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HOW GEORGE ELIOT CAME TO WRITE FICTION

By Rosemary Ashton

We are celebrating one hundred and fifty years since the publication in volume form of George Eliot's first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, three stories printed first in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* between January and November 1857, and then in two volumes in January 1858. I will tell the story of how George Eliot came to write fiction by moving backwards from the *Scenes* themselves, via George Eliot's journal entry of 6 December 1857, 'How I Came to Write Fiction', to her literary criticism in the *Westminster Review* in the earlier 1850s, and finally to two letters, of 1849 and 1846, in order to demonstrate, with the benefit of hindsight, how we can observe her writing talent appearing more than a decade before she dared to try her hand at fiction, and what we can conclude about her attitude towards identifying herself as a writer of fiction, particularly with reference to the decision to write under a male pseudonym.

The first story, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', began its serialization in *Blackwood's* anonymously, as was the custom for magazine writing at the time. Readers would not expect a name to be attached. But in this case, unusually, even the publishers, John and William Blackwood, were unaware of the identity of the author. It was not until 4 February 1857, after much correspondence about the first story had passed between London and Edinburgh, that Marian Evans wrote to William Blackwood giving him 'my prospective name, as a tub to throw to the whale in case of curious inquiries'.¹ Up to this point, she had let her life's partner George Henry Lewes, a long-time contributor to *Blackwood's* on literary, philosophical, and scientific subjects, negotiate with the Blackwood brothers, only beginning to represent herself directly in the correspondence in January 1857, when she signed herself 'The Author of Amos Barton'. Even after choosing to style herself 'George Eliot', it took her another year, by which time *Scenes of Clerical Life* had appeared in volume form and *Adam Bede* was already being written, to reveal her identity to her 'best and most sympathizing of editors'.²

What the Blackwoods and the readers of their magazine met with in the opening paragraphs of 'Amos Barton' was a discursive introduction to a midland place – Shepperton – at a significant time – 1831, just before the passing of the Reform Act which enlarged the franchise and brought the first reforming parliament into power. The narrator looks back with a mixture of nostalgia and superior humour, including the reader in the survey, inviting him/her to agree about the changes for better or worse which have occurred since 1831, and demonstrating at once a pleasing confidence yet self-deprecation, a reasonable balance which suggests that we are in the company of a fair-minded observer, one who notices details and criticizes, yet at the same time is open-minded, prepared to sympathize or not, after careful scrutiny:

Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago. To be sure, its substantial stone tower looks at you through its intelligent eye, the clock, with the friendly expression of former days; but in everything else what changes! Now there is a wide span of slated roof flanking the old steeple; the windows are tall and symmetrical; the outer doors are resplendent with oak-graining, the inner doors reverentially noiseless with a

garment of red baize; and the walls, you are convinced, no lichen will ever again effect a settlement on – they are smooth and innutrient as the summit of the Revd Amos Barton's head, after ten years of baldness and supererogatory soap.[...]

Immense improvement! says the well-regulated mind, which unintermittently rejoices in the New Police, the Tithe Commutation Act, the penny-post, and all guarantees of human advancement, and has no moments when conservative-reforming intellect takes a nap, while imagination does a little Toryism by the sly, revelling in regret that dear, old, brown, crumbling, picturesque inefficiency is everywhere giving place to spick-and-span new-painted, new-varnished efficiency, which will yield endless diagrams, plans, elevations, and sections, but alas! no picture. Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind: it has an occasional tenderness for old abuses; it lingers with a certain fondness over the days of nasal clerks and top-booted parsons, and has a sigh for the departed shades of vulgar errors.³

The narrative voice is already distinctive for the variously amused, confiding, informative but also imaginative tone it takes towards small-town life at times of change. After finishing 'Janet's Repentance', the last of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Marian looked back in her journal on 6 December 1857 at how she had come to write fiction. The entry begins:

September 1856 made a new era in my life, for it was then I began to write Fiction. It had always been a vague dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel, and my shadowy conception of what the novel was to be, varied, of course, from one epoch of my life to another. But I never went farther towards the actual writing of the novel than an introductory chapter describing a Staffordshire village and the life of the neighbouring farm houses, and as the years passed on I lost any hope that I should ever be able to write a novel, just as I desponded about everything else in my future life.⁴

Here she looks back to her dissatisfied youth, when she had offended her father and brother by ceasing to go to Church with them after her faith had been shaken by reading, among other things, David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*) – a historical study of the Old Testament which she herself translated into English in 1846 – and when both her siblings had married, while she despaired of finding a soulmate to share her life with. Having given up hope of future happiness, she had moved to London after her father's death, finding employment and lodgings with John Chapman, the publisher of her Strauss translation and new owner from 1851 of the *Westminster Review*, for which she wrote a number of knowledgeable and witty reviews which brought her the admiration of many fellow contributors and readers. In 1854 she had embarked on her life-changing journey to Weimar and Berlin with Lewes, who was the very soulmate and life's partner she most needed, but who was unfortunately stuck in a broken marriage. He it was who, recognizing her descriptive ability, her wit, and her extensive knowledge and philosophical wisdom, but doubting whether she had dramatic power, encouraged her to pursue her ambition of writing fiction.⁵

In her journal account, she remembers John Blackwood's praise and his remark in a letter that

'the men at the club seem to have mingled their tears and their tumblers together'. 'It will be curious if you should be a member and be hearing your own praises!' he had added. Marian's comment on this is 'There was clearly no suspicion that I was a woman.'⁶ The irony of this piece of fishing by Blackwood – who had not yet been told the identity of the new author 'George Eliot' – could not have been lost on Marian, who, far from frequenting the Garrick and other men's clubs in London (where Lewes was a frequent visitor), was sequestered in lodgings in Richmond, withdrawn from society, not visited by even her best female friends, who were scandalized by her anomalous social position as an unmarried woman living openly with Lewes.

In February 1858, fifteen months after Lewes had first sent John Blackwood the manuscript of 'Amos Barton', saying it was by 'a friend who desired my good offices with you',⁷ and a month after publication of *Scenes* in two volumes, the curious but patient publisher visited the Leweses in Richmond. George Eliot and Blackwood both recorded the event. The former wrote in her journal:

On Sunday the 28th [February 1858] Mr John Blackwood called on us, having come to London for a few days only. He talked a good deal about the 'Clerical Scenes' and George Eliot, and at last asked, 'Well, am I to see George Eliot this time?' G. said, 'Do you wish to see him?' 'As he likes – I wish it to be quite spontaneous.' I left the room, and G. following me a moment, I told him he might reveal me. Blackwood was kind... He came on the following Friday, and chatted very pleasantly – told us Thackeray spoke highly of the 'Scenes' and said *they were not written by a woman* [George Eliot's emphasis]. Mrs Blackwood is *sure* they are not written by a woman. Mrs Oliphant, the novelist, too is confident on the same side.⁸

The entry shows how keen Marian was on keeping her incognito, even to the extent that she should not be recognized as a woman writer, let alone the particular woman she was; it also gives an insight into Blackwood's tact and shrewdness in dealing with her. For his account of the same encounter comes in a letter to his wife of 1 March 1858:

I drove to Richmond to see Lewes, and was introduced to George Eliot – a woman (the Mrs Lewes whom we suspected). This is to be kept a profound secret, and on all accounts it is desirable, as you will readily imagine. She is a most intelligent pleasant woman, with a face like a man, but a good expression.⁹

Blackwood's interest in keeping the secret as long as possible was to stop his new author from becoming the object of moral outrage. Though Marian fondly imagined that she had fooled her readers into thinking her a male author (and indeed she had succeeded with very many), one famous reader to whom Blackwood had sent a copy of *Scenes* had already thanked 'George Eliot' on 18 January 1858, praising 'the humour and the pathos of those stories', but daring to notice 'such womanly touches, in those moving fictions' that 'if they originated with no woman, I believe no man ever before had the art of making himself, mentally, so like a woman, since the world began'.¹⁰

Why was it so important to Marian that her writing should not be recognized as that of a woman? Her reasons for adopting a male pseudonym were multiple. The most anxious and personal motive, as we have seen, was that of a single woman living with a man separated from his wife but unable to divorce her; she naturally shrank from the exposure to public scandal which would be the inevitable result of using her own name when she turned from a career of anonymous reviewing and editing for the *Westminster Review* to writing fiction. In addition to this strong motive based on her personal circumstances, her temperament, as Lewes knew and the Blackwoods had quickly come to understand, was sensitive, proud, and self-doubting, and so constituted another reason for reticence and caution when she came before the public for the first time as a writer of fiction. In short, she feared failure in this new but long-contemplated genre. This second reason would not have required the pseudonym to be specifically male, however. There was another motive at work, one which relates to the very characteristics which inform all George Eliot's writings. She wanted to write not 'women's fiction', novels and stories centring exclusively on young women observed in their domestic setting as they found romantic love, but to use a wider canvas, to show both men and women in their everyday lives, to pursue her characters into the workplace and to observe their interactions in terms of all their relationships – emotional, social, professional. Hence in the novels which followed *Scenes of Clerical Life* the reader is exposed to Adam Bede's carpentry workshop and Bartle Massey's schoolroom, as well as – most unusually – observing a woman at work, namely Dinah Morris the Methodist preacher; in *Middlemarch* we see landowners, doctors, lawyers, bankers, clergymen, and merchants interacting in the densely imagined social setting of a midlands town.

Marian Evans had an unusual breadth of knowledge, which she wished to exploit to the full in her fiction. She had learnt modern languages as a girl; she translated Strauss and also Ludwig Feuerbach into English in her late twenties and early thirties; she taught herself Hebrew and read widely in philosophy, history, science, literature and art, and in John Chapman she found an editor who used these talents by employing her as the chief reviewer and his co-editor on the *Westminster Review* from 1852. She moved in journalistic and literary London, an almost exclusively male world, and by her choice to live with Lewes she shut herself out from most female company. All these facts pushed her towards using a male pseudonym, as did her awareness that novels by women were usually criticized in reviews in different terms from those used to respond to men's fiction. She herself, in the last essay she wrote for the *Westminster Review* before picking up her pen to write 'Amos Barton', chose to make fun of the worst kind of female fiction. This witty piece, entitled 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (*Westminster Review*, October 1856), opens as follows:

Silly novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them – the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic. But it is a mixture of these – a composite order of feminine fatuity, that produces the largest class of such novels, which we shall distinguish as the *mind-and-millinery* species. The heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond. Her eyes and her wit are

both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues.¹¹

On turning to fiction-writing she drew her own lesson, eschewing ideal heroines and heroes in favour of flawed, unhandsome protagonists like the Reverend Amos Barton with the aim of winning over her readers' sympathy and understanding for less attractive but more believable figures than those met with in many novels (not only those by women). The end of this same essay turns seriously to send out a kind of manifesto, claiming that not all female novelists are silly, that indeed fiction is the genre most open to women, that 'like crystalline masses, [the novel] may take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements – genuine observation, humour, and passion'.¹²

It is evident from the extract quoted above from 'Amos Barton' that George Eliot possessed these qualities. If we look at two letters written by her before she moved to London to pursue the journalistic career which so prepared her for her final, greatest career as novelist, we can see some of those elements already present. In September 1849 she wrote to her Coventry friends Charles and Cara Bray from Geneva, where they had deposited her after taking her abroad with them following the death of her father earlier in the year, displaying all the sensitivity, pride, and lack of confidence which Lewes and Blackwood found themselves combatting in George Eliot the novelist, but also the ability to tell a story, to be witty at her own and others' expense, to surprise and delight the reader:

Dear Friends,

I began to write to you on Sunday immediately after reading your letters but a headache came on and sent me to bed where I lay till Wednesday morning. I am better now and am feeling particularly happy because I have had very kind letters from my brother and sister. I am quite timid about writing to you because Sara [Hennell, Cara Bray's sister] tells me that Mr Hennell [their brother Charles] says 'there is much that is morbid in your character (his observations were upon your letters only) with a dwelling on yourself and a loving to think yourself unhappy'. Nothing can be truer than the observation, but I am distressed and surprized that this is so very evident from letters in which I have really tried to avoid everything which could give you pain and have imagined that I have only told you of agreeables except the last, which I hope you understand to be playful in its grumbling. I am ashamed to fill sheets about myself, but I imagined that this was precisely what you wished.

After this complex response, blaming both herself and her friends, showing honesty but also prickliness about her own moods, she continues the letter in neutral tones, returning at the end inexorably, wittily, and with the tenacity of the born imaginative writer who instinctively exploits every possibility, to the initial charge of morbidity and her resentment of it:

I shall certainly stay at Geneva this winter, and shall return to Eng[land] as early as the spring weather will permit always supposing that nothing occurs to alter my plan. I am still thin and my hair is falling off – so how much will be

left of me by next April I am afraid to imagine. I shall be length without breadth – quite bald and without money to buy a wig – but Mr Hennell will think that I am fancying myself unhappy.¹³

An even earlier letter, written to Charles Bray in 1846 while Marian was still living with her father in Coventry, also gives notice of unusual storytelling skills; once again she reveals sensitivity about her plain looks and a fear that she will find no partner to share her life with, and yet manages to turn this unhappy material into humour. Here, too, is the young woman of twenty-six who has spent many months translating the three scholarly volumes of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* into English. Strauss is in her mind as she imagines a visit from one Professor Bücherwurm of Moderig University [Professor Bookworm of Mouldy University]:

Down I came, not a little elated at the idea that a live professor was in the house[...].

[...] 'About a fortnight ago I came to London to seek – singular as it may seem to you – a *wife*.' (Surely, thought I, this poor man has escaped from a lunatic asylum, and I looked alternately at the door and the poker, measuring my distance between the two.) 'But', my professor continued, 'there were certain qualifications which were indispensable to me in the person whom I could receive into that relation. I am a voluminous author – indeed my works already amount to some 20 vols. – my last publication in 5 vols was a commentary on the book of Tobit.[...]

I am determined if possible to secure a translator in the person of a wife. I have made the most anxious and extensive inquiries in London after all female translators of German. I find them very abundant, but I require, besides ability to translate, a very decided ugliness of person and a sufficient fortune to supply a poor professor with coffee and schwarzbier, as well as to contribute to the expenses of publication. After the most toilsome inquiries I have been referred to you, Madam, as presenting the required combination of attributes, and though I am rather disappointed to see that you have no beard, an attribute which I have ever regarded as the most unfailing indication of a strong-minded woman, I confess that in other respects your person at least comes up to my ideal.'¹⁴

Anyone reading this spoof can tell that this is someone who could write fiction if she turned her hand to it. Fortunately, encouraged by Lewes, the man who did love her despite her unpromising looks and scholarly demeanour and who, being a talented writer himself, saw her genius and took it upon himself to nurture it, she took the plunge and began what would be a triumphant career as novelist, starting with three stories about the lives of midland clergymen and their families in the years of her youth. There is a passage in the third story, 'Janet's Repentance', which gives a miniature portrait of how Marian Evans might have turned out if she had not had the luck and the courage to move to London, to get work on the *Westminster Review*, and finally to meet Lewes and be introduced to the best of publishers, Blackwood, and if she had not also harboured a strong sense of her innate talent which would not be suppressed by almost crippling diffidence. In chapter three of 'Janet's Repentance' the narrator describes a group of elderly unmarried ladies in the little town of Milby. Among them is Miss Pratt:

an old maid with a cap, a braided 'front', a backbone and appendages. Miss Pratt was the one bluestocking of Milby, possessing, she said, no less than five hundred volumes, competent, as her brother the doctor often observed, to conduct a conversation on any topic whatever, and occasionally dabbling a little in authorship, though it was understood that she had never put forth the full powers of her mind in print.¹⁵

It is indeed a matter of celebration, one hundred and fifty years after the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, that Marian Evans, as George Eliot, did succeed in putting forth the full powers of *her* extraordinary mind in print.

Notes

- 1 George Eliot to William Blackwood, 4 February 1857, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 volumes (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), II, 292.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. David Lodge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 41-2.
- 4 'How I Came to Write Fiction', *Journal*, 6 December 1867, *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 406-7.
- 5 Ibid. For Lewes, see Rosemary Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford, 1991; reprinted Pimlico, 2000); for George Eliot, see Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London, 1996; reprinted Penguin, 1997); and for the history of the *Westminster Review*, see Ashton, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London* (London, 2006; reprinted Vintage, 2008).
- 6 'How I Came to Write Fiction', *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 408.
- 7 Lewes to John Blackwood, 6 November 1856, *ibid*, II, 269.
- 8 George Eliot journal, 28 February-5 March 1858, *ibid*, II, 435.
- 9 John Blackwood to his wife, 1 March 1858, *ibid*, II, 436.
- 10 Dickens to George Eliot, 18 January 1858, *ibid*, II, 423.
- 11 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 301-2.
- 12 *Ibid*, p. 324.
- 13 George Eliot to Charles and Cara Bray, 20 September 1849, *The George Eliot Letters*, I, 307, 310.
- 14 George Eliot to Charles Bray, 21 October 1846, *ibid*, VIII, 13-14.
- 15 'Janet's Repentance', *Scenes of Clerical Life*, p. 268.