

SITES OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN GEORGE ELIOT'S EARLY NOVELS

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In my thesis *George Eliot's Natural History of Common Life*¹ I examine Eliot's working method for viewing human nature, a method which evolved out of her interests in contemporary developments in philosophy and science. Eliot's method attempts to identify a moral sense as the product of specifically human intellect and feeling. For Eliot, the development of a moral sense is the ideal end of human and individual development. However, the possibility of regress is inextricably linked to the inevitability of progress, and she imbues the landscape with this conflict at several points in her early novels.

Eliot rejects the conclusions of scientific materialism that would numb the human spirit, even while she respects its scientific logic. Her reply is to imbue the landscape in her novels with spiritual wonder even as she turns it into an archaeological, scientific site of human consciousness. In *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot externalises the primitive something in human nature as a feature of the landscape. And in these novels the irregular features of the landscape are repeated in the characters found there.

The Midlands of Eliot's novels is a landscape mediated by civilisation. Characters visit sites which are both natural and outworn preparations of the life of man: fields for sheep grazing and abandoned stone quarries. These serve in the novel as experimental places between nature and human nature. Sites in the landscape test the spirit of those characters who exist on the brink of society and the brink of human catastrophe. How the characters behave in response to the prevailing gloom of these spots reveals the timbre of their essential personalities. In *Silas Marner* there can be no resolution until the characters honestly face their past histories, and live better than their degenerate traits, or be claimed by the landscape; as in the tumultuous

conclusion to *The Mill on the Floss*, in which Maggie and her brother are swept away by the river in an angry tide of Geist.

The way in which Eliot casts a sombre mood over the landscape is demonstrated in this passage from *Adam Bede*:

What a glad world this looks like, as one drives or rides along the valleys and over the hills! I have often thought so when, in foreign countries, where the fields and woods have looked to me like our English Loamshire—the rich land tilled with just as much care, the woods rolling down the gentle slopes to the green meadows—I have come on some thing by the roadside which has reminded me that I am not in Loamshire: an image of great agony—the agony of the Cross... this image would seem... strangely out of place in the midst of this joyous nature... hidden behind the apple-blossoms, or among the golden corn, or under the shrouding boughs of the wood, there might be a human heart beating heavily with anguish; perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift-advancing shame... Such things are sometimes hidden among the sunny fields and behind the blossoming orchards; and the sound of the gurgling brook, if you came close to one spot behind a small bush, would be mingled for your ear with a despairing human sob.²

Speculation about the possibility of there being a “young blooming girl” is rhetorical, for by now the reader is deep into the story of Hetty, who wanders the Loamshire countryside seeking her own annihilation, and ends by committing infanticide on her newborn baby. Eliot conveys her compassion for Hetty through her depiction of the landscape; in writing directly about the character the narrator is astringent. Eliot feels sadness for Hetty as the embodiment of mindless human folly, and simultaneously fears her as a ruthless mother who places her own survival above that of her child. This ambivalence pervades Eliot’s treatment of Hetty as an artist’s figure in the landscape.

The landscape of *Adam Bede* is associated with hidden human agony. Pools of water draw a despairing Hetty Sorrel, who tries to imagine annihilating herself in their black depths. At the beginning of the novel, Hetty is drawn dreamily to contemplate her reflection in mirrors and in the admiring eyes around her. When “her airy dream had vanished” (34. 411) she feels pulled towards a different reflection and a different future in a pool in the suitably-named Scantlands, a place where “she may walk slowly, and not care how her face looks” (34. 410). The pool’s surface is as “dark” and as

"blank" as the thoughtless Hetty's eyes (34. 410), and the pool's appearance is as deceptive. At one point in the novel, the narrator follows Hetty across the landscape without even knowing her destination. "Farther on there is a clump of trees on the low ground... No, it is not a clump of trees, but a dark shrouded pool" (34. 411). Here Hetty's consciousness defies reading by a higher mind, even when that "reader" has a narrator's privileged access. The active dreaming Hetty who dreamed before mirrors is mentally convulsed by real life consequences. Repelled by reality, Hetty is pulled compulsively into the vortex of her own inner darkness, through her own dark pupils, windows onto a primitive mind which are externalised as pools in the landscape. Hetty becomes consumed by the idea of tipping herself into black pools of water which the author places strategically in her path across the wintry countryside. The primitive in human nature is drawn into these pits as to the centre of the earth, through levels of geographical strata, back through time. Hetty, and, as I shall demonstrate, other characters in Eliot's early novels, are propelled by something degenerate within their own natures to places of barren rock and of stagnant water, as if they are fitted for the simpler existences of a crustacean or marine organism.

Silas Marner is drawn to a similar site when he is at his lowest ebb. He flees the city and for many years lives an "insect-like existence into which his nature had shrunk"³ emotionally stranded at the Stone Pits. Silas's barren consciousness finds external expression in the landscape: "Silas looked out on that *narrow prospect* round the Stone-pits, listening and gazing, not with hope, but with mere yearning and unrest" (12. 114, italics added).

Even after Silas experiences redemption in the landscape by discovering and adopting the baby girl Eppie, the Stone Pits haunt the reader by evoking the possibility of a watery death. This menace is present during Silas' search for the infant Eppie: Silas "ran eagerly about the unenclosed space, exploring the dry cavities into which she might have fallen, and then gazing with questioning dread at the smooth red surface of the water" (14.

133).⁴ Although the water is probably red from dissolved clay, man's original flesh according to Genesis, the weirdly coloured water suggests blood.

This feeling of dread is resolved in *Silas Marner* when the pits are drained of their murky water. The squire's attempt to modernise the landscape reveals his brother's skeleton in possession of Silas's gold. The squire's brother Dunstan had preyed upon Silas, and his lurking skeleton is a potent symbol indeed of the unredeemable evil in man's consciousness as something primitive and hidden, a hitherto forgotten skeleton in the closet or quarry. In losing his gold to the squire's family, however, Silas has gained from his adoption of the squire's golden-haired daughter, and it is her innocent love which causes the Stone Pits to flower.

There are disused ancient quarries in both *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*. The Stone Pits and the Red Deeps act as repositories for residual or underlying elements in human nature, elements which are primitive in Eliot's schema or ungainly in society's system of values. Eliot's quarries are haunted because in a sense they are the graveyards of all creation, in the way that Eliot's partner Lewes suggests in a scientific article published between the publication of the two novels. He writes: a "quarry... is mainly composed of the skeletons of microscopic animals; the flints which grate beneath our carriage wheels are but the remains of countless skeletons."⁵ To this innumerable, unseen multitude which is the remnant of extinct creation are added Dunstan's bones which are a more obvious reminder of man's part in a chain of existence that stretches over vast tracts of time.

The Red Deeps are described as a bank "broken into capricious hollows and mounds by the working of an exhausted stone-quarry—so long exhausted that both mounds and hollows were now clothed with brambles and trees, and here and there by a stretch of grass which a few sheep kept close nibbled".⁶ There is a sense that the stone quarry memorialises something which can only be recovered in art, so here Eliot's prose draws on both the traditions of literature and of painting. There is a strangeness associated with the Red Deeps and a collapsing of the distinction between

man-made and natural, a conflation which provides a suitable meeting place for the clandestine relationship between the two anomalous characters, Maggie and Philip, the sensitive hunchbacked son of the enemy of Maggie's father. Romantic and Gothic tastes appreciate irregularities in nature. In both novels the irregular features of the Red Deeps and the Stone Pits are repeated in the characters who are found there.

The Red Deeps are also the site of the clash between Philip and Maggie's brutally protective brother Tom. Before Tom discovers the irregular lovers, the Red Deeps had offered them privacy; but, despite its beauty, there is something grotesque in its very isolation. As a child, Maggie shuns the place because she believes that it contains hidden evil. At the end of the book it is really haunted; when Philip in his emotional exile finds "companionship... among the trees of the Red Deeps, where the buried joy seemed still to hover—like a revisiting spirit" (7.5. 656).

The power of the landscape draws primitive forces from each of the characters. This energy is especially strong in Maggie: "she seems to have a sort of kinship with the grand Scotch firs, at which she is looking up as if she loved them well. Yet one has a sense of uneasiness in looking at her—a sense of opposing elements, of which a fierce collision is imminent" (5. 1. 393-4). The narrator "uneasily" reveals the sense of conflict visible in the mature Maggie in a plein-air portrait, the Red Deeps apparently bringing out these latent qualities. Philip's portrait of Maggie against the Scotch firs is a companion to his childhood sketch of her dreamily gazing. These are the "opposing elements" within Maggie; an outward, backward-looking passivity and an upward-looking invigorating force of aspiration. Maggie's dynamism is associated with the Scotch firs which are also a metaphor for human history: "she looked up at the old fir-trees and thought that those broken ends of branches were the records of past storms which had only made the red stems soar higher" (5. 1. 394). Maggie feels kinship with the trees as a physical representation of Geist, of the highest achievements which are in this case predicated on fate's ill-winds or seeming failures. However it is uncertain at the end of the novel whether there is any

compensating force to make up for the loss of Maggie to one of nature's—and Geist's—fiercest storms.

The Red Deeps are like a grotesque Garden of Eden; they contain elements of the Fall. For the sacrifice of Maggie there is a partial restitution in the glowing story of Eppie. A part of the Stone Pits is eventually cultivated for her use as a cottage garden. The transformation of the Stone Pits follows Silas' redemption by Eppie and fulfils the source of her name in Isaiah (62: 4): "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hepzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee."⁷ Eppie's garden includes the furze-bush which was her mother's funerary pillow and is a sign of her father the squire's betrayal in abandoning her, and the stones which form the cosy garden's boundary are taken from the pits where Dunstan Cass's" bones were found. Out of the ignominious secrets of the Squire's family Eppie and her garden are allowed to prosper. With Eppie, the bringer of new life, united with Aaron, the spokesman of Moses, God and of the chosen people, the ending of the story promises the recovery of Eden, albeit a sadder, wiser, more philosophic Eden than before the Fall. The recreation of a spiritual homeland contrasts with a landscape of despair.

Silas Marner progresses towards being reclaimed by feeling by moving from the city to the country, a move that reverses the historical shift in England's population from agrarian to industrial. Hence Silas is an anomaly or fantasy-figure. He moves from a Blakean world of bitter childhood experience in the city to eventually discover an equally Romantic innocence in the countryside. At his cottage the ravaged wasteland blooms again in celebration of his escape from the grimy dark forces at work in the city⁸ where the grounds of his faith were narrow and unexplored,⁹ based on a theology which privileges form over feeling. Silas must escape to a Wordsworthian landscape of true spiritual inspiration, to a landscape which realises Eliot's visionary yearning to make a visible world which contains intimations of an invisible world order.¹⁰ Silas's hermit-like existence, in the closest thing in the Midlands to a desert, is a test of the spirit analogous to

the exile of Moses and his people. The garden blooms as Silas is finally adopted by a new community and exempted from association with dark forces. Those forces are revealed to the light of common day with Dunstan's bones, in a spring-cleaning of the closet of the community's consciousness.

The simple dominating emotions of Silas's personal history are at each point made concrete in his environment. Silas is rescued by a culture of feeling in another genre, another literary landscape. In his exile Silas lives as a recluse in a bleak landscape which recalls in its appearance the birthplace of Christianity. Out of all the desolate proto-industrial landscape Eliot weaves a poetry which transcends its common or primeval subject-matter to evolve into a modern fable.¹¹ *Silas Marner* ends with the imagining of an ideal world¹² of common life and feeling, where spiritual value is found in a common life which can withstand the rigours of the landscape and make of it a thing of beauty.

REFERENCES

¹ PhD, University of Sydney, 1997.

² George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, (1859; London: Penguin, 1980), 35. 205. All further quotations are from this edition, and will be followed by chapter and page numbers in parentheses.

³ George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, (1861; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 2. 19. All further quotations are from this edition, and will be followed by chapter and page numbers in parentheses.

⁴ Silas's search for the missing Eppie resembles Hetty's placement in the landscape in other ways: Silas began "with perturbed vision to see Eppie behind every group of red sorrel... he got over the stile into the next field, looking with dying hope towards a small pond" (14. 112). In his anxiety Silas seems to see Eppie half hidden by the herb which bears Hetty's name, just as the narrator describes Hetty's agony as part of the countryside; as a sobbing behind every bush. This image returns to Hetty's roaming through the fields "with dying hope" and hoping to find a place in which to die.

⁵ G. H. Lewes, "Studies in Animal Life: Chapter 1" *Cornhill* 1 (Jan 1860) 61-74 (62-3).

⁶ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 5. 1. 392-93. All further quotations are from this edition, and will be followed by book, chapter and page numbers in brackets

⁷ Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrim in Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 151. Cf. Harold Fisch, "Biblical Realism in *Silas Marner*" in Mark H. Gelber, ed. *Identity and Ethos*, (New York, Berne and Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1986), 343-60 (p. 347).

⁸ In her search for a Hegelian antithesis Felicia Bonaparte contrasts Lantern Yard with Raveloe as Eden in contrast to the secular, materialistic world where Silas is exiled ("Carrying the Word of the Lord to the Gentiles: *Silas Marner* and the Translation of Scripture into a secular text" *Religion and Literature* 23.2 (Summer 1991): 39-60 (p. 42). Yet Silas's expulsion from the Lantern Yard community occurs because of William Dane's greed for money and the mistaken beliefs of the brethren which allow him to attribute his theft to Silas, a factor in Lantern Yard not completely dealt with by Bonaparte's comment that Dane's betrayal demonstrates the Feuerbachian idea that "theology betrays mankind" (p. 41).

Bonaparte's reading sees Lantern Yard's theology being turned into a religion for Raveloe (p. 45) but the only flowering of the spirit which occurs in Silas' new world occurs outside of religion as civilisation knows it. David R. Carroll's assessment of Lantern Yard is more apt: he aligns George Eliot's treatment with her criticisms of evangelicalism in "Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming." "Silas Marner: Reversing the Oracles of Religion" *Literary Monographs* 1 (1967): 165-200 (p. 169).

⁹ Robert H. Dunham, "Silas Marner' and the Wordsworthian Child", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 16.4 (Autumn 1976): 645-59 (p. 648).

¹⁰ U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "The Post Romantic Imagination: *Adam Bede*, Wordsworth and Milton" *ELH* 34 (1967): 518-540 (pp. 520-21).

¹¹ I do not agree with Brian Swann's claim that *Silas Marner* is "an encapsulation . . . of the movement from superstition to belief, from the primitive to the modern" ("*Silas Marner* and the New Mythus" *Criticism* 18 (1976): 101-21 (pp. 120-21). Rather, the novel extracts what is of value from superstition, belief, and even from the primitive and makes it into a fable of common life for modern readers.

¹² Joseph Wiesenfarth, "*Adam Bede* and Myth" *Papers on Language and Literature* 8 (1972): 39-52 (p. 52 n. 31).