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Patricia Duncker

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## ON WRITING NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION: *JAMES MIRANDA BARRY* (1999) AND *SOPHIE AND THE SIBYL: A VICTORIAN ROMANCE* (2015)

By Patricia Duncker

My first historical novel – *James Miranda Barry* (1999) was not born a Neo-Victorian novel, but became one. And it had a very personal link to my own life. Barry was a nineteenth-century colonial doctor and medical reformer, who had a very successful and colourful career in remote parts of the Empire. He spent an important period of his life in Jamaica, then a British colony, during the 1830s, taking care of the army garrison stationed on the island to protect the interests of the Crown and put down the numerous slave revolts. The British maintained a regiment there until the island's independence on 6 August 1962. I come from Jamaica: my father was Jamaican and my mother is English. Our house in the Blue Mountains near Greenwich, where the army barracks was situated, had been built by my father on the foundations of the old colonial barracks constructed by Dr James Barry to acclimatize the troops, so that they did not all die from yellow fever upon their arrival on the island. But I didn't know that when I began my work on Barry. What interested me was the rumour that leaked out when Barry died in the early 1870s, that he was in fact, a woman. But was he?

No one knows what sex Barry actually was. His recent biographer, Rachel Holmes, argues that he was a hermaphrodite.<sup>1</sup> We would now perhaps describe him as a transgender individual, but we cannot ever know for certain. Whatever he was, he certainly gave a command performance. So my theme was the dramatic interrogation of gender and identity. I decided to create a character that was neither man nor woman, but drew on both roles, sometimes of necessity and sometimes for his own pleasure. I wanted to create someone who was isolated, secretive, trapped inside his own head, and yet absolutely at liberty to be whoever he chose to be. The impulse behind this re-imagining of Dr James Miranda Barry came from my own unease at the roles being offered to me as a woman.

This dilemma will be easily recognizable to all rational, intellectual women of my generation. And the parameters of this dilemma are these: what if you think that conventional femininity is equivalent to being crippled at birth? Or being lobotomized? What if you don't want to be a mother? What if you don't want a family or ever to live in one? And what – wait for it, gentlemen, – what if you loathe men, and the way the majority of men behave towards women, but would rather be a man than a woman if you had the choice? And what if you have no easy answers to the existential questions: what is a man? What is a woman? If any of the above questions seem to you to be irrelevant or highly problematic then either you are not a woman, or, because you didn't like the look of the deal, you have chosen not to be one. This dilemma is one that George Eliot would have recognized. That question – what does it mean to be a woman? – informs her fiction.

How did Barry manage to be what Kate Bornstein, an imaginative transsexual, describes as both a gender-defender and a gender-transgressor?<sup>2</sup> He became famous and successful, he got his own way and he got away with it. He enjoyed the rich privileges of being a man, meaningful work and independence, but maintained his critical distance from the society in which he lived and worked. I needed to imagine cross-gendered characters, who enjoyed the roles proposed to them as well as the ones they invented for themselves. Where was such a model to be found? Shakespeare's heroines!

Shakespeare's women were important visitors in the novel, because the roles were originally played by boys. Of course these characters were represented by actresses on the Restoration stage, but when the parts were played by boys their audiences needed to be complicit in their performances. The Victorians performed and read Shakespeare together in their drawing rooms. I followed Shakespeare's leads and leading roles: Viola, Rosalind, even Lady Macbeth.

I had written 100 pages of *James Miranda Barry* by the summer of 1993, when I got stuck. His unsettled, unresolved gender and the pronouns proved a problem. He never lived as a woman. He could be 'He' and 'I' but never 'She'. I could not resolve the structure. So I sat down for the next seven months and wrote *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996) instead. That novel is about breaking down the gender lines between a masculine woman and a feminine man, and about falling in love with a homosexual, when you happen not to be gay, or in the case of my heroine, the Germanist, not even a man. In short, that novel addressed the ways in which desire short-circuits cliché and convention. Writing *Hallucinating Foucault* proved to be immensely liberating for me. No one, not even a novelist, need be imprisoned by his or her gender, unless that role is imposed, and it often is, by coercion and brute force. I wrote from the heart.

Which brings me to my second historical novel, *Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance* (Bloomsbury, 2015), which, this time is quite self-consciously written as a Neo-Victorian Novel, in awareness that this particular genre has a literary history and an associated, developing body of criticism. *Hallucinating Foucault* represented two writers, one fictional and the other an historical character, the philosopher Michel Foucault. This time, in *Sophie and the Sibyl*, I decided to settle my scores with the Victorian writer I most admire, cherish, re-read and adore: Marian Evans Lewes, better known, but never addressed, or described, except in letters, as George Eliot. George Eliot is a textual rather than a lived identity. Oddly enough, Eliot herself, like Barry, although not in the same way, was both man and woman. The magisterial voice of her narrators is often, but not always, masculine. She relished her male pseudonym, while her identity remained secret, and she assumed a male voice in her writing for the *Westminster Review*. Her writing name has never been abandoned. For us, her readers now, Marian Evans Lewes is never named as the author of *Middlemarch*. The person who wrote the books is still George Eliot.

I decided to transform her, a real historical figure, who was once embodied, a woman who lived and breathed and wrote, into a fictional character – and surround her with the people many writers fear most: their characters and their readers.

Both *James Miranda Barry* and *Sophie and the Sibyl* might loosely be called biographical historical fictions in that they address real lives, once lived in a material, embodied world, and a particular historical time. In my own mind this raised questions that have both a literary and an ethical dimension. Should writers creating Neo-Victorian fictions, which are often more playful, self-conscious, and knowing than straightforward historical novels, consider themselves exempt from the usual traditions, rules, customs and practices that have evolved within the genre broadly considered as 'historical' fiction? And what are those traditions and rules? Who enforces them? Surely the only guidelines fiction need ever follow are what works and what doesn't? Biography must answer to the evidence, fiction must answer to the reader. The art of the biographer must necessarily be closer to that of the historian rather than the novelist. The terms of the contract between the writer and the reader are radically different.

And it is here that I need to raise the debate about ‘getting it right’? What on earth can that possibly mean if all History is interpretation, even after a thorough investigation of the evidence? And if the practice of writing History necessarily involves complex leaps of the imagination, how does ‘getting it right’ differ if you are writing as an historian rather than a novelist? Does ‘getting it right’ simply mean imagining the gaps, where the evidence fades away and all we face is silence? And should writers of fiction, which addresses lives that were once lived rather than imaginary fictional figures, permit themselves the same liberties and freedoms to transform and invent alternative destinies for their characters? How cavalier should a novelist dare to be when confronting the events and conditions of the past? The paratexts, or the writing which surrounds writing, which Kevin Jackson describes as the ‘invisible forms’:<sup>3</sup> dedications, epigraphs, footnotes, prefaces, introductions, afterwords, explanatory notes, further reading, or, most mysterious and suggestive, a Note on the Text, all assume a particular significance in historical fictions. They often mark the self-imposed limit of the writer’s imagination; the point where Fiction meets History, and speculation gives way to inconvenient biographical fact. My own paratexts are indeed crucial in structuring the significance of my fiction. The epigraphs tell you that Eliot is my heroine and that the woman as well as the writer is present in the text. Darwin’s reading, a fact upon which his son commented – and which amused me enormously, influenced some crucial fictional decisions. Here is the epigraph.

‘It often astonished us what trash he would tolerate in the way of novels. The chief requisites were a pretty girl and a good ending.’

George Darwin comments on his father’s reading. Cited in Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: the Power of Place*, Vol. 2 of a biography (Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 68.

Indeed, I tried hard to write a book that, while resisting the lure of utter trash, Darwin would have loved. And my third epigraph introduces my omniscient narrator, the voice that is not mine, but that of the storyteller. In Eliot’s fictions the voice of her omniscient narrator is often located in the present time of the novel’s composition, looking back into the past. This technique is especially visible in *Adam Bede*, set in 1799, with a narrator located in the late 1850s, the time of writing, and in *Middlemarch*, set in the early 1830s but written in the early 1870s. I used her method. My narrator stands in the twenty-first century present, reflecting on our high Victorian past. And she comments not only on my authorial intentions, but also on how we should read epigraphs. This is what she says.

‘What is the function of the epigraph? I always read them carefully. The writing which surrounds writing may well be written in code, but will also offer a key, a clue if you like, to the author’s intentions. And in this case the two quotations above are particularly revealing. Our author is one of those sentimental people who need to admire their chosen heroes and heroines. She cannot bear it if her appointed gods turn out to be made of flesh and blood – with personal vanities and frailties as disappointingly tedious as our own. I think she has scores to settle with Mr. Darwin and Mrs. Lewes, but she adores them both. And that is her weakness. Her vindictive little game is undermined by love.’

I insisted on maintaining this critical distance outlined above between myself and my *Doppelgänger*, throughout the novel. This allowed me to develop a double narrative, the time of the forward action in the novel, and the story-telling time, in which, with the benefit of

hindsight, the narrator guards her ironic distance from the action. Eliot's own ironic distance from her narratives can be pompous and moralistic, but also very funny.

The reassessment of historical fiction as an important rather than a frivolous intervention in the historiography of the past is of recent date, clinched by the serious reception of Hilary Mantel's versions of *The Tudors*, *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012). But the very term 'historical fiction' is unstable. History makes a claim on truth, fiction admits to being created out of the imagination. Even the term 'imaginative truth' appears paradoxical. Historical novelists have different answers and offer different solutions to these questions. Here is Rose Tremain:

I've resisted the term 'historical novelist' because it implies a shallow kind of fiction, in which the reader can escape completely any obligation to think about the modern world. I believe/hope that, although (some of) my fictions transport the reader to a different time, the human dilemmas we face today are present in the story. I offer, as an example of this, the plot of *Music & Silence*, in which King Christian is plagued by the highly contemporary worries of a failing marriage and a diminishing bank account. In *Restoration*, the hero is obsessed by money, advancement and fame – as is British society today. So ... the reader has to address these things. I've searched hard for a new word to describe this genre of non-escapist historical writing, but have still found nothing which perfectly fits it.<sup>4</sup>

George Eliot would probably have endorsed Tremain's sense of the unchanging nature of 'human dilemmas', but this is not a view I share. The past is not just a foreign country, where they do things differently;<sup>5</sup> it is a lost world, to which we have no access. The people who have gone before us did not think as we do, nor live as we did, and in the last hundred years this gulf has suddenly widened. We can only imagine what it was like to live there. But this is why historical novels are so seductive. They invent an embodied past, inhabited by living breathing subjects. The illusion of presence is what Jerome de Groot describes as the 'authentic fallacy'. 'The past as presented in historical novels is an enactment, a re-creation, a performance of pastness [...]'<sup>6</sup> But de Groot makes a strong claim for historical fiction as an intervention in the creation of History, that is the interpretation of the past. Historical fiction, he argues, is 'the other of the archive, the dissident illegitimate reflection of the official ... (text)'.<sup>7</sup> The historical novel remains fictitious, tendentious in its claims to any authority whatsoever, but it is nevertheless an intervention in the historiography of its subject, a ghost haunting other versions of the past.

With the Neo-Victorian novel we have a genre in the process of creation, perhaps even the emergence of a genealogy with all the attendant uncertainties of categorization and provenance. Clearly not all books, which contain a crime, are crime novels. Clearly not, or E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and *The Wind in the Willows* would be candidates for the genre. And genres tend to establish themselves and evolve over decades, even centuries. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn offer a precise and convincing definition of the Neo-Victorian.

To be part of the Neo-Victorianism we discuss (in this book) texts must [...] in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.*<sup>8</sup> [Original italics]

In other words, you have to know what you're doing when you meddle with the Victorians and

have an agenda, whether obvious or covert. 'Neo' does, of course, also mean new. Does it matter if we are looking backwards to the Victorians themselves or taking our stand on Victorian ground and looking forwards into the twenty-first century? And are not all historical novelists Janus-faced, always looking both ways at once? But the suggestion that Neo-Victorian writing manifests a longing to return to something secure, conservative, even reactionary, and above all familiar, cannot be swept aside. The conservative aesthetics of Neo-Victorian fiction, a question raised by Christian Gutleben,<sup>9</sup> still need to be addressed. Neo-Victorian fiction writers insist on that which is not new, as much as enjoying the appropriation and adaptation of the old for new purposes.

The Sibyl is one of the many names used to refer to George Eliot. It's something of a backhanded compliment, for while it suggests her prophetic gifts, it does also seem to refer to her tendency to indulge in terminal pretentiousness. I invented my version of the story of her last triumphant years, from September 1872, when she was writing the Finale to *Middlemarch* in Homburg, up to her death in London on 22 December 1880. I do refer to Eliot's earlier fictions, but concentrated on the two great last novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, which are the novels that she was writing during the period in which I had set *Sophie and the Sibyl*.

I adopted her minor characters, but appropriated major dramatic scenes and situations. You cannot, in my view, re-cycle Eliot's major characters as they are already too fully realized within her brand of psychological realist fiction to follow any other destiny than the one she has imagined for them. But the minor characters are not so finally determined, or at any rate, they seemed so to me. Klesmer and Miss Arrowpoint from *Daniel Deronda* appear as themselves. Hans Meyrick the artist is made a little less kind and self-sacrificing than he is in her novel. I re-imagined him as a society painter bent on commercial success, but Klesmer, whose very name means music, is one of my heroes. I took moments that meant a great deal to me: Dorothea abandoned by Casaubon in Rome, Gwendolen Harleth at the gaming tables in the opening scene of *Daniel Deronda* (this scene supposedly takes place at the fictional resort of Leubronn, but in fact Eliot first imagined the scene in Homburg), that moment towards the end of *Middlemarch* where Dorothea goes to see Rosamond intending to save her from adultery, and I re-set them inside my own fiction. I used real documents, real letters, real situations from the writer's life and tried hard to present the Sibyl as those who knew her tell us how she was: complex, insecure, charismatic and enigmatic. Marian Evans Lewes was a great seductress. Both men and women admired and adored her. But I never presumed to interpret her from the inside. The novel speculates on her motives and behaviour, but offers no authoritative answers. The Sibyl retains her mystery.

The novel therefore uses my own fiction, Eliot's fictions and her own life, as it was lived in history, to set up an argument with my fictional Sibyl, an argument that is both homage and critique. I set a large part of the novel in Germany where George Eliot and her life partner, her not-quite-husband, G. H. Lewes, always felt at home. Lewes is, of course, the first biographer of Goethe, and was a celebrity in his own right. The couple felt at ease in the libertarian, egalitarian circles in Weimar and Berlin during the 1850s and in the various spas they frequented during the early years of Bismarck's Germany. Continental intellectual circles have never been as stiflingly, self-righteously moral as Victorian England, and have a history of welcoming British writers who arrived as sexual refugees from domestic scandals. Italy, the climactic destination of the Grand Tour, proved a favoured retreat. Byron and Shelley both

lived in Italy earlier in the nineteenth century, the Barrett Brownings eloped to Italy, E. M. Forster's characters in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* followed them, in search of sexual adventure and the freedom to think as they pleased. Lewes and Eliot were essentially no different. They were more at ease on the Continent.

The element in Victorian fiction that interests me most is the omniscient narrator, nearly always a character close to the author and the person closest to the reader. I have already noted the importance of this voice in serial publication or publication in parts over a number of months or even years. This character will be the voice in your ear, the person telling you what to recall from earlier episodes, how to read the book and how to interpret the characters and situations before you. This is the story-telling voice, the voice that is your companion for the journey; this is the voice you will remember. That connection between the writer and the reader is a rich and difficult relationship, one that George Eliot, for all her vast intelligence and magisterial authority, doesn't always negotiate successfully. I was not interested in writing a pastiche Victorian novel, but a book that both challenged and played serious games with the forms of Victorian fiction that I loved so well. And the novelist who led the way for me here is the godfather of Neo-Victorian fiction: John Fowles. I am not one of his fans, so our relationship is a heated argument from start to finish.

Fowles is very close to his omniscient narrator in his fiction, and presents himself as easily the most informed and interesting person speaking in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Ostensibly, the subject of his novel is the classic tale of seduction and betrayal, but with the usual sexual roles reversed. Charles Smithson is torn between two women, the conventional, bourgeois, Victorian tool of the patriarchy, Ernestina, to whom he is suitably engaged, and the mysterious Sarah Woodruff, who stands for sexual modernity. Sarah has, apparently, also been seduced and betrayed, for the abandoned woman is always, traditionally, the fallen woman. But in Fowles's Neo-Victorian novel it is not the man who is the seducer and betrayer, but the other woman. And here, Fowles, thinly disguised as the omniscient narrator, declares his hand, and reveals his fictional agenda. 'Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them'.<sup>10</sup> This novel contains his attempt to decode a woman whose sexual and emotional independence remain a mystery to the writer who imagines her.

My starting point was the coincidence of my name and that of The Sibyl's German publishers. Duncker of Berlin did and still does exist; and is now named Duncker and Humblot. I re-invented its contemporary origins at the end of my novel. I first noticed the connection years ago while I was reading George Eliot's Journals. She recorded the thirty pounds paid to her by 'Duncker of Berlin'. At that moment I was merely amused, but then the seed began to grow. If someone who bore my name had been so closely connected to the writer I loved, why should I not take his place? Eliot was as fascinated by the relationship of mentor and disciple as I am, both as a subject for fiction and as a drama in her own drawing room. It is a relationship that recurs in her novels and one that she cultivated in her personal life. She set herself up as a Great Teacher. I have always been one of her disciples. But it is in the nature of the disciple to question and challenge the Master, even as you fight alongside her throughout your writing life. All novelists, including the Sibyl, put their characters, and indeed their readers, through a series of tests. And I am no exception.

George Eliot's reputation as a writer has been a slippery, unstable thing. As her recent biographer, Kathryn Hughes,<sup>11</sup> has pointed out – within ten years of her death in 1880, no one who counted among the intellectual elite was reading George Eliot anymore. Hardy, Stevenson,



Wilde and the more radical women writers of the 1890s carried the day. There were no particular celebrations for the centenary of her birth in 1919 – and until the 1940s she remained in eclipse, before rising again to participate in F.R. Leavis's personal canon, *The Great Tradition* (1948). Her intellectual weight certainly ensured that she was comfortable and at home in the company of Jane Austen, Henry James, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad. And the element in her work that assures her that place is her Englishness.

Well, of course the writer to whom you say 'Master!' does change as you grow older and as you grow up, both as a writer and as a reader. And there's an element of self-aggrandizement in every writer's gesture of homage – especially the moment you choose to name another writer as the one you love. You are choosing not only a source of inspiration and influence, but also an antagonist. This is the mark on the wall that is your personal measure of excellence. When I first read George Eliot I was a very young woman; yet I didn't start in the obvious place – with Maggie Tulliver and *The Mill on the Floss*. I began with the 'large, loose baggy monsters', *Middlemarch*, *Romola*, *Daniel Deronda*. I surged through hundreds of pages; dense, meticulous descriptive writing, arcane speculation and odd information, fabulous melodramatic scenes where the dialogue – or lack of it – made the earth move, and overall, this vast, remote brooding intelligence, housed in the bullying insistent presence of the narrator. And from this intrusive narrative voice there was no escape.

As a young reader I was too naïve to notice the subtle variations in register, which marked that narrative voice, nor did I absorb the intricacy of intonation in her shifting emphasis – the movement from 'I' to 'we'. I never heard the echoes. All I heard was a pompous, sententious Victorian storyteller telling me what to think. The inevitable rebellion ensued. Those narrative voices were my stumbling block. I heard a man's voice, and decided that I didn't agree with his high moral seriousness, or with his opinions of women. I was being coerced into submission, forced to judge and to choose. I stopped reading George Eliot.

I am one of an entire generation of radical women who rebelled against George Eliot. I saw her as a compromiser. I vowed never to compromise. She made a dramatic and irrevocable decision to unite her life to that of a married man, but in every other respect she seemed desperate to be socially acceptable. I promised myself never to be socially acceptable. She seemed to me, when I was in my twenties, to be the kind of writer I mistrusted most. She lived a radical intellectual and sexual life, but wrote pious sermons on marital duty, self-sacrifice, and the schooling of desire for all the rest of us. She was deplorably dependent on male attention and praise. She didn't run off with the gorgeous Edith Simcox, who adored her. And, worst of all, she evolved into a Victorian sage, full of wise, witty and tender sayings, which we would find uplifting in times of grief and crisis. She clearly began to believe her own publicity. My candid advice to all writers, however vain and self-important, would be this: never believe your own publicity. The early feminist onslaught on the literary establishment and the writers we studied did not favour George Eliot. Biographical criticism had been thrown firmly out of the window; realism was a complex hoax and we wanted something more subversive and energetic than self-immolation on the pyre of dutiful, feminine self-sacrifice. We preferred the Brontës, who apparently lived like little Victorian good girls, took care of their widowed Daddy, worried about money, and formed a homemade writers group – only to produce subversive screams that rang across the centuries: 'We were born to strive and to endure' and 'I care for myself'.

Charlotte, Emily and Anne wrote the feminist Bible – they were sexual, passionate,



cross-dressing, gender-bending. Their novels bristled with adultery – all the Brontë novels address the delights and dangers of adultery, and not just heterosexual adultery either – and genuine sexual sadism. If we are convinced that writing surges from our deepest unconscious selves, then the Brontë sisters, noble, Victorian and repressed, produced an unconscious torrent of bitterness and desire, which suited our political agenda. They were our madwomen in the attic.

George Eliot was not welcome at the feast. She preached the wrong gospel. She wrote as a man, not as a woman. She suggested that writing is about judgement and selection – writing is, in fact, about judgement and selection – and her version of gradual historical change, the continuous evolution of a known organic community was anathema to our fractured post-modern consciousness. We did not want to yearn towards ‘the greater good’, dimly perceived, nor to be ‘the sweet presence of a good diffused’.<sup>12</sup> We wanted to read women writers who championed our desires as legitimate and did not ask awkward questions about duty and responsibility. We had a duty to ourselves and no one else. George Eliot wrote about communities. She assumed that we were all part of those communities whether they rejected us, or we rejected them. We are all part of one another, whether we like it or whether we don’t. I, for one, as a very young woman, was not keen on this obligatory inclusiveness. So what happened to my reading of George Eliot to whom I had, not so politely, shown the door? What happened to me was a process of re-reading.

Where can I find erudition and intelligence as sophisticated and wide-ranging as hers in contemporary English fiction? It is as rare as it is satisfying. So much of what is published in our times seems shallow, flat and specious – to say nothing of the innumerable ‘silly novels by lady novelists’. Writing that is deliberately written for our entertainment does not have to be bad writing. Dickens sought to entertain his audience. But I read endless screeds of instant writing that simply records our unsteady world, in a prose that is both sprawling and banal. What is missing? I find little considered knowledge, merely undigested information, little intellectual curiosity and very few serious writers who possess a grasp of time, history, memory. Nor do I find many writers who possess the ability to reflect and to judge. George Eliot still gives me all these things. One aspect of growing up as a writer is that you lose interest in naïve first-person narratives. A first-person narrative may give you claustrophobic intensity, an unreliable first-person narrator is often suggestive and interesting, but it is hard, within the confines of one voice, to represent intelligence, good judgement, moral discrimination and a literary ethic of compassion.

Serious writing, like all the arts, is a problematic, disciplined process of judgement and selection. ‘Shall I take Thee, the Poet said / To the propounded word?’<sup>13</sup> Storytelling, if it is to be compelling, needs to present different possible outcomes and then to persuade the reader, or listener, that the outcome proposed is not only satisfying, but inevitable. Or maybe disturbing, ambiguous, frustrating – whatever readerly emotion the writer desires us to experience. Yet the emotions generated by powerful writing are always incalculable, because the reader is the wild card, the rogue in the pack. George Eliot never forgets her reader. She keeps us close beside her, complicit, knowing, flattered to be included in the plot. This is the most powerful method a writer possesses of influencing our judgement, nudging us towards a shared conclusion. I do not mean judgement as condemnation, and in any case, Eliot’s huge principled compassion still seems to let too many rogues off the hook, but rather, judgement in the sense of the French verb *trancher*, which also means to slice, or to divide. George Eliot taught me how to choose

decisively, sometimes between many options, with a cold, clear head.

Eliot's big scenes are very hard to translate into other media, stage, radio or film. One of her early critics, W. C. Brownell in 1901, observed that 'the drama ... of George Eliot's world is largely an intellectual affair... The plot turns on what the characters think',<sup>14</sup> not upon what they say or do. My relationship with Eliot has been an intellectual affair much along those lines. I am fascinated by *how she thinks*. Her narrators and storytellers have a generosity and sophistication that is subtle, cunning, devious. It is a precious gift left to other, later writers. Eliot was an arrogant and tendentious writer; she believed in the novel as an epic form. I admire her ambition and I still brood on the lessons she taught me: writing is a public art, a performance on the public stage. You must put on your best clothes to welcome and entertain your reader, who is, after all, an honoured guest in the text.

## Notes

This is the text of the Forty-Fourth George Eliot Memorial Lecture delivered at the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre on 10 October, 2015. An extended version of this article will appear in late 2016 or early 2017 as an interview/essay in the series 'anglistik & englischunterricht': Christina Flotmann and Anna Lienen (eds.), *Victorian Ideologies in Contemporary British Culture*, Heidelberg: Winter Verlag.

- 1 I listed my sources in a detailed bibliography at the back of the first edition of *James Miranda Barry* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999) but I could not list this biography as Holmes was writing at the same time. There are two editions: *Scanty Particulars: The Strange Life and Astonishing Secret of Victorian Adventurer and pioneering surgeon James Barry* (London: Viking Penguin, 2002), and the USA edition, *Scanty Particulars: The Scandalous Life and Astonishing Secret of Queen Victoria's most Eminent Military Doctor* (New York: Random House, 2002). The American edition has the scholarly sources and notes which Penguin inexplicably, in a fit of anti-intellectual Philistinism, cut out of the UK edition. Professor Ann Heilmann of Cardiff University is now working on a detailed study of Barry and the literary representations his story has generated.
- 2 Early blasts in the ongoing arguments concerning trans-gendered and trans-sexual individuals tended to be written as autobiographies or confessions. In the 1990s these texts became interestingly politicized. I read – and admired – Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (London: Routledge, 1994) and Jayne County, *Man Enough to be a Woman* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995). Both writers impressed me with their wit, daring and intelligence. They are James Barry's inheritors.
- 3 See Kevin Jackson, *Invisible Forms: A Guide to Literary Curiosities* (London: Picador, 1999) and Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* Translated by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 4 **INTERVIEW WITH ROSE TREMAIN** by ELENA DEDUKHINA Published in the Book Review newspaper **KNIZHNAYA VITRINA** in June 2006 [<http://www.top-kniga.ru/kv/interview/php> Accessed 30.10.2015]

- 5 This is the iconic first sentence of L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953). 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'
- 6 Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 16. Note: this first edition is dated 2016, but was in fact published in August 2015.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.
- 9 This issue is raised by Christian Gutleben in one of the earliest full-length studies of Neo-Victorian writing, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).
- 10 John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1970), p. 85.
- 11 Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).
- 12 These quotations come from Eliot's famous and dreadful poem, 'O may I join the choir invisible'.
- 13 Emily Dickinson, (Poem 1126) *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 505.
- 14 Cited in Tim Dolin, *George Eliot. Authors in Context*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 231.