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Ruth Harris

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AUDIO CASSETTE REVIEW

by Ruth Harris

GABRIEL WOOLF READS A SECOND SELECTION FROM GEORGE ELIOT

Gabriel Woolf's second cassette of readings from George Eliot begins and ends with her poetry. However we assess the value of her poems, there can be no doubt that they raise issues that were fundamental to her. Nor can there be any doubt that the poetry is illuminated for us by the voice of the reader. His tenderly nostalgic interpretation of the Brother and Sister sequence is enlivened by glints of humour as George Eliot describes her devoted dependence on her "little man / Of forty inches", or reveals her excitement when she catches the "silver perch" - her sense of the marvellous mirrored in Gabriel's rising voice. As we listen, we too are haunted by the poignancy of those childhood memories reawakened by love:

"'Tis love must see them, as the eye sees light."

Time and again, Gabriel Woolf's voice (which seems to love what it reads) made me see with clearer eyes lines of poetry I had forgotten or ignored:

"sky and earth took on a strange new light."

After the last, slow, hesitating line, "I would be born a little sister there", Gabriel moves to a passage from Adam Bede that is lively with humour. Skilfully, he rings the changes from the lingering, refined voice of the devious old Squire to the deep, rustic tones of Martin Poyser whose reticence contrasts with the quick, bright challenges of his wife: Mrs. Poyser's adroit attacks on "other folks" soon open out to risky invective: "Your name's no better than a brimstone match in anybody's nose."

In Gabriel Woolf's next passage, Eppie's Choice from Silas Marner, we are even more aware of variety arising not simply from the different voices of Godfrey and Nancy Cass, Silas and Eppie, but also from the alterations of feeling in a single character. For example, we hear Godfrey's change from the voice of severity ("You ought to remember") to the accents of embarrassed persuasion ("Eppie, my dear,"). Changes are even more marked in the words that Silas speaks: there are flashes of excited bitterness ("repentance doesn't alter what's been going on for sixteen year You'd cut us in two") and there is the tremulous humility of his last words before Eppie makes her choice ("Speak to the child. I'll hinder nothing."). At the end of this reading, Gabriel transposes a single sentence so that he concludes:

"She clasped Silas's hand firmly - it was a weaver's hand with a palm and finger-tips that were sensitive to such pressure."

The change seems to give fresh significance to the words.

It is a personal delight to find on the second side of the tape Klesmer's story from Daniel Deronda, since it contains some of the finest dialogue that George Eliot ever wrote. In a subtle reading I particularly enjoy, Gabriel Woolf conveys the obtuseness of Mr. Bult, the arrogance of Mrs. Arrowpoint, and the raw, impassioned sensitivity of Klesmer. Nor can one easily forget Catherine's urgent confession of love: "I am afraid of nothing but that we should miss the passing of our lives together."

The irony that notes how Mr. Arrowpoint "rose to the occasion by saying, 'This will never do, Cath,'" indicates how sure is George Eliot's sense of the ridiculous in human behaviour: it prepares us for the broader humour of the next passage, the Rainbow scene from Silas Marner. One can see from the anxious, piping voice of the well-named Mr. Tookey exactly why he is bullied by the rest. He is no match for the burly tones of Ben Winthrop. Nor will he ever win the respect accorded to old Mr. Macey whose ruminative tone of voice is well captured as he tells his story yet again to listeners who "give their whole minds to the expected words."

There is no doubt that we too "give our whole minds" as we listen to familiar words made fresh for us by the reader whose recital closes with George Eliot's moving poem, "O may I join the choir invisible." In the whole recording, there is a sense of "meeting harmonies", reader in harmony with author, and both combining "to make undying music in the world."

60 minute cassette available from the secretary for £5 plus 50p postage and packing (£1.00 for overseas postage - surface mail)