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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY, 25 JUNE 1994

THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS GABRIEL WOOLF TO MARK HIS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF WORKING CLOSELY WITH THE FELLOWSHIP. THIS IS HIS ADDRESS ON THAT OCCASION:

What can I say about the great writer whom we are gathered here to commemorate that is new, witty or informative or even interesting? After all, you will appreciate that I am not an academic so I can't offer you a Marxist viewpoint, certainly not a feminist one and not even a deconstructionist one. I'm not a biographer either so can't tell you about my latest book, full of such delicious new theories and completely free of any stuffy old evidence to support them. I'm not involved with the media so I can't tell you about camera angles on Dorothea. I am only someone who enjoys reading the novels of George Eliot, but I enjoy reading her aloud and, like the Ancient Mariner, am inclined to stop one of three and bid them hear the tale. Sometimes this is a mutually voluntary event; more often, I must admit, I have been offered payment to stop. Since half these sums over the last twenty-five years have found their way to the coffers of the George Eliot Fellowship, they are in a healthier financial state than many other literary societies. I mention this only because it is as a recognition of my services that I find myself placed in the awkward spot. But it is only awkward because I feel myself unqualified to fill it. To say something suitable about the wonderful talent whose genius we all benefit from; I feel the genius but that is not enough.

Since the Fellowship has put me in this uncomfortable position I will return the compliment for a moment. Over the years I have supported them in a number of projects to commemorate George Eliot, some of which I have been less than enthusiastic about but all of which they have felt – and they have been proved right – have raised her profile, even though most observers have agreed that George Eliot's profile is not her best feature – Savonarola, Dante – these have been among the kindest comparisons. Never, since her death, has she been held in such high esteem as now. All the same, the Fellowship knows that I have always wished that there was some memorial to her of a living nature. I would like to think that we might one day endow a George Eliot Novel Prize, or a short story award. It could be at a university or a school or somehow support a writer and help him or her produce something which, without our help, might not have existed. We want, after all, if not another George Eliot, a writer for our times, inspired and helped on by enthusiasm for George Eliot.

I know I should talk about George Eliot and not about me, but I only know how she has affected my life. Once upon a time long ago, I read an adaptation of *Middlemarch* on radio in fifty episodes. There are twenty-six major characters. How did I differentiate so many with only one voice available, for even in those far off days I had only one? It was not a

problem because George Eliot's ear for speech was uncanny. I was amazed at the ease with which the characters came as a result of their individual speech rhythms, their turns of phrase, choice of words and images, dialect here, slovenliness there, thought out speeches, spontaneity, dryness, warmth, humour, pomposity. She was a great, great artist, deeply and sympathetically identifying with the life of each of her creations and, therefore, when they spoke, it was from within. It was a revelation to me then and, like all great works of art, a fresh revelation each time one returns to it. This has been an exciting year for all lovers of George Eliot to live through. At the height of the television *Middlemarch* 2000 copies a day of the book were being sold. If the purchasers thought it was going to be as easy as watching the box, many copies will reappear, strangely new-looking, in car boot sales. But some will have been prodded into reading, have been bowled over and become fresh and eager converts. These we welcome aboard. George Eliot will thus have something to say to the twenty-first century. But she must also have something to say to the twenty-fifth century. This is where we come in, all of us here in Poets' Corner today. Thomas Hood once said, when contemplating this little huddle of great writers, that, even when we commemorate them, we put them where we put our naughty children, in a corner. As a nation we tend to treat the Arts as anything but a central part of our lives. The French say that any child who has not been immersed in the Arts is an abused child. Great art unites a society. As George Eliot says, it encourages sympathy, and empathy and it is an essential part of a full education for all. It is the greatest thought and emotion and the sum of our achievements.

I have given a good part of my life to sharing my passionate belief in the value of George Eliot's work because I think it is important. I ask you all to share your admiration with others; we can do good in the way Dorothea did – by diffusion. It is a crusade; just because we don't sport red noses it shouldn't diminish our quiet determination. If we don't fight to disseminate the best of our cultural heritage we will be left with a desert, however comfortable. The rich can be morally bankrupt; poor people can live an imaginative and full life. Would George Eliot be proud of our society today, after a hundred years? She would seek for the positive certainly, and there are positive signs. The size of today's gathering here is one of them. But I feel that each one of us has a responsibility to improve things – not just to moan and shake our heads at those we complain about – our leaders, our teachers, our part-time parents etc. If we find something worth-while in George Eliot's marvellous humanity, if we have benefited, we must encourage others. That doesn't mean grabbing the first person we meet and sitting on his head until he promises to read *Romola*. Maybe people will ask 'how you come to be such a nice person'. 'Well', you'll say, 'I owe it all to regular chapters of Felix Holt!' I try to share my enthusiasm; do you share it your way.

Even if we rest in unvisited tombs we owe it to George Eliot's vision – to live in minds made better by our presence, create pulses stirred to generosity, in scorn for miserable aims that end in self. With a final call to deeds of daring rectitude, like my call has been, I will stop. So to live, as she prayed fervently, is heaven – even if all we can manage is one with a small 'h'.