

PENGUIN CLASSICS



GEORGE ELIOT

SILAS MARNER





SILAS MARNER

Mary Ann (Marian) Evans was born in 1819 in Warwickshire. In 1828 she was sent to Miss Wallington's school in Nuneaton, where she met and was greatly influenced by the Rev. John Edmund Jones, an evangelical preacher who makes several appearances in her novels. In 1836 her mother died and Marian became her father's housekeeper, educating herself in her spare time. In 1841 she moved to Coventry, and met Charles and Caroline Bray, local progressive intellectuals. Through them she was commissioned to translate Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and met the publisher John Chapman, who, when he purchased the *Westminster Review* in 1851, made her his managing editor. She moved to London and met Herbert Spencer (whom she nearly married, only he found her too 'morbidly intellectual') and the versatile man-of-letters George Henry Lewes. Lewes was separated from his wife, but with no possibility of divorce. In 1854 he and Marian decided to live together, and did so until Lewes's death in 1878. It was he who encouraged her to turn from philosophy to fiction, and during those years, under the name of George Eliot, she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt: the Radical*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, as well as numerous essays, articles and reviews. George Eliot died in 1880, only a few months after marrying J. W. Cross, an old friend and admirer, who became her first biographer. She was buried beside Lewes at Highgate. George Eliot combined a formidable intelligence with imaginative sympathy and acute powers of observation, and became one of the greatest and most influential of English novelists. Her choice of material widened the horizons of the novel and her psychological insights radically influenced the novelist's approach to characterization. *Middlemarch*, considered by most to be her masterpiece, was said by Virginia Woolf to be '... one of the few English novels written for grown-up people'.

Q. D. Leavis was married to the distinguished literary critic Dr F. R. Leavis, and taught in Cambridge for many years. Her publications include *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Peregrine), *Lectures in America* and *Dickens the Novelist*, which has been published in Penguins (the two latter books written jointly with her husband), and two volumes of *Collected Essays*. She also edited *Jane Eyre* for Penguin Classics. Q. D. Leavis died in 1981.

George Elwell

SILAS MARNER

The Weaver of Raveloe

'A child, more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to declining man,
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts.'

WORDSWORTH

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY Q. D. LEAVIS

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

Silas Marner first published 1861
First published in Penguin Books 1944
This edition published in the Penguin English Library 1967
Reprinted in Penguin Classics 1985
9 10 8

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Set in Linotype Georgian

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INTRODUCTION

I

It is in *Silas Marner* that we come closest to a George Eliot who is everywhere present in her letters and Journal and in other people's reminiscences of her, but who has been buried by the legend of the masculine blue-stocking, the editor of the Benthamite review, the admirer of Comte, the student of all the ancient and modern languages, the friend of Herbert Spencer and the consort of G. H. Lewes, that middleman of all the arts and sciences. This other George Eliot reread the *Pilgrim's Progress* while reading the newly-published *Origin of Species* and having reported of the Darwin that 'it is not impressive, from want of luminous and orderly presentation', went on to note that she was 'profoundly struck with the true genius manifested in the simple, vigorous, rhythmic style' of Bunyan. This was the George Eliot who wrote to Lady Ponsonby to beg her to 'Consider what the human mind *en masse* would have been if there had been no such combination of elements in it as has produced poets. All the philosophers and *savants* would not have sufficed to supply that deficiency. And how can the life of nations be understood without the inward life of poetry – that is, of emotion blending with thought?'

Acquaintance with her life is still best made through the volume called *George Eliot's Life* published by her widow Mr J. W. Cross, which he made out of selections from her Journal and letters and the reminiscences he collected from her relatives and friends. The Letters can now be read complete in the edition by Professor G. Haight, who has now published a biography too. Cross himself gives all the necessary details of her appearance and qualities. He tells of 'the organ-like tones of her voice', of her fine brows and musician's hands,* and while mentioning her 'impressive speech which

* She was an accomplished pianist, performed with professional musicians in her own home, and was an ardent concert-goer and opera-addict, even accepting Wagnerian opera with sympathetic intelligence.

claimed something like an awed attention from strangers',* he tries to stress her hearty laughter and humour and her pride in being a skilful housekeeper, concluding: 'She had the instinctively feminine qualities which lend a rhythm to the movement of life'. All this is borne out by Henry James's letter to his father after first meeting George Eliot: 'a delightful expression, a voice soft and rich as that of a counselling angel – a mingled sagacity and sweetness – a broad hint of a great underlying world of reserve, knowledge, pride and power – a great feminine dignity and character in these massively plain features'. Cross's account of his first meeting with his future wife satisfies one's notions of her personality but he gives a very unexpected insight into the Lewes home in 1878, when G. H. Lewes was near his end:

between bouts of pain he sang through, with great *brio*, though not much voice, the greater portion of the tenor part in the *Barber of Seville* – George Eliot playing his accompaniment, and both of them thoroughly enjoying the fun.

George Eliot was nearly sixty at this time so the anecdote should correct any false idea that she was a solemn prig.

II

It is evident that by the time George Eliot came to write *Silas Marner* her ideas about the Novel had matured. She confesses that while 'there are portraits in the "Clerical Scenes"', 'that was my first bit of art, and my hand was not well in'. In *Adam Bede* she claimed there were no actual portraits from life, and rose to some theorizing about the art of fiction, offering in the text a well-known defence of Dutch pictures of 'homely existence' which is generally taken to be a defence of realism'. But it is in fact a quite different argument; the intention is to plead for humble life to be

*Not all: Henry James notes with some amusement mixed with his respect her 'tendency to *aborder* only the highest themes' when he attended her *salon*. But she did not find it easy to talk to a number of people, or to strangers at all.

treated in art on theoretic grounds of moral obligation, not aesthetic ones: 'In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! Therefore let Art always remind us of them ... your common labourer, who *gets his own bread*, and eats it vulgarly but *creditably* with his own pocket-knife'. These are the people, she says, who have '*done the rough work of the world*'. (All my italics.) This is more Radical than even Wordsworth's grounds for choosing humble life as the subject-matter for true poetry. And this Radicalism is an important constituent of *Silas Marner*.

By 1859 George Eliot could write to a friend: 'I have turned out to be an artist – with words'. And after *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* the remarks she makes in her letters and Journal about her own books and the books she reads show more sophistication and more understanding of the problems a novelist has to solve. Whereas in 1857 she was saying: 'my stories always grow out of my psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*', by 1866 she has completely changed her position. There are some sign-posts on the way: her report that 'I went to hear *Faust* at Covent Garden; I was much thrilled by the great symbolical situations – more, I think, than I had ever been before', and her numerous accounts of hearing orchestral concerts or herself playing the piano in chamber-music concerts at home, and her unexpected dictum 'The Opera is a great, great product'. In 1866 in a letter to her friend Frederic Harrison she makes an important revelation of the way in which she now (soon after finishing *Felix Holt*) recognized that she composed:

That is a tremendously difficult problem; its difficulties ... press upon me, who have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic – if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram – it becomes the most offensive

of all teaching. . . . Well, then, consider the sort of agonizing labour to an English-fed imagination to make out a sufficiently real background for the desired picture, – to get breathing individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience – will, as you say, ‘flash’ conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy.

Far from the ‘portrait’ being the foundation of a novel or the ‘story’ being dictated by her ‘psychological conception of the dramatis personae’, she now feels the danger of being too schematic and of failing to create convincingly and to ‘group’ naturally enough the lives needed to incarnate her ‘ideas’ *‘as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh’*. That is, she now starts with the ideas, and stresses what she also calls ‘symbolic situations’, and ‘the myth’ – because she is preoccupied with her *theme*. *Silas Marner* is the first novel in which she is seen to have worked like this but, as I hope to show, she did not have to do this consciously: the theme forced itself on her. *Felix Holt, the Radical* followed in theme out of *Silas Marner* and as a complement to *Adam Bede*, but the ‘idea’ in *Felix Holt* was a subject outside herself, it had to be read up for like *Romola* (as we see from her Journal) and though this subject embodied some of her most cherished beliefs these could not be ‘incarnated’ so naturally in felt life as in *Silas Marner*. In 1868 she makes an observation about Greek tragedy which repeats the theory of creative composition she had explained to Frederic Harrison earlier:

The Greeks were not taking an artificial, entirely erroneous standpoint in their art – a standpoint which disappeared altogether with their religion and their art. They had the same essential elements of life presented to them as we have, and their art symbolized these in grand schematic forms.

So it was not only the concept of Nemesis that George Eliot gained from reading Greek. Her youthful enthusiasm for Scott had yielded at the *Silas Marner* period to a critical view of his inadequate ideas of composition in spite of his fertile imagination, his ability to tell a story and ‘create’

characters: 'But somehow experience and finished faculty rarely go together. Dearly beloved Scott had the greatest combination of experience and faculty – yet even he never made the most of his treasures, at least in his *mode* of presentation' (1861). Shakespeare, Molière ('I think the *Misanthrope* the finest, most complete production of *its kind* in the world', she wrote in 1859), Bunyan, Greek tragedy, opera, orchestral and chamber-music, we see, helped her to extend the scope and richness of the novel and make a more intelligent use of her 'experience and faculty'.

III

In his reminiscences *The Middle Years*, written in his old age, Henry James when starting on his memories of George Eliot refers to her as 'the author of *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*', a selection from her novels intended either to represent her at her best or as covering two distinct kinds in her creative art, or both. He goes on to describe her work in general as 'a great treasure of beauty and humanity, of applied and achieved art, a testimony, historic as well as aesthetic, to the deeper interest of the intricate English aspects'. Of none of her novels is this more true than *Silas Marner*; one could only have wished that he had been specific. What deeper interest of the aspects of England, what aesthetic and historic testimony, does *Marner* represent? That it is not to be dismissed as the mere moral 'faery-tale' or '*divertissement*' of many critics we might have guessed from the quite exceptional nature of its origin, of which we luckily have an account. Our first knowledge of this book is a note in George Eliot's Journal (28 November 1860): 'I am now engaged in writing a story – the idea of which came to me after our arrival in this house [a depressing furnished London house] and which has thrust itself between me and the other book [*Romola*] I was meditating. It is *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe*.' Thus at the outset *Silas* was identified by his trade. And we note also that this same day's entry in her Journal opens:

Since I last wrote in this Journal, I have suffered much from physical weakness, accompanied with mental depression. The loss of the country has seemed very bitter to me, and my want of health and strength has prevented me from working much – still worse, has made me despair of ever working well again.

Six weeks later, in writing to tell her publisher of her new book she again stresses the involuntary nature of this new undertaking: 'a story which came *across* my other plans by a sudden inspiration'. She adds: 'It is a story of old-fashioned village life, which has unfolded itself from the merest millet-seed of thought.' On 10 March 1861 she notes: 'Finished *Silas Marner*.' Previously she had replied to Blackwood's comment, that so far as he had read he found it 'sombre', that she was not surprised and doubted if it would interest anybody 'since Wordsworth is dead', but assured him that it was not sad on the whole, 'since it sets in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations'. Thus the Weaver's story belonged to the village life of the past and exemplified a theory congenial to Wordsworth (and Coleridge); and the impulse to write it sprang from a deep depression of health and spirits due to living in conditions which were the very negation of 'old-fashioned village life', a depression that, as we see, was morbid, since it involved irrational despair of succeeding again as a novelist, in spite of the great success of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. The letter to Blackwood ends: 'It came to me first of all quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollections of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen weaver with a bag on his back; but as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment' – that is, she dropped the association with a faery-tale figure. And this is borne out by her saying that she felt 'as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than prose fiction', 'except that, under that treatment, there could not be an equal play of humour'. The humour is not only quite as much a characteristic of the book she finally wrote as the 'poetry', but is itself no simple matter; it contains much irony of various kinds and a great

deal of pointed social criticism which no light-weight legendary tale could support, not even those art-versions of the faery-tale so characteristic of nineteenth-century literature with which *Marnier* might be associated if superficially read. Even the author's own account here is misleading; that something essential has been left out is proved by the truer, fuller version contained in a letter from Major Blackwood to his wife in 1861: '*Silas Marnier* sprang from her childish recollection of a man with a stoop and expression of face that led her to think that he was an alien from his fellows.' Physical deformity and the stamp of alienation are the important factors; the bag then ceases to be sinister, suggestive of a figure in Grimms' Tales, and connects the man with the one in another vision that we often feel to be behind George Eliot's in *Marnier*, the Man bowed under 'a great Burden upon his back' crying lamentably, '*What shall I do?*' and setting out from the City of Destruction to another country to seek salvation.* It is in keeping with this serious intention that the author insisted that in the title and in advertising the book the word *story* should be avoided, undoubtedly because she felt this was a misleading description, tending to make the book appear something slight and fanciful. And rightly, for in *Marnier* she had found a framework within which she could present the problems that pressed on her, that life had shown her must be solved or managed, and

*There are many overtones from *Pilgrim's Progress*, e.g. Silas has to live away from the village at the Stone-pits by the Waste; a consequence of his adopting Eppie is that the waste is drained and a flower-garden and fertile fields replace it; in his youth Silas has worshipped in Lantern Yard, 'a turning out of Prison Street, where the jail is'; he comes from a 'region called "North'ard"' which, while suggesting the Industrial North to us, seems in the mouths of the peasants who are quoted to be in the same parts as Mr Honest's 'Town of Stupidity' where ' "we lie more off from the Sun, and so are more cold and senseless" ' than even the City of Destruction itself - Bunyan consistently uses descriptions of places for allegorical purposes. It is his Giant Despair who has disabling fits, which may have suggested Silas's equally convenient 'fits'. But unlike Christian and the rest, Silas finds his reward and the end of his pilgrimage in Raveloe on earth.

which were more than merely personal. Though *Marnier* prepares us for its successors *Middlemarch* and *Felix Holt* it is superior to these in an art of concentration that uses always the minimum – the loaded word and the uniquely representative act – an art which puts *Marnier* with Shakespeare and Bunyan rather than with other Victorian novels. It is very evidently the source of Hardy's novel-writing, but he never anywhere equalled the characterization of Raveloe and the talk in the Rainbow in his efforts at the same kind of thing, nor did he ever manage to invent a plot where coincidence, as in *Marnier*, is felt as part of a natural and just order of things, or a plot which, like *Marnier's*, perfectly exemplifies its theme.

Leaving aside for the moment why this book insisted on being written when its author was struggling to write a quite different novel, we ask first: Why was this stooping man alien? what country did he not belong to and why?

The book begins by deliberately establishing in 'anthropological' terms the conditions of a poor nineteenth-century Christian whose burden is not Original Sin but loss of faith and of a community – in fact what the City had given him in the way of a religion and a community was not recognizable as such by the traditions of the countryside, the village life in which the English civilized themselves. To this, the original state, the man makes his way by instinct with his only skill, his loom, and all that is left of his religion, his Bible.* In Raveloe the Industrial Revolution has not yet been felt and it is the countryside of the timeless past of packhorse and spinning-wheel, of the organic community and the unified society. To the people of Raveloe

*"The Bible as you brought wi' you from that country," says Dolly, confirming that in spite of having lost his faith he had kept his Bible. This is precisely what George Eliot did, valuing it, says Cross, who was in a position to know, 'not only from early association, but also from the profound conviction of its importance in the development of the religious life of man'. In 1862 we find her writing of G. H. Lewes: 'He is not fond of reading the Bible himself, but "sees no harm" in my reading it.'

professional weaving, though necessary, is an alien way of working; it produces 'pallid, undersized men who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race', objects therefore of a superstitious repugnance; we are first shown the weaver through the eyes of a peasantry. The machinery *they* know is their servant; the country-bred novelist understood the real distinction between mechanical aids and a mechanized industry, and her feeling for music provided the natural human reaction: she expresses it in the countryfolk's perception of a difference in rhythm – 'the cheerful trotting of the winnowing-machine and the simple rhythm of the flail' – human or animal rhythms, contrasted with the mechanical rhythm which is *imposed* on the worker by his loom; significantly Marner is described as working *in* his loom, which eventually turns him into a machine component, 'so that he had the same sort of impression as a handle or a crooked tube, which has no meaning standing apart'. The signs of his enslavement are 'the bent treadmill attitude' and the short sight, produced by his work, that cuts him off from seeing his fellow-men both actually and metaphorically. He is the opposite of the country craftsman like Adam Bede whose healthy livelihood made him a superior type of manhood.

Silas's solitary working round could find compensation only in an inward spiritual life and 'incorporation in a narrow religious sect'. But the religious life available to him was not beneficial, taking as guidance a pathetically ignorant inner light ('Lantern Yard') which has proved delusive when tested. Moreover, it has deprived him of his cultural inheritance (represented, by a stroke of genius, by the medicinal herbs) without providing anything in the way of education in living instead. George Eliot presents more of the truth about Dissent in *Marner* than in the earlier and very partial account of Methodism in *Adam Bede* – *Marner* is more truthful in many ways. Besides the problem of the machine toil which is dehumanizing, she has brought in another major problem of her age, the threat to the traditional

heritage by the now dominant Evangelical outlook.* 'The little store of wisdom which his mother had imparted to him as a solemn bequest' (the knowledge and preparation of medicinal wild herbs) Calvinism had taught him to mistrust, 'so that the inherited delight he had in wandering in the fields in search of foxglove and dandelion and coltsfoot began to wear to him the character of a temptation.' This symbol is finely chosen, for it conveys that help for others, contact with Nature, and a kind of education, as well as the satisfaction of knowing he is maintaining the wise lore of his ancestors, are all denied him. There is thus a multiple typicality about the case of Silas Marner. In him the dire effects of the Industrial Revolution are examined; the current form of religion, a Christian fundamentalism, has finished the effects of denaturing him by disinheriting him. How can such losses to the race be made good? – it is George Eliot who describes Marner's kind as 'a disinherited race'.

Driven by 'something not unlike the feeling of primitive men, when they fled from an unpropitious deity', Silas leaves the alleys for the immemorial countryside. (It is not an accident that Raveloe lies in the 'rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England', the countryside of George Eliot's infancy, which was still in essentials Shakespeare's.) To Silas, fresh from Lantern Yard, the lives of the people there seem merely unspiritual and misdirected ('women laying up a stock of linen for the life to come' is not only humorous but has a scriptural phrasing hinting their blindness to their eternal welfare, or what seems blindness to Silas); but as we presently see, their materialism is an art of living. The clue to the basis of their lives is in a word we keep meeting: 'neighbourly'. Silas, with his refusal to mix by attending church or dropping in to gossip at the Rainbow or courting a girl, is suspect.

* Compare an earlier novel, *Alton Locke* (1850), and we find Kingsley trying through the technique of fictional autobiography to register the deprivation suffered by the poor London boy, cut off from green fields, and – by his mother's religion – from poetry. Bewick's *Memoir* is a useful contrast to both *Alton Locke* and *Silas Marner*.