

Foreword

By September 1860 Mary Ann Evans had been writing for three years as George Eliot. She was 40 and already had two successful novels behind her – *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Over the summer she'd been in Italy, researching what she imagined would be her third novel, *Romola*. When she returned to England, however, she became distracted by a story which, she told her publisher, “came across my other plans by a sudden inspiration”. It was a story, she explained, “of old-fashioned village life, which has unfolded itself from the merest millet-seed of thought”.

Only a month later, on 15th February 1861, she sent John Blackwood 230 pages of the manuscript, and was able to predict then that the “entire story will make 100 pages more”.

From start to finish, *Silas Marner* took six months. The novel was published on 2 April 1861. To most twenty-first century novelists this might seem a feat in itself – not only the timescale, but the linear surety and control of composition; but it is even more remarkable given the physical and emotional pressures Eliot was under during those months.

By now Eliot was openly living with George Henry Lewes – a brave and radical flouting of convention - and signing herself generally, ‘Marian Evans Lewes’. The couple were unable to marry as George Lewes already had a wife, whom he was unable to divorce on the finicky grounds that he'd condoned her adultery. In September 1860 they'd moved from the outskirts of the city into central London; they moved within London again in mid-December. Time was being eaten up by the petty demands of house-hunting and sorting out domestic arrangements. Writing to her friend Sara Hennell, George Eliot confesses, “I was suffering from...extreme languor and unbroken fatigue from morning to night – a state which is always accompanied in me physically by utter self-

distrust and despair of ever being equal to the demands of life.”

In her journal, she writes, “the loss of the country has seemed very bitter to me”. Ruefully she tells Sara that, “in our own drawing room, I mean to have a paradise of greenness”. Both her state of mind and her strong impulse to assuage it must surely have influenced the tale of loss and redemption, the imaginative retreat to rural life, that became *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*.

Silas Marner is an unlikely hero, a wretchedly unhandsome weaver prone to epileptic fits. The one thing in his favour, as far as his creator might be concerned, is that his exile bucks the industrial revolution trend. Rather than abandoning the country for the economic and social lure of city life, Marner is driven out of the city into “the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England”.

In classic pastoral style the action is set back in time. From the tone established in the very first sentence – “In the days when the spinning-wheels hummed busily...” – we could almost have woken up in Chaucer’s England or, even further afield, in the middle of a fairy tale. But this whimsical mode is fairly swiftly overlaid as George Eliot engages with the specifics of Raveloe life. She had written to John Blackwood stating her intention to give her “sort of legendary tale” a “more realistic treatment” and the resulting novel is set very specifically at the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the Napoleonic Wars.

So, a potentially idyllic pastoral is shot through with historicity. We observe the social and economic effect on the home front of the war; the corruption and lassitude of the local upper class; the petty squabbles of village worthies trying to maintain pecking order; and the despite-it-all kindness of a good woman, whose homespun, pragmatic take on Christianity is an antidote to the intransigent radical religion of ‘Lantern Yard’, of which Silas has so devastatingly fallen foul.

Temporality is used as the overt structure of the novel. George

Eliot is emphatic about the fifteen years Marner has lived in Raveloe by the time the narrative gets going, and the sixteen years after that in which in 'Part Two' we return to the village to discover what has become of him and the child Eppie, whom he has adopted as his own.

Notably, against this very precise account of time there are dramatic and unaccountable moments out-of-time, most vividly exemplified by Silas's fits, described as "a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness". These occur at fatefully significant points in the story and have been considered by some as too convenient facilitators of the plot. But they seem much more integral to the framework than this reading would suggest, part of what, in the 1967 Penguin introduction, Q D Leavis described as the novel's 'pregnant construction'.

There are other places at which George Eliot plays with a kind of dramatic suspension: the point, for instance, at which Silas, having raced to 'The Rainbow' pub to announce his missing gold, is kept in narrative limbo at the door, while we are given a whole chapter's worth of eavesdropping on the village characters gathered around the bar. Having skipped through the years we are now slowed to the actual pace of time passing, forced to listen politely to the halting conversation, with a growing frustration to let Silas in to the assembled company in order to set in motion his revelation and any potential for resolution. Time past has become acutely time present.

Although Eliot is at great pains to situate the action among and in the 'real', she never wholly jettisons the underlying power of fairy tale. Although a socially and morally complex one, she allows the world she creates to be susceptible to the romanticism of pastoral. Like a forest of Arden, the rural environment of Raveloe exerts an almost allegorical power. It is a place sufficient to itself, a parallel world, capable of providing a neutral ground upon which present-day political concerns might air their differences.

George Eliot was a great admirer of Wordsworth and bemoans his death (a decade earlier) as he is the only reader, she tells Blackwood, who she can imagine being interested in her present novel. The epigraph is from Wordsworth's elegiac 'Michael: A Pastoral Poem'. Eliot chooses to take and follow the promise of the poem - the gift of a child and the attendant 'forward-looking thoughts', rather than its dark conclusion.

When Silas is robbed of his gold, it is as if he has been robbed of his future too. He becomes utterly bound by the tyranny of the present, "deafened and blinded more and more to all things except the monotony of his loom and the repetition of his web." Given how often he is associated with a spider, there is a subtle reversal of expectation in his final transformation. Silas's slow epiphany is marked not by an exaltation of being, but by a reduction. He is compared to a fly: "even to the old winter flies that come crawling forth in the early spring sunshine, and warming him into joy because she had joy". The diminution, because it allows Silas to discover the power of empathy, becomes in fact its opposite: an amplification. Suffused with the momentum of the eternally forward-looking season - Spring - Silas has reached an understanding of what several years earlier (in *The Natural History of German Life* 1856) Eliot usefully defines as the business and process of 'Art': "a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowman beyond the bounds of our personal lot".

There is another metaphorical occasion in the novel, only truly revealed on re-reading, which shows how, by this time, Eliot was exceeding her own brief:

Silas's ultimate redemption turns crucially on a twist of the plot: the stealing of his gold by the local squire's dissolute son Dunstan. In Silas' desperate attempt to rationalize the disappearance, clutching at straws, the narrator comments, "A man falling into dark waters seeks a momentary footing even on sliding stones..."

On first reading, this might strike us as a fine and serviceable metaphor. But on second reading, with the benefit of hindsight, it astonishes. For at the very moment it occurs in the narrative, we know that outside the cottage, in the dark and fog, Dunstan's fate is being sealed. The metaphor becomes gruesomely specific. A comparative condition for Silas is simultaneously grim temporal reality for Dunstan, the deadly consequence of which is revealed at the end of the novel.

That metaphor, then, is a stroke of genius, as if it arises *sui generis* from the text, the germ of Eliot's 'millet-seed' visibly unfolding before our eyes.

In this most economic and symbolically pregnant of her novels, George Eliot achieves a tremendous balancing act. From symmetries of structure down to the felicities of language, she juggles with precarious systems of belief: nature versus nurture, city versus countryside, time past versus time present. Even the first reader of the novel read it from the vantage point of one remove, a present time. It is this dimension – a consciousness besieged by the peculiar preoccupations of its age, unsure of itself and beliefs, which are constantly challenged and capable of being undone - that any subsequent reader brings with them too, and which Eliot so richly exploits.

Hoarding and profligacy, financial ruin, the insidious effects of a war fought elsewhere, the problems of childcare: *Silas Marner* is surely an urgent fable for our times, renewing its relevancies with every reading.

Jane Feather
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