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POLITICS AND PASTORAL IN *SILAS MARNER*

By Barbara Hardy

When eighteen-year-old surnameless Eppie stands by Silas Marner and against Godfrey Cass she joins a line of subversive children in Victorian fiction. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* speaks out against her aunt; Dickens's *Oliver Twist* asks for more gruel; his *Paul Dombey* asks the capitalist father, 'What is money after all?' One child rebels against adult power; one against institutional power; one against the cash nexus. The children are all economic dependants but there is no emphasis on class. *Oliver* behaves like a little gentleman; *Paul* is a little gentleman; *Jane* tells *Brocklehurst* she would not like to be poor, and goes to a charitable school for children of gentlefolk. *Eppie's* father is gentry, her mother a barmaid, but she is the only one of these four rebels who is working-class by upbringing, who chooses the working class, and who rejects the upper class. She is not a child but older than the others, though young enough to share their articulate innocence which makes them metonymic and larger than life.

Q. D. Leavis's insistence on the novel's Radicalism has been sidelined: David Carroll in his *Penguin English Classics* edition (1996), includes her Introduction¹ to the *Penguin* of 1967 in his selected booklist but doesn't say it is reprinted as an appendix in his own edition; Terence Cave in his *World's Classics* edition (1996) mentions her choice of text but not her criticism; Ruth Livesey in her essay 'Class' for *George Eliot in Context*² asserts that *Eppie's* preference of *Silas* is based not on class but on personal relationship and continuity, dismissing Leavis as one of the 'earlier critics' who saw the rejection as political, but naming her in an endnote as the only example. Leavis said 'Nancy presses Godfrey's rights on *Eppie*, who answers the spirit of the insult with a passionate affirmation of class solidarity as well as of loyalty to the only father she has ever known' (Carroll, p. 230): I want to recall and extend that judgement.

Eppie is not only a rebel like *Jane Eyre*, *Oliver Twist* and *Paul Dombey*, but a rare example of a strong Victorian working-class heroine, like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Bessy Higgins* in *North and South*, who is a factory girl, killed by lung disease, while *Eppie* is lovingly fostered and has only the care of *Silas Marner's* simple household. Her touch of 'refinement and fervour' is attributed to 'tenderly-nurtured unvitiated feeling' (ch. 16) and she is placed as a heroine in a pastoral setting, with echoes of *The Winter's Tale*.³ *Eppie's* *Florizel* is no prince in disguise but a gardener, *Aaron Winthrop*. He may echo *Polixenes's* abstract argument with *Perdita* about grafting, as he suggests that lavender may be transplanted into poor men's gardens, though unlike *Polixenes*, he uses imagery arising naturally from his daily experience. He uses *Perdita's* word for cuttings, 'slips', 'I can bring you slips of anything', and shows political imagination and sense in what Leavis calls a vision of 're-distribution':

there's never a garden in all the parish but what there's endless waste in it for want o' somebody as could use everything up. It's what I think sometimes, as there need nobody run short o' victuals if the land were made the most on, and there were never a morsel but what could find its way to a mouth. It sets one thinking o' that – gardening does. (Ch. 16)

Silas Marner's pastoral is firmly rooted in reality. The traditional pastoral contrast between town and country is a structural principle, worked out in a linear and non-linear form, with floral and seasonal symbolism involving most characters, and romantic implications deepened

by a restrained but clear political critique in which young lovers participate with mind, feeling, and imagination, like the disguised lovers in *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*. As Cave observes in the Introduction to his edition, after its appearance in 1861 the novel was twice re-published during Eliot's lifetime: once in 1863, with *Scenes of Clerical Life*, sharing an interest in 'the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones' ('The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton', ch. V) and in 1878 bracketed at the author's request with the fable-like 'Brother Jacob' and the fantasy '*The Lifted Veil*'.

Eliot first thought the idea for *Silas Marner* might lend itself to metrical expression, but it lent itself to ordinary tones, like those of 'Simon Lee' where Wordsworth begs us to 'Learn with me to find a tale in everything', but in prose. Cave believes that *Silas Marner* is doing something different from the earlier books, but I think it is also reverting to Eliot's first attempt to do ordinary life. This is her fourth book and by now she has learnt to do daily life by doing what she had earlier failed to do (except in treating Amos's attempt to keep grief alive), namely, to put the dailiness of life under a strong lens and see it as extraordinary.

When the figure of Silas Marner appeared as a compulsive memory and inspiration, Eliot had created Adam Bede and Maggie Tulliver, and was contemplating Savonarola and Romola, all more complex in intelligence, self-awareness and development than 'average' or 'ordinary' men and women. The new ordinary characters of *Silas Marner*, their habits and habitat known from her childhood – as Leavis observes, she was Wordsworthian before she read Wordsworth – are presented through the environment of things and natural phenomena of which they are conscious, or keenly aware, or analytic: loom and thread, silver and gold coins, whole, broken and mended brown jug, pebbles, flies, ladybirds, cats, dogs, herbs, gardens and flowers, all affectively animated in relationship, work, sustenance, and the daily round, rooted in routine and ritual, interactive presences, images and parts that stand for the whole, in symbol and metonymy.

In this warm pastoral, the natural world is prominent, the more so as Silas undergoes his late metamorphosis and the lovers grow into love: Eliot imagines imagination, of past, present and future, in a fertile story of great and small gardens, and many gardeners. Every important character except for the land-owning Squire, whose title falls into disuse, makes a pastoral contribution: least conspicuous is Godfrey, but he takes the waste stone-pit to drain and farm, finding his dead and admitting his past; Nancy sweetens the Red House with rose-leaves and lavender, hopes to share a love of gardens with Eppie, and gives her the pink-sprigged wedding-dress; Dolly's double daisies are Eppie's model; Silas collects medicinal herbs, coltsfoot, dandelion and foxglove.

At the centre, heroine of pastoral, Eppie plans and plants, taking into her garden the furze-bush where her mother died in winter, linking past and future in a protected, light and fertile space. She takes a practical and also an animistic delight in flowers, feeling their connection with human beings, longs for lavender, like Silas values herbs, 'rosemary, and bergamot, and thyme' – Perdita's wise Whitsun distribution includes lavender and rosemary – and quotes Aaron's choice: 'snowdrops and crocuses 'cause Aaron says they won't die out, but will always get more and more' (ch. 16). Eppie's political choice roots the flowering in the ordinary social world, and the flowering poeticizes and mythologizes her power and role: like the gold coins and the golden hair, the mundane and the mythical are held in balance. Eppie tells Silas, 'I always think the flowers can see us and know what we're talking about' (ch. 16).

In the last sentence of the novel, Eppie Winthrop expresses a family's happiness, as we see through the open fence how 'the flowers shone with answering gladness'. Eppie's flowering of a waste land in a cottage garden is a remarkable resolution.

Aaron's role is the more clearly political because he cannot even be imagined by Godfrey and Nancy. The divisiveness of this 'organic' community, which makes the plot possible, as it does for *Adam Bede*,⁴ is emphasized by Godfrey's class-prejudice and ignorance: he explains to Silas, 'She may marry a low working-man and then I could do nothing for her'. Nancy's more observant consolation, 'Well, he's very sober and industrious' is still a conspicuous and conventional class-judgement (ch. 20). Aaron is not a low working-man, but a radically intelligent and imaginative working-man, whose chirped carol 'God rest you, merry gentleman' first brings music and blessing into Silas's house, as he receives and returns the hospitality of Dolly's ritually stamped lard-cakes. (In 1843 the same Christmas carol, also sung by a boy, blessed Dickens's Scrooge.) Eppie's awareness of Aaron's authority and knowledge, spiced with emulation when she sets off on her travels to the city, makes clear their affinity, which is not shown in erotic ecstasy like the love of Perdita and Florizel, but as a deep long-growing affection which in this novel must support – in dramatic psychology and artistic structure – a filial love and fertile social choice.

Eppie's creative choice is of Silas, Aaron, and working people's 'ways'. The pondered word 'victuals' is sacramentalized and particularized, Silas's eating 'o' the same bit' and drinking 'o' the same cup' (ch. 19) given physical and social substance: he warms up and sweetens his porridge for the hungry child, Dolly brings cakes and he gives one to Aaron, Eppie warms up potato pie for Sunday dinner: the simple meals – except perhaps for the perhaps uneaten pork on the doorkey, and that comes to good – compose a ceremony of love, to contrast with the soiled tankards and hasty breakfast at the Squire's table, before the good housekeeper Nancy takes over. The novel makes an interesting comparison with Dickens's *Great Expectations*, where giving and receiving food make the touchstone of love: though meals are important in *Silas Marner*, etiquette is more eloquent, partly because it forms a conclusion. For the crucial choice, and Eppie's central subversion, Eliot dramatizes the behaviour of deference, in positive and negative.

In chapter 19, Godfrey and Nancy come to the cottage, Eppie opens the door and drops 'her little rustic curtsy'. When she makes her first refusal of the offer to adopt her and make her a lady, she takes her hand from Silas's head, moves from his chair to come forward 'a step', then 'drops a low curtsy, first to Mrs Cass and then to Mr Cass'. At this point she makes the refusal, personal and more than personal: "'I can't leave my father, nor own anybody nearer than him. And I don't want to be a lady – thank you all the same". She dropped another curtsy'.

Here is marked repetition and dramatic placing, the deferential 'lowering' curtsy displayed four times in a series establishing the social norm, the more clearly to question and subvert: after much has been said and felt, the curtsy is withheld and the breach of ceremony is marked, like the beginning of a new Act, which it is. But in this drama where every move is planned by a skilful novelist for an impassioned character, the curtsy is not only conspicuously denied, but replaced, by another significant performance, a holding of hands. The courteous deferential curtsy has been a disguise, consciously assumed and imitated; the hand-holding is the real thing, spontaneous and deeply personal.

Nancy thinks they have won the argument and says, 'We shall want for nothing when

we have our daughter', but 'Eppie did not come forward and curtsy, as she had done before. She held Silas's hand in hers, and grasped it tightly – it was a weaver's hand, with a palm and finger-tips that were sensitive to such pressure'. This action is one of fellowship and affection, the opposite of deference, strikingly particularized in her firm grip and her sensitivity to his sensitivity of reciprocal affection, and his peculiar craft. Eliot first wrote, 'capable of such pressure', then changed the first two words and wrote that 'sensitive to', a perfect wording (Carroll, p. 207).

George Eliot may not use Marxist terminology, but she and Marx experienced similar class divisions at the same time, and whatever she thought, she writes of what she observes as well as what she analyses and judges. (Leavis emphasizes Marian Evans's early experience of class difference.) But if Ennie is not using the language of class when she says 'I don't want to be a lady'. and makes her last polite curtsy, what is class language? And the gesture is ironic, even if the character is not. Moreover, the 'lady' does not stand alone. Eliot does not use the word 'class' in this novel, but she uses 'rank', and also words and phrases signifying economically determined social 'superiority' and 'inferiority': ladies, great ladies, lord, squire, gentry, gentleman, working-man, low working-man, and working-people, very great, and far above.

Eliot is surely revising *Adam Bede*, echoing Hetty's name and undoing all the material and materialist terms of her fatal fantasy life – carriage, clothes, and another girl eyeing her enviously in church, as Eppie imagines the estrangement of new feelings:

'I shouldn't know what to think on or to wish for with fine things about me, as I haven't been used to. And it 'ud be fine work for me to put on things, and ride in a gig, and sit in a place at church, as 'ud make them as I'm fond of think me unfitting company for 'em. What could I care for then?' (Ch. 19)

She makes Eppie mention differentiated forms of behaviour, too, in 'victuals', and the unsophisticated but effectively generalizing 'ways':

'I wasn't brought up to be a lady, and I can't turn my mind to it. I like the working-folks, and their victuals, and their ways. And' she added passionately, while the tears fell, 'I'm promised to marry a working-man.' (Ch. 19)

The word 'victuals' was substituted for 'houses' in manuscript (Carroll, p. 199) and echoes the narrator's conversation 'with an old labouring man' (ch. 1), Dolly's word (ch. 14), and Aaron's good gardening speech (ch. 16). Eppie also uses more of the precise class-language: 'lady', 'working-folk', and of course 'working-man', which she repeats tearfully, to amend radically, Godfrey's 'low-working-man'.

Silas Marner unexpectedly came 'across' the research for *Romola* as a childhood memory of a man with a burden, stoop and expression which made him seem alien, inspiring 'a sort of legendary tale' (Carroll, viii). Perhaps the unconscious imaginative work that went to its making was the more powerful for the conscious cerebral and scholarly work it was suppressing. Perhaps it helped to make a pastoral creativity grow political roots, and fruits, in one of the most plain-speaking but subtle subversions in the Victorian novel.

Notes

- 1 References to Q. D. Leavis are to her Introduction.

- 2 *George Eliot in Context*, ed. Margaret Harris (CUP, 2013).
- 3 Affinities with Shakespeare's romance have been noticed, for instance, by Cave in his World's Classics' edition where he says *Silas Marner* seems to be 'a deliberate reversal' of *The Winter's Tale* (p. xxiii) and compares the dance lead by Solomon Macey's wild fiddling to the shepherd's anti-masque (p. xxx).
- 4 Livesey says the divisiveness of community was more marked in urban life than in Eliot's rural worlds (op. cit.) but neglects crucial examples of class ignorance like Godfrey's opinion of workmen and Mr Irwine's fatally superficial knowledge of his parishioners' private lives; Leavis mentions the moral causality but also forgets social determinants in *Adam Bede*, calling *Silas Marner* 'the only novel in which she makes class a major cause of the different treatment she gives human beings'. The weakness of her brilliant essay, I think, is a romantic attachment to the organic concept.
- 5 Looking at this detail from a different perspective, Cave says it 'draws the reader directly into the intensity of George Eliot's experiment with feelings at the limit of perception'(p. xxxi).