

SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE

MARY ANN (MARIAN) EVANS was born in 1819 in Warwickshire. She attended schools in Nuneaton and Coventry, coming under the influence of evangelical teachers and clergymen. 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 radical publisher John Chapman, who, when he purchased the *Westminster Review* in 1851, made her his managing editor. Having lost her Christian faith and thereby alienated her family, she moved to London where she met Herbert Spencer 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 and journalism to fiction, and she subsequently wrote, under the name of George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, *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 changed the nature of fictional characterization.

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GEORGE ELIOT

Scenes of Clerical Life

Edited with an introduction by

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Readers buying *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in January 1857 for the price of two shillings and sixpence would have found among its contents articles on European politics and English public life, reviews of Mrs Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and a book on sea anemones, and, right at the beginning of the number, the opening of a story called 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton'. They would have found the story's anonymous writer appealing as directly to their appetite for knowledge and controversy as to their fondness for the humour and pathos and suspense of serialized fiction. Throughout the nineteenth century, literary periodicals developed a market place within which fiction might be as seriously regarded as an article of natural science and might be cross-fertilized by its findings. John Blackwood, editor of 'Maga',¹ quick to recognize 'Amos Barton' as eminently suitable for his readership, agreed to publish it and its successors, 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' and 'Janet's Repentance', in monthly parts. A year later, he published all three in book form as *Scenes of Clerical Life* under the name of 'George Eliot'. The appeal of these *Scenes* to the taste of its Victorian readers is evident in the enthusiasm of early reviewers who found the writer 'religious, without cant or intolerance', 'strong in his knowledge of the human heart' and faithful in his pictures, 'manifestly drawn from life'.² There was general suspicion in literary circles that 'George Eliot was an assumed name, screening that of some studious clergyman, a Cantab who lives, or has lived, the greater part of his life in the country, who is the father of a family, of High Church tendencies, and exceedingly fond of children, Greek dramatists and dogs.'³ Dickens alone, it seems, guessed that the writer was a woman.⁴

The moral outrage when it was discovered that the 'studious clergyman' was Marian Evans 'a female atheist living with another woman's husband',⁵ helps to explain why she clung to her anonymity as long as possible, and began by sending her work to Blackwood via George Henry Lewes, with whom she lived in 'the free bond of love' until his death in 1878. Lewes was one of Blackwood's regular contributors: his was the review of the Revd George Tugwell's *Manual of Sea Anemones* in the January 1857 issue. Lewes's *Seaside Studies* and George Eliot's 'Ilfracombe Journal' of 1856 record their expedition to gather and study small marine creatures. Close, scientific observation of 'the complex facts of life' was one of the many shared pursuits of their remarkable partnership. Contributions to the literary periodicals were unsigned, and Lewes was amused to hear his review attributed to a well-known professor of anatomy⁶ – a foreshadowing of the more difficult situation that arose when Joseph Liggins, Cambridge-educated son of an Attleborough baker, began to be credited with the work of George Eliot.⁷ This prompted Marian Evans to make her authorship known. Blackwood, although he reaffirmed his confidence in 'the truly good, honest, religious and moral tone of all you have written or will write',⁸ no longer felt able to risk publishing her fiction in 'Maga'. He was not similarly constrained, however, when it came to the lucrative rewards of the book market, publishing over the years all of her novels with the exception of *Romola*,

The choice of a masculine pseudonym has seemed politically objectionable to some recent women readers, but it was a not uncommon choice for nineteenth-century women writers.⁹ The Brontë sisters began their publishing careers as 'Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell', and 'George

Sand' was the pen-name of a French woman whose novels George Eliot particularly admired. Eliot's sophisticated and erudite voice in the *Westminster Review* essays that pre-date 'Amos Barton' is expertly sustained, like Milly Barton's tailoring, so that 'no one would suspect the sex of the tailor'. Experience had taught her that male authors received a more respectful hearing. Her trenchant criticism of a popular contemporary preacher, 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming', published in 1855 in the *Westminster Review* (which shows her beginning to reflect on 'clerical life' and on her own youthful evangelicalism), 'appears to have made a strong impression', she wrote to her friend Charles Bray. 'But that impression would be a little counteracted if the author were known to be a woman.'¹⁰ It was Marian Evans whose editorial skills re-established the *Westminster Review* as 'the organ of the ablest and most liberal thinkers of the time',¹¹ while John Chapman, its publisher, received the public credit. In an 1854 essay, Evans applauds the intellectual vitality of French women like Madame de Sablé, but exposes, in an essay written the following year ('Silly Novels by Lady Novelists'), 'the absence of any high standards' in contemporary English women's writing.

'Woman in France: Madame de Sablé' concludes with a plea for the complementarity of masculine and feminine qualities in 'a marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling'.¹² The name 'George Eliot' embodies this aspiration, acknowledging perhaps indebtedness both to George Sand and to George Henry Lewes; to women's writing (Jane Austen's Anne Elliot, in *Persuasion*, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre who chooses to become 'Jane Elliot') as well as to the world of masculine work (one of her father's maps contains a 'George Eliot Close').¹³ It highlights that 'peculiar double focus' to which women critics of the *Scenes* have recently drawn attention: 'boldly locating herself in the privileged realm occupied by Victorian men of letters, she suggests that clerical life as experienced, or endured by women, might differ substantially from the ecclesiastical histories written by men'.¹⁴ It is a double focus that will at times trouble the narrator's vision, making one of several points of tension between narrator and narrative, writer and reader.

Under cover of her pseudonym, Marian Evans was able to draw freely on people and scenes from her provincial girlhood in Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton and Coventry.¹⁵ Arguably, too, it allowed her to explore more difficult emotional terrain: the pernicious effects of gossip and scandalous rumour (it was said that she had alienated Lewes from his wife and children); the pain of unrequited love (she had formed successive deep attachments to John Chapman and to the scientist Herbert Spencer); the formative experience of evangelicalism and her own early 'conversion' as a pupil at the Miss Franklins' school in Coventry.

Scenes of Clerical Life has often been described as a nostalgic tribute to that formative past. It is the first of her many fictional returns to the Warwickshire landscape made more dear through life-long exile in London. The changing of the seasons and the coming of spring to Milby show her delight in describing this Midlands scenery, not just as authenticating detail, or for its visual appeal alone, but because these scenes of childhood are 'spots of time', helping to define for her as for Wordsworth, the poet she most admired, the self that remembers. She compares her own art with that of the painter: the *Scenes* are full of references to painters and paintings. Landscape itself was for her, 'a piece of our social history in pictorial writing'.¹⁶ 'Landscape with Village Church' might be the title of dozens of scenes painted in the period within which this first work is set. She is clearly aware of the nostalgic pull of a pastoral world centred on the visible symbol of historical continuity and

authority. Nor is she able, always, to resist it. The attempt to hold time still within her picture frame sometimes conflicts with her sense of time as process. 'Looking Backward', an essay written towards the end of her life, contains echoes of the *Scenes* (it is written in the assumed character of a cleric's son) and reflects again on its concerns: 'I often smile at the consciousness that certain conservative prepossessions have mingled themselves for me with the influences of our midland scenery, from the tops of the elms down to the buttercups and the little wayside vetches.' She locates these 'conservative prepossessions' in a distinctively English contest between 'stability' and 'susceptibility to change', and in the relationship with a beloved father who is committed to 'England, with its fine Church and Constitution', and in quiet assimilation of political enthusiasm.¹⁷

From the vantage point of post-modernism, however, we are perhaps better positioned to see how strenuously, right from the beginning, George Eliot engages with questions of social and textual authority. Caught up by 'the transforming currents of Evangelicalism',¹⁸ she was carried beyond orthodox Christianity altogether – a mobility paralleled in her journey from Coventry to London. The move to Coventry with her father in 1841 coincided with her most intense period of intellectual development. Even before friendship with the Unitarian Bray and Hennell families introduced her to the German 'higher criticism' of the Bible, she had begun to learn German (one of seven languages in which she was proficient), and was able to translate first David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* in 1846, and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* in 1854. Her decision to cease attending church made a painful breach with her church-going father. The Bible, she wrote to him, no longer seemed for her divinely inspired truth and had become instead 'histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction'.¹⁹ The moral teaching she continued to value in Christianity found a new form, shaped by her reading of Feuerbach and the positivist philosopher Auguste Comte, a 'religion of humanity', which looked for divinity not in the supernatural, but within what is most noble in human nature itself. The move to London after her father's death, 'to earn her living by the pen', placed her in the milieu of the *Westminster Review* where her thinking about historical process was sharpened by the theories of evolutionary science and by the newly developing science of sociology. The breach with her brother was completed by her decision to live openly, in defiance of Victorian propriety, with George Henry Lewes.

It is not surprising, then, to find that father figures, texts and narrative authority are keenly scrutinized in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Its narrative voice is recognizably related to the voice of the essays and reviews that intertwine with its composition, reflecting the writer's own history of radical questioning informed by wide reading and the habits of public debate. There is good reason to suppose that the confident authority assumed by Marian Evans the journalist enabled the 'experiment'²⁰ of George Eliot's fiction.

THE SAD FORTUNES OF THE REVEREND AMOS BARTON

Eliot's chosen title, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, though calculated to appeal to readers who enjoyed the rural tales popularized in the fiction of Scott and Galt, and the poetry of Crabbe and Wordsworth, and in France by Balzac's *Scènes de la Vie de Province*, seems to promise the fragmentary and the sketchy. The limitations of the short-story form do indeed constrain

Eliot's imagination at times, as Blackwood noted in his comments on the 'wind-up' to 'Amos Barton' and the sometimes uneasy balance between narrative and description in 'Janet's Repentance'.²¹ The 'scene shifting' – 'suppose we go there', 'so we will at once quit' – is a stagey device she abandons completely in the novels that were to follow. But the seeds of those novels are here. The emergent novelist is glimpsed in the way in which the three scenes interpenetrate to establish a densely textured, cumulative study of a particular provincial location, its beliefs and customs and way of life. While the scene setting that opens 'Amos Barton' appeals to the visual and the pastoral, introducing a writer who felt herself most at home with 'description', the writing is never static. There is an equally strong appeal to the more dramatic sense of 'scene' as shifting in time and dependent on the 'prepossessions' and vantage point of the viewer:

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 Rev. Amos Barton's head, after ten years of baldness and supererogatory soap. Pass through the baize doors and you will see the nave filled with well-shaped benches, understood to be free seats; while in certain eligible corners, less directly under the fire of the clergyman's eye, there are pews reserved for the Shepperton gentility. Ample galleries are supported on iron pillars and in one of them stands the crowning glory, the very clasp or aigrette of Shepperton church-adornment – namely, an organ, not very much out of repair, on which a collector of small rents, differentiated by the force of circumstances into an organist, will accompany the alacrity of your departure after the blessing, by a sacred minuet or an easy 'Gloria'.

Immense improvement! says the well-regulated mind... Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind...

Eliot will return in the later novels to this kind of proem, which opens up the thematic concerns of the whole. Here, the impact of change within the rural community is focused on the church, visible spiritual and communal centre of village life. Amos Barton's sad fortunes as the agent of change in Shepperton are pictured in his unattractive bald head, and elided in the organ's graceful minuet. The narrator who takes us inside the church for a closer look is also involved, quite self-consciously so, in this drama of change. Sorting through his pictures old and new, he lingers with fondness on the church as it used to be, reminder of a childhood self responding to quaint detail and sometimes unexpected drama – perhaps an anthem 'in which the key-bugles always ran away at a great pace, while the bassoon every now and then boomed a flying shot after them'. There is sympathy for Shepperton's pride in the new organ and the reverential baize and resplendent oak. But the mind that expresses itself in the erudite diction ('supererogatory') and legal and philosophical metaphors ('effect a settlement on', 'differentiated by') and wittily juxtaposes its rather self-indulgent lingering with the alacrity of the customary exit from church, has moved a long way from Shepperton.

The pictorial quality of the writing does not simply reflect the writer's feeling at home in scenes known to her. She expressed her admiration, at this time, for the 'realism' of the Dutch school of painters, with its loving attention to ordinary people and commonplace detail. Her essay on 'The Natural History of German Life' by the pioneering sociologist Wilhelm von Riehl, for the *Westminster Review* of 1856,²² provides something of a manifesto for the fiction

she is about to write. It is a manifesto that may be traced back through the English poets who influenced her: to Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, which announces 'humble and rustic life' as its subject and, a generation earlier, to Thomas Gray, whose 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' is tacitly recalled in the Riehl essay: 'idyllic ploughmen are jocund when they drive their team afield'.²³ While she shares Romanticism's democratic emphasis on the ordinary lives of 'the people', it is from her perspective as the daughter of Robert Evans, Warwickshire carpenter, farmer and estate manager, that she rebukes the idealizing strain that reflects 'the imagination of the cultivated and the town-bred'. In calling for a study of 'the natural history of our social classes', she sees the representation of the people 'as they are' as a 'sacred task'. Religious terminology is also evident in her interpretation of Riehl's view of European society as 'incarnate history': as no abstract process, but one that is fleshed out in the details and processes of a dense social medium.

She was to provide such a history and such a medium most satisfyingly in her greatest 'study of provincial life', *Middlemarch*, in 1871–2. 'Amos Barton' marks her beginning as 'social historian' with a close observation of the social structure and history of the Shepperton community as it is expressed in the very fabric of its church. Social attitudes and distinctions are enshrined in the 'eligible corners' reserved for the gentility and the so-called 'free-seats' which expose the working man to the more direct interlocutory gaze of the clerical eye. The collector of small rents of a weekday is wondrously transformed on a Sunday. Theological issues are deeply entangled in material interests. Soundness of doctrine is indicated in the proper forms and appearances, in daily life as well as in church. Foreshadowed in the opening of 'Amos Barton' are all those conversations and pontifications that make up the texture of the *Scenes*. Familiarity with Mr Gilfil's sermons in the second story ('that those who do wrong will find it the worse for them, and those who do well will find it the better for them') sheds its backward light on Mrs Patten's notion of religious duty in the first chapter of the first story:

I don't understand these new sort o' doctrines. When Mr Barton comes to see me, he talks about nothing but my sins and my need o' marcy. Now, Mr Hackit, I've never been a sinner. From the fust beginning, when I went into service, I al'ys did my duty by my employers. I was a good wife as any's in the county – never aggravated my husband. The cheese-factor used to say my cheese was al'ys to be depended on. I've known women, as their cheeses swelled a shame to be seen, when their husbands had counted on the cheese-money to make up their rent; and yet they'd three gowns to my one. If I'm not to be saved, I know a many as are in a bad way.

Eliot could apparently revert at will from the standard English she had learned to speak into the Warwickshire dialect of her girlhood. The 'dramatic ventriloquism' G. H. Lewes praised is not only a matter of a keen ear and memory, and a concern to render dialect with absolute accuracy.²⁴ At its liveliest, the speech of her rural characters evokes a life dignified by rural labours and pleasures. Mrs Patten's theology may be found wanting, but then so is that of the equally pragmatic Milby doctor, Mr Pilgrim, in 'Janet's Repentance'. The narrator's tendency to generalize 'the bucolic mind' as a known quantity is counteracted by the individualizing touch of Mrs Patten's fine cheese-making, or the later Mrs Jerome's esteem for the delicate white fluted china with gold sprigs upon it, or the graphic similes of Mr Hackit, who sees the Revd Barton's sermons floundering about 'like a sheep as has cast itself, and can't get on'ts legs again' and recalls a Ranting preacher's saying: 'You're like the

wood-pigeon; it says do, do, do all day, and never sets about any work itself

Amid the play of voices in the *Scenes*, it is always the voice of the narrator that seems the most authoritative. And yet this voice displays uneasy tensions from the start, as it attempts to mediate a series of gaps. There is first the gap in time: the twenty-five years that separate the speaker's boyhood memories from the world in which he writes, and which correspond to the gap between the old Shepperton Church and the improved version, between Mr Gilfil and Amos Barton. There is the gap between the 'bucolic' or 'Shepperton mind' and that of the *Blackwood's* reader for whom, elsewhere in the January 1857 number, 'provincial' seems agreed on as a term of contempt. It is a gap that is troubled by further distinctions: between the villager and the 'miserable town-bred reader' who is accused of never having enjoyed tea properly made with cream; between Mrs Farthingale who looks for 'the ideal in fiction' (the 'glorious possibilities' that would continue to attract Eliot herself, in the fictional lives of Romola and Dorothea Brooke and Daniel Deronda) and the masculine census-reader who knows that eighty out of a hundred of his 'adult male fellow-Britons' actually lead a 'dim and narrow existence'. Most testing of all, perhaps, is the gap between the church-going narrator and the post-Christian author attempting to keep faith with both her old and her new selves.

Raymond Williams was the first of Eliot's Marxist critics to find her attempt to render 'the life of the People' compromised by her immersion in metropolitan bourgeois culture.²⁵ Colin McCabe develops this view further, seeing the form of 'the classic realist text' itself as privileging the discourse of the narrator as a 'metalanguage', controlling, interpreting and judging the other discourses that compose the text, and putting the reader in a position of dominance over the characters and their stories.²⁶ Eliot's awareness of just these problems is evident, even as early as the *Scenes*, however: she continues, in her novels, to set the 'totalizing' tendency of 'omniscient narration' (never itself more than a fiction, as Hillis Miller long ago pointed out)²⁷ against a recognition of the inherent limitations of all perspectives. The deliberately constructed masculine persona who narrates the *Scenes*, still attached to his birthplace by memories and shared stories in which he appears, from time to time, with a new friend or a new suit of clothes, will sometimes boast of having the 'real' story. Yet he acknowledges, at the outset, the limitations not only of his own 'mental retina', but of the whole contemporary 'condition of thought' reflected in the opening meditations on 'Time and Space'. Any hegemonic or authoritarian tendency in the telling of the clerical stories is continually qualified by the democratic interplay of voices and social registers, and by the many discourses – Evangelical Christianity, Comte's and Feuerbach's 'religion of humanity', Romanticism, literary 'realism', evolutionary science – on which Eliot's narratives draw. Shepperton Church itself may be a time-honoured recorder of time, a repository of the human wish somehow to reconcile continuity with change, but its 'intelligent eye' looks back to mock the viewer both for pride in historical 'improvement' and nostalgia for a beloved past, challenging any sense of history as finally 'told'.²⁸

Like the narrator, the Revd Amos Barton has some difficult gaps to bridge. The very upward mobility represented in his 'cure of souls' at Shepperton compromises the authority of his role. The class-bound foundations of the Church of England ministry are nicely exposed in the clerical gossip in Milby vicarage in Chapter VI. 'Not quite the gentleman' ('instead of *perambulate*, the Rev. Amos wrote *preambulate*'), Amos carries into this traditionally genteel calling the whiff of his cabinet-maker father's Dissent. Uneasily poised between reforming

zeal that has a decidedly evangelical air and ‘a High-Church assertion of ecclesiastical power and functions’, needing to keep up appearances on a salary of eighty pounds per annum with a wife and six children to support, he is socially, theologically and economically insecure. The narrator demands sympathy for his ordinariness and his unattractiveness, and begins to enlist it by a narrative habit Eliot inherited from earlier women novelists²⁹ but which she was to make fully her own, rendering his innermost thoughts by ‘*erlebte rede*’ or indirect free speech: ‘the religious life of Shepperton was falling back towards low-water mark. Here, you perceive, was a terrible stronghold of Satan; and you may well pity the Rev. Amos Barton, who had to stand single-handed and summon it to surrender.’ This flexible movement in and out of the character’s consciousness encourages the reader to share the narrator’s ironic judgements. In Amos, the first of Eliot’s zealous reformers, grandeur of aspiration is measured against lack of self-awareness and insensitivity to the feelings of others.

G. H. Lewes had promised Blackwood that the *Scenes* would show the clergy in their ‘human’, rather than their ‘theological’, aspect.³⁰ In fact, Eliot found the two aspects inseparable. Each of the *Scenes* charts its own moral and narrative bearings from an embedded biblical text. This sound evangelical practice is one of several signs that Eliot remains, in this first work, ambiguously positioned in her relationship with Christian theology. In Chapter II, for example, the clerical life of Amos is read in the light of the text on which he preaches to the workhouse: the institution of the passover, or feast of unleavened bread, in [Chapter 12](#) of Exodus. The Barton family’s distressing want of ‘bread’ keeps pressing up into the narrative in the form of unpaid butcher’s bills, handouts from Mr Oldinport, and Milly Barton’s painstaking domestic contrivings. Amos (not uncharacteristically for a Cambridge Simeonite, the narrator implies) fails lamentably to provide the spiritual nourishment needed by his flock. Bridging the gap between ‘the geographical, chronological and exegetical mind’ and ‘the pauper point of view’ requires not only ‘an adroit tongue’, but ‘a flexible imagination’. A series of implicit comparisons underlie Revd Barton’s failure as a moral teacher. Unlike Mr Cleves, who calls ‘a spade a spade’, and who has ‘the wonderful art of preaching sermons which the wheelwright and the blacksmith can understand’, or Mr Gilfil, who endears himself by approximating his accent and mode of speech to that of the local farmers, Mr Barton talks the abstract language of evangelical cant: ‘he talked of Israel and its sins, of chosen vessels, of the Paschal lamb, of blood as a medium of reconciliation’. When he does engage with the direct experience of his congregation of pithily described refractory children, wrinkled old women and superannuated old men, he displays a very different theology from the one at work in Mr Gilfil’s delightful exchange with Dame Frick about her pig. Amos takes the opportunity to point a harshly judgemental moral: ‘you’ll soon be going where there is no more snuff. You’ll be in need of mercy then. You must remember that you may have to seek for mercy and not find it, just as you’re seeking for snuff.’ The Old Testament God of Exodus 12, who rewards obedience and punishes deviation from the law, is more congenial to Amos than the New Testament God of mercy. This prompts a further comparison: with Christ, the ‘Paschal lamb’ himself, whose sacrificial blood, Amos’s Christian theology should remind him, supersedes the passover. Christ’s homely way with ‘familiar types and symbols’ in his New Testament parables, moreover, expresses that ‘flexible imagination’ Eliot sees as essential to all sympathetic social relationships: ‘and Mr Barton this morning succeeded in carrying the pauper imagination to

the dough-tub, but unfortunately was not able to carry it upwards from that well-known object to the unknown truths which it was intended to shadow forth.' Eliot's own imagination is visibly engaged by these matters, which call out the quick satiric wit that peppers the *Scenes*, as well as the more sustained imaginative play that is further developed in 'Janet's Repentance'. Amos, though trained in a place where 'butter can be purchased by the yard', is unable to break open 'the bread of life'. In this he is no different from those Milby clerics making their 'corrupt text' of Barton's life, as Mr Cleves points out, and who are more interested in farming their crops than in distributing the sacramental bread prefigured in the miracle to which the erudite narrator refers, when God distils the dew as bread in Exodus 16. In this narrative meditation on biblical typology, the chain of authority that runs from God through Moses and Judaic and Christian theology might seem to be completed by Eliot's version of 'the religion of humanity'.³¹ The narrative of 'Amos Barton' turns on the perception that in the end it is his ordinary human suffering that earns for him the communal support his preaching could never win.

While this is consistent with Feuerbach's view that the essence of Christianity is to be found in one's fellow human beings, it is not inconsistent with the Christian discourse on which Eliot's narrative relies. Amos, like the Revd Tryan in 'Janet's Repentance', becomes a figure of the suffering Christ, a 'sacrifice' through whom others are brought into a strengthened religious community, and a 'Christ-like compassion'. It is through his suffering, in turn, that Amos himself is redeemed from his failures of sympathetic imagination and compassion. The element of Christian parable, however, with its quiescent pastoral ending at the graveside of Milly Barton, seems at odds with the story's more disturbing insights into the domestic fortunes of the Bartons. It is the death of Milly Barton that initiates the process of her husband's redemption, prompting the judgement that 'the women in *Scenes of Clerical Life* are holy sacrifices through which men's lives are given spiritual meanings'.³² Milly's story raises the question of how critical Eliot is of Victorian culture's 'sacrifice' and idealization of women.

The influence of contemporary genre painting can be detected in Milly's first appearance as 'a large, fair, gentle Madonna'. What rescues her from the cliché of Victorian domestic angel is the sensuousness of her beauty and the hardship that tempers it. She is brought alive by her relationship with a husband whose 'dejection at his mistakes and failings' is soothed by her 'cool soft hand' and with the children whose generalized 'blond heads' are individuated into distinct personalities. The scenes in which her shy sincerity and child-tending are measured against the Countess Czerlaski's gushing affections and pampering of her lap dog add a further dimension to the social analysis of 'Amos Barton'. The dinner party at Camp Villa, in Chapter III, in which gravy is spilled on Milly's already-turned-black dress brings this analysis to sharp focus, culminating in a game of chess in which Barton is seen to 'expose his queen'.

What he exposes her to is not only neglect, but the gossip and innuendo of which she becomes aware when the Countess (a widow on the prowl in a likely neighbourhood for an eligible husband) comes on her protracted stay at the overburdened vicarage. The assiduous church-going of the Countess simply fuels the 'high-life' plot constructed by 'Milby respectability', in which she is first supposed the mistress of the half-brother with whom she has been living, and then of Amos Barton himself. If there is a germ of truth in the rumour that Amos is smitten by the Countess, it lies in his susceptibility to extravagant compliments

on his sermons and her promise to advance his fortunes with her 'friend' (a former employer), Lady Potter.

Chief among Milly's domestic burdens, however, is her annual child-bearing: 'that poor thing is dreadful weak an' dilicate; she won't stan' havin' many more children', as Mrs Hackl comments – a perception that is slyly underlined in the sentence that follows: 'Mr Barton, meanwhile, had been indefatigable in his vocation.' 'Not at all an ascetic', he exhibits none of that superiority to 'the things of the flesh' ladies of 'more enthusiastic views' might wish to see. Almost immediately after her near death from miscarriage in Chapter V Milly is pregnant again. Eliot resorts, necessarily, to euphemism³³ in describing the event as an 'illness', but overt attention is given here to an issue central to Victorian marriage and family life. Eliot's letters at this time record her distress at the toll of child-bearing on her sister Chrissie. (It seems likely that she herself remained childless by choice, practising a form of contraception clearly not available, if indeed theologically acceptable, to an Amos Barton.) The point being made is not that Milly's pregnancies might have been avoided, but that they reveal the sexual partnership recollected in her last words to Amos: 'you – have – made me – very – happy'.³⁴ The burden of physical affection is borne by Milly's 'delicate body... becoming daily less fit for all the many things that had to be done between rising up and lying down': the marital bed in 'Amos Barton' is graphically both child-bed and death-bed. This perception gives force to a death-bed scene that tends to make twentieth-century readers uneasy,³⁵ though George Eliot and George Henry Lewes wept together at this proof that she could command 'pathos'. And it distinguishes sharply between the quality of Milly's 'sacrifice' and the sacrificial role of selfless abnegation she hands on to her daughter Patty.³⁶ In this commonplace tragedy of Victorian domestic life, the love that stands between the Revd Amos and his social insecurities and clerical failures conspires with them in his 'sad fortunes'. Eliot's narrative, though it purports to focus on the clerical life of Barton, measures the cost of his vocation most powerfully in the sufferings of Milly. 'We women are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections', Eliot wrote, many years later: 'and though the affections are perhaps the best gift we have, we ought also to have our share of the more independent life... surely women need this sort of defence against passionate affliction even more than men'.³⁷ 'Amos Barton' raises questions about the lives of women in Victorian society that make a connecting thread in the two *Scenes* that follow.

MR GILFIL'S LOVE-STORY

The locked room in which Mr Gilfil's wife has died in childbirth is the same room in which Milly Barton is to die years later. Caterina Sarti's musical gifts offer at least a glimpse of the artist's 'independent life', though she too is destroyed in the end by her 'living too exclusively in the affections'. In Shepperton memory she is still the young bride about whom Mrs Patter is conceded to be the final authority, and whose loss creates an abiding respect for Mr Gilfil: 'Poor man, poor man! It had like to ha' killed him when she died, though he niver gev way, but went on ridin' about and preachin'.' In Mr Gilfil's memory, too, she remains the eighteen-year-old girl with dark eyes and cherry-coloured ribbons enshrined in the miniature in the locked room, whose function as 'a sort of visible symbol of the secret chamber in his heart' is

somewhat obviously spelled out. In 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' Eliot reworks Amos Barton's story of sacrifice and loss within a different social milieu. More is stirring in her than the need to embrace some grander possibilities than the self-imposed 'domestic realism' of 'Amos Barton' allowed.³⁸ The aristocratic world of Cheverel Manor that produces, in Maynard Gilfil, so different a cleric from Amos Barton, allows her to attempt a much more ambitious analysis of the conservatism and complacency of provincial England. Thematically, as well as in its plot, this second *Scene* is an extension of the thinking of the first. The spirit of change that transforms Shepperton Church is seen on a grand scale in the 'improvements' to Cheverel Manor.

In Cheverel, Eliot recreates Arbury Hall, where her father was employed as estate manager. Arbury is as much a part of her living memory as Chilvers Coton. Affection for its formal beauties is evident in the opening 'scenes' with their painterly landscape views, and in the narrator's tribute, in Chapter IV, to the gothic ceiling created in the library by the lord of the manor: 'I, who have seen Cheverel Manor as he bequeathed it to his heirs... have felt that there dwelt in this old English baronet some of that sublime spirit which distinguishes art from luxury, and worships beauty apart from self-indulgence.' Welcomed to work in this library as a girl, yet held at a distance appropriate to her father's station, George Eliot looks backwards now to explore, through the story of Caterina Sarti's adoption by the Cheverels, questions about class and gender and aristocratic patronage of the arts.

The gothic motif of Mr Gilfil's locked room is echoed in the winding passageways and buried feelings at Cheverel Manor. It is echoed too in the recessive narrative structure, which moves backwards to uncover its buried story, suggesting that Eliot is experimenting with the gothic genre so popular in the pages of *Blackwood's* at this time. Her interest in the cultural climate that produces the literary and architectural taste for the gothic nevertheless seems to promise a more critical enquiry. As in 'Amos Barton', she reads patriarchal authority in the light of its reading matter, returning to the library, as it were, to prove herself fully in command of the baronet's textual authorities. These include the newspaper that reports 'the last portentous proceedings of the French parliaments' that herald the French Revolution, and *The Gentleman's Magazine* which throughout the 1780s and 1790s encourages the English landed gentlemen in a taste for reconstructions of the gothic.³⁹ The response of English conservatism to revolutionary France is elaborated in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). It is in the spirit of Burke that Sir Christopher Cheverel sees both Europe and 'innovation' – as tempered by what Burke defines as a proper regard for continuity: 'a spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors... the people of England well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservatism... without at all excluding the principle of improvement.'⁴⁰ In making 'sympathetic' improvements to his property, Sir Christopher has one anxious eye on posterity (he has no natural heirs), and the other on the ancestral portraits that line his walls. When he and his lady, painted by Joshua Reynolds, take up their places, what is recorded is not only a way of life and its purchasing power, but the power of art to replace the living links with its narrative of continuity. The cultural imperialism that counts on assimilating Milan Cathedral into Cheverel Manor is made doubly ironic by its appropriation of medievalism.

‘The art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues’,⁴¹ wrote John Ruskin. Eliot was a devoted, though not uncritical, reader of Ruskin. His essay ‘On the Nature of Gothic’ carries the reminder that ‘all that gorgeousness of the Middle Ages... had, nevertheless, for foundation and for end, nothing but the pride of life – the pride of the so-called superior classes’.⁴² Behind Ruskin lies the work of Pugin, for whom the ‘truly Christian style’ of Gothic was to make part of ‘a truly Catholic revival’.⁴³ In attempting ‘to capture the Gothic for Protestantism’, as Raymond Williams preface001,⁴⁴ Ruskin adapts what he needs for his own distinctive (and English) vision of the organic society. This, Eliot suggests, is essentially the late eighteenth-century English country gentleman’s enterprise. Sir Christopher’s patronage of artist and architect and stonemason gives new shape to the social role of the hereditary aristocracy. The newly gothicized manor house gives enduring form and borrowed sanctity to the motto finely carved ‘in old English letters’ above the servants’ fireplace: “‘Fear God and honour the King’”. This enshrinement of establishment values is marked in the ‘pretty sight’ that ends Chapter II, where the household, composed as for a painting, formally and correctly observes the Church of England service of Evening Prayer.

As well as architectural plans and drawings, the Cheverels bring-back from Italy Tina, infant daughter of an impoverished musician: ‘it would be a Christian work to train this little Papist into a good Protestant, and graft as much English fruit as possible on the Italian stem’.⁴⁵ The metaphor of grafting is later echoed in the even more distasteful metaphor of cross-breeding, when Sir Christopher imagines his ‘little monkey’ Tina ‘with a baby about the size of a kitten in her arms’. Nature, it seems, may be more resistant to his attempts at husbandry than the stones of Cheverel. His ‘pride of class’ imposes its vision on the landscape, as well as on the family. His ‘selfish temper’ is seen in the domestic discomfort his improvements exact. His interview with Dame Hartopp catches the dictatorial element in his paternalistic dealings with his tenantry. In choosing as his heir the effete Anthony Wybrow (thus disinheriting the son of an elder sister who has displeased him) and arranging to have him marry Miss Assher (daughter of his own first love), he sets the stage for the drama that is to unfold between Chapters IV and XXI.

Eliot’s analysis of the landed English family’s attempt to embrace and control change is at its best in her exposure of what E. M. Forster was to call, a century later, ‘the undeveloped heart of the English’.⁴⁵ Instinctively filling the vacancy left by her childlessness, Lady Cheverel replaces ‘the tinsel Madonna’ in whose protection Signor Sarti is accustomed to leave his infant daughter. Distantly affectionate, she remains embarrassed by Tina’s ‘stage antics’, especially when they take the form of physical demonstrativeness towards her ‘Padroncello’. Sir Christopher’s reciprocal delight in Tina, and in his other surrogate children Maynard Gilfil, his ward, and Anthony, his heir, gives poignancy to his discovery that his role as patron has blinded him to the feelings of all three. Anthony Wybrow’s heart is literally diseased: he is flattered by Tina’s love for him (his trifling with her affections anticipates Arthur Donnithorne’s seduction of Hetty in Eliot’s first novel *Adam Bede*, just as the early companionship of Maynard and Tina anticipates the childhood of Maggie and Tom Tulliver, her second, *The Mill on the Floss*). But he is incapable of any feeling deeper than a dutiful attempt to please his uncle. The scenes between Tina and the Asshers, mother and daughter, while they owe something to the Ingrams in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, show Eliot beginning to exploit, in her own distinctive way, the gap between surface manners and inner

thoughts and feelings.

Tina, like the later Maggie Tulliver, is conceived of as potentially more passionate and more genuinely creative than those around her. What Eliot begins to envisage here awaits the linked studies of disinheritance and of the female artist in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. The passage in Chapter V, where 'our little Tina and her troubles' are set in the context of a Carlylean 'stream of thought and deed' on the one hand, and the microscopic 'centre of quivering life in the water-drop' on the other, is a first try at the last novel's reflections on 'the consciousness of a girl' as the delicate vessel 'through which is born onward through the ages the treasure of human affections' (Bk I, Ch. II). Tina's rejection by Anthony confirms her social status as perpetual foreigner at Cheverel. Not even her magnificent voice can make her a real daughter of the house, though it does elevate her from the position of 'companion' to that of artist-in-residence.

Tina's foreignness makes a problem, too, for Eliot's own sympathetic imagination. The narrator's attempt to mediate that foreignness for an English readership alternates between eliciting sympathy for the migrant plight of 'the little southern bird' and censoring her unbridled passion. She is early on described as having 'a certain ingenuity in vindictiveness': the passage in Chapter XIII that imagines her murderous rage is blatant in its appeal to those very readers whose taste the story intends to criticize:

See how she rushes noiselessly, like a pale meteor, along the passages and up the gallery stairs! Those gleaming eyes, those bloodless lips, that swift silent tread, make her look like the incarnation of a fierce purpose, rather than a woman... Wait, wait, O heart! till she has done this one deed... she will plunge that dagger into his heart...

But what is that lying among the dank leaves on the path three yards before her?

Good God! it is he... O God, he is dead!

No rehabilitation of 'the melodramatic imagination' can disguise the fact that what is going on here is not the release of extreme and repressed feeling⁴⁶ but the confirmation of cultural stereotypes associated with Italian opera and European revolutionary ardour. Question-and-answer rhetoric and stage directions replace the real questions raised by Tina's suffering: whether she has earned the right to her rage, and whether callous disregard for her feelings might make Tina capable of murder. Anthony's fortuitous heart attack is the first of those convenient deaths in which Eliot seems both to indulge her heroines' guilty wishes and spare them from real consequences.⁴⁷ One of the 'foolish virgins' about whom Maynard Gilfil has preached, Tina is absolved from her guilt by his loving counsel: her marriage to him brings to an end what the narrator describes as 'the short interval of sin and sorrow'. But her return to her favourite air, 'Che Faro Senza Eurydice', reverberates with the unanswered questions of lost love, and announces the transition of Tina from passionate self-assertion into the ethereal voice and memory of art.

Maynard Gilfil is the first of Eliot's portraits of the old-fashioned English clergymen for whom vocation is founded in the exercise of a social duty appropriate to the rank of a gentleman. Mr Gilfil is on terms of equality with the best families of Shepperton. Nevertheless he refuses to align himself with Squire Oldinport, an oppressive landlord: the good nature and integrity of the young Maynard persist in the old cleric. To appease Blackwood, who found Gilfil's moral stature compromised by his involvement in the love

triangle, Eliot wrote an Epilogue, which pictures Mr Gilfil as 'poor lopped oak', noble still, deeply rooted in his English soil. The world that has made him what he is, and to which Tina has been sacrificed, is uncritically evoked in this organic image of continuity. The story's more searching social criticism is laid aside, as in 'Amos Barton', in its pastoral ending.

JANET'S REPENTANCE

In 'Janet's Repentance', Eliot dispels any tendency to see provincial life in terms of pastoral tranquillity. Janet's alcoholism and Dempster's physical violence challenge the Victorian stereotype of respectable middle-class marriage, and there is an ugly edge to the sectarianism that mocks Christianity's civilizing mission of peace and goodwill. Once again, Eliot's exploration of these disturbing energies is checked by the ever-watchful Blackwood and by her own awareness of the sensitivities of her readership. Janet remains, none the less, the most powerful of her three studies of a woman's 'passionate affection'.

The social 'scene setting' of the opening chapters seemed diffuse to Blackwood and to some later readers: 'large chunks of description and information and the introduction of too many characters who tend to clutter up the story and confuse the reader'.⁴⁸ Through this mosaic of personality and viewpoint, however, Eliot conveys the experience of day-to-day market-town life, and moves closer to achieving what she attempts in the previous *Scenes* – a sense of the social conditions by which the process of change is shaped. The forces that govern Milby society are reflected in the drama of the Dempster marriage and the persecution of Mr Tryan, the Evangelical minister.

Milby stands just off-centre in the previous *Scenes*. Milby gossip, which a generation earlier shunned the Countess, has a new object in the Revd Tryan, curate of the Paddiford Chapel-of-Ease. Milby comes into focus now in Chapter II as 'a dingy-looking town, with a strong smell of tanning up one street, and a great shaking of handlooms up another'. Amos Barton, on his way to the workhouse, passes by the pale and sickly-looking weavers 'doing a sort of treadmill work with legs and arms'. These are the people to whom Tryan ministers and among whom he lives, breathing 'the smoke of coal-pits'. His influence is reaching out beyond evangelicalism's historic mission field among the industrialized urban poor, however, to invade the very drawing rooms of the prosperous citizens of Milby.

The paired scenes of Chapters I and III provide a deft analysis of the climate of opinion (and its underlying vested interests), which vilifies and fêtes Mr Tryan: the male world of The Red Lion where lawyer Dempster is accustomed to laying down the law, and the female world of Mrs Linnet's parlour where the ladies show their receptiveness to the new 'gospel'. The contest between law and gospel raised by Amos Barton's sermon is at the centre of the contestation of authority precipitated by Tryan's evangelicalism. 'Preaching without book' is one of the charges against him. That the battle concerns the use, interpretation and ownership of texts, is made clear in the anti-Tryanite petition and playbill organized by Dempster, and in the many references to textual authorities throughout the *Scenes*. Dempster's authority in civil matters (his name plays on 'Doomster', or pronouncer of sentences) is believed to extend itself to matters of religion ('he knows everything, Dempster does. He studied very hard when he was a young man'). The arrogance of Dempster in his cups is displayed in his spat

with Byles over the derivation of 'Presbyterian'. He is hostile to Tryan's emphasis on the doctrine of 'justification by faith', largely because it implies a rebuke to his own licentiousness, as a passage Blackwood persuaded Eliot to excise (see note 33) makes clear.

Miss Pratt, 'the one blue stocking of Milby' (inclined, she will admit, to carry Mr Tryan 'a little beyond the depth of the other listeners'), is able to pronounce that 'justification by faith', the New Testament 'gospel' that the redemptive sacrifice of Christ ensures the Christian's salvation, restores a 'cardinal doctrine of the Reformation... obscured in the English Church'. The dark forebodings in the Red Lion that evening lectures will promote sexual promiscuity and a socially subversive 'education' find a comic echo in the transaction in Mrs Linnet's parlour. Mr Tryan inspires a tender affection in the ladies binding books for his lending library. The narrator (who enters the story in the youthful innocence of his first coat-tails) is bitingly satirical in his exposure of the economic interests that underlie opposition to Tryan in the Red Lion. But his relish in laying bare the reading habits and the various stages of marriageability, rivalry and expectation of the book-binding ladies threatens, however, to overbalance into blatantly sexist jibes that recall Dempster's anti-Tryanite playbill ('*Two Hen-birds who are no chickens*', 'a Pair of *regenerated* Linnets'). The male narrator's inside knowledge of female 'venom' suggests that perhaps Eliot is settling old scores: 'even her female friends said nothing more ill-natured of her [Miss Rebecca Linnet], than that her face was like a piece of putty with two Scotch pebbles stuck in it'. The narrator is forced (somewhat disingenuously) to check his exposure of deeper unvoiced personal interests that motivate the female Tryanites as they motivate the male anti-Tryanites: 'Poor women's hearts! Heaven forbid that I should laugh at you, and make cheap jests on your susceptibility towards the clerical sex, as if it had nothing deeper or more lovely in it than the mere vulgar angling for a husband.' The target of the satire in Chapter III is at least in part the narrowness of female education and opportunity deplored in Eliot's *Westminster* review of some of the novels the ladies are binding.

Janet Raynor's 'superior education', as the gossiping ladies note, has fitted her for nothing better than to become the wife of 'the cleverest man in Milby'. The dynamics of this alcoholic marriage, with its shared dependency, temporary respites, unpredictable moods escalating into violence, suggest clinical observation,⁴⁹ gathered, no doubt, by the young Marian Evans in the sickrooms of the parish. The account of Dempster's *delirium tremens* is vividly descriptive, tracing the psychological process in which Dempster's brutality returns to him in the shapes of abject fear, guilt and paranoia. Janet's emotional and sexual importuning is transformed into punitive charnel-house images. In a nightmare of revenge she becomes associated with the Tryanite enemy. His most deeply buried guilt, the eviction of Janet, in her night-dress, following the drunken battle over his clothes, now comes to the surface: 'Dead... is she dead? *She* did it, then. She buried herself in the iron chest... she left her clothes out, though.' His ravings recall the hellish being he becomes in his drunken rages. Spewing out a satanic diatribe, he is transformed into the 'Old Harry' others see: 'I'll make a fire under you, and smoke off the whole pack of you... I'll sweep you up... I'll grind you to powder... I'll make them say the Lord's Prayer backwards... I'll pepper them so that the devil shall eat them raw.'

Janet's drinking, like Tina Sarti's passion, makes for tensions in the structure and tone of the narrative, which turns on the action of 'conversion'. Brought to this turning point by her

eviction, Janet has literally nowhere to go until she finds refuge with the Tryanite Mrs Pettifer: she has been entrapped by the interplay of dependencies as she is entrapped socially and legally (Dempster has control of her mother's small property). The scene in which the good old woman takes Janet into her own warm bed is moving in its unsentimental attention to physical sensation: the cold of the streets, the absolute desolation of Janet's despair released as hysterical outpouring by Mrs Pettifer's physical comfort. The effort at the end of Chapter IV, to imagine the maternal solitudes of Mrs Raynor, by contrast, displays the rhetorical patterns that come in the way of Tina Sarti's murderous instincts: 'Surely the mother hears that cry... Poor grey-haired woman! Was it for this you suffered a mother's pangs... Was it for this you kept the little worn morocco shoes...?' Mrs Raynor's reading of the parable of the lost sheep (the germ of *Adam Bede*), and her appeal to the picture of the crucified Christ, make part of a moralizing response that is at odds with the perception of Janet's alcoholism as a symptom of, and a response to, her intolerable domestic circumstances. *The Saturday Review*, predictably enough, refers to Janet's 'tragic sin'.⁵⁰

The form of Eliot's story, then, echoes the Christian parable of the lost sheep. Tryan, dying of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three, is even more overtly an image of Christ than Amos Barton, embodying as well as preaching the gospel of forgiveness and redemption. Janet and Tryan's meeting over the sick-bed of Sally Martin is a plotted point that prepares the way for the providential grace of Janet's appeal for help. It is Tryan's confession of a sin even greater than hers that enables Janet to renounce 'wicked feelings'. Manifestly, however, the gospel of Tryan that supersedes Dempster's discredited law is a foreclosing of the rational enquiry that had guided Marian Evans through the emotional labyrinth of her loss of faith: 'But what do we know? We cannot foretell the working of the smallest event in our own lot: how can we presume to judge of things that are so much too high for us? There is nothing that becomes us but entire submission, perfect resignation.' The narrator is equivocating, nevertheless, in assessing Mr Tryan's tendency to fill up 'the margin of ignorance which surrounds all our knowledge with the feelings of trust and resignation. Perhaps the profoundest philosophy could hardly fill it up better.'

Eliot's reading of Feuerbach had caused her to ponder deeply 'the blessed influence of one true loving soul on another'. As novelist, too, she is more interested in the human interaction of Tryan's ministry than in its theological adequacy. A persistent theme of the story is the finer neighbourliness that redeems the materialism of Milby, exposing the absurdity of the 'doctrinal zeal' that opposes 'good works' and 'faith'. Old Mrs Raynor, Janet herself, the kindly old Dissenter Mr Jerome, like Mr Tryan, go about quietly doing good. The attractiveness that draws Tryan's female parishioners is seen in complex ways. If he is responsive to 'pretty woman', his eloquence, sincerity and exemplary life make him attractive also to Mr Jerome. His self-denying ministry to the most needy makes 'the people love him'. But there is a self-punitiveness in his neglect of his illness. The story of his seduction of Lucy, a characteristic Victorian tale of the guilt-ridden male and the fallen woman, is clearly designed to establish Tryan as a sexual being, and it is reinforced by allusion to his ongoing struggle to subdue the flesh. Janet's voluptuous beauty, despite the narrator's need to spiritualize it into 'a glorious Greek temple', establishes in her, too, a strong sensuality. There is no attempt to deny that her growing love for him, with its strongly maternal element, is both sexual and spiritual. 'The sacred kiss of promise' they exchange just before his death,

while it resembles a conventional romance ending, reflects once again the views of Feuerbach:

The strongest of the impulses of Nature, is it not the sexual feeling? Where there is no *thou*, there is no I, but the distinction between *I* and *thou*, the fundamental condition of all personality, of all consciousness, is only real, loving, ardent, when felt the distinction between men and women.⁵¹

Theologians at the end of the twentieth century, less troubled than the Victorians by too precisely naming ‘the margin of ignorance which surrounds all our knowledge’, might be inclined to read ‘Janet’s Repentance’ as a refashioning of the old religion, despite Eliot’s formal adherence to the new.⁵² What is clear is that the exploration of the disputes that trouble and animate the clerical life of her times brings Eliot into close touch with the deepest sources of her own experience. This is marked by the progressive abandonment of the knowing and gendered narrative persona, and the emergence of a voice that anticipates the narrator of *Middlemarch*:

The blessed work of helping the world forward, happily does not wait to be done by perfect men; and I should imagine that neither Luther nor John Bunyan, for example, would have satisfied the modern demand for an ideal hero, who believes nothing but what is true, feels nothing but what is exalted, and does nothing but what is graceful. The real heroes, of God’s making, are quite different: they have their natural heritage of love and conscience which they drew in with their mother’s milk; they know one or two of those deep spiritual truths which are only to be won by long wrestling with their own sins and their own sorrows; they have earned faith and strength so far as they have done genuine work: but the rest is dry barren theory, blank prejudice, vague hearsay. Their insight is blended with mere opinion; their sympathy is perhaps confined in narrow conduits of doctrine, instead of flowing forth with the freedom of a stream that blesses every weed in its course; obstinacy or self-assertion will often interfuse itself with their grandest impulses; and their very deeds of self-sacrifice are sometimes only the rebound of a passionate egoism...

Yet surely, surely the only true knowledge of our fellow-man is that which enables us to feel with him – which gives us a fine ear for the heart-pulses that are beating under the mere clothes of circumstance and opinion. Our subtlest analysis of schools and sects must miss the essential truth, unless it be lit up by the love that sees in all forms of human thought and work, the life and death struggles of separate human beings. (Chapter X)

Readers of the later novels will recognize the distinctive qualities of George Eliot’s mature writing – the move from broad sweep to microscopic focus, the continual adjusting of moral and visual perspectives, the enrichment of generalization by detail, and the cadences that shape her stories of noble impulse struggling against the limitations of individual egoism and unfriendly report. Collective wisdom is often the subject of irony in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. But the narrator of ‘Janet’s Repentance’ feels able to abandon ‘lofty height’, trusting to the best instincts and more keenly attuned eye and ear of the interpretative community her stories have called into being.

NOTES

1. The abbreviation suggests its place in the affections of the reading public. For Blackwood's correspondence with Eliot during the writing of the *Scenes*, see David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971), pp. 49–61.
2. Quotations are from *John Bull's Weekly*, 8 February 1856 and *The Critic*, 15 January 1857, quoted Thomas A. Noble, *George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1965), p. 4, and Samuel Lucas, unsigned review in *The Times*, 2 January 1858, in David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 61–2.
3. *Saturday Review*, 29 May 1858, *ibid.*, p. 67.
4. 'I have observed what seem to me to be such womanly touches, in those moving fictions, that the assurance on the title-page is insufficient to satisfy me, even now.' Charles Dickens to George Eliot, 18 January 1858, in Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1954–78), Vol. II, p. 424.
5. David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, p. 2.
6. Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. II, p. 295.
7. Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1985), provides an interesting discussion of the Liggins rumour, the uses of the pseudonym, and the interconnected secrecies of Eliot's relationship with Lewes.
8. Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. III, p. 215.
9. Penny Boumelha, 'George Eliot and the End of Realism', in Sue Roe, ed., *Women Reading Women's Writing* (Harvester Press, Brighton, 1987), considers the problems raised for feminists by the masculine pseudonym.
10. Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. II, p. 218.
11. From Eliot's *Prospectus of the Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, eds. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Penguin Books, London, 1990), p. 4.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 37. (This edition contains all three essays.)
13. J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (William Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1884), p. 431, reports that Eliot chose this name 'because George was Mr Lewes' Christian name and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word'. Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot, A Biography* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968), p. 220, provides other possible sources. Ruby Redinger, *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (The Bodley Head, London, Sydney, Toronto, 1975), p. 331, cites 'family tradition' that the name is an acrostic: 'To L-I owe it'.
14. Mary Wilson Carpenter, *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1986), p. 30.
15. With a precision of detail that enabled the originals to be quickly recognized. Revd John Gwyther, curate of Chilvers Coton 1831–41, the model for Amos Barton, 'thought it unkind and taking a great liberty with a living character'; the Newdigate family recognized their sea

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