

2006

Review of George Eliot's Travels: Composite Characters and Coded Communications.

Kathleen McCormack

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McCormack, Kathleen, "Review of George Eliot's Travels: Composite Characters and Coded Communications." (2006). *The George Eliot Review*. 499.

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Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot's Travels: Composite Characters and Coded Communications*. (New York: Taylor & Francis / Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 193. ISBN 0 415 36022 6

When we think of George Eliot, the word 'travels' is likely to suggest journeys to far-flung places in foreign lands, but considered in an English setting, she seems to be locked in either Warwickshire or London. Kathleen McCormack, however, shows how widely George Eliot travelled in her own country, so widely that she made over fifty visits to English places and only thirty to foreign destinations. Indeed, 'widely' is a word that stimulates Kathleen McCormack's imagination as she has revealed in an earlier work, *George Eliot and Intoxication* (2000), in which the last word, 'Intoxication', is interpreted in its widest sense. Her article, 'Widely Sundered Elements' (*George Eliot Review*, 2000) prepares the reader for this more detailed and ambitious survey which should fascinate anyone interested in English settings and their relevance to the writings of George Eliot (or 'Evans' as she at first forbiddingly if fashionably calls her). After an exploration of well-known haunts in Warwickshire, chapter headings invite us to visit less familiar places: 'Seasides', 'Islands', 'Country Shires', 'Spas', 'Whitby, Devon, Oxford, Surrey' and 'Country Houses'. The Leweses rarely travelled for pleasure alone; we are shown how they journeyed for other reasons too: for health, for research, for escape from gossip, for specimen-gathering on English beaches, for visits to museums, art galleries, cathedrals, for the refreshment of working in different places. Although the railway must have helped, they were prepared to endure all kinds of discomfort in England and on the Continent for the sake of fresh environments. The author of this interesting new book describes their travels as purposeful and productive unlike the dreamy, fruitless voyage of Maggie Tulliver down the river and unlike her subsequent 'boarding a coach without checking its destination'.

It is a tribute to the writer's enthusiasm for fruitful destinations that she kindled my interest and made me want to set sail immediately for the Scilly Isles and Jersey – especially the Channel Islands where George Eliot increased her knowledge of the names of wild flowers and learned to identify woodspurge and yellow iris. Kathleen McCormack points to the same love of names that is apparent in 'Janet's Repentance', written in Jersey: Mr Jerome's garden is described with 'great specificity': 'red-streaked apples, russets, northern greens (excellent for baking), swan-egg pears'. George Eliot's pleasure in rural life, in 'feathered grass' and 'red sorrel', prepares us for *Adam Bede*, later promised to Blackwood as a country novel full of 'the breath of cows and the scent of hay'. The Queen's Farm Valley walk in Jersey brought her and Lewes close to cows, which they liked to pat, also closer to hay-making in the meadows, and to a 'perfect pond' which 'resembles the pond by which Hetty sits considering, but rejecting, the idea of drowning herself: a pool with grassy banks and an oak tree against which she reclines'. There is too much speculation here, since cows and hay-fields and pools and even oak-trees may be seen anywhere in the countryside – though I should like to try the Farm Valley walk for myself! The writer is on surer ground when she turns to 'red sorrel', and recalls that Hetty Sorrel's 'surname turns up regularly in the records of Jersey residents, and, in the novel, her French-sounding ancestry accounts for some of her vagaries, at least to old Mr Poyser'. She is also on surer ground when she notes that George Eliot's Journal describes the contrast between the blossoming orchards of Jersey and the wilder, more exposed Isles of Scilly, a contrast she

not only describes later in *Adam Bede* but makes richly symbolic as she notes the difference between lush Loamshire and bleak Stonyshire.

Against the background of differing landscapes, Kathleen McCormack sets the characters of George Eliot's novels as she searches for 'composite' originals; she recognizes that after the single portraits in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, characters are usually created from many varied sources. Tertius Lydgate might, she maintains, bring together elements of a Warwickshire physician (John Bury) or the first doctor at Coventry's Provident Dispensary (Charles Nankivell) or a medical brother-in-law (Edward Clarke) or an Oxford don (Henry Acland) or a friend's husband (Eugène Bodichon) or even her 'dissecting, microscoping non-husband himself ...' and the list goes on, as it does for Mr Casaubon and Dorothea. 'If the Casaubon character owes something to Dr Brabant, Mark Pattison, the dons of Brasenose, H. W. Mackay, Jacob Bryant, and George Eliot herself ... living models for Dorothea are equally scattered and equally numerous'. She convinces us that composite characters are far more likely than single originals, even though she finds a single link between the 13-year-old Daniel Deronda in the cloisters of Lacock Abbey, anxious that he may be illegitimate and his father guilty of infidelity, and the young Phil Burne-Jones who is the same age as Daniel when he is hurriedly dispatched to Marlborough College purely to reduce any suspicion he might feel about his parents' difficult marriage and his father's infidelity. 'Of all the people who contribute one or more details to her characters and for whom the novels contain coded communications, George Eliot calls most frequently on Barbara Bodichon and Georgiana Burne-Jones, who between them contribute aspects to Maggie, Romola, Dorothea, Mirah, Gwendolen, the Meyrick sisters, and Mrs Glasher.' Interesting and thought-provoking though this is, one wonders if anything can be said for wholly original creativity. Who, for example, inspired Grandcourt? Is the secret of Grandcourt in ourselves, in our fear of eliciting no reassuring response, in our dislike of one who dominates by silence or by a cold reticence that terrifies?

In her sub-title, Kathleen McCormack adds 'coded communication' to 'composite characters', the whole phrase with its strong alliteration daunting but emphatic. There are many signs of 'coded communication' in which George Eliot signals to private individuals. Nancy Henry's examples of 'signalling' in *Theophrastus Such* is acknowledged, and so is Beryl Gray's interesting suggestion that Caterina Sarti in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story' embodies George Eliot's coded message to Dickens on his creation of Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit*. On more well-trodden ground, she perhaps hoped that her portraits of Tom Tulliver and Maggie might stir the memory and conscience of her brother Isaac. Less well-known is her knowledge of the uneasy relationship between Barbara Leigh Hunt (later Bodichon) and her autocratic brother Ben: their quarrel is likely to have elicited a private message of sympathy to her friend. In July 1870, a distressed young wife, Georgiana, betrayed by her husband, the artist Edward Burne-Jones, would have been able to confide in George Eliot on their holiday in Whitby. Kathleen McCormack vividly pictures the Pre-Raphaelite scene as Georgiana received against the background of mediaeval Abbey ruins the same wise if hard counsel that Gwendolen received from Daniel Deronda against the mediaeval background of Lacock Abbey. His advice that she should turn her mind outwards away from 'the small drama of personal desires' to the larger world of ideas admittedly failed to inspire Gwendolen to peruse those heavy tomes in Grandcourt's library, but in the real world it seems to have encouraged Georgina to study Latin and music, and presumably to recognize her own plight when she read the novel and found her

friend's advice reiterated. Perhaps there is some speculation here, but there is no doubt that Georgiana appreciated her friend's counsel. In August 1870, she wrote to George Eliot apologizing for talking so much about herself at Whitby, and adding, 'The only atonement I can make is a resolve that what you have said to me in advice and warning shall not be lost'.

Not only Whitby but so many places described in *George Eliot's English Travels* set my feet tingling and make me wish that the writer had included maps so that I – and other enthusiasts particularly from abroad – might follow more easily in her footsteps. We need both maps and illustrations so that as we set out on the *Daniel Deronda* trail, for example, we could compare and contrast Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire with George Eliot's description of Monk's Topping, Spye Park House with her account of Offendene, Bowood with Diplow, and Corsham Court with Brackenshaw. Might we also imagine Lydia Glasher's dark eyes gazing through a window at Folly Farm? Readers are encouraged to identify Transome Court in *Felix Holt* with The Deepdene in Surrey (its 'grandly pillared sculpture hall ... its river and the political occupations of its owners'). Kathleen McCormack maintains that she is certain of her identification of Cadhay Manor in Devon with Mr Casaubon's manor-house, 'east of the limes and west of the yews', but although Cadhay does appear in one of the two illustrations in the book, the chance to view its appearance from different points of the compass would be welcome.

Nevertheless, it is good that in this likeable, well-researched and clearly written book (with its modest request for help if any detail is considered to be wrong), George Eliot's English travels receive their rightful due. The writer closes with a final tribute to their influence: 'Because the majority of her settings are English, her English travels were at least as much a part of her creativity as were her childhood in Warwickshire or her journeys in Italy. From the granite islands and beachside cliffs, from Weybridge, Devonshire, and Yorkshire, George Eliot fed her creative imagination on the sights of England.'

Ruth M. Harris