

George Eliot's Spiritual Quest in *Silas Marner*

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By

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TO MY FAMILY

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INTRODUCTION

George Eliot started writing *Silas Marner* in November 1860, and finished it on March 10, 1861. It was published on April 2nd of that year by Blackwood & Sons in Edinburgh. The first feedback is that of John Blackwood himself, who expresses his impressions after the reading of Part One, which the author had sent him on February 15, 1861.¹ He hoped that she would take into account his comments in order to wind up the story in a happy way. He writes her back the following lines a few days later, on the 19th:

“The child found on the hearth replacing the poor weaver’s lost treasure is a beautiful idea and is I hope to be the medium of restoring the unfortunate Silas to a more Christian frame of mind. How perfectly you paint the poor creature quite at sea when his simple faith was cut from under his feet.”
(*Letters* III, 379)

We note that the publisher stresses the evident Christian ethical content of the novel. Shortly after the publication of this masterpiece,² the critic E. S. Dallas, in an unsigned review in *The Times*, also praises the ethico-religious qualities of it, and writes that, “in this ambitious age, when we see every one hastening to be rich and covetous of distinction, it is pleasant to be reminded that the honest man is the noblest work of God.”³ He compares Silas with Job (Carroll 180-181 and 185),⁴ and also underscores the importance of the epigraph from Wordsworth, “meant to

¹ *The George Eliot Letters*. Volume III. Edited by Gordon S. Haight. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954, 377.

² Joan Bennett writes about *Silas Marner* that it is “the most flawless of George Eliot’s works. It is not the greatest since its small scale, its narrow world and its symbolical character precluded the exercise of some of her gifts. But nowhere else does her fiction carry all that she has to say so unobtrusively and effortlessly” (Joan Bennett. *George Eliot. Her Mind and Her Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948, 138.)

³ *The Times*, 29 April 1861, 12. Reprinted in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. Edited by David Carroll. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971, 180.

⁴ The anonymous reviewer of *Silas Marner*, in *Saturday Review* of 13 April 1861, also compares Marner with Job, but barely writes about religion. Reprinted in D. Carroll’s *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, 173.

exhibit the unconscious influence of a child in gradually redeeming and reviving what may be almost described as a lost soul" (Carroll 181). The religious spirit the critic finds in this epigraph is again emphasized by quoting the narrator's comment at the end of Part One: "we read that though now there are no white-winged angels to lead men from the city of destruction, still a hand is often put into theirs to lead Silas Marner into the light, and the hand is a little child's" (Carroll 181). On the other hand, even though *Silas Marner* is in his view "a noble lesson," he does not consider George Eliot as belonging "to the class of religious or moralizing novelists who have rendered hateful the very idea of serious purpose in a novel" (Carroll 185), for "her novels are true novels, not sermons done into dialogue" (Carroll 185).

In the twentieth century the critics have shown less interest in the religious content of *Silas Marner*. Some have rather insisted on G. Eliot's supposedly agnosticism. But at the time the novel appeared until World War II, the reception was somewhat different. Even a Nietzsche could see religiosity in G. Eliot. Although his knowledge about her was very little, he had understood that her ethics was Christian, and to him it was enough to consider her a Christian. Mocking their "inconsistency," he thus writes about certain English authors, such as G. Eliot: "They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality: that is English consistency, let us not blame it on little blue-stockings à la Eliot."⁵ Nietzsche, in a sarcastic tone and superficial criticism, actually hints at the notion of the religious unconscious, and implicitly indicates the relationship between ethics and metaphysics. He contends that "Christianity is a system, a consistently thought out and *complete* view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands" (Nietzsche 80-81).⁶

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1990, 80. ["Sie sind den christlichen Gott los und glauben nun um so mehr die christliche Moral festhalten zu müssen: das ist eine englische Folgerichtigkeit, wir wollen sie den Moral-Weiblein à la Eliot nicht verübeln" (*Götzen-Dämmerung*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1964, 132.)]

⁶ The translator's emphasis. "Das Christentum ist ein System, eine zusammengedachte und ganze Ansicht der Dinge. Bricht man aus ihm einen Hauptbegriff, den Glauben an Gott, heraus, so zerbricht man damit auch das Ganze: man hat nichts Notwendiges mehr zwischen den Fingern." (*Götzen-Dämmerung* 132) Helena Granlund is one of the rare persons who have paid close attention to Nietzsche's remark (*The Paradox of Self-Love: Christian Elements in George Eliot's Treatment of Egoism*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell International, 1994.)

Nietzsche's criticism, however, may apply to Feuerbach who indeed rejected God while preserving the Christian ethic,⁷ but not to G. Eliot who, in the first place, never claimed to be an atheist. Besides, if she liked the Christian ethic, it is because she had only lost her faith in the traditional Christianity, not in Christianity or religion altogether. For example, her approach to the notion of "mystery" concerning one's existence is far from Feuerbach's "demystification" of the various "mysteries." She is in this case closer to Spencer than to Feuerbach.⁸ Nevertheless, G. Eliot's approach to God and religion, in general, is not in my view that of Spencer or Comte or Feuerbach. One would rather find in her works more affinity with Coleridge and Wordsworth, but also with Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard. But overall, it is perhaps impossible to describe her thoughts concerning theology in a precise or systematic way, because she was an artist, not a philosopher or theologian. The best I have been able to do is: 1°) To acknowledge the fact that there is a religious or spiritual quest in *Silas Marner*, as in her works in general, and 2°) To try to compare her with some authors and thinkers of her time. The essays that constitute the chapters of the present book are but an attempt to clarify to myself and maybe to some readers interested in religion and theology G. Eliot's rich thought in this area.

⁷ The religious unconscious in Feuerbach is suggested by K. Barth in his *Die Theologie und die Kirche* (Zollikon-Zürich, Evangelischer Verlag A. G., 1928, vol. II, 212-39), which has been translated in English by James Luther Adams, and serving as "An Introductory Essay," in L. Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by G. Eliot. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, x-xxxii.

⁸ Nancy Paxton reminds us that G. Eliot totally agreed with Spencer, who in *The First Principles*—G. Eliot had read the book before its publication in 1862 as she was writing *Silas Marner*—declares that "the production of matter out of nothing is the real mystery, which neither this simile nor any other enables us to conceive," and adds that "the Power which the universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable" (quoted by Nancy L. Paxton. *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer. Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of gender*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991, 95.) Spencer also contends that, "that which to most will seem an essentially irreligious position is an essentially religious one—nay is the religious one, to which... all others are but approximations" (Paxton 94). Paxton herself thus concludes about *Silas Marner*: "When it is read in the context of Spencer's work of this period, Eliot's novel reveals her ongoing interest in the irreducible 'mystery' of creation, suggested by Silas's weaving, and the related epistemological issues raised by those invisible weavers who turn Molly Cass's child into a blessing for Silas and produce that 'mild' Nemesis that checks Godfrey Cass." (Paxton 95)

CHAPTER ONE

SUPERSTITION AND PREJUDICE

In the opening of *Silas Marner*, the narrator uses the term “superstition,” illustrates several kinds of it, and presents its damaging effects. His conception of superstition and the way his criticism is carried out will be the object of this chapter. Further, I would like to demonstrate that the narrator opposes superstition to religion and implicitly suggests the latter’s positive aspects.

The story takes place in rural England at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.¹ The village of Raveloe, outside of which the weaver Silas has lived for fifteen years now, is by no means a poor village. It is not, indeed, “one of those barren parishes lying on the outskirts of civilisation” (5), but rather is it located “in the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England” (5). Superstition,² however, was then still persistent among the peasants: “In that far-off time *superstition* clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwonted, or even intermittent and occasional merely, like the visits of the pedlar or the knife-grinder” (3).³

Silas Marner was just one of those “unwonted” persons when he came to settle in Raveloe after he left his hometown, very disappointed by men and having lost his faith in God. First, he was physically different. He was a “pallid undersized” man compared to the “brawny country-folk” (3). The ironic remark about the dog is interesting:

“The shepherd’s dog barked fiercely when one of these alien-looking men appeared on the upland, dark against the early winter sunset; for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?—and these pale men rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden.” (3)

¹ “In the early years of this century” (George Eliot. *Silas Marner*. Edited by Terence Cave. Oxford: OUP, 1996, 4.)

² Superstition is “Unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious, or imaginary, especially in connection with religion; religious belief or practice founded upon fear or ignorance” (*Oxford English Dictionary*.)

³ The italics in the quotations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

This is one kind of superstition which the narrator presents in the free indirect speech or, as Ann Banfield calls it, in a “represented thought.”⁴ The represented thought of the dog (“alien-looking,” “for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?” and “that mysterious burden”) is not only comic because of the anthropomorphism, but also because of the implicit reverse phenomenon of placing the shepherd on an equal footing with his dog. The expressions “alien-looking” about the hawking weavers and “mysterious burden” about their bags are the represented thought of the dog as well as its owners. Both the owner and the dog, without any good reason, distrust strangers or people who look *different*. This comparison makes the shepherd, who represents the prejudiced country folks of Raveloe, all the more stupid and mean because *he* knows who those hawkers are, but his dog does not:

“The shepherd himself, though he had good reason to believe that the bag held nothing but flaxen thread, or else the long rolls of strong linen spun from that thread, was not quite sure that this trade of weaving, indispensable though it was, could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One.” (3)

The weaving job is associated in the mind of these people with the Devil. The shepherd, who is just an ordinary inhabitant of Raveloe—not backward folks relatively speaking, as we have noticed above—knows very well that the weaving trade is “indispensable,” but still distrusts the weaver, just because he is superstitious. This detail, however, should not make us think of *Silas Marner* as a kind of fairy tale.⁵ This novel is overall another “realist” novel by George Eliot—, realism in the sense she

⁴ “And to show or represent a character’s thoughts, the natural mode is represented speech and thought” (Ann Banfield. *Unspeakable Sentences. Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, 69.) For another rigorous analysis of *free indirect speech*, see Roy Pascal’s *The Dual Voice. Free Indirect Speech*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978. Besides, there are some interesting pages on the use of FIS in George Eliot’s works. In the case I am studying here, I prefer the expression “represented thought,” because the dog’s barking is caused by a “thought” rather than a speech, George Eliot’s narrator being of course humorous.

⁵ “The folk-tale mode of the opening, the ballad-like elements in the story of Godfrey Cass and his secret marriage to opium addict Molly, Silas’s uncanny trances, the mythic substitution of child for gold in a healing inversion of the Midas myth (where Midas unwittingly turns his little daughter into a gold statue): all these elements declare the extent to which the work draws on fairy-tale to sustain its transformations” (Gillian Beer. *George Eliot*. Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986, 125-26.)

understood it.⁶ There are obviously mythical and symbolic elements in *Silas Marner*, but these are found in Eliot's other novels as well. These elements can be part of a "realist" novel.

To return to our superstitious shepherd, we have seen that the narrator criticizes him for being as ignorant and bothersome to a stranger as his dog is. Implicitly, the narrator is asking the people who are like the Raveloe people: what about hospitality, this basic moral duty? In other words, superstition hurts. The humanist narrator describes this attitude towards foreigners in another powerful FIS:⁷ "No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother?" (3) The indirect sarcastic remark refers to the way prejudiced people justify themselves and to the absurdity of their reasoning.

The criticism of prejudice resulting from superstition becomes even more acute as the narrator points out the fact that "the peasants of old times" did not distrust only the wanderers and the newcomers, but also those who had settled in their villages for a long time already. Their prejudice is so deep-rooted that even if one of these persons had some sort of knowledge, he would look suspicious, and even if he had lived among them with perfect honesty all his life, they would still distrust him:

"To the peasants of old times, the world outside their own direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery; to their untravelled thought a state of wandering was a conception as dim as the winter life of the swallows that came back with the spring; and even a settler, if he came from distant parts, hardly ever ceased to be viewed with a remnant of

⁶ For instance in her review of J. Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (vol. 3) in the *Westminster Review* (April 1856), Eliot writes about the critic's criteria for good art: "The truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism* [Eliot's emphasis]—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality. The thorough acceptance of this doctrine would remould our life; and he who teaches its application to any one department of human activity with such power as Mr Ruskin's, is a prophet for his generation. It is not enough simply to teach truth; that may be done, as we all know, to empty walls, and within the covers of unsaleable books; we want it to be taught as to compel men's attention and sympathy" (George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*. Ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren. London: Penguin, 1990, 368-69.) The "sympathy" G. Eliot believed in is found in all of her stories. Thus, in *Silas Marner*, we note that from the outset the reader feels sympathy for the weaver, and for all those who are like him, because he is a victim of prejudice and superstition.

⁷ From now on I will use the abbreviation FIS for free indirect speech.

distrust, which would have prevented any surprise if a long course of inoffensive conduct on his part had ended in the commission of a crime; especially if he had any reputation for knowledge, or showed any skill in handicraft. All cleverness, whether in the rapid use of that difficult instrument the tongue, or in some other art unfamiliar to villagers, was in itself suspicious: honest folks, born and bred in a visible manner, were mostly not overwise or clever—at least, not beyond such a matter as knowing the signs of the weather; and the process by which rapidity and dexterity of any kind were acquired was so wholly hidden, that they partook of the nature of conjuring.” (3-4)

These peasants were prejudiced because they had not known or seen anything else, so their distrust of the wanderer could be understandable, but what about their attitude towards the settler? Why “this remnant of distrust” after such a long time? the narrator implicitly cries out. Simply because this person was originally from another region. Another reason for their prejudice or distrust was the person’s “knowledge.” If this “emigrant” spoke better than they did, he was suspicious. Somehow the intellect beyond the ordinary is not trusted. The FIS, “honest folks, born and bred in a visible manner, were mostly not overwise or clever,” is ironic. The peasants were in reality, the narrator believes, concealed people who claimed to be more honest than the “foreigners,” and without any good reason hated them even more if they had more knowledge than they did. Prejudice and superstition are both present: “they partook of the nature of conjuring.” Whether one comes first and leads to the other, it is hard to tell. We just note that the peasants’ “untravelling thought” is both superstitious and prejudiced. So the linen-weavers who have moved from the town become “lonely” and “eccentric” simply because they are “regarded as aliens by their rustic neighbours” and are rejected by them. Then, it is not only Silas Marner who lives isolated in Raveloe. And it is not his fault if he is “lonely” and “eccentric.” It is not his personal unfortunate past alone which has caused this strange life of his. There is something definitely wrong with the country folks themselves—it is their unfairness and nastiness caused by ignorance. Influenced by their parents, even the children have been mean to the weaver:

“The questionable sound of Silas’s loom, so unlike the natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine, or the simpler rhythm of the flail, had a half-fearful fascination for the Raveloe boys, who would often leave off their nutting or birds’-nesting to peep in at the window of the stone cottage, counterbalancing a certain awe at the mysterious action of the loom, by a pleasant sense of scornful superiority, drawn from the mockery

of its alternating noises, along with the bent, tread-mill attitude of the weaver.” (4)

The sound of the loom is “questionable” to the children, because the machine is just new to them. They like the winnowing machines or flails better, which they know well. This is understandable, but they look at the loom with suspicion, and that is the problem. Its action seems “myterious,” and, probably, they think it is diabolic. Further, the boys’ “half-fearful fascination” is actually similar to that exercised by the Devil, and they look at the “stranger” with a “scornful superiority.” Like their parents, the children are at the same time prejudiced and superstitious. They are scared of Silas as if he were the Devil in person. When he gets angry at their maliciousness and stares at them, superstitious ideas cross their minds. They think that the weaver’s “dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth at any boy who happened to be in the rear” (4). The power they credit Silas with is devilish, but it is the parents who have inculcated these noxious and irrational ideas in them: “They had, perhaps, heard their fathers and mothers hint that Silas Marner could cure folks’ rheumatism if he had a mind, and add, still more darkly, that if you could speak the devil fair enough, he might save you the cost of the doctor” (4).

The mimicry shows what the boys say to each other about Silas’s power. They in fact repeat what they have heard from their parents. The narrator here describes the peasants’ perception of the Devil, which is definitely not biblical. If one knows the Devil’s language “fair enough,” one could get cured, these naive people think. The narrator has already expressed the hurt caused by superstitious people, and sadly adds that this mentality still exists. With a critical tone, he says:

“Such strange lingering echoes of the old demonworship might perhaps even now be caught by the diligent listener among the grey-haired peasantry; for the rude mind with difficulty associates the ideas of power and benignity. A shadowy conception of power that by much persuasion can be induced to refrain from inflicting harm, is the shape most easily taken by the sense of the Invisible in the minds of men who have always been pressed close by primitive wants, and to whom a life of hard toil has never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith. To them pain and mishap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment: their imagination is almost barren of the images that feed desire and hope, but is all overgrown by recollections that are a perpetual pasture to fear.” (4-5)

This reflection is very important in order to understand the narrator’s attitude towards religion. He is not against religion, so to speak, but

against superstition. In his view, God, called the “Invisible,” is a good and positive power, which brings “hope,” and religion is not against “gladness and enjoyment.” Thus, “the ideas of power and benignity” can indeed go together. He contends, however, that the superstitious and “rude” mind of the peasant “has never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith.” The latter expression is of great importance inasmuch as it clarifies more the narrator’s conception of religion. Quite clearly, “enthusiastic religious faith” is contrasted with superstition. The presupposed idea is that one comes to the former through an “illumination” or divine inspiration. In other words, a conversion which cannot be explained rationally. Still, the term “enthusiasm” is used by Eliot in the positive modern meaning of “passionate eagerness” (*OED*)— here in the pursuit of God—, and not in the eighteenth century sense of “fancied inspiration or extravagance of religious speculation” (*OED*), especially since the narrator does not stress so much illumination as the source of religion but its illuminating (or enlightening) effect on “a life of hard toil.” The “enthusiastic,” personal religious experience is to be distinguished from the “demon-worship” of these people, for they do not worship God but the Devil. Therefore, the narrator is implicitly making a distinction between true and false religion. At any rate, the peasants’ prejudice against Marner did not have any foundation—it was only caused by ignorance. Thus, the weaver’s physique seems normal to the narrator, but not so to those people:

“[...] he was then simply a pallid young man, with prominent, short-sighted brown eyes, whose appearance would have had nothing strange for people of average culture and experience, but for the villagers near whom he had come to settle it had mysterious peculiarities which corresponded with the exceptional nature of his occupation, and his advent from an unknown region called ‘North’ard.’ ” (6)

The emphasis is put on ignorance. Ignorance about the weaving job and about the northern regions. The narrator’s tone mimicking the peasants’ accent (“an unknown region called ‘North’ard’”) is sarcastic. In the FIS he also mocks the villagers who blamed the weaver for living in a different way. If “he invited no comer to step across his door-sill, and he never strolled into the village to drink at the Rainbow, or to gossip at the wheelright’s” (6), it was because from the beginning, due to people’s prejudices, he was rejected by them and so forced to live like an outcast. Besides, the villagers’ life, including “gossiping” and “drinking,” had nothing to be considered good and worth imitating. And one prejudice brings about another. So the weaver’s cataleptic seizures were also subject

to criticism. The peasants were not only ignorant in medicine, but were self-assured and thought they knew a lot. Jem Rodney, who had seen Marner in such a state, probably exaggerated what he saw, but this was enough for a superstitious and conceited person like Mr Macey, the “clerk of the parish,” to draw from it a supposedly religious conclusion. Again, in an ironic FIS we read that, according to this trusted man, Marner’s problem was caused by the departing of his soul. It was not a “fit” as some people thought,

“but there might be such a thing as a man’s soul being loose from his body, and going out and in, like a bird out of its nest and back; and that was how folks got over-wise, for they went to school in this shell-less state to those who could teach them more than their neighbours could learn with their five senses and the parson. And where did Master Marner get his knowledge of herbs from—and charms too, if he liked to give them away?” (6-7)

The FIS mimics a superstitious man who happens to be a respected church person. The supernatural explanation of Marner’s physical illness by Mr Macey is presented as ridiculous. Besides, the issue of Marner’s knowledge of medicine is raised here again from a supposedly religious standpoint, that of the parish clerk. In sum, Silas Marner is a person associated with the Devil, even according to the church people. He had, indeed, a certain power, but of a satanic kind—“He might cure more folks if he would,” thought Mr Macey, “but he was worth speaking fair, if it was only to keep him from doing you a mischief.” (7)

The narrator’s criticism of superstition, which is so prejudicial, goes even further when he mentions the fact that Marner would have been literally persecuted, had he not been feared by these ignorant people: “It was partly to this vague fear that Marner was indebted for protecting him from the persecution that his singularities might have drawn upon him [...]” (7). Moreover, the villagers, especially the richer ones, needed him, since he was the only weaver in the surrounding area, but their mind had not really changed about him:

“[...] their sense of his usefulness would have counteracted any repugnance or suspicion which was not confirmed by a deficiency in the quality or the tale of the cloth he wove for them. And the years had rolled on without producing any change in the impressions of the neighbours concerning Marner, except the change from novelty to habit. At the end of fifteen years the Raveloe men said just the same things about Silas Marner as at the beginning.” (7)

This shows how persistent superstition and prejudice are.

*

The second part of the first chapter is about the place where Marner lived before moving to Raveloe. He had lived a different sort of life in the city, but people, including himself, were quite superstitious over there too. He changed because he became a victim of superstition himself, and he suffered so much from it that it seemed he had got cured somehow, even though for other reasons—his isolation caused by the prejudiced people of Raveloe as well as his loss of faith in everything but work and the emptiness of life as a result of all that—he did not find happiness. Besides, he is a sincere and good-hearted person, but it takes many years before he understands the difference between superstition and religion. In this second part of the first chapter, a little longer than the first, the setting is a so-called religious place. The narrator insists here again on the fact that life in those days was not different from the present time. This, too, shows his desire to be realistic and relate the past to his own time. In other words, superstition and prejudice still exist and hurt people:

“His life, before he came to Raveloe, had been filled with the movement, the mental activity, and the close fellowship, which *in that day as in this*, marked the life of an artisan early incorporated in a narrow religious sect, where the poorest layman has the chance of distinguishing himself by gifts of speech, and has, at the very least, the weight of a silent voter in the government of his community.” (7-8)

The narrator calls the community of Lantern Yard, of which Silas was a member, “a *narrow* religious *sect*.” One should not confuse this with religion, for the epithet “narrow”, as well as the noun “sect”, do not have positive connotations. The democratic spirit probably attracted Silas to this place,⁸ but he himself was not an intellectual, and did not have a better understanding of religion than others did. Furthermore, he was liked and respected by the other members:

“Marner was highly thought of in that hidden world, known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard; he was believed to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith; and a peculiar interest had been centered in him ever since he had fallen, at a prayer-meeting, into a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness, which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death.” (8)

⁸ See T. Cave’s note in this regard (n. 8, 181.)

The parallel between this incident and the one witnessed by Jem Rodney in the first part of the chapter is interesting. It is indeed worth comparing the “religious” interpretation provided by Mr Macey in Raveloe with the one which had been given many years before by the Lantern Yard members to the same phenomenon. Silas may not have been an intellectual, but he was sincere and honest. The narrator insists on this; he also identifies the trance as a physiological and pathological phenomenon. By contrast, everyone tried to offer a supernatural interpretation: “yet it was believed by himself [Silas] and others that its effect was seen in an accession of light and fervour” (8). What the narrator is implicitly saying here is that superstition was so deep-rooted, that it was just impossible for these people not to relate Silas’s cataleptic fit to something supernatural. So, this view of religion is rejected as superstition. What follows is even more critical, because it implies a very serious moral issue:

“A less truthful man than he might have been tempted into the subsequent creation of a vision in the form of resurgent memory; a less sane man might have believed in such a creation; but Silas was both sane and honest, though, as with many honest and fervent men, *culture had not defined any channels for his sense of mystery*, and so it spread itself over the proper pathway of inquiry and knowledge.” (8)

The narrator is assuming that some so-called religious experiences are just fake, and there are simple-minded people who believe in them. These supposedly religious people are qualified as insane or dishonest, but since Silas “was both sane and honest,” he would not have invented a story to impress others. Anyway, William Dane represented the fake religious person, a Tartuffe, whereas Silas was rather the naive kind who trusted him. And, apparently, most of the brethren at Lantern Yard were naive too, since they believed William: he “was regarded as a shining instance of youthful piety” (8-9), as much as Silas was, if not more. Thus, the Lantern Yard brethren and sisters could not distinguish between the sincere believer and the hypocrite, and when Silas had had his “cataleptic fit” at the prayer-meeting, although various explanations were proposed by different members, “William’s suggestion *alone* jarred with the general sympathy” (9). Even Silas at first believed it.⁹ Obviously, the suggestion

⁹ “Silas, feeling bound to accept rebuke and admonition as a brotherly office, *felt no resentment*, but only pain [...]” (9).

was calculated and deliberately destructive.¹⁰ And even after William's theft of the church's money, putting the blame on Silas, the latter still had difficulty to believe his friend capable of such a perfidy.¹¹ But he understood all of a sudden what was going on: "Suddenly a deep flush came over his face, and he was about to speak impetuously, when he seemed checked again by some inward shock, that sent the flush back and made him tremble" (11). Silas remembered that there was no knife in his pocket, and finally realized William's treachery, but he preferred to remain silent and not defend himself, because he could not prove his innocence and charge his friend—"I can say nothing. God will clear me" (12). He is, however, still a believer. It is the act of drawing lots in order to find the truth which will seriously shake Silas's faith after the unfortunate outcome. First, the narrator himself criticizes the resolution "on praying and drawing lots"¹² as absurd, and says in this respect:

"This resolution can be a ground of surprise only to those who are unacquainted with that obscure religious life which has gone on in the alleys of our towns. Silas knelt with his brethren, relying on his own innocence being certified by immediate divine interference, but feeling that there was sorrow and mourning behind for him even then—that his trust in man had been cruelly bruised." (12)

This method of drawing lots, criticized by the narrator, is in fact found in the Bible,¹³ but seems so far from a modern understanding of religion that the Victorian reader would be surprised to hear about the existence of such a thing in England even at the end of the eighteenth-century. That is why the narrator adds that there were "obscure religious" sects, like the

¹⁰ "He observed that, to him, this trance looked more like a visitation by Satan than a proof of divine favour, and exhorted his friend to see that he hid no accursed thing within his soul" (9).

¹¹ "William, for nine years that we have gone in and out together, have you ever known me tell a lie? But God will clear me" (11). Marner is puzzled, but does not yet question his friend's honesty.

¹² Cave remarks that "it is wholly in keeping with the Calvinistic theology of the sect that the members choose to place the outcome in God's hands by relying on chance accompanied by prayer rather than by trusting human methods of inquiry" (182, n. 12). But Calvin himself never admitted such a principle. The identification of chance with the election of grace is in fact Feuerbach's, as J. Wiesenfarth points out ("Demythologizing *Silas Marner*," *ELH* 37, 1970, 226-40, 234).

¹³ Even in the New Testament, the casting of lots seems alright in *Acts* 1:26. Jesus would not have liked it, of course, but it is by casting lots that Matthias is chosen to replace Judas as an apostle.

one in Lantern Yard, which still practised this method. In any case, Silas had not lost his belief in this principle yet—indeed, he accepted to pray and wait for the outcome of the drawing—, but he had already lost his “trust in man.” He was disgusted by William’s attitude, and had questioned the meaning of friendship. As Cave notes, cheating had certainly occurred, because William was not going to risk to lose in this affair, so “Silas was no doubt required to choose one of a number of sticks or other objects which had been marked in advance” (182, n. 12). When “*The lots declared that Silas Marner was guilty*,”¹⁴ the weaver lost his faith in *this* “religion” and in *this* “God” altogether.

The narrator never says that religion *is* superstition, but certainly the one practised by the Lantern Yard members was, in his opinion. Marner, however, did not make the distinction, and that is why he lost his faith in what he thought *was* religion. He was also so sensitive that he lost his faith in friendship as well, because of a false friend. So, having nothing else to lose, and perfectly sure of William’s treachery, he decided to boldly say:

“The last time I remember using my knife, was when I took it out to cut a strap for you. I don’t remember putting it in my pocket again. *You* stole the money, and you have woven a plot to lay the sin at my door. But you may prosper, for all that: there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent.” (12)

He became so pessimistic that he felt that Sarah would not believe him any more than the other members did: “In the bitterness of his wounded spirit, he said to himself, ‘*She* will cast me off too.’ And he reflected that, if she did not believe the testimony against him, her whole faith must be upset as his was” (12; emphasis in original). He did not know the whole story yet, so he thought that his fiancée would not question the validity of her religion and would take the drawing of lots seriously.

In the last comment the narrator makes in this opening chapter, he shows one more time the difference between religion and superstition. The latter, resulting from ignorance and lack of understanding of true religion, causes trouble, disappointment, and unhappiness. It is an important conclusion which has to be considered throughout the reading of the novel if one wants to study George Eliot’s attitude towards religion:

“We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner’s position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgment by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent

¹⁴ In italics in the text.

thought such as he had never known; and he must have made the effort at a moment when all his energies were turned into the anguish of disappointed faith. If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, he knows how many and deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas for which no man is culpable." (13)

The basic idea is that "drawing lots" is an unreasonable thing to do for "an appeal to the divine judgment." The narrator is not rejecting the idea of God, as we can see; on the contrary, God and "divine judgment" are presupposed notions. Now, in order to understand religion, "independent thought" is necessary, so everything we read in the Bible may not be godly. Unfortunately, Marner, superstitious like the other members of the Lantern Yard "sect," lacked this "independent thought," and, therefore, had no idea what *true* religion was all about. No wonder that he lost his faith in what *he* considered to be religion.

As we have observed, the narrator believes in the religious concepts of guilt and sin, and shows that false religion, or superstition, or "false ideas," but not religion strictly speaking, hurt people. Besides, from the outset, we clearly feel the presence of a narrator who has embarked upon a story, which is *not* a "fairy tale" but a "realist" and symbolic one just like George Eliot's previous stories, *Janet's Repentance*, *Adam Bede*, or *The Mill on the Floss*, even though the symbolic and mythical aspects may seem here more evident than in the latter works.

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If we read the critical studies done on George Eliot, say in the past sixty years, before we discover her novels, we think that she was a humanist-atheist or a humanist-agnostic author; but when we actually read her without any preconceived ideas, we might be in for a surprise, especially if we are familiar with the evolution of theology in the Christian world. Indeed, we find from the beginning in her novels, as I attempted to show it in the case of *Silas Marner*, not only a great artist, but also a religious thinker. How then can we explain this "paradox" as Svalgic called it?¹⁵ The fact is that there is no paradox if we keep in mind that most critics, including Svalgic, have based their judgments on non-

¹⁵ "Of English novelists of the first rank, George Eliot is easily the most paradoxical. She appreciates the importance of religion in human life and writes novels to enforce it; but she does not believe in God" (Martin J. Svalgic. "Religion in the Novels of George Eliot," in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1965, 285-94, 285-86.)

fictional writings by Maryan Evans, such as letters, essays, translations, etc. They have also disregarded certain facts: for instance Maryan Evans never, as far as I know, said anywhere that she was an atheist. So why Tim Dolin, for example, labels her philosophy a “liberal humanistic atheism”¹⁶ and an “atheistic ethical humanism” (Dolin 188)? He adds that if her characters are religious, it is because she “was a realist, and committed to the representation of things as they were” (Dolin 164). But this leaves unanswered the question of a ‘providential’ ordering of the plot, for instance in the case of *Silas Marner*. Why should Dunstan die in that way, and Silas find his money again? Do these things always happen like that in real life? Why does Godfrey become childless after having rejected the child God had given him? Why has Lantern Yard, a place representing “false religion” or “superstition,” disappeared when Silas returns there to visit it with Eppie? The narrator never suggests that there is a rational explanation to all these phenomena or that they are all accidental. Rather, the author, George Eliot, presents her readers with an image of life that is full of mysteries. And if the critics want to call this superstition, then the author herself is either superstitious or offers a symbolic story here, not unlike many to be found in the Bible itself. Thus Dolin himself also writes: “Eliot’s whole thought tends towards ‘the development of the Christian system’ (not its rejection), not just for the sake of reconciling it to inconvenient modern realities; but in order to secure it from anachronism and assure its universality and durability” (Dolin 172). And quoting a letter: “I believe that religion too has to be modified—‘developed,’ according to the dominant phrase—and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent, must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot” (*Letters* 5: 31; qtd. in Dolin 173). So this critic, after having labelled George Eliot an atheist, now admits that there is in her works a religious quest. How to explain this contradiction?

Another question to be asked in this context is, why did George Eliot decide to have very religious heroes, such as Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*? Was it to please the Victorian conservative reader, as some have supposed in a more or less direct way? Barry Qualls thus argues:

“Tellingly, the author who represented to her generation what the novel could accomplish did not write, did not think, without the texts that she abandoned when she lost her faith, without the language of the Bible and the traditions that formed around it, without the histories of its texts that

¹⁶ Tim Dolin. *George Eliot*. Oxford: OUP, 2005, 165.

she transformed into contexts and structures for the lives of her characters. Her history of religious engagement is a history of Victorian England's engagement with God and the Bible."¹⁷

Yes, she did lose her faith, but in the religion of her youth, not in religion altogether. She broke with evangelical Protestantism, but not with religion or even with Christianity. There is indeed nothing in her fiction which proves that she was an atheist. Her idea of God is just different, more modern, apparently more or less in agreement with the Biblical Higher Criticism of the time, represented in England by a Coleridge for example, and in Germany by a Schleiermacher. Not that she was a follower of anyone in particular. Besides, one can even find in her works, concerning Christian love for example, affinities with Kierkegaard, whom she did not know of course.¹⁸

Another preconceived idea the critics have had is that they have confused her with Feuerbach.¹⁹ What if she had not translated him? But

¹⁷ Barry Qualls. "George Eliot and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. Ed. George Levine. Cambridge: CUP, 2001, 119-37, 119-120.

¹⁸ Another critic who affirms ideas which cannot be verified in George Eliot's novels in terms of religion is Bernard J. Paris, who writes: "The real crisis in George Eliot's history came not when she broke with Christianity, but when she broke with pantheism, for only then did she have to ask herself if life has any meaning without God" ("George Eliot's Religion of Humanity," *ELH* 29, 1962, 418-43, 11. Rpt. in *George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. George R. Creeger. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1970, 11-36). Another one is Jerome Thale, who writes: "Actually *Silas Marner* is a sophisticated and self-conscious work of art by one of the most tough-minded of the English novelists, a novelist who believed that the 'highest calling and election is to *do without opium* and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance'" ("Introduction" to *Silas Marner*. Ed. J. Thale. New York: Holt, 1962, vii-xxi, vii). Thale supposes that George Eliot had the same idea about religion as Marx did. But the difference between Marx and Eliot is that the former totally rejected the idea of God and considered all kinds of religions as "opium," whereas Eliot never claimed to be an atheist, and the metaphor of "opium" in her language refers to certain traditional understandings of religion. She makes a distinction between superstition and religion.

¹⁹ See for example U. C. Knoepfelmacher's "George Eliot, Feuerbach, and the Question of Criticism" (*Victorian Studies* 7. 3., 1964, 306-09. Rpt. in *George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. George Creeger. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1970, 79-85), which is mostly on *Adam Bede*. In his *George Eliot's Early Novels...*, on the other hand, the chapter on *Silas Marner* also stresses Wordsworth's influence (*George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1968, 221-59). Overall, this critic would not admit a George Eliot as a religious thinker either, in spite of the fact that he

even a Feuerbach to a theologian like K. Barth was closer to religion than many so-called theologians.²⁰ In sum, it all depends on one's definitions of God, theology, and religion. David Carroll considers George Eliot a "natural historian of religion," not a religious thinker herself. He goes on: "Part of George Eliot's purpose, as a natural historian of religion, is to explore the origins of folk myth and its continuity with more sophisticated belief, as the network of biblical allusions implies."²¹ I do not see any justification of this assertion in *Silas Marner*. Felicia Bonaparte, on the other hand, declares: "To me it seems the work in which, becoming dissatisfied with empiricism as the sole basis of her thought and yet unwilling to return to a theological creed, Eliot sought a way to conceive, for herself and the modern world, a secular but a transcendent religion."²² She too tries to answer the "paradox" posited by Svalgic. But how can one be secular and religious at the same time? Then she sees in George Eliot's works a *theology* which is "universalist" in essence. Lately, Anna Neill has published an article in which she explores the relationship between science and religion, and admits that George Eliot believed in the mystery of life and that she was not as rationalist as many critics have claimed she was. Thus, referring to a famous letter, she writes: "Having praised the

recognizes the importance of religion in her works. See also Joseph Wiesenfarth. For instance, with regard to the Christmas story in *Silas Marner*, he writes: "Just as Feuerbach takes the Christmas story as a myth that needs to be stripped of its theological trappings to be understood in a human context, George Eliot dramatizes Silas's response to the love that Eppie brings on New Year's eve, not to the doctrine Mr. Crackenthorpe preaches on Christmas day. The saving event in his life is human love [...]" (Wiesenfarth 242). And he concludes his article by saying that, "*Silas Marner* ends, gently but ironically, positing the utopian myth of a demythologized world" (244). First nothing proves in *Silas Marner* that George Eliot demythologizes in the same way as Feuerbach does. Why not seeing in her "demythologization" a philosophy closer to that of Schleiermacher or Strauss on the one hand, to that of Kierkegaard on the other, and even somehow announcing R. Bultmann's way in the next century?

²⁰ "[...] the attitude of the anti-theologian Feuerbach was more theological than that of many theologians" (K. Barth. "An Introductory Essay." Trans. J. L. Adams. in L. Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. Trans. G. Eliot. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, x-xxxii, x. Barth's original text on Feuerbach first appeared in *Die Theologie und die Kirche*. Zürich: Zollikon Evangelischer Verlag A. G., 1928, vol. II, 212-39).

²¹ David Carroll. *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations. A Reading of the Novels*. Cambridge: CUP, 1992, 145.

²² Felicia Bonaparte. "Carrying the Word of the Lord to the Gentiles: *Silas Marner* and the Translation of Scripture into a Secular Text," *Religion and Literature* 23. 2, 1991, 39-60, 39.

‘clearness and honesty’ of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, George Eliot went on to say that ‘development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.’ What sounds uncharacteristically mystical probably expresses a passion for the unknown as it is navigated by the imagination....²³ And concerning *Silas Marner*:

“[...] the plot of the novel is driven by the sudden, inexplicable appearances and disappearances of people as well as precious objects. These are mysteries whose natural cause is only sometimes apparent to the narrator and a few skeptical characters on the periphery of the narrative. Thus, even though this narrative describes social life in thoroughly organic terms, its very structure respects the force of the mystical.” (Neill 941)

Neill focuses on Silas’s catalepsy and believes that George Eliot thought that a scientific explanation to phenomena which seem mysterious to the naive characters in the novel might some day be provided. But she wrongfully confuses her philosophy with that of Lewes and states that the latter predicted “the eventual triumph of science over theology and superstition” (959). Where, in *Silas Marner*, does the narrator express such ideas about science? Why confusing Eliot with Lewes? And where does she put together theology and superstition?

There are, nonetheless, a few exceptions among George Eliot’s readers. For example, with regard to our novel, Harold Fisch writes: “If the hero of *Silas Marner*, like the author of the book, has broken with evangelical Christianity, he has not rejected the Bible along with it. For him, as for George Eliot, it remains to be re-interpreted and re-understood.”²⁴ But the most important study which has appeared on George Eliot’s religious quest is that of a well-known theologian, not a literary critic. Peter Hodgson’s book, which has no pretension, should inspire some critics interested in religion. Hodgson indeed admits that God is “present and active” in the story of *Silas Marner*,²⁵ but that George Eliot’s understanding of religion is not a traditional one. Christmas, for instance, through this story is interpreted not as a historic but a mythical

²³ Anna Neill. “The Primitive Mind of Silas Marner,” *ELH* 75, 4, 2008, 939-62, 939-40.

²⁴ Harold Fisch. “Biblical Realism in *Silas Marner*,” in *Identity and Ethos: A Festschrift for Sol Liptzin on the Occasion of his 85th Birthday*. Ed. Mark H. Gelber. New York: Peter Lang, 1986, 343-60, 343.

²⁵ Peter C. Hodgson. *The Mystery Beneath the Real. Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 75.