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Vic Hopkins

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## A HARD MORAL CORE

by Vic Hopkins

The novelist C. P. Snow, reviewing a book on George Eliot by Robert Speaight (1954), seeking an answer to his own question: "Which of the Victorian novelists means much to the younger writers today?", after rejecting most of them, finally selected George Eliot, who, in her time, he explained

"received a complete esteem not given to any other English novelist, and who afterwards became regarded as a faintly comic monument."

I paused over that statement, puzzled and fearing worse might follow, but mercifully the writer of it, buoyed perhaps by the thought "serious art needs a hard moral core", and satisfied in his own mind that George Eliot's novels fulfilled that requirement, went on to grant near-perfect work-of-art status to 'Silas Marner' and high commendation to parts of the other novels, singling out 'Middlemarch' as one of the best novels in the language - despite its faults.

Thereafter, his flow of faint praise exhausted, C. P. Snow was rather less generous, going so far in his disapproval as to admit himself to be "sometimes repelled by George Eliot who often wrote execrably" and clinching his tirade:

"At times she spread herself in a style half-pompous and half-facetious in the very worst English academic tradition"

but at that stage I parted company with him.

In common with most critics who are particularly censorious of George Eliot, however, Snow recognised her art as having "a hard moral core" and it is to that aspect of the novels I now turn, having shelved the problem of trying to visualise George Eliot as "a faintly comic monument" or her style as "half-pompous" and "half-facetious". At some point in his article, Snow praised the brilliance of Dr. F. R. Leavis (before the verbal demolition of Snow by Leavis in 1962) who championed the cause of George Eliot as a great moral novelist and rectified the generally fashionable opinion

that George Eliot's intellect overweighted her emotions thereby deadening her books, and making good his claim that the boot was on the other foot.

In harness with the great driving forces of emotion and intellect in about equal proportion, George Eliot had a strong, even stern moral code. Her staple was conduct, that is right living. She accepted wholeheartedly Matthew Arnold's

"conduct is three-fourths of our life and its longest concern"

substituting an ethical rationalisation for the Methodist beliefs of her girlhood. For George Eliot, life was just; you cannot escape the consequences of your acts; deeds and their consequences are irretrievably linked throughout the novels. Examples can be multiplied but perhaps the motto to Chapter Four of 'Middlemarch' can represent them all; it is a brief dialogue between 1st. Gent. and 2nd Gent.:

"Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves"

"Ay, truly, but I think it is the world that brings the iron"

As readers of 'Middlemarch' might recall, Mr. Bulstrode lecturing Mr. Vincy on his vanity and encouragement of his son's idle habits, warns him that he is now 'reaping the consequences', words which assume an ironical significance when we read of Mr. Bulstrode's own downfall later. The banker indeed forged his own fetters and the world provided the iron.

It is probably this moral attitude of George Eliot which alienates many readers as well as critics. Morality, or a code of morals, paid lip-service to by society in the sense that honesty is recognised as the best policy but little more than that, is not popular as a staple diet, least of all in the present social climate. In general, the reading public does not take kindly to the 'good' character. Adam Bede, for example, as devoted a son, as loyal a brother, and as good-living a man as might be found, earns from most critics the doubtful praise "a prig". Similarly, Dinah Morris, the gentle-voiced Methodist has won few fervent admirers among readers. Paradoxically almost, if critics were in need of a carpenter to do a job well, and employed a man of Adam's qualities, and readers engaged a girl of Dinah's, they would be more than satisfied. We are delighted to

come into contact with goodness and good workmanship in life but are suspicious of it in books.

The actor, Ben Kingsley, won universal acclaim for his performance as Silas Marner in the BBC film of that novel (as did Donald Pleasance for his playing of Rev. Septimus Harding in Trollope's 'Barchester Towers'). Each of these characters, in different ways, was a 'good' man, the goodness originating from within, quite naturally, and in no way grafted on to the part by the actor; Ben Kingsley and Donald Pleasance gave performances so pleasing, so true, so convincing because the right material was there for them to use. 'Silas Marner' is a great work of art because its moral code is embodied naturally into the text and operates through real human beings. Viewers, and readers, respond to Silas (and to Dolly Winthrop, of course, who helps him find his place in human fellowship again) because they recognise their truth to ordinary life through the dialects and muddledheadedness. 'Silas Marner' might be called George Eliot's "religion of humanity". I would add the point that the novels before and after 'Marner' operate in the same way, with a strong moral code working in the conduct and relationships of recognisable human beings.

With that point in mind, I return to C. P. Snow's opening reference to the attitude of younger writers of to-day towards their predecessors, and find one of them, a successful, practising novelist and journalist, expressing her opinion of George Eliot in an article headed 'A Cold, Calculating Mind'. If those words are not sufficiently dampening, the writer having, like Snow, agreed 'Middlemarch' to be the greatest single English novel, went on to bracket it with 'Mill on the Floss' as "tracts, not works of imagination, . . . not leavened and transformed, given light and life by the fire of imaginative, creative genius". Even 'Silas Marner' praised as "a compassionate, forgiving book" is seen as "giving the lofty intelligence and indefatigable moral dedication a human face".

I was puzzled by C. P. Snow's strictures, bewildered by those of the woman novelist I have quoted. We are all free to like or dislike an author as we choose, but

how anybody concerned with the human situation and who herself writes about it can think that George Eliot need be given a human face to accompany her moral dedication after reading the many acts of tenderness and forgiveness shown by characters towards others in the novels, is beyond my comprehension. To call 'Middlemarch' and 'Mill on the Floss' tracts is to misrepresent their meaning and to reduce the novels to essays on moral truths, which they are not.

The qualities which I admire in George Eliot's books are not her lofty intelligence, well to the fore, of course, not even the moral dedication if that is to be divorced from the people to whom it relates; but warmth, affection, and human understanding, all three working as one, like the Trinity. Primarily, George Eliot concerned herself with right living and the consequences of our own acts, but she presented the men and women of her novels with sympathy. Consequences might be unpitying but George Eliot herself pitied her characters even while she exposed the inevitable results of their acts. There is erring humanity in her novels but I can find no example of an out-and-out villain.

I know Stephen Guest has roused strong feelings of dislike in many critics, as have possibly others, but my point is George Eliot had a certain sympathy - not liking necessarily - for them. It is difficult to say with certainty, but I think she admired Adam Bede and his sound moral principles, but Adam Bede's 'fault' in the eyes of modern readers is his readiness to declare those moral virtues aloud. Indeed, at times, one feels a certain kinship with Walter Allen, the critic, when he wrote "It is not altogether pleasant to be lectured by George Eliot". There are moments when the reader feels there is too much of the high-minded moral precepts, but, within the whole range of George Eliot's output, I personally find it a small price to pay.

George Eliot's moral earnestness is an austere creed perhaps in the present social climate of licence and self-aggrandisement, but it is infinitely more than a mere pointing the finger of disapproval, or wish to impose a level of righteousness. To read the novels is to enter into a world where goodness emerges after

a full look at the Worst, if I might paraphrase a line from another great writer, Thomas Hardy, a world of rich, warm, kindly humour, not pomposity and facetiousness.

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