Primitive Minds

Anna Neill

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Neill, Anna.
Primitive Minds: Evolution and Spiritual Experience in the Victorian Novel.
The Ohio State University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/27531.

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Access provided at 24 Oct 2019 03:17 GMT with no institutional affiliation

Conclusion

Consciousness occurs, Antonio Damasio explains, when "self comes to mind," or when the self bears witness to events in the mind. This self, he echoes William James, is two-sided. It is an objective, material something, generated by feelings, or somatic markers, that establish the difference between "me" and "not me." And it is also subjective—the self-aware knowing "I," which sometimes constructs erroneous intuitions about its relationship to the world but which, situated at the origin of inquiry, also ultimately "makes reason and scientific observation possible."[1] For Damasio, consciousness occurs when we have the "feeling of knowing"; that is, we do not just create a stream of images that represent the objects we encounter internally, but we have a feeling accompanying the making of that image in which we mark that image as somehow our own.[2] As an increasingly differentiated and coordinated flow of images is triggered by objects in the environment, this embodied mind unfolds in a "normal" sequence of proto, core, and finally

autobiographical selves. Eventually it delivers a higher-order awareness that sweeps beyond the "here and now" of core consciousness into both the past and the future.[3]

"Power outages" that occur with certain brain dysfunctions can, however, obliterate this magnificent architecture, depriving the mind of its self.[4] As Damasio puts it:

> When selves do not occur within minds, those minds are not conscious in the proper sense. This is a predicament faced by humans whose self process is suspended by dreamless sleep, anesthesia, or brain disease.[5]

If we Victorianize this list to include the conditions of hypochondriasis, hysterical epilepsy and catalepsy, mesmeric sleep, spiritual trance, and reverie, then the episodes of dissolving selfhood in the novels I have written about in this book might be seen to challenge Damasio's implicit linking of mental health with a deep grasp of reality. In the novels, it is not the highest form of self but rather a dreamy, disorganized mind that moves simultaneously into the past and the future or that discovers the invisible influences and suppressed forms beneath the observable surface of things. In Brontë's fiction, this dreamy mind pulls back from the observing self to find ecstatic union with God, Nature, or another human spirit and in so doing recognizes and resists women's oppression. Dreamy intuition uncovers disguised connections linking disparate characters and events in *Bleak House,* the organic bond between the living and the dead in *Our Mutual Friend,* and hidden criminal motives in Victorian detective fiction. In *Silas Marner,* the collapse of the functional self obliterates both personal history and medical knowledge, yet it also points to the dilatory awareness of a longer novel where self-loss allows for deeper forms of knowing, unhampered by the narrowing influence of the ego: in *Daniel Deronda* the mind discerns evolutionary threads intersecting in even the most subtle events of feeling and recognizes in these the origins of precognitive dread and prophecy. Finally, in *Tess* and *The Return of the Native* the haze of reverie provides the protagonists relief from their psychic suffering as it infuses modern landscapes with spiritual forms from the deep pagan past.

If, as Kay Young argues, we are aware when reading nineteenth-century novels that we are in the presence of other minds, those minds do not always or consistently house a functional self.[6] In Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens,* many of the examples of self-loss are acute and tragic, such as coma, advanced Alzheimer's disease, and stroke-induced akinesia (in which a patient loses almost all power of animation), although he also discusses temporary

loss of or impaired consciousness in absence seizures and automatisms. The "cases" in the novels I have talked about here represent not so much a lost as a reduced self or, as James put it, a shrinking of that aspect of self that enables us to "think ourselves as thinkers."[7] James describes some spiritualized states—alternating selves and mediumship—as "abnormal alterations in the present self."[8] The "(often deplorably unintelligent) rudimentary utterances" produced in trance and automatic writings "are the works of an inferior fraction of the subject's own natural mind."[9] Victorian novelists broadly agreed. The attenuations of consciousness that belong both to characters and to the organizing narrative minds in their stories represent evolutionarily lower states of mind. Yet in each case, the novel values this primitive mind for its reach into the otherwise imperceptible regions of the objective world it depicts.

The title of my last chapter, "The End of the Novel," is of course disingenuous. The novel did not disappear, not even the realist novel. Nonetheless, what Hardy experienced as the strain of animating ghostly half-selves under the pressure of naturalism might have something to do with the twentieth-century shift to a much more Jamesian, self-aware narrative mode, where inward movement is to some extent independent of external environment. One way of characterizing modernist fiction is through its representations of the palpitating consciousness, as James described it, "in a constant play of furtherances and hindrances"[10] magnifying the felt movements of thought or sequenced "cephalic adjustments"[11] that produce the self. Victorian novels, more interested in the inherited and environmentally wrought nervous changes that determine what the embodied psyche makes of the world and how much it sees, instead direct us to exotic, otherworldly dimensions of the real. They do so by showing us minds in which both the self and the certain forms it make possible slide dreamily away.