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Review of With Great Pleasure

Gabriel Woolf

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WITH GREAT PLEASURE

The 1989 Readings devised and presented by Gabriel Woolf
King Edward VI Sixth Form College, Nuneaton April 27th
Arts Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry April 28th

An open letter to Gabriel Woolf

Well, Gabriel, you have completed the first twenty that 'will not come again'. It gives us great pleasure to say "thank you", on behalf of the George Eliot Fellowship, for all you have done for us. After twenty years we regard you as one of the family. Your regular visits have given many people a great deal of enjoyment, and you have garnished and enriched the Fellowship besides.

Your latest programme was received with great pleasure by all who heard it. Its form was intriguing: Inspiration, First Effort, Love up North, Music and Children's Hour. Was it biographical, autobiographical, or perhaps classical sonata form, using key relationships as a means of contrasting and linking various themes? Possibly it was none of those things, and you will say, like Prufrock's friend: 'That is not what I meant at all.'

Your fanciful First Drafts made an allusive beginning, and left us feeling thankful that you did not depart for Schleswig - Holstein, or wherever it was, nor linger long with Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The Bard of Avon's loss has certainly been the Sibyl of Mercia's gain, and you led us neatly into George Eliot's prophetic essay, Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.

Your second movement introduced a different theme and a different Eliot. The three pieces contrasted agreeably, the hesitant Prufrock being set off by John Donne's confident lover, chiding the sun for intruding at the wrong moment. A sinister note was struck with Browning's Duke, who, having disposed of his last Duchess, was looking forward to his next. Your fine voice did full justice to these fine poems.

With a change of voice, Love up North gave us the men of action whose virility we all admired. Quite obviously, in northern parts men are men and women are glad of it. Ann of the Graveyard, bearing the imprint of her passion, gave us laughter, and the jogging Northern Farmer, put love into proper perspective, that is, second to money. Sexual jealousy, and the fight between George Eliot's lusty young men, made a potent curtain-fall.

Fortified with drink, we returned to face the Music in the second half. Music plays a large part in the lives of many of us, including yours, we know. Music and Money, from Daniel Deronda, linked up elegantly with Tennyson's Northern Farmer. The varied voices were first-rate; we visualised the scene and were cheered to see love triumphant. Two light-hearted pieces of music

drama gave us laughter again before D. H. Lawrence's touching little poem introduced Children's Hour.

We sensed that our protagonist had reached maturity in the last three pieces. There was an equivocal note; he seemed to love children but to feel some relief when they were tucked up in bed. Saki's wicked wit, Thomas Hood's whimsy, and George Eliot's delicious humour sent us home happy, and delighted that, from the thousands of works that you know and love, you had managed to put together such a harmonious and satisfying programme.

As the audience departs, their comments are always a joy to hear, and quite revealing. "Marvellous", someone said, and a complete stranger thanked us for a lovely evening. It was clear that he thought he had been to a party.

Shall we have another one next year?

KATHLEEN PORTER