

BEARING WITNESS IN *SILAS MARNER*: GEORGE ELIOT'S EXPERIMENT IN SYMPATHY

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THERE IS A CURIOUS NARRATIVE MOMENT near the middle of George Eliot's novel *Silas Marner*. Marner, on discovering the theft of his gold, runs to the Rainbow Inn, the village's popular gathering place, intending to broadcast the theft and demand justice. This is a climatic moment in the plot; as readers we turn the page with mounting anticipation: how will the villagers react to the strange weaver's first intrusion into this most sacred of spaces in Raveloe? The reader must immediately be disappointed, then, on turning the page and coming to chapter six. We do go inside the Rainbow Inn but leave Marner on the other side of the yet-unopened door; instead of an exciting confrontation between Marner and the villagers, we are made to listen to a meandering exchange of retold stories by a cast of unimportant characters. This narrative interruption within the novel echoes the much larger interruptions that surround the production and reception of this text. *Silas Marner* most literally interrupted Eliot's work on *Romola*. She says in her journal that the idea "thrust itself between me and the other book I was meditating" (*Journals* 87). The novel also disrupts most critical consensus about Eliot as a realist writer. No one seems quite sure what to do with this half fable, half realist work alongside such masterpieces as *Middlemarch*. In addition, the character of Marner interrupts what we have come to expect from Eliot's characters; whether an earlier hero like Adam Bede or a later heroine like Gwendolen Harleth, her characters have at least some endearing qualities despite, or maybe because of, their flaws. When one turns to *Silas Marner*, however, a reader can be hard pressed to find anything appealing about the peculiar weaver.

Attending to *Silas Marner*'s strangeness shows this novel to be Eliot's most provocative experiment in redefining nineteenth-century understandings of the sympathetic act.¹ Central to this claim is a way of reading the textual interruptions of *Silas Marner* as ethical interruptions that question the efficacy of sympathy dependent on identification. I read these interruptions through Emmanuel Levinas, a twentieth-century French philosopher and Jewish intellectual, and Kelly Oliver, a more recent American philosopher of ethics and subjectivity in the fields of feminism, film, and media studies. Each of their distinctive

ethical philosophies, Levinas's focus on encountering the other through a theory of the face and Oliver's focus on subjectivity through the concept of witnessing, informs my reading of how the otherness of Marner serves an ethical purpose. Levinas and Oliver each challenge contemporary notions that conceive of the relationship between self and other as divided by unresolvable hostility (at worst) or difference that must be overcome (at best). In either case, there is the impulse, which Levinas and Oliver call unethical in each of their philosophies, to repackage the other's difference into something that will be familiar and therefore knowable. The other cannot be reduced to merely a tool for making sense of one's self; rather, the other should profoundly interrupt the self, should remain "beyond recognition" (in Oliver's terms) or remain "irreducible to the I" (in Levinasian terms).² Recognition is unethical, as Oliver explains, because it insists on representing the other only in terms of what I already know: "Any real contact with difference or otherness becomes impossible because recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar. When recognition repeats the master-slave or subject-object hierarchy, then it is bound to assimilate difference back into sameness" ("Witnessing" 79).³ In placing the problem of recognition at the center of their philosophy of ethics, both Levinas and Oliver show themselves to be fundamentally concerned about representation, and this makes their work especially useful in thinking through the fraught relationship between Victorian realism and representations of the other.

Reading Eliot's emphasis on faces and stories through Levinas and Oliver show these narrative elements to be part of a larger ethical project, rather than mere materialism or detailism common to realist novels. *Silas Marner* insists that we see scenes such as the spying eyes of village boys and the glaring face of Marner's response as a moment about (dis)connection and not about simply looking at the other. This reformation of vision is especially important for Levinas and Oliver. Levinas's formulation of the face to face dispenses with the face's visual significance to focus instead on the face as grounded in presence and discourse, overwhelming one's ability to perceive and understand: "the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge" (198). Levinas thus reformulates the act of looking, a key step for Oliver, who praises Levinas for "tak[ing] us beyond knowing or grasping the other through vision – the mind's eye or the body's – toward a relationship beyond recognition" (206). Oliver also reclaims theories of vision mired in power dynamics of the objectifying gaze. She uses the concept of witnessing (in the sense of both an eye witness and one who bears witness) to structure subjectivity around address-ability and response-ability, thus refocusing the self-other relation around connection rather than alienation.⁴ Marner's status as stranger reflects this very tension between the other's alien qualities and the desire to connect with the other.

Silas Marner's strangeness complicates critical approaches to the novel, even in Eliot's own time. Focusing on the unusual character of Marner, one reviewer from the *Times* thought him "a singularly unaccountable being" and a "most unsuitable hero" (qtd. in Carroll 16–17). The opening pages of the novel also describe Marner as an oddity: he belongs to a set of "alien-looking men" who resemble "the remnants of a disinherited race" with "eccentric habits" (5–6; ch. 1). Some of the elements that contribute to his strangeness – his cataleptic fits and mysterious past – also contribute to the fable-like quality of the text. F. R. Leavis complains that Eliot's heavy-handed use of metaphor and allegory turns this novel into "something of a fairytale" (46). His assessment from the 1970's, that we do not apply this

tale to “our everyday sense of how things happen,” persists in the scholarly approach that ignores *Silas Marner* in discussions of Eliot’s more realist texts.⁵

Though the novel may puzzle readers and critics, Eliot’s emphasis on sympathy in *Silas Marner* should come as no surprise given her constant preoccupation with fostering that virtue in her readers. Sympathy, Eliot claimed, was the centrally human act that formed her whole purpose in writing: “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves” (*Letters* 3: 111). Eliot was in many ways, then, firmly entrenched in the Victorian belief that sympathy was a necessary virtue, but a reconsideration of *Silas Marner* reveals an evident uneasiness about the sympathetic act that has not been fully considered in discussions of Eliot.⁶ Critics have described Eliot’s sympathy as narcissistic, voyeuristic, and sadomasochistic, an “incentive to egoism,” and as the “spectacle of another’s suffering.”⁷ These descriptions do not account for the way in which *Silas Marner* undermines the standard nineteenth-century perceptions of the sympathetic act that sacrificed difference in order to obtain the identification thought to be necessary for extending sympathy.⁸

To challenge such deeply held assumptions about the nature of sympathy (assumptions that I might argue we still hold today) requires unsettling the reader through fairly abrasive techniques. In *Middlemarch* this comes in the form of the famous question, “But why always Dorothea?” and the narrator’s abrupt shift from Dorothea’s perspective to Causabon’s. In *Silas Marner*, Eliot successfully unsettles our notions of sympathy through pervasive references to faces and exchanges of stories. Eliot’s radical experiment in sympathy claims that to resist understanding the other is an ethical act. This essay shows how it is precisely the way Eliot weaves the visual and storytelling moments *together* in this novel that allows her to remove sympathy from this paradigm. Eliot’s novel challenges the Victorian confidence in knowing the other and then reimagines the sympathetic act as one where the other’s singularity remains intact.⁹

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A LOOK AT ONE OF THE PIVOTAL SCENES in the novel will serve to show how Levinas’s and Oliver’s theories work together to illuminate Eliot’s proposal that sympathy can be extended without first understanding the other. The first time Marner shares a story face to face with the other villagers marks a turning point in their relationship. Before this moment, Marner has remained an outsider because he does not participate in any of the Raveloe customs. He never invited someone “to step across his doorsill, and he never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow, or to gossip at the wheelwright’s”; instead, his interactions are strictly business dealings spawned from necessity: “[he] sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling, or in order to supply himself with necessaries” (7–8; ch. 1). As a result of this intentional seclusion, Marner’s life began “narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had *no relation to any other being*” (20; ch. 2, italics mine). These descriptions of Marner’s attitude toward others are further supported by literal descriptions of his face, depicted in mechanical, inhuman terms: “Strangely Marner’s face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life, so that he produced the same sort of impression as a handle or crooked tube” (20; ch. 2). Connection to others was a central part of life in Eliot’s view, and part of her writing was an attempt to help her readers “in getting a clearer conception and

a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence" (*Letters* 4: 472). Marner's choice to live a life disengaged from those around him must be reformed, and the solution will come through witnessing as a powerful form of sympathy.

When Marner crosses the threshold of the Rainbow Inn for the first time in order to seek help in recovering his stolen gold, his behavior illustrates how estranged he is from Raveloe customs. He bursts in and immediately begins making demands for the Justice and accusing Jem Rodney of stealing his gold. The landlord tries to explain to Marner that his manner of speaking offends the villagers: "if you've got any information to lay, speak it out sensible, and show as you're in your right mind, if you expect anybody to listen to you" (56; ch. 7). Since speaking sensibly in Raveloe means telling a story, Marner takes his seat in the center of the company, assuming the role of storyteller that the villagers recognize. As Marner begins to tell his story of coming home to find all of his money disappeared, the narrative describes how "all faces were turned to Silas" (56; ch. 7). The first step toward transforming the relationship between Marner and the villagers begins with letting Marner, as other, tell his story. The reference to faces importantly underscores the presence of bodies and the attention given to Marner in this company of villagers.

It is the presence of these faces, then, that initiate a transformation in Marner: "This strangely novel situation of opening his trouble to his Raveloe neighbours, of sitting in the warmth of a hearth not his own, and *feeling the presence of faces* and voices which were his nearest promise of help, had doubtless its influence on Marner" (57; ch. 7, italics mine). The influence of faces greatly affect Marner in part because of the contrast to the spying eyes of the village boys and the "coins with unknown faces" that had previously defined his existence. All descriptions of faces to this point in the novel have only increased the enmity between Marner and Raveloe. The openness with which Marner finally approaches his neighbors, by admitting he needs their help, and the reciprocal openness of the villagers as they bear witness to his story, creates the kind of generosity that can produce ethical sympathy. As the villagers listen to Marner's story in the Rainbow Inn, they are not attempting to understand Marner's strangeness. They are instead bent on answering his call for help.

It is the need of the other, not the similarity of the other, on which ethical sympathy must be based. This kind of "orientation to the other" Levinas calls the face: "For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. . . . The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face" (50). Throughout the transformation from Marner's alienation to his inclusion in the community, Eliot never drops descriptors like "strange" and "singular" when talking about Marner. Early in chapter two the narrator tells readers that eventually "his history became blent in a *singular* manner with the life of his neighbours" (22, italics mine). In Levinas's terms, Marner's difference means he will always exceed any idea the villagers can have of him; the radical nature of the Rainbow Inn encounter, and why it moves Marner so much, comes from the fact that despite such alterity, Marner finds that the villagers are still willing to bear witness to his story.

If the ethical relationship for Levinas is one in which the other always in some way remains beyond comprehension, then the dilemma becomes how does one sympathize with someone beyond comprehension or understanding? Eliot postulates the exchange of story as

an answer to this dilemma. Story is embedded in Levinas's notion of the face, which rests on linguistic rather than verbal cues: "Although Levinas's choice of terminology suggests otherwise, the face-to-face relation with the other is not a relation of perception or vision, but is always linguistic. The face is not something I see, but something I speak to" (Critchley 12). Eliot illustrates the linguistic turn of Levinas's theory of the face by aligning the exchange of story with a response to the face of the other. Marner "feels the presence of faces" only when he shares his story, an opening of himself to the other that produces more "open smiling faces" and "listening faces" and turns his own shriveled, inward life outward enough to recognize the "ties that bind."

Although the content of Marner's story is noteworthy – his gold has been stolen and he is asking for help – it is not this content that changes Marner and the villagers. It is the act of sharing it with the villagers and the fact that they *respond*. Oliver's notion of witnessing explains why the act of telling matters more than the substance of the story. The term's roots in trauma studies focuses on the tremendous effort required to narrate rather than on the resulting narration. The very nature of the story that most trauma victims attempt to articulate demands this shift in focus because so often the story itself is incomprehensible and beyond understanding, sometimes even beyond belief. Nevertheless, as studies of trauma victims show, something crucial happens in the coming together of a narrator and listener: "What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony" (Felman 85).¹⁰ The term witnessing is a deeply embedded component of trauma studies, but I suggest the important work done in this field can inform a vital paradigm shift for all tellings, traumatic or otherwise, in order to help us engage with difference by downplaying the role of understanding the other and emphasizing instead the event of sharing stories.

By underscoring the act of bearing witness, Oliver draws an important distinction between the act of telling and what is told. This is, in fact, the same distinction between the Saying and Said that is so crucial for Levinas in describing the indeterminacy of the ethical moment in the face to face. The Said fixes language into categories, thereby emphasizing comprehension and the known. The Saying occurs before language, in the moment when the other's face is presented before me. The Saying will always dissolve into the Said, but it can leave a trace that, I would emphasize, we are more apt to be aware of if we attend to this distinction in the first place. Eliot's *Rainbow Inn* chapter illustrates this in a more concrete way by first drawing our attention to the act of telling stories, before giving us the story itself. Indeed, although our attention will always fall back on what Marner's story is about and the narrative resolution, the most ethical readings will not forget the traces of Saying that are the moments where we feel our readerly assumptions interrupted by the very strangeness of *Silas Marner*, both as a character and as a narrative.

Eliot also suggests this shift of focus onto the exchange of story rather than the stories themselves through the rather strange subject matter of chapter six in *Silas Marner*. The entire chapter contains nothing but a random conversation that takes place in the *Rainbow Inn*. When read carefully with the central role of storytelling in mind, the scene in this chapter becomes essential for laying out Eliot's definition of ethical sympathy. The meandering pace of this chapter forestalls the reader's desire to find out what will happen when Marner enters the *Rainbow Inn* for the first time and can therefore seem like an irritating interruption. The stories told do not reveal anything important about the plot, nor do they reveal anything

new to the listeners in the tavern, as they have heard these stories before: “Everyone of Mr. Macey’s audience had heard this story many times, but it was listened to as if it had been a favourite tune, and at certain points the puffing of the pipes was momentarily suspended, that the listeners might give their whole minds to the expected words” (51; ch. 6). The familiarity of these stories indicates that their importance lies not in what they are about but in the ritual of the telling itself. The story has become like a “favourite tune” that one listens to over and over for the pleasurable rhythm and for how it fits into the context of one’s life. In fact, the narrator provides just as many details about how the stories are told as what the stories are about. Although often ignored by critics, this chapter plays an important role in shifting the reader’s focus from the *content* of stories to the actual *act* of sharing stories, an important emphasis that Eliot must foreground to help readers understand the central role of witnessing in creating more ethical sympathy.¹¹

While shifting the reader’s focus to the act of telling, the exchange of stories in the Rainbow Inn also demonstrates how the story component of witnessing can create a balance between singularity and community. Through the stories in chapter six, readers become aware of distinct characters within this village that up to this point have been presented as one entity in the name of Raveloe. We meet the prideful and confident Mr. Macey, the cautious and suspicious Mr. Tookey, the jovial and pleasant landlord, and the pessimistic Mr. Dowlas. At the same time, we clearly see how they are situated within the community. In a decidedly Levinasian strain, Adriana Cavarero also stresses the other who is unknowable to me, but whom I nevertheless depend on for my identity. In her work *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero places story at the center of ethical exchanges between self and other. Unlike Oliver’s focus on the effects of this exchange on the other, Cavarero’s concern centers on how the act of narrating, and the need to do so, effects constructions of the narrative’s subject, that is, the self. Narrating one’s story to an audience encourages the development of subjectivity, according to Cavarero, because the web of communal stories fosters a sense of individuality. Individuality is not lost in community but rather depends on it: “One cannot appear if there is no one else there . . . existing consists in disclosing oneself within a scene of plurality where everyone, by appearing to one another, is shown to be unique” (20). Our desire for a unique identity, which Cavarero argues we only come to know by displaying it to others, is intimately tied to the relational character of our nature: we must exist within a community to display our identity at all. Cavarero further asserts the affirmation, not the loss of, the individual in the community; a life story is unique “precisely because it is constitutively interwoven with many others” in a way that no other story can be (71). As the exchange of stories in chapter six demonstrates, stories reveal how one’s identity depends on the other, but stories also differentiate self from the other.

Macey’s wedding vow story, for example, is both a public performance of his own identity and a confirmation of his relationship to the Raveloe community. In the marriage ceremony of Mr. Lammeter and Miss Osgood, the parson mixes up the vows and asks Mr. Lammeter, “Wilt though have this woman to thy wedded husband?” and he asks Miss Osgood, “Wilt though have this man to thy wedded wife?” (50; ch. 6). As the only person in attendance to notice the mistake, Macy uses this story to identify himself as someone who is “allays uncommon for turning things over and seeing all round ’em” (51; ch. 6). His propensity to notice details has also earned him the important place as storyteller in the community. When Macey comments that he has given up storytelling to the younger generations and looks pointedly at Tookey, the deputy clerk immediately refuses to take on

the role: “‘If you’re pointing at me, Mr. Macey,’ said the deputy clerk, with an air of anxious propriety, ‘I’m nowise a man to speak out of my place’” (48; ch. 6). Macey’s stories affirm his own individual traits as well as his distinct place within the community, demonstrating Cavarero’s claim that story can incorporate an individual into a community without losing the uniqueness of that individual.

Chapter six thus importantly prepares the reader to see Marner’s eventual inclusion in the community not as the erasure of his singularity, but as an acceptance of his strange story within the larger narrative of the Raveloe community. Eliot preserves the storyteller’s uniqueness by focusing on the ritual of storytelling rather than on the story itself. This illustrates Oliver’s description of the act of bearing witness and her insistence that subjectivity is born not from the *content* of the testimony, but from the *act* of telling oneself to another: “I construct and reconstruct my experiences for another, even if I don’t ever actually tell them the narrative that I have prepared for them. It is the bearing witness to the other itself, spoken or not, that gives birth to the I” (206–07). This focus, Oliver claims, can free identity formation from dependence on an oppositional conception of defining self against other. If, as Oliver believes, the process of forming identity is not limited to the binary of either defining self against the other because of difference or assimilating self and other into the same, then this has important implications for how we perceive difference, both in terms of identity formation and the extension of sympathy. Witnessing, as a term used to describe the ethical extension of sympathy, moves away from the necessity of reaching an understanding and toward simply dwelling in the presence of shared story.

When an encounter with difference no longer aims for understanding or recognition, sympathy can flow out of and around difference rather than devolve into assimilation or estrangement. Furthermore, if stories can help affirm what is unique in the other, then sympathy created in the act of sharing story is more likely to preserve difference. The scene in the Rainbow Inn generates sympathy because the villagers are no longer struggling to understand Marner; rather, they are intent on bearing witness to his story. In entering the Rainbow Inn, Marner has found something beyond the curious, objectifying faces of the boys, and the villagers now have a story through which they begin to feel for him as a fellow sufferer: “The repulsion Marner had always created in his neighbours was partly dissipated by the new light in which this misfortune had shown him” (77; ch. 10). Marner and the villagers each see the other now in relational terms: the villagers are Marner’s “nearest promise of help” and Marner becomes someone who needs the villagers’ assistance. Witnessing describes sympathy that depends on an act, the generous, welcoming stance in a face-to-face encounter in which the other shares her story. The villagers’ act of witnessing indicates a recognition of this centrally human activity and they extend their help and sympathy, not because they now understand Marner, but because he has finally given them something to respond to.

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I HAVE SHOWN HOW THE EXCHANGE OF stories in chapter six set the conditions for the ethical extension of sympathy; that is, a recognition that the exchange of story takes precedence over trying to understand or comprehend the content of the story. This practice establishes an approach to the other that does not view difference as something to be overcome; when difference becomes irrelevant, understanding is no longer necessary. Defining the role of

story in this way explains why Marner's first moment as storyteller in the Rainbow Inn opens the possibility for ethical encounters between Marner and the villagers. The significance of the Rainbow Inn scene must also be fully appreciated in contrast to the prior encounters between Marner and Raveloe. The narrative carefully prepares the reader to see the extension of sympathy in the Rainbow Inn scene as truly radical by providing detailed accounts of the animosity between Marner and Raveloe. The differences that exist between them infect every interaction with suspicion and even disgust.

One example of the hostile way Marner and the villagers treat one another occurs during an incident prior to the Rainbow Inn scene. Marner uses his knowledge of medicinal herbs to cure Sally Oates when no one else in Raveloe could, and this healing became a "matter of general discourse" as the villagers discuss Marner's strange powers (18; ch. 2). Instead of going to Marner himself to hear how he gained these skills, the villagers speculate based on prior experiences and assumptions. Because this encounter lacks the crucial components of witnessing – embodied presence and storytelling – it only affirms the distance between them. The villagers assimilate his identity into the same category as *The Wise Woman*, another figure othered by the community because of her strange charms and muttering words. The villagers' act of comparing Marner to something familiar, *The Wise Woman*, goes against Levinas's concept of ethics that resists the impulse to relate everything and everyone we come across to our own experiences. Ethics entails an interruption of self, a moment that derails the confidence required to look at something or someone and say "I know" and to assign some definition that more or less reflects the self rather than the other. The ability to interrupt this confidence is what Levinas finds sacred about the other: the other always exceeds any idea in myself and therefore interrupts and explodes the notions I have used to neatly organize my world, or as Levinas says, the other is the "Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself" (39).

Marner's successful healing of Sally Oates literally sends a flood of strangers to his home, though such visitations do not result in the Levinasian ethical encounter described above. Instead of allowing these strangers to disturb him, Marner sends them away with "ill-will and irritated glances" (19; ch. 2). Furthermore, the villagers also refuse to let Marner's strange healing powers disturb their neatly organized world; they merely shuffle him into a category already established for strange characters in their town. The villagers' approach lacks what is crucial for engendering ethical sympathy: adopting an attentive stance toward the other, inhabiting a space embodied by the presence of the other, and witnessing the context of the other's story. The Sally Oates incident stresses the importance of this last component. Rather than situate Marner's story into the correct context of his strange history, the villagers would rather assimilate his story into a context they already know. By neglecting the particulars of his story, the villagers also neglect what makes Marner unique. That the other must be present to tell her own tale is implicit in Levinas's notion of how language is ethical. In a section entitled "Language and Attention" Levinas states, "he signals himself by attending the work that signals him; he does not only signal himself, but speaks, is a face" (99). Here, as elsewhere, the concept of face and language are closely aligned so that we understand language as presence, signaled by the face. This moment in the novel illustrates why an important component of ethical sympathy includes being in the presence of the other in order to bear witness to her story. Without these elements of witnessing, Marner's kindness to Sally Oates in the end only serves to "heighten the repulsion between him and his neighbors, and made his isolation more complete" (19; ch. 2).

In contrast to the Sally Oates incident, then, the Rainbow Inn scene shows a marked improvement in the ability for Marner and Raveloe to extend sympathy without concern for their differences. The progress proves inadequate for Eliot, who not only wants to push her experiment with how far these characters can extend sympathy but also wants to show how such improvements do not progress seamlessly.¹² The progress in *Silas Marner* can be measured by the way Marner greets the villagers when they show up at his doorway after each episode. He advances beyond the practice of turning them away with “irritated glances” after the Sally Oates episode to a practice of welcoming visitors after the Rainbow Inn scene: “when he did come to the door he showed no impatience, as he would once have done, at a visit that had been unasked for and unexpected” (81; ch. 10). Although these two scenes appear in stark contrast, even the improved condition of the second encounter has some flaws, as the narrator points out: “I suppose one reason why we are seldom able to comfort our neighbors with our words is that our goodwill gets adulterated. . . . We can send black puddings and pettitoes without giving them a flavour of our own egoism; but language is a stream that is almost sure to smack of a mingled soil” (77–78; ch. 10). The sympathy in Raveloe is of a “beery and bungling sort,” flawed because the villagers are more interested in telling Marner how to improve his situation by adopting their own practices than they are in listening to him share about his own values and beliefs. Marner reacts to the villagers’ onslaught of “friendly” advice by “leaning his elbows on his knees, and pressing his hands against his head” in silence (79; ch. 10). His rejection of the villagers’ sympathy reveals the assimilative impulse underlying their visits. However good-natured their attempts may be, Marner cannot fully accept their sympathy because to do so would be to lose himself in their desire to make him into a model Raveloe citizen.

Although the villagers’ flawed sympathy cannot fully draw Marner outside himself, his invitation for them to come into his home is a crucial next step following the Rainbow Inn scene. Indeed, according to Levinas the welcome is the first gesture toward the other. Levinas asserts that welcoming the other causes us to question our assumptions, a necessary ethical practice: “the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge” (43). Welcoming the other opens the self to the ways difference can challenge one’s ability to know or to stand solidly on what one believes. We can read Marner’s literal act of welcoming villagers in terms of this philosophical stance of welcoming the challenge of difference. Marner’s and the villager’s horizon of experience will inevitably be changed as they come to genuinely engage the other. Beyond the initial gesture of welcome, however, the villagers and Marner are still hesitant to extend sympathy while their differences loom large. Eliot keeps her experiment with sympathy within the realist bounds of plausibility, though she leans heavily on unrealistic incidents of chance or fate elsewhere in the novel. The golden-haired child who appears magically at Marner’s fireside may be the stuff of fairytales, but the sympathy Marner learns to extend for her is part of the ordinary struggle of daily life Eliot sought to portray in her writing.

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THE EXCHANGE OF STORY IN THE RAINBOW Inn begins the transformation in how Marner and the villagers relate to one another, yet each still seems determined to inscribe the other within what is known rather than allow the other to disrupt what is familiar. The final catalyst

in Eliot's experiment with sympathy arrives in the form of a small child who appears unasked for and unexpectedly like the first villagers who began arriving at Marner's doorstep. The plot of the novel to this point has been split between the story of Marner and the story of the Cass family in roughly alternating chapters devoted singly to each. Eppie finally connects the double plot of this novel as the unclaimed child of Godfrey Cass who wanders off during a snowy night when her mother, Godfrey's forsaken mistress, collapses in the snow on her way to seek revenge on Godfrey. Eppie wanders toward the light that emanates from Marner's doorway and falls asleep at his fireside without his notice.

Eliot utilizes descriptions of face once again in this scene to show how Marner's life remains figuratively blinded to others, just as his literal nearsightedness makes it difficult for him to see much beyond his worktable. With his "blurred vision," Marner at first mistakes Eppie's golden hair for "his own gold – brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away!" (110; ch. 12). When he touches the softness of her curls, his "agitated gaze" then constructs her as his sister come back to him, "his little sister who he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died" (110–11; ch. 12). Within just a few moments, Marner's efforts to recognize Eppie assimilate her according to his own experience, focusing first on his most recent tragedy of losing his gold and then turning to the tragedy of losing his beloved sister when he was just a boy.

Marner's ability to see the other, represented here in Eppie, is distorted; his "blurred vision" and "agitated gaze" remain unable to perceive something outside what is relevant to himself. He therefore attempts to turn the object of difference into something he knows and understands. To perceive Eppie's difference requires a transformation of Marner's vision in order to re-structure the seeing event. One of Oliver's aims in using the term witnessing is to reformulate what it means to see. She shifts the paradigm of vision usually based on a subject-object dichotomy by moving "beyond recognition" in her conception of the witnessing event. Marner initially follows this dichotomy; as the seeing subject, he objectifies Eppie so he can assimilate her within his own horizon of understanding. Ethical sympathy thus requires that Marner let go of his desire to recognize Eppie, to move "beyond recognition" in Oliver's terms, in order to avoid the impulse to assimilate her otherness. As Oliver explains:

Any real contact with difference or otherness becomes impossible because recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar. When recognition repeats the master-slave or subject-object hierarchy, then it is also bound to assimilate difference back into sameness. The subject recognizes the other only when he can see something familiar in the other. (79)

The progress of Marner's ability to sympathize is measured by his ability to acknowledge the way Eppie exceeds his understanding and to allow her mysteriousness to exist alongside his own. Eppie's displays of affection over the next several days, so outside Marner's recent experience, cause him to tremble "with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life" (122; ch. 14). As Marner welcomes this unknown into his life, he finally begins to see the world with the "clearer conception" that Eliot desired for her readers.

Eppie represents the interruption of the other in Marner's life because she remains beyond his comprehension. She has the opposite effect on the villagers, however, by actually making Marner intelligible to them. His decision to keep the child causes the villagers to greet Marner "with open smiling faces and cheerful questioning, as a person whose satisfactions

and difficulties could be understood. Everywhere he must sit a little and talk about the child, and words of interest were always ready for him" (130; ch. 14). The "open smiling faces" occur only because the villagers finally have something they can understand about Marner: his love for a child. The villagers' ability to understand Marner's "satisfactions and difficulties" produces their willingness to engage with him; understanding precedes sympathy. This moment represents, then, a retreat from Eliot's radical experimentation with sympathy extended to an unknowable other.

It is worth pointing out, briefly, a few of the ways Eliot complicates this avowal of sympathy preceded by understanding. The narrative continues to underscore Marner's strangeness in subtle ways, such as the gender reversal that becomes evident through Marner's role as mother to Eppie. Critics have noted Marner's feminization, and I point it out here for the way it maintains Marner's otherness: although the villagers feel there is now something about Marner they can relate to, his role as the sole caretaker of Eppie still sets him apart from the traditional English family model.¹³ Readers also find themselves in unfamiliar territory when asked to extend sympathy to a male character. Established norms cutting across both reading and social practices in the nineteenth century positioned women, not men, as the object of sympathy. If Eliot seems less willing to grant Raveloe the ability to extend untainted sympathy, she still seems to hope her readers will learn this more ethical, and more challenging, form of sympathy.

§

LEVINAS PROVIDES A USEFUL REMINDER that ethics and literature often make uncomfortable companions, but this discomfort can be productive by always calling into question both our approach to the text and the way in which it influences us. Although the amount of critical work that employs a Levinasian lens to read literature continues to grow, critics often feel they must contend with his tenuous relationship to the aesthetic, especially as expressed in the essay "Reality and its Shadow." While such acknowledgment of Levinas's own hesitations about literature's ethical status is important, there are several recent works that use his ethical philosophy to inform readings of literary texts.¹⁴ I thus take as instructive Levinas's sense that art fixes categories (turning the Saying into the Said), and when a reader encounters a character, Levinas would not see this as a face-to-face encounter.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as critics, most notably Jill Robbins, have demonstrated, much can be gained from extending the insights of Levinas's philosophy to the rhetorical reading of literature.¹⁶

In taking up Robbins's suggestion that we not limit our understanding of rhetoric to persuasion, I employ the broader conception of rhetoric as the art of communicating. The rhetorical element of literature, then, refers to all the means of communicating with a reader whereby the reader's expectations are interrupted, in the way that Levinas writes of the other interrupting one's assumptions. I take literature to be ethical in a Levinasian sense when it causes the reader to question the borders of herself, when the theme, plot, characters, or other elements in the literary text form an interruption of otherness. This is precisely the function of *Silas Marner*, a claim that could be extended to much of realist art: more than simply mirroring the world back to the reader in miniature, realism may mirror the world in refracted ways in order to call into question the reader's prior perceptions and organization of the world. Not only does this construction of the relationship between ethics and literature have an important bearing on how we interpret the interactions among characters within

Eliot's novel, it also informs how we understand the act of reading itself, the interaction between the reader and the text. Both Levinas and Oliver shift our focus from the text as an object, or even the event of reading itself as an object to be analyzed, to the space between the text and the reader as a relational space that interrupts the self.

In this closing analysis of the novel, I shift from the relations between characters in the text to the relational space between the reader and the text where *Silas Marner* makes a claim on the reader, a claim Eliot herself extends to readers in her essay "The Natural History of German Life" when she states, "the greatest benefit we owe the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies" (*Writings* 198). As the novel progresses, the additional knowledge and insight readers gain about Marner only makes it more difficult to find ways to sympathize with him. The narrative draws attention to this growing distance at the same time that it pushes readers to continue sympathizing with Marner. Sometimes the narrator overtly asks the reader to have sympathy for Marner, as in the first example below, and at other times the characters themselves provide a model for reading as witnessing, as seen in the second example.

Although Eliot admits to Blackwood "I should not have believed that any one would have been interested in it but myself," the narrator of *Silas Marner* goes to great lengths to make sure that readers are not only interested in the story but have their sympathies engaged as well (*Letters* 3: 382). Following the descriptions at the beginning of the novel that clearly establish Marner's otherness, the narrator provides readers with a glimpse into Marner's former life in what seems like an effort to help us better understand him. After we have heard the whole story of how much the Lantern Yard community meant to Marner, and how much he loved Sarah, his fiancé, and William Dane, his best friend, we are outraged at Dane's betrayal when he falsely accuses Marner of stealing. As readers inhabit the imaginative space of revisiting Marner's former life, the narrator decreases the distance between the reader and Marner by allowing us to feel the indignation for him that we would feel if *our* best friend or lover treated us this way.

The narrator immediately withdraws this space of common ground, however, when he shares how Marner responds to these wrongdoings. Instead of defending himself to Sarah, Marner numbly states "*She* will cast me off too," and he "for a whole day sat alone, stunned by despair, without any impulse to go to Sarah and attempt to win her belief in his innocence" (14; ch. 1). By revealing this part of Marner's story the narrator has actually made it harder to sympathize with Marner when readers cannot understand his actions. Anticipating this, however, the narrator emphasizes the struggle in understanding someone whose customs and beliefs are so different from one's own:

To people accustomed to reason about the forms in which their religious feeling has incorporated itself, it is difficult to enter into that simple, untaught state of mind in which the form and feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection. We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner's position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgment by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known. (14; ch. 1)

The readers are the "people accustomed to reason" who are being asked to consider the difference between Marner's position and their own. What we are "apt to think," the narrator points out, reflects our own worldview more than Marner's. This passage begins to

develop the ethical sympathy required of the reader, and it does not depend on sympathy felt because the reader understands Marner's story. In fact, the narrator asserts readers will not understand the depth of Marner's loss: "But even *their* experience may hardly enable them thoroughly to imagine what was the effect on a simple weaver like Silas Marner, when he left his own country and people and came to settle in Raveloe" (15; ch. 2). Rather than increase readers' sympathy by making a character more intelligible, this narrator instead asserts how impossible it is to understand someone with so many differences. As ostensibly the hero of the story, Marner is not a character readers can simply relegate to the realms of unlikeable and uninteresting characters; instead, the narrator will push readers to attempt a fresh way of reading that strives to witness Marner's story rather than understand it.

In addition to the narrator's work in developing sympathy for Marner, there are scenes in the novel that act as models for extending sympathy through witnessing. One such model occurs during an episode when Marner shares his life story with the matronly and friendly Dolly. Dolly's example of letting go of the need to understand and instead actively listening to Marner's story demonstrates the witnessing act for readers. As Marner grows to trust Dolly more, he is able to "open his mind" to her until he "gradually communicated to her all he could describe of his early life" (143; ch. 16). The narrator details carefully what this ethical space and stance look like, focusing on how Marner tells his story and on how Dolly responds:

The communication was necessarily a slow and difficult process, for Silas's meager power of explanation was not aided by any readiness of interpretation in Dolly, whose narrow outward experience gave her no key to strange customs, and made every novelty a source of wonder that arrested them at every step of the narrative. It was only by fragments, and at intervals which left Dolly time to revolve what she had heard till it acquired some familiarity for her, that Silas at last arrived at the climax of the sad story – the drawing of lots, and its false testimony concerning him; and this had to be repeated in several interviews, under new questions on her part as to the nature of this plan for detecting the guilty and clearing the innocent. (143; ch. 16)

The first sentence describes this encounter clearly as an example of people with "narrow outward experience" who are others to one another because of their "strange customs." Despite these differences, both Marner and Dolly engage the other ethically through an act of generosity, seen in Marner's willingness to "open his mind" to the other and Dolly's willingness to be fully present and listen. Dolly's "listening face" models the kind of attention the act of witnessing requires; even during the pauses she spends time pondering "what she had heard till it acquired some familiarity for her." The fragmented and interrupted nature of the story Marner narrates to Dolly closely resembles the way *Silas Marner* has been narrated to the reader with the Cass family story constantly interrupting the telling of Marner's story. It also resembles the way readers often put a novel aside and come back to it later. These lapses of time, the gaps that occur in the narrative, active listeners can fill by pondering the story and asking questions of it as Dolly does. This way of reading requires the same attitude of generosity that witnessing entails: willingly acknowledging the other by dwelling in the act of sharing story.

What makes Eliot's experiment in sympathy so compelling is the way she refuses to present sympathy as something innate, natural, or easy. Eliot clearly dramatizes the struggle to feel for those who are different in the pages of *Silas Marner*, but she also presents readers

with a strategy to engage this struggle. I use the term witnessing to describe this strategy, an act signified by the embodied presence of faces willing to engage the other's story. By emphasizing the act of bearing witness as the extension of sympathy, we can begin to reformulate understanding not as a moment where I recognize sameness in the other, but as "revelatory moments of realization when it becomes apparent that the other does not think the *same* as me or that I can no longer think the *same* as I did about a person or a text" (Davey 5).¹⁷ This defamiliarization of our own thinking produces the possibility for an ethical encounter; that is, one in which we do not attempt to familiarize, misrepresent, or misunderstand the other. Eliot rejects the unethical use of sympathy that relies on the erasure of difference. Her conception of sympathy instead attempts to respect the other as a person who has a story, while maintaining an important degree of distance and difference by insisting on the singularity of each person.

In a period when knowledge and evidence were paramount, Eliot's notion of sympathy challenged the Victorian need to know, suggesting that for the sympathetic act to be ethical it can not be based on understanding and knowing the other. Eliot will continue to struggle with the tension between the damaging effects of sympathetic acts that ignore the other's singularity and her belief in the necessity of sympathy and its ethical possibilities. The more hopeful view of sympathy portrayed in *Silas Marner* gives way to a skeptical view of sympathy's limitations. For example, Audrey Jaffe looks at Eliot's more negative portrayal of sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*. In her book *Scenes of Sympathy*, Jaffe explores how the representational nature of sympathy figures identity as socially contingent, arguing: "sympathy in Victorian fiction is always about the construction of social and cultural identities, about the individual subject's relation to the group" (23). Jaffe traces how Deronda is better able to sympathize with other Jewish characters only when he discovers his Jewish heritage. Jaffe thus concludes that "rather than promoting sympathy as a means toward understanding difference then – indeed strikingly rejecting that principle in Deronda's rejection of Gwendolen – the novel valorizes sympathy as an identification with and affirmation of similarity" (141). In her astute observations about failed sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*, Jaffe illustrates Eliot's struggle with the unethical assimilative impulse in the sympathetic act. Eliot's experiment with sympathy is not one of triumphal resolution; she instead honestly presents both the limits and possibilities of the sympathy she always claims to be a necessary struggle. At first glance, Jaffe's claims might appear applicable to Marner's transformation from an isolated life as an outsider to a member of the Raveloe community. However, in this Eliot novel at least, sympathy does affirm difference, as the ending illustrates.

The most significant concluding detail of the novel is not the description of Eppie's wedding, but how the villagers had "leisure to talk of Silas Marner's strange history" (182; "conclusion"). His story now circulates within the larger Raveloe narrative, but his "strange" story upholds the unique qualities that set him apart. The eventual inclusion of Marner within the Raveloe community can be understood in terms of the concept of trace found in Levinas's theory of the face. The face, in order to maintain its alterity, must somehow exceed what I assume to know about how the world works, but at the same time the very presence of the other's face before me entails that the other is also somehow part of the world. Thus we find that Marner's story has become woven into the fabric of the village, and yet his story remains qualified as "strange." The conclusion to Marner's story that everyone agrees on, that he "had brought a blessing on himself by acting like a father to a lone motherless child" was enough for villagers to include his story among those told in the Rainbow Inn (182;

“conclusion”). Indeed, the typically negative farrier “took it up as peculiarly his own,” an image that invites readers to re-imagine the story exchange in the Rainbow Inn as one that now includes the retelling of Marner’s story. At the same time Marner himself remains an entity that cannot be wholly consumed by the Raveloe narrative. He remains to the end a strange weaver who came from the outside, residing within the village in the strange role of both mother and father to Eppie, with a past that remains incomprehensible even to the attentive Dolly. The villagers’ sympathy, in the form of continually bearing witness to his story, exists even with Marner’s singularity still firmly in place. *Silas Marner* thus offers a rich source for understanding how Eliot challenges what she sees as the unethical use of sympathy by proposing a new practice of extending sympathy I have here called witnessing. As we attempt to re-envision how sympathy should function in a global world, Eliot’s work provides a needed cautionary impulse toward a sympathy that dominates the other, but also a hopeful vision for a sympathy that embraces the other.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Mary Ellis Gibson, Annette Van, Jennifer Keith, Nancy Myers, and Mary Beth Pennington for their invaluable feedback during the early stages of this essay.

1. As Nestor rightly points out, *Silas Marner* “confronts the most radical challenge to her aesthetic determination to produce a capacity in her readers to imagine and to feel with those who are different from themselves” (13). Nestor, after tracing the development of Eliot’s theory about sympathy through her earlier works, says that in *Silas Marner* Eliot moves away from sympathy based in recognition or likeness and instead suggests an ethical challenge “to embrace what is not like or known, and that embrace requires more than empathy or imagination contemplated in earlier novels” (13). Nestor does not provide an analysis of the specific tools Eliot uses to propose this construction of sympathy beyond simply a leap of faith; she therefore suggests Eliot’s construction of sympathy relies on “an instinctive, extra-rational welling-up of emotion” (85). I suggest Eliot’s construction of sympathy has more concrete specifications about how to approach the other, specifications she details through references to faces and storytelling.
2. Nineteenth-century versions of sympathy often used the other as a tool for defining the nation. In later editions of Smith’s *Theory*, he includes a new section clearly connecting sympathy with nationalism: “The most extensive public benevolence which can commonly be exerted with a considerable effect, is that of the statesmen, who project and form alliances among neighbouring or not very distant nations” (qtd. in Gottlieb 36). Critics like Amit Rai identify unethical uses of sympathy to affirm Britain’s imperialism. While I do not quibble with Rai’s connection between sympathy and empire, understanding voices like Eliot’s as contesting, rather than solely upholding, this nineteenth-century version of sympathy prevents us from flattening this rather complex and nuanced debate.
3. Levinas articulates this problem in similar ways as a justification for why the ethics of the other, and not the ontology of being must be first philosophy: “The correlation between knowledge and being, or the thematics of contemplation, indicates both a difference and a difference that is overcome in the true. Here, the known is understood and so appropriated by knowledge, and as it were freed of its otherness. . . . Knowledge as perception, concept, comprehension, refers back to an act of grasping” (Hand 76). Levinas’s break with Heidegger’s ontology of being may be in part because Levinas sought to find some explanation for Heidegger’s Pro-Nazi stance. It would seem that Levinas could no longer agree wholly with a philosophy that could allow for such beliefs.

4. Oliver's concern with subjectivity can be seen in her choice of the term "witnessing" and her particular interest in the dual meaning of both eyewitness and bearing witness to what cannot be seen. Oliver uses this play between two poles of meaning to articulate the difference between subject position and subjectivity, the two forces that contribute to identity, the historical/social context of a person and the relationship to others through the address-response structure. Oliver thus distinguishes between subject position and subjectivity: "By subjectivity I mean one's sense of oneself as an "I," as an agent. By subject position I mean one's position in society and history as developed through various social relationships. While one's subject position is developed through the life situations one lives through, subjectivity is developed when I address and respond to an other and when the other addresses and responds to me" ("Witnessing and Testimony" 81).
5. For example, Doyle omits the novel because it remains "to the side of her high road of the development as artist of sympathy" (94), and Graver's important work on Eliot and community does not consider *Silas Marner*.
6. Several works have emerged recently that call attention to *Silas Marner* as a novel that deserves more attention in Eliot's oeuvre. I join these more recent conversations that explore the ripe possibilities *Silas Marner* provides for critical analysis. Shires, Carroll, and Nestor each include a chapter in their monographs that shows the novel's troubled relationship to perspective, interpretation, and sympathy. Goodman's edited collection concentrates solely on *Silas Marner* and features essays on a wide range of topics addressed by the novel from moral responsibility to community. While these critics make an important contribution to ongoing work with Eliot by drawing attention to *Silas Marner*, they tend to focus on visual references, storytelling, or ethics as separate elements in their analysis of the novel. Reading these narrative elements through Levinas and Oliver enables us to see how face and story are crucially linked to form this radical experiment in sympathy.
7. For these views see Hertz, Hinton, During, and Redfield.
8. Popular iterations of this description of sympathy can be found in the work of Smith or Ruskin. According to Ruskin: "The Imaginative understanding of the nature of others, and the power of putting ourselves in their place is the faculty on which virtue depends" (27: 627). Ruskin here highlights the most common way of talking about how sympathy necessitates understanding "the nature of others" in order to put "ourselves in their place." The role of the imagination was central to Victorian conceptions of how sympathy worked; imagination presented the possibility that one could fully understand what another was experiencing. Smith argued that the ability to enter another's experience relied solely on the imagination "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him" (12). Thus, although he clearly places limits on the ability to know the other, he also underscores the importance of the imagination as enabling that knowledge.
9. Following Dianna Perpich, I use singularity rather than difference. She finds this emphasis on the other's uniqueness useful for challenging a politics of identity that focuses on an essentializing difference. Singularity, for Perpich, "expresses the idea that each human being is a unique, irreplaceable self, irreducible to any of the attributes or qualities that could be used to describe her and that would inevitably reduce her to what she has in common with others. In addition, it expresses the idea that the other has unequivocal ethical standing" (Atterton 29). Oliver's theory of witnessing has also been used to recast discussions about the politics of difference, such as in Markell's book *Bound by Recognition*. He says of Oliver: "For Oliver, witnessing is neither a matter of recognizing the identity of the other, nor of recognizing the identity of the self; instead it is a matter of experiencing and responding to one's connection to and dependence upon others – including, crucially, bearing witness to, and acting responsibly in the face of, the ways in which one's relation to others has been shaped by injustice" (37).
10. For more on how trauma studies have shown the importance of leaving behind our dependence on understanding an event and thereby freeing us to be witnesses to the other, see writers Laub, Felman, Caruth, and Schwarz.

11. In a few important exceptions, Shires takes up the Rainbow Inn scene, discussing in particular the significance of the “rainbow” in terms of vision, light, and perception. Anger and Carroll astutely show how the content of the stories are concerned with the issue of interpretation and point of view, linking this scene crucially to the issues Eliot characteristically explores in her fiction.
12. Ablow points out how sympathetic relations break down continually in Eliot’s novels, particularly when the sympathy becomes exclusive like in *The Mill on the Floss*. In addition, Lane traces the relational conflict in Eliot’s novels, surmising that social conflict for Eliot was “insoluble” and inclusion in community “sometimes irreparably damaging to individuals” (116). While I hope my discussion of chapter six demonstrates one way Eliot proposes a balance between self and community in *Silas Marner*, nevertheless these critics point to a tension that often remains unresolved in Eliot’s work.
13. See for example Davis’s reading of *Silas Marner* as a critique of masculine privilege and an affirmation of Marner’s feminine traits, which include his skills as weaver and knowledge of medicinal herbs as well as his maternal role (264–66).
14. Wehrs’s recent collection on Levinas and literature, for example, brings Levinas and nineteenth-century literature together explicitly, but he carefully qualifies that this move is not meant to suggest that Levinas explains these authors, or that these authors are pre-cursors to Levinas’s philosophy. Instead, Wehrs suggests that these writers stand in proximity to Levinas through a “transhistorical dialogue,” a conversation worth having, Wehrs insists, for the way in which Levinas “introduces a productively alien horizon that resists the nineteenth century’s own tendency toward scientism in interpretation, systematization in historical thought, and a forgetting of the priority of ethics to essence” (31). I bring Levinas, and Oliver for that matter, into conversation with Eliot in a similar spirit, but I would add that a conversation about Levinas that includes the world of literary characters also helps us consider Levinas’s abstract theorization of the other in a more pragmatic way, attending to elements of context guiding any encounter between self and other.
15. I also heed the warning of critics like Eaglestone, and more recently Mitchell. Eaglestone insists that “if Levinas is as opposed to the aesthetic in general as [his] writings suggest, a Levinasian ethics of criticism will be either impossible or, at best, weak to the point of incoherency” (99). Mitchell qualifies her own application of Levinas to Victorian Literature by maintaining a strict distinction between the work of art as an object and the human other we encounter in our daily lives. Mitchell thus uses Levinas to illuminate the tension at work in realist fiction between “representing the limits of knowledge and the limitation of knowledge embodied in the individual other” (22), but does not extend this ethical lesson into human encounters.
16. In one example of a provocative application of Levinasian ethics to literature, Newton argues that narrative is ethics: “the ethical consequence of narrating a story and fictionalizing person, the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process (10–11). Newton draws attention, in important ways, to the complex relationship between a reader and a text, but ultimately real readers do not respond as predictably as Newton seems to suggest; thus, it is not always clear that readers actually feel bound to respond in the way that Newton describes.
17. Davey’s description of understanding here grows out of a larger project that explores the ethical implications of philosophical hermeneutics. As Eliot herself was influenced by the hermeneutics of her day, I find Davey’s discussion interesting and relevant when read alongside Eliot’s own theories. Davey defines philosophical hermeneutics as “a practice of disposing or orientating oneself toward the other and the different with the consequence of experiencing a dis-positioning of one’s initial expectancies” (xvi).

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