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AWAKENING THE 'MERE PULSATION OF DESIRE' IN *SILAS MARNER*

By Melissa Raines

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the narrator reflects on those crucial events which shape pathways in our lives. For Tertius Lydgate, this occurs with the chance opening of a book to a particular page:

[T]he first passage that drew his eyes was on the valves of the heart. He was not much acquainted with valves of any sort, but he knew that *valvae* were folding doors, and through this crevice came a sudden light startling him with his first vivid notion of finely adjusted mechanism in the human frame.¹

For Lydgate, this seminal instant is the one which inspires him to be a doctor. While Eliot did not pursue a specifically scientific pathway in her own life, she had an undeniable interest in physiology and is even specifically described by Kirstie Blair as 'a novelist engaging with medical investigations into the heart.'² Terence Cave highlights Eliot's familiarity with Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, which 'she read in page-proof even while she was writing *Silas Marner*', along with *The Physiology of Common Life* by her partner George Henry Lewes.³ These works both addressed the issue of 'the interaction between and, ultimately, the inseparability of psychological and physiological experience' (Cave, p. xv). It is this tie between the mind and the body that Eliot made a focal point in her writing – not just at the level of story, also through syntax.

The syntactical expression of the physiology of the heart is particularly evident in *Silas Marner*. The title character is a solitary weaver who retreats from human interaction after being turned away from the religious community that dominated his young life. He attempts to protect himself from the pain of past rejection and betrayal with a closed-off, 'insect-like existence'⁴ that is, in an odd twist, a strange, waking equivalent of the cataleptic fits from which he suffers:

So, year after year, Silas Marner had lived in this solitude, his guineas rising in the iron pot, and his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being. His life had reduced itself to the mere functions of weaving and hoarding, without any contemplation of an end towards which the functions tended. (p. 19)

What we see in this passage is the creation of that purely functional 'pulsation of desire' through the syntax with a sensitivity that is almost poetic. Subtle repetition of words, and even parts of words, helps to produce this effect. The more obvious movements come in phrases such as 'year after year' and 'more and more', as well as in the repeated words with greater distance between them – 'mere' in 'mere pulsation' and 'mere functions', and 'functions' itself, which appears twice in the concluding sentence. But these repetitions alone do not sustain the slightly irregular but ever-present rhythm of the passage. The suffix 'ing' recurs in verbs throughout the first sentence, and its usage within the phrase 'narrowing and hardening' creates an almost cyclical stress pattern that appears again with the gerunds 'weaving' and 'hoarding'

in the second sentence, as well as earlier and more quietly with the noun 'being'. Finally, the dominance of words that end in 'tion' cannot be ignored: there are six alone in the final four lines. These individual recurring sounds would fail to produce any distinct pattern, but in combination, they form a faint, unpredictable pulse that seems nearly to die out and then resurface softly but unavoidably later within a line of text. This rhythm is the bare minimum of existence, a weak throbbing that is also reminiscent of the repetitive noise of the loom itself. It is sign of life in Marner and, paradoxically, a sign of how far he is from actually living. In this case, the syntactical intricacy we tend to expect from Eliot may be said to go beyond syntax. In fact, it is not so much intricacy in the sense of structural complexity, but the repetition of simple sounds used to communicate a feeling of temporal suspension. The rhythm subliminally complements the context of the sentence, enhancing the overall meaning through a 'kind of auditory metaphor',⁵ so that Eliot speaks to readers at a level of pre-conscious impulse.

As *Silas Marner* was shorter than any of Eliot's other published novels written before or after, her commitment to its brevity seems to have filled her with a determination to devise what Q. D. Leavis termed 'the economical and pregnant construction' of the work.⁶ Through the language, Eliot was attempting to describe unvocalized feeling itself. Thus the heart as a physiological entity would prove an accurate physiological metaphor for syntactical structure. The heart is tied to emotion but primarily as a reactive organ in that it does not assist in the understanding of strong feeling. Instead, strong feeling is 'expressed directly and physiologically by it.' Thus it is fitting that a passage describing a man whose life is 'a mere pulsation of desire' is filled with a subtle linguistic pulse that seems in constant danger of disappearing altogether. The pattern of the language becomes the reactive force to the organized thoughts behind the text, just as the beating of the human heart responds to the organized, if not always understood, thoughts of the human mind.

Kirstie Blair discusses what she calls an 'imaginative shift', taking place even before the Victorian period, 'by which the nervous system and/or brain came to displace the heart as the central agent within the body' (p. 11). However, she also examines the persistent fact that 'Victorian poems frequently contain an intense and oddly pathological concentration on the heart' (p. 9). With this in mind, Eliot's decision to focus on the heart in *Silas Marner* is not so much literary nostalgia as a breach of genre barriers – an attempt to write poetically in prose. The poetic aspects of *Silas Marner* have not gone unnoticed: the work has even been referred to 'as a lyrical ballad' (Cave, p. xxiii). Eliot herself wrote to her publisher,

I have felt all through as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than prose fiction, especially in all that relates to the psychology of Silas.⁸

Earlier in the same letter, Eliot mentions that she never imagined that anyone but she and the late William Wordsworth would appreciate the tale (p. 382). She strengthens this connection within the text itself by using lines from Wordsworth's 'Michael' as an epigraph. Wordsworth's interest in the ties between poetry and the workings of the heart has been well-documented, which further helps to explain the pulse-like patterns within *Silas Marner*. As John Beer puts it:

There was also one further major virtue of the heart for Wordsworth. It was in its own right an *actual* physical resource: despite the elusiveness of some issues raised, Wordsworth had only to put his hand to his breast in order to feel its quiet work steadily and palpably continuing.⁹

While Wordsworth's focus on the heart could be termed 'intense', it was by no means 'pathological'. It was a clear realist conviction of the value of its simple but profound activity. For even within moments of unconsciousness, there must remain that 'co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed'.¹⁰ In essence, the heart becomes a metrical accompaniment to life itself.

It is not surprising that the pulse of passages describing Silas is characteristic of poetry. It is a language of simplicity, repetition, and, in the early sections of the work, of threatening despair:

His loom, as he wrought in it without ceasing, had in its turn wrought on him, and confirmed more and more the monotonous craving for its monotonous response. His gold, as he hung over it and saw it grow, gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own. (p. 40)

As he sat weaving, he every now and then moaned low, like one in pain: it was the sign that his thoughts had come round again to the sudden chasm – to the empty evening time. And all the evening, as he sat in his loneliness by the dull fire, he leaned his elbows on his knees, and clasped his head with his hands, and moaned very low – not as one who seeks to be heard. (p. 74)

These incidents described above are separated within the story by the loss of Silas's gold, the one thing he had grown to love in his lonely life – which he hoarded merely for the joy of having it, rather than spending it. Yet the passages are similar in their tendency to repetition, resulting in the creation of a significant rhythm. The first passage repeats several words ('wrought', 'more', and 'monotonous'), as well as repeating the overarching pattern of the simple sentences, in which Silas acts upon and is also changed by the inanimate objects that dominate his life – the loom and the gold, respectively. The second passage also has the characteristic repetitions: specifically, 'as he sat' and 'evening', as well as the similar phrases 'moaned low' and 'moaned very low'. In both there is a sense of the cyclical, though the second also includes the recurrent 'sudden chasm' that marks the hidden pain of Silas's life. Within the cycle, whether working by day or sitting alone at night, Silas is forced to 'come round again' to the need to express his anguish by moaning, 'not as one who seeks to be heard'. In that final phrase, there is something being expressed about the difficulty of communicating in and of itself – about the almost physical, nervous need to give vent to expression even when it is seemingly useless. This is particularly difficult for Silas, who has almost lost his capacity to *want* to articulate his feelings of loneliness precisely because he feels there is no one to listen. In this we are reminded that the heart, in a metaphoric sense, is not meant to be solitary. John Beer expands on this idea, in both metaphoric and literal respects, as he further discusses the heart in Wordsworth's poetry:

The work of the heart is not restricted to the existence of man as a part of nature, but includes his relationships with other animated beings. The heart can

engage itself to others—and this statement, like others which we have examined, is not *simply* metaphor: the actual movements of physical heart and physical bloodstream can be intimately involved in such engagement, giving urgency to love [...].¹¹

Thus the reactive abilities of the human heart are twofold in their ability to express intensely solitary, as well as intensely mutual, feeling. Eliot already had some familiarity with the metaphoric aspect of this through her translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*:

As the action of the arteries drives the blood into the extremities, and the action of the veins brings it back again, as life in general consists in a perpetual systole and diastole; so it is in religion. In the religious systole man propels his own nature from himself, he throws himself outward; in the religious diastole he receives the rejected nature into his heart again.¹²

In the passage, the arteries and veins are represented as pathways that facilitate, as well as react to, the heart's activity. The imagery allows them to function as symbolic pathways of connection between humans and their idea of God, as well as between humans and their own consciousness of the ideal – a sort of 'parallel for religious feeling' (Blair, p. 153). This anticipates human longing for connection with another because for Feuerbach, the very desire for a loving god manifests itself out of human need for another. In the translation, the scientific words 'systole' and 'diastole' are used to distinguish the distinct moments of contraction and relaxation in the heartbeat – the action that drives blood out of the heart and then allows it to 'come round again'. Eliot must have had a dual awareness of the physiological and metaphoric levels of meaning, as well as a clear grasp of the human need for responsiveness – the need to be allowed to accept our own 'rejected nature' back from the similarly pulsing, forgiving heart of another. If within the compactness of the novella, Eliot was trying to mimic this systole and diastole through the syntax to express solitary fear and despair, I would argue that she also attempted to create a similar pulse in passages describing intense connection.

Silas Marner finds intense connection through Eppie, the child of a clandestine marriage between the heir to the town squire, Godfrey Cass, and a drug-addicted barmaid. Eppie wanders innocently into Marner's home after her mother has collapsed and died in the snow. It could be argued that the entire story turns on the moment in which Godfrey and Silas demonstrate their widely different responses to the little girl:

The wide-open blue eyes looked up at Godfrey's without any uneasiness or sign of recognition: the child could make no visible audible claim on its father; and the father felt a strange mixture of feelings, a conflict of regret and joy, that the pulse of that little heart had no response for the half-jealous yearning in his own, when the blue eyes turned away from him slowly, and fixed themselves on the weaver's queer face, which was bent low down to look at them, while the small hand began to pull Marner's withered cheek with loving disfiguration. (p. 116)

Godfrey's anxiety throughout the passage is contrastingly matched by the understandable

placidity of the baby daughter who cannot know him. His 'conflict of regret and joy', as well as in his awareness that with the child's 'recognition' could only come pain, makes it impossible for him to want to articulate his inner torment. Thus after one designation of Godfrey as the child's father through the possessive pronoun 'its' in the phrase 'its father', the narrative thereafter labels him 'the father'. With the switch from possessive pronoun to article, distinction is made between the indisputable, if hidden, biological role and unfulfilled emotional role of a parent. The idea of a pulse recurs, but initially it is found explicitly within the text of the narrative rather than within the pattern of the syntax: 'the pulse of that little heart had no response for the half-jealous yearning in his own'. Just as Godfrey's fulfilment of his biological role has not been accompanied by an emotional presence in his child's life, the passage describing their meeting mentions pulse but does not structurally create one. There is no emotional connection made between the father and daughter. The strength of Godfrey's jealousy for the burgeoning connection between the child and Marner is then made clear by Godfrey's immediate move to ask Marner, 'You'll take the child to the parish tomorrow?' (p. 116). The words come as a harsh, dissonant shock after the soft description of the careful movements of recognition and affection between Silas and Eppie at the end of the passage: 'when the blue eyes turned away from him slowly'. It is significant that a rhythm is gradually beginning to establish itself as Silas and Eppie look at one another, the phrases flowing naturally and responsively into each other, and that Godfrey's callous speech interrupts its development. Silas responds to Godfrey by saying that he will take care of Eppie:

'The mother's dead, and I reckon it's got no father: it's a lone thing – and I'm a lone thing. My money's gone, and I don't know where – and this is come from I don't know where. I know nothing – I'm partly mazed.' (p.116)

The language of repetition that Eliot uses to describe Silas within the narrative is actually the speech pattern of Silas himself; here, however, the monotony that used to fill Silas's lonely hours becomes a symbol of human connection and balance: 'it's a lone thing – and I'm a lone thing. My money's gone, and I don't know where – and this is come from I don't know where.' Through his simple language, and his identification with the child, he creates his own vocalized pulse of feeling, reestablishing a rhythm that the biological father cannot sustain. It is the sort of beat that Silas's friend Dolly Winthrop feels, even in her inarticulacy, as she tries to work out the confusing details of Silas's past. As she says, '[I]t got twisted back'ards and for'ards, as I didn't know which end to lay hold on. But it come to me all clear like [...]' (pp. 139-40). This sense of things coming without explanation, without sense, is important – just as the very inarticulacy of *Silas Marner* is vital to its pulse.¹³

The disparity between the effect Eppie has upon her adoptive father and her biological father could not be greater, for Silas's heart is reawakened by her love:

As the child's mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory: as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness. (p. 124)

The passage is purposely symbiotic: the language flows forward in the description of Eppie's growth and then back again as Silas is revived by her experiences. The syntax mimics the action within the arteries and veins as described by Feuerbach. The dependent clauses

describing Eppie's development, namely 'As the child's mind was growing' and 'as her life unfolded', are paralleled by the advances in the mind and soul of Silas Marner. The use of the colon to link the parts of the sentence deepens the causal relationship already implied through the phrasing. Thus the rhythmic syntax shows how they have mutually developed in the naturally different directions of a young child discovering life as she advances into her future, and an older man coming back to life in trying to make sense of his painful past.

The reader cannot help but be reminded of an earlier passage, when Eppie first came to Marner shortly after the loss of the gold which had been the only thing that he could manage to care about for years:

Marner took her onto his lap, trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life. Thought and feeling were so confused within him, that if he had tried to give them utterance, he could only have said that the child was come instead of the gold – that the gold had turned into the child. (p. 120)

The very confusion of conscious thought and impulsive feeling is syntactically expressed through Silas's characteristic repetition: 'he could only have said that the child was come instead of the gold – that the gold had turned into the child'. It is the conversion of 'instead' to 'turned into' which is vital. It is only when the thoughts can move along *with* the feelings that the more complex workings of the mind can begin to understand the emotion expressed by the beating of the heart – then one can be said to be '*trembling gradually into full consciousness*' (italics mine). Thus in its syntactical expression of a literal and metaphoric pulse, *Silas Marner* is not just George Eliot's most poetic work. It is also the work wherein she studies most carefully those inarticulate nervous impulses at the basis of human empathy.

Notes

- 1 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by David Carroll, first published 1871-2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 134-5.
- 2 Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 35-6. Further references to this source will be placed within the text and abbreviated as 'Blair'.
- 3 See Terence Cave's introduction to George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. vii-xxxi, p. xv. Further references to this source will be placed within the text and abbreviated as 'Cave'.
- 4 George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, edited by Terence Cave, first published 1861 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 16. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses.
- 5 Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), p. 212.
- 6 Q. D. Leavis, 'Silas Marner', in *Collected Essays, Volume I: The Englishness of the*

- English Novel*, edited by G. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 275-302, p. 290.
- 7 John Beer, *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (London: MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1978), p. 11.
- 8 Gordon S. Haight (ed.), *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), II, p. 382.
- 9 Beer, p. 11.
- 10 William Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, edited by W. J. B. Owen (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957), p. 127.
- 11 Beer, p. 16.
- 12 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by Marian Evans, first published 1841 (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 31.
- 13 It is also what makes *Silas Marner* 'a radically *experimental* novel'. See Cave, p. xix.