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THE TWENTY-SIXTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE, 1997

Delivered by Professor Gillian Beer

A TROUBLED FRIENDSHIP

Edith Simcox is now usually remembered, if at all, as the woman who recorded in a secret journal ('Autobiography of a Shirt Maker') her passionate and physically unrequited love for George Eliot. Yet to her contemporaries Simcox was well known as a philosopher, a distinguished translator of intellectual works from German, an incisive journalist reviewing important works written in French and German as well as English, an ethnographer, and a political activist. She was, under the pen-name 'H. Lawrenny' one of the founding contributors to the Academy in 1869 and appeared for the first time in her own person there as Edith Simcox in March 1873 shortly after writing (still as 'H. Lawrenny') her important essay on *Middlemarch* in January. Her acquaintance with George Eliot began that year. Simcox's *Natural Law: an essay in ethics* (1877) was praised in *Mind*, II (1877) as 'the most important contribution yet made to the Ethics of the Evolution theory' (p. 552). Her co-operative of women shirtmakers not only produced excellent shirts for a decade but largely fulfilled the dream with which they had set out of 'a strictly self-supporting clothes-making factory, where women should do all the work, and divide the profits among them' ('Eight Years of Co-operative Shirt-making', *Nineteenth Century*, June 1884, p. 1039). She composed the Constitution for the Second Socialist International. What then were the incentives of her friendship with the more conservative Marian Lewes? One undoubtedly was that Marian Lewes was George Eliot, the famous novelist, whom Simcox deeply admired; another was that behind the powerful figure of the novelist lay a woman not quite at ease with herself. Understanding their relationship during the 1870s may shed light on George Eliot's late work, as well as on the struggle which engaged Simcox to find a discourse that can include sexuality and socialism, insights and inhibitions. And because friendship produces a third figure, an interlocked self that cannot be reproduced in any other circumstances, this uneven and troubled relationship changes both women.

The faltering voice in the exchange below is that of George Eliot, Marian Lewes, trying to explain to her passionate friend Edith Simcox why she has 'never in all her life cared very much for women.' Edith Simcox, on the contrary, never cared very much for men. Hence their dilemma and the fascination between them.

Then she tried to add what I had already imagined in explanation, that when she was young, girls and women seemed to look on her as somehow 'uncanny' while men were always kind.

The 'uncanniness' of George Eliot interferes repeatedly in her relations with other women, despite her life-long equal friendship with Barbara Bodichon.

George Eliot was a kind of *dea abscondita*, dwelling as Marian Lewes in the highminded isolation of an irregular union that excluded her from social circulation. The only way to encounter her was to go and call and hope to be received. You were either a pilgrim or an intimate. She was known to be there, but sequestered, not to be lightly encountered at social gath-

erings. This powerful stasis monumentalized her. The novelist of community dwelt in what she herself described to Edith Simcox as a 'dual egoism'. Her bodily withdrawal from the throng turned her into a brooding force. Anne Thackeray Ritchie offers a reading of her meeting with George Eliot, replete with detail that enforces the impression of enclosure, privilege, restraint, and even occult learning. Yet the scene has an undertow of sensual life with its measured description of heat and cold, touch discreetly concealed as black satin:

I once had a talk with George Eliot. It was in winter-time with the snow lying on the ground. She sat by the fire in a beautiful black satin gown, with a green-shaded lamp on the table beside her, where I saw German books lying and pamphlets and ivory paper-cutters. She was very quiet and noble, with two steady little eyes and a sweet voice. As I looked I felt her to be a friend, not exactly a personal friend but a good and benevolent impulse.

Subdued lighting and composure; the scene is one that draws attention to its own composition – its self-making, and to the shadowing and driving inward of energies. The stasis achieved or compelled ('not exactly a personal friend') is given a more hostile reading by Lynn Linton in *My Literary Life*: she contrasts the 'frank, genial, natural, and brimful of happiness' young Marian Evans just after 'her flight with George Lewes' with the sibylline elder. 'She was a made woman – not in the French sense – but made by self-manipulation, as one makes a statue or a vase. I have never known any one who seemed to me so purely artificial as George Eliot'. Linton insinuates an upstart mistress by denial ('not in the French sense') and blames George Eliot for that self-fashioning that can find poise only as 'the goddess on her pedestal'. Yet her first biographer Mathilde Blind declares that 'she flung herself, as it were, into other lives, making their affairs, their hopes, their sorrows, her own.... Sympathy was the keynote of her nature, the source of her iridescent humour, of her subtle knowledge of character, and of her dramatic genius.' That sympathy was not self-abnegating; it included resistance to others' demands, as well as a supple exploration of how to sustain impossible relationships by re-naming them. That last was a skill necessary to her as she moved in the 1870s among the meta-kin and pseudo-children who clustered round her under Lewes's tutelage. One of that group has left a record of the dynamics surging through the sober Sunday gatherings. Edith Simcox, with the helpless insight of the rival, watches Johnny Cross establish himself as the favourite child:

I had hardly begun to despair of reaching more interesting topics when the fatal Johnny came in, he had missed his train yesterday & had a book to return by way of pretext.

The next week George Eliot teases her about her crossing with Johnny:

I said I knew I should poison his shirt some day, & she hoped I wouldn't, he saved them a great deal of trouble about money affairs, besides being the best of sons & brothers – I said of course, that was just why, – I was jealous.

George Eliot refers to Cross's own family but Simcox seizes the code of family attachment and makes it refer inward.

Simcox indeed had the capacity to poison Johnny's shirt, as well the desire, here expressed as

awkward joke. Together with Mary Hamilton she organized a co-operative of women shirt-makers – from whom the Leweses as well as other well-to-do people bought freely, often by the half-dozen. Simcox entitled her secret journal (now in the Bodleian Library to whom I am grateful for permission to quote from it) ‘Autobiography of a Shirt Maker’. The shirt of Nessus, clinging to the skin, burning and impossible to remove, represented her own aroused and unrequited sexual longing, as well as a vengeful fantasy about Johnny Cross. The shirt-makers’ co-operative was, at the same time, a free, sober, and reasonably successful social experiment that affirmed Simcox’s achievement as a radical activist.

Edith Simcox has often been represented as an encumbrance to Eliot, even a stalker. She thirsted for what she could not have: George Eliot’s physical love. She consigned that ‘passionate longing’ to a secret journal where she recorded her ‘impatience, resignation, the counting of endless days, heart aching love, and patient gratefulness – to say nothing of Herodotus and Fraser. Oh when, when, when! I am hungry! Oh the howl that is in my mind there are no words to spell, but it echoes wolfishly’.

The fierce abandonment of such passages, reaching beyond language yet quizzically turning to include ‘Herodotus and Fraser’, typifies Simcox’s hyper-conscious secret diary. Within that safe domain she can unloose her emotions and tease out her sexual and social self-knowledge, seeking a discourse for what she knows of her own desire. But it would be a mistake to imagine that the diary mirrors her behaviour in the world or that it includes all her pre-occupations. Simcox was an activist across many fronts, organizing one of the first trade unions for women, serving on the London School Board, founding the Lodgers’ League, writing the constitution for the Second Socialist International, and, later, travelling widely in Europe on socialist affairs, a friend of Morris and Kropotkin. She was also an excellent philosopher and Germanist, an intellectual journalist and a translator for Max Müller. She was the author of *Natural Law* (1877) which *Mind* considered the most formidable exposition of the ethical consequences of evolutionary theory and more important than Herbert Spencer. She was twenty years younger than Eliot. Her career seemed to take up and take further George Eliot’s own early experience as an intellectual journalist and translator. Eliot ceased such work when she began to write novels. Simcox had brought an original work of ethics to fruition and wrote for a variety of journals, among them, most constantly, the neo-Hegelian *Academy*.

To George Eliot, who had begun as a translator of Spinoza and Strauss, Simcox represented, perhaps, a road not taken, an avatar of achievements she had not pursued. The younger woman was also an intellectual challenge, coming from the succeeding generation. When they first met, in 1872, Simcox was 27; by her mid-thirties she was a prominent philosopher. She came closer to George Eliot’s own achievement than any other of the women in George Eliot’s life. She was a potential rival for the acclaim of future generations as well as a ‘daughter’. She became, helplessly, incapacitatingly, a worshipper — and one who suffered acutely as a result of George Eliot’s refusal to comment on her writing. George Eliot remained silent about *Natural Law* for weeks after Edith presented it to her, so that Edith fantasized about having it withdrawn once Trubner had covered his publisher’s costs. (Of course, she may not have read it – but that fatal possibility does not occur to Edith.) When at last she does speak about it it is in terms of a paradox so painful that Edith never again attempts a work of philosophy.

Simcox explains:

I did not think or feel it right – or possible – to be content without action; & to her I spoke my discontent at a life of powerless inaction. She said – love & feel – & I felt a passionate love for her & – oh bathos! – I wrote a book. Then it appeared to me from her criticisms of this book that she thought, not indeed that pleasure & virtue were one, but that virtuous action was the natural fruit of unsought, involuntary happiness, & that no good thing came from any other sort.... That this was horrible I knew gave no assurance why it should not be true, but if true it was a damnable and damning truth.

Without ‘the natural fruit of unsought, involuntary happiness’ achievement is withered on the vine, without value for others as well as for the self. So at least Simcox understood George Eliot’s ‘uncanny’ insight which, medusa-like, seemed to blast her powers as a writer and sexual being. She can only worship, without return. No intellectual outlet can bring release.

George Eliot may have had no such intention but she stopped Simcox in her tracks as a philosopher. Instead, Simcox turned to active life, sustaining her political work even in the face of the Lewes’s disapproval. Later, after George Eliot’s death, she published books again: one, *Episodes in the Life of Men, Women and Lovers* is an amalgam of musing and narratives, straying across relationships through that cross-gender third term of ‘lovers’. Too late in then-current discussions, she published in the nineties the great work on *Primitive Civilisations* which she had presaged and struggled with twenty years earlier – an examination of women’s property rights in ancient cultures that makes clear how ‘rents’ and ‘possessions’ are terms to do with indenture as much as with ownership. That she had learned working alongside women in the co-operative as much as through her study of ancient Egypt. She had learnt it too as they looked for a place to house the shirtmaking co-operative:

We began our quest in what appeared superficially the most desirable streets, and, as we descended gradually in the social scale, we found that we might have been accepted had we wanted a studio, or a school, or even a milliner’s shop, but as shirtmakers we must betake ourselves to humbler and more expensive quarters.... As working shirtmakers, after refreshing our radicalism with a glimpse of ‘th’ oppressor’s scorn, the proud man’s contumely,’ we were fortunate in securing half a house for 90 L., under a landlord whose exceptional amenity explained itself afterwards when we learned that he was an admirer of George Eliot’s works.

George Eliot is mentioned only once in this essay, but her name and writing alleviates and provides ‘half a house’. Simcox’s essay on the co-operative, published in *The Nineteenth Century* in June 1884, looks back with affection on those difficult years when she was engrossed by her passion and yet learning to live an outward life that reached past it.

George Eliot’s need for worship has been well documented. George Henry Lewes managed this side of her life. There is no doubt that he encouraged and controlled the adulation that younger people brought to George Eliot; yet it is also clear that Edith Simcox felt deep affection for him and loved them as an *Ehepaar* as well as yearning for George Eliot alone. George

Eliot seems to have relished the situation some of the time, often with a flirtatious humour. Some of the pseudo-children succeeded in regularizing their relationships with her: Elma Stuart is buried next to her in Highgate cemetery acknowledged as her 'daughter'; Johnny Cross became her second husband having hitherto always been addressed as 'nephew'. The temper of the correspondence between these two while G. H. Lewes was alive reads oddly now:

April 29.78

Dearest Nephew,

I had no opportunity yesterday of thanking you for my transcendently beautiful basket of flowers, which not only cheered me as a sign of your valued affection, but made our table cheerful and supplied some deficit of vivacity in the hostess.

It is a precious thought to me that you care for that part of me which will live when the 'Auntship' is gone – 'non omnis moriar' is a keen hope with me. Yet I liked to be loved in this faulty frail (yet venerable) flesh.

My master insists that I shall go out and walk with him. So I have only three minutes to scribble in.

Always your affectionate

Aunt

The hastily scribbled love-note, the high mortality and the fleshliness, all squeeze themselves rather awkwardly within the anodizing fiction of aunt and nephew. No wonder Edith was jealous of Johnny Cross in this curious meta-family where the children are all in love with the mother. Edith Simcox for a while was invited to call George Eliot 'mother' and then was asked by her not to do so: 'her feeling for me' Edith reports her as saying 'was *not* at all a mother's'. George Eliot tempers the withdrawal by emphasizing that to her the idea of being mother is associated with a 'task', but she is setting Edith outside those cosy family parameters within which Johnny and Elma are included. At the same time she is acknowledging an adult equality between them. The disguise of familial feeling is cast aside. Incest is avoided. What they feel for each other is unequal, but Eliot declares her 'respect and admiration' for Edith. That declaration acts as a fire-break against Edith's passion.

What then did George Eliot draw from the relationship with Edith Simcox? Most of the evidence about their relationship comes now from Simcox. Gordon Haight believed that about 200 letters passed between them. These do not survive. So we must look elsewhere for the traces left by their friendship. And friendship it was, though brought to its intensity by Edith rather than by Marian Lewes. The direct traces are few: George Eliot lent Edith Simcox *The Story of Avis* by the American novelist Elizabeth Phelps. It opens by rewriting the start of *Daniel Deronda* with the inward questioning of whether she was beautiful or not beautiful. Again the gaze stretches questioningly across the room to the one admired. This time, though, instead of a man musing on a woman, it is a woman who muses ardently on another woman. The message between the lender and borrower of the book, if there was one in this act, cannot now be securely deciphered.

Friendship is most frequently written about in terms of accord and closeness. But there are friendships where resistance matters more. Being the one who does not respond in love is an ungrateful role, and a taxing one. In her late writing George Eliot reconsiders whether it necessary to accept the burden of another's need (as *Middlemarch* suggests). Must it be accepted as a claim that solders two people together, though one of them may never have sought the connection? During the years that George Eliot knew Edith Simcox well she was writing her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Simcox described that novel as a 'more depressing book to me than her others, perhaps because it is a faithful transcript of the coexistence of unreconciled tendencies.' In it George Eliot explores repeatedly the *resistance* to claimed relationships and to the demands of others. Daniel's long sought mother has long ago left her son and escaped the roles of Jewish wife and mother in order to become a great singer. She does not now wish or expect to take on again the role of mother. She gives him back his Jewish inheritance and refuses any further personal relationship. Gwendolen feels attachment, and belatedly, only to her mother. Daniel himself supports Gwendolen in her misery but refuses to return her love, shocking the reader who habitually identifies the first narrative appearance as a pair with the expectation that the pair will marry. Eliot shows in this novel that desire cannot assure possession, and has no right to possession, even when it is the child's desire for the mother; another person's will and the larger scope of life may sweep past that need. No wonder Simcox suffered as she found in it 'the faithful transcript of the coexistence of unreconciled tendencies.'

In the same conversation that I cited at the start, and which took place after the death of George Lewes, George Eliot intimately revealed to Simcox her distant feelings toward the Lewes grandchildren. Yet she tells also of her sister's little girl, since dead:

who used to stay with her, & not withstanding the biting things she has written since about maternal follies, she used every night long before bedtime to undress this child & rock her to sleep in her arms, feeling a sort of rapture in the mere presence, even though she might want the time for reading.

That image of rapture and danger in the momentary mother-daughter relationship with her little niece, the allure of the trance-like bodily rhythm as against the trance-like mental occupation, rocking against reading, gives a strange turn to her request in this same conversation that Edith cease to call her mother. Edith does not comment on the juxtaposition and, of course, we are inevitably over-dependent on the honesty and accuracy of her witness. Yet the very scrupulousness with which she makes no such attachment between topics vouches for the voices that we hear from the two friends. Writing sympathy, it seems Marian Lewes knew well, requires sustained resistance.

[Some elements in this paper have appeared in *Women: a Cultural Review*.]