

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1998

Mathilde Blind

Graham Handley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Handley, Graham, "Mathilde Blind" (1998). *The George Eliot Review*. 316.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/316>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

MATHILDE BLIND

by Graham Handley

The first titles in the *Eminent Women Series* published in 1883 by W. H. Allen included studies of Emily Brontë and George Sand (Margaret Fuller, Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Fry, and Harriet Martineau would be in the next wave) as well as Mathilde Blind's pioneering, sensitive, uneven and sympathetically feminist exposition of George Eliot's life and art. Blind herself deserves a full-length study, and at particular points her own life and works touch those of George Eliot. Born Mathilde Cohen in Mannheim in 1841, she took her stepfather's name when her mother remarried. Dr Karl Blind was an ardent republican in Baden, was imprisoned, freed, then exiled himself, first to Belgium then to England, the family settling in St John's Wood a couple of years after the European year of Revolutions in 1848. Richard Garnett, in the Memoir prefixed to the *Poetical Works of Mathilde Blind* (1900) refers to her unpublished autobiographical writings in which he notes her strong attachment to another girl at her school, her love of music and dancing (exemplified in her novel *Tarantella*, 1885) and her embracing of Christianity in her girlhood as 'this profoundly personal religion'. Her early poetic predilections are seen in her reactions to Swiss scenery, where she describes 'high white clouds changing chameleon-like as the sun and wind touched their ethereal substance. Sometimes they stood on tiptoe on the top of a mountain peak like columbines balancing themselves on the shoulders of a giant'. This was in 1859, ten years after George Eliot's Geneva experience, and just as the emergent novelist was to rehearse her wittily ironic observations of people met in a *pension*, so Blind rehearsed her natural powers of observation on the elevating and consoling effects of nature. She read avidly, her German inheritance ensuring her admiration of Goethe, while she wrote an ode to celebrate the Schiller centenary in Bradford (1859), and shared with Lewes a fascination for Robespierre, writing a tragedy about him which was praised by Louis Blanc. Blind – dazzlingly beautiful when young – admired Mazzini, but found Garibaldi (c.1864) lacking in personal magnetism though inspiring nonetheless. She sought the company of famous men: Mazzini prescribed a course of reading for her (as Scott Fitzgerald was to do for Sheila Graham in the 1930s) but, although she hung 'with my whole soul upon his every word', from the mid-1860s onwards she was concerned with raising the status of women, passionately interested in their education, which she regarded essential if they were to achieve a proper equality with men. She was an enthusiastic admirer of George Eliot, had a more temperate admiration of George Sand, was bowled over by 'Aurora Leigh', was influenced by Carlyle, and more profoundly by Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-62), author of *A History of Civilisation in England*, only two volumes of which had appeared before his premature death. He adopted a scientific basis for historical investigation and was much admired by Darwin: Blind obviously found this congenial, so much so that one of her later (and greater) poems is called 'The Ascent of Man' and is distinctly Darwinian in its emphasis. In 1866 her brother Ferdinand committed suicide following his failed attempt to assassinate the great German statesman Bismarck, and annual tribute was paid to him by Blind and many sympathizers. In 1867 she published her first poems under the pseudonym of Claude Lake, and soon began to see herself as a lecturer: interestingly Trollope's American friend Kate Field embarked on just that career with some success on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1869 Blind lectured on Shelley at St George's Hall (her beauty winning, her accent difficult), and as a result met John

Chapman, her lecture being reproduced in his *Westminster Review* (July 1870), the periodical George Eliot had edited for Chapman in the early 1850s. Thereafter she travelled much, became interested in another cult of the time, spiritualism, and, in 1873, published her translation of Strauss's final work, *The Old Faith and the New*. Visits to Scotland stimulated her sense of history and her poetic impulse: she was to write movingly about the clearances of the Highlands in 'The Heather on Fire' (1886), observing of the glens and the desolated villages that 'it was but yesterday that they were inhabited by a brave, moral, and industrious peasantry, full of poetic instincts and ardent patriotism, ruthlessly expelled their native land to make way for sporting grounds rented by merchant princes and American millionaires'. Bronchial, financially insecure, suffering from bouts of depression, she contributed two biographies to the *Eminent Women Series*. The first, on Eliot, cost her much labour, even anguish. When she had finished it, she feelingly recorded: 'It was a lovely afternoon. I was too tired to walk, and sat down on a bench in a little garden in front of the house, drinking in the air, the hum of the insects, the colour of flowers and leaves, the glory of the sky'. The second, *Madame Roland* (1886) had to be cut down by a third ('So Madame Roland was decapitated for the second time', observes Garnett); she produced a series of aphorisms from Goethe for *Fraser's Magazine*, wrote a preface to a selection from Byron for the Camelot series (1886), and lived for some time with the Madox Browns in Manchester and London. In 1892 she inherited a fortune from her brother Max Cohen, journeyed to Rome and Egypt, and wrote a number of poems before she went into a decline: she spent some time in the company of the Regius Professor of Medicine at Cambridge, Dr Clifford Allbutt (friend of Eliot and Lewes, thought by some to have provided the germ of *Lydgate*) and, wishing to benefit women's education practically, left the greater part of her estate to Newnham College, Cambridge, when she died in 1896. A fine monument was erected to her memory in Finchley Cemetery, where she was buried close to the grave of her friends the Madox Browns.

There is no indication that Blind met Eliot, or that her biographical/critical treatment in 1883 registered widely two years before Cross's cosmetics. When Victoria Sackville-West came (in 1929) to write her essay on the woman poets of the 1870s she noted Blind's variety outside her chosen passion, but did not mention (had it been invented then?) the unequivocal feminism of her stance. On the first page of *George Eliot* that feminism is apparent, as Blind praises Eliot's essay on 'Woman in France: Madame de Sablé' and says that she, Eliot, assigned Frenchwomen their literary superiority in 'having had the courage of their sex. They thought and felt as women, and when they wrote, their books became the fullest expression of their womanhood'. Immediately, with striking pertinacity, Blind takes up the cause of the Englishwomen, asserting that Jane Austen has 'a microscopic fidelity of observation' and 'a well-nigh scientific accuracy, never equalled unless in the pages of the author we are writing of'. After praising the Brontës and of course Mrs Browning, she further asserts that Eliot 'is the greatest realist, George Sand the greatest idealist, of her sex', speaking of her as presenting her subjects 'in the broad pitiless midday light, which leaves no room for illusion, but reveals all nature with uncompromising directness'. Sometimes, however, Eliot is guilty of a 'windy current of words'. Thereafter Blind traces, with minor inaccuracies, the biographical outline, inserting her own critical judgments. She describes the translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* as 'a masterpiece of clear nervous English, at the same time faithfully rendering the spir-

it of the original', refers in detail to the comically self-mocking letter about Dr Bücherwurm seeking a translator-wife and finding her in Coventry, which was not published until the appearance in 1978 of Volume VIII of *The George Eliot Letters*, edited by Gordon S. Haight. Blind, whose own humour is not her strong point, sees in this an anticipation of Casaubon. Just as, some thirty years later, Mary Deakin would intelligently link Eliot's *Westminster Review* essays with her fiction, so Blind indicates the strong connections between Lewes's article in the same journal in October 1858 ('Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction') and Eliot's theories. Blind's European, and particularly German, reading enables her to make other connections: a passing one with Paul Heyse, praised by Lewes, one of whose stories ('The Lonely Ones') has a scene where a Neapolitan fisherman murderously fails to rescue his drowning friend and experiences lifelong remorse after his death, thus having some parallelism with Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda*. Blind finds that Eliot's essays are characterized by a style which had 'a swiftness of movement, an epigrammatic felicity, and a brilliancy of antithesis which we look for in vain in the over-elaborate sentences and somewhat ponderous wit of "Theophrastus Such"'. And she retells the story of 'Jermola the Potter' by the Polish novelist J. I. Kraszewski in order to show how much it has in common with *Silas Marner*, though she stresses that it is almost certain that Eliot had never seen the tale or even heard of it. Blind must be one of the earliest to suggest that the Rainbow Inn sequence is 'Shakespearean', and further compares the picture of Eppie's childhood to Sand's *La Mare au diable* (1846) and *François le champi* (1847-8). She prefers the early novels; although she praises *Romola* she also registers its 'cumbrousness and pedantry', and she says of *The Spanish Gypsy* that the characters 'even the bright, gloriously-conceived Fedalma herself, think and speak too much like sublimated modern positivists', while Eliot's 'thoughts, instead of being naturally winged with melody, seem mechanically welded into song'. Amen to that! But the appraisals fall away: in *Felix Holt* Eliot is striving too consciously for effect, *Middlemarch* is a 'story without a plot', while *Daniel Deronda*, despite the fact that Gwendolen is 'unsurpassed' in Eliot's fiction, carries 'the principle of nationality to an extreme if not pernicious length... This unwavering faithfulness to the tradition of the past may become a curse to the living. A rigidity as unnatural as it is dangerous would be the result of too tenacious a clinging to inherited memories'. But again she does not identify these views subjectively with Eliot, believing perhaps that she voiced them 'at present in order to act as a drag to the too rapid transformations of society'.

Blind is no small author. Her poetry has a superb lyricism; Sackville-West selects 'The Sower' as pre-eminent:

There was no motion in the air, no sound
 Within the tree-tops stirred,
 Save when some last leaf, fluttering to the ground,
 Dropped like a wounded bird:

For now the big-thewed horses, toiling slow
 In straining couples yoked,
 Patiently dragged the ploughshare to and fro
 Till their wet haunches smoked.

The sower sows the seed, which mouldering,
Deep confined in the earth,
Is buried now, but with the future spring
Will quicken into birth

The whole sequence of 'Love in Exile' has a running purity of expression, while 'The Ascent of Man' uses a variety of verse forms from the sonorous and declamatory to the lyrical Shelleyan elevation of the poet,

...in whose shaping brain
Life is created o'er again
With loftier raptures, loftier pain;
Whose mighty potencies of verse
Move through the plastic Universe,
And fashion to their strenuous will
The world that is creating still.

Individual lines stand out, like one in a city journey through degradation where a boy is described as having 'Strange eyes full of horror yet fuller of heaven'. 'Love in Exile' has the exquisite

Many will love you; but I may not, no,
Even though your love sets all my life aglow,
And at your fairness all my senses ache.
You will love many, but not me, my dear,
Who have no gift to give you but a tear
Sweet for your sweetness' sake.

And in 1873 something transcendently different, the authorized translation from the sixth German edition of Strauss's *The Old Faith and the New: A Confession*, in which he set out to show that Christianity as a religious faith was dead and urged that a new faith be reared on art and the scientific facts deducible from nature. This strongly individual argument (Genesis is a 'didactic poem' which has been misinterpreted 'on account of its erection into a dogma') demolishes variously the 'notorious' doctrine of original sin 'which transforms God from an object of adoration and affection into a hideous and detestable being', and the resurrection ('a world-wide deception') before asserting that Christianity rests on crusade and persecution and that 'it has never attained tolerance'. Gradually he moves towards his bias, an appendix arguing the preeminence of poetry and music, the latter being 'the universal speech which requires no translation' since it is 'the soul, the heart of man'. Doubtless Lewes would have accepted his assertion that Goethe 'is a world in himself, so rich and varied that none of us who come after him may hope even to fully comprehend him'. Strauss's last work has been seen as an aberration, and indeed the early arguments given above are followed by slack ideas. But Blind's translation in terms of its ease and readability reflects her dedication and her sympathy. The latter quality informs 'A Study of Marie Bashkirtseff' (1892) which followed her

translation of the *Memoirs* in 1890 and shows her to be no mean art critic. She describes Marie's arrival in Paris, her taking art lessons, her visit to Spain ('Velasquez and Goya opened her eyes') and the influence of Bastien-Lepage upon her. Whereas he was inspired by the country, she was inspired by the town, capturing the scenes of the streets with 'that scrupulous and powerful realism which was the secret of her strength', the faces of children 'so pathetic in their premature maturity' with 'the childhood taken out of their childish features ...with eyes where experience has already taken the place of innocence – the experience taught them by the teeming streets, those books of the poor, for ever unfolding fresh pages before their inquisitive eyes.' Blind describes 'Le Meeting' as 'a triumph of realism. The faces speak, the limbs are informed with life....How pert, how Parisian, how wide-awake they are, with their thin, sharp-edged features and their gimlet eyes which allow nothing to escape them'. Blind's evaluations are detailed yet precise, animated but stringent, conveying Marie's individuality, the fact that 'the energies of her glowing vitality are now alive in her pictures'. Predating this, and standing in strange contrast to it, is Blind's novel *Tarantella* (1885), a tragic romance without realism, having a Countess (more fully conceived than Czerlaski in 'Amos Barton' but more highly improbable too), a tortuous and tortured plot with an overuse of retrospect far from Eliot's psychological and integrative mode, a child called Wolfgang who, like Eppie in *Silas Marner*, hides in the coal-hole and has to 'undergo the ordeal by soap and water', and a frenetic and passionate atmosphere throughout irradiated by the curative mystique of the dance and the sublime emotionalism of music. The biographer of Eliot loved realism and wrote romance; the critic of Eliot (she came to love Warwickshire and Stratford-on-Avon in particular) was a poet of greater talent than her subject, her diffusive energies seeking new areas to explore, new experiences to record. Yet she touches Eliot – strangely through Strauss but movingly and permanently through the quality of her own humanity. I have indicated the nature of many of her interests above, but by no means all. Blind represents the latter part of the nineteenth century in many of its fascinating aspects, notably that of doubt, the emergence of a positive feminism, a capacity for experience and an ability to respond to that experience.

Works Cited

Blind, Mathilde, *George Eliot* (1883); *Tarantella: A Romance* (1885); *Madame Roland* (1886); trans. Strauss's *The Old Faith and the New* (1873); 'A Study of Marie Bashkirtseff' (1892); *The Poetical Works of Mathilde Blind*: ed. Arthur Symons, memoir by Richard Garnett (1900).