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## Loyola College, Baltimore, Nineteenth-Century Studies Association: Conference Report

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# LOYOLA COLLEGE, BALTIMORE, NINETEENTH- CENTURY STUDIES ASSOCIATION: CONFERENCE REPORT by Rosalind De Sailly

The 14th conference of the Nineteenth Century Studies Association was held at Loyola College, Baltimore, Maryland at the end of March. The conference theme, 'Conflict and Resolution', allowed examination of the period from the French Revolution to the end of the Victorian era in terms of artistic, literary, philosophical, political, economic, religious, scientific and social change. This rich theme attracted papers on many of the issues that now interest George Eliot scholars and other Victorianists.

Christine Morris (University of South Carolina at Chapel Hill) examined Victorian keepsake annuals in her paper, 'Marketing Femininity in the 1830s: The Case of Heath's *Book of Beauty*'. Dr Morris posited the theory that these keepsakes gave Victorian women a standard by which to place themselves in a ranking of attractiveness and vanity, to arouse other women's envy and men's admiration. Rosamond Vincy played this game to perfection, and George Eliot used a sentimental *Keepsake* to focus the attitudes of Rosamond, Lydgate and Ned Plimdale in a telling scene early in Rosamond's and Lydgate's courtship. Dr Morris mentioned the example of Maggie Tulliver who is given a *Keepsake* by the illiterate Bob, who expresses unenlightened admiration for the fashionable beauties on the annual's pages. Maggie later learns that her un-annual-like beauty can attract the attention of Stephen Guest.

Margaret O'Shaughnessy's (St Mary's College, Raleigh, North Carolina) paper, 'From Loathly Lady to Comely Maiden', observed the Victorian debate over representations of beauty and ugliness in art. Wilkie Collins expressed the Victorians' distaste for Dutch paintings of women scrubbing pots. Dr O'Shaughnessy cited the example of the lumpish female forms in Rembrandt's paintings as 'his protest against applying artificial shapes to the human form'. George Eliot entered into this complex debate in her novels, a debate in which Charles Dickens wrote with distaste about Millais's painting of Christ as a boy in his father's carpentry shop, and Dickens himself was subject to the same criticism for his depictions of the poor. Dr O'Shaughnessy concluded that Ruskin offered a syncretic aesthetic theory when he wrote that Imagination may make a complete beauty out of the disparate elements in art.

Beverly Taylor (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) spoke on 'Portraiture and Gender Politics: Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*', which posited the theory that both Charlotte and Branwell Brontë rejected their era's tendency to idealize in portraiture, preferring truth over beauty. Dr Taylor also noted that aristocratic pedigree was an essential ingredient in the annual's idealizing conventions, something she believes Charlotte Brontë to have understood in her character Crimsworth. This observation gives added poignancy to Rosamond's construction of herself from ladies' manuals.

The conference's sessions on Victorian configurations of femininity in women's keepsakes, and the power of the press, show up two concerns relevant to George Eliot scholarship: her critique and use of women's literature and her involvement in the male-dominated world of Victorian journalism, which contributed to her narrator's voice. The research of Professor K.K. Collins (who was not at the conference) into the presentation of George Eliot's life in the nineteenth-century popular press will no doubt reveal much about the way in which Victorians read George Eliot's novels.

A session titled 'Novel Sympathies' and Antipathies' featured two papers on George Eliot. Rosalind De Sailly posited a philosophy shared by Eliot and Lewes's to be found in Lewes' *magnum opus*, his *Problems of Life and Mind*, of which the two final volumes were edited by George Eliot for publication after Lewes's death. The *Problems* encompass many issues that were critical to the formation of the new science, Psychology, which would be so important to artists and writers in the following era. George Eliot's interest in contemporary science led her to experiment with the form of the novel and the role of the narrator. Lewes and Eliot, like other Victorian intellectuals, sought in science and scientific method a resolution of ethical problems and wanted to prove their positive outlook on humanity. It is in this spirit that Eliot began writing novels and Lewes started his syncretic work, the *Problems*. When Eliot came to edit the *Problems*, however, these issues served as catalysts for the doubts of the age, and Eliot altered some of Lewes's more confident pronouncements with a muted, late-Victorian austerity, a shift from humanist optimism to realist ambivalence that may be traced in the themes and narration of her novels. Rosalind De Sailly's paper '*Problems of Life and Mind*: the Philosophy of George Eliot and G.H. Lewes' discussed the two writers' mature philosophy, 'Reasoned Realism', as related to Eliot's final works of fiction. This mature philosophy gives new importance to Eliot's notebook for an uncompleted Napoleonic novel (Jerome Beaty published the first comprehensive study of this manuscript).

Professor Beaty's paper, 'Visited Tombs: The Heroic in George Eliot' found evidence for a new emphasis on the heroic in *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* and in changes made to the manuscript for *Middlemarch*. Although it is a novel that is unheroic in scale and the lives of its characters, Eliot's manuscript shows her developing a notion that the good in the world is only 'half owing' to 'those who live faithfully and rest in unvisited tombs'. Professor Beaty identifies a new heroism in Eliot's *Romola*. At the end of the novel, Romola wants Tito's illegitimate son, Lillo to be not just a good man but a great one; to fight powerful wrongs with a heroism that is grander than personal feeling, because the moral range of personal sympathy is limited. The need for those who engage in world-class action, who rest in visited tombs, complicates Eliot's value system; the personal and the universal become matters of perspective, are neither morally good nor bad. This affects her treatment of egoism: the chastening of Gwendolen Harleth compared to the moral education of Adam Bede, who is bound to unheroic suffering to remedy his egoism. Gwendolen lives in an heroic world. Unlike Dorothea, who grows by her involvement in surrounding life, Gwendolen is redeemed by the fullness of her nature, expressed as something beyond the corporeal: her spiritual dread. Gwendolen's egoism is checked when she

learns to see the claims of all humankind and to acknowledge Deronda's involvement in an arena of heroic action. At the novel's end, Deronda is poised to become the founder of something, to become a public figure for whose heroic acts he rests in a visited tomb. Professor Beaty concludes that Eliot's scepticism of heroism, established in 'Amos Barton', lessened and that she made room in her aesthetic theory for both angels and old women scraping carrots, for the people of the Rhone and of the Rhine.

Professor Beaty remembers visiting F.R. Leavis while a graduate student, when Leavis asked him, why research the manuscript for *Middlemarch* when we have read the novel? This conference showed the diversity and newness of contemporary scholarship that never fails to find a new perspective on the work of George Eliot.