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Scenes of Clerical Life: George Eliot's Own Version of Conversion

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Before the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, few people would have thought that Miss Evans had all the qualities for writing fiction, or, what is more, that she would become a great novelist. She was in her late thirties when she came to fiction writing, although, at the approach of middle age, most novelists have already tried their hand at it. Yet, as she confessed in her Journal, when she started writing the first story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, it marked a new beginning for her, because she had always dreamed of writing fiction: 'September 1856 made a new era in my life, for it was then that I began to write Fiction. It had always been a vague dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel. 

This vague dream would perhaps never have materialized without the encouragement and help of her companion, George Henry Lewes, who persuaded her that she had all the gifts to do it well, and helped her find a publisher (Blackwood) — always an essential step for a would-be novelist.

The religious subject she chose for this first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, was something unexpected, perhaps, considering that she was known as the translator of Strauss and Feuerbach, two German critics of Christianity. Moreover, she was associated with the *Westminster Review*, a Radical and freethinking journal, for which she wrote literary articles and acted as deputy editor for Chapman. Who would have thought that someone who had parted from Christianity would choose a religious subject for her first work of fiction?

In a virulent article, 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming', published by the *Westminster Review* in October 1855, she had attacked Dr Cumming, one of the most famous representatives of the evangelical movement, blaming him for his intellectual limitations and even more for his spiritual fanaticism. In October 1856, only a few days before she began writing the *Scenes*, she had published another article, even more virulent, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', in which she attacked both the 'oracular novels' written by lady novelists to support the High Church, and 'the white neck-cloth species' of novels, meant to support the evangelical cause. She considered that those poor literary specimens, trying to conceal the inadequacies of their writing by an enthusiastic didacticism, were typical of barren personalities who were totally unable to experience any genuine sympathy, an idea that she took up again in another article devoted to the poet Young in January 1857.

When she wrote the *Scenes*, the craze for religious novels, which probably reached a peak in the 1840s, was apparently on the decline, after the polemics originating in the Oxford Movement – but religious themes and the life of the clergy were still prominent in Victorian fiction. By a strange coincidence, for instance, the serial publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1857 coincided with the publication in three volumes of Trollope's *Barchester Towers*.

Therefore, we may presume that when she wrote the *Scenes*, she did not want to try her hand at a genre whose dangers and pitfalls she recognized fully, nor did she follow a fashion – I
would argue that she tried to give the religious novel a new direction, adjusting it to her own views. She did not see it as a sort of ideological weapon, which she could use for or against a particular religious cause. Her own type of religious fiction was different from all the other specimens she could know, because it was not based on any apologetic discourse, and it reflected no particular hostility to any denomination, to any form of Christian belief.

When Lewes was negotiating the publication of the *Scenes* with Blackwood, this is how he presented the new work, on behalf of the new author, who was then supposed to be a male friend of his:

> It will consist of tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its human and not at all in its theological aspect; the object being to do what has never yet been done in our Literature, for we have had abundant religious stories polemical and doctrinal, but since the ‘Vicar’ and Miss Austen, no stories representing the clergy like any other class with the humours, sorrows and troubles of other men. He begged me particularly to add that – as the specimen sent will sufficiently prove – the tone throughout will be sympathetic and not at all antagonistic. (*Letters*, II, 269)

Thus, the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* marks the end of the Victorian religious novel used as an ideological weapon, and a return to the purely human description of the life of the clergy, such as is to be found either in Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, or in the novels of Jane Austen, for which both Lewes and his companion had a great admiration.

The new novelist, who adopted the pen name of George Eliot, to disguise both her gender and her previous involvement in the war of ideas, also had a great admiration for Walter Scott. This may account for the time-gap between narrating time and narrated time, which is equivalent to a generation or two, as we shall see. Seen from a historical perspective, the religious debates of the 1830s have lost their violence and can be considered with less passion. Like Scott, George Eliot is deeply aware of historical change, and insists on the contrast between past and present. For instance, she is aware of addressing a predominantly urban readership, whose environment has little to do with the traditional rural parishes described in the work. Because she had herself left her native Midlands to settle down in London several years before, she realized that many of her readers had lost contact with the countryside too. In the first chapter of ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton’, this is how she addresses her reader: ‘No – most likely you are a miserable town-bred reader, who think of cream as a thinnish white fluid, delivered in infinitesimal pennyworths down area steps’. Thus, the reading contract implies a double journey through time and space, and a return to the good old times of Merry Old England.

Choosing a clergyman as a central character in each of the three stories reflects a human and sociological bias. He is then the key character of the community. He is thus either the protagonist or the main witness of the events described, and often both. Quite naturally, he is also the character who is most commented upon. Whether he arouses favourable or critical comments, he can be seen as a primary target for public opinion. In the three stories of *Scenes*, we have three different clergymen, who represent different periods in the history of rural or
If we follow chronological order, rather than the order in which the stories were published, we start with Mr Gilfil, the clergyman of the second story, briefly mentioned in the first. He appears as the embodiment of the traditional Anglican clergyman of the late eighteenth century. We first meet him in his old age, in 1826, but, because the story is based on a long retrospect, we are invited to return to the time when he was a young man in 1788 – when his ‘love-story’ took place. This good rider, very fond of hunting, is quite close to the traditional image of the country clergyman of the eighteenth century. He is connected with the nobility, since he is introduced as the ward of Sir Christopher Cheverel, Baronet, and he spends much of his time at Cheverel Manor. This is probably why his parishioners see him as a real gentleman. There is a social gap between them and their pastor, and his relationship with them is always characterized by a tinge of paternalism. In an age when the Anglican Church is steeped in a long doctrinal and spiritual slumber, he is no exception to the rule. He does not try to appeal to the religious zeal of his parishioners with sensational sermons:

[...] the Vicar did not shine in the more spiritual function of his office; and indeed, the utmost I can say of him in this respect is, that he performed those functions with undeviating attention to brevity and despatch. He had a heap of short sermons, rather yellow and worn at the edges, from which he took two every Sunday, securing perfect impartiality in the selection by taking them as they came, without reference to topics; and having preached one of these sermons at Shepperton in the morning, he mounted his horse and rode hastily with the other in his pocket to Knebley, where he officiated in a wonderful little church [...]. (121)

Because he has some useful agricultural knowledge, he is widely respected in this field too. In short, he is exactly the kind of clergyman to suit this quiet, traditional, rural parish.

In the last story, ‘Janet’s Repentance’, set in 1830, in the market town of Milby, near the village of Shepperton, we meet a totally different kind of clergyman, a few decades later. Mr Tryan too is a gentleman. He belongs to a good family. As Miss Pratt, an elderly unmarried lady, who is one of his parishioners, and also one of his admirers, puts it,

I understand he is of a highly respectable family indeed, in Huntingdonshire. I heard him myself speak of his father’s carriage – quite incidentally, you know – and Eliza tells me what very fine cambric handkerchiefs he uses. My eyes are not good enough for such things, but I know what breeding is as well as most people, and it is easy to see that Mr Tryan is quite comme il faw, to use a French expression. (271)

Once, in a confidential moment, Mr Tryan confesses that before becoming a clergyman, he looked forward to a political career, because his father was private secretary to a man high in the Whig Ministry, who had promised strong interest in his behalf (359). Yet this gentleman puzzles the inhabitants of Milby by his decision to live very humbly, almost miserably, on Paddiford Common, in order to be among the weavers and the coal-miners, and closer to the poor. This evangelical curate represents a new way of caring for the souls of his parishioners,
and at first, his new ideas are misunderstood and strongly resisted by a large part of the Milby population, who suspect him of wishing to take the place of the old traditional vicar, Mr Crewe. Gradually his religious zeal is appreciated, and his personality highly respected, but originally he meets with serious antagonism, because he is a disturbing element.

The last clergyman, from a chronological point of view, belongs to the first story, ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton’, set in 1836-37. Contrary to the other two, he is not a gentleman, for he comes from a rather humble social background. His father was a cabinetmaker and a deacon in an Independent Church (60). These origins may account for his lack of distinction, his desire for social promotion in the Church, and his snobbery with the Countess Czerlaski, who gives him reason to hope for a vicarage. He represents a strange combination of evangelicalism, probably acquired when he was at Cambridge, and an adherence to the ideas of High Churchmanship, probably popularized by the Oxford Movement, which was quite influential then. The mixture is very odd, however:

He was like an onion that has been rubbed with spices; the strong original odour was blended with something new and foreign. The Low-Church onion still offended refined High-Church nostrils, and the new spice was unwelcome to the palate of the genuine onion-eater. (67)

This ambiguous ideological positioning, his lack of charisma, his ill-advised decisions and his imprudent relationship with the Countess, deprive him of spiritual influence on his parishioners. He is completely isolated in his own parish, where he has very few supporters, until his sudden misfortunes, with the death of his wife in childbirth, engender a current of sympathy for him.

Significantly, George Eliot never says anything on the comparative merits of Evangelicalism and High Churchmanship. She is more interested in the personal qualities of her clergymen than in their doctrinal orientations. In Scenes of Clerical Life, the theological aspect of religion is always unimportant, compared with the human aspect. She has an equal respect for different forms of religion. What she insists upon is the quality of human relationships between a clergyman and his parishioners.

The history of Amos Barton is a long succession of blunders and failures. He is a mediocre character:

And, after all, the Rev. Amos never came near the borders of a vice. His very faults were middling — he was not very ungrammatical. It was not in his nature to be superlative in anything; unless, indeed, he was superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity. (85)

He fails to impress his parishioners, because he has a very humble social position, and he always lacks money, which creates a serious financial problem. How to raise a family of six children on a yearly income of only £80, without living poorly and borrowing money now and again?

His pastoral work reveals his lack of tact and discretion. The scene in the workhouse shows that he is unable to express himself appropriately when addressing uneducated poor people. By
wanting to edify them, he ignores their real misery, preaching to them a sermon loaded with theology, based on the fear of the other world, instead of using simple words of charity and comfort. The episode shows the inadequacy of a religion obsessed with the other world, ignoring the needs of this world.

Knoepflmacher draws a very illuminating parallel between George Eliot’s critical portrait of Amos Barton and her severe condemnation of the poet Young in her 1857 article:

The historical portrait of Young and the fictitious ‘history’ of Barton’s misfortunes contain identical judgments. Both men are incapable of reconciling the worldliness of their personal ambitions with the otherworldliness of their professed religious teachings. In their attempts to balance ‘temporalities and spiritualities’, they slight the finite, temporal domain which George Eliot’s positivism had taught her to regard as ‘real’.

The character is torn between two worlds, which cannot be reconciled. His very name ironically suggests a tension between the prophetic ambition of an Amos – a great figure of the Old Testament – and the commonplace nature of a Barton, a name which clearly has prosaic, rustic connotations, for the OED tells us that a barton is ‘a farm-yard, a demesne-farm, a pen for poultry’. Like his Jewish predecessor, this modern-day Amos is a simple shepherd, in charge of the souls of the village of Shepperton. In his preaching, he prophesies punishment for sins and divine retribution. Like the prophet Amos, he is mostly ignored by his contemporaries, and finally driven away from his land. George Eliot reveals her ironical attitude towards him, by calling him ‘the Rev. Amos Barton’, thus pointing out how little, in fact, he is revered by his parishioners.

She also shows how things change completely, however, once the character is humanized by his experience of suffering, which marks the beginning of a real conversion for him. After the death of his wife, his parishioners are no longer inclined to criticize him, or to laugh at him. He is then seen as a fellow-sufferer. If he succeeds in arousing Christian feelings of pity and charity, it is not through his active preaching, but through his personal experience of death and bereavement. Only then is he really revered:

There were men and women standing in that churchyard who had bandied vulgar jests about their pastor, and who had lightly charged him with sin; but now, when they saw him following the coffin, pale and haggard, he was consecrated anew by his great sorrow, and they looked at him with respectful pity. (109)

The clergyman of the second story, ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, is presented as the direct antithesis of Amos Barton. He has no prophetic ambition, no scorn for the simple commonplace realities of Shepperton. His teaching is never loaded with theology. He is always aware of his parishioners’ needs, wishes or misfortunes. He is the perfect embodiment of brotherly care and goodwill.

On a Sunday afternoon, when he meets an old woman who prefers to keep her pig, because it gives her company, instead of killing it to get something to eat, he does not rebuke her for not
going to church in the morning, but sends her a piece of bacon, to make sure that she knows
the taste of it again (120-21).

When dealing with children, for whom he has a particular fondness, he jokes with them, and
gives them sweets. His pastoral discourse is always found acceptable, because it is never
obtrusive, and can be easily understood. His parishioners feel a great respect, tinged with
affection for him. That this is the case is no doubt conveyed by the fact that he is always
referred to as ‘Mr Gilfil’. His official title, ‘the Reverend’, would create too great a distance.

Here again, Knoepflmacher suggests that his full name corresponds with a double-faced
personality. His patronym, Gilfil, might be in fact a matronym, with the meaning of ‘gille fil’
or ‘fil gille’ – being the equivalent of ‘son of Jill’. This would reflect the feminine aspect of the
character and account for his feminine tenderness, which George Eliot emphasizes:

In the love of a brave and faithful man there is always a strain of maternal
tenderness; he gives out again those beams of protecting fondness which were
shed on him as he lay on his mother’s knee. (230)

On the other hand, Maynard, his Christian name, of Germanic origin, suggesting ‘Mein Hart’,
would convey his manly courage and steadfastness. Throughout the story, George Eliot plays
with this interesting combination of the masculine and the feminine. When Maynard is still a
teenager, he is both a healthy boy, with robust limbs, and a very affectionate lad. In the
Epilogue, the narrator concludes on his ‘brave, faithful, tender nature’ (244). The final
metaphor equates him with a ‘noble tree’ (244). Yet this noble tree bears a wound, which has
altered its growth forever. This solitary old man respected by his parishioners has remained true
to the memory of his early love, his young wife Caterina, who died in childbirth. And in his
house, he has kept all the personal belongings and souvenirs of Caterina as sacred relics, in a
locked room:

Such was the locked up chamber in Mr Gilfil’s house: a sort of visible symbol
of the secret chamber in his heart, where he had long turned the key on early
hopes and early sorrows, shutting up for ever all the passion and the poetry of
his life. (130)

The old clergyman cannot be understood without a reference to his former story, when he was
in love with Caterina, an Italian girl adopted by his guardian, Sir Christopher Cheverel.
Caterina was more interested in Captain Wybrow, Sir Christopher’s heir, who was simply
having a flirtation with her. She finally consented to marry Mr Gilfil after a long ordeal, which
revealed all the remarkable qualities of his heart, his natural goodness and tenderness.

Death and sorrow, which in the case of the Reverend Amos Barton, have brought about a
sudden conversion, have caused a more gradual change in the case of Mr Gilfil. His profound
and true love, which he could no longer express to Caterina, who died too soon, has been
converted into a universal sympathy, which his parishioners are very sensitive to, even if
Christian faith seems to have little to do with it.

Some of the features, which are typical of Amos Barton and Maynard Gilfil, can be found again
in the description of the third clergyman, Edgar Tryan. His very Christian name possibly links
him to an Anglo-Saxon king who developed religious and monastic life, a century before the
Norman Conquest. Like Amos Barton, Mr Tryan is a young evangelical clergyman with great
pastoral zeal, and he devotes much of his time to preaching. But there ends the resemblance.
For in his sermons there is no reference at all to hell and eternal punishment. At the beginning
of the narrative, Janet Dempster, who does not know him yet, must admit that – in spite of her
prejudice against him: ‘I’ve got Tryan’s sermons up-stairs […]. I’ve only just looked into them;
they’re not at all what I expected – dull, stupid things – nothing of the roaring fire-and­
brimstone sort that I expected’ (298). His way of speaking is very simple and friendly, for he
is sensitive to the misery of others. He is never the preacher who exhorts others, but a fellow­
sufferer, who, quite humbly, confesses his own weakness when faced with suffering. As Mrs
Pettifer, one of his supporters, puts it: ‘What is so wonderful to me in Mr Tryan is the way he
puts himself on a level with one, and talks to one like a brother’ (329). In this respect, he would
be closer to Mr Gilfil, but his presence in Milby is far from being comparable to Mr Gilfil’s
ministry in Shepperton. It is not comfortable and reassuring. It is a call to conversion, to mutual
assistance. His preaching is a source of division, for he has his followers and his opponents,
some of them being bitter enemies, doing their best to thwart him and to ridicule him. To some
extent, he can be seen as a Christ-figure. Like Christ at the time of his passion, he is thirty-three
(275). And when he is first described entering a room, he seems to be wearing a kind of halo
round his head: ‘But Mr Tryan has entered the room, and the strange light from the golden sky
falling on his light-brown hair, which is brushed high up round his head, makes it look almost
like an aureole’ (276). His parishioners see him as a real shepherd: ‘the clergyman […] who
had undertaken before God to be their shepherd’ (324). In all the interest he takes in the fate of
Janet Dempster, whom he rescues from her poor condition of a beaten, alcoholic, wife, there is
something of the love of the Good Shepherd for a stray sheep, a parable that is referred to on
two occasions (chapter 5, and chapter 22). He speaks to her very friendlily after her terrible
ordeal, when she was driven away from home by her violent husband, and left alone in the cold,
with bare feet, undone hair, and no other dress than a mere nightgown – almost like a repentant
Magdalene (chapter 15). Commenting upon this crucial scene, Knoepflmacher shows the
cryptic significance of the apparently bad pun made on Tryan’s name by Dempster, Janet’s
husband, who appears as Tryan’s most determined enemy:

Mr Tryan, however, who is ridiculed as ‘Mr Try-it-on’ in his rival’s squib,
welcomes Janet to his house when she wears the new attire provided by her
neighbor. The minister introduces her to an existence in which ‘all things are
become new’; unclothed by her husband’s lack of charity, she is now ‘clothed
upon’ by new spiritual garments. 9

Thus his name could be associated with the symbolism of clothing, which is so prominent in
St Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians (2 Cor: 5, 4 and 17). But the name can also be
associated with the notion of trial – of judgment, or at any rate of ordeal. When Mr Tryan is
mocked and ill treated by his enemies, the episode is vaguely reminiscent of Christ’s passion.
Yet the resemblance ends there. For Tryan is not the innocent lamb offered for a redeeming
sacrifice. He is ready to acknowledge that he is himself a sinner. He remembers that, when he
was a student at the university, he contributed to the downfall of a young girl, Lucy, who
suddenly disappeared from his life, but whom he accidentally came across, a few years later,
when she was a London prostitute, lying dead on a door-step, after she had committed suicide.

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This gave him a great shock, a terrible sense of guilt, and brought about his conversion, his desire to work for the salvation of others: 'There was only one thing that could make life tolerable to me; that was, to spend all the rest of it in trying to save others from the ruin I had brought on one' (360). In this strange, unexpected context, which shows the boldly realistic inspiration of George Eliot, we find again the clear link between the death of a young woman and the conversion of a clergyman, which is also characteristic of the other two stories. It could well be a unifying element between the three stories.

Yet, the motive underlying Mr Tryan's conversion remains something of a secret, which only Janet Dempster has the privilege to share. In her misery, she confides to him, thinking that he might understand her wretchedness. In order to comfort her, he is ready to show his sympathy: 'in speaking to me you are speaking to a fellow-sinner who has needed just the comfort and help you are needing' (356). This is no time for good words and religious exhortation, but for acknowledging a similar experience of despair and guilt: 'The tale of the Divine Pity was never yet believed from lips that were not felt to be moved by human pity' (358). For the sake of Janet, he is thus led to open for her a chapter of his past history, which is referred to almost like the locked room where Mr Gilfil's secret story is kept: 'Yet he hesitated; as we tremble to let in the daylight on a chamber of relics which we have never visited except in curtained silence' (358).

By this revelation, which shows that 'Mr Tryan had gone through the initiation of suffering' (374), he manages to touch her heart and to help her conversion. Once a widow, after a dreadful new ordeal, Janet changes completely: she is cured of her need for drink, finds new hope in life, and makes more comfortable the last months of Mr Tryan, who is dying of consumption. Janet's conversion, which owes a great deal to her personal affection for the clergyman, seems to have a purely human dimension, as Laurence Lerner notices: 'It is conversion by a clergyman, in the name of Christianity: but what Janet gets from Mr Tryan is wholly human'.

As a matter of fact, this remark is not relevant only to 'Janet's Repentance', for it could also be made about the two other stories. In all the stories of this collection, George Eliot clearly borrows the experience of conversion from the tradition of the religious novel in order to give it a new, purely human, significance. Thus she conveys her humanist philosophy, largely inspired by her reading of Ludwig Feuerbach, for whom the essence of Christianity is anthropological – his famous phrase being 'Homo homini deus est'. For although the writing of *Scenes of Clerical Life* marks a new departure in George Eliot's career, there is still a link between her last translation, Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, published in 1854, and her first work of fiction, which she began in 1856. Now, why did she choose such a religious subject, if not to set into relief the essence of Christianity, and to come to terms with the Evangelicalism of her youth?

In December 1859, one year after the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in book form, she was to write to her Swiss friend and first translator into French, François D'Albert-Durade about her lasting respect for Christianity, in spite of her having parted with its dogmas:

I have no longer any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves; on the contrary, I have a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies. I have
not returned to dogmatic Christianity [...] but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind [...] although my most rooted conviction is, that the immediate object and the proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellow-men and this earthly existence. (Letters, III, 231)

In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, we have religious fiction of a new kind, insisting on the human dimension of religion, and converting Christian charity into human sympathy. From Feuerbach, George Eliot keeps the notion of the positive value of suffering as a necessary initiation, so that we may share the experience of our fellow men: ‘Love does not exist without sympathy, sympathy does not exist without suffering in common’. Hence the importance of genuine sympathy, which in George Eliot’s work is given an almost sacramental dimension.

By turning to fiction writing, which is going to be her new vocation, Marian Evans does not simply become a different person, as shown by her adoption of the pen name of George Eliot. She also radically changes the nature of the genre she is turning to; she converts it, so to speak. And in her picture of various forms of Christian experience, she uses the theme of religious conversion to describe the birth of sympathy, which Thomas Noble, in his monograph on *Scenes of Clerical Life*, rightly describes as a ‘life-giving water indispensable to human existence’.

Because she believes that a literary work of art has no real value, unless it can arouse the sympathy of the readers, George Eliot thinks of her new vocation in almost religious terms. Quite naturally, she finds almost biblical expressions to describe the sacred nature of her new mission, in her Journal, after the favourable response to her work she found in *The Times*:

> I wonder how I shall feel about these little details ten years hence, if I am alive. At present I value them as grounds for hoping that my writing may succeed and so give value to my life – as indications that I can touch the hearts of my fellow-men, and so sprinkle some precious grain as the result of the long years in which I have been inert and suffering. But at present fear and trembling still predominate over hope. (Letters, II, 416)

After submitting Holy Writ to a critical examination in her translations from the German, George Eliot the humanist eventually converted to fiction writing, and became convinced of the holiness of her new calling.

[I am grateful to the Editor of *Études Anglaises* for kindly allowing me to reproduce here, in a slightly modified form, a former article published in French (EA, 33, 268-81).]

Notes


3 Selected Essays, 140-63.
4 Selected Essays, 164-213.
8 Knoepflmacher, 61.
9 Knoepflmacher, 78.