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978-0-521-09074-2 - Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University

John Sparrow

Excerpt

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## 1

## PATTISON AND THE NOVELISTS

Mark Pattison is probably thought of today, by those who remember him at all, as the rival of Jowett in the field of University reform; as the author of a remarkable book of *Memoirs*; perhaps, as the hero, or anti-hero, of a famous Oxford intrigue; and as a very learned man. People with specialized interests may be able to go further: scholars will connect his name with Isaac Casaubon, of whom he wrote a classic biography, and readers of George Eliot may be aware of a different association with the same name: was he not Mr Casaubon, the hero, or (again) the anti-hero, of *Middlemarch*?

Even to those who know so much about him, Pattison, I suspect, remains little more than a name; they do not see him as a living man. And that is not surprising. He published little—his study of Casaubon; an excellent short *Life of Milton*; a tract on University Reform; first-rate editions of Milton's sonnets and of certain of Pope's poems; and a number of articles on literary and historical subjects, the best of which were collected and published in two volumes after his death. His life's work—a *History of European learning*, built round a biography of Joseph Scaliger—never took shape as a book. And what he did publish was not work of the sort that reveals the character of its author, nor yet of the sort that impels the reader to inquire: 'The man who wrote that, what must he have been like?'

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But once you have read Pattison's posthumous *Memoirs*, you want to find out more about him. And when you get to know him, you cannot help wanting to introduce him to others. He was the most perfect English example of an uncommon type—the man whose life was dedicated to his mind; not the consummate scholar, like Bentley, but the living encyclopaedia of organized knowledge. In this he represented his own ideal: 'Learning', he said, 'is a peculiar compound of memory, imagination, scientific habit, accurate observation, all concentrated, through a prolonged period, on the analysis of the remains of literature. The result of this sustained mental endeavour is not a book, but a man.'

Pattison was such a man; but he was more than that: he was an extraordinary human being; he made an unforgettable impression, not always an agreeable one, upon almost every one who met him. Before I try to reproduce that impression, I had better sketch, in the fewest possible words, the framework of his life.

Pattison was born, in a Yorkshire parsonage, in 1813; he went up to Oriel in the year of the Reform Bill; was elected a Fellow of Lincoln in 1839; took Orders, and nearly followed Newman to Rome in 1845; just failed to become the Head of his College in 1851; achieved that position ten years later; and died in 1884. In 1861, the year he became Rector of Lincoln, he married Emilia Francis Strong, a girl twenty-seven years his junior and almost as remarkable a person as he was himself: the marriage was childless; she survived him, and a year after his death became the wife of Sir Charles Dilke. She died in 1904.

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Pattison devoted his career to Oxford and to learning. He was not exactly an academic hermit; he enjoyed the open air; even in middle age he could 'bustle an Oxford hack across the country side' after hounds, and to the end of his life he spent months in every year alone with rod and line; in his middle years he made several prolonged visits to Germany, and in later days he became a familiar figure at the Athenaeum, at such gatherings as the Social Science Congress, and in intellectual circles in London. But his real life was lived in his library at Lincoln: 'I am fairly entitled to say', he declared in 1883, a few months before his death, 'that, since the year 1851, I have lived wholly for study.'

When he died, Pattison was, in the smaller and more compactly civilized England of a hundred years ago, a well-known figure. *The Times* devoted the best part of a page to his obituary, and declared that by his death the country had lost 'a master mind'.

Records of the impression that he made on his contemporaries are to be found in many volumes of Victorian correspondence and reminiscence, and the impression was usually a vivid one. Swinburne, to whom Pattison represented all that was least attractive in Oxford, contrasted his own patron Jowett with 'such spiritually and morally typical and unmistakable apes of the Dead Sea as Mark Pattison'.

One who was a pupil, but by no means an admirer, gives a more measured judgement of his personality:

Pattison's temperament [says John Morley], his reading, his recoil from Catholicism, combined with his strong reflective

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powers to produce an infinitely curious and salient personality. There was no one in whose company one felt quite so safe against an attack of platitude. There was no one on whom one could so surely count for some stroke of irony or pungent suggestion, or, at the worst, some significant, admonitory, and luminous manifestation of the great *ars tacendi* . . .

His silences were famous; they made undergraduates dread the prospect of an afternoon walk not broken even by the Rector's famous snarl.

The best account of what Pattison looked like in his later years comes from a pupil, T. F. Althaus:

His face was pale with the pale cast of thought, and the deep lines with which it was marked were the result rather of hard thinking than of age. The thin, reddish moustache and beard, and the short, slightly-curling brown hair, showed little or no trace of grey; but the somewhat sunken mouth, with the consequent convergence of nose and chin, helped to give the face an aged appearance. This served, however, to bring into prominence the singular brightness of the grey eye, which, whether 'glittering', as it has been well described, with the light of some fresh thought, or fixed, as it occasionally was, in the compassionless rigidity of a 'stony glare', or mild, almost melting at times, with sympathy, was always deep and searching, and must be regarded as his most striking feature. His voice, in unconstrained conversation, was soft and pleasant; but in official intercourse, or when he was severe, the utterance, accompanying the 'stony glare', would become harsh and nasal; and there were some who, as they expressed it, had only heard the Rector 'snarl'.

Here is a last portrait, drawn by Stephen Gwynne:

In 1883 or 1884 a group of figures entering the Radcliffe Square at Oxford made a lasting mark on my mind. Mark Pattison,

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Rector of Lincoln, drawn in a bath-chair by a shambling menial, lay more like a corpse than any living thing I have ever seen. And yet there was a singular vitality behind that parchment covered face: something powerful and repellent. Beside him walked his wife, small, erect, and ultra Parisian: all in black with a black parasol—I did not know then how often Frenchwomen thus enhance the brilliance of a personality: still less did I know how few but Frenchwomen could do it. But there, plain to be seen for the least accustomed eyes, was the gift of style. No less plainly, her presence conveyed detachment from her convoy with an emphasis that absence could never have given. Either of these two figures alone would have arrested even the least observant eye: together, they presented dramatically the spectacle of an amazing marriage to which the world's attention had already been called.

These are vivid presentations. But for a really living picture we must go not to the photographers but to the painters. As Pattison himself observed: 'If truth is stranger than fiction, fiction has its revenge in being truer than fact. It is the privilege of the novelist, as of the artist, to place before us the truth which is in things, but which is concealed by the facts.'

The place in Victorian fiction that one naturally turns to if one is looking for a portrait of Mark Pattison is Mallock's *New Republic*. That brilliant conversation-piece came out in 1876,<sup>1</sup> when Pattison's reputation was at its zenith; to Mallock, who had just taken his degree, the Rector of Lincoln must have been a familiar figure; he included Jowett in his portrait-gallery, and Pater, and Matthew Arnold; Carlyle is there, and Ruskin; there is even a glimpse of Dr Pusey; and one of the minor characters has

<sup>1</sup> In *Belgravia*; it was published as a book in the following year.

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been, for no good reason, identified with Mrs Mark Pattison. But Pattison is absent, and (to me at any rate) his absence is a mystery. For a *pastiche* of Pattison in a university setting the world has had to wait half a century for the brilliant parody of his *Memoirs* in Mgr Ronald Knox's *Let Dons Delight*.

Three writers of fiction—among them one of the most admired of English novelists—felt the force of Pattison's personality intensely enough to reproduce it, more or less faithfully, in their books. All three were women; and that is not surprising, for Pattison was interesting to women in a way in which he was not interesting to men.

Of the three novelists who put Pattison, in one way or another, into their books I will take first Rhoda Broughton—'Our dear Rhoda, our gallant and intrepid Rhoda', she was called by Henry James, who thought her 'admirable and wonderful'. She was an acid and indomitable spinster who, as she said herself, began life as Zola and ended it—she did not die until the 1920s—as Charlotte M. Yonge. Her luxuriantly sentimental novels—*Cometh Up As A Flower* and *Not Wisely, But Too Well* were two of the most popular—are readable now only for their vivid but superficial pictures of Victorian social life; but she was thought daring eighty years ago; she was a shrewd observer, she had a sharp tongue, and she was no respecter of persons. She was already a popular novelist and a familiar Oxford figure when, in 1883, she published *Belinda*.

I will not recapitulate the plot of this crude and childish three-volume novel; it is enough to say that a very

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ordinary girl believes she has been jilted by the young hero, and impulsively marries Mr James Forth, Professor of Etruscan in Oxbridge University. The professor is a mean, pedantic, hypochondriacal egotist, who uses his young wife as an unpaid secretary. We are not told that he was a fraud; but the reader cannot help having his suspicions about a Professor of Etruscan whose *magnum opus* is an edition of the fragments of Menander, and who apparently relies upon St Augustine and Irenaeus as authorities for his text.

Belinda, condemned to a loveless and joyless existence in North Oxford, bitterly regrets her mistake, but is duly restored to the man she loves by the professor's providential death.

The background, and the relation between the principal figures, find their exact counterparts in the Rector of Lincoln and his wife; and there are plenty of particular touches that identify Pattison with Professor Forth: the meanness of the 'old skinflint' is a perpetual theme; he is always out of humour, and his ill-humour 'renders yet more pinched and captious his pinched pedant face', he talks like a book—one of Pattison's books: 'You must be aware', he declares, 'that the whole tendency of my teaching is to show that the pursuit of knowledge is the only one that abundantly rewards the labour bestowed upon it.' He has a 'contempt for undergraduates' and does not often look at them 'because he dislikes them too much'; but he enjoys 'forming the minds' of intelligent young women, and reads Browning to them while they sit round in an admiring circle.

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The superficial picture is accurate enough; that, no doubt, was how Pattison appeared to most people who met him but did not know him well.<sup>1</sup> And I can quote an episode that proves that Rhoda Broughton was indeed drawing from the life.

*Belinda*, like *Mansfield Park*, was a ‘three-decker’ novel, and Rhoda Broughton, like Jane Austen, took advantage of the three-volume form. You will remember the private theatricals so improperly got up by the party at Mansfield Park during the absence of Sir Thomas Bertram and so dramatically interrupted by his unexpected return. ‘My father is come; he is in the hall at this moment’—Jane Austen makes these terrible words all the more effective by placing them as the closing words of the first volume of the book.

A similar episode closes the second volume of *Belinda*. Professor Forth, supposed to be presiding over a meeting of ‘The Archaeological Society’, returns unexpectedly to find Belinda and her sister enjoying themselves with a party of undergraduates; exhausted with an improvised dance, they have betaken themselves to blind man’s buff; at the height of their merriment, an ‘instantaneous and entire muteness falls upon the so boisterous little assemblage’, and Belinda ‘tears the bandage from her eyes’, to see that ‘The door is half open, and through it Professor Forth is looking, with an expression hard to qualify upon his face, at the entertainment got up with such spirit and success in his absence’.

<sup>1</sup> Certainly the caricature, superficial though it was, was recognized in Oxford: see D. S. MacColl in *The Nineteenth Century*, January 1945, pp. 28–33 and *The Oxford Review*, 21 January 1885.



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Rhoda Broughton, when she wrote that, may well have been recalling *Mansfield Park*; she was certainly recalling life. The following story was told me by an honorary fellow of Lincoln, who had it from one of the undergraduates who were at the party:

One night, when Pattison had gone out to dinner, Mrs P. and her rather giddy sister had got in a number of undergraduates to an impromptu party. At a moment when they had done up all the men's hair in curl papers, the door opened unexpectedly and the Rector walked in. He punished them effectively by going round the room, and very slowly and ceremoniously shaking hands with all present, while they wished that the floor would swallow them up.

No wonder that when Pattison next called on Miss Broughton in Holywell he asked the parlour-maid to announce him as 'Professor Forth'.

My second portrait comes from a more perceptive writer, George Eliot. The question whether *Middlemarch* contains a portrait of the Rector has exercised readers and critics ever since the book was published. George Eliot's admirers have been unwilling to admit it. 'There never was a more impertinent blunder', said John Morley, 'than when people professed to identify the shrewdest and most competent critic of his day with the Mr Casaubon of the novel, with his absurd Key to all Mythologies', and Mr Gordon Haight, the editor of George Eliot's letters, evidently regards any resemblances between them as purely coincidental.

Of course, to talk about 'identification' is to oversimplify. 'Was Mark Pattison Mr Casaubon?' is a question

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too crude to deserve an answer; creative artists are not photographers. But it is reasonable to ask: How far did George Eliot's creation in fact resemble the living man? And how far was George Eliot, whatever she intended, aware of the resemblance?

The likeness was close enough at several points. Casaubon devoted his life to the production of a work of scholarship that never saw the light of day. You may remember his physical appearance—an unattractive creature, sandy-haired, sallow-faced, 'with two white moles with hairs on them', with 'a bitterness in the mouth and a venom in the glance', whose protestations of love were like 'the cawings of an amorous rook'. You will recall that this 'dried preparation', this 'lifeless embalmment of knowledge', 'no better than a mummy', married a high-minded, warm-hearted, impulsive girl, twenty-seven years younger than himself, 'given to self-mortification', and worshipping an ideal of learning that she believed to be embodied in her husband, who (she hoped) would provide her with the key to an intellectual paradise: 'It would be like marrying Pascal, I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by.' *Middlemarch* tells the story of Dorothea's disillusionment, how she discovered the emptiness of her husband's intellect and the pettiness and coldness of his nature.

This literary picture was given to the world in 1872,<sup>1</sup> just ten years after Pattison was elected Rector of Lincoln and married Francis Strong. It resembles him in three respects:

<sup>1</sup> *Middlemarch* was published in monthly parts between December 1871 and December 1872.