

A WRITER'S WRITER
PATRICIA DUNCKER ON READING GEORGE ELIOT

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-aggrandisement 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*.. And I surged through hundreds of pages, dense, meticulous descriptive writing, arcane speculation and odd information, fabulous melodramatic scenes where the dialogue 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, nor with his opinions of women. I was being coerced into submission, forced to judge and to choose. I stopped reading George Eliot.

For Big Sister George wasn't always the most important writer in my personal canon. When I was at school it was poetry all the way: especially T.S. Eliot and Robert Lowell, not only because they made me feel important and clever, but also because poetry seemed more important than fiction. The languages of poetry were more intense, elusive and metaphorical. Poetry appeared closer to philosophy, to a real literature of ideas. I still think that poetry comes first. I then went through a fanatical separatist stage as a young woman where I read only women writers. I revered the Brontës, all three Brontës, because they wrote about adultery and violence against women with a radical candour that still takes my breath away. And I adored Virginia Woolf, because her writing swooped so close to poetry, and I fell for all the myths of Bloomsbury, - all those middle class intellectuals discussing art in deckchairs and being openly queer. I read anything that was written by a woman – that is, a biologically female member of the species. Nothing else would do. We, the literary women of my generation, sometimes operated with a ruthless biological determinism, searching for difference, for confirmation that the genitals of genius governed the brain. I still read writing by women that isn't banal domestic fiction or romance, with a concentration and interest that few contemporary male writers can ever generate within me. Women who aren't tools of the patriarchy are uncomfortable and difficult to read. They are not often published well. But they have their readers - I am still here, still reading.

Yet the woman to whom I returned and to whom I say 'Master!' is George Eliot. I re-read one of her novels every year now. Why? I love her vast intelligence, her eroticism, bitchiness and savagery. I am now fascinated by the slipperiness of her narrative methods, the famous 'we' that includes and excludes whole communities of readers at will. For it is precisely that brutal fact of judgement, the necessity of decision, that drew me back to Marian Evans Lewes and her ambiguous double –

George Eliot. I began to read biographies, her letters and journals, and even other people's accounts of who she was, in the letters of her publisher, John Blackwood, and her literary contemporaries, especially Edith Simcox and Henry James. Henry James learned an enormous amount from her; he poached her themes and plots. He was just as clever as she was, but never so sexy.

Eliot's first novel – *Adam Bede* – was published when she was forty. "Well," said my Aunt, when we were having one of our endless *Middlemarch* discussions, "she could hardly have written more, or better." Where can this erudition and intelligence be found in contemporary fiction? It is as rare as it is satisfying. So much of what is published now seems shallow, flat, specious – to say nothing of the innumerable 'silly novels by lady novelists'. I read endless screeds of instant writing that simply records, in a prose that is both banal and sprawling, our unsteady world. What is missing? I find little considered knowledge, merely undigested information, no intellectual curiosity and no grasp of time, history, memory, nor 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 will give you claustrophobic intensity, an unreliable first-person narrator is often suggestive and interesting, but it is hard to represent intelligence, good judgement, moral discrimination and a literary ethic of compassion.

Writing, like all the arts, is a problematic, disciplined process of judgement and selection. 'Shall I choose Thee- the Poet said- to the propounded Word-' 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' – 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.