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Toast for the 1985 George Eliot Birthday Luncheon

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DR. GRAHAM HANDLEY was the Guest of Honour at the 1985 George Eliot Birthday Luncheon and proposed the Toast to the Immortal Memory

In proposing this toast I thought I would like to look briefly at George Eliot's real children, and before anyone, sensing an even bigger mid-Victorian scandal than she created by living with George Henry Lewes, asks 'Did she have any?', let me define what I mean by 'real'. I do not mean G. H. Lewes's boys, though she was a devoted mother to them in the best sense of the word, writing to them, being caring and concerned at all times, nursing one in his young manhood dedicatedly until his premature death. I do not mean Elma Stuart, whom George Eliot called daughter for some years until her death, and who was proud to claim that title afterwards; nor do I mean Edith Simcox, who was potentially daughter and lover both, and who spent some time, as we know from her letters, trying to see George Eliot alone and falling at her feet whenever the opportunity presented itself. I mean, quite simply, the children in George Eliot's fiction.

The other day, searching Swinburne's poetry for a reference in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, I came across the following title about which I knew nothing. It is called **ON THE DEATHS OF THOMAS CARLYLE AND GEORGE ELIOT**. I will not present the whole of it, but the last six lines about George Eliot are relevant to what I have to say:

Duty Divine and Thought with eyes of fire
Still following righteousness with deep desire
Shone sole and stern before her and above
Sure stars and sole to steer by; but more sweet
Shone lower the loveliest lamp for earthly feet,
The light of little children and their love.

'The light of little children and their love'. Ponder that line, and think back to the very beginning of

George Eliot's fiction. In the first of the Clerical Scenes there is a warm and concentrated focus on children. Consider part of the opening description of the Barton family.

Nearest her mother sits the nine-year old Patty, the eldest child, whose sweet fair face is already rather grave sometimes, and who always wants to run upstairs to save mamma's legs, which get so tired of an evening.

There is some attempt to make Patty and her smaller brothers and sisters seen and not heard when the Countess Czerlaski occupies their home. But it is the children who make the end of the story so moving, as they are brought in to see their dying mother, and it is Patty who is a mother to them by her mother's wish, and Patty who alone remains by her father's side, and makes the evening sunshine of his life.'

I do not intend here to look at every reference to children, but I do want to stress the consistency with which they are presented. They are presented realistically and this, I suggest, is the major difference between George Eliot and her great contemporary, Charles Dickens. Caterina is never more than a child, and this is her tragedy. But she brightens the lot of Sir Christopher and Lady Cheverel, her devotion to Sir Christopher being particularly evident, and her impulsiveness and extreme emotionalism show George Eliot penetrating to the heart of the psychological matter. Caterina is adopted, but her superior conditioning cannot obliterate those natural characteristics which are in all of us and which surface from time to time despite ourselves. And sometimes, as in Janet's Repentance, the stress on the absence of a child is more telling than its presence. George Eliot is mistress of the might-have-been in fiction, and in this story there is a weighted stress on Janet's childlessness. We are left wondering, I suggest, if her marriage might have been more complete and certainly happier, and if Dempster would have become more humanised, if Janet had had a child. Certainly in Adam Bede one can argue that Totty humanises Mrs Poyser, for that lady's

aggressive scolding covers the warmth of her heart. And we must not forget the mite left in the woodpile by Hetty, and how its crying haunts her and us. Hetty's plight with her child after her journey in anguish shows her author's concern for her and all like her. Hetty and her baby, like Tess and her baby in Hardy's great novel, are victims of a social and moral law.

When we come to The Mill on the Floss we are in the major area of George Eliot's exploration of childhood, with its strong autobiographical flavour, its unerring psychological insight into what today we would call the traumas of family life, the agonies of adolescence. Had I the voice of Gabriel Woolf - or Margaret Wolfit - (notice how vulpine the Fellowship is becoming), I would read you the jam-puff incident, Maggie pushing Lucy into the mud (good old Maggie), Maggie cutting her hair off (good old Maggie), Tom patronising Maggie's quickness at Mr Stelling's, or Tom's humiliation of Bob Jakin. The Mill is rich in incident, vital and moving with Maggie's emotion, but if I had to focus on any character apart from Maggie it would be on the sympathetic, moving and totally comprehending portrayal of Philip Wakem. To know that you are seen to be abnormal physically, and yet to be aware of your own sensitivity, artistic talent and essentially, your isolation because of what you are, is to suffer greatly. Philip is always within the orbit of our sympathy, and I feel that his finest moment - real, moving, poignant - is when he goes to Tom after the disaster with the sword and tells him that he will not be permanently lamed. Philip has put aside selfishness and self, and that action is at the heart of George Eliot's teaching. Tom and Maggie normally get the critical accolades for their truth to life; it is right that they should, but Philip is a superb study in childhood, closely related to the abnormal psychology of Latimer in The Lifted Veil, written a year earlier than The Mill.

There is little doubt that the reader who thinks of George Eliot in relation to children will set Silas Marner beside The Mill. Let me remind you of the quotation from Wordsworth which is prefixed to the novel:

A child, more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to declining man
Brings hope with it, and forward looking thoughts

I suspect that there are many of you here and, happily, Bill and Kathleen are numbered among them, who will find yourselves in sympathy with that quotation. And the element of felt realism that I have referred to is present in the depiction of Eppie as a child, from her babyhood of crawling towards the warm hearth to her rather indulged childhood in which she outmanoeuvres Silas, particularly in the episode of the coal-hole. Eppie represents what George Eliot rightly called the remedial influences of human nature, and it is Silas who has the hope translated into reality, Silas who has the forward-looking thoughts which make life so purposeful to us as we get older. Eppie as a young woman is rather different; she has become a symbol, a Perdita who, faced with a father she doesn't know, resolutely asserts her intention to continue with the father she does know and love. And once again love is the key word, for Silas's timid nature has been re-born into the world of love through the simple needs of loving and being loved in return.

Romola is not only a different historical and geographical location, it is a different human one, but there are points of contact with the old locations. Romola, like Janet, is childless, and again we speculate, though it is doubtful whether the opportunist and egoistic Tito would have been moved by having a child in his own home. Yet we are given glimpses of Tito's childhood with his adoptive father Baldassarre which are redolent of love for, like Silas, Baldassarre has been given fullness and meaning by the possession of a child. And we remember Romola's rescuing of the baby in the plague-stricken village or, most poignant of all, her caring for Tessa and Tessa's children by Tito, Lillo and Ninna. In effect she brings them up; duty has come before self, love before self-pity and Romola, like her creator, has found fulfilment in what today would be called surrogate motherhood.

In the last three novels, Felix Holt, Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda, the role of the children is a much smaller one. Perhaps first we should turn aside for a moment to look at that comic-miniature, Brother Jacob which, as I have written elsewhere, is in some ways a cunning anticipation of Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. Jacob is a giant idiot with a very sweet tooth; his unconscious exposure of his swindling brother David is a masterpiece of ironic and grotesque comedy, but George Eliot is careful to keep the idiot within our compass of compassion and his unscrupulous brother outside it. Again the ethic is one of duty and responsibility, for Jacob's parents have cared for him, and Jacob, in his turn, loves his no-good brother. In Felix Holt there is the melodramatic story of Annette Ledru and her baby, brought up by Rufus Lyon as his daughter, with again the man giving all his love to the child and being loved in return. The remedial influence is certainly apparent, and there are realistic compensations in Felix's devoting himself to teaching the little ones, in the contrast between Harold's mixed race son Harry and little Job Tudge but, above all, a new element - the mystery of birth. The last three novels have children who become adults with a question mark against their real identity - an identity subsequently revealed by the plot. In Felix Holt Harold Transome is the child of Mrs Transome and Lawyer Jermyn, something he discovers when it is too late and he is in direct physical confrontation with his father. In Middlemarch we only get a glimpse of the child Ladislav who is punished in manhood for his grandmother's impetuosity in marrying a poor Pole and by the swindling activities of Bulstrode. Daniel Deronda finds out that he is the son of the Princess Halm-Eberstein and that he was born a Jew, knowledge which changes the whole balance of his life. There would appear to be a deep humanism underlying the child-mysteries of these three novels, namely that children cannot be held responsible for the sins or decisions of their parents, but that they, the children, are the sufferers anyway. The switch between the early and late novels will be apparent; in the early novels children are seen as children, in the late novels what happened in childhood

takes second place, a kind of plot device, to the adult the child became.

These are random thoughts, and I do not want to draw any critical conclusions from them. George Eliot, it seems to me, had the love of little children constantly in her mind, so that it becomes morally irresponsible of Rosamond to indulge in riding and have a miscarriage, that Dorothea is not really fully educated until she has a child of her own (look how self-absorbed she is so that she hardly notices Celia's baby), that Daniel Deronda is humanised when he visits Mr Cohen and bargains with little Jacob and responds to the lisped syllables of Adelaide Rebekah. The touch of the child is the feather-touch of love. Two or three years ago, when I was a young lecturer, I used to glibly quote the following lines to classes as evidence of the fact that George Eliot was a yucky poet:

And were another childhood world my share,
I would be born a little sister there.

To appropriate Adrian Mole's feelings for Pandora, I am profoundly in love with the sentiment if not the poetry. For the loves and devotions and experiences of childhood - and I know that the quotation I have just given may upset some feminists and all ultra-feminists - are the innocent substance that makes adulthood bearable. George Eliot knew this, and her writings exemplify it. I ask you to join me in the toast to the Immortal Memory, coupled with the words of Swinburne about George Eliot's reverence for 'The light of little children, and their love.'

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