

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1996

University of Warwick, Second George Eliot Conference Report

Ruth Harris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Harris, Ruth, "University of Warwick, Second George Eliot Conference Report" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 280.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/280>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK, SECOND GEORGE ELIOT CONFERENCE REPORT

by Ruth Harris

In July 1995, the English Department of the University of Warwick, in conjunction with the George Eliot Fellowship, hosted a week-end conference on *George Eliot and Europe*. This seemed a natural progression from the 1992 conference on *George Eliot at the Heart of England*, since although George Eliot's roots in Warwickshire were deep, her intellect and imagination were continually branching out towards wider horizons. As though to echo this enlargement of perspective, there were more lectures this time (twenty to 1992's ten) and many more speakers from abroad.

On Friday evening, the opening lecture was given by Professor Margaret Harris who came from the University of Sydney where she is co-editing George Eliot's Journals. She maintained that the Journals provide evidence of George Eliot's way of seeing, evidence that Cross doctored when, for example, he omitted embarrassing references to Lewes, to the sensuous pleasures of a picnic in Weimar and the differences between German and English beds. The Italian journey of 1860 was George Eliot's version of the Grand Tour in which the appraisal of experience was set against romantic expectations and in various ways prepared for *Middlemarch*. From the Grand Tour we passed to a literary tour of three European novels, English, Russian and German, compared by Professor Barbara Hardy of Birkbeck College. In *Middlemarch*, *Anna Karenina* and *Effi Briest*, three heroines dance into quicksands, three men's responses to Art symbolise their lack of passion, and three unsatisfactory marriages are paradigms of wider social constraints. Barbara Hardy discussed key moments in narrative, proleptic moments in discourse, and the achievement of realism in all three novels.

Saturday morning opened with an exploration of the uses of Continental Europe in *Middlemarch* by Professor Hans-Ulrich Seeber of Stuttgart University. He invited us to see the novel as both European and modern in its consciousness of social change and cultural interaction. Our common heritage is recalled by all the European voices, notably in the epigraphs, while major characters, especially Will Ladislaw and Dorothea (whose name reminds us of the Dorotheas of German literature) represent Anglo-European identities. Dr Nancy Cervetti from Avila College then analysed the influence of Strauss and Feuerbach on George Eliot, differentiated between the two influences, and discussed the philosophical relationship between Eliot and Karl Marx, noting those rural injustices in *Middlemarch* that are epitomised by 'Mr Dagley's Midnight Darkness'.

Parallel sessions that followed presented problems of choice, making it difficult to do justice to lectures I could not attend. I am told that Caroline Levine (Birkbeck College), speaking on *The Prophetic Fallacy*, discussed *Romola* as a *Bildungsroman*, contrasted the heroine's education through experience with the more arbitrary nature of prophecy, and revealed that the persuasions of narrative are also arbitrary. Dr Lesley Gordon from the

University of Newcastle showed how George Eliot's detailed research for *Romola* covered the revival of Greek studies in Renaissance Florence, a revival represented by Bardo and Baldassare and conflicting with ascetic Christianity. Dr Linda K. Robertson (University of Arkansas at Monticello) examined the benefits and hazards of Continental education in life and fiction, contrasting for example the teaching at Hofwyl with Rev. Walter Stelling's educational strategy.

In the parallel session, Dr Derek Miller (City University, New York) discussed '*Daniel Deronda* and Allegories of Empire': he showed clearly how personal relationships, especially between Gwendolen and Grandcourt, are conducted in the language of imperialism and set against the background of slavery in America, the formation of the German empire, and the struggle against foreign occupation in Italy. He also saw as significant the First Crusade, the chivalric code and pastoral allegory. Delia da Sousa Correa from the University of St Petersburg explored the links between Klesmer and German Romantic literature. Having surveyed critics who see Klesmer as either a fine representative of European culture or a strange and coercive figure, she discussed his possible models, Rubenstein and Lizst, and his association with Wagner's 'music of the future'. Klesmer was then compared with Hoffman's musical characters whose heightened levels of perception prepare one for uncanny elements in *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Lifted Veil'. In the same session, Rosalind Holt from the University of Leicester also looked at German literature: she showed how George Eliot understood from her reading of pre- and post-Hegelian philosophers and historians the need to incorporate myth and symbol. She also considered the development of her patterns of symbolism and allegory.

After the usual excellent lunch, a Guided Tour of 'George Eliot Country' by Mrs Kathleen and Mr Bill Adams, Secretary and Chairman of the George Eliot Fellowship, enabled delegates to understand those Warwickshire roots from which George Eliot moved on to the wider horizons that were explored in the last lecture on Saturday, 'George Eliot and the World as Language'. Professor Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (University of Edinburgh) reflected on the complex nature of language and illustrated its complexity by examining George Eliot's multiplying perspectives, the shifting constellation of her view-points. Her knowledge of various languages was seen as important, since to learn a second language is to gain a different perspective. Having emphasized the distinction between relativism and relativity, Elizabeth Ermarth explored not only the collision between different systems in George Eliot's novels but also the possibility of a common denominator and of communication.

On Sunday morning, Dr Beryl Gray of Birkbeck College showed how George Eliot animates the natural history of St. Ogg's: its 'vital connection with the past' is illustrated by references to the forgotten but real presence of Roman, Saxon and Dane, and by analogies drawn from dwellings on the Rhine and the Rhône. Maggie Tulliver recommends Goldsmith's *Animated Nature*, a book that not only recalls Buffon and Pliny but also helps to inspire links between animal and human worlds: in *The Mill on the Floss*, we are aware of ostracized spiders, dogs whose special qualities are observed and interiorized, charac-

ters presented through animal imagery. Dr Gill Frith (University of Warwick) then considered *The Mill on the Floss* as one version of the story about the relationship between gender and national identity which nineteenth century women told themselves and which had its origins in Madame de Staël's *Corinne*. Both Gaskell's *North and South* and *The Mill on the Floss* draw on *Corinne* but are firmly placed within English family life. Gill Frith described George Eliot's novel as 'a double narrative' in which Maggie's subversive qualities are both rejected and nurtured by the female members of her community. Clothes are significant: the process of dressing and undressing suggests both censorship and complicity. Dr Siv Jansson of Royal Holloway College continued the theme of female relationships in her discussion of 'Sisters under the Skin'? She explored George Eliot's ambivalence, her vacillation between a sense of female possibilities and a lack of faith in women. The pattern of sexual rivalry between the dark woman and the light is present in more than one novel, but so is the flash of communication, the possibility of 'bonding'.

It was difficult to choose between Spain and France in the following parallel sessions. I am told that Dr Bonnie McMullen reflected on George Eliot's interest in Spain, her responses to its landscape, art and architecture, her departure from contemporary prejudices, and the impact of her experiences on *Daniel Deronda*. Professor Connie Fulmer (Pepperdine University) examined *The Spanish Gypsy* and the treatment of Fedalma, whom she described as more truly feminist than any other George Eliot heroine. She compared Fedalma with Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel who suggested to her – in their differences – the two halves of Fedalma's divided spirit.

Dr Shoshana Milgram Knapp (Virginia Tech) noted that for forty years, George Eliot and Lewes were ambivalent in their evaluations of Victor Hugo's work. Nevertheless, George Eliot's attentive reading of *L'Homme Qui Rit* and *Les Misérables* might have inspired new elements in *Daniel Deronda*: its perverse but attractive heroine; its double plot emphasizing different values; its presentation of history and heritage as choices for a dispossessed hero. Dr John Rignall (University of Warwick) then explored connections between the novels of George Eliot and the fiction of Balzac and Proust. He was concerned not with patterns of influence but with the placing of her work in the mainstream of European fiction. Affinities emerged firstly between *Daniel Deronda* and Balzac's novels about Parisian life, and secondly between *Daniel Deronda* and Proust whom Eliot both anticipates and, in her understanding of language and metaphor, goes beyond.

In the final session, Dr Nancy Henry (SUNY Binghamton) considered the influence of European studies of anatomy and then focused on Eliot's last published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, which was written only a few months before Lewes's death and recalled their early years together. Using illustrations from Lewes's *Sea-Side Studies* and *Studies in Animal Life*, Nancy Henry showed how George Eliot referred to his texts and communicated with him in private jokes and intimate, coded language. The last lecture, 'George Eliot and Verdi: Tombs Revisited', was given by Professor William Baker of the University of Northern Illinois. Illustrating his talk with music, he concentrated on her reactions and Lewes's to performances of Verdi and the Opera; on parallels drawn

between themes, characters and motifs in Verdi and Eliot; and on the reasons why Verdi illuminates George Eliot and her writings.

Final impressions? A more crowded time-table presented some problems, but on the other hand, more time was allowed for delegates to discuss issues raised by speakers. This was very welcome. The occasional problem with audibility continues to disconcert and make even more desirable the publication of all papers in the unambiguous clarity of print. Overall, however, this was a full, thoughtful and stimulating conference on a possibly more complex subject than last time. We thank Dr John Rignall for his excellent organization of an important week-end.