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THE TWENTY-SECOND GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE – 1993

Delivered by Dr. William Baker

GEORGE ELIOT IN THE LETTERS OF GEORGE HENRY LEWES

I am preparing an edition of the letters of G. H. Lewes.¹ The edition is selective. It does not include those 722 G. H. Lewes items (letters, extracts from his journals and diaries) included in Gordon S. Haight's monumental *The George Eliot Letters* published in nine volumes by Yale University Press between 1954-55 and in 1978.² My edition includes nearly 500 letters of which less than 50 have been previously published, making a just over 1,200 total of G. H. Lewes letters in print: a figure contrasting with upwards of 3,500 George Eliot letters in Haight's edition, less than 2,000 surviving Tennyson letters and far less than those found in published editions of letters by Carlyle, Dickens, Darwin, and Trollope, to name but four of G. H. Lewes's and George Eliot's contemporaries. Remember that this was an age of letter writing, the age just prior to the telephone. So, the lens of G. H. Lewes's telescope, his letters, is selective: no doubt many more of his letters will come to light and probably they will illuminate George Eliot, her writing, activities, attitudes, relationships.

The first letter in my edition is dated 2 October 1834. The 17-year-old G. H. Lewes writes to the elder distinguished man of letters, editor and poet Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) soliciting assistance and requesting that Hunt return or publish a story called 'Mary Altonville' which Lewes sent him. The last letters are dated forty-four years later. Written in the weeks before G. H. Lewes's death on 30 November 1878, he writes to his son Charles Lee Lewes that he and George Eliot wish to avoid company owing to ill health. However, he excitedly tells of lawn tennis games with his partner, yet cancels a planned visit to Edinburgh to see John Blackwood the publisher (6 September 1878). Lewes writes in French a postcard on George Eliot's behalf to her old close friend Madame Barbara Bodichon, to the effect that George Eliot will be happy to see her soon (1 November 1878). Lewes in these letters is playing the role of the distinguished man of letters protecting George Eliot from even her oldest friends, he is an intermediary for George Eliot whose life he has transformed, and who in turn has transformed his life.

Lewes's letters to his sons reveal much about filial relations. The edition contains 59 letters to Charles Lee Lewes, and to his brothers, addressed collectively under the headings of 'Boys', 'Pups', 'Dearest Children' or singularly as 'Dearest Boy'. All these letters appear to have gone initially through Charles Lee Lewes's hands. He was the oldest and lived the longest. The first mention of George Eliot/Marian Evans in a letter to his sons comes in a letter written from Munich on 28 April 1858, i.e., nearly four years after he and Marian had shocked literary London by leaving together for Weimar in late July 1854. Lewes writes 'Charley'—'You say you have only read the Lay of the Last Minstrel out of

1. To be published by Ohio State University Press, probably in 1995. I'd like to thank Jonathan G. Ouvry, copyright holder on all unpublished George Eliot-George Henry Lewes letters, for his permission to publish these letters.

2. Hereafter referred to in the text by L., volume and page number.

the book Miss Evans sent you. Now take my advice—read “Marmion” & the “Lady of the Lake”.’ His son is admonished for overspending, and Lewes reveals ‘how hard it is for [him] to get money’. He reminds his son how expensive schooling is: ‘don’t increase the bill where you can possibly avoid it’. The struggling, hard-working writer scratching out a sustenance for himself, Marian Evans, and his dependants, is not far from the surface in such letters.

G. H. Lewes’s 1858 birthday letter is written four days before Charles Lee Lewes’s sixteenth birthday falling on 24 November. Lewes, as father, is anxious not to repeat his error of the previous year when he was late for his son’s birthday. This time there is no mention of Charles Lee’s natural mother, but mention is made instead of his surrogate mother: ‘Miss Evans, who hopes you have not forgotten her more than she has forgotten you, gave me five francs for your *watch fund* the other day, as a birthday remembrance.’ Lewes and Marian visited Switzerland in the summer of 1859. In July Lewes left Marian in Lucerne and visited his sons by himself without her. On 13 July he took the boys for a walk in the woods and records in his Journal: ‘there lying on the moss I unburthened myself about Agnes to them. They were less distressed than I had anticipated and were delighted to hear about Marian.’ A letter to Charles from Florence dated 30 May [1861] reveals how close the relationship with George Eliot has become. She is ‘the mutter’, the plural forms ‘we’, and ‘our’ are used continually, reference is made to ‘The comedy you began to read with the mutter’, and Lewes concludes his letter ‘Mother sends her kisses’. This affectionate tone remains throughout Lewes’s correspondence with his children. Often George Eliot is ‘the little Mutter’ (e.g., 18 March 1864). In this letter Charles Lee is instructed to feed Ben the bulldog and provide ‘a saucer of milk in his mother’s name’.

A 22 June 1866 letter addressed to ‘Dearest Children’ written from Schwalbach is representative of Lewes’s dealings with his eldest son. The plural forms ‘we’ or ‘us’ occur throughout, and are interrupted at times with the singular personal pronoun ‘I’. Lewes begins ‘Charles’ letter was I presume awaiting us though I only got it an hour ago having been denied when I called earlier in the morning at the office’. There is a detailed description of places visited: where Lewes and Marian stayed, the picture gallery, trips taken, the weather, church and synagogue visits, trips up the Rhine, the condition of towns. Politics intrude, for their holiday coincided with the Austro-Prussian War. Lewes writes: ‘We proposed staying a day at Coblenz but found the town so different (dirty) from what we remembered it, & so unpleasantly crowded with soldiers & all the material of war, that our evening ramble sufficed & we started next morning at 8 for this place [i.e., Schwalbach].’ Lewes details the difficulty of finding ‘good rooms’. As is common in most of his letters his cigar is mentioned, as is coffee. The price of ‘a very large well furnished’ salon with a decent bedroom’ is mentioned as is ‘the privilege of dining alone in our room’. This is ‘a privilege which your mother regards as singularly enhancing her comfort’. Marian is now definitely the mother rather than the surrogate. The time of their getting up, rambles, listening to music—‘Beethoven’s third symphony tolerably well played’—is related. Health issues are rarely far from the surface: ‘As to health the little Mutter is already a browner & stronger woman’. Lewes chooses an interesting metaphor to describe his own condition: ‘I am capable of whipping my weight in polecats—least ways kittens.’ He

adds: 'We hope to stay here a fortnight—& get flesh.'

An account of the Dutch-German visit is also to be found in a 10 August 1866 letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, a friend from adolescence, written by George Eliot when back in London. Eliot uses the opportunity to tell her friend family news; for instance, that Charles Lee's wife, Gertrude 'expects to have her baby at the end of September and is remarkably well'. There is none of the detail contained in Lewes's letter: although Lewes doesn't observe as does George Eliot 'between war and cholera... we felt our position as health and pleasure seekers somewhat contemptible' (L., IV, 298). Lewes refers to Coblenz as 'dirty' but fails to mention 'cholera'—perhaps not wishing to alarm the family. George Eliot as ever faces the reality head on without rose-tinted spectacles: she is writing from London after the event having safely returned from the trip. Lewes is writing during the event as impressions crowd upon him. Selective memory has not had too much time to operate. Perhaps surprisingly George Eliot doesn't refer in her letter to Sara Sophia Hennell to a review of *Felix Holt* published on 15 June 1866. Lewes refers to this, however, in a letter from Schwalbach dated 1 July 1866 and directly addressed to his 'Dearest Boy'—Charles Lee. He writes: 'occasionally we see the Times—I saw the review of Felix'. How Lewes kept the *Times* from his partner and reviews away from her is something of a mystery. After expressing amusement at the reviewer's [E. S. Dallas's] 'absurd supposition that the situation of Esther at the trial was borrowed from Charles Reade's novel' (probably *White Lies*), he adds 'The copious praise was not accompanied by any of that insight which would make the praises valuable—except as a puff'.

There is a third lengthy letter home written on this trip. Dated 15 July 1866 Lewes describes the weather and the scenery but the war is not far away: 'War & rumours of war frighten away the guests, but leave us perfectly calm, assured that...no harm can reach us, & that the only difficulty will be that we can't get away by railway'. None of this uncertainty occurs in these terms in Eliot's letter to Sara Sophia Hennell. Indeed Lewes goes so far as to write 'We cant go to Wiesbaden on account of the troops (indeed Schwalbach is now full of them & we come upon the outposts occasionally on our rambles)'. However he tells Charles 'Blackwood is in high spirits about the success of "Felix Holt"—he says the admiration is universal. The little Mutter is glad to be away & not to hear it spoken of'.

Lewes's letters to his sons are from abroad or written on trips. They cover the weather, health, sometimes plays or operas seen, activities, scenic description, and practical domestic concerns. For instance, instructions to their cook Grace concerning what food should be ready on their return to the Priory: 'She will get a small loin of mutton for chops with our tea when we arrive'. Lewes's letters to Charles Lee do not always disguise unpleasant facts. He writes on 7 May 1870 to Charles Lee from the Priory—his son being on holiday in Yorkshire—that the German trip he and George Eliot had just had was not successful: 'We cannot say that we gain any strength by our trip;...the Mutter had nothing but malaise & sore throat & I had several headaches & sicknesses.'

The Reverend Wathen Mark Wilks Call (1817-1890) is a link with George Eliot's life

before she met Lewes. On 23 July 1857 Call married Rufa Hennell (Brabant), one of George Eliot's closest friends. In a letter from 1859 Lewes complains of Call's inadequacies as a correspondent, complains about his own 'digest apparatus' and refers to George Eliot and himself as 'rambling dyspeptic individuals.' If Lewes's request in an 18 December 1862 letter is to be relied on, Call was reluctant to return books which he had borrowed from Lewes, who constantly in his letters to Call and other close friends refers to health problems: 'We are, & have been rather shaky in health, but industrious enough in work.' Lewes gives an account of his own work and of Eliot's activities: she 'lives entirely in the 15th century.' Lewes is realistic about *Romola*: 'It is not & cannot be popular.' On 5 July 1862 Lewes writes to Call: 'Mrs. Lewes is tolerably well and hard at work. If I may say so, you do wrong in postponing "*Romola*" until it is finished. My main object in persuading her to consent to serial publication was not the unheard magnificence of the offer, [i.e., from Smith for £7000 for twelve monthly part publication] but the advantage to such a work of being read slowly & deliberately. Instead of being galloped thro in three volumes.' A brief note written just after Thornton Lewes's death on 19 October 1868, observes: 'Polly is terribly shaken. She lavished a [mother's] love & feels a [mother's] grief.' Literary advice opens a letter dated 22 November 1875. In his second paragraph Lewes expresses his and George Eliot's mutual concern over Rufa Call's poor health, although Lewes admits that his and his partner's health is far from good. He gives Call a brief account of their summer creative and leisure activities and not for the first time indicates that he is writing to Call without disturbing the 'Madonna', who 'would of course send all sorts of secret messages if she knew'. Lewes is again protecting George Eliot's concentration whilst she is creating, on this occasion, *Daniel Deronda*. Indeed Lewes uses a pregnancy metaphor to convey her state to Call: 'She is "confined"'. Incidentally this is not the only time Lewes uses metaphors of giving birth to describe her creativity. For instance on 9 September 1870 Lewes tells James Thomas Fields of Ticknor's (the American publishing house) that the 'Clerical Scenes [are] great favorites of hers, probably because her first children; and without them an edition of her work would be truncated.'

Lewes's letters to members of the Blackwood family are to people with whom he has had a long standing business relationship going back to his journalistic activities in the 1840's. He conducted most, but by no means all, of George Eliot's business correspondence, and acted on his own behalf. A letter dated 5 September 1856 contains the usual ingredients of a Lewes-John Blackwood letter: gratitude for a cheque; respect for Blackwood's editorial judgment; family matters; the weather and scenery; contact with Langford, Blackwood's London manager for a magazine copy. Lewes acts for George Eliot and protects her rights and interests: 'I observe you do not advertize the cheap edition of the "Mill" in *Maga*, so presume you have postponed the appearance thereof' (31 October 1860). He is in accord with Blackwood about personalities: 'I had already come to your opinion about Burton [i.e., Richard Burton, the explorer and author of the *Arabian Nights*] – a thoroughly disagreeable man' (13 November 1860).

In his letters Lewes maintains a kind of running commentary on the progress of Eliot's writing of her serial novels being published in parts by the Blackwoods. A lengthy letter

[of 10 September 1876] to John Blackwood opens with personal family details, and moves onto regrets for being unable to cooperate with a proposed project due to the lack of strength. The letter's central and lengthiest paragraph is taken up with readers' reactions to *Daniel Deronda*. Lewes writes: 'To me it seems strange that any reader of hers should not recognize her fundamental thought that "Life" looks out from the scene of human struggle with the awful face of *duty* & a religion shows itself which is something else than a *private consolation*'. Throughout, Lewes's letters to John Blackwood are marked by candour, directness, and ease of tone, business acumen, and the protection of his and George Eliot's interests. These coincide with Blackwood's interest, for George Eliot is a publishing asset to be nourished and nurtured. There is also a personal warmth evident in the correspondence: a warmth and trust not always consistently present in Lewes's correspondence with another publisher, George Smith.

Most but by no means all of Lewes's letters to Smith belong to the period of the early 1860s when *The Cornhill* was being founded and Smith was publishing *Romola*, having snatched George Eliot away from her regular publishers Blackwood's. Lewes seems aware that Smith's motives in offering him generous terms 'to act as his chief Literary Adviser in the selection of articles and suggestion of subjects' for *The Cornhill* are connected with George Eliot. Lewes notes 'Salary £600 per annum. This is very handsome, as the work promises to be light, and not disagreeable' (L.,IV.29). Lewes writes: 'If I join you, the first thought naturally will be the strength of the magazine—therefore I should endeavour to persuade Mrs. Lewes to publish her new work in it—as soon as possible & prudent' (3 May 1862).

Lewes's letters to Smith show him acting as an editor, a publisher's advisor and reader, a protector of George Eliot, a businessman, personal friend and a source for basic common sense advice. He chastises Smith for a slight in publishing the 'logic of Servants' before Mrs. Lewes had seen a proof of the article [17 March 1865]. A letter of 27 October 1868 reveals a distinct cooling in their relationship. The cause was the unsympathetic reviews of *The Spanish Gypsy* which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 June 1868 and 3 July 1868. Smith regularly sent Lewes and Eliot presents: chocolates, cigars, tickets for the theatre and opera. A Smith present to George Eliot necessitated Lewes breaking silence 'on a subject on which otherwise I should have preferred keeping silence to you as to others.' Lewes writes Smith on 27 October 1868: 'Our relationship with you had for a long while been so very much beyond those of mere business & so infused with friendliness and esteem that any disturbance of them must have been painful'. He tells Smith 'Mrs. Lewes on principle abstains from reading criticism favourable or unfavourable on her works; a fact you are more aware of but which I recall here in order to dismiss from the present question the element of an author's wounded *amour propre*. It was not the author but the friend that was hurt.'

Lewes did not protect his beloved Marian only from a close friend such as Smith. He writes to James Russell Lowell, the American author, on 3 October 1871, after Lowell has asked him for a photograph of her: 'I wish I could send you a photo of her but she has never had one taken'. Lewes's memory is being selective: a photograph of Marian was

taken by John Edwin Mayall on 26 February 1858, inscribed 'To my sisters Cara and Sara'. It was given to Cross by Mrs. Bray and Miss Hennell. There was an earlier photograph mentioned in a letter to Sara Hennell [23 November 1857; *L.*, VIII, 200]. Lewes adds 'Her dislike of publicity is so great that when a publisher offered her £200 for the right of publishing an engraving from Burton's portrait [probably a reference to the one in chalk now in the National Portrait Gallery] she declined—declaring that if it were to be seen in the shop windows she would be forced to leave England.'

Lewes's letters then reveal much about George Eliot. They provide material for comparison of their reactions to shared experiences such as church visits, visits to art galleries and so on. The letters provide material for comparison of their reaction to people. Berlin Archives reveal letters from Lewes and Marian to the Princess Sayn Wittgenstein-Caroline Elizabeth Iwanowska (1819-1887) who was openly living out of wedlock with Franz Liszt. It is clear from Marian's journal of 10 August 1854 that she did not like the Princess, whom she found 'not beautiful' and '[plump]', her 'profile especially...harsh and barbarian', 'her teeth...blackish'. Although it must be said that Marian's negative impressions were modified as the acquaintance progressed. She was patient at a meeting with the Princess for, as she writes: 'Then came the thing I had longed for—Liszt's playing. For the first time in my life I beheld real inspiration' (*L.* II, 169-70).

Lewes's letters to the Princess contain the very first mention of Marian Evans in his letters and are affectionate. On 16 December 1854 he writes: 'The happy hours we have spent' in Weimar 'furnish us with frequent conversation, and to have known you and the Maestro is enough to make Weimar a green spot in our lives'. His letter to the Princess is playful, and he gives a succinct account of their life in Berlin: 'We rise at 8; after breakfast read and work till between one and two, walk in the Thiergarten or pay visits till dinner, which is at 3; come home to coffee, when not at the theatre or in society Miss Evans reads Goethe aloud to me & I read Shakspeare aloud to her. There you have the programme of our lives...we stay much at home, although numerous friends attract us sometimes from our quiet'. However when he writes in a postscript that 'Miss Evans begs to join in the remembrances—but abjures the stupidity of this letter. O les femmes!', it is indicative that she does not share Lewes's warmth towards the Princess. Whereas Lewes writes lengthy and warm epistles to the Princess, Marian Evans's letters are short, dispassionate, and rather formal. Perhaps the Princess reminded her of her own vulnerable unmarried situation; she was without the Princess's wealth, station in society or social contacts.

Evidence from the letters emerges of the depth of her love and affection for Lewes's sons. The letters suggest that although she had no children of her own, she was indeed a surrogate mother. The letters convey Lewes's impressions of her reactions to stressful life events, personal illness, the death of friends, personal disappointments, intellectual preoccupations and concerns, and information concerning the composition of her work. Lewes's letters when placed alongside *The George Eliot Letters* increase our knowledge of Lewes and Eliot, their mutual relationship and their individual personalities and at the same time place them in a differing perspective. Lewes's letters are a telescope we may look through revealing much of the multi-faceted kaleidoscope of the genius George Eliot.