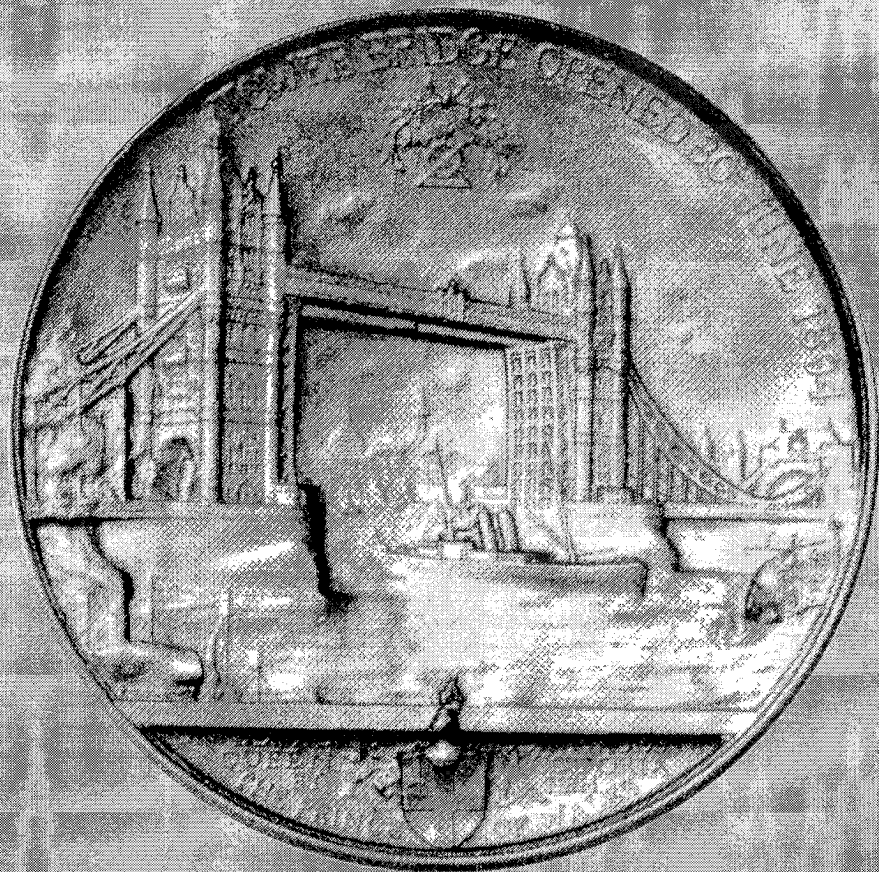


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**EVE'S FIG-LEAF: THE MALE NARRATOR,
SOPHISTRY AND THE LOSS OF NARRATIVE INNOCENCE
IN *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS***

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Elaine Showalter has famously compared the use of the male pseudonym by women writers of the nineteenth century to Eve's fig-leaf: "Like Eve's fig-leaf," writes Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*, "the male pseudonym signals the loss of innocence. In its radical understanding of the role-playing required by women's effort to participate in the mainstream of literary culture, the pseudonym is a strong marker of the historical shift"¹. Showalter approaches the figure of the male pseudonym from the point of view of the literary historian tracing out the emergence of the professional woman writer on the literary scene. The loss of innocence she refers to acknowledges the woman writer's need to engage with the sordid realities of the market place, a sphere considered improper for womanhood but within which women writers had to negotiate a place. The male pseudonym served as the necessary veil or mask behind which such negotiations could be undertaken while allowing the aura of "femininity" to be preserved, which, as Showalter

1. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1978, reprinted 1999) 19.

also points out, nineteenth century women writers were also anxious not to compromise.

On the formal level of narrative, the male pseudonym finds its extension in the figure of the male narrator, the role-playing persona behind which the biological identity of the woman writer is concealed. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the figure of the male narrator is a typically problematic site of narrative tensions, a point of convergence for assertions of masculinity which are alternately innocent—designed simply to build up the masculine identity of the narrator—and self-consciously ironical, the hyperbolic insistence on the conventional masculine attributes of the narrator pointing to the guilty fiction of the narrator's masculinity being sustained by the narrative. Casual invitations to the reader to savour the beauty of Maggie's arm¹ or to share with the narrator memories of the time when "his mother absolutely refused to let him have a tailed coat that 'half', although every other boy of his age had gone into tails already" (66) all attest to the masculine identity of the narrator as well as of the implied reader. Such insistent gender-mapping of both the narrative instance and the implied readership clearly impacts upon the way George Eliot means to have her narrative responded to, since the cross-dressing she herself indulges in she also imposes on the substantial part of her reading public represented by women readers; in such instances the female reader is, in the words of Judith Fetterley, "co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded"², and thus required to confirm the hegemonic view of gender relations, and the subordinations they entail, being propounded by the male narrator. The use of the male narrator is thus inseparably bound up with a number of *compromises* for the woman writer and for the female reader. But being thus "compromised" through vicariously living the experience of the masculine Other also allows the woman writer privileged insight into the complex processes of justification and rationalisation through which the masculine world-view

1. "Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm?" George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998) 441. All subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

2. Judith Fetterley, "Introduction: On the Politics of Literature", *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977). Anthologised in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, *Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 564-573.

is engendered and sustained; it allows her imaginatively to work through, and to see through, the tangle of cause and effect relations which are marshalled often illegitimately into support of that view, and to cast ironical and critical light on them.

Most critics agree that the use of a male narrator endows George Eliot with "the power of a confident, analytical, culturally authoritative voice"¹, allowing her to make axiomatic statements on areas deemed inaccessible for women—the reasons for war, for example (147), or the legitimacy of Aristotle's rhetorical precepts (140). Such forays into areas of "masculine wisdom" (287) traditionally barred from women all substantiate the sense of the narrator's masculinity, and may be seen as an emancipatory strategy for the woman writer, albeit one which ultimately confirms gender divisions and the ideology of separate spheres. However, the self-consciously assumed veil of masculinity is also a means whereby George Eliot can engage in a critique of prevailing cultural representations of masculinity and femininity, and beyond these, in a critique of the complacent or suspect processes of explanation and rationalisation which lie behind the production of such cultural representations. It is these suspect processes of rationalisation which I want to excavate in demonstrating George Eliot's "radical understanding", to borrow Showalter's phrase, of some of the guilty fictions on which the authority of the gender-based narratives which the cultural hegemony tells itself reposes. *The Mill on the Floss* constantly foregrounds processes of pseudo-rationalisation and questionable relations of cause and effect as far from innocent sense-making processes which sustain such narratives and the patriarchal order itself.

I THE MALE NARRATOR

Being himself firmly gendered, the male narrator does not hesitate to make equally gendered observations about his world, observations which are grounded in conventional notions of the masculine and the feminine and which at times incline even to misogyny: one thinks here of the conju-

1. Kate Flint, "George Eliot and Gender" in, George Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2001) 178.

gal condescension levelled at Mrs Glegg about whom the narrator avers the impossibility for a “healthy female mind even to simulate respect for a husband’s hobby [of gardening]” (120), or again of the narrator’s accusation of “Fortune” who, “being a female as well as blindfold” (167) is held responsible for Mr Stelling’s insufficient income on account of her distinctly “feminine” form of “logical confusion” which she introduces in apportioning the ratios between his wants, his intellect and his income:

[I]t is no fable that there were other clergymen besides Mr Stelling who had narrow intellects and large wants, and whose income, by a logical confusion to which Fortune, being a female as well as blindfold, is peculiarly liable, was proportioned not to their wants but to their intellect—with which income has clearly no inherent relation. (167)

The strategy at work in histrionically “masculinist” statements such as this seems to consist in positing as the *cause* or origin of the prevailing social and economic organisation of the world a conventional gender trait, here female illogicality, which might actually be shown to be not a cause but an *effect* or by-product of the patriarchal order it is called upon to account for. In the figure of blind Fortune, the idea of feminine illogicality is naturalised as a mythical figure and enshrined as a founding icon of Western *logos*. “Cherchez la femme”, goes the saying. The myth or “narrative” of female illogicality is here rooted in the dawn of Western civilisation and, being thus enshrined, becomes culturally ordained as the *cause* motivating Mr Stelling’s “readjusting” the proportion between his wants and his income by raising his income in the name of a non-feminine, and therefore presumably masculine, form of (rather bad) logic: “since wants are not easily starved to death, the simpler method appeared to be—to raise his income.” One of the key institutions of patriarchy, the over-charging clerical and teaching professions thus appears to be grounded on this bad logic, although George Eliot’s tongue-in-cheek irony underlines the unjust outcome of this “logical” process which “turns out very poor work at a high price” (167), effectively turning such “masculine” logic on its head. As a result, feminine illogicality comes to appear not so much as the *cause* of some of patriarchy’s less enlightened practices as an *effect* of patriarchy, a convenient but guilty fiction which culture gener-

ates and tells to itself in order to sustain and perpetuate some of its more unethical and unenlightened views and practices.

2 FICTIONS OF GENDER

The figure of blind and female Fortune is one of several *fictions of gender* on which patriarchy establishes its ascendancy in *The Mill on the Floss* and which George Eliot sardonically rehearses through the ventriloquism of her male narrator. Beyond the conventional gender stereotypes which seem to be her targets, what George Eliot appears to be questioning is the manner in which such cultural representations are marshalled into supporting the patriarchal order by being posited as *founding narratives or sustaining conditions* accounting for and guaranteeing the very existence of the order. A case in point is the narrator’s comment in the chapter entitled “To Garum Firs”, in which the “fortunes of our race”, and hence, it is implied, humanity’s advanced state of progress and civilisation, are attributed to the “desire for mastery over the inferior animals [...] including [...] small sisters” (92) as manifested in such budding patriarchs as Tom Tulliver, and typified by his infantile gesticulating and gurgling at the farm animals:

[Tom] was often observed peeping through the bars of a gate and making minatory gestures with his small forefinger while he scolded the sheep with an inarticulate burr [...]; indicating thus early that desire for mastery over the inferior animals, wild and domestic, including cockchafers, neighbours’ dogs and small sisters, which in all ages has been an attribute of so much promise for the fortunes of our race. (92)

The narrator here rehearses the received cultural narrative of human progress which he shows has typically been read as an essentially masculine one of conquest and domination. It is significant that this comment follows on immediately from a description of conventional masculinity which the narrator offers to the reader as a bit of man-to-man advice on how to impress young boys, an endeavour in which weak-minded, “thin-legged” uncle Pullet has failed deplorably with Tom: “It is only when you have mastered a restive horse, or thrashed a drayman, or have got a gun in your hand, that these shy

juniors feel you to be a truly admirable and enviable character" (91), we are advised. Emblematised by the three predatory activities of mastering a horse, thrashing a drayman and getting a gun in one's hand, conventional masculinity as it is evoked here both consolidates the masculine identity of the narrator and prepares the idea that such predatory masculinity is in fact the *mainspring* or first cause of human progress and the "fortunes of our race". In this view, the "fortunes" of the human race are predicated on the essentially masculine cultural narrative of "desire for mastery", and especially on its "early", nascent manifestations which make it appear to precede, and thus motivate and legitimise, the present superior state of humanity to which all "inferior animals" are subordinated, "small sisters" included. The promising fortunes of the human race are thus presented as the happy *effect* of predatory masculinity's "desire for mastery", while predatory masculinity is projected as the founding *cause*, reason or origin of human civilisation.

As we might expect with George Eliot, the absurdity of this claim, as well as the fragility and untenability of the masculine cultural narrative which supports it are thrown into relief by the undermining irony which places on the same footing the diminutive "minatory gestures" of Tom's "small forefinger" and the cosmic fortunes of the human race "in all ages". Conventional predatory masculinity is *not* to be seen as the mainspring or first cause of humanity's higher state of civilisation, is what George Eliot's submerged ironical subtext actually says. It must, in consequence, be a product of it, a narrative emanation or excrescence, a cultural construction produced and fostered by the apparent onward movement of the human race. This cultural construction, the narrative of conventional masculinity as "mastery", then in turn feeds back into and sustains the belief in human progress, until finally it appears to have produced it so that the superiority of the human race becomes equated with, and attributable to, the virtues of predatory masculinity. George Eliot here points to the spurious circularity of the logic which marshals such gender-based cultural narratives into supporting prevailing social and sexual arrangements, the perpetuation of which clearly serves the interests of the part of humanity represented by the bourgeois male narrator.

If the narrative of humanity's progress and "fortune" is held to be an essentially "masculine" cultural narrative, the story which society tells of its "preservation" is the prerogative of the "feminine". In relation to the gossiping "world's wife", the narrator reiterates the conventional gender-based notion that the perpetuation of Society and nation is to be ensured through the essentially *feminine* "instinct" of moral refinement: "the world's wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of Society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver's conduct had been of the most aggravated kind" (491). Once again, a conventional gender-based notion, that of feminine moral refinement, is taken for granted and summoned in defence of the status quo, being cited as an intrinsic quality of the feminine on which the preservation of society and continuation of the species depend. Yet as feminist critics have shown, such gender stereotyping may be seen as nothing more than a cultural construct: myths of feminine moral refinement and purity as guarantors of civilisation or instruments of national regeneration¹ are precisely engendered and fostered by the patriarchal order to whose advantage they work by having the women themselves police the borders of patriarchy's own hegemonic position and expel the more transgressive members of their own sex².

As the above examples illustrate, George Eliot repeatedly stages through her male narrator ways in which gender stereotypes are posited as the enabling causes or premises on which the existing social order is founded, rather than as the effects or constructions emanating *from* that order. In doing so, she not only points up the rather crude gender representations upon which society is content to see itself as founded; she also implicitly denounces the elaborate *sophistry* which characterises the *causal arrangements* underpinning patriarchal society's representations of itself, in

1. Eleanor Stewart Tanguy pointed out a similar point in her paper "Representations of Women in Late Victorian and Edwardian Drama: from Angel in the House to New Woman", given at the SFEVE conference "L'innocence perdue", January 2003.

2. Of course, through the ironical hyperbolic comparison of the world's wife to God ("He had not the care of Society on His hands—as the world's wife had", 492), George Eliot clearly distances herself from this common assumption on which society founds its belief in its own existence.

which the validity and desirability of existing social arrangements emerge enhanced, and patriarchy's own position reinforced.

3 SOPHISTRY

The sophisticated manipulation of causal relations in support and explanation of desirable ends or consequences is frequently foregrounded in *The Mill on the Floss*, and not only in the field of gender representations. Auctioneer Mr Riley misguidedly recommends Mr Stelling as a tutor for Tom following a fallacious reasoning process in which he sees an opportunity to make events coincide with the desirable end of "doing a good turn to a son-in-law of Timpson's" and providing him with a well-paying student. What starts out as an unsubstantiated recommendation made on "slight grounds", and urged out of Mr Riley by Mr Tulliver's "warm hearth and the brandy-and-water" (27), comes to take on the force of "high authority" (26) when filtered retrospectively through what the narrator, in the manuscript version of the novel, calls "the softening medium of desirable consequences"¹ which is Mr Riley's congenial brand of sophistry, of imaginatively working out processes to suit his desired end.

Philip Wakem too becomes the vehicle through which the attractions and dilemmas of sophistry are dramatised. When trying to convince Maggie to meet him in the Red Deeps, he tries to "persuad[e] himself his end was not selfish" (330), that he has Maggie's best interests at heart, that he can bring her "some opportunity of culture—some interchange with a mind above the vulgar level of those she was now condemned to live with" (330). Philip's reasoning is called both "sophistry" and a "subterfuge" by the narrator:

after hours of clear reasoning and firm conviction, we snatch at any sophistry that will nullify our long struggles, and bring us the defeat that we love better than victory. Maggie felt her heart leap at this subterfuge of Philip's [...] (330).

and it is explicitly presented as a distorting reorganisation of cause and effect relations from the standpoint of desirable consequences:

1. See note 27 in the Oxford World Classics edition, p. 523.

If we only look far enough off for the consequences of our actions, we can always find some point in the combination of results by which those actions can be justified: by adopting the point of view of a Providence who arranges results, or of a philosopher who traces them, we shall find it possible to obtain perfect complacency in choosing to do what is most agreeable to us in the present moment.² And it was in this way that Philip justified his subtle efforts to overcome Maggie's true promptings [...] (330)

If Philip is guilty of such causal reorganisations to satisfy his own personal reading of Maggie's position, the reader too is challenged to re-consider given cause and effect relations in reading Philip:

Do not think too hardly of Philip. Ugly and deformed people have great need of unusual virtues, because they are likely to be extremely uncomfortable without them: but the theory that unusual virtues spring by a direct consequence out of personal disadvantages, as animals get thicker wool in severe climates, is perhaps a little overstrained. (331)

In this evolutionary analogy, George Eliot puts into question the relation of cause to effect as used in Lamarck's theory of adaptation: according to this theory, thicker wool in some animals may appear to be the *result* of severe cold to which the animals have adapted, but George Eliot casts doubt on this, implicitly reversing the causal relations by putting forward instead the hypothesis that thicker wool may actually be the *cause* or reason for the survival of these favoured animals¹.

Seen from the perspective of the desired end result, George Eliot shows, causal relations may take on a variety of configurations, be reorganised and brought into line with results following a rather specious form of retrospective rationalisation. This is what the world's wife, and, it is implied, the reader, does when judging character(s): "We judge others according to

1. In this she follows Charles Darwin who, although he observes that animals living in colder climates have thicker fur than those living in more temperate climates, asks "how much of this difference may be due to the warmest-clad individuals having been favoured and preserved during many generations, and how much to the direct action of the severe climate?" Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, quoted in Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1984) 60.

results; how else?—not knowing the processes by which results are arrived at” (490). Imagining processes in such a way as to make them appear to support, explain and substantiate perceived or desired ends is a form of sophistry which allows the world’s wife retrospectively to discern the seeds of Maggie’s “aggravated” conduct in her earlier appearance at the charity bazaar: “Maggie’s conspicuous position, for the first time, made evident certain characteristics which were subsequently felt to have an explanatory bearing” (430-31). This kind of retrospective re-reading as practised by the world’s wife holds out the fallacious promise of a unified, coherent explanation, in which processes and ends will chime in with one another in a properly “prelapsarian” unity of signification. I call it “prelapsarian”, because, as the narrator points out in the chapter tellingly entitled “The Golden Gates are Passed”, the time before the fall was the time when processes and ends coincided: Maggie’s promise to kiss Philip whenever she meets him is, the narrator points out, void, “void as promises made in Eden, before the seasons were divided, and when the starry blossoms grew side by side with the ripening peach—impossible to be fulfilled when the golden gates had been passed” (185-86). Eden is the time “before the seasons were divided”, when the flower and fruit grew side by side on the same branch, a moment in which the *processes* of growth (figured by the “starry blossoms”) and their resulting *ends* (figured by the “ripening peach”) coincided in a state of blissful union and concomitance. The fall from innocence is here construed not only as the fall into the awareness of sexual difference which prevents Maggie from fulfilling her promise, hitherto rendered suspect by gender-based cultural expectations (“Philip would not expect it”, 185); it also signals the radical separation of processes and ends which now, instead of co-existing in a state of primeval simultaneity, organise themselves along a temporal axis of contiguous sequence according to the logic of cause and effect, which is also the logic of narrative. As critic Cynthia Chase has remarked, the operations of temporal and causal sequence and the operations of narrative run parallel:

[...] to read a sequence of events as a narrative is to expect that sequence to become intelligible. By the almost irresistible pressure of this expectation, the temporal sequence is conflated with a causal sequence; post hoc is interpreted

as propter hoc. A novel evokes the passage of time, which is itself presented to show the “effects” of “causes” and thereby to reveal the events’ significance.¹

The fall from innocence figured by the departure from Eden may thus be seen as synonymous with the fall into temporality and narrative, and all its attendant causal distortions and manipulations, which we have seen exemplified in the patriarchal order’s self-serving manipulation of the cultural narratives of gender. By foregrounding the problematic and unstable relations of cause and effect (which for example lead Mrs Tulliver to “expect that similar causes may at any time produce different results”, 129) and by dramatising the temptations of sophistry and retrospective rationalisation, George Eliot highlights the difficulties of sense-making and the manipulative and coercive uses to which it is put by those who interpret the world through “the softening medium of desirable consequences”, be it Mr Riley, Philip Wakem or the patriarchal order itself.

In conclusion, it should perhaps be pointed out that Maggie Tulliver alone refuses to rationalise her position according to this retrospective logic, or to arrange events imaginatively so as to justify her personal desire, as she explains rather brokenly to Stephen:

[...] it is difficult—life is very difficult! [...] If life were quite easy and simple, as it might have been in paradise, and we could always see that one being first towards whom . . . I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see—I feel it is not so now [...] (449; emphasis mine)

We see Maggie here struggling and failing to articulate the prelapsarian illusion in which love and duty might coincide or centre in the same person, and love be an innocently transparent “sign”, “as it might have been in paradise”. Yet she is unable to give expression to this particular narrative, and her words significantly break off in mid-sentence. Maggie sees the impossibility of mapping personal desire onto the canvas of “ties” to others which have been constituted over time. She alone refuses the comforts of sophisti-

1. Cynthia Chase, “The Decomposition of the elephants: Double-reading *Daniel Deronda*,” in *PMLA* 93 (2), (March 1978): 217.

cal rationalisation from the retrospective narrative standpoint of “desirable consequences”, and just as she is unable to make Minna’s or Corinne’s narratives end happily, so she is unable or unwilling to re-write the narrative of her own desire from this retrospective standpoint. This is because the imperative of chronology is paramount for Maggie over other forms of (pseudo)-rationalisation or logic—the fact that “duty”, in the form of Tom and Philip, has come *first, before* love, makes duty the overriding principle: “If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?”, she famously declares (475). Paradoxically, in having Maggie thus acknowledge her time-bound, and hence postlapsarian condition, and refuse to avail herself of sophisticated after-the-fact rationalisation, George Eliot designates Maggie as the one true innocent in a world of guilty narrators.

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