In George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861), the men at the Rainbow debate over whether or not there is a ghost at the Warren stables. Further, they weigh in on whether a ghost, even if it did exist, would want “ignorant folk” to believe in it. With Silas’s unnoticed entrance into the bar, and with his apparition-like countenance, Eliot suggests that ghosts aren’t actually all that discriminating as to who they want to believe in them—they just want to be remembered. Silas, of course, is not a ghost, but “ghosts,” or presences associated with the past, do haunt many characters in the text. And these ghosts, if ignored, give every reason for people such as those at the Rainbow to be wary of them. Raveloe is also inhabited by an apparition from the future: Eliot herself, as a narrative presence. But Eliot would rather embrace Raveloe than haunt it. In fact, her visit is evidence of the continuing influence of old ways of thinking—of ghosts—on her own life. Knowing intimately the increasing prospects for happiness moderns like her have in an age where seemingly anyone can rise to success, and knowing how different her situation and beliefs that sustain it are from those of the past, she is not be able to shake off the feeling that she has earned punishment for being unfaithful to her heritage. In her unfaithfulness, she is like her character Godfrey Cass. But perhaps—her vicious attack on him notwithstanding—Eliot is more like the diabolically cunning and daring Dunstan, in imagining though her creation *Silas Marner* a stratagem for appeasing the ancestral ghosts. By showing both that she has not forgotten them and that she believes they must be remembered—lest the present prove degenerate!—Eliot placates internal persecutors, but only so as to buy time until she is ready to banish them from her mind altogether! We look first to signs of agitation in the narrator in a text otherwise crafted by a sympathetic but judicious mind, for evidence that Eliot fears she is blameworthy for being an egoistic, willful modern.

When Mr. Macy argues “[a]s if ghos’es ’ud want to be believed in by anybody so ignorant” (Eliot 54), Eliot, with Silas’s ghost-like appearance at the Rainbow, is able to suggest otherwise, because his statement could be contradicted by experience. Experience, often in the form of sudden and dramatic changes to everyday life, is most often used by Eliot to show how unpredictable nature is. Eliot’s conception of nature likely strikes us as realistic for it being of persistent interaction and change. In Raveloe, or with simple, reductive people such as Silas, Eliot shows us that because
“life [is] [. . .] breathed on variously by multitudinous currents, from the winds of heaven to the thoughts of men[,] [. . .] [which] are for ever moving and crossing each other, with innumerate results” (23), neither the town nor its inhabitants can long hold life or nature at bay. Realistic-seeming, too, is Eliot’s characterization of systems or codes of thought as ideologies particular to a person or people at a particular time and place. She treats those who cling to regular and patterned ways of thinking with sympathy, but in general shows rigid ways of thinking as imposing a form onto reality which Reality either subverts at their user’s expense (as with Silas and his ritual of leaving his door unlocked), or which endorses their users in walled-in misery (as is the case with Nancy’s “unalterable little code[s]” [156]).

Yet despite this tendency, she herself expresses a tenuous-seeming maxim in the text, namely, that burglars are dull-minded, which she insists is almost always true (39). Furthermore, *Silas Marner* is itself a rhetorical argument for judging the degree to which people are rewarded and punished in life as depending entirely on how selfishly they behave. It advances the same sort of argument we often actually expect to see in a fairy tale, and it reflects a world-view which Dunstan—the character Eliot makes a skeleton of—“deprecate[s]” (74).

Eliot is concerned to show how Godrey, Dunstan, and Silas think of themselves and how they fare in life. Godrey, at book’s end, has been both punished and rewarded. He is admonished in the text for not having the “moral courage” to own up to his marriage to Molly to Nancy. Yet not informing Nancy did not prevent the marriage, nor did it entirely ruin his prospects for happiness: he fails to make claim to Eppie, but dearly has found happiness in marriage. With “tenderness,” he says to Nancy (175), “I got you in spite of all [], [. . .] and yet I’ve been grumbling and uneasy because I hadn’t something else” (175), adding, “as if I deserved it” (175). Godrey’s brother Dunstan is judged by Eliot for his demoniac cleverness, and is punished more severely; for whereas Godrey at least had been modest enough to think he deserved punishment, Dunstan extorts his brother and preys upon his neighbors without any self-reproach. To be rewarded with an entirely happy present and with promising future prospects, according to the logic of *Silas Marner*, demands the “humble sort of acquiescence in what was held to be good” (142) that Silas has.

Eliot, who discerns when the landlord, for example, uses “analogical logic” (54), clearly knows and believes that reflection can help one avoid mistaking norms or habits of thought for universally valid truths. Reflecting on “[p]oor Marner” (14), she tells us that “[t]o people accustomed to reason about the forms in which their
religious feeling has incorporated itself, it is difficult to enter into that simple, untaught state of mind in which the form and the feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection” (14). According to psychoanalyst Stanley Greenspan, however, even those used to reasoning things out and reflecting before acting, may find that in certain circumstances they are unable to make use of these higher-order thinking processes. He writes:

The emotional guides to our thinking can also lead us astray during extreme states of anxiety, depression, fear, anger, or the like. At such times our emotions become so overwhelming that we are unable to fine-tune our ideas. Thoughts become polarized, rigid, fixed, while inflexible beliefs dominate the mind. (34)

Greenspan, who believes that each of our sensory perceptions is “[labelled] by [. . .] both its physical properties [. . .] and by the emotional qualities we connect with it” (21), and that abstractions are created by “fus[ing] various emotional experiences into a single, integrated concept” (26), would disagree with Eliot’s contention that reflection severs form from feeling; to him, reflection, instead, helps us “modulate our emotions” (22). And since even highly abstract concepts like religion are actually constituted by emotions (27), no less than the untaught and simple, the reasoning philosopher is not able to exempt herself from emotional influence. Those who seek pure exemption, in fact—and so not just those overrun by base desires—are exactly those to be expected to suffer from extreme lapses of self-control, for their flight no doubt owes to their inexperience in successfully managing what are, of course, inevitable emotional upsets.

Perhaps the reason that Eliot, then—at least with the dispersal of rewards and punishments is concerned—suddenly conceives of nature as predictable and orderly, that it ensures that there are, to Dunstan’s huge misfortune, “unpleasant consequences” to people’s actions (73), when otherwise nature is vicarious and unfathomable, is because Eliot herself, with this matter, has not yet managed to entirely free herself from that simple way of thinking too bonded to emotional arousal to enable reflective thought. That is, while writing, when she brings to mind clear examples of egoism, of people’s intention to immodestly satisfy themselves, feeling guilty for her own superior intelligence and success, she becomes so agitated she cannot manage that controlled, calibrated state of mind required to notice, and
therefore be capable of altering, her inclination to associate ambition with hubris, and see vengeance visited upon all the guilty trespassers.

Eliot, we know, does not always distinguish herself from simpletons; she frequently tells us—often including all humanity in her sweeping generalizations—that we all share some of the mental habits of the simple and honest members of the Raveloe community. But suspiciously, the exceptions—those such as William Dane and Dunstan Cass, who consider themselves exceptional, and who expect status and riches—are also those whose gains she insists on characterizing as ill-gotten. William, whom his peers see as being “so dazzled by his own light as to hold himself wiser than his teachers” (10), displaces Silas as a revered brother with a plot that involves stealing from the deacon. Dunstan, who “swaggered” (34), who is always on the lookout “to take [. . .] someone in” (34), refers to Silas as an “old staring simpleton” (39). William and Dunstan are youngsters who not only disrespect their elders—the teachers, with William, the elderly, with Dunstan—but are indifferent to their fates once they have left them behind in pursuit of further “petty egoistic” (156) acquisitions. Dunstan possesses a singular ability to arouse Eliot. Eliot, who seems to find every way to find virtue in the simplest of minds, finds none at all when she estimates Dunstan’s as dull. But is this really how she thinks of him? We note how she attaches this label just after his dismissing Silas as but an old simpleton. Further, while the sequence that has him ride his horse to death and burglar Silas shows him as an impulse-driven, unthinking fool, previously Dunstan not only showed considerable cunning in his mastery over his brother but also showed himself a competent master of his emotional state. Considering that Eliot characterizes Dunstan’s manipulation of Godfrey so that it seems much more diabolically clever than miscreant but otherwise dull, spite and vengeance, not reasoned fair commentary, dearly is moving her pen here.

Previously Eliot showed Dunstan as a risk-taker, but a thoughtful and intelligent one, emphasizing his own self-control and Godrey’s lack thereof. While Godrey succumbs to a “movement of compunction [. . .] which was a blight on his life,” it is Dunstan who sees “in his brother’s degrading marriage the means of gratifying at once his jealous hate and his cupidity” (31), and seizes upon his opportunity. Godrey prefers to intimidate rather than reason with his brother. Godrey, “mastered by [. . .] fear,” would flog [Dunstan] [. . .] within an inch of his life” (29). Dunstan, in contrast, maintains, even while under physical threat from threat, “an air of unconcern” (29). His insouciance owes to having sufficient insight into his brother’s
ways that he can simply “wait” (29) for Godrey to stop resisting, and then lead him to accept his terms. If Eliot was to make a fair assessment of Dunstan’s intelligence and impulse control at this point in the narrative, she really could do no better than to suggest, as Godrey does, that he could have “more sharpness” (27). But even in this she would be in error, because one of Dunstans’s goals—unfortunate as it surely is—is to agitate his brother as much as possible. He braves a trial, risks error (or “oversho[oting] his mark” [27]), but thereby better knows just how well he has caught his brother out. Ultimately, we note, Godrey acquiesces; Dunstan accomplishes his goal, and need not fear Godrey. But Dunstan is not, however, safe from Eliot; and it is she, incapable of the restraint that even Godrey manages, who ultimately “knocks[...] [Dunstan] down” (28).

What Dunstan in particular represents to Eliot is someone who “forsake[s] a decent craft that he may pursue the gentilities of a profession to which nature never called him” (74). Dunstan, the second son, lives a gentry-life of drink, horseriding, and leisure, and has his elder brother contemplate the consequences of becoming a soldier (28). In his presumption, Dunstan is similar to William Dane, who, though favored, is not looked upon with quite the reverence as those thought selected by God (such as Silas) for a special purpose are. As with Dunstan, William, when he devises means to benefit at Silas’s expense, betrays the bond that ought to exist between brothers, and both of these “betrayers” are actually similar in nature to Eliot and her contemporaries. Mid-Victorians, as with Dunstan, and as with later born sons, rather than having dear roles and identities thrust upon them, have instead the nebulous freedom to shape their fates themselves. Elder sons have an obvious link to the past in that they would—as with Godrey—“come into the land someday” (24). They are more easily imagined—again, as with Godrey (and as Eliot herself imagines him)—“as having an essentially domestic nature” (31), and are thus not subject (as Eliot imagines Dunstan) to wanderlust. Eliot, like Dunstan and William, possesses the intelligence to, if she should desire, manipulate those about her for her own benefit. Moreover, they all have sufficient will and self-confidence to accept the risks involved in pursuing ambitious goals. In a complex, modern, ever-changing society, this degree of intelligence and will would be necessary, not just to succeed but simply to meaningfully participate, and would have been imagined by Eliot and her contemporaries, the norm for their age. But perhaps the habitual association of this sort of intelligence as egoistic and self-serving—as “bad”—afflicts people like Eliot sufficiently that it still leads to attempts at penance, variant enough to include the likes
of Eliot’s attempt to punish her likeness in her writing, and necessitates efforts to exonerate themselves from charges they belong to a dangerously degenerate age far removed in purity from the “honest[y] [belonging to] [. . .] their ancestors” (20).

We know that Eliot is concerned to show how intrusive past events can be upon our present existence. Eliot tells us that Nancy “filled the vacant moments by living inwardly, over and over again, through all her remembered experience” (154), an experience Eliot characterizes as a “morbid habit of mind” (154). And with Godrey, Eliot shows us someone who cannot, simply by changing his patterns of thinking, free himself from torment. For even if Godrey was, with the gracious assistance of time, to forget his past, the past has not chosen to forget or forgive him! Eliot conjures up Molly as a revenant, as an embodied ghost who returns from the dead to punish Godrey. The passage of time, forgetfulness, actually works to Molly’s advantage, for she wants nothing more than to catch Godrey just when he feels safe enough from harm to venture out to pursue a relationship with Nancy. Eliot wishes Godrey had the moral courage to tell Nancy about his marriage to Molly earlier than he in fact does; but considering it is difficult to believe Eliot imagines this would not have ruined his chances with her, using his confession of wrongfulness toward Molly to express the wrongfulness of her own neglect of her past would seem untenable, a false-confession—a lie. Eliot is, however, trying to demonstrate to internal persecutors, to ghosts nesting in her mind, that with Silas Marner she is remembering her forefathers—her “neighbors” from the past—and that she not only values them but, given the chance, would readily stand up for them.

Eliot defends the Raveloe inhabitants both through subtle plot contrivances and through impassioned narrative rants. The members of the Raveloe community are described as simple and honest, but at times, also as vengeful and barbaric. At the beginning of Eliot’s account, it is only fear, born of superstition, which prevents Silas “from the persecution that his singularities might have drawn upon him” (9). And near book’s end, Silas’s isolation helps protect Eppie from “the lowering influences of [. . .] village talk and habits” (146). The result is that, since we never do witness their persecution of Silas, nor do we see Eppie grow into anything other than a pure child, we are most likely to associate the typical Raveloean with the benevolent Dolly. Eliot also has the chance to actively defend Nancy (apparently from some of the readers she has “invited along”) when she seeks to reprove “grammatically fair ones,” who cannot fathom how her “feelings can at all resemble theirs” (93). And Eliot sometimes even sounds like a proud member of the Raveloe community, especially
when she mimics, with her diatribe against those who seek more than they were by nature ordained to possess, the Raveloean hatred for those who “wish to be better than the ‘common run’” (80).

With *Silas Marner*, Eliot proves to herself she is more the favored who embraces the past than a truant concerned to disparage it. As with Eppie’s soothing remarks to her father when he fears he may lose her upon marriage, that he is not so much losing a daughter as gaining a son, Eliot tells herself that as a successful modern writer she is not detaching herself from the norms of her forefather but rather attaching, with a supposed respect for old folkways in her writing, a new age to her own. So doing, she hopes to replace her habitual conception of those “who ha[ve] more cunning than honest folks [. . .] [not using] that cunning in a neighbourly way” (77), with her preferred sense that “mind[s] [. . .] of extraordinary acuteness must necessarily contemplate the doings of their fallible fellow-men” (102). She hopes, as proved true with Eppie, having placed her “relations,” she might better enjoy her own refinement and difference.

It is even possible that Eliot may not, at heart, truly respect her forefathers. Indeed, there are signs in the text that she thinks the poverty of “ordinary farmers” (68)—the prototypical inhabitant of our pastoral past—a condition they both could and should have freed themselves from. We feel this when she draws our attention to how similar in nature the Raveloe farmers are to Squire Cass, remarking that because they have “slouched their way through life with a consciousness of being in the vicinity of their ‘betters,’ [they] want that self-possession and authoritativenss of voice and carriage which belong[s] to a man who thought of superiors as remote existences” (68). Perhaps for Eliot, Raveloe is akin to the brown pot Silas keeps by his hearth: it is be kept and tended to only while its mistreatment might “bruise [her] [. . .] roots” (142)—that is, while its removal or replacement would disturb her. But just as Silas might one day come to experience his precious relic—the last remaining piece at book’s end of his dwelling’s old furnishings—as but a plain old pot he’s too long kept near his side, Eliot might come to see Raveloe—or, rather, the composite of place, time, and people Raveloe represents—as irrelevant, and forget, now, exactly why she once placed so much interest in it. Considering Eliot’s previous loving sentiment, thoughts, and words, this would be a considerable betrayal of her forefathers, but as she herself tells us, “language is a stream that is almost sure to smack of a mingled soil” (78).
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