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Review of 142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London & George Eliot in Germany, 1854-55: 'Cherished Memories'

Rosemary Ashton

Gerlinde Roder-Bolton

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Rosemary Ashton, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London* (Chatto & Windus, 2006). pp. xiv + 386. ISBN 0 7011 7370 X

Gerlinde Röder-Bolton, *George Eliot in Germany, 1854-55: 'Cherished Memories'* (Ashgate, 2006). pp. xiii + 180. ISBN 0 7546 5054 5

The outlines of Marian Evans's life in the years immediately preceding her emergence as George Eliot are well-known—her work for the *Westminster Review*, her relationships with Chapman, Spencer and Lewes, and then her departure with the latter to Germany in July 1854. What these two studies do in their different ways is fill in the picture with fascinating detail. In focusing on the house that John Chapman rented from 1847 to 1854 and from which he ran the *Westminster Review* and his publishing business, Rosemary Ashton recreates the circle of radical intellectuals that the future novelist came into contact with through living there and working as the effective editor of Chapman's journal. The Strand was mid-Victorian London's main East-West thoroughfare, and here its press and bustle are brought vividly to life: it was the centre of journalism, the meeting place for raffish bohemians, and the main shopping street of the great metropolis, home to an immensely varied retail trade, from cutlers and drapers to wax chandlers and wigmakers. Chapman was not the least colourful resident of the street, and we see him here working from five in the morning until ten at night; courting, and then tactlessly alienating, wealthy backers in his efforts to stave off financial ruin (the *Westminster* always ran at a loss); juggling uneasy relations with the various women in his life; and on one occasion surprising a thief in the act of stealing his silver plate, chasing him down the Strand, tripping him and seizing him by the throat. Ashton draws on a wide range of sources, some of them unknown to Gordon Haight when he wrote his *George Eliot and John Chapman* (1940). Thus the mismatch in Chapman's marriage, which may help explain his susceptibility to other women, is sharply illustrated by the testimony of a young woman from a Unitarian family, who describes the couple's appearance in the following terms: 'He, tall with a fine expressive face, full of alert intellectual power, and absorbed in ideas; she, short, stout and unattractive'. Only twenty-six when he took over the lease on the house, Chapman made No 142 the centre of radical intellectual life in the capital. Holding regular soirées and renting rooms to often illustrious visitors, like Emerson, from America and Europe, he gathered around him the progressive minds of his day and made his house a forum for free thinkers and political liberals from Britain and abroad.

When Chapman leaves 142 Strand in 1854 to take less expensive quarters, Ashton follows his fortunes, so that, despite its title, this study is as much a biography of Chapman as an account of the radical intellectual milieu that was centred for a few years on his most famous address. His is, indeed, a remarkable story. A man of ordinary origins with no advantages of birth, wealth or education, and none of the intellectual distinction of men like Spencer and Lewes, he made himself a pivotal figure in the literary and intellectual culture of Victorian Britain by his energy and persistence, and his untiring intellectual curiosity. While making plain his limitations as she traces his often clumsy efforts to secure financial support for the journal, Ashton pays tribute to his achievement in keeping it going for over forty years while running his publishing business and then training and practising as a doctor. Moreover, for a man whose thinking lacked clarity and whose own writing was undistinguished, he had a sure eye for the talents of others, recruiting an array of distinguished contributors to the *Westminster* especially

in its heyday in the 1850s—Harriet Martineau, Froude, Huxley, Tyndall, Francis Newman, Pattison, Lewes, Spencer, and even Carlyle, as well as, of course, George Eliot. As a publisher, he introduced Emerson, Strauss and Feuerbach to Britain, provided a platform for pioneering feminists like Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes, brought out sensationally heterodox works like Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith*, and scholarly works like J. L. Motley's *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, when other publishers would not touch them. He was, as this study makes clear, a great enabler, and in describing the range of writers whom he assisted and his shifting and sometimes uncomfortable relations with them, Rosemary Ashton brings to life the world of Victorian radical intellectual culture with the command and assurance that one has come to expect from the biographer of George Eliot, Lewes, Coleridge and the Carlyles. The story of George Eliot's relations with Chapman will be familiar to students of the novelist, but this study provides a fuller understanding of the milieu in which, through working and writing for Chapman, she began to establish herself as a writer and intellectual, and in which, through him, she came into contact with the man who was to play the most important part in her emergence as a novelist, George Henry Lewes.

Gerlinde Röder-Bolton's study begins in the same year that Chapman leaves the Strand and follows George Eliot's first months of life with Lewes, presenting a detailed account of the places they visited in Germany and the people they met in Weimar and Berlin. It sets the scene topographically, culturally and historically, ranging back from the 1850s to engage with German history and literary history, giving biographical sketches of individual figures and setting out the literary connections of people and places. Thus the couple's experiences in Weimar are interspersed with glimpses of Goethe's life in the principality since that was, of course, the reason for their visit. When they move on to Berlin, we learn about Heine's presence in the city in the 1820s and the story of Kleist's suicide, which George Eliot refers to in her journal. Sometimes the historical detail is more interesting for its own sake than for its pertinence to George Eliot, as with the story of the interrupted building of Cologne Cathedral, but in general the larger temporal context is very helpful for an understanding of the Germany she and Lewes encountered. When they attend Henriette Solmar's salon in Berlin, it is important to know that this was the last liberal salon of its kind in a tradition that stretched back to the late eighteenth century, when it was initiated by progressive Jewish women like Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin, Varnhagen von Ense's late wife. Varnhagen himself emerges here not just as an important contact for George Eliot and Lewes but as a cool and sceptical observer of the social scene who, despite his friendliness to the couple, could express reservations in his diary about Lewes's character and his view of Goethe, which seems to have been too apolitical for someone with Varnhagen's commitment to political reform. The political context of the Berlin visit is illuminated by an account of the development of the Prussian capital and of the street battles of 1848 and the eventual suppression of the revolution, and that background of recent upheaval and a repressive monarchy plays a part in cultural conditions that the couple may not have fully understood. Their surprise at the staging of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, a play about religious tolerance that puts Christianity, Judaism and Islam on the same level, reveals an ignorance of the nature of Prussian state censorship, which was not so much concerned with upholding Protestant Christian orthodoxy or standards of personal morality as with stifling political dissent.

Although the profusion of names and details threatens at times to overwhelm the narrative, it

is in its detailed grasp of the German context that this study is valuable. It has often been assumed—by this reviewer among others—that George Eliot’s and Lewes’s irregular relationship was accepted without fuss in Weimar, like the similar one between Liszt and Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, but this study paints a more nuanced picture. Grand Duke Carl Friedrich and his Court did not exactly condone Liszt’s relationship despite his fame, the Duke always sending his communications to Liszt to the hotel where the composer had stayed before moving in with the Princess. Similarly, all invitations to Court were sent to Lewes only; and although the French ambassador, the Marquis de Ferrière, and James Marshall, private secretary to the Grand Duchess Sophie, were part of the couple’s circle of friends, Lewes only went to dinner with the Marquis on his own and Marshall never invited the couple to his house at all, although he had entertained Carlyle on his visit two years earlier.

In addition to this kind of detailed insight, Röder-Bolton seeks to show how some of George Eliot’s experiences feed into the fiction that is to come. Some of these connections are more persuasive than others: the story of Wagner’s niece, the soprano Johanna Wagner, certainly appears to lie behind ‘Armgarth’, but the claim that there are clear echoes of her in Leonora Charisi, Daniel Deronda’s mother, is not directly supported by the evidence presented here. But in fleshing out the experiences recorded in George Eliot’s diary and in her recollections of Weimar and Berlin in her journal, this study provides the material for readers to make their own assessment of, for instance, the pertinence of Danneker’s sculpture of a reclining Ariadne which she saw in Frankfurt to the scene in *Middlemarch* where another such statue is described in the Vatican. In her informative and comprehensive account of George Eliot’s eight months in Germany with Lewes, Gerlinde Röder-Bolton brings out clearly the distinctive characteristics of German life and culture and helps us better to understand why the couple’s memories of that time were to be so cherished.

John Rignall
University of Warwick