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THE TWO TIMOTHY COOPERS

By Barbara Hardy

Once or twice when I read and re-read the scene of the railway survey in *Middlemarch* I felt a sense of niggling lost connection, then one day I belatedly found it. George Eliot had copied the name of Elizabeth Gaskell's Timothy Cooper, in *Cousin Phillis*, for her character in *Middlemarch*.

Eliot wrote to Gaskell¹ that she felt an affinity with 'the feeling which inspired "Cranford" and the earlier chapters of "Mary Barton"' and had read *Cranford* when writing *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Mary Barton* when writing *Adam Bede*. When *The Moorland Cottage* was proposed as source for *The Mill on the Floss* she said she had not read it. She writes about *Ruth*, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and *Sylvia's Lovers*, but as far as I know never mentions *Cousin Phillis*, serialized in *The Cornhill Magazine* between November and February, 1863-4, six years before Eliot began to brood over *Middlemarch*, nine before her novel began its serial appearance. She is unlikely not to have read Gaskell's novella, and also unlikely, I think, to have deliberately used the name of its Timothy Cooper. It seems to be a case of creative forgetting.

The two Timothy Coopers are poor farm labourers, on the fringe of the action, each given one big scene. They might be called minor characters but the description is misleading. I once wrote that George Eliot refused to create minor characters, liking to imply that every figure in her fiction has, as she explicitly says, a 'centre of self'. The same is true of Gaskell, exemplified in her late novella *Cousin Phillis*, a feat of condensation she described as 'a complete fragment', an oxymoron effortlessly defining the story and its genre.

Timothy Cooper is only one link between the greatest Victorian novella, narrative at its most terse and small-scale, and the greatest Victorian long novel, narrative at its most expansive. Both works combine love-story – twanging what the narrator of *Middlemarch* calls the old troubadour strings – with wide geographical reference (the Midlands, Italy and America) and historical range. Both dramatize and discuss the coming of railways to England. *Cousin Phillis* dramatizes more detail about technicalities (shunting, difficulties of laying rail on marshy ground) and personnel (share-holders, managing engineer, clerk, inventors, and navvies) than *Middlemarch*, and inserts English railways between those in Piedmont and Canada. We may list Gaskell with Robert Evans and Herbert Spencer, both involved with railway survey and works, as a source of Eliot's railway information.

Unlike Gaskell, Eliot shows, in narrative and drama, opposition to railways. She explicitly reveals the politics of vested interest, landowners' support, and manipulated rural opposition, and in Chapter 56 invents the ignorant farm-labourers' demonstration in which Caleb Garth shows managerial skill, Fred Vincy finds a vocation, and a second Timothy Cooper creates a satisfying intransigent element, a voice for readers uncomfortable with Caleb the Master's Man. To the novel's chorus of admiration for Caleb's personal, moral, and social value, led by the narrator, Timothy Cooper brings discord and dissent. Making hay, apart from his fellows' attack on the surveyors, he is contemptuous of Caleb Garth's confident condescension.

Dorothea's land-agent forgivingly instructs the rebels: ²

'Somebody told you the railroad was a bad thing. That was a lie. It may do a bit of harm here and there, to this and to that; and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway's a good thing.'

'Aw! good for the big folks to make money out on,' said old Timothy Cooper, who had stayed behind turning his hay while the others had been gone on their spree; – 'I'n seen lots o' things turn up sin' I war a young un – the war an' the peace, and the canells ... an' it's been all aloike to the poor mon. What's the canells been t' him? They'n brought him neyther me-at nor be-acon, nor wage to lay by, if he didn't save it wi' clemmin his own inside This is the big folks's world, this is. But yo're for the big folks, Muster Garth, yo are.'
(Chapter 56)

Timothy is a nonce character, supplying all that is necessary for a radical qualification, an unanswerable question. The labourers can't answer back, but he can. His appearance and this speech (which I have cut: it with one later line are a little longer than the first Timothy's speaking part but both men speak in one scene only) do not come with an individualized story: we are merely told he is old and wiry, 'had his savings in a stocking-foot' and 'lived in a lone cottage'. The first Timothy, less eloquent but articulate, is like his successor given creative emotion, Biblical first name, English craft-surname, and dialect: both Timothys use 'yo're' and 'sin', and 'clem' is an important word in *North and South*. But the second Timothy is also given a special story, like many creatures and even plants in the novella – the dog Rover, the cow Daisy, a vine and an apple-tree.

Timothy's story is told in neatly spaced episodes, beginning in Part 2, continued in Part 4. As well-named as, and even more many-sided than Eliot's father-inspired Caleb, Ebenezer Holman, Phillis's father, (independent Minister, self-repressed sensualist, good farmer, student of classics, science and technology) finds it hard to tolerate Timothy, 'so to speak, a half-wit',³ with a wife, family and tied cottage, who will not get work anywhere else. In Part 2, after Holman frowns on Phillis's liking for ribbons he admits his 'sin': 'the old Adam' rising in anger, he cuts himself shaving as he sees Timothy 'sauntering about his work'. In Part 4, he covers his anxiety about Phillis by telling how he has sacked Timothy for killing a ribstone-pippin apple-tree with lime.

Later in Part 4, Paul Manning, indiscreet narrator, relieves his anxiety by talking to Timothy, who explains contemptuously and confrontationally – I reckon yo're no better nor a half-wit yourself' – that he has spent a day keeping noisy carts from Hope Farm where 'yon wench' – is ill. Without self-pity, he says he has 'nought else to do', having been turned 'adrift.'

Timothy Cooper brings out Holman's fallibility, emotional, intellectual, and political, as the second Timothy does Caleb's, but sub-textually. Timothy has not heard Holman's 'so to speak, a half-wit', but he knows the cruel reductive word, and proves its incorrectness by his use. Holman does not hear him, but his qualifying 'so to speak' shows he can question the language⁴ and action of power. What Eliot calls 'feudal spirit' hurts Phillis,⁵ but the patriarch has a second try with Timothy. The community has feudal loyalties which are quietly challenged in the confrontation, and also, I think, at the end, which may seem complacent.

After the narrator achieves his one useful telling, Timothy is reinstated, tolerated and taught by his master, but the reader knows he can no longer be even 'so to speak' a 'half-wit', and has taught his master to tolerate, teach – and imagine. It is the story's only bit of happy ending, but not bland. In *Cousin Phillis*, unsentimental novella of sentiment, as in her other late narratives, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell assimilates and embeds the politics that in her early work were more didactically schematic, and romantic.

Eliot places her Timothy's historically conscious speech in more historically conscious commentary:

... Timothy ... having as little of the feudal spirit, and believing as little, as if he had not been totally unacquainted with the Age of Reason and the Rights of Man. Caleb was in a difficulty known to any person attempting in dark times ... to reason with rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth which they know through a hard process of feeling, and can let it fall like a giant's club on your neatly-carved argument for a social benefit which they do *not* feel. (Chapter 56)

George Eliot too can be assimilative: this chapter uses indirection as well as ironic analysis. 'Muster Garth' can't learn from his Timothy, but he has no answer, and perhaps Eliot learnt – not an answer but a question – composing the labourer's speech.

The Timothy Coopers of *Cousin Phillis* and *Middlemarch* could be removed from their larger narratives without plot-loss, but with loss of meaning. Gaskell's character is extended and individuated in character and history, subtly functional, making a social critique through indirection. Eliot's is more schematically instrumental, but also raises radical political uncertainty, more loudly than Gaskell, perhaps more subversively than the author intended. The namesakes enrich their novels in deceptive marginality, representing, questioning, even criticizing, structures and values of property, labour and class with disturbing eloquence and dignity. Eliot must have recognized the achievement of Gaskell's imagination – to some extent, and I suppose unconsciously, in the influential warmth of admiration – when for her own good reasons she made and named the second Timothy Cooper.

Notes

- 1 I mention such links in 'Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot', the *Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Sphere Books, 1969).
- 2 I discuss this scene in '*Middlemarch: Public and Private Worlds, Particularities. Readings in George Eliot*' (London: Peter Owen, 1982).
- 3 Gaskell knows the significance of politically incorrect language.
- 4 Gaskell's Timothy resembles Thomas Hardy's Biblically named Abel Whittle in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, an incompetent labourer who is angrily dismissed but returns to stick by his master and hand over his will.

- 5 This brief article is about a link between Gaskell and Eliot, so I am not discussing the feminist critique and main subject of the novella, in which Timothy Cooper's is a subdued but vital sub-plot.