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Ruth M. Harris

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THE TWENTY-FIRST GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE — 1992

Delivered by Ruth M. Harris

THE NAMES OF GEORGE ELIOT

‘What’s in a name?’ asked Juliet. Our response would surely be different if Romeo were no longer called Romeo, and from that romantic balcony in Verona there came the cry: ‘O Egbert, Egbert, wherefore art thou, Egbert?’ As an exploration of George Eliot’s names should reveal, there is far more significance in names than Juliet or we might imagine.

Allowing for minor differences, George Eliot chose or was given seventeen different names during her life-time: Mary Ann(e) Evans, Little Mama, Marianne Evans, Marian Evans, Clematis, Deutera, Polly, Pollian, Marian Lewes, Marian Evans Lewes, Mutter, Madonna, The Prioress, our Lady, Beatrice, Mary Ann Cross — and supremely, of course, George Eliot. Some names are more significant than others. Some were chosen for her because people wanted to define her own capacity for change. The names she chose or liked for herself suggest a quest for identity: she knew that she adopted different roles (‘we are all of us *Dramatis Personae* in our own life’), and there is a strong element of self-defining and self-affirmation in the various names preferred.

In May 1856, she wrote: ‘I have never before longed so much to know the names of things as during this visit to Ilfracombe.... to escape from all vagueness and inaccuracy into the daylight of distinct, vivid ideas.’ Here, names represent truth, clarity, control. Nevertheless, the names that others give us may not always clarify: they may cloud the truth. The Rev. Edgar Tryan’s name is distorted by Dempster into a mocking nickname, ‘Mr. Try-it-on’, whereas the more generous George Eliot suggests by his true name that he is the one who will encourage Janet to new endeavours. Similarly, Celia’s nickname for Dorothea, ‘Dodo’, hints at her sister’s ineffectiveness: a dodo was a clumsy, extinct bird unable to fly. The true name, Dorothea Brooke, indicates more generous possibilities: a divine gift and a larger destination. Silas Marner chooses Eppie’s name, Hephzibah, because it sweetens the past for him, recalling the name of his mother and his little sister. Moreover, its reassuring Biblical origin is remembered: in ‘Isaiah’ a desolate land is reminded that it will not be forsaken; it will be called ‘Hephzibah, for the Lord delighteth in thee.’ Silas has come to a strange country where he feels forsaken, but the unravelled threads of Raveloe will at last be disentangled, and he will come home. Rightly or wrongly, Maggie Tulliver needs a name to bring her home: Tom’s reconciling name for her, ‘the old childish name “Magsie!”’, answers her cry in the widening flood: ‘Which is the way home?’

And Mary Ann Evans also needed names to bring her home to her true self, for our names are the voices we use to proclaim who we are and where we are. The horror of the hidden voice underlies Armgart's fear of being buried alive in the clinging mud of 'a deep, deep tomb' where she will cry out for all eternity from inaccessible depths, 'crying unheard for ever.'

The true name is not found at once, but it is significant that in the early life of Mary Ann Evans there are signs of dissatisfaction with her baptismal name. Perhaps 'Mary Ann' sounded humdrum, a name chosen to please relatives especially on the mother's side. By the age of fifteen, we find her signature in a large, ornate script, 'Marianne', which must have sounded far more romantic and risky than plain 'Mary Ann'. For the rest of her life, it was the 'Marian' that she preferred. It appears that she also liked 'Polly', a homely diminutive that suggests by its lack of grandeur a possible reluctance to climb the pedestal and vent forth wisdom. It may be significant that in her novels diminutives belong more frequently to women than to men: if masculine names are shortened, then Will Ladislaw, Fred Vincy, Bob Jakin sound brisk and lively: they cut a dash as Millie and Bessie and Eppie never can. Maggie Tulliver is not dominated by a Tommy, and we can scarcely imagine a Teddy Casaubon or a Nicky Bulstrode or a Danny Deronda. Is it that men need to present a more impressive face to the world? Sometimes a diminutive is yoked to a more serious surname: the juxtaposition of childishness and bitterness in 'Hetty Sorrel' reminds us of the contrast between 'Polly Evans' and 'George Eliot', the first homely and domestic and the second large and resonant, taking its place in a male world.

The names record her passage towards that place. In her girlhood, the flower-name, Clematis, was chosen for her by her friend, Martha Jackson, because its meaning was 'Mental Beauty', but she herself recognized another meaning when she signed 'Your clinging Clematis'. Her own deep need of approval gave her insight into characters who cling: Maggie Tulliver, Silas Marner, Dorothea Brooke are all dependent in different ways. Sometimes dependence leads to distortion and should be avoided; at other times, as clematis weaves and winds itself into the lives of other plants, such interweaving may be a source of strength. Although she must learn to stand alone, Gwendolen's clinging to Deronda is for a time a means of moral education.

In November, 1843, during her twenty-fourth year, Mary Ann visited the home of her friend Rufa's father, Dr. Brabant, who gave her the punning nickname of 'Deutera' which, she wrote, 'means "second" and sounds a little like "daughter"'. It reminds us of those times in her life when she took second place. In her mother's eyes, it looks as though she came second or even third after Isaac and Chrissey; as a child, it seemed right to her that her brother should have a larger share of the picnic 'because he was the elder and a boy'. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted that deep personal anxiety, including the 'anxiety of authorship', often made her choose second place

despite a hunger for glory: the translator comes second to the original creator; the scribe or secretary or assistant gives precedence to the editor; and even though she became anonymous editor of the *Westminster Review*, Marian Evans the editor must surely come second to George Eliot the artist. Perhaps one who belonged to what Simone de Beauvoir has called 'The Second Sex' felt she had to learn with Christina Rossetti 'Not to be first'. However good it must be that George Eliot never fully learned that lesson, the displacements she experienced enabled her to understand the privations of those who are denied priority. Her knowledge of subservience sharpens her insight into Maggie Tulliver, who struggles to renounce all selfish desires, into the young Dorothea, who seeks to serve Casaubon as a dutiful daughter, and into Romola, whose gender prevents her from taking first place in her father's classical studies.

An obsessive theme in her novels is that of renunciation of self, the transition from egoism to altruism. As a rule, we are made to feel that renunciation is right: elsewhere we feel with Philip Wakem that fulfilment of the whole self is also to be prized. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot shows people who aspire to such great fulfilment but fail to reach it. When Dorothea and Casaubon, Lydgate and Ladislaw end in lives less grand than they had hoped for, the second and third places they achieve are not felt to be right. It is no accident that Lydgate's first name, Tertius, means 'third' and that his decline from one who sought to be first in the field of medical research to a third-rate physician is a bitter impoverishment. Such disappointing decline may be contrasted with those ascents of the rejected that are to be seen in Maggie Tulliver, who moves from second place to ultimate if questionable triumph, in Romola who moves from disregarded daughter to Holy Mother, and in Silas Marner — the most convincing — who moves from the cold edge of the circle to its heart. When Scrooge stands outside the glowing window, the focus is on the bright circle inside where we all want to be, but when Master Marner comes through the darkness and the snow to the Red House, our knowledge of the uneasy cross-currents in the Squire's home prevents us from wishing to be there in that bright but tarnished circle. It is the outsider in the dark who has to be given the first place, since he is the one who has found the real treasure, and we want to go out into the darkness with him when he leaves with the child Eppie in his arms. And we focus on the real gold, the bright and living circle of Eppie's hair.

The path to first place may be painful. It was in 1845, her twenty-sixth year, when Polly Evans was translating Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, a work which casts doubts on miraculous elements in the Christian story, that Sara Hennell first called her 'Pollian', a name arising from a pun on Apollyon, the Angel of Destruction. Even if there was humour in her continued use of the name, she was not unaware of the dark side of herself: without her father, she feared that she might become 'earthly, sensual, and devilish.' As Jenny Uglow has noted, her journey after his death from Chamonix to Geneva was a horrifying one since her 'inner fear took the form of absolute terror of

losing her balance and falling not from moral, but from real precipices.' The fear of falling is echoed in those 'frightening images of vertigo' that appear in *Romola*: 'The World had seemed to break away all around her, and leave her feet hanging in darkness.' Pollian or Apollyon as a lost and fallen spirit is an apt image for the terror of evil, a terror present in Maggie Tulliver's demonic associations, in Rosamond Vincy's 'devilishly alluring charms' and in Gwendolen Harleth's serpentine image and pursuit of 'the devil's game'. Critics have noted how George Eliot likes to bring together the fallen woman and the angel, the Medusa and the Madonna. No doubt the two sides of her own personality, the dark side recalled by 'Pollian' and the bright side represented by her later name, 'Madonna', must have been in sharp conflict.

She was never complacent about her shortcomings. To Herbert Spencer she wrote: 'I can't help losing belief that people love me: the unbelief is in my nature, and no sort of fork will drive it out.' The curiously painful metaphor suggests deep-rooted self-distrust never wholly eradicated even by the love of a man who gave her her true name, 'Marian Lewes.' This, her first supremely great choice of name, reminds us of those who search for identities that involve changes of surname — a problem peculiar to women. Maggie has to choose between three destinies as Maggie Wakem or Maggie Guest or Maggie Tulliver. Eppie Marner might rise socially as Eppie Cass or find her right future as Eppie Winthrop. Esther Lyon might choose a life of apparent ease as Esther Transome or renunciation of class and inheritance as Esther Holt. In each case, the alternative selected involves a crucial change of direction. A similarly critical choice informs Marian Evans's change of name to Marian Lewes: her subversive new name rings like a challenge to those who would, like Savonarola, condemn her choice: 'You wish your true name and your true place in life to be hidden that you may choose for yourself a new name and a new place.... And I have a command to call you back.' Her refusal to be called back to the old name (although perhaps her alternative signature, Marian Evans Lewes, indicates a wish to belong to more than one world) and her brave adoption of a married name to which she was not legally entitled, remind us of her celebration of all those who claim illegitimate titles. Silas Marner and Rufus Lyon are not true fathers by law — but genuine fathers in spirit. The childless Romola becomes a Holy Mother and offers protection to Tessa and her children. In legal terms, Marian Lewes was neither wife nor mother but she fulfilled both roles with exemplary devotion.

Out of her union with George Henry Lewes was born her greatest name — George Eliot. The masculine pseudonym served more than one requirement; the wish to acknowledge both debt and closeness to the man she loved; the need for concealment in view of her social ostracism; the desire for justice from readers prejudiced against a woman's work; and perhaps, as Ruby Redinger indicates, the need for a 'second self' to comment on the action and become 'the critical half' of her 'double consciousness' — 'thus converting the force which had undermined self-confidence into the one

which critically analysed characters.’ The masculinity of the name is less important than its ordinariness. Its sobriety, solidity, lack of any ‘macho’ flamboyance suggest that the name is not to be seen as a symbol of aggression but as a wish to occupy some more quiet and neutral place. Although she is aware of the privileges and privations of gender, her deepest wish is not to divide the sexes but to unite them. Her voice is there in the widening waters of the floods: ‘In their death they were not divided.’

George Eliot’s love of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna reminds us of those maternal names that accumulate in maturity (although ‘Little Mama’ was bestowed in childhood). Such names as ‘Mutter’, ‘Madonna’, ‘Our Lady’ and ‘The Prioress’ bring to mind that ‘unused stock of motherly tenderness’ which makes her sympathize with her characters. Few are beyond her understanding: of these, the most aptly named is Henleigh Grandcourt — ‘Henleigh’ sounds haughty, echoing the high, braying tones of the well-born while ‘Grandcourt’ suggests cold grandeur, a measured superior detachment. What woman could mother such a man? But for most of her people, endearing or not, she invites our understanding. Of Casaubon, she says quietly, ‘For my part, I am very sorry for him’. When the hypocritical Mr. Bulstrode is exposed to public disgrace, we see him at the last through the eyes of his wife as they sit together, in tears. Although she can analyse shortcomings with sharp irony, she feels ‘the cherished child even in the debased, degraded man’, and her last word is so often addressed to the crying child within her readers as well as within her characters: ‘We have all of us sobbed so piteously, standing with tiny bare legs above our little socks when we lost sight of our mother or our nurse in some strange place’. George Eliot’s characteristic approach as the wise mother is to involve us, to awaken memories, guide sympathies and direct judgements. Her appeal is a universal one: ‘Have we not all felt?’

In our imaginations, George Eliot grows so large that it is scarcely surprising to find her portrayed in terms that are more than human: she is a ‘diva’ (a primadonna but the Latin derivation means ‘divine’); she is a ‘sybil’ growing ever larger in the gloom; she is ‘Beatrice’, Dante’s guide to Paradise, for her husband John Cross; she is even ‘Our Lady’. In the light of such magnifying titles, it is touching to find her at the age of sixty reverting to the humble name of Mary Ann. Perhaps under ‘the mellowing power of distance’ she remembered with deepening tolerance a distant past in Warwickshire and the old name by which she was once known. She rejoiced that John Cross had sisters and that she could once again sign her letters in the old way. Indeed, it is likely that the last words she wrote were ‘a sister’s affection.’

Nevertheless, the final word should not be with nostalgia. So many names remind us above all of her power to touch us at so many different points in our passage through life. The name of George Eliot, carved on her statue in Nuneaton market-place, gath-

ers within itself a wide and warm range of human experience. Other statues — Shelley's cold Ozymandias or Hardy's forgotten 'Sir Nameless' — recall the limitations of earthly power and influence. But the name of George Eliot lives on, a necessary part of our lives.

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