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CONFERENCE REPORT

GEORGE ELIOT'S BEGINNINGS: *SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE* CELEBRATED

By Juliette Atkinson

Over three dozen people from around the United Kingdom and beyond gathered on Saturday 1 November 2008 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication, in volume form, of George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Barbara Hardy warmly welcomed the audience and presented the day's alluring programme. The conference promised to be both a celebration of the three short stories that marked Mary Ann Evans's fictional début and an exploration of the personal and artistic influences that prompted her to change direction at the age of thirty-seven.

Echoing the words of Eliot's famous journal entry with the title 'How George Eliot Came to Write Fiction', Rosemary Ashton (UCL) began by taking the audience back from the opening words of *Scenes of Clerical Life* to several years earlier in the life of George Eliot in search of 'demonstrations of her talent'. Letters, journal entries and caricatures provided powerful, and often very amusing, glimpses of Eliot's first attempts to identify herself as a writer and the early responses of her intrigued publisher and readers. Eliot's alternating self-doubts and confidence, together with her self-deprecation, tenacity, and humour were all vividly brought to life and set the stage for the following discussions of her first published work of fiction.

Alain Jumeau (Paris-Sorbonne) drew attention to the surprising nature of Eliot's choice of subject for this first work in his paper on 'George Eliot's own Version of Conversion'. Despite Eliot's earlier engagement with the works of Strauss and Feuerbach and her satire of religious fiction in 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *Scenes of Clerical Life* displays no hostility towards the various religious denominations it depicts. On the contrary, the work embodies 'religious fiction of a new kind', in which Christian charity is softly converted into a form of human sympathy with 'sacramental' qualities. In a provocative conclusion, Jumeau suggested that, notwithstanding her agnosticism, Eliot was tempted to think of her new vocation in quasi-religious terms.

With 'Idlers and Collaborators: Enter the Dog', Beryl Gray (Birkbeck) offered a tantalizing taste of her forthcoming book on dogs in Victorian literature and society. The unusual thoroughness with which Eliot integrates dogs within *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and indeed many of her novels, was thrown into sharp relief by a comparison with Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels, in which dogs are used principally as characterization tools. Gray revealed how, in contrast, Eliot 'acknowledges that dogs have their own history' and 'excelled in giving a sense of a dog's interior life'. Ranging from the charming, opportunistic Jet in *Scenes of Clerical Life* to Celia's dog in *Middlemarch*, the paper deftly illustrated how the canine characters of Eliot's fiction form an important part of her extraordinarily inclusive creative vision.

In the afternoon, the conference proceeded with three shorter, though equally thought-provoking, papers that together provided further evidence of how much of the *Scenes'* richness is to be found in the details and seemingly mundane portions of the tales. The 2007 winner of the George Eliot Prize, Melissa Raines (Liverpool), delivered a paper on "The stream of

human thought and deed" in 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story', in which she offered a masterly close reading of Eliot's language in the second of the *Scenes*. Raines traced the characters' need for sympathy through the multiple streams of thought that exist concurrently throughout the tale as well as the gaps and pauses that reveal their desire for a more responsive universe. Absence and longing also formed the subject of Kenichi Kurata's (Warwick) identification of 'Orphic Variations in *Scenes of Clerical Life*'. Kurata argued that the myth of Orpheus's descent to the underworld provides a paradigm for patterns of desire in George Eliot's fiction. He went on to scrutinize some of the occurrences of this paradigm, such as Mr Gilfil's search for Caterina, Janet's loss of Dempster or yet again Adam Bede's quest for Hetty. The theme of suspended desire provided an ideal transition to Toni Griffith's (UCL) paper "'Indications that I can touch the hearts of my fellow men:": Reading *Scenes of Clerical Life* from a Kleinian Psychoanalytical Perspective', which used Melanie Klein's insights on how the latent level of a literary text can touch the heart to consider the 'psychological aesthetic' of the *Scenes*. Griffith indicated how the stories' emphasis on sight – seeing, mis-seeing, and being seen – offer particularly productive ways of exploring the emotional configurations presented by Eliot.

The final paper, presented by John Rignall (Warwick), completed the conference's journey from 'beginnings' to 'endings' with reflections on 'Death and Recollection: The Elegiac Dimension of *Scenes of Clerical Life*'. The paper noted how death framed Eliot's work as a novelist, from the death of Milly in 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' to that of Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda*. Sadness, pathos, and elegy, moreover, all form part of the *Scenes*. Rignall examined ways in which Eliot navigated between the otherworldly quality of Young's poetry and the vision of Cowper who, despite his gloominess, retains a grasp on the particular rather than the abstract. The paper probed Eliot's gradual refinement of the elegiac mode from its initial appearance in the *Scenes* to the solemn, yet strangely uplifting, conclusion of *Middlemarch*.

The lively discussion between speakers and delegates that followed offered a final demonstration of George Eliot's ability to provoke passionate responses amongst her readers. Both papers and discussion showed that the very imperfections of Eliot's first work of fiction provide a unique opportunity to observe the author honing her craft. The recurrent themes of the conference – Eliot's extraordinary grasp of the particular, her dislike of ideological, creative, and emotional narrowness, and her unique approach to the theme of sympathy – reinforced the sense that so many of the key ingredients of Eliot's art are already present in *Scenes of Clerical Life*.

Delegates were invited to read the *Scenes* afresh after leaving with the new edition of the work produced by the George Eliot Fellowship and published by Wordsworth Classics (2007). Well-deserved thanks were awarded to the conference organisers Rosemary Ashton, Beryl Gray and Barbara Hardy for putting together such a rich and stimulating event.