

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

6-23-1984

Westminster Abbey Wreath-Laying

Steve Race

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Race, Steve, "Westminster Abbey Wreath-Laying" (1984). *The George Eliot Review*. 27.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/27>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH-LAYING

23rd June 1984

Address by Steve Race

It was George Eliot's Parson Gilfil who "smoked very long pipes, and preached very short sermons". Anyone speaking on this occasion (whether clergyman or layman) should remember Parson Gilfil, and preach a very short sermon!

But standing here, and looking around this little group of memorials ... George Eliot, Lewis Carroll, Tennyson, Browning, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, John Masefield ... one can't help thinking how happily they must have greeted one another's arrival in this poetic Pantheon. ("Have you heard, Tom? George Eliot's joining us!"). One also reflects on how long all these now-silent literary lions had to wait for the great novelist whom we honour to take her rightful place among them.

I say "her rightful place". But in a book I read last year, what do I find? – A suggestion that the novels of George Eliot were written by Mr. Lewes! This, I suppose, is on the Shakespeare/Bacon principle. It's not unlike the old assertion that the works of Homer were written, not by Homer, but by someone else of the same name.

And yet that very same recent book uncompromisingly describes George Eliot as "Warwickshire's second volcanic genius". Note the word 'volcanic', applied to a Victorian lady novelist. John Ruskin, writing about what he called "this disgusting 19th century", complained of his contemporaries that "we are a different race altogether from the men of old

time. We live in drawing-rooms instead of deserts, and work by the light of chandeliers instead of volcanoes". It was a well-aimed rebuke. But, however inviting the general target, there is no doubt that in George Eliot's work there are volcanoes, as well as occasional chandeliers. And chandeliers may glitter with a gentle wit that passes almost unnoticed if one reads too quickly. Consider the neat 'one-liner' (as we would call it these days) from my beloved Middlemarch. Celia is sympathising with her sister, Dorothea:-

"Poor dear Dodo! - How dreadful!" said Celia, feeling as much grieved as her own perfect happiness would allow".

What a charming description of well-meant sympathy at second hand!

But then - effortlessly, as it seems to us - we get the swerve into a marvellously-conceived sentence. Here George Eliot is talking about the need for human sympathy and feeling, but pointing out at the same time the mercy of being spared too keen a sensibility. She writes: - "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies at the other side of silence".

No wonder we honour the writer of that immense sentence! No wonder, too, that George Bernard Shaw said once - speaking of Tolstoy - that he (Tolstoy) was "second only to George Eliot". And Elizabeth Bowen captured George Eliot's genius for characterisation in one memorable sentence. "Experience made her know many people" (she wrote),

"Imagination made her penetrate them".

Exactly. But whether such insight brings happiness to the creative writer is another matter. Is one blessed with genius? ... Or perhaps (as I sometimes suspect) cursed with genius? Would Beethoven have been happier as an innkeeper, or Tolstoy as a serf? George Eliot herself said "One has to spend so many years learning how to be happy. I'm just beginning to make some progress in that science!"

On the same general topic, at the age of 47, she replied in a letter to an enquirer: "No, I don't feel as if my faculties were failing me. On the contrary, I enjoy all subjects – all study – more than I ever did in my life before. But that very fact makes me more in need of resignation to the certain approach of age and death. Science, History, Poetry ... I don't know which draws me most, and there is little time left to me for any of them. Time thrown away when I was young I should be so glad of now! I could enjoy everything, from arithmetic to antiquarianism, if I had large spaces of life before me. But instead of that, I have a very small space".

Not so small, as it turned out – she lived for another fourteen years. But then came 1880. And on learning of her death, Lord Acton wrote to a friend :– "It seems as if the sun has gone out. You cannot think how much I owed her. In problems of life and thought (which baffled Shakespeare disgracefully) her touch was unfailing. No writer had anything like her power of manifold – but impartially observant – sympathy."

One year later (in 1881) a young poet – Oscar Wilde – published his first verses. It was

that same Oscar who was to write such a terrible,
tragic line - the cry of the creative artist in torment:-

"Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God?"

George Eliot struck that clear chord time and time
again. And here, named in God's house at last, we
honour her for all time.

—oOo—