rivista interdisciplinare di comunicazione
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THROUGH THE VEIL:
VOICES OF THE AFTERLIFE IN GEORGE ELIOT'S
THE LIFTED VEIL[1]

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Abstract - Written between George Eliot's early and late novels, *The Lifted Veil* (1859) departs from the typical third-person narration characteristic of the Victorian writer's *oeuvre*. The story is told in the first person from the perspective of an eccentric young man named Latimer, an aesthetic choice that lends a confessional tone to the tale. Latimer possesses a special ability: he can read the future and foresee his own death. In many ways, the novella straddles dark fantasy and realism as it juxtaposes elements of Gothic fiction, such as Latimer's interests in revivification, with an attentive depiction of the material reality. After all, *The Lifted Veil* reminds the reader that Eliot's literary realism alternates between an accurate depiction of the external world and an investigation of human consciousness. Starting from these premises, in this essay I would like to argue that through the motif of the veil Eliot builds up a densely poetic narrative in which the boundary between art and fiction, reality and imagination is refracted. On the one hand, *The Lifted Veil* pushes realism to its limits much like Giuseppe Sanmartino's famous marble sculpture *Cristo velato* (1753), foregrounding a narrative form replete with sensory vividness, especially for the visual, haptic and olfactory imagery that permeates the text. On the other hand, the novella serves a much broader purpose in that it may be read as an aesthetic experiment. Through the trope of the veil, Eliot acknowledges that scientific inquiry can expand the scope of literary writing, contributing to a more accurate form of realism.

Keywords: George Eliot; Victorian Literature; Afterlife; Realism; Fantasy.

1. George Eliot and the veil

Traditionally, the veil has been employed as a symbol of softness and transparency. Already in the ancient Greek period, artists depicted and carved veiled figures, resorting to the veil as a figurative device capable of instilling a sense of illusion in the observer. Typically portraying female figures, Greek sculptures present delicate veils that conceal parts of the face or body. The veil adds an air of mystery, inviting viewers to delve deeper into the stories and emotions these pieces of art convey. In this respect, the veiled element serves as a symbol for obstruction, a threshold that forms some degree of barrier between the viewer and that which is veiled. This is the case, for instance, with the late baroque sculpture *Cristo velato* (1753) by the artist Giuseppe Sanmartino. The *Cristo velato* was initiated by Antonio Corradini who had already worked on *La velata* (1743), a sculpture in which the Vestal virgin Tuccia demonstrates her innocence by carrying water from the river Tiber in a sieve without spilling a drop. Sanmartino's famous carved marble life-size sculpture depicts the veiled body of Christ covered in a diaphanous marble shroud. This aesthetic choice can be said to epitomise a boundary between the human and the divine, the tangible and intangible, presence and absence. Moreover, the presence of the transparent shroud, carved from the same rock as the statue, partially separates the viewer from the figurative representation of the divine. The *Cristo velato* not only portrays the transition from Christ's death to resurrection, but it can also be said to push the limits of realism for its remarkable attention to detail, especially in depicting blood vessels, ribs, bones, tendons, and the wounds of the nails on Christ's hands and feet. Paradoxically, the veil creates a dynamic effect on Christ's body, entailing life rather than death. As is well-known, the Neapolitan artist's work was commissioned by the Prince of Sansevero Raimondo di Sangro who dedicated himself to experiments in many fields, from art to alchemy, and cultivated a special interest in esoteric knowledge. The Prince's intellectual curiosity is well exemplified by Sanmartino's sculpture, which is part of the rich decoration of the Cappella Sansevero, the Sansevero family's burial chapel in the historic centre of Naples. According to a legend, it was Prince Raimondo di Sangro himself who transformed the veil into marble through an alchemic process. As Marino Niola observes, however, the sculpture embraces a "deictic function" (Niola 1995, p. 49; my translation) in that the veil is the indirect indication of an unspeakable presence.

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[1] I would like to dedicate this article to the bright memory of Professor Ady Mineo, whose passion and teachings continue to fuel my work.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no evidence to claim that George Eliot might have known about Sanmartino's *Cristo velato*, even though the sculpture was one of the most visited Italian attractions of the grand tour during the 18th and 19th centuries. By contrast, Eliot was possibly acquainted with *La vestale velata* (1846-47) by the Italian Raffaele Monti. The marble sculpture represents a full-body statue of a kneeling Vestal, a virgin dedicated to the service of Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth. In Monti's work, the veiled virgin holds a plate with Vesta's flame between her hands while her body is dressed in classical drapery. Commissioned by the Duke of Devonshire, William Cavendish, to adorn one of his family properties, Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, the statue was inspired by the Vestal House uncovered in Pompei on the one hand, and Corradini's *La velata* and Sanmartino's renowned masterpiece on the other hand, especially for the technique of the veil. Monti's works achieved mass popularity in Britain. First, his sculptures were showcased at the Colnaghi Art Gallery in London between 1847 and 1850. A year later, *La vestale velata* was displayed at Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition, drawing in a large crowd of visitors. Thus, following these comments, we may claim that Eliot might have drawn inspiration from these veiled statues from Italy when writing her novella *The Lifted Veil* in 1859.

Eliot was a regular visitor to Italy, the first time in 1860 with the philosopher and literary critic George Henry Lewes, the man she decided to live with as a spouse despite Lewes's previous marriage. It was Lewes who encouraged Eliot, née Mary Ann Evans, to use her famous pen name and write her first story "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton", which was published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1857 and later collected in the volume *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Thus, when Eliot first visited Italy, she had already published her earlier novels *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Italy, as Andrew Thompson argues, "stirred George Eliot – sometimes passionately – both emotionally and intellectually" (1998, p. 5). This is evident, above all, in the historical novel *Romola* (1862-63) where Eliot explores the glorious period of the Florentine Renaissance and, more interestingly for the scope of this paper, in the depiction of Roman baroque art in *Middlemarch* (1871-72). Here, during her disappointing honeymoon in Rome with her pedant older husband, the reverend Edward Casaubon, Dorothea Brooke, fails to understand the complexity of baroque art. In Saint Peter's, for instance, the sight of the basilica generates a visual shock in Dorothea, "like a disease of the retina" (Eliot 1996, p. 182). The ruins and the gigantic churches "thrust abruptly" (p. 181) on her mind. Eliot compares Dorothea to Saint Teresa of Avila for the ways the fictional heroine exemplifies a nineteenth-century version of heroic life. In addition, while in Rome, Dorothea is very close to Santa Maria della Vittoria, the church which houses the *Santa Teresa in estasi*, a white marble altarpiece carved by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Bernini's sculpture depicts the moment of reverberation and the saint is represented in a condition of total abandon. Thus, Roman baroque art entails an awakening effect or, as Ady Mineo argues, it favours a sort of "nuptial epiphany" (Mineo 1995, p. 136; my translation) for Eliot's heroine who eventually comes to realise Casaubon's lack of affection. During her travels to Italy, Eliot might have visited Bernini's altarpiece and, as already suggested, at that point, she had already published her novella *The Lifted Veil*.

The Lifted Veil is a unique case in Eliot's *oeuvre* for the use of first-person narration, which lends a confessional tone to the story[2]. Eliot's dark novella revolves around the afterlife recollections of an eccentric young man named Latimer, who is afflicted with telepathy and clairvoyance. Latimer has "the poet's sensibility without his voice" (Eliot 2009, p. 7), thus lacking the expressive power to articulate his imagination. When the reader first meets Latimer, the man narrates the last moments before his death and what follows is basically the reminiscence of his life, in particular his marriage to Bertha Grant. Once Latimer eventually realises the cold and indifferent nature of his wife, the figurative veil that covers Latimer's perceptual frames is lifted and the man dies, closing the circle of the narrative. As we can infer from this summary, the tale conflates realistic elements and motifs indebted to the Gothic genre by delving into extrasensory perceptions, phrenology, and the voices of the afterlife. For these reasons, *The Lifted Veil* can be seen as a narrative experiment that the Victorian writer herself called a "*jeu de mélancolie*" rather than "*a jeu d'ésprit*" even though Lewes found the story "very striking and original" (Eliot 1978, p. 41). This explains why, as Franco Marucci notes, the story has been subject to "a gross critical misunderstanding" though in the last three decades it "has firmly been reinstated in GE'S major canon" (2022, p. 4) in consideration of the convergence of themes, motifs and events recurrent in Eliot's macrotext.

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, the veil is evocative of patriarchal power. In this sense, Eliot could not "evade experiencing herself as a veiled lady" (1979, p. 475) despite her radical critique of patriarchy. What is more, beyond the implications of the title in terms of gender, in Eliot's tale the veil is a symbol of the Victorians' fascination with science. In Kate Flint's words, to lift the veil is "to peep at the forbidden, to access taboo knowledge" (1997, p. 456). Thus, on the one hand, *The Lifted Veil* relies on the veil as a metaphor for the transgression of the boundary between life and death, thereby refracting the voice of the afterlife through the image of the veil. On the other hand, Eliot's novella hints at the experimental potentialities of fiction, pointing to the self-reflexive quality of stories in which narrating is the central motif in all its forms, such as foreseeing and recollecting. In this respect, *The Lifted Veil* employs the trope of the veil as a figurative mechanism that challenges the traditional view of realism as "resolutely attached to the visual" (Brooke 2005, p.71). Further, Latimer's sad story discloses the burden of transparency and the threat that truth can bring.

In *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot uses the word "veil" (2009, p. 10; 29; 31; 41) and its nearly synonyms "shroud" (p. 31; 38) and "curtain" (p. 4: 42) as symbolic of the spatio-temporal barriers that Latimer can cross with his mind. Moreover, the image of the veil returns in the works of the philosophers Eliot studied and translated, such as the Dutch Baruch Spinoza and the German David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach. In 1846, Eliot translated *The Life of Jesus* by Strauss, one of the most controversial theological works of the 19th century. Strauss widely discusses the veil of the temple which was torn in two in the aftermath of Jesus's death. Still, Strauss also employs the motif of the veil to narrate Christ's transfiguration as in Sanmartino's sculpture, stating that "the transformation of [Christ's] appearance into something more than earthly, might give countenance to the opinion that his human form was nothing but an unsubstantial veil, through which at times his true, superhuman nature shone forth" (Strauss 1860, p. 609). The image of the veil also returns in Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, which Eliot translated in 1854, thus before the writing of *The Lifted Veil*. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach analyses religion in anthropological terms, claiming that religion is "the solemn unveiling of a man's hidden treasures, the revelation of his intimate thoughts, the open confession of his love-secrets" (Feuerbach 1881, p. 13). Thus, as Nic Panagopoulos argues, the veil "can be seen as a figure for artistic representation itself which promises presence but endlessly defers it" (Panagopoulos 2017, p. 133). In this sense, the veil discloses ethical implications and alludes to the narrative ability to see beyond the veil.

Bearing these comments in mind, in this essay I will argue that through the motif of the veil Eliot builds up a densely poetic narrative in which the boundary between art and fiction, reality and imagination is refracted. On the one hand, *The Lifted Veil* pushes realism to its limits much like the Italian sculptures described above, foregrounding a narrative form replete with sensory vividness, especially for the visual, haptic and olfactory imagery that permeates the text. On the other hand, the novella serves a much broader purpose in that it may be read as an aesthetic experiment. Through the trope of the veil, Eliot acknowledges that scientific inquiry can expand the scope of literary writing, contributing to a more accurate form of realism.

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[2] The only other case with a first-person narration is *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, which was first published in 1879. Here, Eliot imagines a fictional minor scholar who is the author of various essays. However, Theophrastus Such's focal perspective is continuously interrupted by Eliot's omniscient viewpoint.

2. A narrative of/on the afterlife

Narratives about death and dying characters address the enigmatic nature of death, showing the potential of literary writings to "cross the border that separates us from the unknowable" (Jernigan, Wadiak and Wang 2019, p. 8). In this respect, as Sabine Köllmann notes, narratives of/on the afterlife tend to privilege the stream of consciousness and the interior monologue. Moreover, these accounts can be said to unveil the last secrets of life, offering the reader "the imaginary experience of living through dying by proxy – and surviving" (Köllmann 2023, p. 3).

Following these assumptions, *The Lifted Veil* can be read as a story concerned with the narration of death and the afterlife, reflecting, in particular, the Victorians' "intimate relationship with death" (Zigarovich 2012, p. 3). In the Victorian Age, death came to be "marketed" with the creation of death cards, photographs and hair lockets. Furthermore, this period saw the institutionalisation of death with a vigorous debate over "burial, cemetery and cremation reform" (Hotz 2009, p. 3). From a literary perspective, the narrative of death implies the narration of an absence, which "signifies the unspeakable, the unknowable" (p. 4). In essence, texts exploring death and the afterlife focus on the theme of absence, allowing writers to manipulate the relationship between life and death, presence and absence and inviting the reader "to fill the textual gaps that stand in for death" (p. 6). In the case of *The Lifted Veil*, the gaps that must be filled are exemplified by the disarrayed temporal linearity, including both analeptic and proleptic incursions. In addition, on a symbolic level, Eliot's story largely depends on ambiguity, thus creating confusion between the living and the dead.

This ambiguity is already clear in the opening scene of the story. Formally, *The Lifted Veil* is divided into two untitled chapters. When we first meet Latimer, he is a moribund person, on the threshold of death, suffering from attacks of *angina pectoris*, a spasmodic affection of the chest that afflicts him despite his "exceptional mental character" (Eliot 2009, p. 7). The first chapter opens with a cryptic scene, describing in detail the circumstances of the moment when Latimer will die:

> For I foresee when I shall die, and everything that will happen in my last moments. Just a month from this day, on the 20th of September 1850, I shall be sitting in this chair, in this study, at ten o'clock at night, longing to die, weary of incessant insight and foresight, without delusions and without hope. Just as I am watching a tongue of blue flame rising in the fire, and my lamp is burning low, the horrible contraction will begin at my chest. I shall only have time to reach the bell, and pull it violently, before the sense of suffocation will come. No one will answer my bell. I know why (p. 7).

What the reader witnesses here is a plurality of registers that speak to the challenging task of reproducing death in fiction, thus addressing what has been defined as the "porous and unstable" (Jernigan, Wadiak, and Wang 2019, p. 6) border that separates life from death. The incipit of Eliot's novella conflates the registers of fantasy and realism at the same time. On the one hand, clear spatio-temporal references provide readers with accurate details about the story. We are told the date of Latimer's death and his studio is portrayed with attention to detail, including the flame flickering in the fireplace that reminds us of the convulsions that afflict his body. On the other hand, this realistic frame is challenged by the unreliability of a narrator endowed with clairvoyance and thus capable of imagining his future death. And, to this end, the narrative takes a gothic quality as the reader is invited to envision Latimer lying on the floor with strong contractions before suffocating alone in the room.

And yet, whereas Latimer is sure of his death, the reader ignores the reasons for this certainty. The elliptic treatment of the news that opens the story intensifies the exposure to loss in the character, pointing to the emotional and cognitive crisis it brings about, and it also leaves the reader stranded before the narrator's paranormal faculties. Thus, early in the story, Eliot infuses the narrative with a certain instability which signals our limited ability to understand Latimer's experience.

In the "Introduction" to the Oxford edition, Hellen Smith argues that the story originates in Eliot's anxiety about death and, more specifically, it foregrounds Eliot's "familiarity with depression" (Eliot 2009, p. xxvii). The novella was composed during a sad time when Eliot lost her older sister Chrissey and was deeply concerned with Lewis's physical frailty. This might explain why Latimer's vulnerability is a way to win "sympathy from strangers" (p. 4). To this end, when Latimer starts narrating his own life, his partial point of view seems more like a plead for the reader's understanding than a reliable account. Thus, Latimer's unreliability chimes with Alice Bennett's contention that the narrative of the afterlife is "an object of speculation and imagination, but also a product of half-recollected experience, unreliable testimony and retold stories" (2012, p. 1). In *The Lifted Veil*, as the reader gradually learns, Latimer lives in a family context marked by isolation. Eliot presents her main character as a "neglected" child reeling subconsciously from the shock of his mother's death (Eliot 2009, p. 28). In the wake of his "tender" mother's loss (p. 4), he is left alone with his father, "a firm, unbending, intensely orderly man" (p. 5), and his older brother, who is a student at Eaton and is to become his father's heir. This explains why Latimer is in search of sympathy from the reader. In this sense, the *memento mori* represents Latimer's last "chance of meeting with some pity, some tenderness, some charity" (p. 4). As a child, "the curtain of the future was as impenetrable" (p. 4) to him. In response to his emotionally traumatic loss, Latimer's multi-layered dream-like interactions with the others and involuntary splitting of consciousness show how Eliot's character seeks to fill the emotional void through an insistent craving for sympathy and support. Latimer's splitting of personality and the voices he starts to hear convey a form of dissociation through which his own death comes to be projected.

Interestingly, Latimer's search for sympathy recalls Eliot's own interest in spiritualism[3]. Even though the Victorian Age is generally related to industrial, scientific, and technological progress, the supernatural and the occult became however of paramount importance. During the 1850s, life expectancy was around 47 years and the attempt to communicate with the dead rose to prominence. This explains why spiritualism attracted considerable interest and women were considered particularly suited to work as mediums, "as the embodiment of the spiritual and moral" (Owens 2004, p. 28). As such, women were regarded "as invaluable in the promulgation of spiritual truths" (p. 28). Following these comments, we can argue that Latimer serves as a spiritual medium who possesses the ability to foretell his death and read other people's minds. As Jill Galvan claims, Latimer is a "fraudulent spiritual medium" (2006, p. 245) as he repeatedly calls for sympathy, addressing the reader in many ways. There are moments when Latimer expresses his doubts about how reliable his narration is, pledging the reader's support, as we can read from the following quote: "Are you unable to give me your sympathy—you who read this? Are you unable to imagine this double consciousness at work within me, flowing on like two parallel streams that never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue?" (Eliot 2009, p. 21).

The above-quoted passage hinges on a double meaning. First, Latimer acts as a spiritualist medium. Spiritualism was based on the so-called "law of sympathy" (Natale 2016, p. 48), which was dictated by emotions and feelings that contributed to a climate of suspense similar to dramatic representations. This theatrical quality of spiritualism is reflected in Latimer's transient visions and voices. Second, Latimer's "double consciousness" is an instance of division. As Smith explains, in the Victorian Age doubleness could suggest "mesmerism" or "animal magnetism" (Eliot 2009, p.

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[3] According to Simone Natale, spiritualism emerged in 1848 when two adolescent sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, "initiated communication with the rappings allegedly produced by the spirit of a dead man" (Natale 2016, p. 1). In 1849, the Fox sisters demonstrated that they were able to communicate with the dead before a paying public during an event organised at the Corinthian Hall, a large theatre in the nearby city of Rochester.

xviii), practices about which Eliot herself had a certain knowledge[4]. Thus, double consciousness might describe a mesmeric state in which the subject remains in possession of his consciousness but also points to “the altered consciousness produced by the magnetic sleep” (pp. xxi-xxii). This is what happens, for instance, when Latimer has his first vision of Prague. When his father tells him that they are going to visit Prague, Latimer experiences the first case of prevision, imagining how the city might be:

> he left my mind resting on the word *Prague*, with a strange sense that a new and wondrous scene was breaking upon me: a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course—unrefreshed for ages by the dews of night, or the rushing rain-cloud; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories (p. 9, emphasis in the original).

In many ways, Latimer’s vision of Prague recalls Dorothea’s vision of Rome. As Barbara Hardy suggests, the two characters share a similar “journey into foreignness” (1993, p. 15) which implies a symbolic transformation for both characters. Further, Latimer’s vision of Prague materialises “in a dissolving view” (Eliot 2009, p. 10). At the same time, the landscape of Prague with its buildings evoking imperial grandeur and religious wars becomes gradually distinct “as the sun lifts up the veil of the morning mist” (p. 9). Here, the reader finds a first allusion to the motif of the veil as something that creates a barrier between Latimer and the reality around him. Interestingly, Latimer compares himself to other famous visionary poets, such as Homer, Dante, Milton and Novalis, who addressed the afterlife in their poetic works. Moreover, like Dorothea, Latimer’s prevision of Prague implies a sort of illness. While Dorothea is afflicted by a disease of the retina, so Latimer feels the “exalting influence of some diseases on the mental powers” (p. 9). What ultimately brings Latimer’s mind back to his present reality is the clang of metal that thrills through him. While Latimer’s imagination roams elsewhere and his eyes see the imperial scenario of Prague, his mind is capable of registering stimuli around him, from the sight and hearing of the falling fire irons to the violent palpitations of his heart. As Galvan contends, Latimer’s vision of Prague is “of a gloomy netherworld caught out of time” (2006, p. 241), punctuated by frequent references and invocations to the reader.

Therefore, whereas Latimer’s double consciousness is a metaphor for the dissociation of his mind and represents his clairvoyance, this sense of duplicity is related to Latimer’s (and Eliot’s) interests in science. Of all the senses, the (veiled) sight prevails, inevitably stirring curiosity about the workings of both the mind and the body. More than a spiritual medium, Latimer acts as a medical student who, as Flint argues, “schooled in science, confidently employs medical vocabulary” (1997, p. 459). Rather than a spiritualist practice, Latimer’s previsions are the basis of scientific inquiry. By quoting G.H. Lewes’s words, Flint explains that a prevision is “the characteristic and the test of knowledge” (p. 459), which recalls the scientific inquiry introduced by Auguste Comte, the father of Positivism[5]. Against this background, one could read the image of the “double consciousness” as a poetic configuration of the blood as it circulates in the human body, thus reinforcing the influence of Eliot’s fascination with science. Latimer’s double consciousness circulates “like two parallel streams which never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue” (Eliot 2009, p. 21). The image of the blood that flows through the veins is also evocative of the accurate portrayal of the veins still throbbing and swollen with blood on Christ's forehead in Sanmartino's sculpture. In Eliot's story, this scientific focus on blood and the circulatory system is however prevalent in another central moment, when Mrs Archer, one of the maids working for Latimer's wife, falls severely ill and dies.

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[4] Mesmerism derives from the French word *mesmérisme*, after the name of the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) who first developed a theory of animal magnetism and a mysterious body fluid which allowed one person to hypnotise another. According to Gordon Haight, the author of Eliot’s biography, Eliot came into contact with William Ballantyne Hodgson, a Scottish educational reformer and was mesmerised to the point that she was “unable to open her eyes” (Haight 1968, p. 54).

[5] Here, Flint quotes Lewes’s words from his philosophical treaty *Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845-46) where Lewes praises the scientific method of positivism. According to Lewes, the positivist method implies the observation of previsions and the ensuing analysis of the phenomena. “If we can predict certain results”, Lewes writes, “and if they occur as predicted, then we are assured that our knowledge is correct” (2023, p. 660).

3. Predicting death or narrating life after death?

Latimer's vision of Prague is an early manifestation of his double consciousness. However, this form of mental dissociation is gradually enmeshed with the idea of death. In this sense, Bertha Grant has a special impact on Latimer's capacity since his telepathic powers are unable to access the woman's mind. Bertha is initially destined to marry Alfred, Latimer's older brother. Latimer first encounters Bertha before Alfred's fatal accident and this episode impinges on the whole narrative. Latimer and Bertha meet while visiting the Liechtenstein Palace in Vienna and Latimer's attention is immediately caught by the sight of a painting depicting Lucrezia Borgia that Eliot erroneously attributes to the Italian Renaissance painter Giorgione[6]:

> [That] morning I had been looking at Giorgione's picture of the cruel-eyed woman, said to be a likeness of Lucrezia Borgia. I had stood long alone before it, fascinated by the terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects (pp. 18-19).

The vision of this painting anticipates Bertha's actual presentation in the novel. Once Latimer is joined by Bertha in the gardens of the museum, Latimer is still haunted by the cruel eyes of the woman in the painting and feels overwhelmed by "a strange intoxicating numbness" which he sees as "the continuance or climax" (p. 19) of the sensation arising from the sight of the painting.

From the very beginning, the reader realises that Latimer feels "in a state of uncertainty" (p. 15) with Bertha since he is unable to read her thoughts. Throughout the story, Bertha is compared to other women characterised by ambition and tragic death. Not only is Bertha related to a painting depicting Lucrezia Borgia. What is more, Latimer conjures up the image of a woman moving with a candle in the house, while the marble mantelpiece with a "dying Cleopatra" (p. 19; 34) is lit up. Bertha, whose name inevitably evokes the devilish Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), is also compared to a Water Nixie (p. 11), a monstrous creature that tries to lure men into drowning. Though Latimer's clairvoyance cannot penetrate Bertha's mind, when he first sees her, he already envisions the woman as his future wife, imagining, again, the moment when he will die:

> Intense and hopeless misery was pressing on my soul; the light became stronger, for Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand—Bertha, my wife—with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress; every hateful thought within her present to me… 'Madman, idiot! Why don't you kill yourself, then?' It was a moment of hell (p. 19).

As we can infer from this quote, images of decay haunt Latimer's imagination and Bertha inevitably evokes the theme of death. And yet, despite the aura of mystery surrounding the woman, Latimer feels attracted to Bertha since a figurative veil captivates Latimer's attention, making him feel like the victim of an unconscious form of sadomasochistic relationship.

This insistence on death is resumed when, immediately after the scene in the museum, Latimer's brother suddenly dies. Alfred's death is anticipated by a slight ellipsis since the scene that describes Alfred's death occurs in the second chapter. However, the shadow of death and misery towards Latimer’s brother is already materialised through the sense of “witchery” (p. 20) associated with Bertha’s presence. When Alfred falls off his horse and dies, Latimer marries Bertha as he had foreseen. It is during their marriage that Latimer gradually discovers the true nature of Bertha. Whereas Bertha remains “shrouded” (p. 31) from her husband, Latimer eventually realises Bertha’s cold nature and this revelation comes as a “terrible moment of complete illumination” (p. 32). By contrast, darkness conceals Bertha’s intentions. In the aftermath of his father’s death, for instance, Latimer sees again his wife as he had imagined her before their marriage “with a candle in her hand […] the white ball-dress, with the green jewels” (p. 34). The candle, the dim light of the studio and the general idea of darkness associated with Bertha contribute to the image of Bertha as a “fatal female” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, p. 460), a motif indebted to a long literary tradition going from Mary Shelley to Charles Swinburne.

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[6] As Small observes in an explanatory note in the Oxford edition, the attribution to Giorgione was an "error" since what Eliot saw in Vienna was a copy of Lorenzo Lotto's "A Lady with a Drawing of Lucretia", which is now in the National Gallery, London. Lucrezia Borgia was the illegitimate daughter of Pope Alexander VI. She played a crucial role in the Italian Renaissance, incarnating the typical traits of the *femme fatale*.

Critics have observed that Eliot employs the veil as a figurative device, inspired by other authors, to disclose the true nature of reality, particularly in relation to the concept of the *memento mori*. According to Ronald E. Sheasby, Eliot’s story contains echoes of Nataniel Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836), one of the most anthologised stories by the American author. The story centres on a man, Reverend Hooper, who mysteriously wears a black veil until his death. As Sheasby argues, “The Minister’s Black Veil” influenced Eliot’s story because of the thematic and symbolic echoes. When the veils are lifted, Sheasby notes, “too much light and too much power ensue” (2001, 389), causing suffering and death in both Latimer and Hooper. In a similar vein, this gothic orientation also recalls the motif of the black veil in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mystery of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797). In the first novel, for instance, the veil appears three times: to hide a decaying corpse, to cover a deathbed and to conceal the protagonist’s aunt. Interestingly, each of these veils tends to obscure reality, serving as a tool to find “a balance between the feelings and the rational mind (Broadwell 1975, 82).

Oscillating between concealment and revelation, Bertha’s gothic and dark allure hides a secret, which involves her maid Mrs Archer. The unusual friendship between Bertha and her maid is infused with “a mingled feeling of fear and dependence” (Eliot 2009, p. 35) that recalls the strange tie between Bertha Mason and the servant Grace Pool in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha distances herself from her husband and hopes that he will commit suicide, while Latimer reconnects with an old friend, the physician Charles Meunier. Mrs Archer is afflicted by a fatal attack of peritonitis and Meunier decides to experiment on the dying old woman: he seeks to revive the maid through blood transfusion, a medical practice that was experimental in the Victorian Age. This is how Latimer himself depicts the scene of Mrs Archer’s revivification:

> I could see the wondrous slow return of life; the breast began to heave, the inspirations became stronger, the eyelids quivered, and the soul seemed to have returned beneath them. The artificial respiration was withdrawn: still the breathing continued, and there was a movement of the lips (p. 41).

The reappearance of Latimer’s old comrade represents a crucial moment in the story, which has elicited contrasting critical views. John Blackwood himself, the editor of the magazine, found the scene of the revivification perplexing and “strongly advise[d] its deletion” (Eliot 1978, p. 67). In this respect, Terry Eagleton sees this moment as a “piece of tawdry melodrama, a grotesque and infelicitous flaw” (1983, p. 58). Others, such as Flint, contend that the scene foregrounds Eliot’s interests in medicine, thus engaging with “the theme of medical investigation and questioning that has been raised by Latimer’s own condition” (1997, p. 463)[7].

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[7] According to Flint, Charles Meunier is the fictional alter ego of the Mauritian physiologist and neurologist Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard, who experimented with blood transfusions on animals. Moreover, this passage is evocative of Lewes’s two-volume study *The Physiology of Common Life*, which came out in 1859, the same year as *The Lifted Veil*. The fifth chapter of Lewes’s study is devoted to blood and its circulation. Here, Lewes discusses the transfusion attempts

Interestingly, Mrs Archer's death is a prevision of Latimer's own death. The woman can be hence seen as "a narrator complementary to Latimer" (McGlynn 2007, p. 65). Paradoxically, Latimer starts to narrate his life when he is close to death, while the woman, temporarily brought back to life by Meunier's transfusion, reveals the secret around which the story centres. When the old woman wakes up, Bertha returns to the room where Mrs Archer lies and hears the maid accusing Bertha of storing poison to kill her husband. A corpse speaking beneath the veil that separates life and death, Mrs Archer thus sheds light on Bertha's mental plans. This means that, despite his clairvoyance, which figuratively evokes the omniscience of the narrator, Latimer is not aware of all the secrets of the story. In many ways, the term "poison" recalls the fatal odour of "poisoned sensation" Latimer had already experienced in the garden of the museum in Vienna. Not only is Latimer shocked by the news, but he is also horrified by the sight of Mrs Archer's body, admitting that the scene "seemed of one texture with the rest of [his] existence: horror was my familiar, and this new revelation was only like an old pain recurring with new circumstances" (Eliot 2009, p. 42).

By witnessing Mrs Archer's revivification, Latimer foresees his own death and what happens to the human body when it is brought to life. The "unstilled thirst" and the "unuttered curses" emitted by the lips and the "muscles ready to act out their half-committed sins" (p. 42) are evidence of these corporeal terms that abound in Eliot's story. This emphasis on the physical aspects of death returns also in the scene of Latimer's death at the very beginning of the story:

> I make a great effort, and snatch at the bell again. I long for life, and there is no help. I thirsted for the unknown: the thirst is gone. O God, let me stay with the known, and be weary of it: I am content. Agony of pain and suffocation—and all the while the earth, the fields, the pebbly brook at the bottom of the rookery, the fresh scent after the rain, the light of the morning through my chamber-window, the warmth of the hearth after the frosty air—will darkness close over them for ever? (p. 3)

Thus, early in *The Lifted Veil*, the reader familiarises with the agony of death. Notably, the initial scene is narrated in the present tense. The aesthetic effect of this choice is to favour a sense of proximity, to give the impression of attending the death of the protagonist as it unfolds throughout the story. In this respect, Latimer asks the reader to sympathise with his condition. This open temporality suggests that the events are not closed and that we are in the middle of a critical moment in which the ghost of death continuously lingers. The present tense returns in the final scene when Latimer closes the narrative with the following words: "It is the 20th of September 1850. I know these figures I have just written, as if they were a long familiar inscription. I have seen them on this page in my desk unnumbered times when the scene of my dying struggle has opened upon me…" (p. 43). The date conveys a realistic frame to the scene, though the final suspension dots suggest hesitation and ambiguity. Hence, ambiguity dominates the whole story to the point that we might interpret the narrative as an after-life account rather than a long flashback occurring on the point of death. Or, put in other words, as McGlynn argues, "Latimer begins to write only after his death becomes imminent, and thus his entire narration operates as a prolonged revivification" (2007, p. 65). In sum, the veil covers the secrets hidden in the text. By accessing Mrs Archer's words as she is brought back to life through Meunier's transfusion, the reader is eventually able to lift the veil from the story, not only realising Bertha's homicidal plans but the broader meaning of the story itself.

4. Coda: Eliot's veiled realism

The climax of the story reflects the aesthetic value of the veil and, more generally, the extent to which *The Lifted Veil* is preoccupied with the main tenets that govern Eliot's narrative art and her realistic

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by Brown-Séquard. The sixth chapter instead addresses the process of breathing and suffocation. These two chapters might have provided Eliot with a certain knowledge about the medical themes explored in her story.

style. In this sense, realism does not mean that art is reality. Rather, as John McGowan explains while commenting on Eliot's fiction, realism "tries to maintain a close relationship of similarity between art and life" (McGowan 1980, p. 172) and this is possible by taking into account the limited nature of the medium itself. Literary representations bear a resemblance to reality or, as Lewes himself writes in a piece that appeared in *The Westminster Review* in 1858, an artistic representation "is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium" (Lewes 1979, p. 392). Eliot's realism implies meticulous attention to the observation of details. As Nancy Henry and George Levine claim, Eliot's works seek "to bring together intellect and feeling" (2001, p. 6), thus conflating sympathy and knowledge at the same time. More specifically, Levine adds, Eliot's realist vein is infused with "what we might call a Positivist idealism", in which the "confident empiricism" of her early novels is intertwined with the "movement into the disenchanting sunlight of clear perception" (Levine 1980, p. 3). Eliot reflected upon her literary style in the essays she had published in the *Coventry Herald and Observer* in 1847 and later collected in *Poetry and Prose from the Notebook of an Eccentric*. In these five essays, Eliot sketches eccentric fictional characters that share "pronounced affinities with Latimer" (Viera 1984, p. 750), such as their unhappy adult life and the prevision of their deaths. This means that in *The Lifted Veil* Eliot returns to sketches she had already worked on earlier and that her realistic style is an amalgamation of many strands, shuttling between the accurate observation of the external world and the exploration of human consciousness.

In my view, it is precisely this perceptual quality of realism that Eliot thematises in *The Lifted Veil*, especially concerning sight and its limitations. As discussed earlier, the story is preoccupied with observation, visibility and invisibility since the narrator is haunted by various forms of vision, such as prevision, foresight and hindsight. The opening scene, with the narrator's admission of his own death, is a suspension of the narrative tension that animates sensational stories since the rest of the story is a reiteration of his past. As a narrator in search of sympathy, Latimer tries to appeal to the reader, while in his "double consciousness" (Eliot 2009, p. 21; 35; 42) mental and physical realities become confused. Seen in this light, the title has a metanarrative function in that it veils the story, blurring the reader's sight and comprehension. In this respect, as Gilbert and Guber observe, Eliot draws on the romantic tradition of poets like Wordsworth and Shelley who conceived of the veil as the "revelation of divinity behind these veils" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, p. 471). In addition, the story hinges on a secret, Latimer's death, though what we eventually see by the end of the story is already depicted earlier. Thus, the tile might be seen as a joke, a deliberately provocative remark on the fact that all visibility depends on invisibility. Once the veil is lifted, there is nothing to be seen or, more precisely, the veiling trope demonstrates that what we expect to see is already there. As Latimer declares, "[o]ur sweet illusions are half of them conscious illusions, like effects of colour that we know to be made up of tinsel, broken glass, and rags" (Eliot 2009, p. 30). The title of Eliot's story has a performative meaning, which echoes the mesmerising effect of the shroud covering Christ's body in Sanmartino's *Cristo velato* and in Monti's *La vestale velata*.

Much like these sculptures, *The Lifted Veil* portrays the transition between life and death. Sanmartino's sculpture is deceptively real since the veil is so thick and close to the skin of Christ that the viewer can see both the calmness and serenity of the face and the deep cicatrices on his hands and feet. Fluid like water, the veil creates the illusion of life in the observer. In Eliot's story, the veiling trope and the motif of the sights, with its multiple ramifications, point to the duplicity and untrustworthiness of Latimer's narration. The veil unveils the creative function of the medium itself, thus making the reader aware of the literary text as a medium. Eliot's realist art, to conclude, is attentive to the differences and gaps that separate the known and the unknown, between what is visible and accountable and what lies beneath the veil of fiction.

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