

SARAH E. MAIER

Trivialized Female Idealism and Valourized Male Realism: The Importance of Being George

A feminine Goethe ... is more than mankind
can endure.

Frederic W. H. Myers in the *Nineteenth
Century*

Having thus named and surnamed herself, she
further thought fit to assume the privilege of ...
[the] masculine....

Anonymous Reviewer in *Foreign and
Colonial Quaterly Review*

Any consideration of the artistic movement of literature in the nineteenth century must express concern with the apparent gendering of aesthetic categories and the ways in which that gendering shapes the reception and valourization of various texts as well as the de-valourization of many female-authored texts. One of the primary ways in which this heirarchization occurs is through the binary opposition which has been accepted between the idealist novel and the realist novel. In particular, women writers such as George Sand, George Eliot, and George Egerton have been variously trivialized or valourized in relation to the canon. It is a model which asserts realism as the dominant mode of writing and secures its superiority "within the paradigm of representation" through "the alignment of its terms with the paradigm of gender" (Schor 1993,11), and which needs to be reconsidered along with the need to rethink idealism in the novel especially as it pertains to the gendering of these two aesthetic categories. Perhaps a reading of the "Georges" will demonstrate that rather than the characterization of aesthetic categories as a dialectical, Hegelian struggle between idealism and realism, there may be

greater value in the construction of a continuum that may be seen as constituting a sort of equivalent for what Foucault describes as the nodal point in phenomenological criticism, "where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction" (151).

In *Women and Romance* (1990), Laurie Langbauer reminds us that the novel has historically been defined explicitly against romance (3), and even though these terms may shift semantically, romance is always "inextricably intertwined" (1) with and is equated to woman; thus, the realist novel's alleged superiority over its feminine origin is assumed through "an ever useful ploy of a dominant system, which maintains its positions of privilege — staked out by those attempting to define themselves as 'men' and 'novels' — by taking its meaning" (2) as epistemological truth. The conceptual orthodoxy of the opposition has been brought into being in such a way that, in spite of their pseudonymous similarities, the writing styles of these women has "been patterned along sexual lines and explicitly assigned a matching sexual paradigm" (Danahy 2) which constitutes a tyranny of the binary extending back to Aristotle "where poesis, like valor [sic], would not be appropriate for woman" (48) who are thought to be the Ideal, rather than creators of the ideal. In this way, realism as a valorized, masculinized mode remains unchallenged; consequently, the triumph of realism in literature has caused the concept of idealism to all but vanish from critical consciousness, taking with it an idealist, George Sand, while valorizing a realistic George Eliot, and marginalizing the New Woman, George Egerton.¹ Patricia Thomson, in *George Sand and the Victorians* (1977), locates the long history of critical desire to contrast and compare the two nineteenth-century Georges of the novel; for her, it is not "that the idealist, optimist and romantic has less of value to communicate than the writer with a deep and realistic sense of the irony and tragedy of life" (183), but that they may, in fact, be ideologically closer than perceived by modern readers. Into this comparison, a third woman writer under the pseudonym of "George" is suggested by Penny Boumelha in "George Eliot and the End of Realism" (1987) — George Egerton — who might offer an additional place of compatibility between the two perceived opposing "isms."

While it is difficult to date the establishment of particular theories of opposition in art, and in aesthetics in general, it is clear that there is an

instability in the idealism and realism dialectic in literary and philosophical studies. Traditionally, these terms always appear as a dialectical pair where realism is joined to idealism; however, an interesting rupture highly relevant to a consideration of our female Georges takes place in the literary criticism of a fourth George, George Henry Lewes. Indefatigable philosopher and essayist, careful reader and supportive critic of the work of George Sand, common-law husband and advocate of George Eliot, Lewes' opinion of the novel is much higher than the condescension of his fellow critics. He believes it is a serious art form, and in "Criticism in Relation to Novels" (1865) written for the *Fortnightly Review*, he encourages "a more serious conception of the art, and a more earnest effort to make [novels ...] in all respects conformable to sense and artistic truth" (361). His published literary criticism shows the extensive development of a theory of the novel and of the responsibilities of the novelist whose "representation of human life by means of a story" (Lewes 1856, 513) demands "the expression of experience and emotion — of what [... the novelists] have seen, felt and thought" because "only that literature is effective which has reality for its basis" and it will only be found "effective in proportion to the depth and breadth of that basis" (Lewes 1852, 130). Realism, for Lewes, is the means to both pleasure and truth because "only those works which are distinguished by any felicity of realism in their treatment are capable of conveying any durable pleasure to the cultivated reader, and this in exact proportion to the truthfulness of the treatment" (1858, 518); however, he is clear that he does not believe in the naturalist tendencies expressed in some fiction which he feels vulgar and without merit. He believed in a modified, or "reasoned Realism" (Kaminsky 44) in which every experience contains the double aspect of the real and the ideal because art can only be "a Representation which inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium" (Lewes 1858, 493). Lewes' intended rupture to the terminological opposition is clear: idealism is a particular aspect of realism, not separate from it. Rather than being the opposite of realism, idealism is reclaimed and the "antithesis [of Realism] is not Idealism but Falsism" (1858, 494).

What is also significant in Lewes' commentary is that idealism is no longer realism's only possible antonym, nor is the opposition between idealism and realism gendered in any way. It is only through the axiomatic status of the opposition that idealism comes to function in the history of aesthetics as the opposite of realism just as romance opposes the real in fiction. The term that now appears dominant, realism, was in fact subordinate to idealism. Where in

1 These are the respective pseudonyms for Aurore Dudevant, Mary Anne Evans (later Marian Evans and Marian Lewes), and Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright.

twentieth-century critical theory, idealism appears, if at all, as a reaction to realism, in the nineteenth century debates on aesthetics, the opposite was true. What secures the superiority of realism within this paradigm of representation is the alignment of its terms with the paradigm of gender. The pertinent question then becomes what is the relation between femininity and idealism as a representational mode. The notion of femininity as a cultural construction since Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) points out that one of the consequences of feminine acculturation in patriarchy is woman's compensatory tendency to situate themselves on the side of the ideal: "Because she is condemned to know only the factual contingencies of life, she makes herself the priestess of the Ideal" (688). The concept of woman as ideal becomes immediately problematic: woman is either disembodied in such a manner that she is no longer a real woman, or she is idealized by man to a universal status because the Ideal implies "the negation of everything particular" (Hegel 1975, 1:157). It is this culturally induced idealism and/or idealized image of woman, that, according to de Beauvoir, accounts for woman's romanticised nature and her "profound need to be ontologically optimistic" (690). Romance, as the most prevalent expression of female idealism in culture, satisfies a culturally determined need to escape into a fantasy world inhabited by idealized characters and ordained by a logic of wish-fulfilment. The idealism that is at work in romance literature is bound to specific historical situations; consequently, its popular expression does not prove that idealism, in general, is essentially feminine. Like realism and unlike idealism, romance is traditionally a major literary mode, albeit discredited by its coupling with the feminine. For such reasons, the differences between Eliot and Sand deserve to be problematized by the recognition that the triumph of realism over idealism is due to the penetration of the aesthetic opposition by an illegitimate paradigm.

Sidney Colvin's review of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) for the *Fortnightly 'Review'* exemplifies how these over-simplified oppositions have been attributed to Sand and Eliot:

Their excellences are in few things the same. The flow of George Eliot's writing we have felt is apt to be impeded with excess of thought while of writing which does flow, George Sand is an incomparable mistress. But this only the sign of deeper differences. George Sand excels in the poetical part of her art. George Eliot excels in the philosophical. Each is equally mistress of human nature and its secrets, but the one more by instincts, the other more by reflection. In

everything which is properly matter of the intellect, the English writer is the superior of the French by far. (614)

These comparisons which result in the valorization of Eliot's intellect over Sand's passion continue in Mathilde Blind's *George Eliot* (1883) where she locates Sand as "impassioned, turbulent, [and] revolutionary," but as "the great idealist of her sex" in novels which were not "studies of life" but "prose poems" in opposition to Eliot whom she describes as "contemplative, observant, and instinctively conservative ... the great realist of her sex" (7-8). If, indeed, this is the nineteenth-century understanding of the dis/connect between Sand and Eliot, then as Naomi Schor argues in *George Sand and Idealism* (1993), "if idealism is not ... an essentially female representational mode, the practice of an aesthetics of idealism was unquestionably for Sand a strategy for bodying forth her difference" (47) in writing as a woman. Sand's aesthetics begin with the premise that art must be true to nature. Her preface to *Indiana* (1832) claims it to be "Un recit fort simple ou l'ecrivain n'a presque rien cree" because the role of the artist is as a mirror of reality — "L'ecrivain n'est qu'un miroir ... qui n'a rien a se fake pardonner se ses empreintes sont exactes, si son reflet est fidele" (6). Further, "le narrateur espere qu'apres avoir ecoute son conte jusqu'au bout, peu d'auditeurs nieront la moralite qui ressort des faits" (8). Sand believes that it is not necessary to stray far from life for the material of her narratives because "fvjraiment la vie est assez fantasque [...et] il y a assez de desordre, de cataclysmes, d'orages, de desastres, et d'imprevu pour qu'i soit inutile de se torturer la cervelle a inventer des faits etranges et des caracteres d'exception" (*Lucreza Floriani* 117). Indeed, in "George Sand's *Francis le Champr* (1848), Lewes commends her effort "to recal [sic] novelists to a right sense of their office, and bring back their vagabond imaginations to the proper starting-point — Nature ... Persuaded that the nearer artists approach to nature the more perfect will be their Art, she undertakes" in her novel to "interest the public by a narrative of the simplest every-day events, told in the simple language of the people" (502). While Lewes identifies here a parallel in her writing with the ideals and idealization of the Romantic writers, he sees her text as far from deserving of critical delegation to trivialized feminine or idealized concept of the romance. The complexity of the relation Lewes sees between Sand's desire for realism and her idealism seeks to inscribe woman into a predominantly masculine and prestigious precinct of human thought in order to call into question the reduction of idealism to the version that excludes woman because of its association of woman with lesser forms of

ideality such as the pretty, the agreeable, the romantic or the useful. Lewes would recognize, as both philosopher and critic, that the Hegelian claim that "Women may have happy ideas, taste, and elegance, but they cannot attain to the ideal" (Hegel 263) is false because that while woman is the object most often idealized, it does not exclude a woman writer from aspiring to construct an ideal in fiction; indeed, in "The Lady Novelists" (1852), Lewes encourages women to write from their lives and the truth of her experience.

This is not to suggest that the waning of appreciation for Sand's aesthetic can only be ascribed in any simple terms to her gender, but it is compounded by the fact that her idealism has been relegated to the acceptable but devalued representational mode of feminine romance. To the contrary, her contemporary Lewes is captivated by her writing, and argues that Sand introduces a new form of realism in fiction and considered her "the most remarkable writer of the present century" (1842, 578) due to her ability to feel profoundly unlike those writers whom he believes "imitate the thought of others, round their periods, deliver their formulas, or flutter around their emotions, and the result [is] always ... powerless and pointless" (1842, 581). Lewes uses his ideas of modified idealism to situate Sand as poetic and subtle, idealist yet based in realism because instead of "giving you an inventory [her writing] gives you an emotion" (1844, 279) not solely a romantic narrative. Lewes sees the characters in Sand's *Indiana* (1832), *Lélia* (1833) and *Consuelo* (1842) as powerful representations because they have trouble negotiating a fulfilling social existence in a system which prevents them from intellectual and individual development; her novels also focus on the relations between the sexes and she is openly critical — both in person and in fiction — of the restrictions placed on women by conventional attitudes. Committed to authenticity in her writing, Sand's own experiences are central to her fiction and non-fiction. Her narratives are highly autobiographical and her *Lettres d'un voyageur* (1837) are part confession and part exploration of her own lyrical and artistic selfhood after her failed marriage. In those emotions, Sand believed sympathy could be conveyed because "[d]ans un livre de la nature ce celui-ci, c'est l'emotion, c'est la reverie, ou la tristesse, ou l'enthousiasme, ou l'inquietude, qui doivent se rendre sympathiques au lecteur" (38). To arouse a sympathetic ear to champion a positive cause is embodied by her theory of artistic responsibility and evocative blending of the ideal with the real.

There is a certain instability of each categorization due to the play of gender in the realm of the ideal; first, because the logic of idealization usually entails some form of disembodiment or representation of woman as merely

sensual or natural, and second, because in art, idealism heightens the sense of the real. A progressive idealism which promotes the feminine and/or feminist ideals must necessarily contain a radical subversion and rejection of the male-authored idealism that it challenges. A woman writer's decision to turn away from the attempt at pure descriptiveness which is embraced by realists, and the addition of idealistic intent, begins to distinguish her — but not separate her entirely from her realist male counterparts — as she seeks to challenge the patriarchal heirarchization of value.

Sand's writing demonstrates such a moment. There are certainly tensions between Sand's feminism and her idealism; if idealism as an aesthetic mode tends toward the abstract and the metaphysical, then any feminist protest necessarily entails an immersion in the concrete and the corporeal. Lewes voices his strong belief that Sand's ability to combine these modes in her writing shows she is:

A moral writer because an earnest one. She puts forth convictions. It is incumbent on an author, not that he speak the truth but what he holds to be the truth; he is accountable for the uprightness, not the rightness of his doctrine.... She loves to contemplate the victory of mind over matter. Generous herself to a high degree, she everywhere manifests a love of generosity and integrity. Self-dependent, self-sustained, she is fond of exhibiting her heroines relying solely on their own will and dignity. (1844, 266-71)

Sand's texts challenge conventional histories of nineteenth century literature and the hegemonic place of realism and its male practitioners.

It has been suggested that the connection between the realist writing of Eliot and the mentorship of Lewes is one of "critical pygmalion" (Kaminsky 85). While it is impossible to trace the direction of the influence from one to the other in a singular direction, it is significant that their respective theories on writing, art, and artist converge in many respects. Prior to writing her own novels, EKot writes critical pieces in her role as Editor of the *Westminster Review* in which she clearly admires art which is faithful to life; for example, she commends the work of John Ruskin for his advocacy of realism and his "doctrine that all art and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by the imagination on the mists of feeling, in the place of definite substantial reality" (1857,306). In *Adam Bede* (1859), Eliot's positioning of the artist is reminiscent of Sand when she explains that her goal is to provide "a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored in my mind" and to "tell you, as precisely as I

can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath" (221). Eliot, far from being in opposition to Sand's own narrative theories (as is posited by theories which place them at variant ends of the realist/idealist opposition) is synchronous in her belief that literature is a tool in which to communicate sympathy for one's community. She claims in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) her "wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles — to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you" (50); further, Eliot believes that "Art is the nearest thing to life: it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (1963, 271). It is such sympathy that Eliot sees as the very duty of art; if "Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally" which troubled her enough to declare that "the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures" (Haight 3.111).

Initially content with an "artistic bent ... directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human being in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgement, pity and sympathy" (Haight 2.299), Eliot's art evolves in her later fiction such as *Middlemarch* (1871) and in particular, in *Daniel Deronda*, which embodies both the ideal and the real; mere realistic description is insufficient for so "much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissues" (Eliot 1989, 9). The novelist must find a mode to "demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure and to help to define men's thought more accurately after the true order" (Eliot 1989, 122) which will allow for a "reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth" (166).

To a recent critic, George Levine in his "George Eliot's Hypothesis of Reality" (1980), Eliot's great ability is to take that sympathy found in a "buried self which Eliot 'had been discovering, was even more tenuous, complex and minutely articulated and differentiated than she had earlier thought. The ideal and the real were fused" (2) in her increasing inclusion of idealism in her exploration of the representation of the real; in fact, it is "important to recall that in Lewes's usage (and surely, in George Eliot's), 'ideal' does not imply distortion of reality but an idea about reality" (19) and is a central tenant of Eliot's fiction. In this objective, Eliot convincingly echoes the writer she greatly admired because in each writer's case, there is a distinct unwillingness to separate art from feeling in her work. Lewes articulates, in parallel

consideration to the theorization of the two women writers who see themselves as mirrors, how the aim of literature cannot only be the description of society, but must also be an expression of the emotions of the persons in that society and by the artist depicting the social circumstances of the novel as "a mirror" and instead "of regarding literature as the expression of society" we must also "regard it as the expression of the emotions, the whims, the caprices, the enthusiasms, the fluctuating idealisms which move each epoch" (1852, 131). Further, he believes that "literature, being essentially the expression of experience and emotions ... only that literature is effective, and to be prized accordingly, which has reality for its basis ... and effective in proportion to the depth and breadth of that basis" (1852, 130). The task of the writer in the mind of all three Georges is ultimately social in which the artist must add another dimension to realistic art — namely the ideal which is only a more abstract truth — and combine it with a philosophical vision of essences for the betterment of the reader.

Such a comparison between the literary philosophies of these three "Georges" should serve to dispel the notion of a woman writer bound only to playing the romanticized ideal of essential femininity, and of realism as an innately masculine mode. In a manner that anticipates and reasserts the difference between the terms idealism and realism, Eliot qualifies her idealism and repudiates romance, while Sand disclaims romance while they both reinvent Lewes's modified idealism for the female gender. The difference in the legacies or literary fates of these two female Georges, while not exclusively reducible to the gendering of the idealism/realism opposition, does intersect with it in interesting ways. Eliot's poetics has been judged by critics to anti-idealist therefore classically realist which accepts the notion that "realism presupposes an idealism to be corrected" (Levin 66). A more honest reading of Eliot's writing reveals a more complex, palimpsestic intention; for example, in *Adam Bede*, Eliot explains that she chooses neither "to represent things as they never have been and never will be," but also creates the world with a "tasteful pencil...[and] make things better than they were" at the risk of offending her "idealistic friend" (223) with the vulgar details and representation of the commonplace. For Eliot, superiority of the real over the ideal is moral as a way to evoke the sympathy for the Other:

There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I

touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy.... It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar in a vilely assorted cravat and waistcoat, than with the handsome rascal in red scarf and green feathers. (Eliot 1859, 224)

For such reasons, the assumed distance between Eliot's realism and Sand's idealism is not valid. Eliot is, in her own way, an idealist, and Sand's idealism is informed by some of the same moral and social imperatives that create Eliot's progressive realism.

Gender is important in the breakdown of the distinction between realism and idealism in Eliot's fiction. One reason that realism is said to oppose directly the alternate, idealist mode of presentation by claiming that it supposedly presents an objective (usually masculine) picture of common details in "reality" or verisimilitude, whereas idealism supposedly seeks to chart some illusory metaphysical realm outside the ordinary; however, as Naomi Schor points out in *Reading in Detail* (1987), any focus on ordinary or extraordinary detail relies on certain specific gender assumptions: "the detail is gendered and double gendered as feminine and is bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose prosiness is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women" (4). This gendering of detail as feminine is so insistent that the association of woman/feminine and detail persists even in aspects of detail, both decadent and everyday, that seem contradictory. It is, as Schor states, doubly gendered as feminine and/or effeminate — even verging on the decadent. If realism is reliant upon the variant aspects of the detail, then the undisputed legitimacy of the dominant paradigms of patriarchy that categorize the general against the detail, and the universal/particular as masculine/feminine need to be reconsidered when making the leap of logic to the ideal and the real.

One writer who takes Sand's feminist idealism and Eliot's progressive realism to its logical development is George Egerton, a short story writer and novelist of 1890s who lived variously in Ireland, Norway, and England. Her first two volumes of short stories, *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), could be the realization of a feminist idealism which seeks to insert woman into the patriarchal discourse of idealism through the creation of a feminist portrait of woman while recognizing the importance of the material and corporeal as a means to achieve the reinstatement of woman in cultural, social, and literary discourse. Critics were fascinated by these tales of women's lives, but were sometimes repulsed by "a set of stories written with the least amount of

literary skill and in the worst literary taste. We [*The Pall Mall Gazette*] have refrained from quotation, for fear of giving to this book an importance which it does not merit" while others saw it as "a book which is a portentous sign of our times. The wildness, the fierceness, the animality that underlie the soft, smooth surface of woman's pretty and subdued face — this is the theme to which she again and again recurs." In spite of the confusion about the gender of this George, one critic astutely realizes that every "line of the book gives the impression that here some woman has crystallised her Efe's drama; has written down her soul upon the page" (1894 end 2).

Another critic, Hugh Stutfield, is the first to label the fiction of New Woman writers such as George Egerton "erotic, neurotic, and Tommyrotic," and warns that "Society[s] ... most dangerous and subtle foes are beyond question 'neurotics' and hysterics] in their manifold forms" (1895, 833). He claims that texts such as Egerton's are written by women who are the "offspring of hysteria" that write repulsive fiction because "To be a woman is to be mad,... [but even worse], the woman of the new Ibsenite [neurotic] school is not only mad herself, but she does her best to drive those around her crazed also" (1895, 835) because they "are simply sick ... degenerates to be shunned like any other manifestations of disease" (1897, 114). He dismisses the New Women's unconventional views and fictional techniques as forms of degenerate corruption and argues against their political agenda because they "are wrong when they turn women away from the duties of their sex and when they turn their heads with *illusory emancipatory ideas*, which are unrealizable and absurd. Let woman remain what Nature has made her: *an ideal woman*, the companion and lover of a man, the mistress of the home" (my emphasis, 1895, 842); in other words, let her remain the idealized Victorian angel in the house rather than a writer with an ideal.

While there are limited extant MS of Egerton's personal correspondence, therefore few non-fictional accounts of her theories of writing, her fiction is full of intentional commentaries on the responsibilities of women and writers in the progression of society, but the realism of her stories in her desire to recast a new woman for the future, become susceptible to criticism on the basis of their closeness to the synaesthesia of decadence which is chastized and marginalized as a negative female form which virile women, and effeminate men, propagate. Against such fearful criticisms, the argument can be made that Egerton is not a psychologically classic hysteric or neurotic; rather, the psychological characterization found in her texts is reminiscent of that proposed by Lewes where characters are to be "of mingled woof, good

and evil, virtue and weakness, truth and falsehood, woven inextricably together" because the best story "is the result of character acting upon circumstance, and of circumstance acting upon character" (1845, 328). Objective representation must necessarily be combined with a "strong power of subjective representation ... the power also of connecting external appearances with internal effects — of representing the psychological interpretation of material phenomena" (1847, 693) in order to achieve the most effective style of writing. Further, he believed a necessary requirement of a writer to be "perception of character, and power of delineating it; picturesqueness, passion; and knowledge of life" (1847, 691), knowledge which all of the Georges — Sand, Eliot, and Egerton — had from extensive life experiences unusual and unconventional to women of their century.

Egerton's texts represent the progressive affirmation that if today's reality is resultant from the social codes and mores of the past, then the future can be revisioned through a continuation of the melding of feminist idealism to progressive, modified realism through the depiction of woman's experience; indeed, Egerton says "I could not be *me* as I wish to be if I were not to go bravely, go true to myself, to what I believe is the right thing for me as *woman*" (de Vere White 59). Just as in her life, her fiction creates a threat to patriarchal culture because she creates active and erotic female characters who challenge the Victorian notions of ideal woman as an ahistorical, non-subjective other who exists only to define the masculine. The later nineteenth century in the United Kingdom is the time of the Woman Question which seeks to disrupt the circumscription of woman to the angel in the house or the fallen woman. Egerton's fiction makes apparent that the spectacular inflation of women's idealized value, while repressing her subjectivity or realness, is inextricably a part of the Victorian investment in history, and the tremendous effort to understand and idealize women, occurs at the expense of the real woman and is the price of discovering the truth of man.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf locates one crucial aspect of woman's subjection to man in that "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). De Beauvoir further discusses how this dialectic articulates the relative roles of the sexes where "the terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form.... In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral... whereas woman

represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (xxi); she continues:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other, (xxii)

Confined by the masterful male subject to passivity and repetition, woman in patriarchy is a prisoner of immanence. George Egerton categorically refuses to allow her writing to reflect the relegation of woman to such an opposition between the ideal and the real, both in woman's writing and writing woman; instead, she questions what exactly is the essential nature of woman, and demystifies the ideology of womanliness and the entrenched, conventional epistemology of representation when she challenges literary tradition by combining it with both psychological insight, stylistic experimentation, and idealistic commentaries. Her style is as disarming as her material because it is episodic, full of narrative gaps or ellipses, and shows an almost complete lack of interest in causal relations. Instead of assuming that art imitates reality and represents something both external and prior to the work of fiction, Egerton problematizes the representation of the real in her fiction; as an early modernist, her narrators focalize through her characters which enables them to reflect upon and question the power dynamics of marriage when the alternatives that women have limit their options, to explore the idea of women's complicity in conventional repression, and finally, to disrupt the perception of women's desire for individual rights to sexuality and freedom as neurotic; in fact, Egerton argues that it is the repression of women's sexuality and personality that causes the perceived feminine malady of "moral insanity" (1897, 104), and which "established a system that means war, and always war, because it is a struggle between instinctive truths and cultivated lies" (1893, 41).

Her fiction calls for the open resistance to the imposition of ideal womanhood onto real women because it is both degrading and debilitating to woman's "destiny to fulfil ... to teach one self-knowledge, to give one a glimpse into the contradictory issues of one's individual nature" (1893, 41). In "Now Spring Has Come," one woman explains in her first person narrative how her "intuitive experiences" (1893, 61) have led her to realize that to a man, she "came as a strangely lovely dream into his life. Probably the whole

mistake lay in that. He thought of me as a dream lady with dainty hands, idealised me — and wrote to the dream creature" but when she "came back in the flesh, he realised that I was a prosaic fact, with less charming hands, a tendency to leanness, and coming crow's feet. His look of dismayed awakening was simply delicious" (1893, 61-62). This fictional reflection upon the literary status of woman as the object rather than the true subject of prose, although addressed to a particular moment in her story, might as easily be Egerton's commentary on women's idealization in male-authored fiction. Stories such as "A Psychological Moment" assert to her women readers that all

the systems of philosophy or treatises of moral science, all the religious codes devised by the imagination of men will not save you — *always you must come back to yourself*. That is your problem, and one which you must solve alone. You've got to get a purchase on your own soul. Stand on your own feet, heed no man's opinion, no woman's scorn if you believe you are in the right (1894, 64)

just as George Sand, George Eliot, and George Egerton have transgressed both literally and literarily the boundaries of prescribed womanhood and her place in/as fiction.

Egerton's stories read as authentic portraits of womanhood through what one of her first supporters, Laura Marholm Hansson, calls "the intensity of... awakened consciousness as woman" (68) which not only describes the realities of woman's existence, but posits possibilities, or ideals, for an emerging New Woman. For example, in "A Psychological Moment," Egerton has her protagonist realize that childhood "dream[s] of a White Knight" are "foolish Fancies" (1894, 48) derived by society to control and socialize girl children before they understand what it is to control their own lives or decide their own fates. "An Empty Frame" deals with a short moment in a woman's life where she stands gazing intently at an empty picture frame while she contemplates her husband's infidelity that she is expected to forgive and forget. She thinks of an earlier time and of another man who desired her as an equal, and wanted a life-long relationship based on mutual respect, but who refused to subsume her identity in a conventional marriage. Her thoughts range from anger to regret in a humorous but revealing reversal of a social cliché; this woman knows that "with a great man [she] might have made a great woman" (1893, 119) if she had only had the courage to refuse to conform to conventional expectations of marriage. Her current situation defines her merely in opposition to her husband, whereas a liaison with a "New Man" would have enabled her to fulfil her potential and define her own

identity. As a further resistance to the ideal of a passive and passionless woman, in "A Shadow's Slant," Egerton argues the need for internal resistance to a life of possession and objectification. The husband in this story considers his wife as his property, but there is something in her that he cannot possess: "You wait on me, no slave better, and yet — I can't get at you, near you; that little soul of yours is as free as if I hadn't bought you, as if I didn't own you, as if you were not my chattel, my thing to do what I please with; do you hear ... to degrade, to — to treat as I please ... your spirit is out of my grasp" (1893, 146).

Egerton asserts woman's right to her own body; in spite of the critics' charges that her stories exemplify decadence and erotomania, Egerton does celebrate female eroticism and sensuality by displaying through an Utopian or idealized psychological moment the existence of her female character's individual and subjective sexuality. The most notorious instance of this is Egerton's unnamed female protagonist's fantasy in her story, "A Cross Line:"

Her thoughts shape themselves into a wild song... an uncouth rhythmical jingle with a feverish beat ... to the untamed spirit which dwells in her. Then she fancies she is on the stage of an ancient theatre out in the open air, with hundreds of faces upturned towards her. Her arms are clasped by jewelled snakes and one with quivering diamond fangs coils round her hips.... She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissom waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil. And she can feel now, lying here in the shade of Irish hills ... the grand intoxicating power of swaying all these human souls to wonder and applause. She can see herself... sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, no slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating.... She can feel the answering shiver of feeling that quivers up to her from the dense audience, spellbound by the motion of her glancing feet, and she flies swifter and swifter, and lighter and lighter.... One quivering, gleaming, daring bound and she stands with outstretched arms and passion filled eyes, poised on one slender foot, asking a supreme note to finish her dream of motion. And the men rise to a man and answer her. (1893,15)

Here, through the fully-empowered woman of the vision — in fact, in a moment of re-visioning of Salome's mythic draw for male artists — Egerton disrupts the social construction of the ideal, passive Victorian angel as a masquerade to be discarded as archaic truth. She argues that Victorian man "has fashioned a model on imaginary lines" (1893, 22) of Ruskinian conservative devotion to the female ideal which blinds him to woman's true

possibilities. Egerton's unnamed protagonist notes that, if men were observant, they would see that the "Stray words, half confidences, glimpses through soul-chinks of suppressed fires, actual outbreaks, domestic catastrophes" hint at the "eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman" (1893, 22).

Through this scene of assertive female sexuality, Egerton tries to make her reader aware of historically conditioned society, and its constructions the site of her representations. As she defies the Victorian ideology of the ideal of woman's sexual passionlessness by describing sexuality as the core or centre of real human personality, she disrupts the destructive imposition of an ideal against which all women are measured. Real women, Egerton suggests, have flaws, needs and desires that are not acknowledged in the scope of male fantasies or idealized images, and she shows the injustice of the fact that women are constantly judged according to their ability to live up to or to project the ideal image which men desire. Egerton challenges the traditional ideal boundaries with her nonconformist female characters in an attempt to disrupt or demythologize this imposition of the ideal on women because she recognizes the problems women face in society as men reject the real woman for the idealized image. The conflict between men's need for women to live up to the ideal and a real woman's resistance to the imposition of the image creates a struggle of wills or battle of the sexes in Egerton's stories, a struggle which involves women's desire for power and autonomy and men's desire to maintain the status quo. Egerton and her real women characters are dismissed as neurotic because they "show an undue adherence to an unrealistic idea of things or exhibit the inability to take rationally objective view of life" (OED); the problem is, it is a resistant and historically situated masculine Victorian world-view that decides what is rational and objective, or what is ideal or real. Egerton's progressive ideas, that may stem from her foremothers George Sand and George Eliot, of a woman as a thinking, active subject who constitutes herself historically and contextually were thought unrealistic because her women did not conform to an acceptable societal aberration of a passive hysteric or a raving madwoman in the attic.

In her one brief commentary on her own writing, "A Keynote to *Keynotes*" (1932), Egerton explains that the task she set herself as a woman writer was, to her, not necessarily revolutionary but rather, pragmatic:

Unless one is androgynous, one is bound to look at life through the eyes of one's sex, to toe the limitations imposed on one by its individual physiological functions. I came too soon.... I recognized that in the main, woman was the

ever-untamed, unchanging, adapting herself as far as it suited her ends to male expectations; even if repression was altering her subtly. I would use situations or conflicts as I saw them with a total disregard of man's opinions. I would unlock a closed door with a key of my own fashioning. I did. (58)

Fully cognisant of how disruptive such a de-idealization of man's image of woman and the positing of a strong, independent, re-idealized woman's woman in fiction will be perceived by critics like Stutfield, Egerton draws attention to the stereotyped assumptions which exist about a bold woman author. A woman author in "The Spell of the White Elf" is "shockingly unladylike" and there "is something manlike about her" (1893, 74); she may, indeed, be referring to the oft made comments regarding Sand and Eliot as representatives of the masculine mind misbegotten in a woman's body, and to the assumption by several critics including T. P. Gill that *Keynotes* and *Discords* must necessarily be the product of male experience; Gill, in fact, encouraged her to remain pseudonymous as a position of power for the "less you emerge from the 'George Egerton' enigma — until your ground is sure — ... the better. This is a general principle. Don't make yourself common" (de Vere White 29). Instead, she is unflinching in her declaration that her pseudonym is taken from her mother, Isabel George (Stetz 40), but it is tempting to see it as an homage to her literary matrilineage of Georges, a further assertion that as a woman writer, she has moved beyond the opposition of ideal and real to show that one woman can be an exemplar of both modes of writing. In her most striking comment on her intentions as a woman writer, she further situates her understanding of the place she has taken as a transitional figure in literature:

There was only one small plot left for her [the woman writer] to tell: the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her — in a word, to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writings. In that I think I succeeded. A German critic said of *Keynotes* and *Discords*: "There is no donning of the breeches in Egerton's books, one can hear the zip of the staylases." (58)

Her pride in the recognition that her texts successfully exhibit the removal of woman's constraint in society rather than mimic the masculine mode is evident.

The disruption of the dialectic between idealism and realism by George Sand, George Eliot, and George Egerton, and the recreation of the matrilineal

literary heritage as a continuum of change and adaptation, blends feminist idealism and progressive, modified realism with the *terra incognita* of woman's psychological point of view. In each case, the importance of being George reflects their individual beliefs that "Deep through ages of convention, the primeval trait of [eternal wildness] burns, an untameable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture [because it is] the keynote of woman's strength" (Egerton 1893, 22) and the key to her redefinition.

University of New Brunswick Saint John

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