deeds" emerge from disembodied thoughts like "leaflets covering a fermenting heap" ("Veil" 14), indicating the disconnection between particles in the air and one's olfactory sensation.<sup>4</sup> Latimer's loathing of physicality is declared more straightforwardly when he is asked to sit as the model for "a fancy picture": "I thoroughly disliked my own *physique*, and nothing but the belief that it was a condition of poetic genius would have reconciled me to it" ("Veil" 14, emphasis original). The relinquishment of physicality here foreshadows Latimer's renunciation of his sensual ability when confronted with Lotto's painting, as he renders it as both painful and morally defective. With these unpleasant thoughts in his mind, it seems only natural that Latimer concords with Symonds's argument that the double consciousness is unhealthy and immoral, but I would argue that these ominous visions do not result from but in Latimer's painful mental state, and that they are the products of the disregard for embodied physicality.

Latimer's neglect of physicality appears in his narrative as part of his aesthetic theory, the defect of which will ultimately give rise to his incapability of sympathy despite his seemingly omniscient visions. When he first sees the prevision of Prague, Latimer reckons it as the dawning divination of the "poet's nature in me", and considers that his physical illness has brought about "some happy change in my organisation – given a firmer tension to my nerves." ("Veil" 10). It is obvious that Latimer treats his physical state as the means to achieve mental elevation. Significantly, he relates this seeing the prevision in his mind's eye to the success of those great spiritualist poets: how the blind Homer and Milton "*saw* the plain of Troy" and "the earthward flight of the Tempter", and how Dante has left his physical body before he "*saw* the abodes of the departed" ("Veil" 10, emphasis mine). Latimer's exultation of sharing the horizons with these spiritual poets deprived of physical eyesight naturally leads to "an exertion of my will", an attempt in vain to guide his "poetic memory" to something "more familiar to my imagination" ("Veil" 10). Latimer's aesthetic understanding has two fatal defects that will eventually cause his death in sorrow and loneliness: first, he fails to recognize physicality as the essential perquisite of imagination and common feelings; second, he misreads "partial knowledge" as "imagination", consequently restricting his taste of artwork within the scope of copying from his own limited, solipsistic mind. These defects are demonstrated by his choice of Cartesian vision when encountering Lotto's painting and during his clairvoyance.

Latimer's contempt for physicality undermines the essential precondition of imagination and its productiveness. According to Edmund Burke, imagination derives from the representatives of the senses. As everyone is endowed with sensory organs, imagination is a common faculty in all humans, and can be enhanced through "a greater degree of natural sensibility" and "a closer and longer attention to the object" (Burke 21). Therefore, Latimer's obsession with pure spirituality not only impedes the possible sympathetic understanding with others through sensory connection but also undermines his power of imagination. More importantly, when dealing with more abstract proper-

ties – that is, what Burke calls compounded abstract words like virtue, honour, persuasion, etc., physical senses must be supplemented by legislative reason, which “affords rational agents the ability to autonomously prescribe laws and maxims to themselves and others” (Marshall 23). In other words, a complete aesthetic process should involve both sensory connection to the physical world and the rational intervention, adjustment, and modification to the sensory impressions with the help of judgment. Latimer, however, can only resort to his “poetic memory”, which is in effect a self-contradictory formulation since he is too unimaginative, if not too frightened, to take in anything that is not copied from his known knowledge. Therefore, there is no wonder that when he tries to exert his poetic power in search of “more vivid images” (vivid in the sense of life-like), he fails to produce anything but the “colouring the Canaletto engravings that hung in my old bedroom at home” (“Veil” 10). Understandably, when Latimer is appalled by the apparitional shadow in Lotto’s painting – that is, the imaginative intrusion of an Other – he resolutely resorts to the imitative branch of art endorsed by Symonds’s moral discourse. Indeed, Latimer is aptly diagnosed as “a poet manqué who possesses ‘the poet’s sensibility without his voice’” (Knoepflmacher 142). Although Donald Stone has detected an affinity between Latimer and Rousseau, claiming that it is their excessive romantic imagination that decides the depriving distance from happiness in life (210), it is my belief that Latimer’s rigid “poetic memory” would take him no further than the reiteration of his own partial, disembodied mind: neither has he turned the romantic impulse into fanciful poems like Coleridge does, nor would he leave sharp observation and expression of aesthetic sentiments like those of Walter Pater, who, unlike Latimer, clings to the “hard gem-like flame” of experience of life, who is desperate to “breathe a common air and catch light and heat from each other’s thoughts”, and who is only too willing to compare Lady Lisa to an unnatural and penetrating figure of vampire “older than the rocks among which she sits [...] and learned the secrets of the grave” (120, 6, 70). Even unlike Stephen Dedalus, the modern poet manqué wandering in Dublin, Latimer is too dejected to learn from a Leopold Bloom how to truly sympathize with others instead of being confined to a self-restricting solipsism. What prevents Latimer from all of these possible outlets is the Cartesian vision he submits to.

The Cartesian vision and along with it, the visual mechanics related to camera obscura accounts for Latimer’s disembodied approach to the world outside himself, which leads to his solipsistic and reductive estimation of others, hence the impotence of his scope of sympathy. Narrowly defined in its mechanical sense, camera obscura is an optical device made from a darkened chamber with an aperture on it. Light from an external source coming through the aperture projects the image of the objects onto the opposite surface. More importantly, however, camera obscura should not be regarded as simply “an inert and neutral piece of equipment or a set of technical premises” – rather, it is embedded in “a much larger and denser organization of knowledge and of the observing subject” (Crary 27). For about two hundred years since the sixteenth century, camera obscura represents a reason-based way through which a subject observes the objective world, ideally unmediated by sensorial deflections. Camera obscura cancels the Renaissance tradition in which nature and its representation stay adjacent to each other – in other words, a tradition that acknowledges the affinity between and the unity of an embodied observer and the outside world s/he perceives. In contrast, the introduction of camera obscura denotes a kind of detachment, defining an observer as “isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines”, thus cutting the connection between the observing subject and the perceived image (Crary 39). Moreover, the observer is “decorporealize[d]” in the sense that the individual’s physical and sensory experience is reinstated in and replaced by a set of mechanical apparatus: in the description of Issac Newton, there is no embodied observer in the dark chamber but an organizer, a “stager of an apparatus” who arranges the positions of lens and pinhole. (Crary 39–40). A much more unsettling description of the epistemological presumption of camera obscura can be found in Descartes’s *La dioptrique* (1637), in which he proposes to take a dead eye from a newly dead person, or less satisfactorily but quite

feasibly, an eye from an ox, and use it as the pinhole of a camera obscura. Descartes's suggestion indicates the "radical disjunction of eye from observer", which turns a corporeal eye to an "infallible metaphysical eye" (Crary 48). In accordance with Descartes's radical division of body and mind, the model of camera obscura discredits the participation of a corporeal observer, let alone the possible interaction between subject and object. Naturally, the seventeenth century Dutch painters such as Esaias van de Velde and Jan Vermeer endeavoured to faithfully represent "reality" with the help of camera obscura, which allows them to see the image of nature within their studios (Wheelock 101). According to Jonathan Crary, the mechanics of camera obscura dominates the way subjects observe the world as well as the paintings until the 1830s. Typically, Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin's painting *Boy Blowing Bubbles* (1739) demonstrates how the Cartesian understanding of visibility sought to confirm "a single homogeneous field" constructed by disembodied reason (figure 2): there are two parallel straws, one in a glass of feculent soapy water, the other produces a transparent bubble almost exactly the same size as the boy's head; the very transparency of the bubble transcending the solidity of the terrace on which the glass of opaque water is placed indicates "the distorting power of a medium" bound to be neutralized and governed by reason – the boy's head elaborately placed above the bubble (Crary 64). Viewed in this light, the boy blowing the bubble is immersed in a self-absorption, focusing on nothing other than the transparency related to his consciousness. In the same light, Latimer who feels uncomfortable with the questioning gaze of Lorenzia is only too willing to lapse into the disembodiment enveloped by the "pale shadows" of his ideas ("Veil" 21).

When George Eliot composes this story in 1859, she was probably aware of the transition of visibility from the Cartesian detachment emphasizing the hegemony of reason to the modern acknowledgement of corporeality based on the position of a complicatedly involved observing subject. By 1840s, the dominating paradigm of camera obscura was challenged by the invention and introduction of a number of optical devices that shifts from "something external and public [...] to something wholly internal or subjective" (Wolfreys 64): stereoscope, kaleidoscope, phenakistoscope, and so on. Unlike camera obscura which uses an extracted eyeball as the indication of unmediated, detached vision, these devices acknowledge the process of perception itself as the primary object of vision (Crary 138). In other words, the fluid identity of an observer whose physical condition, perception, and imagination are acknowledged is admitted and introduced into the study of visibility. In the previous model of camera obscura, the single-eye point of view urges the viewers to accept the similarity between the projected image and the real object; the new inventions, however,

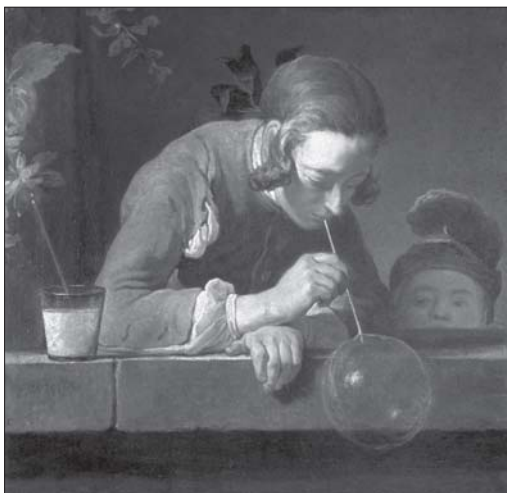


Figure 2. *Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, Boy Blowing Bubbles*

are actually in accordance with the "*non-veridical* theories of vision that effectively annihilate a real world" (Crary 14, emphasis original): generally, they abandon the single-eye perspective for the biologically credited retinal afterimage and binocular disparity, expecting the "functional interaction of body and machine" (Crary 132). The "dissolving image" ("Veil" 10) Latimer uses to describe the previsions he sees, for instance, functions when two angled magic lanterns alternately project overlapped images onto a screen in a speed too fast for human eyes to detect. Some more complicated but entertaining displays of these devices require not only the participation of the viewers but also present them a test for both imagination and judgment. In 1856 and 1857, the popular public scientific lecturer John Pepper held two speeches on optical illusion, to be fol-

lowed by his famous 1862 lecture at the Polytechnic in which he presented stunning ghost illusions; Pepper's conjuring was so popular that he gave a lecture to the Prince of Wales and Prince and Princess Louis of Hesse by royal command (Lightman 202-4). As Terry Castle has pointed out, the visualized ghosts caused a profound epistemological confusion: in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, ghosts have been understood as either the manipulation of a transcendent being like God, or originated in the troubled brain of the ghost-seer, but Pepper have produced these illusionary ghosts with the help of devices that rely on the new model of visibility and projected them outward (54, 58). In other words, what was previously understood as a process within the minds has been externalized in "an uncanny, involuntary, oddly embodied way" (Castle 59). It is no longer feasible to get rid of the horror one sees by resorting to a higher providence or to one's own wicked mentality; to some extent, viewing a visualized ghost is comparable to viewing a painting, as sensory involvement, imagination, and judgment are all essential to account for the interwoven reality and consciousness.

By introducing the new optical devices and Eliot's knowledge of them, I am by no means implying that the previsions Latimer sees is produced by mechanics; rather, I want to call attention to the important episteme they represent: visibility should no longer be understood as the static, unilateral, and incorporeal gaze modelled as camera obscura, but requires an embodied participation of something other than the self-absorbed observer. The modern visibility turns to the everyday experience of seeing, remembering, and imagining, and thus endeavours to avoid the potential danger of reflection: "a danger in paying too much attention to mental images or in 'thinking too hard'" (Castle 57-8). As the model of camera obscura can be illustrated by Chardin's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, the modern visibility can also be demonstrated by Édouard Manet's painting of the same name (1867).<sup>5</sup> (figure 3)



Figure 3. Édouard Manet. *Boy Blowing Bubbles*



In Manet's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, there is no parallel straws: the only one is held in the boy's hand which produces a smaller and more opaque bubble. The boy takes the bowl containing sippy water in the other hand, thus shattering the split of body and mind, of materiality and spirituality represented in Chardin's painting. In a gesture not unlike the Lucretia holding the dagger, the boy raises the straw much higher than his predecessor, making the bubble stay at almost the same horizontal level of his head, which not only acknowledges the equally important status of one's mind and the opaque mediation represented by the bubble, but also indicates an extended space outside the frame. In a word, the casual, everyday modern gesture in Manet's painting replaces the enclosed, elaborate and contemplative manner of Chardin's. It is precisely at this point that Latimer fails: the evasiveness he shows when confronting Lotto's painting epitomizes his absorption in his own feeble and futile self-consciousness, which leads to the very limited scope of sympathy in spite of his ostensibly omniscient clairvoyance.

The problem of Latimer's lack of engagement in real life and his narcissistic<sup>6</sup> obsession with his own self-consciousness is that he can only understand others reductively and metaphorically rather than sympathetically. In the model of camera obscura, Latimer's monadic point of view is authenticated, but according to the critique of Theodor Adorno, if the "phenomenal self is reduced to simply one empirical object among others, the autonomy and authenticity of its representations are also in question" (Crary 77). In other words, the authenticity of an autonomous modern self cannot be guaranteed simply by one's own metaphysical contemplation on the universality of human reason; only when the modern self is situated among others who are different from itself, can the authenticity of it be possibly realized. The failure to recognize the complicity of others surrounding the embodied self would lead to morbidly egoistic and reductive views: after Latimer has seen prevision of his cruel future marriage, he dwells on it in a most self-pitying way:

My consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation, and we begin to weep, less under the sense of our suffering than at the thought of it. ("Veil" 24)

Just like the audience who were frightened by Pepper's visualized ghosts, Latimer refuses to recognize the complicated process that involves sensory perception, imagination, and judgment, and stubbornly believes whatever his mind's eye sees. Moreover, the uses of first-person plural pronouns here signify his hasty assertion that what he thinks he sees is a "drama" that is naturally shared by all human beings. It has never occurred to him that Bertha may think differently, less disapprovingly of him. Previously when he discovers that he has wronged Bertha for not taking his present seriously and that Bertha may have a feeling for him, Latimer simply shuts himself up in his room and "intoxicate myself afresh with the thought of this scene, and all it implied" ("Veil" 17), showing no intention of participating in real life and engaging with real people. Latimer's obsession with the drama played within his own mind naturally ensures that the seemingly omniscient clairvoyance should be heavily tampered with by his self-consciousness, if not completely projected by his ego. Understandably, Latimer understands sympathy as a reductively modified "common nature and a common destiny" ("Veil" 31), namely, the nature and destiny of himself. Thomas Albrecht has brilliantly formulated that "the more disturbing ethical conflict in *The Lifted Veil* is not between antipathy and sympathy but between an ethics based on similarity and one based on difference" (Albrecht 443), emphasizing that Eliot's ethical stance cannot not be simply summarized as sympathy based on simulation – more importantly, one must realize the difference between individuals, reaching out to others while allowing others to penetrate one's own self-confinement.<sup>7</sup> Latimer's disappointment culminates after his last attempt to bridge his mind and Bertha's:

I saw *myself* in Bertha's thought as she lifted her cutting grey eyes, and looked at me: a miserable *ghost-seer*, surrounded by phantoms in the noon-day [...] We were front to front with each other, and judged each other. The terrible moment of complete illumination had come to me, and I saw that the darkness had hidden no landscape from me, but only a *blank prosaic wall*. ("Veil" 32, emphasis mine)

Instead of a mind of Bertha's own, Latimer reduces it to a mirror reflecting his own image as a ghost-seer, still troubled by the self-absorptive visuality of camera obscura, with Bertha's thoughts totally impenetrable like a prosaic wall. Albrecht sharply suggests that by treating Bertha's mind as a "prosaic" metaphor, Latimer simply "looks" without "seeing" or "reading" – he fails to interpret the text provided by Bertha, simply replacing it with a visual image that refers back to himself (447). Again it is helpful to draw on Gadamer's explanation of a painting's ontological presence: a painting is situated between a sign and a symbol, the former, like a transparent mirror, disappears when pointing to something else, while the latter represents by taking the place of the original (Gadamer 145–48). Latimer has sadly touched both ends but failed to remain balance: disowning his sensual perceptiveness, he believes in the superiority of unmediated contemplation, and modifies what he encounters in real life with the reduced version of his own. Latimer's tragedy is foretold not by this previsions or clairvoyance, but by his disengagement with facing Lotto's painting.

Critics have long discussed the last scene of blood-transaction as Eliot's allegory of realist narration. James Decker has discovered the etymological meaning of the name "Latimer": literally meaning a man speaking Latin, the word refers to an interpreter, and its relation to the word "Latoner" (laton/latten) may suggest the "mock-saintliness" of "a type of quasi-alchemy, a reinterpretation of the 'facts'" (58–60), which echoes Terry Eagleton's assertion that the parody of omniscience in the story indicates "the sickening tautology of a cultic intersubjectivity" (54), pointing to the defect of realism that Eliot fails to amend: the questionable role of the so-called realist narrator. I would agree with Jill Galvan that Latimer's problematic narration "Eliot's vigilance toward the mediating position" (246), which echoes her metaphors of intricate "drop of ink" and scratched pier-glass, both questioning the reliability of narrative mediation (*AB* 1, *Middlemarch* 166). More important, I will argue that Eliot not only implies the limit of realism but also puts emphasis on how participation fulfils one's ontological existence. Just as Latimer's refusal to recognize the gaze of an other when facing Lotto's painting and his failure to join Bertha in real life, the meaning of a narrative "must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves." ("Veil" 34). If not complemented by action and participation, the narrative would be mere "neat syntax" and "summary medium" learnt by rote, and nothing more ("Veil" 34). Even in the most disturbing blood-transaction scene, Latimer is not unsettled by the bizarre resurrection of Mrs Archer and her accusation against Bertha, and insists to understand it through his own lens: "As for me, this scene seemed of one texture with the rest of my existence" ("Veil" 42). In H. É. Blanchon's picture of this scene *La Transfusion du sang* (1879), Latimer stands at the far-right corner, wearing a coat so shadowy that it is almost indistinguishable from the background (the painting is now lost, and Eliot knows about it but never sees it in person), which aptly illustrates how feebly Latimer participates in any embodied, worldly affairs. When the dying Latimer recounts his life-story, he finally realizes "the powerlessness of ideas" which are "pale shadows that beckoned in vain", but he still fails to extend the scope of sympathy beyond himself: "Are you unable to give me your sympathy – you who read this?" ("Veil" 21).

In "The Lifted Veil", Eliot has touched upon many issues that will be further considered and represented in her career – the problematic mediation of realism, the limited scope of sympathy, and the ontological valence of participation. In the novel immediately follows the story, *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie endeavours to move beyond Latimer's self-absorption to a self-distancing semi-detachment; Silas Marner would awake from his trance-like passivity and welcome the baby that changes his life; Felix Holt and Esther ultimately share a vision that brings about momentous participation in political life; and Dorothea Brooke manages to incorporate Ladislaw's artistic vision into sympathetic engagement in real life. Visuality is among the constitutive perspectives through which Eliot discusses the issues of sympathy and realism, and its relevance in the more complicated world of the substantial novels remains to be explored.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “by ‘parcels’ or portions, bit by bit, piecemeal” (*OED*). *OED* uses this particular sentence as the example of this sense.
- <sup>2</sup> For the information on pseudoscience, see Gray and Wood; for Eliot’s early aesthetics, see Viera; for Victorian Spiritualism and its implication on the Women Question, see Flint and Despotopoulou.
- <sup>3</sup> A typical example of such gazes that receive and reflect the viewers’ vision would be that of the queen’s chamberlain in the background of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656). It is also noticeable that the chamberlain appears only dimly in a half-open door in the shadow, recalling the apparitional shadow in Lotto’s painting.
- <sup>4</sup> Derek Woods in his study convincingly situates this metaphor in the body-mind-environment interaction. Noting the Great Stink in London, 1958, Woods argues that the disgusting smell intrudes “the atoms of mind”, contaminating the moral function in Latimer and his telepathy with other minds (Woods 61–62).
- <sup>5</sup> As Hugh Witemeyer has noticed, there is no direct record of George Eliot’s opinions on modern paintings and impressionist movement in France. However, considering the notorious popularity of the Salon des Refusés in Paris, it would be unlikely that Eliot has never noticed their momentous influence during her visits to many of the important “galleries of Europe” between 1854–1867 (Witemeyer 13). Moreover, as she admires John Ruskin’s art criticism, the fact that she leaves no comment on the famous Whistler vs. Ruskin case (1877) seems more curious. One may even speculate that her long reticence on modern paintings may signify some tacit resonance that she is unwilling to declare. However, it is less important whether Eliot has or has not acknowledged the influence of modern arts than the point that her writings are profoundly embedded within the larger epistemological and scientific model of modern visuality.
- <sup>6</sup> In Nancy Anne Marck’s analysis of *Adam Bede*, she contends that the characterization of Hetty constructs narcissism as a form of egoism which leads to her isolation as well as the moral recovery of the community of Hayslope (Marck 448). It is possible that Eliot brings this narcissistic figure into “The Lifted Veil” which was composed not long after *Adam Bede*, but as I will argue, the narrative intervention in the story serves quite different purposes from those of *Adam Bede*: it does not represent a story of moral correction but shows the very limit of such a narrative.
- <sup>7</sup> For David Hume’s theory that sympathy is based on the similarity of humankind and its influence on Eliot, see Lowe 10–11. In Daniel S. Malachuk’s recent study, he argues that Eliot manages to rival the unlimited scope of sympathy by introducing a reasonably good kind of egoism called by “pride” (Malachuk 33).

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