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Formal Experiment and Ideological Critique: *Silas Marner* and ‘Victorian Values’

In the previous chapters I have tried to show that what makes Eliot stand apart from her contemporaries and indeed most of the writers who come after her is that she was not only a major intellectual who engaged with what she saw as the significant issues of her time but also a self-conscious artist who aims to integrate the intellectual and the literary, and whose attempt to do so led her to anticipate literary modernism in several respects. Though support for this position up to now has been primarily through discussion of the later fiction, especially *Daniel Deronda*, one should beware of creating too radical a division between the earlier and later novels. The novel which might appear to be most resistant to the view of Eliot as intellectual and self-conscious artist engaged in cultural critique is *Silas Marner*, a work which has given many critics some trouble to interpret and which, like *Daniel Deronda*, has often been seen as incoherent: ‘a work of uncertain form and dubious perspective’.¹ The historical accident that for a long time it was regarded as a novel suitable for school children does not make this resistance any easier to overcome. In the following analysis I shall suggest that *Silas Marner* is not fundamentally different in its conception and literary aims from her later novels, and as with *Daniel Deronda* there may also be some literary playfulness.

In the good (or bad, depending on one’s point of view) old days when it was taken as a matter of course that classic literary texts were central to any English syllabus, *Silas Marner* was one of the most widely studied of Victorian novels in schools. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, was that it was short by nineteenth-century standards as well as being perceived as a simple story written in an accessible style. But perhaps even more important was its identification with Victorian moral idealism since it would appear to present a world in which moral order is intrinsic and triumphs over moral disorder, with the good being rewarded and the bad being punished. In an edition of the novel for schools first published in 1912 and often reprinted the editor discusses the appropriateness of *Silas Marner* as a school text and states,

[A]bove all, the ethical interest must be paramount; and no treatment of *Silas Marner* can be really educative which does not make its appeal to the moral consciousness. It is in the belief justified by a long experience that in this lies

the true value of the teaching of literature, that this edition of *Silas Marner* is included in the series of English Literature for Schools.²

What were perceived as 'Victorian values' remained powerful well into the twentieth century, and the prescribing of literary texts in schools must have played some part in sustaining them. What makes *Silas Marner* a particularly significant text in cultural terms is that the moral certainties associated with 'Victorian values' appeared to be more straightforwardly asserted in this novel than in almost any other literary text of the period. Indeed it might be claimed that it exemplifies the theory of fiction proclaimed by Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when she describes her lost novel in the following terms: 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.' Wilde was clearly satirizing what he believed to be the simple-minded moralism and optimism of Victorian fiction, which *Silas Marner* has been perceived as exemplifying and which almost certainly accounts for its former prominence as a school text. This use of the novel in schools to promote Victorian ideology not only in Britain but also in America may have been a significant factor in continuing the decline of Eliot's reputation as an artist beyond the late nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century, since it reinforced the view of her as a heavy Victorian moralist.

In certain political circles there have been demands both for a 'return to Victorian values' and for the restoration of classic literary texts to English syllabuses in schools, demands that are clearly not unconnected. It may be that *Silas Marner* will again be thought of as an ideal school text. I shall suggest that it is not as amenable a text as proponents of 'Victorian values' may think and that only critical impercipient allowed it to be seen in such terms in the past. Even though there has been critically sophisticated discussion of *Silas Marner*, such criticism has not, I think, directly called into question the assumption that the novel promulgates Victorian moral certainties.³

Silas Marner is difficult to categorize within Eliot's fiction. It can either be seen as the end of her early phase or the beginning of her mature style. It has links with her first novel *Adam Bede* in that it deals with English rural life; yet in structure it is similar to her later work since all of her novels from *Silas Marner* onwards employ a double plot. Eliot is, of course, noted for her commitment to realism in fiction; yet *Silas Marner* has often been seen as more akin to myth or fairy tale, which has aroused a certain critical disapproval: '*Silas Marner* is simply an allegorical fairy-tale'⁴; it is 'essentially a myth of spiritual rebirth'.⁵ Also divine providence appears to be at work in the novel, rewarding the good and punishing the bad, which would suggest that it embodies a religious or metaphysical meaning; yet how is this to be reconciled with the fact that Eliot's other writings indicate that she had rejected religious and metaphysical beliefs? Readings of the novel which assume that it is a simple and straightforward moral fable are weakened by ignoring these considerations, which complicate the question of interpretation.

One significant fact that needs to be taken into account is that Eliot acknowledged the influence of Wordsworth on the novel, and its connections with certain of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* is obvious.⁶ Both *Lyrical Ballads* and *Silas Marner* may seem simple in style when compared with other texts by their authors, and both writers are clearly drawing on traditional ballads and fairy tales, but one should not forget that they are sophisticated writers adopting an apparently simple style for their own purposes. Their texts cannot be credibly interpreted as if they were genuine ballads or fairy tales.

To look at the question of realism in *Silas Marner* first of all, though critics have seen the novel as resembling a fairy tale or myth and therefore as a departure from the realist representation associated with her other fiction – as Leavis puts it, ‘the atmosphere precludes too direct a reference ... to our everyday sense of how things happen’⁷ – there is no evidence that Eliot regarded the novel as a break from realism. Although the ‘atmosphere’ may often resemble a fairy tale nothing that happens in the novel is irreconcilable with a rational perspective on the world, as one critic admits: ‘[It] is constructed completely within the limits of conventional realism, with careful attention to probability and verisimilitude of detail’.⁸ Of course, the novel contains what appear to be some striking departures from conventional realism, but these, I believe, should not be seen as belonging to the ‘world’ of the novel but as the outcome of an aesthetic strategy. Though the events and situations in themselves are not intrinsically different from those depicted in her other novels, at the level of style and narrative structure the novel draws much more obviously upon fairy tale and myth. To put the matter in terms of narrative theory, there is a discontinuity between ‘story’ – the basic material of the novel – and ‘discourse’ – how that material is rendered in artistic terms; a story that is ‘realist’ in its philosophical basis – unlike fairy tales, myths and legends – is represented using some of the devices of fairy tales, myths and legends.

An example of such discontinuity is the association of weavers at the beginning of the novel with ‘the remnants of a disinherited race’, ‘alien-looking men’ who ‘rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden’.⁹ They are ‘wandering men’ who are viewed with suspicion by their rural neighbours. Yet these weavers are not in reality Wandering Jew figures belonging to a Romantic world remote from historical specificity. They are clearly products of the Industrial Revolution, and the burden they carry is not the consequence of some mysterious sin committed in the past but contains the thread and other materials they require to practise their trade. The dehumanizing effect of the Industrial Revolution is conveyed by using language and symbols associated with early Romanticism to turn the weavers into alienated, rootless wanderers, but the historical reality retains its integrity. This illustrates in miniature the aesthetic strategy employed in the novel.

Another example of this discontinuity is Silas’s strange fits in which he goes into a death-like trance. These are crucial to the plot; yet they seem too

bizarre to be appropriate to fiction in a realist tradition. People in Lantern Yard or Raveloe have no idea what causes them, and they contribute to the Romantic or fairy-tale atmosphere of the novel. Yet the narrator makes it clear that there is a medical explanation for Silas's condition, namely catalepsy. Silas's association with Romantic figures such as Wordsworth's leech gatherer or Michael and most obviously Coleridge's Ancient Mariner is plain from the way he is presented, but realism is, I would suggest, not compromised at the level of 'story'.

A sign that *Silas Marner* is not a simple fairy-tale-like story but a highly self-conscious literary exercise in narrative construction is its punning and metaphoric language. Its subtitle is 'The Weaver of Raveloe' and as Marner weaves thread to make cloth, Eliot (or more exactly her narrator) weaves text to make narrative. 'Text' is, of course, derived from the Latin verb 'texere', to weave. There is also a pun on the term 'tale',¹⁰ which is used to mean both a weight or quantity of cloth as in 'he worked into the night to finish the tale of Mrs Osgood's table-linen sooner than she expected ... He seems to weave, like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection' (SM, 15) and to mean 'story' as in Mr Macey's response to Silas's account of the theft of his gold: 'For, says I, you talk o' Master Marner making out a tale – why, it's nonsense, that is: it 'ud take a 'cute man to make out a tale like that' (SM, 76). Silas's spider-like weaving is further developed metaphorically when 'weaving ... reduce[s] his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect' (SM, 15) and leads to an 'insect-like existence' (SM, 16). A spider, of course, weaves a web and Silas's 'weaving' involves 'looking towards the end of his pattern, or towards the end of his web'. This use of 'web' anticipates *Middlemarch*, where 'web' is used metaphorically to refer to the organization and structure of narrative. Other metaphoric connections between 'weaving' and the writing of narrative are suggested by Silas accusing William Dane of having 'woven a plot to lay the sin at my door' (SM, 12) and a farrier 'taking up the thread of discourse' (SM, 44) in the Rainbow tavern. The fundamental difference between the novel as a literary form and fairy tale or myth is that in the latter the narrative and linguistic dimensions do not need to be synthesized – the narrative being open to being rendered in multiple forms of linguistic expression – in contrast to literary texts, and this is self-consciously demonstrated in *Silas Marner* where punning and metaphoric play of language indicate that it is a literary artefact and not a fairy tale in any ordinary sense.

As I mentioned previously, this is the first of Eliot's novels to use a double plot, and it is clear that Silas's and Godfrey Cass's stories are inextricably connected. The Romantic atmosphere of the novel allows Eliot to create a more fable-like structure than would be possible in conventionally realist fiction where such structuring would have to be understated so as not to undermine the reader's sense of realism. Silas and Godfrey represent two differing perspectives on life which are brought into confrontation with experience. It may not be

insignificant that *Silas Marner* was written shortly after Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, for the world that Silas and Godfrey have to face – far from being fairy-tale-like – can be seen as Darwinian in basis; that is, a world in which there is no evidence of a divine or providential order, with chance, circumstance or accident playing an important role. It is such a world that Silas and Godfrey have to confront.

Chance is a significant factor in *Silas Marner*. The narrator informs us that 'Favourable Chance ... is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in' (SM, 71). Silas has been brought up to accept the view that the world is governed by a divine order, and when accused of robbery he puts his faith in the drawing of lots to prove his innocence, believing that 'God will clear me' (SM, 11). Godfrey, however, relies on chance to rescue him from a set of circumstances that threatens to ruin his life: a degrading marriage that would result in him losing his inheritance and being denied the possibility of marrying Nancy Lammeter. When chance in the form of drawing lots goes against Silas, it destroys his faith in a beneficent God and he retreats into despair: 'there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent' (SM, 12). Godfrey, however, profits from chance. By waiting on events and being prepared to adapt to them, he avoids ruin: 'The longer the interval, the more chance there was of deliverance from some, at least, of the hateful consequences to which he had sold himself' (SM, 31). His wife dies without their marriage or the fact that he has fathered a child being disclosed, and his brother Dunstan, the only other person who knows about the marriage, disappears. Godfrey has gambled with events and won. He is now free to marry his 'paradise' (SM, 30), Nancy Lammeter, and inherits his father's property on his death. No relation is revealed between human desert or justice and what happens in the world. Silas had put his faith in a moral order in the world controlled by a beneficent God but that faith is shattered. In contrast, Godfrey has gambled with events and won.

Although the world of *Silas Marner* is one that reflects Darwinian ideas, the novel nevertheless suggests that this need not undermine human notions of a moral order, since the absence of an immanent moral order in the world has no necessary bearing on how human beings ought to live. Those characters in Eliot's novels such as Godfrey who try to exploit chance and circumstance to serve their own immoral or selfish purposes are clearly treated with little sympathy, for the novel implies that Darwinian natural selection has no tenable application to human society. This attitude to Darwinism was untypical of the period. As discussed in Chapter 1, those who grasped what the theory meant in scientific terms but who believed that morality was dependent on the existence of a moral order in the world claimed that Darwinian theory could have negative social consequences; human individuals would no longer have any incentive to behave morally since for Darwinists the survival of species had no relation to morality but was dependent on adaptation to a constantly

changing world. Others who interpreted Darwin less scientifically and who were influenced by Herbert Spencer's translation of natural selection into the 'survival of the fittest' believed that Darwinism demonstrated the existence of an order in the natural world founded upon struggle and conflict and one should accept that this applied equally to the human and social world. While Darwin's concept of 'natural selection' was neutral in evaluative terms, the term 'fittest' could be taken to mean those most fit to survive. *Silas Marner*, the first of Eliot's novels to reflect strongly the influence of Darwinism, suggests that Eliot rejected both these readings of Darwinism from the start, though her critique was continued more directly in later novels such as *Felix Holt*, as I have tried to show earlier.

Silas Marner shows, however, that the undermining of the idea of an immanent moral order could have disastrous effects. Silas's response to the shattering of his faith when the drawing of lots reveals him to be guilty when he knows he is innocent is to construct a mechanical way of life for himself: 'Strangely Marner's face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life' (SM, 19). The main elements of this mechanical life are work and money; nothing else matters to him until his encounter with Eppie. Of course, work and money were all too prominent features of Victorian life, and it seems certain that Eliot is implying a relationship between the Victorian preoccupation with them and loss of faith. Marner's mechanistic life functions allegorically as a commentary on the alienation Eliot suggests permeates Victorian culture. Likewise Godfrey's hope that he will be rescued by a fortunate turn of events has wider implications. The reader is told that he 'can hardly be called specially old-fashioned' (SM, 71) in conducting his life in this way. He is seen as typical of people in Eliot's own time, even though the novel is set some sixty years in the past: 'Let even a polished man of these days get into a position he is ashamed to avow, and his mind will be bent on all the possible issues that may deliver him from the calculable results of that position' (SM, 71). Silas with his Ancient Mariner associations and Godfrey (God-free) represent symbolically different forms of Victorian alienation.

Yet, apparently, good eventually triumphs: the man who had believed there was an intrinsic moral order in the world wins out at the end over the calculating gambler on chance. It is this triumph of good that has persuaded some critics that the novel finally supports a providentialist view of the world. In a previous chapter I argued that U. C. Knoepfelmacher's view that "'mystery" ... is allowed to survive in this legendary tale ... where obstacles come in threes',¹¹ confused 'story' and 'discourse'. Another way of putting this is that it mistakes style and artistic expression for philosophical content. The triumph of 'good' in the novel is not a matter of arbitrary rewards and punishments being administered to Silas and Godfrey. I shall rather suggest that the moral position the novel takes would be unchanged if Silas had lost Eppie and Godfrey had succeeded in taking her from Silas.

Silas had believed that moral equilibrium is structured into the world and is thus shattered when he is unjustly pronounced guilty of theft. Godfrey in gambling with events in effect rejects such moral equilibrium. The novel shows, however, that people have a psychological need for such equilibrium even if it does not exist. As Eliot's narrator states in *Romola*, 'Justice is like the Kingdom of God – it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning'.¹² Since Godfrey's rewards are not in equilibrium with his sense of his deserts, he is vulnerable to guilt. He also has to adopt a role which is at odds with his inner self since he cannot acknowledge his past actions to others, not even to Nancy, the person closest to him. Because of the fear that the past may come to light he is accompanied by 'his importunate companion, Anxiety' (*SM*, 85). Godfrey's eventual acknowledgement of providence – 'Everything comes to light, Nancy, sooner or later. When God Almighty wills it, our secrets are found out' (*SM*, 157) – should be seen in this psychological context.

In *Early Victorian Novelists* David Cecil claimed that Eliot imposed an arbitrary moral order on the text by punishing Godfrey through making him childless:

George Eliot vindicates the moral order by making him [Godfrey] childless. This is not in the least an inevitable consequence of his act. There is no inherent reason in the nature of things why a morally-feeble man should not beget twenty children. In consequence we feel Godfrey's discontent to be no inevitable expression of the moral law, but a gratuitous piece of poetic justice imposed on him by the arbitrary will of his creator.¹³

Cecil ignores the fact that Godfrey's success in avoiding the consequences of his past actions and marrying Nancy resulted from his gambling with events and winning. But gamblers always lose sooner or later. Godfrey's predicament is not so much 'a gratuitous piece of poetic justice' as a piece of bad luck. Since he has had so much good luck previously, it is not difficult for the reader to accept that his luck should run out. Although he interprets it as God's retribution – understandable in the light of his continuous sense of guilt and anxiety – there is no reason why the reader should agree with him.

Silas, however, would seem to provide support for Godfrey's view as he has his belief in providence restored. He says to Dolly Winthrop, 'There's good i' this world – I've a feeling o' that now ... That drawing o' the lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us – there's dealings' (*SM*, 141). Yet even though his money is returned he says that if he lost Eppie 'I might come to think I was forsaken again, and lose the feeling that God was good to me' (*SM*, 160). He has no sooner said that than Godfrey and Nancy come knocking at his door to ask for Eppie. Just as in Lantern Yard his belief in providence will be tested.

But whereas in Lantern Yard Silas's identity had been shattered with the collapse of his faith in benevolent providence, the significance of this second crisis is that it indicates that a belief in providence is no longer central to

Silas's identity. Although he had regarded Eppie as having been sent to him as a substitute for the loss of his gold, he is able to rise above such views and ceases to regard her as his possession. He allows her to choose: 'Eppie, my child, speak. I won't stand in your way. Thank Mr and Mrs Cass' (*SM*, 163). But when Eppie rejects Godfrey's offer and he then asserts his claim to her as her natural father, Silas suffers his greatest test. Even though he had been prepared to let Eppie choose, confident no doubt that she would choose him, Godfrey's claim that she is his by right again creates the spectre that there is no beneficent God and that the world is devoid of justice – 'God gave her to me because you turned your back upon her, and He looks upon her as mine: you've no right to her!' (*SM*, 164) – a view that Godfrey regards as 'very selfish' (*SM*, 165). Yet instead of reacting in the same way as he had done in Lantern Yard when the drawing of lots goes against him, Silas transcends questions of theology through experiencing the primary Wordsworthian feeling of sympathy. Fearing that 'he should be raising his own will as an obstacle to Eppie's good' (*SM*, 166), the question as to who has the greater right to Eppie – a mechanical view of the issue – ceases to matter: the right is what is good for Eppie: 'I'll say no more. Let it be as you will. Speak to the child. I'll hinder nothing' (*SM*, 166).

The significance of this is that Silas is able to set aside absolute notions of what is right or what is good and instead sees the right and the good in humanist terms. The right is what is good for Eppie; it is not an absolute which exists external to humanity. Whether God has decreed that Silas is entitled to Eppie becomes a matter of no importance; it is the human considerations that are paramount. Even if Eppie had chosen to go with her natural father, it is clear that Silas would not have retreated into his previous sense of alienation. He would have borne her loss through renunciation since the relation to the world he has established in Raveloe is one which is no longer dependent on the sense that the world is providentially ordered. If one interprets the novel as a fairy tale about a man who is rewarded by the workings of a benevolent providence, the novel's humanist message is lost.

What makes Silas able to allow Eppie to choose the good rather than to see the good in absolute terms is that he is now an integrated member of the community of Raveloe and Eppie is a living person to him, not a mere possession like his gold. The theft of his gold and then the coming of Eppie had resulted in Silas becoming more and more a part of this community, and significantly in Raveloe rigid theological ideas such as divine providence have no place. The religious life of Raveloe is one which emphasizes human relationship, not theological concepts. Even without Eppie Silas would have had the community to fall back on.

Notoriously Margaret Thatcher – who urged a return to Victorian values – asserted that '[t]here is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, there are families'.¹⁴ This view is certainly not borne out in *Silas*

Marner. Indeed, for Eliot human identity is social in a constitutive sense and those of her characters, such as Tito in *Romola* or Christian in *Felix Holt*, who attempt to live purely individualistic lives virtually cease to have human identities. *Silas Marner* attacks on a number of fronts ideas and beliefs that have been seen as characteristically Victorian. Morality and justice are shown not as immanent in the world, as most Victorians would have believed, but as social in origin and thus purely human constructions, though not the less valid for that. The devotion to work and money, strongly associated with the Victorian ethos and a feature of Victorianism much admired by those who urge a 'return to Victorian values', is represented as symptomatic of an alienation from the human. Silas becomes humanized not merely by having to care for another human being but by taking part in the community life of Raveloe. It would not be wrong to describe Raveloe as an organic community and to see *Silas Marner* as a novel that uses organicist ideas derived from the Romantics and from such writers as Carlyle as part of an implicit attack on the dominance of 'mechanistic' structures in mid-Victorian British society. In her essay of 1856, 'The Natural History of German Life', Eliot had criticized the application of mechanistic theories to social life – 'that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations' – though there is no rejection of sociology as such or idealization of peasant communities and their customs and traditions, recognizing, for example, their 'communal exclusiveness – the resistance to the indiscriminate establishment of strangers', evident in *Marner's* initial treatment in Raveloe. It is a weakness of 'modern liberalism' for Eliot that it merely condemns this on rationalistic grounds rather than developing a more scientifically based sociology in which 'there is an advance from the general to the special, from the simple to the complex, analogous with that which is found in the series of the sciences, from Mathematics to Biology'.¹⁵

Eliot is thus not a conventional organicist who rejects rationally based social theory, and she is well aware that organicist ideas are vulnerable to attack on the grounds that they idealize the past. Clearly Raveloe is not idealized despite the fairy tale and mythic atmosphere of the novel. The upper class represented by the Casses is largely cut off from the community. The people of the town are in many respects unenlightened; they make little effort at first to help the incomer Silas and treat him with suspicion. It is years before he is accepted by them. Eliot is aware of the dangers of such communities being inward looking and unwelcoming to strangers. Though Dolly Winthrop may be a warm and generous person, her ignorance is apparent and her advice to Silas at times unreliable, notably when she urges the necessity to discipline Eppie: 'I put it up' your conscience, Master Marner, as there's one of 'em you must choose – ayther smacking or the coal-hole – else she'll get so masterful, there'll be no holding her' (*SM*, 125). Yet the value of Raveloe is clear: it does possess a spirit of community, and though people in the village are reluctant to reach out to what they perceive as other, Silas is finally accepted by them. Both benefit

from this coming together: Silas is no longer an alienated consciousness, and Raveloe has overcome its fear of the other, become less inward looking and accepted him. This spirit of community is reinforced by various ceremonies, such as going to Church and the New Year dance, that are intrinsic to Raveloe life and which, together with a story such as the Lammeters' wedding that has become something of a community myth, create a sense of shared consciousness. At Eppie's christening Silas 'shared in the observances held sacred by his neighbours' (*SM*, 123). Religion in Raveloe is not associated with a rigid theology; rather it is inseparable from the social fabric. Silas has become integrated into a society that can absorb good and bad fortune and is thus less vulnerable to the amoral development of events.

Although superficially it might seem that Silas is rewarded and Godfrey punished when Eppie chooses to stay with Silas rather than go with her natural father, Eppie's choice of Silas is not an arbitrary one. It is in keeping with the novel's critique of the 'mechanical'. Godfrey may be Eppie's natural father, but her relationship to him has no human substance; Silas is her father in human terms. It is also more than Silas that she chooses. To take her place in the class-conscious world of the Casses would be to reject the community in which she has been brought up and would cut her off from her past: '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' (*SM*, 168). Modern advocates of 'Victorian values' often point to the importance of the nuclear family in creating stability and security in both social and individual terms during the Victorian period and contrast this with the instability and insecurity created in recent times by the emergence of large numbers of one-parent families. It is worth pointing out, therefore, that in *Silas Marner*, a one-parent family – admittedly with community support – is seen in very positive terms, with one parent successfully combining paternal and maternal roles and bringing up a child who shows every sign of developing into a well-adjusted and socially responsible adult.

It may seem more difficult to demonstrate that even if Godfrey had been successful in gaining Eppie the moral scheme of the novel would have been unchanged. David Cecil suggests that in depriving Godfrey of children, Eliot is arbitrarily punishing him. But what the novel suggests is that even if Godfrey's luck had persisted, his life would have continued to be a failure in human terms. For Godfrey's life is founded upon the search for gratification. Exploiting chance and the desire for gratification are connected: the 'more chance ... of deliverance ... the more opportunities remained for him to snatch the strange gratification of seeing Nancy, and gathering some faint indications of her lingering regard' (*SM*, 31). Even Nancy is associated with gratification though he thinks of her in religious terms: he had 'wooed her with tacit patient worship, as the woman who made him think of the future with joy ... And yet the hope of this paradise had not been enough to save him from a course which shut him out of it for ever' (*SM*, 81). In paradise one is beyond desire and the

quest for gratification because paradise by definition implies that one's desires are completely fulfilled and therefore no lack persists leading to further desire for gratification. Yet even after he has achieved 'paradise' by marrying Nancy, having exploited chance to escape from his past actions, desire as lack does not cease as his failure to father a child by Nancy prevents gratification being complete. The language used to describe his feelings when he fails to gain Eppie implies that it is gratification that motivates him: 'Godfrey felt an irritation inevitable to almost all of us when we encounter an unexpected obstacle' (SM, 164), and at the end of the chapter his feelings on failure consist in 'frustration' (SM, 168).

One can conclude from this that even if Eppie had chosen to go with him and Nancy gratification would have been only temporarily satisfied for Godfrey because there will always be something lacking to make desire complete. Nancy as 'paradise' had proved insufficient; her childlessness was a lack which generated a new desire. Godfrey cannot accept renunciation, like Silas, or Nancy's more rigid identification of the development of events with providence, as ways of controlling desire:

Meanwhile, why could he not make up his mind to the absence of children from a hearth brightened by such a wife? Why did his mind fly uneasily to that void, as if it were the sole reason why life was not thoroughly joyous to him? I suppose it is the way with all men and women who reach middle age without the clear perception that life never *can* be thoroughly joyous: under the vague dulness of the grey hours, dissatisfaction seeks a definite object, and finds it in the privation of an untried good. (SM, 154, emphasis in original)

Desire is seen as an intrinsic force within human beings that cannot be quenched since no gratification of desire can be complete, as Carlyle maintained in *Sartor Resartus*:

[T]he shoeblack also has a Soul quite other than his Stomach; and would require ... for his permanent satisfaction and saturation, simply this allotment, no more, and no less: *God's infinite universe altogether to himself* ... No sooner is your ocean filled, than he grumbles that it might have been of better vintage.¹⁶

Again this suggests that those characters who commit themselves to desire or the will and experience frustration are not defeated arbitrarily. For Eliot as for Carlyle and also Schopenhauer,¹⁷ whom she had read, people such as Godfrey who live a life based upon the gratification of desire will always end up frustrated.

At the level of the individual, then, the underlying philosophy of the novel is one of apparent pessimism: there is no God, at least no just God who takes account of human hopes or deserts, and even if one obtains everything that one desires, it will never be enough to satisfy. Nancy articulates the latter philosophy when she remarks to Godfrey after he has disclosed the fact that he is Eppie's father: 'I wasn't worth doing wrong for – nothing is in this world. Nothing is so good as it seems beforehand – not even our marrying wasn't, you see'

(SM, 159). One has, of course, to balance against this the loving relationship between Silas and Eppie, which is at the centre of the novel. However, even here Silas is never free from the anxiety that Eppie will be taken away from him leaving him bereft in a similar manner to his experience in Lantern Yard. He tells Eppie 'how his soul was utterly desolate till she was sent to him' (SM, 160) and the fear that he could return to this state if he lost her, in addition to the fear that God having abandoned him once could do so again, means that his happiness is constantly compromised by a sense of anxiety. She has mysteriously come into his life and she could just as easily be taken away from him, as he finds out. Silas's anxiety about losing Eppie is only a heightened form of that which all people – consciously or subconsciously – experience, as eventually a symbolic 'knocking at the door' (SM, 160) will come to threaten all relationships as human beings exist in a world of change which, the novel suggests, is indifferent to human feeling.

It could be argued that even if the novel takes a pessimistic view of human life at the level of the individual, it is more optimistic at the social level. Marner is eventually integrated into Raveloe, a society with shared implicit values and assumptions which provides some protection from the amoral world of chance that is a continual threat to human beings at an individual level. In an earlier discussion of the novel I suggested that one of the functions of Raveloe was as a kind of model of an organic community for Eliot's contemporary Victorian society, performing a role similar to that of feudal society in Carlyle's *Past and Present*.¹⁸ Though the latter sort of societies belonged to the past and could not be imitated in the present they could serve as examples of a shared social and cultural consciousness that industrialized societies needed to find a new form for in the contemporary world. However, another perspective is also implied. Even if Raveloe acts as a model for the present, it also testifies to the disappearance of the kind of community spirit achieved in such a society in Victorian Britain. Carlyle's writings are full of despair about the ability of Victorian industrialized society to change course and make itself 'organic'. He refers in *Past and Present* to 'the immense Industrial Ages, as yet all inorganic, and in a quite pulpy condition, requiring desperately to harden themselves into some organism!'¹⁹ but the impression one forms from most of his writing is of profound pessimism that such a change can happen. The emphasis is very much on the spiritual disaster that will result if contemporary society remains mechanistic.

Likewise Eliot expresses at times a Carlylean despair at the consequences for any society that remains 'inorganic' and therefore alienated, as in this passage from her poem 'In a London Drawing Room':

All hurry on & look upon the ground,
Or glance unmarking at the passers by.
The wheels are hurrying too, cabs, carriages
All closed, in multiple identity.

The world seems one huge prison-house & court
 Where men are punished at the slightest cost
 With lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy.²⁰

Although her writing continually emphasizes the importance of ideals in shaping action, there seems little optimism that Victorian society can be changed. As with Carlyle, though of course less melodramatically expressed, pessimism about the mechanistic tendencies of contemporary British society is the dominating tone. This culminates in *Daniel Deronda* where Deronda rejects England in favour of a proto-Zionist ideal. There seems little likelihood of organicist values having any impact in Britain, an imperialist country committed to free-market economics and globalization. In relation to *Silas Marner*, this suggests that the positive social forces of the pre-industrialized Raveloe, which reclaim Marner from his mechanistic devotion to work and money, no longer exist in the England of the 1860s and seem unlikely to exist in the future, though as I shall discuss later there is an element of messianic hope in Eliot's writings that acts as a counter to pessimism.

Silas Marner is thus a work which in important respects presents a radical critique of the dominant Victorian ideology. Significantly, however, most critics have not even considered such a view of it because they have identified the form of the novel, with its mythic and fairy-tale-like aspects, with its content and thus have perceived it as a simple moral story, which they either admire or criticize depending on their ideological perspective. But as I have tried to show, the novel is a highly self-conscious fictional construction in which the relationship between form, style and content is complex. Its fairy-tale-like surface masks a world which, far from exhibiting the presence of an immanent moral order, is Darwinian in its conception since it is indifferent, taking no account of human needs or hopes. Silas Marner's religious world view cannot survive confrontation with such a world, and the work ethic he constructs as a response to his alienation is depicted as a desperate, mechanistic attempt to impose some kind of order on a life devoid of meaning, while the money he accumulates by work only accentuates his estrangement. Optimism and a belief in progress are ideas very much associated with the Victorian ethos but they are little in evidence in the novel. The only reason that the 'bad' end unhappily is that, since desire can never be fully satisfied, they are bound to experience frustration and may find that less easy to bear than the 'good'. Instead of the future promising improvement, the novel suggests, in its implicit contrast between Raveloe – not a perfect but at least a partially organic community – and contemporary Victorian society, that organic social structures belong to the past and that their existence in post-industrial society is problematic. All of this, of course, was clearly not evident to earlier generations who prescribed the novel as a set text in schools. I would suggest that modern advocates of Victorian values looking for texts to promote them might be well advised to steer clear of *Silas Marner*.