

The Style in Silas Marner

—the speech of the countryfolk—

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Exploiting the full possibility of self-revealing qualities of speech, G. Eliot shows fine skill in individualizing each character of her novels by his or her language.

Besides individualization, language has rich connotations, regional, social, and historical, when it is carried by the dialect as in some of her pastoral novels where the dialect contributes a considerable amount of power to her sustained effort of portraying local life as it is. And it is a stylistic study of the dialectal speech of the countryfolk in *Silas Marner* that this essay aims to survey under the confidence that since they are the most important ingredient of the village population, it should follow that as a linguistic group they employ some special instruments of dialogue style which it is impossible to imagine Eliot using without any special intention her art demands.

Frequent references to the speech of the countryfolk in the Hardy novels shall be made in the following survey partly to point out some features common between Eliot and Hardy, giving them, if possible, a more universal status as a social language, and partly to demonstrate the difference of their fictional worlds in terms of language.

Raveloe village, the regional background of the novel, where Silas Marner emerges from the north country to begin a solitary, sequestered life as a weaver, is supposed to be in North Warwickshire. And it is the dialect of Warwickshire that we hear in *Silas Marner*, although Silas Marner himself, as might be expected from a person from a big industrial town, speaks not the dialect but, if ever he speaks, Standard English, until intercourse with the villagers through Eppie brings about a change in his language—the change which affords a noteworthy illustration of language as an indispensable factor of social life.

The people in the village, from their social status, can be divided into two groups: the Red House group, a group of high-class people who frequent Squire Cass' house, and the Rainbow Inn group, a group of low-class people who frequent a public house called 'Rainbow'. It seems, however, dangerous to draw a linguistic borderline of dialect and style between these two groups, there being such people in the Red House group (which is supposed to be a Standard English speaking group) as Squire Cass, who is no other than a country gentleman with unrefined speech, or Miss Priscilla Lammeter, a daughter of a gentleman farmer, whose speech is scattered with dialectal

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vocabulary and pronunciation.

Nevertheless there is no denying of the fact that the countryfolk of the Rainbow group (which is a dialect speaking group) have some peculiar linguistic habits of their own as no other class of people could possibly have, and, practically, there is no harm in drawing a linguistic line between these two groups if we consider that the countryfolk are, so to speak, a linguistic matrix of the language of, shall we say, Squire Cass and Priscilla.

Insofar as the Raveloe villagers' speech is concerned, the extraordinary gaiety and vigorous vitality which animate the speech of Hardyean countryfolk and even that of some characters in *Adam Bede* can rarely be allowed full play. The natural outlet of various spiritual experiences is controlled within a certain amplitude, consequently the movement of speech is less dynamic. For example, in the interchanges of conversation at Rainbow Inn in chapter VI—which would have afforded Hardy the most proper place for rustic humour and gaiety—the dominant atmosphere is rather heavy, torpid; the movement of speech is static. Yet in no sense does this mean that the style falls flat. As in Hardyean style it retains spontaneity of mind to the full and amuses us to a rare degree with its inflectional phrases and its various linguistic irregularities.

The range of occupations of the main characters of the Rainbow Inn group varies widely—farrier, landlord, tailor, butcher, wheelwright... Yet they are all tradesmen or professional, practically occupying the middle layer of the village population (we may presume that among this class of people dialect was generally spoken in the countryside of early nineteenth-century England, which was closely followed by the time of wide canalization between the standard language area and the local dialect). And *Silas Marner*, together with some of Eliot's other pastoral novels, can claim linguistic value as a stock of ample evidence to the living language of nineteenth-century England.

This much in our mind, we shall proceed a step farther and see more in detail the stylistic features of the speech of the countryfolk.

I. The Choice of Vocabulary.

Simpleness and homeliness of words and phrases in daily use will be one of the most distinct qualities of the speech of the countryfolk in *Silas Marner*. The accumulation of these simple words, without jargons of polysyllables, basically determines the rhythm of speech. The regular tempo of narrative style is one of the tones of *Silas Marner*, and the speech of Dolly, a simple, kind-hearted village woman, is a specimen of the sort. The effect characteristic of Dolly comes not so much from each linguistic ingredient as from a subtle interweaving of several ingredients. The following is a passage from her preaching on Christianity to Silas Marner, followed by the author's comment on it:

“...and if a bit o' trouble comes, I feel as I can put up wi' it, for I've looked for help i' the right quarter, and gev myself up to Them as we must all give ourselves up to at the

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last ; and if we'n done our part, it isn't to be believed as Them as are above us 'ull be worse nor we are, and come short o' Their'n."

Poor Dolly's exposition of her simple Raveloe theology fell rather unmeaningly on Silas's ears, for there was no word in it that could rouse a memory of what he had known as religion, and his comprehension was quite baffled by the plural pronoun,³ which was no heresy of Dolly's, but only her way of avoiding a presumptuous familiarity.

Carried on by the regular rhythm, the tone is quiet, subdued, unaffected and sometimes even monotonous, and all these effects come from her manipulating simple words in a simple structure of sentence. The real virtue of this sort of speech will be most profitably noticed when it is compared with the speech of Dinah, a fervent Methodist in *Adam Bede*. In Dinah, even the most common conversation is carried in a formal preaching style profusely sculptured with Christian doctrine, accordingly having no room for an intrusion of personality; while in Dolly, it is her personality that has the power of persuasion.

As in Dolly's speech, with an extremely limited vocabulary, the countryfolk must and can project their inner life into verbal expressions, which, therefore, tend to be more concrete than abstract, more specific than general, more emotive than plain, and accordingly, insofar as their linguistic habits are concerned, every expression seems to be moulded according to the materialistic turn of mind of unsophisticated people. Their thought-world, indeed, is a concrete one, quite alien to abstruse generalization; so that everything around them, physical or non-physical, is liable to be interpreted in terms of physical objects. And just as in Hardy the expressions thus attained add to the vividness of the colourful presentation of the world they live in.

The term "inside", for example, occurs fairly frequently in the sense of "inside of the body":

(body) When I've got a pot o' good ale, I like to swaller it, and do my *inside* good, i'stead o' smelling and staring at it to see if I can't find faut wi' the brewing.⁴ / It's your *inside* as isn't right made for music...⁵

(mind) ... you can't think what goes on in a 'cute man's *inside*.⁶ / For I've often a deal *inside* me as 'll never come out...⁷

(stomach) ... and if you ever feel anyways bad in your *inside*...⁸

Similar effects are noticeable in the following examples which acquire their expressive force through the vivid representation of the world the countryfolk live in—a world of solid things, tangible, visible, audible.

... yet some folks are so wise, they'll find you fifty reasons straight off, and *all the while the real reason's winking at 'em in the corner*,⁹ and they niver see't.

But now, upo' Christmas-day,...if yon was to take your dinner to the bakehus, and go to church,... you'd be a deal the better, and you'd know *which end you stood on*...¹⁰
And I doubt he's got *a soft place in his head*...¹¹

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II. Simile and *As if* Clause.

An emphatic (consequently, emotional) tone is generally prevailing over the speech of unsophisticated people, and the simile is the most common rhetoric used for effect.

In *Silas Marner* nineteen similes appear in the dialect part of the conversation and only eight in Standard English. In fact, the comparison in raw scores is not enough. If we duly allow for the fact that the dialect part is a little more than that part of conversation carried in Standard English, then the exact ratio in frequency should show less imbalance, if not nullify the comparison in raw scores.

The similes used by the people who share one and the same social and regional environment can provide ample material for the study of their inner life—the objects of their interests and the scope of their imagination. Just as in Hardy, the similes used by Raveloe villagers may be said to have associations, not with any kinds of urban life or with the modern world, but almost exclusively with a homely country life savouring of antiquity:

he can sing a tune off straight, like a throstle / you were allays a staring, white-faced
creatur, partly like a bald-faced calf / he looked as scared as a rabbit / that speaks to me
like the blackbird's whistle / There's a lass for you!—like a pink-and-white posy / the child
'ull grow like grass i' May / he isn't come to his right colour yet: he's partly like a
slack-baked pie / one while he was allays after Miss Nancy, and then it all went off
again, like a smell o' hot porridge.

More explanatory, descriptive, and therefore circumlocutory, is the form of analogy in the *as if* clause, which occurs less in frequency than the simile, yet is nonetheless important for its exclusiveness. In *Silas Marner* nine *as if* clauses appear and only one of them is from the lips of a lady of the Red House group, Priscilla, whose speech is fairly close to that of the Rainbow group. That is to say, in this novel this is rather exclusively a marker of dialectal speech, and incidentally in Hardy not so remarkable a method of comparison as to attract our attention as a genuine marker of dialectal speech.

As in or even more than in the simile, the countryfolk seem amusing themselves by parading witty 'comparison of manner' in this form whose apparatus allows selection of more complicating, original 'Terminus' or the second argument of comparison than the simile:

— it's like as if she had little wheels to her feet.
The door was open, and it walked in over the snow, like as if it had been a little starved
robin.
My husband says I'm allays like as if I was putting the haft for the handle—
... that was what fell on me like as if it had been red-hot iron...
But ride he would as if Old Harry had been a-driving him...

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The sparing use of the simile and the *as if* clause among the more or less educated people will be due in part to their refined taste which always recoils from anything of this sort of hackneyed rhetoric, in part to the general tendency of Standard English which is so constructed, so to speak, as to serve the purpose of accurate and business-like exchange of information, and is felt to be no place for artificial rhetoric, much less for those emotive similes or *as if* clauses in question.

III. Anaphoric Repetition.

The most important property which characterizes the sentence of the speech of the countryfolk is Anaphoric Repetition, which is given the following definition by Jespersen:

By a stylistic trick, which for more than a century has been gaining ground in literature, a word is repeated and for emphasis given front-position. . . .²⁵

In *Silas Marner*, in most cases a phrase is repeated, given front-position and invariably replaced by the demonstrative pronoun 'that':

. . . if there's any good to be got we've need of it i' this world—that we have. . . .²⁶
He's my youngest. and we spoil him sadly, for either me or the father must allays hev him in our sight—that we must.²⁷
. . . the child 'ull grow like grass i' May, bless it—that it will.²⁸
I'd keep him in liver and lights for nothing—that I would.²⁹

The abbreviated version of the principal sentence functions as supplement to it, emphatically confirming what it means, and the resultant style gains in power.

The supplementary function is similarly noticeable in the following cases where only subject and Finite verb are repeated with no inversion:

Why, Dowlas, that's easy betting, that is.³⁰
I'm for peace and quietness, I am.³¹

Sometimes a proper noun is so stressed by a speaker that it is given Extraposition:

And young Mr Lammeter he'd have no way but he must be married in Janiwary. . . .³²
But Cliff, he was ashamed o' being called a tailor. . . .³³

In all these phenomena of language is projected the bare human psychology; the style of the countryfolk is organized according to the most natural impulse, without much regard to logical reorganization or economic expression of their thought.

Now we shall go into some supplementary cases, which, combined with the main features, would give us a general idea of the style of the countryfolk.

The uosophisticated mind shows no hesitation in employing here and there the

same sentence pattern with little or no alteration of vocabulary, and some of them are apparently a habitual or favourite expression of the speaker:

(the butcher)

... but I don't quarrel with 'em.³⁴
... but I'll quarrel wi' no man.³⁵

(Dolly)

... but I'll come, and welcome, and see to it [i. e. the child] for you...³⁶
... I'll come and see to the child for you, and welcome.³⁷

Some other examples attain an almost proverbial status:

(the butcher)

I'm for peace and quietness.³⁸
I'm for peace and quietness, I am.³⁹

(Dolly)

... for if there's any good, we've need of it i' this world.⁴⁰
... for, as I said, if there's any good to be got we've need of it i' this world—that we have...⁴¹
Ah, if there's good anywhere, we've need of it.⁴²

Sometimes to give a sort of unity to one's style can be a motive of employing this method of repeating the same expression here and there, and in such occasions, the speaker is very consciously artificial. For example, in the Rainbow scene of chapter VI, Mr Macey, a tailor, begins two of his discourses with exactly the same sentence pattern:

"I should think I did," said the old man, who had now gone through that complimentary process necessary to bring him up to the point of narration...⁴³

"Ay, and a partic'lar thing happened, didn't it, Mr Macey, so as you were likely to remember that marriage?" said the landlord, in a congratulatory tone.

"I should think there did—a very partic'lar thing," said Mr Macey, nodding sideways.⁴⁴

He is undoubtedly conscious of his style, in fact he gives himself airs, and well he might. For in both occasions, he is asked by the folk to recount his favourite old stories and he is in his best humour with this honour. Again, in one of his discourses, the name Mr Drumlow is twice given exactly the same commentary parenthesis, that is, an inserted digression: "poor old gentleman, I was fond on him"⁴⁵, which suggests the fact that in Mr Macey's mind the name "Mr Drumlow" is inseparably combined with the phrase.

This kind of rhetoric is so rudimentary that the more sophisticated mind would not care to use it, although it is fairly common among the unsophisticated people, whose speech has strong individuality.

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The language of Silas Marner is also worth noticing to understand the story. His mysterious figure is all the more so for his spare speech. If ever he speaks, it is done so briefly and mechanically in Standard English as to make us feel a sort of repulsion in his manner. And yet, as he gradually narrows distance he has kept between the villagers and himself, recovering humanity in himself, he begins to speak not infrequently and even comes under the influence of Dolly's style, and at this point his "spiritual rebirth"⁴⁶ is completed:

"Ah!" said Silas, who had now come to understand Dolly's phraseology, "that was what fell on me like as if it had been red-hot iron⁴⁷; because, you see, there was nobody as cared for me or clave to me above nor below...."

Thus we can measure the degree of his alienation by his language.

The language of the countryfolk is a product of centuries in a remote countryside still in the primitive stage of culture, where, for an exclusive character of the place, a fairly slow process of assimilation of Standard English could preserve the rich texture of dialectal locutions unchanged up to at least the early years in the life of Eliot. As time goes by, their favourable locutions, grammatical and rhetorical, became more and more stylized to turn into a kind of established formulae.

This process of development of style is overwhelmingly borne in on us as we read *Silas Marner*, where the rustic speech retains the marks both of natural impulse which prompted the original speaker, and of the immemorial traditions of thought and feeling.

This much established, we may enlarge our interest and see more clearly the affinities and differences between Hardy and Eliot—or to be more exact, the Eliot of *Silas Marner*.

The speech of the Hardyean countryfolk and that of the Raveloe villagers is sufficiently similar for us to extract certain features in common and assume them as attributes of rustic speech in general.

"Emotional," "emphatic," and "periphrastic" (that is to say quite "natural" in a sense that their style is bare expression of the rustic mind)—these will be the terms to describe the speech style of the countryfolk of both Eliot and Hardy. In the speech of rustic people both of them noticed words and phrases all savouring antiquity, the rudimentary way of handling the machinery of sentence structure, an absence of economy of expression, hence a lyrical style—a style for the heart, and not for the mind. Indeed between them there exist great many similarities even in quite minute and local details of language.

And yet the differences between them are as great as the affinities. Natural is the speech of the countryfolk in both Hardy and Eliot, but the way in which naturalness

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manifests itself is different. Hardy finds it in an elastic, dynamic style through which breaks out in all its force the natural impulse of the human mind. On the other hand Eliot finds it in an easy, moderate style through which a true nature of humanity flows out in a regular, even rhythm.

Those stylistic differences are well accounted for by the differences of the fictional worlds of these two novelists. The dominating tone of *Silas Marner* is retrospective in terms of the village life, and mysterious in terms of the life of Silas Marner. Eliot, as with some of her other pastoral novels, looks back with nostalgia on the early nineteenth-century English countryside, traditional, antique, unchanged over generations. The villagers are "the eternal verities of the lost paradise of her childhood"⁴⁸. Moreover, the story of *Silas Marner* demands the village to be a place poles apart in every particular from such a big industrial town as Lantern Yard, from which he escaped, so that it can be a place which should make a myth plausible in the time of the Industrial Revolution: Raveloe village must make a myth out of a sheer reality, imposing a pattern and colour of myth on the disappearance of Silas's gold and on the appearance of a golden-haired baby, Eppie. And also it should be a place which can make a mysterious figure of Silas Marner who is no more than one of the most common working-class people in a town. The self-centred, parochial village society finds great difficulty in assimilating a heterogeneous element, attributing everything beyond its comprehension to the doing of "Old Harry", and intrinsically not only Silas Marner's mysterious way of life and a no less mysterious lot fell on him, but the villagers' limited outlook itself performs to make his life look mysterious.

The function of dialectal speech in this novel is to conjure up before us a little nook of the world in an old-fashioned mode of life. The rustic speech, for its eloquence with local and ancient connotations, can carry the old time into the present without reducing its original power of authority. The faint flavour of soil which the dialect carries with it invokes a remote place where religion, legend, and superstition had an authentic voice. Homely, simple vocabulary; idiosyncratic phraseology; slow, easy, sometimes monotonous rhythm; these are the linguistic traits her memory holds of the countryfolk of her early life. And these are the verbal expressions of a stable, even torpid society well suited for the story of mysterious atmosphere.

On the other hand, in Hardy the speech of the countryfolk, besides being the language of old times in a remote countryside, is the language offered against that of the refined, prudish middle-class of the Victorian Age. As such, it must be a vent for the natural outburst of humanity free from any social conventions of the time. This is why in Hardyean countryfolk we see boldness, animal vitality, "coarse touch"⁴⁹, gaiety and humour, which in Eliot, especially in *Silas Marner*, we do not see so much. The only scene in the novel that comes close to the Hardyean style is that of a dance at the Red House in chapter XI where "Mr Macey and a few other privileged villagers, who were allowed to be spectators on these great occasions"⁵⁰ give most

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humourous comments on each of the genteels assembled there. Hardy deliberately makes use of oaths, swearings and other coarse expressions which the people more elegant than the rustics would not care to say in public, unless elaborately clad in euphemism, but which are all the more appealing to the rustic mind. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* a villager gives an apology for swearing:

Nater requires her swearing at the regular times, or she's not herself ; and unholy exclamation⁵¹ is a necessity of life.

The linguistic irregularities are to the countryfolk nothing but an authentic marker of truth and reliability, and to the genteel nothing but "the terrible marks of the beast"⁵².

It is unjustifiable to judge which writer is more real to life in his or her way of handling the rustic speech unless we duly take into consideration the difference of both fictional and regional background. The ultimate question is whether the dialectal speech in their novels has not only acceptable verisimilitude but is more acceptable, more convincing in its own way than the actual one, and in this point both of them can bear the severest of criticisms.

The task left to us is to enlarge the range of our study to some of Eliot's other pastoral novels which undoubtedly afford a new idea on her style—apparently Mrs Poyser in *Adam Bede* or Bob Jakin in *The Mill on the Floss* are a type of people missed in *Silas Marner*—and compare Eliot and Hardy on a higher level of perspective. This essay on *Silas Marner* is preliminary in character.

NOTES

The text used : *The Works of George Eliot*, Illustrated Copyright Edition, (London).

1. The article on the style of Hardy by the present writer appeared in MACHIKANE-YAMA RONSO, NO. 3 (OSAKA Univ., 1969), under the title : "The Dialect and the Style in Hardy—the speech of the countryfolk"
2. Walter Allen, *George Eliot*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), P. 125.
3. *Silas Marner*, P. 128.
4. *Ibid.*, P. 159.
5. *Ibid.*, P. 72.
6. *Ibid.*, P. 76.
7. *Ibid.*, P. 216.
8. *Ibid.*, P. 131.
9. *Ibid.*, P. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, P. 127.
11. *Ibid.*, PP. 159—160.
12. *Ibid.*, P. 72.
13. *Ibid.*, P. 119.
14. *Ibid.*, P. 120.

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15. *Ibid.*, P. 155.
16. *Ibid.*, P. 159.
17. *Ibid.*, P. 185.
18. *Ibid.*, P. 159.
19. *Ibid.*, P. 160.
20. *Ibid.*, P. 158.
21. *Ibid.*, P. 186.
22. *Ibid.*, P. 191.
23. *Ibid.*, P. 215.
24. *Ibid.*, P. 78.
25. O. Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*, (Heidelberg, London, Copenhagen, 1909—49), VII. 2. 37.
26. *Silas Marner*, PP. 125—6.
27. *Ibid.*, P. 129.
28. *Ibid.*, P. 185.
29. *Ibid.*, P. 73.
30. *Ibid.*, P. 80.
31. *Ibid.*, P. 81.
32. *Ibid.*, P. 75.
33. *Ibid.*, P. 78.
34. *Ibid.*, P. 70.
35. *Ibid.*, P. 70.
36. *Ibid.*, P. 186.
37. *Ibid.*, P. 187.
38. *Ibid.*, P. 69.
39. *Ibid.*, P. 81.
40. *Ibid.*, P. 125.
41. *Ibid.*, PP. 125—6.
42. *Ibid.*, P. 126.
43. *Ibid.*, P. 74.
44. *Ibid.*, P. 75.
45. *Ibid.*, P. 75.
46. W. Allen, *George Eliot*, P. 120.
47. *Silas Marner*, P. 215.
48. W. Allen, *George Eliot*, P. 92.
49. T. Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, (Greenwood Edition, Macmillan), P. 58.
50. *Silas Marner*, P. 156.
51. T. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, (Greenwood Edition), P. 68.
52. T. Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, (Greenwood Edition), P. 148.