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SILAS MARNER: GEORGE ELIOT'S MOST COLERIDGEAN WORK?

By Jen Davis

In 1861 Henry Crabb Robinson compared George Eliot's *Silas Marner* with Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner'. He noted the novel's 'great affinity' with the poem: 'A little child, its mother having frozen to death at his solitary hovel, is taken in by Silas [...]. It is to him what the blessing of the animals is to the Ancient Mariner.'¹ In 1977, U. C. Knoepfelmacher argued that: '[b]oth *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* hark back to those poems of severance, loss, and expiation that had haunted the imaginations of Coleridge and Wordsworth at the turn of the century'.² Elsewhere, Knoepfelmacher has suggested that '[t]he man called "Old Master Marner" belongs and does not belong to that disinherited race of wanderers who roam through the *Lyrical Ballads*. [...] His surname' says Knoepfelmacher, 'suggests his kinship to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner'.³ So, connections between *Silas Marner* and 'The Ancient Mariner' have been made before, but none has focused on consonance and dissonance in the language and narrative structure of each text in relation to the other. Close readings of the texts produce startling correspondences in the language used to describe alienation, isolation, and ideas of community. At the same time, the narrative of each text can be read as a reversal of the other, and each employs remarkably similar metaphorical language to characterize the nature of narrative itself.

Of his contributions to 1798's *Lyrical Ballads*, which included 'The Rime of the Ancient Marinere', Coleridge wrote: 'the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real'.⁴ Of Eliot's comments concerning her intentions in writing *Silas Marner*, those on creating 'a sufficiently real background [...] so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience' are significantly consonant with the qualities championed by Coleridge: the power of the emotions to engage, and the employment of elements 'real' enough to convince.⁵ Coleridge's inclusion of supernatural 'incidents and agents' does not detract from the emotional power and impact of the 'Mariner', but his rendering of their effects produces a lack of coherence in his narrative radically at odds with the moral cohesion Eliot imposes on her 'legendary' tale. A fundamental reason for this divergence is the differing treatment of subjectivity in each narrative, which informs, and is informed by, agency, moral responsibility, and materiality.

One of the most significant features of the relationship between the narrative structures employed by Coleridge and Eliot is their reversal of each other. *Silas Marner* ends with a wedding feast, and the 'Mariner' commences with one. In *Marner*, the wedding reconciles various elements of the plot; Marner's future status as an integral part of a family unit and of Raveloe's community is ensured. The garden described in the penultimate paragraph of the novel is enclosed with stone walls on two sides, but presents a vista on the third, through which flowers greet the homecoming family 'with answering gladness'.⁶ Eliot's symbolism here deftly combines solidity and security with imagery suggesting a joyful and generative future. Conversely, the wedding feast at the beginning of the 'Mariner' posits stability in its ritual, family, and community dimensions. This stability is immediately broken up by the Mariner's interception of the next of kin, which fragments the unity of the celebrations.

Fragmentation becomes the predominant motif of Coleridge's narrative, which resists

attempts to impose a unified meaning on its events and characters. Despite his centrality, the Mariner does not direct the action. As William Wordsworth observed, 'he does not act, but is continually acted upon', and his passivity means that he lacks the power to impose stable interpretations upon his experiences.⁷ The absence of any coherent system, either empirical or rational, by which narrative events may be understood, means that a consistent framework for interpretation is unobtainable. As Edward E. Bostetter argues, 'Coleridge has created the kind of universe [...] in which [the Mariner is] at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces.'⁸ The Mariner is separated from his country, his community of fellow mariners, and his vessel, which is finally broken up. Marner, on the other hand, finds a new country, a new community, and a stable home environment, thus overcoming the threat of fragmentation presented by his Eppie's marriage.

Despite this dramatic divergence in their narrative structures, the storytelling dimensions of narratives are foregrounded in both the 'Mariner' and *Marner*. The thing that Silas Marner, the weaver of Raveloe, weaves, and the Mariner tells, is the 'tale' (p. 9).⁹ Weaving is a relatively straightforward metaphor for storytelling; read in conjunction with the Mariner's compulsive tale-telling, though, it assumes a darker, more disturbing aspect. The 'tale' of the cloth woven by Marner is its amount, or number of pieces, and the telling, or (re)counting, of the tale is an indication of its weight. Metaphors proliferate to reveal a symbolic language shared by Eliot and Coleridge. Eliot claimed that the inspiration for *Silas Marner* was her 'recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back', and her novel describes 'these pale men [who] rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden' (p. 5).¹⁰ The 'burden' of the 'tale' is, literally, the weight of its telling. Metaphorically, this also characterizes the Mariner's burden; he is compelled to tell his tale by the 'agony' (l. 579) visited upon him by an unknown and unpredictable force. The mystery of the burden resides in its unknowable qualities; its concealment, from visual interpretation in *Marner*, and from rational interpretation in the 'Mariner', presents intriguing parallels.

The 'hopeless riddle' of Marner's 'strange world' (p. 19) could equally describe the world in which the Mariner is compelled to tell and retell his tale; Marner might, comments Eliot, 'if he had a less intense nature, have sat weaving, weaving – looking towards the end of his pattern, or towards the end of his web, till he forgot the riddle' (p. 19). The Mariner's inability to offer interpretation of his experiences, combined with the 'anguish [that] comes and makes me tell' (l. 584), is redolent of that 'weaving, weaving' which sees only the end of the pattern – the possibility of redemption – and omits the reasons for, or answers to, the riddle of how and why the situation has come about.

While the loose threads of Marner's life are eventually woven together by Eliot, the Mariner's story presents a progressive unravelling of the factors that humanize and situate him in the narrative. This dehumanization of character is signalled by the Hermit's appalled '[s]ay quick [...] I bid thee say, / What manner man art thou?' (ll. 576-7). Prior to Marner's redemption through his relationship with his adopted daughter, Eppie, Eliot places him outside the web of community and familial relationships, as isolated a figure as the Mariner. Characters like Marner are 'to the last regarded as aliens by their rustic neighbours, and usually contract[ed] the eccentric habits which belong to a state of loneliness' (p. 6). This description is also applicable to the alienation evoked by the Mariner, who wanders 'from land to land' (l. 586), and cannot be placed, or has no place, within the interrelationships of the narrative. The language of isolation in *Marner* corresponds closely to that in the 'Mariner'. Marner

recognizes himself as a 'lone thing' (p. 118), and a 'lone man' (p. 149), while the Mariner creates a refrain from his lone state: 'Alone, alone, all all alone, / Alone on the wide wide Sea' (ll. 232-3). This imagery is paralleled in Eliot's observation that the loss of his gold leaves Marner's soul 'like a forlorn traveller on an unknown desert' (p. 44). Both Coleridge and Eliot evoke an absence of material bearings to emphasize their characters' spiritual isolation. This theme is woven through Coleridge's poem, and summarized in the Mariner's anguished observation: 'So lonely 'twas, that God himself / Scarce seemed there to be' (ll. 599-600).

Further parallels in Coleridge and Eliot's depictions of physical and spiritual desolation are to be found in references to origins and the country of origin. These references bring together several aspects of the lone state: separation from community; estrangement from familiar customs and beliefs; loss of origins; and a lack of connection with the divine. Marner observes to Dolly Winthrop that 'your ways are different: my country was a good way off' (p. 124). Dolly misconstrues his unfamiliarity with local religious forms as absence of knowledge of God. The Mariner's joyful recognition of 'the Hill [and] the Kirk' (l. 466) is inflected by his questioning of whether this is truly his 'own countrèe' (l. 467). The instability of his perceptions turns out to be justified. The Hermit, who represents local religious authority in the 'Mariner', usually 'loves to talk with Mariners / That come from a far Countrèe' (ll. 517-8). This willingness to embrace the unfamiliar makes doubly poignant his rejection of a man whose faith originated in his own country, who regards him as a figure with the power to redeem his perceived sins, yet is unrecognizable and appalling to him. Although now 'in mine own Countrèe' (l. 570), the Mariner experiences loss of home at the deepest and most painful level. This estrangement of self from community is mirrored in the equally devastating ejection of Marner by his spiritual brethren in Lantern's Yard. While Eliot eventually allows Marner the wholeness to choose a new home, however, Coleridge amplifies the Mariner's fragmentation, instability, and estrangement.

Despite the Mariner's strange power of speech, and his uncanny ability to 'know the man that must hear' him (l. 589), he is unable to free himself from the constraining force of his periodic 'anguish' (l. 584). Marner, too, is subject to recurrent 'visitation[s]' (p. 12), in which he is 'arrested [...] by the invisible wand of catalepsy' (p. 110). Eliot's descriptions of Marner's epileptic fits imbue them with uncanny dimensions, which centre on ambiguity about whether he is dead or alive. Similar ambiguities abound in the Mariner's description of his fellow mariners; a large part of the supernatural horror of the 'Mariner' is produced by the reanimation of his supposedly dead shipmates. Similarities in these descriptions are notable for their focus on the eyes and the gaze. Marner is described by the local girls as 'a dead man come to life again', partly because of his 'pale face and unexampled eyes', and partly because of Jem Rodney's discovery of him in a cataleptic state, when his eyes are 'set like a dead man's' (p. 8). The Mariner is horrified by 'the curse in a dead man's eye' (l. 260), the accusing 'look' (l. 255) concentrated upon him by the other mariners. Marner's myopic 'gaze' (p. 6) has malign powers attributed to it by the local boys; it is 'always enough to make them take to their legs in terror' in the belief that the 'dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth' (p. 6). However, striking similarities in descriptive language are accompanied by a reversal of effect in these portrayals. The power of the malign gaze is attributed, albeit through superstition, to Marner; this enables Eliot to demonstrate the power of sympathy to overcome aversion based on ignorance of a person's true nature. The Mariner, however, is the object of the malign gaze, and the curse is projected onto him, rather than by him. His passivity ensures

that there is no reconciliation for him as there is, eventually, for Marner.

These constructions of character serve to highlight the differing narrative directions of their authors. Eliot's portrayal of Marner as estranged and otherworldly is reversed in his redemption through his relationship with Eppie. In contrast with his previous soulless state, he is once more part of the natural and human world, 'his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, [...] trembling gradually into full consciousness' (p. 126). Conversely, the Mariner's perception that he may have 'died in sleep, / And [become] a blessed Ghost' (ll. 307-8) is compounded, rather than reversed, by his self-depiction as '[I]ike one that hath been seven days drown'd' (l. 552). He remains otherworldly and, with his 'glittering eye' (ll. 3, 13), reminiscent of his dead shipmates. In the midst of this 'ghastly crew' (l. 340), it is himself that the Mariner perceives as other; he 'quake[s] to think of [his] own voice / How frightful it would be!' (ll. 345-6). Later, he believes himself to be invisible to the living dead who surround him: '[t]hought I, I am as thin as air - / They cannot me behold' (ll. 372.1.15-16). Even in the company of the undead, the Mariner is separate, his sense of identity, and all possibility of community, fragmented. Eppie enables Marner's understanding of himself as an integral part of community life, from which he had previously 'stood aloof as from a strange thing, wherewith he could have no communion' (p. 130).

Coleridge and Eliot use similar symbolic language to describe the potential for a reversal of isolation, and the possibility of communion, in two crucial events that mirror each other structurally as well as linguistically: the moments when the Mariner blesses the water-snakes, and Eppie is drawn by the light from Marner's cottage. Each event represents a turning point for their protagonists, despite the subsequent divergence in outcomes. Eppie sees the 'bright glancing light on the white ground', and is 'immediately absorbed in watching the bright living thing' (p. 109). The water-snakes move 'in tracks of shining white' (l. 274), their beauty provoking the Mariner's exclamation, 'O happy living things!' (l. 282). Of symbolism, Coleridge wrote that '[a]n IDEA, in the *highest* sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a *symbol*'.¹¹ The symbolic nature of the language used by both Coleridge and Eliot in these descriptions can be inferred from the supernatural, or transcendent, qualities attributed to the things described. Eppie's physical situation in the snowy night is life-threatening, and the light represents her rescue on a practical level; on a symbolic level, the light functions as a metaphorical substitute for Marner's redemption from the darkness of his isolation. The whiteness of the snow-covered ground is a symbolic manifestation of the purity of the child's innocence, an appropriate backdrop for her role as the bringer of hope into Marner's life. The bright living thing is, therefore, simultaneously the physical light issuing from Marner's cottage, the person of Eppie, and the qualities she represents in the narrative.

The tracks of Coleridge's water-snakes are 'shining white'; their supernatural dimensions are emphasized by the 'elfish light' (l. 275) generated by their movements. Unlike the light seen by Eppie, however, they are resistant to material interpretation; they are held fast in the realm of metaphor and potential. Rather than offering a material means of escaping his predicament, their shining white tracks remain separated, elementally, in water which would drown the Mariner should he follow their light. His only possible connections with them are visual and emotional. They function as metaphorical substitutes for the possibility of redemption, because their indescribable beauty causes the Mariner to recover his ability to pray, upon which the Albatross falls from his neck. However, his act of prayer does not free him from either his physical entrapment or his psychological burden. Although they enable a

'spring of love' (l. 584) to issue from the Mariner's heart because they possess, like Eppie, transformative agency, the Mariner is unable to sustain the transformation. Both the Mariner and Marner are passive recipients of gifts; the 'flash of golden fire' (l. 281) caused by the water-snakes' tracks and the gold of Eppie's hair in the light from Marner's fire are uncannily analogous. But if the water-snakes symbolize the transformative power of love in the 'Mariner', that power is realized only contingently. Eliot's symbolic use of light and the living thing forecasts the certainty of change for the better. Coleridge's symbolism, despite the vital dimensions of the happy living things, reinforces the unalterable nature of the Mariner's separation.

Disruption to ethical order is also denoted by symbolism in both narratives. In Eliot this is temporary, but in Coleridge moral signification is more radically and permanently unsettled. The drawing of lots to determine Marner's guilt or innocence at the beginning of *Silas Marner* results in the initial injustice that drives him away from his religious community and causes the 'despair in his soul [and a] shaken trust in God and man, which is little short of madness to a loving nature' (p. 14). Eliot's narrative requires faith to be lost in order to demonstrate the power of love to restore it. No such restoration is possible in the 'Mariner'; he is, by his own confession, guilty of killing the Albatross, and thus his despair endures. Ethical order in the 'Mariner' is hard to discern, because of the apparent randomness of the killing and all subsequent events; this contingency is further emphasized by the playing of dice for the souls of the mariners.

Although the Mariner views his act as a sin, this is not the definitive verdict on the killing. Even his fellow mariners cannot decide whether it has brought good or bad luck: their initial response, that the Mariner 'had done an hellish thing [...] For all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird / That made the Breeze to blow' (ll. 93-4) is countered in the following stanza by 'Then all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird / That brought the fog and mist. / 'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay' (ll. 99-101). This *volte face* is occasioned by the sunrise that dispels the mist; when the weather changes again, the mariners once more change their minds. These 'arbitrary and unpredictable forces', as Bostetter calls them, further deprive the Mariner of any sense of agency.¹² Eliot gives Marner far greater sense of agency, although this is also, in some ways, contingent. When his gold is stolen, he agonizes over the thief's identity:

Was it a thief who had taken the bags? or was it a cruel power that no hands could reach which had delighted in making him a second time desolate? He shrank from his vaguer dread, and fixed his mind with struggling effort on the robber with hands, who could be reached by hands. (p. 44)

Marner's focus on hands is an attempt to make the responsibility for the crime material and tangible; human, rather than the act of a 'cruel power', over which there is no possibility of control. The idea that hands denote human agency for Marner is particularly compelling in the context of Coleridge's multiple references to the Mariner's 'skinny hand' (ll. 9, 225, 229), but the spiralling instability of events in the 'Mariner' renders problematic the establishment of a causal relationship between the act and its consequences. This disjunction is mirrored in *Marner* when his church finds Marner guilty of William Dane's crime by drawing lots. The Mariner does penance for an act whose moral signification is unobtainable, but Marner is required to atone for a crime he has not committed. The community thus restored to Marner would be predicated on a false premise and an equally false confession. Eliot's presentation of

this initial injustice sets up clear moral parameters for her tale. Marner does not make the mistake of complying with a false moral agenda, and is eventually rewarded by a restoration of faith in human nature, and in a form of religion very different from that of his old country. Dolly insists that Eppie be brought up 'like christened folks's children', taken to church, and taught her catechism: 'the "I believe," and everything, and "hurt nobody by word or deed"' (p. 123). This last delineation of faith is consonant with the Mariner's insistence that '[h]e prayeth well who loveth well, / Both man and bird and beast' (ll. 612-13). Despite the reversal of narratives that ensures Marner's stability within family, community and church, and the Mariner's instability in the expectation of any life everlasting but the agonizing one he is condemned to live, Eliot and Coleridge seem to be morally concordant here.

Eliot's repetition, in differing contexts, of her essential message that 'the same cause would produce the same effect' (p. 127) and that things can and do change if the will is there, is accretive in effect, and posits a stable relationship between the act and its consequences. Conversely, the effect of Coleridge's repetitions is to foreground the *lack* of causality in the Mariner's tale; rather than emphasizing any continuity, they draw attention to its lack. Instead of binding together, they reveal the predominating fragmentation in the narrative. By placing Marner within a stable causal framework, Eliot rescues him from the Mariner's fate.

For Coleridge, subjectivity frequently results in a passivity that guarantees continued isolation, whereas the agency attributed to many of Eliot's characters enables their apprehension of sympathy and correct moral action. This leads to a moral cohesion in her narratives which contrasts dramatically with the instability and lack of cohesion intrinsic to much of Coleridge's poetry. Despite this, the effect produced by such a high incidence of correlative language suggests a greater affinity between Coleridge and Eliot than has previously been established. Exploration of such compelling language similarities can open up a dialogic relationship between the texts of these two great writers.

Notes

- 1 Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, 3 vols, ed. Edith Morley (London: J. M. Dent, 1938), vol. 2, pp. 800-801.
- 2 U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 'Wordsworthian Child of Nature', in U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (eds), *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 418.
- 3 Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 233.
- 4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), vol. II, p. 6. The version of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' that appeared in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* has been used in this comparison because of Eliot's reference to it in *Adam Bede*, the chronology of which [commencing 'in the year of our Lord 1799'] supports this choice. For clarity, however, the most common spelling of the title, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', abbreviated to 'Mariner' is used in the body of the essay.
- 5 George Eliot, letter to Frederick Harrison, 15 August 1866, in *Selections from George*

- Eliot's Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 318.
- 6 George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ed. David Carroll (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 183. All subsequent quotations from the text will be from this edition; references will be given in the body of the essay.
- 7 William Wordsworth's note to 'The Ancient Mariner' in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, eds Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Ontario: Broadview, 2008), p. 289.
- 8 Edward E. Bostetter, 'The Nightmare World of "The Ancient Mariner"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 1:4 (1962), pp. 241-54 (p. 251).
- 9 Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere, in Seven Parts', in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 16, Poetical Works I*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 416, ll. 580, 590. All subsequent quotations from the text will be from this edition; references will be given in the body of the essay.
- 10 George Eliot, letter to John Blackwood, 24 February 1861, in *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, p. 258.
- 11 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. I, p. 156.
- 12 Bostetter, 'The Nightmare World of "The Ancient Mariner"', p. 251.