TO

KNUT HAMSUN

In memory of a day when the west wind and the rainbow met.

1892-1893.

Fancies are toys of the brain, to write them down is to destroy them—as fancies! and yet . . .

'I gave him such a pretty toy to play with, and he is breaking it up. When I say: "You are very naughty, Biff; if you break it I shall whip you!" he only says:
'"But I must, Mumsey, I must!"'

FRAGMENT OF A LETTER, 1893.

INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Keynotes* in 1893 and *Discords* a year later made George Egerton one of the most famous—and notorious—writers of the 1890s. In a decade that encouraged originality and experimentation, Egerton seemed remarkably new and daring. The *Review of Reviews* praised her honesty, believing that 'some woman has crystallised her life's drama, has written down her soul upon the page'.[1] *Punch*, always on the look-out for the latest literary fad, parodied 'The Cross Line' as 'She Notes' by 'Borgia Smudgiton'.[2] But Egerton was not simply a literary *cause célèbre*. She was also in the vanguard of what more conservative critics dubbed 'erotomania', the unseemly display of sexual feeling on the part of women writers:

> The physiological excursions of our writers of neuropathic fiction are usually confined to one field—that of sex. Their chief delight seems to be in making their characters discuss matters which would not have been tolerated in the novels of a decade ago. Emancipated woman in particular loves to show her independence by dealing freely with the relations of the sexes. Hence all the prating of passion, animalism, 'the natural workings of sex', and so forth, with which we are nauseated. Most of the characters in these books seem to be erotomaniacs.[3]

London journalists had found it hard to swallow Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) as the story of 'A Pure Woman', but the sudden popularity of writers such as Egerton seemed to indicate a terrible change in

1. *Review of Reviews*, 8 (December, 1893), p. 671.
2. *Punch*, 106 (1894), pp. 109, 129.
3. Hugh Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 157 (June, 1895), p. 836.

England. Their dismay was not unreasonable. Women were revolting against their traditional role with utter disdain for male opinion.

During a brief space of three years the London literary world was rocked by women writers determined to expand the permissible topics in fiction. Egerton's daring was matched by others. Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) dissected the effects of venereal disease; Iota's *The Yellow Aster* (1893) analysed frigidity; Emma Brooke's *The Superfluous Woman* (1894) described the sexual and spiritual limitations placed upon an upper-class woman; Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) traced the sexual perils of an independent woman composer; and Ménie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* (1895) analysed the social and sexual choices of an emancipated woman.[4] These 'New Women' revolted against what they saw as a totally unnatural upbringing, teaching them nothing about themselves or the opposite sex. Their fiction focused upon the extremes into which such an ill-trained creature could plunge, testifying to the sexual confusion, misery and frustration of the times. All confronted the very limited range of alternatives available to women with an honesty and anger that shocked and fascinated readers.

Egerton in particular felt compelled to describe with a new vehemence and confidence the importance of honouring women's sexuality. She opposed the demeaning notion that a woman's honour consisted in her technical virginity before marriage, and asserted through her characters that a woman must have a full life—

4. Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896) all reflect this concern with woman's sexuality and her role in modern sexual relationships which was begun by women.

marriage, maternity and work. The reverse of these demands was an extreme distaste for any life that was less than its full potential. A cowardly refusal to follow one's soul-mate, as in 'An Empty Frame' or 'A Psychological Moment in Three Parts', met with condescending pity. Egerton, unlike other feminists, had no patience for respectability, considering it a male construct:

> . . . men manufactured an artificial morality; made sins of things that were clean in themselves as the pairing of birds on the wing; crushed nature, robbed it of its beauty and meaning, and established a system that means war, and always war, because it is a struggle between instinctive truths and cultivated lies . . . In one word, the untrue feminine is of man's making; while the strong, the natural, the true woman is of God's making.[5]

Egerton's disdain for conventional morality separated her from her contemporaries of both sexes. Even her mentors thought she might be a little more cautious in discussing sexual desire.[6] But Egerton was never interested in guilt or punishment; rather, her works celebrate the potential in women, not the possibly debilitating consequences of living the life of a New Woman in an old world.

Egerton has been labelled a realist and a naturalist because of her devastating descriptions of marriages gone awry in such stories as 'Wedlock' and 'Virgin Soil'. Certainly she shared with her female contemporaries a zeal (and zest) for describing the effects of sexual ignorance on women faced with venereal disease, or

5. 'A Cross Line', *Keynotes*, pp. 49–50.

6. See, for example, T. P. Gill's letter to her about 'A Cross Line', when he assumed that she was a man, *A Leaf from the Yellow Book: The Correspondence of George Egerton*, ed. by Terence de Vere White (London: The Richards Press, 1958), pp. 23–26.

alcoholism or gratuitous violence on the part of a careless man. But she differed from her contemporaries in her portrayal of solutions to these situations; she advocated not restraint and meaningful work, but sexual fulfilment and power. Throughout her work the highest compliment Egerton could give a woman was to declare her a witch, in the sense of being bewitching—someone who knew her sexual attractiveness and was willing to use it. She praised

> . . . the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman. Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns,—an untameable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture—the keynote of woman's witchcraft and woman's strength.[7]

Women were not boring carriers of society's social and moral standards, but mysterious creatures whom no man could understand; they were about to seize the leadership of society and reinstate the primacy of maternity and feeling. Men read her to find out about women, while women responded to her insistence upon freedom for the soul to grow and expand, no matter how much social convention might weigh them down.

By the 1890s Egerton had earned her optimism and her indifference to conventional morality; in her own life she balanced the two with adroitness. Born in 1859, Mary Chavelita Dunne was the oldest daughter of a ne'er-do-well Irishman who 'lived, with a large family, on air and other people for the greater part of his life'.[8] When she was fourteen-and-a-half her mother died, and

7. 'A Cross Line', p. 30.
8. de Vere White, p. 12. All biographical information comes from de Vere White's book.

the family broke up. Relatives helped out from time to time, but in such an unreliable fashion that her brothers received no schooling at all. 'Chav' was given sufficient money to attend a German school briefly, but she hated the idea of teaching. The other obvious option was nursing, which she tried for a short period in London. She then fled to New York, where she worked at a variety of low-paying jobs, living in a boarding house. Her novel, *The Wheel of God* (1898) and 'Gone Under' both provide glimpses into these lonely years. After two years she returned to England to eke out her living. Forced to make her way at an early age, Chav had few illusions, but many fantasies, about life, men and her own future.

In spite of occasional flashes of anger at her hopelessly impractical father, Chav remained close to him and deeply attracted to men of his charm. Her father taught her to fly-fish, a sport that was an abiding passion for both. Her father also treated her as an equal in a hearty male fashion that she never ceased to admire. Throughout her life Egerton considered the sportsman's outdoor life to be truer to male and female natures than the artificialities of the drawing room. She consistently moves her characters outdoors for moments of self-revelation or reverie. Men and women who fish meet as comrades-in-arms, recognising and appreciating each other's skill. Egerton did not equate Nature with woman's nature, but rather saw the outdoors as a freeing agent, providing the space and climate for personal growth. Thus, Nature never simply reflects a character's emotions or symbolises states of mind; it is a place of possibilities, but individuals must make the most of their own opportunities.

But Chav's father left her a more mixed dowry than just a love of the outdoors. Her attraction to his type of

feckless charm led her into two nearly disastrous liaisons. In 1887 a friend of her father's suggested that she join him and his wife as a travelling companion. Henry Higginson was actually bigamously married at the time, but he was soon making love to Chav Dunne. The two fled to Norway, bought property and set up as a wealthy English couple. Higginson turned out to be a violent drunkard, as recorded in 'Under Northern Sky', but fortunately he lived only two years. These years were to be the most important in Egerton's life, for they gave her the experience and the tools to shape and fictionalise her life. Although she had had plenty of experience with men's lying and prevaricating, Higginson's brutality and neediness swept away any remaining illusions she might have had about finding a man to lean upon. Her two marriages were to lesser men in a dependent mother-son relationship. In her fiction she tended to idealise a similar relation, as in 'The Regeneration of Two' or 'The Cross Line', where the women clearly hold the reins of power.

Egerton learned Norwegian quickly, and was soon devouring the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, Bjørnsen, Hamsun and other lesser-known writers of Scandinavia. She was enthralled by what she read; they represented a kind of honesty and spirituality that she had found absent from Anglo-American literature of the time. Unlike other *fin de siècle* writers, such as George Moore, Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson, Egerton was not influenced by French Decadence, but by the virtually unknown Scandinavian realists. From them she absorbed the value of describing the minutiae of the moment—the tiny seemingly irrelevant impressions that remain after emotionally important events, such as the look of the grass or the pebbles on a path. She also adapted Hamsun's extended recreations of fluctuating states of mind in a character, acutely recording the inner reactions of

sensitive women and girls. 'A Psychological Moment at Three Periods' is her most effective example in this style, describing with a fidelity new to English literature the painful promises of childhood. Given her infatuation with Norwegian literature, it is not surprising that she carried on an intense correspondence with Knut Hamsun, described in 'Now Spring Has Come'.

By 1890 Chavelita was back in London, working in the British Museum, translating Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, and seeking to recoup her fortunes. Then in 1891 she abruptly married an idle and penniless Newfoundlander, George Egerton Clairmonte. To save money they moved to Ireland, but soon their financial situation was so precarious that they considered emigrating to South Africa. Chav decided to try her hand at writing stories first. She sent a set of six to T. P. Gill, who ran an advice column for aspiring writers in the Dublin *Weekly Sun*. He wrote long and enthusiastic letters to her, recommending that she try Heinemann or the new publishing firm of Elkin Mathews and John Lane. After being summarily rejected by Heinemann, the stories were sent to John Lane, who was just beginning plans for *The Yellow Book* and a series of short works by new writers. Richard Le Gallienne, the reader, strongly recommended publication, but Chavelita had failed to include a name or return address. She finally turned up at the Bodley Head office, and was enthusiastically welcomed. *Keynotes* was published under her husband's first two names. Its success led Lane to name his new series 'Keynotes'. Launched at the head of what became a distinguished list of new writers, Egerton's life was transformed.[9]

9. For a full discussion of the 'Keynotes' series and Egerton's role, see Wendell V. Harris, 'John Lane's Keynote Series and the Fiction of the 1890's', *PMLA*, 83 (October, 1968), pp. 1407–1413.

In the mid-nineties Egerton was sought after by all the literary lights of London. Havelock Ellis, W. B. Yeats and George Bernard Shaw were only three among many who invited her to their homes. Richard Le Gallienne and John Lane had serious flirtations with her, if not affairs. They were heady years, but Egerton's later writings showed a discouraging falling off from *Keynotes* and *Discords*, and interest in her waned. After the birth of her son in 1895 Clairmonte became increasingly unreliable. He finally left for America and they were divorced; he died soon after. Then in 1899 Egerton met Golding Bright, an aspiring drama critic fifteen years younger than she. After the failure of an affair with a Norwegian (commemorated in the fictionalised *Rosa Amorosa* [1901]), Chav agreed to marry him. Bright went on to become a well-known and respected literary and dramatic agent, while she attempted under his influence to recoup her fading star by writing plays. In 1932 she explained her limited output,

> I could not take myself seriously. I was *intransigeant*, a bad seller of myself, but I had my standard and I could not be bought. I was a short-story, at most a long short-story writer. For years they came in droves and said themselves, leaving no scope for padding or altered endings; the long book was not my pigeon . . . Publishers told me bluntly: There is no market for short stories.[10]

She did not include her plays in the accompanying bibliography. Egerton's strength—the subtle transformation of personal experience—was also her weakness. Once she was settled into respectable marriage, she

10. 'A Keynote to *Keynotes*', *Ten Contemporaries: Notes Toward Their Definitive Bibliography*, ed. by John Gawsworth [Terence Armstrong] (London: E. Benn, 1932), p. 59.

could not develop new themes with the daring and excitement of her first stories.

However brief her fame, Egerton's stories live for us once again because she speaks to our renewed sense of the unspoken divisions between the sexes, and of the need for a specifically female voice to articulate how women feel about themselves and their most important experiences. Egerton pioneered in presenting English women's internal states of consciousness, capturing 'the eternal wildness' she saw there:

> I realised that in literature, everything had been done better by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for her 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 away in his writings.[11]

Freed from the confines of respectability, yet resiliently optimistic, Egerton could frankly present a wife's desire to be rid of her husband in 'Under Northern Sky' as a positive virtue. Indeed, the mysterious heroine of 'The Regeneration of Two' might well be the wife of 'Under Northern Sky' recovered and seeking some outlet for her energy and money. Egerton sought to express women's needs, fears and strengths, regardless of who she shocked; her honesty and perceptive subtlety have not dated, though she no longer shocks us.

Egerton anticipated the modern short story.[12] She was among the first to employ ellipses, to refuse to give what had always been considered necessary background. She

11. Ibid., p. 58.

12. For a full discussion of Egerton's literary innovations, see Wendell V. Harris, 'Egerton: Forgotten Realist', *Victorian Newsletter*, 35 (Spring, 1968), pp. 31–35.

leaves unexplained, for example, how and why the woman in 'Under Northern Sky' came to marry a wealthy and brutal alcoholic, or why the woman in 'A Psychological Moment' is subject to blackmail. Causality is minimised, while impressions—fleeting moments, vital encounters, intuitive understandings—are emphasised. She was a master at capturing 'the infinitesimal electric threads vibrating' between woman and man, woman and woman. Although her use of the present tense can become at times a gratingly familiar device, at its most effective, its use captures precisely the mood, the moment, Egerton felt had been neglected by past writers. The sudden flash of recognition, of understanding, comes in virtually all of her stories. The coyness of 'The Spell of the White Elf' is redeemed by the growing friendship and respect between the two women; the hackneyed romanticism of 'Her Share' by the poignancy of the youthful moment described and the narrator's fidelity to the past.

Like so many writers at the end of the nineteenth century, Egerton tended to pour nonrealistic material into realistic forms. Struggling to express the previously unnamed aspects of themselves, women writers in particular experimented with remaking the traditional realistic novel. Olive Schreiner wrote a series of short allegories, expressive of the general seeking for new ideals, new relationships between men and women. Grand, Brooke and Iota created masculine, strong-minded women who are forced to take over temporarily male responsibilities. Alternatively they invented fantasy interludes, in which a woman will dream of an entirely different world or will cross-dress, experimenting with the freedom available to boys and men. Within the conventional tale of courtship and marriage we have an effort to explain and analyse other, more inchoate desires

and hopes of women. In our own times we have seen feminist writers turn to science fiction, prose poetry and personal journals as appropriate vehicles to express previously neglected aspects of women's lives and thoughts. In the 1890s Egerton used the short story as her best means of describing a woman's intuitive sensibility.

Egerton's women recognise two parts within themselves: their free soul and their need for self-fulfilment, usually through maternity. She endowed many of her heroines with money, time and sexual experience; ironically, Egerton herself never had the financial security she gave her characters until after her second marriage. Her women know their discontent, and are ready to see the world, to explore a range of experiences; they are eager to test their power. Under the guise of the realistic, Egerton wrote utopian fiction, a fiction that tries on different models of behaviour for different women.[13] In a fantasy interlude, the heroine of 'A Cross Line' imagines herself dancing before 'hundreds of faces' in a 'cobweb garment of wondrous tissue', giving 'to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil'.

> 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, and cheer, cheer till the echoes shout from the surrounding hills and tumble wildly down the crags.[14]

Despite this keen sense of sexual power, the heroine gives up a spiritual friendship with a summer fly-fisher, not because she loves her husband, but rather because she

13. This same point is made more briefly by Patricia Stubbs in *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel, 1880–1920* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 111–112.
14. 'A Cross Line', p. 28.

recognises the primacy of her pregnancy. Her maternity will keep her faithful, but it is a freely chosen fidelity to the forthcoming baby who will need her. Egerton never slips the burden of personal responsibility off her women characters, but assumes that they will make their choices freely, given their limited circumstances or unlimited imaginations.

Egerton's most extended utopia is the last story in this collection, 'The Regeneration of Two', in which a fatal moment, a single encounter with an honest man, turns a spoiled widow from her aimless life. Spurning social proprieties, she starts a co-operative in her country home, composed of all the fallen women of the area, working together in love and harmony. Her reward is the return of her poet, to be nursed back to health and love. When he recovers, she proudly tells him:

> You stung me to analyse myself, to see what was under the form into which custom had fashioned me, of what pith I was made, what spirit, if any, lay under the outer woman . . . I was sorry for myself, resentful because I had been reared in ignorance, because of my soul-hunger, but I had found myself all the same, and I said: From this out I belong body and soul to myself; I will live as I choose, seek joy as I choose, carve the way of my life as I will . . . Woman has cheapened herself body and soul through ignorant innocence, she must learn to worthen herself by all-seeing knowledge.[15]

They establish a free marriage of equals, which enables them to continue their respective work, but to draw nurturance from each other. Egerton, in common with her feminist contemporaries, insisted that women must regenerate themselves, without the assistance of male sympathisers. But unlike other women of her times, she

15. 'The Regeneration of Two', *Discords*, pp. 241–242.

could imagine the creation of a more equal relationship between the New Woman at her strongest and freest and an evolving 'New Man'. Her community of working mothers does not dissolve, but continues as a living testimony to a new power. Such a conclusion was obviously impossible in 1894, yet Egerton's fantasy still works. We are convinced because we, like her original readers, need to imagine a better world where women work together and men understand and keep their freedom too.

Egerton was unique in her positive expectations for women's natural superiority over men, and of her assumption that some men could overcome their sexism. But the gentleness and respect of the poet combined with the strength and independence of the widow are still goals feminists seek as the basis for better relationships and a better world. At the same time, Egerton was fearless in presenting the evil consequences of the continued ignorance and victimisation of women, though her portrayals of fallen women, injured wives and victimised women are more conventional, more predictably nineteenth century. The real excitement of reading Egerton comes from the discovery of self—the pushing outward of woman's potential in her stories. She refuses to accept less than the most complete life, the most complete freedom, the most complete soul for her women. Sometimes this means a traditional marriage, sometimes a free liaison, sometimes simple independence, but never does a woman deny her self without denying her soul. For Egerton the price of repression was always too high.

Martha Vicinus, Michigan, USA, 1982