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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON
November 19th 1989
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY
by Gabriel Woolf

Our invitation to Gabriel Woolf to propose the Toast on this annual occasion was given so that we could say thank you to him for 20 years of work on our behalf in promoting George Eliot in his own unique way. In proposing the Toast he began by telling us about his own introduction to George Eliot. He was doing his National Service in the R.A.F. and was particularly lonely in an alien situation with people with whom he had little or nothing in common. He remembers vividly taking Romola down from an R.A.F. library shelf and being instantly captured by the measured style of the writing. He described it as 'love at first paragraph'. He spoke of a holiday in France when he was still alone and where he spent many days on a beach, his only company being Adam Bede and Middlemarch.

In his radio work over many years he read many of George Eliot's novels, adapted for the medium by himself, and he was once very amused when a lady told him how much she had enjoyed his reading of Silas Marner - probably the only George Eliot novel he had never read there! He thought he had given a lot of pleasure by the books he had not read, even though some people appear to remember them clearly! But the one that made all his radio work worthwhile was Middlemarch, read in 50 episodes, again in his own adaptation.

The thing which clearly impressed Gabriel about the novels, apart from the style that first caught his eye, was the remarkable way George Eliot listened to and remembered the way people spoke and the things they said. He reminded us, with passages from the novels (and, as always, beautifully read and interpreting the characters in his own unique way), of Lizbeth Bede and her grudging praise of Dinah's efforts with the porridge, "Ye might ha' made the parridge worse. I can ate it wi'out it's turnin' my stomach".

He was sure Mary Ann Evans had suffered from aunts at Griff House - "Heyday!" said Aunt Glegg with loud emphasis. "Do little boys and gells come into a room without taking notice o' their uncles and aunts? That wasn't the way when I was a little gell." Aunt Glegg took their hands, hurting them with her large rings and going on to criticise the way they stood and the way they looked.

One of his (and our) favourite characters came in next - Mr. Macey in the Rainbow Inn in Silas Marner and the delightfully realised narrative which the other men had heard so often but it was listened to 'as if it had been a favourite tune'. How we, too, enjoyed hearing again the story of the marriage which Mr. Macey feared would not be legal because the parson got the words mixed up, and how relieved he was to find later that 'it's the register does it - that's the glue'. (Chapter 6)

Gabriel reminded us of Mrs. Cadwallader in Middlemarch discussing marriage (and particularly Dorothea's projected marriage to the 'great bladder for dried peas to rattle in' - Mr. Casaubon) with Sir James Chettam. She gives her reason for abusing everyone as an attempt to hide her own husband's inability to attend 'so little to decencies' - "Humphrey finds everyone charming. I can never get him to abuse Casaubon. He will even speak well of the bishop, though I tell him it is unnatural in a beneficed clergyman...." Other characters in the same novel who speak in a way so effectively captured by their creator are Dorothea, Lydgate, and Caleb Garth, while the two characters that Gabriel himself portrays so vividly - Mr. Casaubon and Mr. Brooke - are indecisive and use an unnecessary number of words. Gabriel's Mr. Brooke is a gem and one we all remember from our own annual Readings as well as from the radio Middlemarch over 20 years ago.

George Eliot listened to people speaking and stored up what they said and the way they said it in her retentive memory. She said herself that there were no portraits in her novels, but there were amalgams and the characters spoke with words and sayings she had heard for herself in her native Warwickshire. One only has to read Mrs. Poyser to know that this is true, for Mrs. Poyser is as real as if she were a portrait - as Gabriel demonstrated to us. Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy are equally convincing and yet so different from each other as was shown to us in a passage from Middlemarch when the two ladies are discussing Lydgate. Gabriel reminded us, too, of the marvellously drawn conversation between Gwendolen and Grandcourt when she is trying to captivate this not too disagreeable suitor in Daniel Deronda.

Many of us remember what people have said (albeit not as clearly or as productively as George Eliot) and Gabriel amused us with a tale from his own schooldays. A teacher was a frequent user of er and um during lessons and one day his pupils counted them. When he reached 100 they broke out into applause!

As Gabriel's Address drew to a close, he took from his pocket one of his most treasured possessions - G.H. Lewes's own diary for 1878, the year of his death. We saw the written pages and we saw the blank ones at the end and Gabriel told us how, as well as writing of the day's events, this mortally ill man also recorded jokes which had particularly amused him. Gabriel quoted the following one:-

An Irishwoman applied to a lawyer to get her a divorce.

"On what grounds?" "He is perfectly odious to me."

"Is he brutal?" "Very."

"Violent?" "Very."

"State a case."

"Well, one day I threw a tumbler at his head because he was so aggravating and he locked me up in my room all evening."

"That is not enough to go to court with. Have you no other accusation to make?"

"Well, then, I'm not certain he is the father of my child."

Finally, when Gabriel asked us to rise and join him in the Toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot, he asked us not to think about the head of George Eliot, nor yet her heart, but that other organ he had shown us so sensitively in his address - her ear!