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## George Eliot and Contemporary British Nature Writing. Toppling the Towering Figure of the Author(ess)? A case study of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) and Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond* (2015)

### STEP ONE. How does the subject and corpus fit in with the topic of the seminar?

*En lien avec la thématique commune aux deux équipes internes de l'équipe, « Pouvoir(s) et Représentation(s) : configurations, circulations, nouvelles pratiques », le séminaire ERIBIA s'intéresse aux notions d'auteur, d'auctorialité et d'autorité.*

Author, authorship, *auctoriality* ?, “auctoriality” [(a translation of the French term auctorialité), Pascal Sardin, ‘Self-Translation and Auctoriality in the Correspondence of Samule Beckett, 2018’].

The question of authority is particularly relevant to nineteenth-century novel-writing and has been taken up (often parodically) in neo-Victorian texts (Patricia Duncker, Alasdair Gray) to deride the author's so-called demiurgic function.

A.S. Byatt: ‘Fowles has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the conscience of a god. I think rather that the opposite is the case – this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of characters – as well as providing a Greek chorus – than any first-person mimicry.’ (56)

‘George Eliot was perhaps the English novelist whose interest in the new forms of thought had the most complex effect on the forms of her own writing’. (66)

‘The novel in the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them.’ (130)

A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories, Selected Essays*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2000.

In the same way as intertextuality may call into question the notion of the authoritative (all-controlling/high-handed) figure of the author, could genre indefinition also question the authority of the writer as demiurge, supposedly in full control, of her/his coherent, consistent, fully unified creation?

In our corpus we have a nineteenth century novel, or is it? ‘legendary tale’ (Eliot to John Blackwood), rustic realism, the novelist as anthropologist and so on, *and* a cycle of stories (*Short story cycle, [novel in stories] non-linear, polyphonic, stories anchored in a specific geographic location, nascent regionalist movement, disjointed, present also in post-colonial context*—see Kerry Myler Newham University). The form is reminiscent of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country and the Pointed Firs*.] *Pond* consists of 20 interconnected stories — though they are more like soliloquies, or digressive meditations, yet labelled by the press as novel.

Authority postulates an author having power and control over his/her text, a transcendental ego (Kant and Husserl, unified self-consciousness). Would *auctoriality* then mean something like

an overall coherence bestowed upon the text, a vision of the world, a system of values, the manifestation of a cultural identity. Something akin to Wayne C. Booth's 'implied author'? (a personality standing behind the text which readers infer). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961, 264-266 ('The Implied Author as Friend and Guide')

The towering subject, supposedly the source of the text, does not hold water anymore...has it been toppled? (See W.J. Harvey 'George Eliot and the Omniscient Narrator Convention', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XIII, [September, 1958], 88).

Cogito ergo sum (Descartes)

'I yam what I am' (Ralph Ellison)

*His quip, "I yam what I yam," which initially appears to be simply another example of Ellison's wordplay, is, on closer analysis, much more complex. The phrase is from Popeye, the cartoon character who is part of our American pop culture, just as yams are part of the narrator's Southern culture. Considering his comment from this perspective, eating yams in public indicates his having overcome his shame at being identified as a Southern Negro, which marks an important turning point in his quest for identity. The Invisible Man*

Who am we? (Sherry Turkle)

'a strong habit of that new self which had been developed in him since he had found Eppie' (George Eliot, *Silas Marner* 142)

'till at last it brought me my new life – my new self – who will live when this breath is all breathed out.' (*Daniel Deronda*, chap. XL, 417)

'well, for many years I felt like a Russian doll, with lots of mes tucked into one another, of which only one, the outer shell, is visible to the external word' (Claire-Louise Bennett, Interview with Jennifer Hodgson, in *Checkout 19*, 224).

[the choice of the word *shell* is especially interesting when drawing parallels and correspondences with George Eliot, see the 'Ilfracombe journal and 'Notes on Form']

And this final quotation that is probably crucial for this seminar.

'The author, like the autonomous individual of Descartes's *cogito*, is, we understand with Raymond Williams, "a characteristic form of bourgeois thought" (192), one that Ralph Ellison parodies, for instance, when his protagonist, in a fleeting moment of self- and cultural integration, proclaims "I yam what I am" (260). **The relentless intertextuality of Web culture, the rapid proliferation of multiple selves online, and the development of what Sherry Turkle has called "distributed selves" of postmodernity would seem to have moved us well beyond autonomous individualism.** (Lisa Erde and Andrea A. Lunsford. 'Collaborations and Concepts of Authorship, theories and methodologies', *PMLA*, 2001, 354).

## STEP TWO Introduction of the corpus. Why this choice?

George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (1861)

Silas Marner narrates the expulsion of Silas, a weaver, from the tightknit Calvinist community of Lantern Yard (a manufacturing town), his years of social alienation as an isolated and ill-favoured weaver on the periphery of rural Raveloe society. He works hard at his loom and he earns money which he treasures until one day his gold is stolen. On a freezing night, a little baby girl with golden curls ends up in his tiny cottage. He adopts Eppie, the foundling toddler. This somehow contributes to his new life as he gains the respect of the local villagers. Yet the novel is not underpinned by a smooth, even narrative line. Silas suffers from periodic cataleptic fits which occur at three pivotal moments. His destiny was first decided by a drawing of lots which led to his being exiled from Lantern Yard. It turns out that his money had been stolen by Dunstan Cass, the younger lewd son of the local squire, the elder brother Godfrey was for his part Eppie's father from a previous marriage (over the broomstick).

*In the widest view, the critical literature is divided over whether to treat Eliot's novel as a providential fable or an example of probabilistic realist fiction. At times it feels like a focused ethnographic study of rural life; at other times, there are flourishes of folklore and myth. (Griffiths 302)*

Claire-Louise Bennett, *Pond* (2015)

Neither a novel nor short story collection, and made up of writing that drifts between poetry and prose, fragments and longer pieces, Bennett's multi-faceted rendering of her narrator's life baffles and intrigues. At one point, the woman writes, 'It's the impression that certain things made on me that I wanted to get across, not the occurrences themselves', and it's this impressionistic tone that suffuses the work. This is an account of a mind in solitude, the mental association of a mind in motion. Musings on what would be an ideal breakfast. Lists of objects 'Wishful thinking'. The practicalities of looking after the house, and the laziness to do certain chores. Attaching a lot of importance to the trivial incidents of daily life that usually pass unnoticed. The fact that she feels she ought to buy placemats to put on the window-sill that the fruit she puts there do not go off. Infraordinary. A rejection of 'anthropocentric parochialism' (Italo Calvino); having to make an impression on people. There are also some more risiky passages, like 'Morning 1908' where the narrator, a woman walking out daydreams about what can be construed as a raped by a stranger strolling in the opposite direction: 'If it – that – were to happen right now, would it be so awful, I thought. Would it be really such an upheaval – such a defiling affront?' (102). The reader knows nothing of this narrator (just that she gave up her Phd. and yet shares very intimate, private moments (vagaries, fantasies, sensations).

All the entries are told in the first person, except the last one 'Old Ground' (144, 145)

- See HORROCKS, Ingrid, 'Dissolving Genre: Writ with Water', in *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction and the Non-Human*, edited by Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, London, Bloomsbury, 2023, 125-131.

The corpus does not consist in a canonical text (Victorian text) + a sequel, prequel, coquel; there are no direct references to *Silas Marner in Pond*. It does not qualify as transfiction (Saint Gelais) either. It is by no means a neo-Victorian text for example. Worse still, Claire-Louise Bennett who has a tendency to quote long lists of writers, especially in *Checkout 19* (Annie Ernaux, Italo Calvino, Jean Rhys...and the list could go on and on...) never ever – as far as I know – mentions George Eliot. Or, any Victorian novelists for that matter). But anyway the influence of the writers she quotes is hardly noticeable, not to say non-existent, in her writing anyway! As for journalists, they have repeatedly drawn a (lazy) parallel between *Pond* and Virginia Woolf (which Bennett herself dismisses), of course because of stream of consciousness → because her writing is anchored in the material, the thinginess of artefact, the tang of nature, the physical sensations induced by the earth. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*. 'the capacity of things, edibles, commodities, storms, metals [...] – to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, tendencies, of their own' (viii) Bruno Latour: 'actants'.

**So what entitles me to enlist Claire-Louise Bennett in a study on George Eliot's afterlife?**  
(as part of a wider project)

- '**catching fire in the mental landscapes of other writers**. Engaging our critical objects and our own critical writing as part of an open ecology of relations alerts us to the wider possibilities of critical interplay.' (Griffiths and Kreisel, 11) Basically this entails that intertextual links can also be worked out from the point of view of our personal reading encyclopedia (Eco), focusing on the receiving end of the fiction act (reception theory – Iser, Jauss). Provided that a substantiated argument be put forward to preclude the risk of any arbitrary whim.

[In a way such an approach partakes of so-called postcritical writing which opts for a more gregarious mixture of critical frames. This entails a turn to a more aphoristic, inchoate, modular, and even atomistic collection of insights in preference to coherent and focused argument. (Haraway, Morton, and Maggie Nelson - autotheory). The formal principle behind such aggregation seems to be that such modes of (dis)organization invite a variety of constellation, assemblage, and mixture in the act of reading, *eschewing a single unitary formation*]

- 'George Eliot: now, there was a writer. Why don't they write 'em like that any more? Except **the George Eliot of today** – so alive to every shade of human feeling, so serious about our dependence on one another – **she won't be like the George Eliot of yesterday**. Her form will be quite different. She won't be writing the classic nineteenth-century novel. She might not even be English. She might be like Mary Gaitskill, say, or Laura Hird, or A. L. Kennedy. George Eliot may look cosy and conservative from a century's distance, but **she was on the border of the New** – so will her descendants be. In her essay 'Silly Novels By Lady Novelists', Eliot laid out her radical programme for great fiction, radical because it was no programme at all: '*Like crystalline masses, it may take any form, and yet be beautiful.*' What twenty-first-century novelists inherit from Eliot is the radical freedom to push the novel's

form to its limits, wherever they may be. Smith, Zadie. *'Middlemarch and Everybody'*, in *Changing My Mind. Occasional Essays*. Penguin Books Ltd. Édition du Kindle. I underline.

Could a likely candidate be Claire-Louise Bennett (an element of risk-taking)?

That said, there are some immediate superficial correspondences between the two texts.

One proviso: admittedly *Pond* is anything BUT a plot- or character-driven (non-)fiction so it is not *Silas Marner*'s diegesis or moral fable, which 'does not cut much ice now' (Duncker on *Adam Bede*'s moral realism) we are interested in. The assumption being that if we still read (or teach) *Silas Marner* nowadays, it may not be because of the interest we take in the plot.

There are nonetheless resonances between the two texts:

- Solitude and isolation in a remote, countryside location (for which the notion of the pastoral may no longer be relevant). And what we make of this solitude?

'The prisoner in solitary imprisonment [the expression is of course metaphorical], Silas Marner, the author and the reader, are all brought together in the inescapable need to create meaning and purpose in a vacuum' (David Carroll, int. to *Silas Marner*, Penguin Classics, 1996, XVI).

This existential experience shared by Silas, the author (could it be Bennett too ?) and the reader, confronted to the necessity of creating meaning and finding purpose is a way of accessing the text (*Silas Marner*). After all, the traumatic experience of the lockdown (perhaps more so in England with the political scandals in its wake) is still not far.

- Setting, spatial environment (more below)
- Christmas *Silas Marner* (22 →) and *Pond* (122-123)
- Animals *Silas Marner* 'The presence of this happy animal life' (141) and *Pond* 'The neighbour's dog comes in, that's true too, and so do flies and bees, and even birds sometimes...' (62) and many other instances.

Embarking on a diachronic study also raises the question of presentism, or *strategic presentism* (Jesse Rosenthal)

"We choose the works we study based on present concerns, while doing so with the idea that these works are representative of our source of concerns' (Rosenthal, Jesse. "Some Thoughts on Time Travel." *Victorian Studies* 59.1 (2016): 102–4, 102)

Our present concerns here are ecology, but ecology is also an epistemology which is applied to literary studies, and has been used for George Eliot, for obvious reasons.

### **STEP THREE. The critical perspective informing the study. Proto-environmentalism**

George Eliot embraced a type of "ecological thought" that can be termed proto-environmentalism; her scientific field observations that incubated what would become her lifelong literary aesthetic of moral sympathy foregrounds the relationship between humans and non-humans.

Eliot as field naturalist: the 'Ilfracombe' journals. Against the cold and detached methods of scientific observation that Ilfracombe required, she postulated that "art is the nearest thing to

life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” Relationality and connectiveness.

Eliot’s recognition of nature’s vast scales, reflected by her notion of “the huge limbs of Mother Earth,” showed sympathy towards nonhuman species such as “shell-secreting animals.” Her language shows an embodiment of what Hubert Zapf calls a “sensitivity to the multi-layered forms of relationality between self and other. . . humans and the nonhuman world”.

In short, “Ecology” is a Victorian concept. Inspired by his careful reading of *The Origin of Species*, Ernst Haeckel coined the term in 1866 as a way to formalize the principle of systemic interaction that Darwin ascribed to nature. The most prominent popularizers of an organicist version of evolutionary theory was Darwin’s and Eliot’s *friend* and contemporary, Herbert Spencer.

- ❖ See Sophie D. Christman, ‘The Rise of Proto-Environmentalism in George Eliot’, in *Dickens Studies Annual*, Penn State University Press, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2019), pp. 81-105

#### **STEP FOUR Bennett’s ecology**

Pond is rife with flora and fauna, y be felt. provoking the feeling that grass is bristling between the walls. In “The Gloves Are Off,” the narrator spends a rapturous paragraph imagining the source of a bundle of reeds in the driveway that will soon be thatched to her roof, romanticizing their journey from river to cottage only to discover that they have been harvested differently than she imagined. At one point there is a close-up view of the reeds recording the life of insects that usually pass unnoticed: ‘the skaters and the midges and the boatmen and the dragonflies and the spawn, and who knows what else the sussurant reeds are raided with’ (115) assonance, alliterations, polysedenton. Bennett seems make possible what is voiced as wishful thinking by Eliot in *Middlemarch* ‘ “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat” (182)

These stories shift and stutter on the axis of voice, following the nameless female narrator’s thoughts and observations in a rural Irish cottage, in which nature is hell-bent on taking over.

#### **STEP FIVE Open ecology**

A few paradigms and guidelines that may come in handy.

##### Open ecology

The *relational turn* in critical theory, as formulated by such theorists as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour.

##### **The “web of life” metaphor, crucial in ecological writing, *Middlemarch*—**

“I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe”—which closes with the caution that “the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web.” George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. Oxford World’s Classics, 2 Book II, Chap. 15, 2019, 132.

Yet, it should be stressed that *Middlemarch*’s webs pull toward a deep skepticism about easy claims to unity or interconnectedness, and against an organicist, holistic worldview.

The web's importance to the novel as a metaphor works for complication as much as for integration: 'tangled crises'.

The polysemic web could refer to the spider's web, a woven piece of cloth, family relations, even bodily tissues (the narrator explicitly cites Bichat's notion that living bodies "must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lung, and so on—are compacted").

Rather than simply a figure for social constraint or organic unity, **the web** figures a radical **openness** to the world and the complex vectors of its interactions.

Open ecology concerns all interactions between living bodies, as well as their relation to the various organic and inorganic materials that constitute their environment. This early wave of ecological theory did not assume that these interactions were coherent, harmonious, or tightly integrated.

Rather than reinscribe a division between society and nature, a more open understanding of ecology encourages us to recognize their mutual entanglement. Yet by the same measure, open ecology does not resurrect the benign unities of natural theological or organic discourse; rather, it turns to those messy, contested, and often violent histories through which cultural and natural systems continue to produce each other, those conflicted formations **Bruno Latour** describes as "**nature-cultures.**" → influence of anthropology (Philippe Descola, nature culture as a continuum)

The notion of ecology emphasises comprehensive intimacy: both the "living relations" that subsisted between organisms but also **the determinative importance of their interactions with the material environment.**

The problem with closed concepts of ecology, like totalizing systems in general, is that they tend to freeze things in place, assuming a stability—whether truly fixed or unchanging in its repetition—that foreshortens the horizon of possibility.

**Ecologies do not have sharp boundaries or stable timescapes.** They are fuzzy and mutable, existing in a permeable relation to their surroundings and to changing conditions.

Hence, the significance of messy moments when things are more labile and alternative possibilities available.

Ecology has fundamentally an interdisciplinary, interspectival object. We ask, then, what would it mean to consider the **edge effects** that subsist at the boundary between novels, between environments, between historical periods, even between characters?

Such studies indicate that any given transition is not a movement from one state to another but an uneven, unpredictable, and ongoing process of reorganization.

To summarise:

1. **Open ecologies** are **situational**: rather than focusing on a single actor, species, or stratum of the environment, they are defined by the interaction of diverse inorganic as well as living components.
2. They are compositional: they are not organic units or holistic cosmologies but instead involve multiple actors with differing interests.

3. They are nonprogrammatic: their forms are emergent rather than predefined or autotelic; their patterns and futures are unpredictable, chancy.
4. They are neither preconcerted harmonies nor utopias.
5. Open ecologies are excessive in the literal sense that they exceed the bounds of totalizing human perception (crucial for the novel, George Levine, Gillian Beer)
6. They foster an intimacy [that] necessitates thinking and practicing weakness rather than mastery, fragmentariness rather than holism, and deconstructive tentativeness rather than aggressive assertion → especially pertinent for *Pond*. For example this is the way the anonymous narrator responds to a herd of cows in a field: ‘The cows stopped and continued several times over and always in the same rhythm, and even though, as they got nearer, I felt increasingly aberrant, I managed, actually to defend my position at the gate. In all this time they did not take their eyes away from me, and so unwavering was this confluence of looking that I went on wondering what exactly they could see. [...] I must admit that all this had me fundamentally perturbed in a way I could not describe or even classify. Did they know something? Could they see something? Were they waiting for something? What did they want, exactly?’ (Morning 1908, 104)

- ❖ See Devin Griffiths and Deanna K. Kreisel, ‘Introduction: Open Ecologies’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 1–28. The whole publication has been crucial to think up this seminar.

## STEP 6. Case study *Silas Marner & Pond*

The following is split into notional entries.

### ➤ Form

Eliot exposed her conception of **form** in her 1868 essay ‘Notes on Form in Art’. Basically, her aesthetics does not regard form as fixed, and solidified into discrete, separate entities, with neatly defined unchanging shapes, but as **plastic and constantly modified by its/their environment**. Her approach is therefore **organic** and influenced by the **natural sciences** (biology or medicine). She borrows from Herbert Spencer the principle of a universal development from homogeneity to heterogeneity, and this applies equally to organic life, poetic form, and the growth of the mind, both in the individual and the race (a term which has lost its scientific validity nowadays). **Form is relational**, not so much a process of rational cognition as of **emotional response**. ‘But my concern is here chiefly with poetry which I take in its wider sense as including all literary production [...] – relations of groups of relations – are more or less not only determined by emotion but intended to express it’ (Notes on Form). Another central quotation reads ‘The highest Form, then, is the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena of emotional response’. To cite Griffiths ‘**form [...] is deeply ecological**: emergent rather than designed or predefined; densely situational, that is, composed of a complex of living and nonliving elements; and centrally concerned with power, the uneven distribution of resources and agency, the fact of violence as well as cooperation, of predation along with community.’

When applied to *Silas Marner*, such a contention raises a debate; **either the emphasis is laid on the principle of cohesion and unity (holism): ‘continuity, moral order, individual responsibility and control’** (Shuttleworth, 83) – in other words on Silas Marner as fairy tale, or moral fable, **or the focus is placed on ‘gaps and jumps in historical development, chance, individual powerlessness, and self-division’** (Shuttleworth 83). Amongst the elements pleading for the latter, we have Silas’s catalepsis: ‘the chasm in his consciousness’. Moreover, what could have been a rural, bucolic idyll is marred or tainted by Silas’s momentary return to Lantern Yard, the ‘great manufacturing town’, plagued by rampant poverty and fanatic religiosity. So Raveloe, the village where Silas ends up in his exile, is an anachronism, in a way. It artificially dismisses a somber reality, persisting on the novel’s periphery. Finally, it could also be hypothesised that there is an element of **‘queer futurity’** which is at odds with the tightly knit, heteronormative web of the pastoral tale. Silas becomes accidentally a foster parent, a surrogate father and when Eppie has the opportunity to reintegrate the patriarchal model by recognising her biological father, Godfrey Cass, she vindicates her attachment to the one and only man she regards as her own legitimate father; the celibate Silas Marner.

‘[Q]ueer futurity, in emphasizing the full possibility of uncertain relations, have taken an increasingly ecological character. [...] Ecologies are sustained by chance, by uncertain interactions, by violent encounters, and by repeated gestures of collaborative affiliation.’ (Griffiths 316) (see also Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Now of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009).

It would be easy to argue that **‘form’ in Pond is characterised by the organic**. There is no clear division between the human element, nature, and objects. The fusion, or osmosis, between nature and the human can be syntactically conveyed: ‘Thoughts such as these lurched and abated throughout several afternoons of inclement weather and churning branches’ (52). A mental activity is braided with the wind blowing. Unlike in *Wuthering Heights* where the storm buffets the protective dwelling place, but remains outside, like a disruptive force, here the mind is consubstantial with the wind drafts. **The mind is ecologised**, as it were, and this is announced right from *Pond*’s outset, with Nietzsche’s citation from *The Birth of Tragedy* in the first epigraph: ‘It is as though...a sentimental trait of nature were bemoaning the fact of her fragmentation, her decomposition into separate individuals’.

- ❖ See Devin Griffiths, ‘*Silas Marner* and the Ecology of Form’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Cambridge University Press 2020. Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 299–326.
- ❖ George Eliot, “Notes on Form in Art” [1868]. in *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, in A .S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (eds.), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1990, p. 231-236.
- ❖ Sally Shuttleworth, ‘*Silas Marner: A Divided Eden*’, in *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science*. Cambridge U.P., 1986, 78-95.

And on Queer Ecology

- ❖ Catriona Sandilands, ‘Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology.’ *Organization & Environment*, June 2002, Vol. 15, No. 2, 131-163

- **Structure** – the idea of the chain of cause of effect, causation (the so-called principle of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, i.e. after this, therefore because of this) is replaced by the contingent, the fact that an event may happen, in the same way as it may just as well *not* happen.

This notion of the unpredictability of things which occur without any particular reason the way they do, is already present in *Silas Marner* through an observation made by Dolly Winthrop, a friend of Silas's, who is often puzzled by the way events occur: 'it [meaning Silas's life before he settled in Raveloe] **got twisted back'wards and for'wards**, as I didn't know which end to lay hold on' (*SM* 144). What Dolly means is that the only narrative she is familiar with, i.e. Divine Providence, did not operate in Silas's case. It is a 'puzzling world' in which, as she perceives it, events do not follow each other logically, according to a moral plan. As for Silas Marner, his destiny started with the drawing of the lots, which in his past life, decided whether he was guilty or not of stealing a sum of money. The drawing of lots, which involves chance, randomness, and aleatory development, engages characters in unpremeditated directions. Instead of the trope of the 'way', or the 'road', which could allegorise the linear progression of a story towards its denouement (teleological perspective), we are confronted to **a tangle of contingent events**. Indeed, the eponymous character finds himself disentangled from one situation (Silas Marner's previous life at Lantern Yard) to be tangled in another. *Pond* pushes further this pattern, or principle of the haphazard, of the disorganised, of what could be called the messiness of life. This is articulated very candidly by the first person narrator:

My wherewithal had quite dried up you see [...] and so I had come to a standstill, not knowing whether to turn left or go right. And the chief reason why I moved after approximately half an hour is because people continually approached me to enquire if the bus had already come and gone. I don't know, I said. I don't know I said again. I don't know [...] I was left standing absolutely and purposelessly alone – I don't think I've experienced a sense of fundamental redundancy to that extent since. (22)

Alongside the notions of indeterminacy, contingency and chance which operate to varying degrees in *Silas Marner* and *Pond*, another structural characteristic is **the web, the tangle**. According to Griffiths 'the language of weaving, tangle, and web in *Silas Marner*, as in Eliot's novels generally, **provides a central vocabulary for ecological life**'. Other novels by Eliot also rely on the web, of course we can't help thinking of *Middlemarch*. Griffiths further plays on the semantics of 'the "ravel" of Raveloe, unspooling, warp and weft' // see 'hyphology' Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue-this texture-the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an hyphology (hyphos is the tissue and the spider's web).

Adopting Eliot's vocabulary, a range of recent eco-theorists, including Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Tim Morton, have turned to various metaphors of entanglement, from the "tentacular," to "entangled loops," to the "mesh," in order to elucidate **the snarl of human and natural events**.

Bruno Latour speaks of 'hybrid assemblages' or 'tangled objects', which could be glossed as imbroglios/ that mess up our fundamental categories of subject and object, human and non-

human, society and nature (see Latour's use of the portmanteau 'culturenature'). Latour's examples include ozone holes, global warming, 'mad cow disease' or immuno-deficiency diseases – things that seem to emerge somewhere between the natural and the man-made and that tangle up questions of science, law, technology, capitalism, and so on: 'these have no clear boundaries, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and their environment' (Latour 2004, 24). These assemblages (and this is interesting for *Pond*) disrupt the standard principle of causation and provoke strange effects. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to Bring Sciences into Democracy*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). For her part, Donna Haraway propounds 'tentacular thinking', which is crucial for ecological thought; it consists in giving up on human exceptionalism and bounded individualism. Said differently, we are all caught up, or enmeshed in nets and networks: 'Tentacularity is about life lived along lines – and such a wealth of lines [...] "the inhabitants of the world, creatures of all kinds, human and non-human, are wayfarers" ; generations are like "a series of interlaced trails." String figures all.' (Donna Haraway 'Tentacular Thinking', in, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke U.P., 2016, 32).

What about Pond ?

The dichotomy between the human and the non-human is abolished, or at least reduced. The human does not stand above nature. For instance, having mentioned that she grows things, which could equally refer to the fact that she digs the soil, and to her nails (her nails grow and are 'grubby and unkempt' perhaps because of her gardening), the narrator states 'I might, [...] occasionally emanate the demeanour of someone who grows things. That's to stay, I might from time to time, be considered earthy in its most narrow application' (Morning, Noon & Night, 16) **A line of continuity is established between nails, roots, soil and the anonymous I**, who is not given any prominence in this concatenation (list of interconnected things) of trivia.

In the absence of any overarching plot, *Pond* consists in **a succession of random micro domestic incidents which are not causally, but casually related**, added the ones to the others in a seemingly haphazard way. This is strongly underlined through a string of remarks 'I may as well mention that' (21), 'None of that has anything to do with now by the way' (21) or its expanded version as 'Still, as I've said, none of this has anything to do with now whatsoever. I don't know what it has to do with and as a matter of fact and I'm not sure what now is about anyway' (23) Therefore the narrative does not set up a logic of causal construction, based on facts that would be classified according to their order of importance, **but meanders, bifurcates abruptly, retraces its steps**. For example, one short vignette depicting a domestic interior, is suddenly erased by the comment 'perhaps that was from another day' (48). At this point, what has just been called up, suddenly shifts into the unreal. To quote Haraway the narrative 'continuously spin[s] out loopy tendrils' ('Tentacular' 33). And these potential narrative threads are soon left pending: 'And to begin with nothing, just a storm, nothing original, nothing I hadn't heard before. I went about my business for a while until it struck me I should disconnect the cables and the lights went out on those small matters I endeavour to attend to and I didn't mind very much because the matters were straightforward and already composed and yet were at the same time quite beyond me at that moment. It was of no great importance really.' (To a God Unknown, 57) So the text sprouts shoots that may abort on occasions, reflecting what Haraway describes as **'the muddle of messy living and dying'** ('Tentacular' 42). In this respect, 'Stir-Fry', Pond's shortest entry is very telling:

I just threw my dinner in the bin. I knew as I was making it I was going to do that,  
So I put in all the things I never want to see again. (60)

### ➤ Poetics of space

There is a link between *SM* and *P* where the treatment of space is concerned. The etymology of ecology is worth remembering at this stage. The word stems from 'oikos' (household or housekeeping and living relations), which of course can be extended from the dwelling place, to the immediate environment and then to the world at large. The world, our *oikos*, which urgently needs to be protected in this day and age! The hub/kernel of both texts is indeed the 'house'. There are many allusions to the humble cottage in *SM*, seen from both the inside and the outside: 'the cottage, once a stone cutter's shed' (34), next to a stone pit, 'and the red muddy water [...] in the deserted quarry' (34), or 'the half-icy red pool shiver[ing] under the bitter wind' (86). These descriptive details evoke Bennett's *Pond*. And even if the word 'pond' is only used once, when Silas is looking for Eppie who has escaped (128), the proximity of the pit, more often than not filled with muddy water, suggests a link with Bennett's text. Incidentally, when the young novelist mentions the pond at some length, it is to deplore the silliness of putting up a sign saying pond, next to the pond, supposedly 'to prevent children from coming upon the pond too quickly and toppling in' (*The Big Day*, 36). This resonates uncannily with Silas's dreading that Eppie might have fallen into the Stone-pit during her flight. (117)

In *Silas Marner* the plot moves backward in time when Silas, the inhabitant from the industrial city, escapes to settle in the bucolic world of 'Merry England'. In many respects, Raveloe is reminiscent of Hayslope in *Adam Bede*, which Eliot treated with her idiosyncratic realism, by extirpating the morally dubious falsism (see Patricia Duncker *Sophie and the Sibyl*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little'). Besides, Raveloe is based on Bulkington, a village that neighbored Eliot's childhood home in Warwickshire. The region was known in Eliot's time as a center for ribbon manufacturing, which is interesting for the weft and the woof, and the textile metaphor of textuality.

*Pond* too recounts a story of relocation, when a young woman, the anonymous narrator, leaves England, possibly London, and the competitive world of academia, to settle in an isolated cottage in Ireland 'on the most westerly point of Europe, right next to the Atlantic ocean in fact. The weather here is generally very bad. Compared to the rest of Europe that is, that might be a reason why not too many people live here'. (79) The narrator shows an interest in the 'history of the place' and when she first arrived the 'cottage [...] just a pile of stones and a sprung of tin roof' (41) was pretty much in the same condition as the 'stone cutter's shed' the omniscient narrator mentions in *Silas Marner* as the eponymous narrator's abode.

Bennett makes much of space as a rule, and of course in *Pond* especially. In an interview with Lauren Elkin for *the Paris Review*, she explains:

the Bachelard book, *The Poetics of Space* [...] put forward a wholly distinct way of looking at the home, the dwelling place, so that it wasn't simply a domestic space but a *stone plant* with *cosmic roots*, a kind of intimate conduit between the *subterranean* and the *aerial*—it's all pretty far out, but not long after reading it I moved into a 400-year-old thatched cottage, the exemplary *stone plant*, and Bachelard's vision no longer seemed so eccentric or utopian. (I underline)

This way of speaking of the domestic interior, the *oikos*, as *phusis* (nature but also all that is, that exists): ‘plant’, ‘cosmic roots’ but also ‘intimate conduit between the subterranean and the aerial’ epitomises **the ecological dimension of home**. Not only does it shine a light on Bennett’s treatment of her Irish cottage in the vicinity of the pond, but it also applies to *Silas Marner* which, for its part, underscores **the tropism of the hole**, or to quote Bachelard cited by Bennett the ‘subterranean’.

**In *Pond* the cottage tends towards the aerial, in *Silas Marner* towards the subterranean.** The anonymous narrator’s attention is caught by an irregularity in the stones; a ‘structural anomaly’ (43): ‘All the other stones fulfil their remit you see, whereas this, this arresting convergence seems to be saying something –’ (43) The meandering prose returns to the baffling incongruity, a few paragraphs later, to endow the riddle with a celestial dimension: ‘one’s attention is drawn back to these gatherings of smaller stones in much the same way as the minor constellations beguile the stargazer [...] because of a seditious force which they themselves do not possess but which they serenely represent.’ (45) The semantic distinction between ‘possess’ and ‘represent’ is worth considering in more detail. Bennett does not attempt to realistically capture the intrinsic qualities of things, here the small stones or constellation of stars, but in rendering the effects which they produce on her. The ecological dimension is to be found in the shift between stones and stars, **in the impossibility to stabilise one or the other, in the context of a flowing world**. Hence the weird, or defamiliarisation sensation which Bennett’s prose is likely to elicit.

*Silas Marner* also proceeds to an extension of the dwelling place, Marner’s lowly abode. But this time it is through a hole in the floor, and the arresting detail is annexed to the plot. This hole is dug in the soil, by removing bricks to serve as a hideout for Marner’s treasure. But the similitude between this man-made hole and natural holes is signalled right from the start. Indeed, the Stone-pit into which one can easily slip is but a stone’s throw away. (39) And when Marner discovers the missing bags of coins, the omniscient narrator plays up the analogy between the hole in the floor and the hole outdoors. Marner who is desperately searching into hole, in the hope of retrieving the coins, is compared to ‘A man *falling into dark waters* seek[ing] a momentary footing even on sliding stones’ (43. I underline). Not only is the hole a concealed extension of the house, but it suggests a **subterranean ramification of plots**; actualised or not. For example, Dunstan, shortly before committing his theft, toys with the idea that Silas may have slipped into the Stone-pit.

Later though, after contributing to the novel’s darkest episodes by accentuating the motifs of loss and despair, the hole is gradually deprived of its ghastliness. It is trivialised to contribute to what some critics see as the plot’s resolution, when others deem that ‘disruption and powerlessness’ persist ‘the fairy tale elements are balanced by the darker history of Molley or Dunsey [Dunstan]’ (Shuttleworth 95). The hole returns as the coal hole to reprimand little Eppie for her misdemeanours. But as the little girl is well-behaved and her father tolerant and also because she turns this punishment into a joke: ‘Eppie in de toal-hole’ (129), the hole becomes the subject of comedy. And, at the end, the hole participates in rebirth and renewal when Silas who has successfully played out the part of ‘father and mother’ gently invites his ward to ‘mark out the beds, and make holes and plant the roots’. (139)

#### ➤ Time and history

**History is consubstantial with Eliot’s literary project**, a point which could be argued for hours. **Eliot’s sense of history is tightly interlinked with space**. In her famous review essay ‘The Natural History of German Life’ (W.H. Riehl), which incidentally she wrote whilst she

was “zoologizing” at the seashore with Lewes’ (King, 179), she uses the concept of ‘incarnate history’. ‘**Incarnate history**’ signals the necessity to distance oneself from the abstract theory of scholastic discourse to focus on the natural vitality of actual people living in close proximity with a specific environment. This emphasis on time as experienced in given circumstances, i.e. **a phenomenological take on time** (incarnate flags the centrality of the body) is common to *SM* and *P*. The contemporary narrator’s dismissal of grand history, her engagement with what would be called **the wider ecology of the present**, is claimed bluntly: ‘The large scale of changes in fact were of no interest to me at all; it was the small things that remained constant which sort of attracted me’ (*P* 43). Yet this does not mean that time has no hold on her, far from it. And here we come across a preoccupation common to *SM* and *P*, i.e. the **connection between history and the experience and exile**. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Eliot develops the interconnection between time and exile and the way it affects individuals:

Even people whose lives have been made various by learning, sometimes find it hard to keep a fast hold on their habitual views of life, on their faith in the Invisible, nay, on the sense that their past joys and sorrows are a real experience, when they are suddenly transported to a new land, where the people around them know nothing of their history, and share none of their ideas – where their mother earth shows another lap, and human life has other forms than those on which their souls have been nourished. Minds that have been unhinged from their old faith and love, have perhaps sought this Lethean influence of exile, in which the past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked with no memories. (15)

The passage is worth quoting at length because it resonates with Bennett’s narrator’s testimony. The style also deserves attention in its own right. The diegesis proper is momentarily suspended and the voice that can be heard is probably the closest to Eliot’s own reflection. The writer seems to be thinking aloud, as it were, and this is perceptible through the use of the adverb ‘nay’, showing that the locutor is attempting *in vivo* (as if she were performing the text) to come to the right phrasing for the idea she attempts to convey. Even if a high, dignified tone is kept up throughout, a form of oral presence emerges **from the to-the-moment effort** to put a reflection into words. Precisely, the mind in the process of exposing thoughts as they come along is what we get constantly in Bennett’s narrative, minus the single story telling arc!

Barring the lexis and insistence on the metaphysical (faith, Invisible) and high register: ‘Lethean’, **the existential dimension is common to Eliot and Bennett**, whose narrator through her self exile shares Silas’s lot:

If you are not from a particular place the history of that particular place will dwell inside you differently to how it dwells within those people who are from this particular place. Your connection to certain events that define the history of that particular place is not straightforward because none of your ancestors were in any way involved in or affected by these events. You have no stories to relate and compare, you have no narrative to inherit and run with, and all the names are strange ones that mean nothing to you at all. And it’s as if the history of a particular place knows all about the blankness you contain. (83-84)

Oddly, this introduction of ‘ancestors’ and ‘inherit’ smacks of moth-balled Victorianism, a far cry from the ‘wider ecology of the present’. What is striking, however, on top of the coiling syntax filled with echoic redundancies (particular place, no less than five times!) is the agency accorded to history, that is alleged to be privy to the vacuum inside the narrator’s mind. This begs the question of what the word history actually refers to.

At a deeper, more general level, both *SM* and *P* trigger reflections which have **epistemological significance for the discipline of historiography** (the way time, and writing about time, may be thought of). The continuity of historical time is hampered in *SM*, where, according to Shuttleworth, ‘The laws of consequences’ (cause and effect), break from a linear model of psychology, because catalepsy, the eruption of chance [the loss of rational control] upset the operation of uniform law. Therefore history would be based on the premises of catastrophism rather than on uniformitarian theory’ (81) [See Gillian Beer, a little difficult without any background]. In *Pond* it is the saturation of humdrum, trivial details and incidents of the quotidian which prevents the access to a more totalising historical outlook.

What is also common to the two books is **the absence**, or attenuation (in the case of *Silas Marner*), **of a model of patriarchal time**, what Muñoz terms ‘**straight time**’. Even if Eppie marries at the end, she does not embrace a heteronormative ancestry and vindicates the nurturing function of her father and mother until the very end. *Pond*’s temporality is shot through with a quantity of micro-events and begins on ‘the cusp of female individuation’ (13), without ever closing itself on a fixed, stabilised female individuality. To this extent it is **an instantiation of queer time**.

➤ **‘Exteriorization of the mind’** (Benjamin Morgan)

Contemporary specialists of Victorian studies, notably Benjamin Morgan in *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (2017) have shown how the aesthetic experience in the nineteenth century progressively stopped being an intellectual, or spiritual pursuit to engage with **materiality**. The material was, on the one hand, the body (the senses, emotions and the affects), but also ‘physiological psychology’ (Lewes): what we would call today neurons and synapses and, on the other, what comes into the making of art (pigment in painting, stone in sculpture, pen and ink in writing). Interestingly Bennett spends a few pages on the material conditions in which her writing takes place, choice of the pen, colour of the ink and so forth: ‘Time was I’d have any number of fountain pens on the go at the same time, but they were not interchangeable for the reason that they each contained a different coloured cartridge and therefore had a specific and distinct function’. (87-88).

The Victorian age, by leaving the abstract, transcendental realm of art as pure intellectual form, as exemplified through Kant’s philosophy for example, initiated a ‘**material**’ or ‘**outward turn**’ whose tangible manifestations may be seen in *Silas Marner* and *Pond*.

This can be seen first through **the close entanglement of subjects with their material environments**. *Silas Marner* is immersed in the material world surrounding him, and co-engaged with some objects with which he seems to develop what amounts to a fetishistic attachment. Eliot goes even further by suggesting the existence of **a mutual attachment between human and object, a reciprocal link of interdependency**: ‘like all objects to which a man devotes himself, they had fashioned him into correspondence with themselves’ (42) The privileged bond – the narrator speaks of ‘sap of affection’ (20) – that unites Silas and an earthenware, to the point of being shaken by grief when he accidentally breaks this utensil, is proof of his paroxysmal attachment with an object. **The ontological man/object hierarchy is even effaced** when Silas and his loom become one single entity, convinced that he is, that his loom is conscious of him (19). The narrator anatomises ‘the pulsation of desire and satisfaction’ (10) between Silas, the loom and his gold. It is as if Silas’s psychological life were no longer circumscribed within **his own individual mind**, but was **dispersed amongst the objects of his life**: ‘psychical Life has no one special centre: it belongs to the whole, and animates the whole’. (Lewes qtd. in Shuttleworth, 85)

The omnipresence of objects which are on a par with the anonymous narrator, when they do not crowd her out, is a distinctive feature of *Pond*. The section titled ‘Control Knobs’ is a snide account of the tyranny objects can exert day in day out. The narrator is obsessed by the idea that her kitchen range will soon pack up on her, as there is only one control knob in functioning order left. This dreadful prospect pushes her to make all kinds of assumptions, and it fills up her mind. For example, from the trade name of the kitchen range, ‘Belling’, she infers a whole list of all the places that ‘Belling’ calls up, from B&B, to grotty domestic interiors and, through a chain of associations to ‘nail scissors’ in a bathroom and a ‘grizzled window’ (75-76). Bennett has commented on the importance of list-making in her writing: ‘List-making has always been a natural feature of my writing. Inventories reveal what and how I see, and I like where they take me. They almost always begin in the physical world, with what is in front of me, and these mundane items trigger associations, they connect with and conjure up phenomena that isn’t in front of me and but is always present in me – so a list charts reality and fantasy bouncing off one another.’ (*Checkout* 19, 226) As for ‘Thing Theory’, from clutter to pantechnicon and *victoriana* in neo-Victorian studies, it is, to all intents and purposes, a fruitful direction in Victorian studies (see ‘Thinking Objectively: An Overview Of ‘Thing Theory’ in Victorian Studies, in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2012, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2012), pp. 347-35).

To return to the ‘Control Knobs’ of the kitchen appliance, their control was not limited to the domestic throwback but extended to the writing of the whole section. In this case, objects did exert their sway.

➤ Investing/covering/investigating the as-yet not narrated

Because ecology is also **concerned with the emergent**, with **what is not as yet shaped into a definite form**, it considers what is still at an incipient stage, without any certainty that the unformed, which is part and parcel of the messiness of life, will ever be actualised into a tangible, observable reality. In fiction, this entails **coming to grips with the non-narrated, and perhaps non-narratable**. Here again, this is a preoccupation shared by *Silas Marner* and *Pond*.

In his isolation, Silas is deprived of any social links and therefore severed from the activity of story-telling, which interpersonal exchanges, however limited, render necessary. Hence, habits and mechanical repetitions, which preclude the possibility of the unpredictable, are Silas’s sole guides. He thinks only of what he is going to have for dinner or contemplates the comforting prospect of beholding his gold in the secrecy of hearth and home. However, Eliot goes deeper in her exploration of what escapes narration, by analysing the potential significance of what is as yet a blank, a vacuum:

The lapse of time during which a given event has not happened, is, in this logic of habit, constantly alleged as reason why the event should never happen, even if the lapse of time is precisely the added condition which makes the event imminent. (41)

Eliot points to the treacherousness of the void, i.e. absence of event, for those who have grown used to leading uneventful lives. A life which is, on the face of it, totally deprived of any narrative interest because it is dull, flat, and monotonous, may actually contain the seeds of an incident. If anything this void may turn out to be ominous in retrospect.

Likewise, Bennett pays heed to what is apparently contradictory with the act of telling, to imply that **life in and of itself is opposed to story telling** ‘Everybody knows deep down that

life is as much about the things that do not happen' (95) This is in itself is a challenge to novelists striving towards realism. This is what leads her to spend time writing about an event that will ultimately not take place, as if **to kill the *raison d'être* of narrating**, in a way:

Then just two days before the big day, I bumped into a man in town who is the boyfriend of one of my neighbours. They can't get anyone to speak, he said. Who can't, I said. The girls can't, he said. Oh, I said, I thought the landlady's sister was going to speak. She was, he said, but she's changed her mind and they don't want to do it themselves. That's a shame, I said. You'd be very good at that, he said. I'm not doing it, I said. (44)

So the whole point of this long-winded rigamarole of an exchange, in which the words 'say' and 'speak' are bandied about, is to come to the conclusion that no one is going to speak on the big day, so **to establish a non-event**.

Finally both *Silas Marner* and *Pond* evoke a mystique of an undeciphered origin of language, the first by inferring that 'language is a stream that is almost sure to smack of mingled soil' (78) while the latter implies that there is a language existing below and beyond the tongue we have been trained to use 'I haven't yet discovered what my first language is so for the time being I use English words in order to say things'. (40) and the whole section 'Words Escape Me' (124-127) (to be continued)

### **STEP 7 Refocusing on Author, Authority and Auctoriality**

Wrapping up by underscoring a few ideas. Author, Authority and Auctoriality has been approached through the prism of ecology. This essentially postulates the erasure of the prominence of the human subject over nature, things, machines, what is designated as the non-human. A first avenue to consider is the fragmentation of the unified authorial voice, Eliot would have afforded a good example through *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*. However it is *Silas Marner's* treatment of space-time and the phenomenological take on existential solitude which qualifies it for a dialogue with *Pond*. Obviously not the whole novel is considered as only Silas's immediate response to his environment and his response to a private event (Eppie's arrival) are relevant. So the reading which is proposed emphasises openings, alternative trajectories rather than holism, silences, cracks, vacuum rather than fully controlled plenitude. This is *Pond's* hallmark, and this is already present, albeit at an incipient stage in *Silas Marner*.

A final point would be the sensation that everything cannot be put into words, the lingering persistence of what may exceed language, an indefinite sense of awe which is suggested both in *Silas Marner* 'it is difficult to enter into that simple, untaught state of mind in which the form and feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection' (14) and *Pond* 'I use English words in order to say things. I expect I will always have to do it that way; regrettably I don't think my first language can be written down at all. I'm not sure it can be made external you see.' (The Big Day, 40) In both cases there is the acknowledgment of what amounts to the failure of authorship, a challenge that cannot be overcome.