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Gerlinde Röder-Bolton GEORGE ELIOT'S WEIMAR

When George Eliot and G. H. Lewes arrived in Weimar on 2 August 1854, their expectation were high. They had come to Germany primarily to collect material for Lewes's biography of Goethe on which he had been working for some time, but the journey also represented the start of their life together. They had left London on 20 July and travelled via Antwerp, Brussels, Cologne and Frankfurt. At last they would walk through the streets where Goethe, 'the stately Jupiter',¹ had not so long ago walked himself. But the glimpses George Eliot caught of Weimar on their early morning carriage ride were more of a market town than of a capital with a court. At last they arrived at the Erbprinzen, 'an inn of long standing in the heart of town, and were ushered along heavy-looking in-and-out corridors, such as are found only in German inns, into rooms which overlooked a garden just like one you may see at the back of a farmhouse in many an English village'.

This inn survived almost to this day. Close to the market-place, the Hotel zum Erbprinzen had its heyday in the nineteenth century. But the Hotel Elephant, almost next to it and overlooking the market, had always been the more prestigious establishment. Over the years, the more modest Erbprinzen fell into neglect, decayed and was finally pulled down shortly before German unification (1990). Now the inn is to be reconstructed to look, at least from the outside, very much the way George Eliot knew it. On their first exploration of the town, Eliot's and Lewes's reaction was: 'how could Goethe live here in this dull, lifeless village?' How could he walk along 'these rude streets and among these slouching mortals'? The inhabitants seemed to them 'to have more than the usual heaviness of *Germanity*; even their stare was slow, like that of herbivorous quadrupeds'. Weimar, with its uninviting shops, the wares on sale often chalked on the doorposts, and its loudly rumbling, badly-sprung vehicles, seemed to Eliot 'more like Sparta' than the German Athens, as it was then known.² The town had to them none of the picturesqueness which delighted the eye in most old German cities. Today, however, the small ochre, pink, green and white houses with their irregular, steep, red-tile or grey-slate roofs dotted with sometimes three rows of dormer windows, the neatly cobbled squares, the narrow streets where the courtly palace shares its end wall with an artisan's house, have an undeniable charm.

They soon came to love the little town and moved from the Erbprinzen to private lodgings with Frau Münderloh at Kaufstrasse 6. Sadly, this house was destroyed by bombs in February 1945.³ However, the need to speak German caused George Eliot some difficulties. Although she was able to produce excellent translations of philosophical works by Strauss and Feuerbach and had read widely in German, she had had little practice in speaking the language. After their arrival in Weimar, she was given some practice and reported that she was 'getting on a little in [her] German'.⁴

One of their favourite walks was along the *Belvedere Allee* to the *Schloss* and its grounds. Part of the *Allee* has now become a busy street, but further along it is probably little changed. Ancient chestnut trees spread their branches and the land rises gently to give lovely views of hills and fields. *The Schloss*, which was a summer residence in 1854, is at pre-

sent being restored. The grounds, 'which are open to all the world as much as to the Duke himself', are 'laid out with a taste worthy of a first-rate landscape gardener'. The *Natur-Theater*, 'constructed with living trees, trimmed into walls and side scenes' which caught Eliot's attention, is today known as *Heckentheater* and is still used for small musical events.

First among Weimar's attractions, according to George Eliot, was the *Park an der Ilm*. She thought it 'would be remarkably beautiful even among English parks', and 'has one advantage over all these, namely, that it is without a fence. It runs up to the houses and far out into the corn fields and meadows, as if it had a "sweet will" of its own, like a river or a lake, and had not been planned and planted by human will'. She and Lewes would walk across the old stone bridge, past the Sphinx Grotto and across the *Sterngarten* to Goethe's *Gartenhaus*. In 1854, it was empty and not open to the public. Today, it is furnished again the way it was when Goethe lived there. Eliot describes it as 'a homely sort of cottage such as many an English nobleman's gardener lives in'. Here again, the reality was far removed from her preconceptions of it.

The path which runs in front of the house leads to Oberweimar, another of Eliot's and Lewes's favourite walks and 'the place for seeing a lovely sunset'. The path across the valley leads to a small bridge, under which flows the Ilm. Before they came to Weimar, Eliot and Lewes 'had had dreams of boating on the Ilm' and were 'not a little amused' to find the it to be only a small, shallow stream overhung by trees and shrubs. Not far from the bridge stands the *Borkenhaus*, a small wooden structure, 'where Carl August used to play the hermit for days together, and from which he used to telegraph to Goethe in his *Gartenhaus*'. A flight of stone steps leads to a 'mimic Ruin', in front of which, in 1904, the Weimar Shakespeare Society erected a statue of Shakespeare. A little further along, 'placed on the edge of the cliff', stands the *Römische Haus*, 'another retreat for ducal dignity to unbend and philosophize in'. Few changes have taken place in the park since Eliot and Lewes walked there, and their descriptions are as accurate as if they had visited it only recently.

In 1854, the *Residenzschloss* was 'rather a stately, ducal-looking building, forming three sides of a quadrangle'. It was the seat of government and visitors, like George Eliot, were allowed only into a suite of rooms called the *Dichtezimmer* (Poets' Rooms). These can still be seen today. In 1913-14, a fourth wing was added to the *Schloss* to complete the quadrangle and the main part of the building now houses Weimar's important art collection.

The famous library in the *Grünes Schloss* is still in use today and open to visitors. George Eliot was particularly interested in the many busts which decorate the main *Saal*. Even the small cup of Dresden china with its miniature of Goethe, 'so wonderfully executed, that a magnifying-glass exhibits the perfection of its texture as if it were a flower or a butterfly's wing', still exists but is now kept elsewhere.

George Eliot, who had read Schiller when she first learned German at the age of twenty,

was 'thrilled by the inscription, *Hier wohnte Schiller* over the door of a small house with casts in its bow window'. The sight of his simple study and bedroom moved her deeply:

Strange feelings it awakened in me to run my fingers over the keys of the little piano and call forth its tones, now so queer and feeble, like those of an invalided old woman whose voice could once make a heart beat with fond passion or soothe its angry pulses into calm.

Goethe's house on the Frauenplan, according to George Eliot, was much more important looking than Schiller's, but to English eyes far from the 'palatial residence which might be expected, from the descriptions of German writers'. She was particularly struck by the simplicity of his study, his library and the tiny bedroom where he died:

To look through the mist of rising tears at the dull study with its two small windows, and without a single object chosen for the sake of luxury or beauty; at the dark little bedroom with the bed on which he died, and the arm-chair where he took his morning coffee as he read; at the library with its common deal shelves, and books containing his own paper marks. In the presence of this hardy simplicity, the contrast suggests itself of the study at Abbotsford [Walter Scott's house], with its elegant gothic fittings, its delicious easy chair, and its oratory of painted glass.

Eliot and Lewes frequently went to the theatre which survived until 1907, when it was pulled down and replaced by a considerably larger building. They also went to the opera there, superintended by Franz Liszt, and 'were so fortunate as to have all three of Wagner's most celebrated operas while [they] were at Weimar. G., however, had not patience to sit out more than two acts of "Lohengrin"; and, indeed, I too was weary', writes George Eliot.⁵ They never came to enjoy the music of Wagner, and Lewes, some years later, noted in his diary that this 'music of the future' was not for them.⁶

Liszt became the most fascinating acquaintance Eliot and Lewes made in Weimar. Not only did he live openly with the Princess Caroline Sayn-Wittgenstein, a married woman, which was important to them in view of their own irregular social position, but he was also a stimulating and frequent visitor in whose company they met musicians, poets and writers. Eliot carefully recorded in her journal her impressions and feelings during their first visit to the *Altenburg*, the home Liszt shared with the Princess, and of Liszt playing one of his own compositions.⁷ This important episode later finds its echoes in Maggie Tulliver's listening to music in *The Mill on the Floss*, or Gwendolen's responses to music in *Daniel Deronda*, especially to the piano playing of Herr Klesmer.⁸ The *Altenburg* still stands today: a large, plain, three-storey building on a busy road leading out of Weimar. A plaque over the front door and a white marble relief of Liszt on the wall of the small vestibule tell of its former occupant. The house is divided into flats and not open to the public. Some of the contents from the *Altenburg*, which Eliot noted in her journal can be seen in the house Liszt occupied in the last years of his life.

Collecting material for the biography of Goethe took Eliot and Lewes to many places in the area around Weimar. The Ettersburg, some eight kilometres north of the town, was even in 1854 in a sorry state and would have looked 'distressingly shabby to the owner of a villa at Richmond or Twickenham'. Today, the *Schloss* is undergoing major restoration and is closed to the public. The *Webicht*, a beautiful forest to the east of Weimar and 'another very favourite walk' of George Eliot's, is probably little changed. Passing through this wood, one arrives at Tiefurt, 'with its small park and tiny chateau'. The *Schloss* has been restored and the park, 'a little paradise', is well worth a visit, if only to search for the precise place by the banks of the Ilm, where 'Goethe and his court friends got up the performance of an operetta - *Die Fischerin*, by torchlight'.

The small town of Ilmenau is only a short train ride away from Weimar, and Eliot and Lewes went there several times. On their first visit, they were determined to find, 'without the incumbrance of a guide', Duke Carl August's hunting-box, a small wooden house standing near the summit of the Kickelhahn; they reached it 'with weary legs' and found 'an interesting memorial of [Goethe's] presence in these wonderful lines, written by his own hand, near the window-frame:

Ueber allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.'⁹

'Over all the peaks lies rest, in all the tree-tops you can sense scarcely a breath; the little birds are silent in the forest. Only wait, in a moment you will rest too'.¹⁰ Eliot thought that this poem was 'perhaps the finest expression yet given to the sense of resignation inspired by the sublime calm of nature'. They were very moved in the presence of these exquisite lines and wrote their names near one of the windows. Alas, this hut burnt to the ground in 1870.

In 1867, Eliot and Lewes returned to Ilmenau, Lewes to recover his health and Eliot to recapture the creative mood for her work on *The Spanish Gypsy*. They spent a fortnight there, working in the morning and taking their favourite walks in the afternoon. Eliot was enraptured with Ilmenau and found it even more beautiful than she remembered from their last visit thirteen years before. After their fourteen days in Ilmenau they left for Dresden, passing through Weimar and remembering with pleasure the three months they had spent there in 1854.

Notes

1 All quotations, unless especially footnoted, are taken from George Eliot's essays,

'Liszt, Wagner and Weimar' and 'Three Months in Weimar', published in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: 1963).

- 2 Adolf Stahr, *Weimar und Jena: Ein Tagebuch* (Oldenburg: 1852), I, 1.
- 3 The address given by Gordon S. Haight in *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford and London: 1968), 153, refers to the old house numbering system. I would like to thank Frau Ruth Kröhs, the owner of the Antiquariatsbuchhandlung in the Teichgasse, for her assistance in locating the site of the house.
- 4 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: 1954-78), II, 172; Haight, *Biography*, 150.
- 5 J.W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (Edinburgh and London: 1885), I, 338.
- 6 Haight, *Letters*, V, 85.
- 7 Haight, *Biography*, 155-6. I would like to thank Frau Seidemann for her kind permission to let me see the garden where George Eliot and G.H. Lewes took *déjeuner* with Liszt and his guests.
- 8 Liszt has been suggested as the model for Herr Klesmer, but Haight prefers another musician, Anton Rubinstein. Haight, *Biography*, 490.
- 9 This account of the incident is derived from Cross, *Life*, I, 337.
- 10 Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age* (Oxford: 1991), 266.