

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

6-22-1996

Wreath-Laying in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey

Graham Handley

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](#)

Handley, Graham, "Wreath-Laying in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 299.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/299>

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.

**WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER,
WESTMINSTER ABBEY, 22 JUNE 1996**

The Guest of Honour was Graham Handley who gave the following Address:

It has always seemed to me, and doubtless to many others, that some of the most moving and evocative words ever written by George Eliot occur near the beginning of the third chapter of her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*:

A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge; a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort or reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood.

I make no apology for opening my address with this quotation, in a spot of native land where the criteria for permanent placement surely include the simple loving qualities, the sweet habits of the blood as well as the widening of knowledge which sustains the mind, promotes perspective and vision, encompassing the human and the intellectual which makes for the inspirational experience of literature by which so many of us set such great store. I remember feeling some years ago that it was good to see George Eliot's spirit resting in this spot of native land close to those of two twentieth-century poets of distinction, W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas. Like her, these two were variously seen as sinners, and, like her, they bear witness to the fact that this chosen spot is above creed, convention, dogma, or any narrowness or bias that inhibits our capacity to appreciate - or reverence - the creative genius. Auden lived with the librettist Chester Kallman for some years as unconventionally as George Eliot lived with George Henry Lewes, and during that time he produced some of his greatest poems and reached that maturity which make many of us believe that he is the most gifted of twentieth-century poets. Dylan Thomas's life, rather than his work, has sometimes been a happy hunting ground for those who feed on the frailties of human nature or, as George Henry Lewes would have put it, with his acid quotational verve:

Great fleas have little fleas, and lesser fleas to bite'em,
And these again have other fleas, and so *ad infinitum*.

Lewes was writing about the factual parasites in his *Sea-side Studies*, which originally appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1856 and 1857 as he and Marian Evans settled into that intimate give and give life which transformed her into George Eliot largely, I suspect, through his inspirational love and certainly through his sympathetic support. But I must return in passing to Dylan, who wrote the impassioned 'Do not go gentle into that good night', and to Auden,

because they shared with George Eliot a passing notoriety which has been justly obliterated by posterity. Like her, they suffered, but time has judged that they *are* their writings. And lastly she would, having been here for sixteen years, appreciate the fact that she has been lately joined by her good friend, and Lewes's good friend too, Anthony Trollope. Trollope greatly admired her: he even put her, I think, into an affectionate story called 'Josephine de Montmorenci'. With his usual trenchant bloody-mindedness he expressed a great liking for *Romola*, though he was later to admit 'I doubt whether any young person can read with pleasure either *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*. I know that they are very difficult to many that are not young.' Nevertheless he placed her second to Thackeray and above Dickens in his evaluation of his contemporaries. We need not, I think, fit her into any league tables. It is sufficient that she is here, evidence of a surpassing greatness that survives time and the vacillations of time. There is a danger that as scholarship becomes increasingly and aridly cerebral it will cease to celebrate, that critical postures will need to be politically correct, that the strictures of tenure will mean that networking - and Internetworking - will make a mockery of the intellect and humanity which gave them their being. For you and me, readers not caught in these constricting vortices, there is another danger, and that is that we shall accept our classics at second hand through the visual medium which has largely superseded the verbal one. During the early heady months of 1994 George Eliot and the makers of *Middlemarch* in Stamford were flavour of the time, in much the same way that Jane Austen via Emma Thompson is flavour of 1996. As Emma, whose feet are firmly on the ground, put it at the Oscar ceremony, she visited Winchester before she left England to pay her respects to Jane and to reassure her about the Box Office returns. She also reckoned that Jane was big in Uruguay. In 1994 the *Independent on Sunday* classified *Middlemarch* as a romance and in that category it ran as a best-seller for some weeks. The adapters are pushing the classics, asking of many that they go to the original, and this means taking up the challenge - and it is a challenge - of the verbal world. In this world, George Eliot is supreme. She is humanly accessible but intellectually stringent, and this is where the challenge comes in. Her people are firmly placed in the medium in which they move - the phrase is hers - the local, social and historical entity which she recreates with assurance and perspective, but she gives them a universality, a tender kinship, if you like, with us her readers. Location is the first of her particular strengths, deep with warm partiality in the description of Shepperton church in 'Amos Barton' in that chosen spot of fact and fiction: there follows sequence upon sequence of people in places, incised in our memories, or lived through again in our re-readings. Think of Hetty in the lucid dairy at the Hall Farm before wayward innocence is overtaken by sexual experience, Maggie sadly or fiercely vibrant in the attic at Dorlcote Mill, Silas in the bare then transformed cottage in Raveloe, Romola Madonna in the plague-stricken village, Mrs Transome, a crone-like and aged lady of Shalott trapped in the past and present of Transome Court; or Dorothea with the tapestry stag and the reined-in destructive intimacy of Casaubon at Lowick, and Mrs Glasher in the perjured and purgatorial Gadsmere, a mistress reduced yet fiercely warm with maternal love. Some of these could hardly be called chosen spots, but George Eliot's irony, as ever, is concerned with reality, and that reality is geographical and psychological, its substance the mind and the emotions in nature and nurture. Always there is omniscient understanding, uncondescending tolerance, sometimes a leavening of humour, always a sympathetic ambience. Think of the moving and uplifting scenes in her fiction, and the profoundly uncomfortable ones too. There is Janet's redemption by Edgar Tryan, or her rescue by the simply good Mrs Pettifer,

or Hetty's journey in anguish, a narrative of isolation and guilt, harrowing, poignant, infinitely sad, shame and ignorance exacerbating the suffering, the whole tremulous with the author's compassion. And as we move on through the novels, through Maggie's crises of identity and rejection, through Silas's to him terrible loss of the gold which symbolizes *his* rejection of humanity in the shadow of his rejection by God, through Latimer's terrifying and self-destructive power, to Harold Transome's recognition of his untender kinship to Jermyn through the truth of the mirror, we approach the final phase of her writing, the two great novels which mark the fullness of her maturity both as an artist and as a thinking, wise, humane and generous woman. I say generous because I feel that in the essence, in the spirit, in the appraisal, in the evaluation of people expressed through *her* fictional people, there is rarely rejection, whatever the aberrations, frailties or even pettinesses which they display or which she displays through them. In *Middlemarch* she returns to her roots in the Midlands, but with a poised ironic control, a practiced and certain insight, a rational yet always humane perspective, an unforced and truthful understanding of people as they are and as they always will be. If we are inclined to laugh at Dorothea initially, we soon find ourselves saddened at her self-inflicted wound. If we initially see Casaubon through Celia's eyes, we come to see him through our own as his creator reveals *his* susceptibilities and the disillusion of his great domestic expectations. And running with this are Dorothea's own disillusion and sadness, climaxed by that wonderful if temporary reconciliation where she waits up for her broken husband. He, in his moment of extreme adversity and self-doubt, finds in himself a generous feeling for Dorothea in her uncushioned vulnerability:

'Dorothea!' he said with a gentle surprise in his tone. 'Were you waiting for me?'

'Yes; I did not like to disturb you.'

'Come, my dear, come. You are young, and need not to extend your life by watching.'

When the kind of quiet melancholy of that speech fell on Dorothea's ears, she felt something like the thankfulness that might well up in us if we had narrowly escaped hurting a lamed creature. She put her hand into her husband's, and they went along the broad corridor together.

A slight sad simple parody, you might feel, of the end of *Paradise Lost*, as Adam and Eve

They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

But this marriage has been no paradise, and nothing can be regained. In one of the most searing and painful revelations in the novel an impassioned Dorothea confides brokenly to Rosamond much later:

'Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the

nearness it brings. Even if we loved someone else better than - than those we were married to, it would be no use I mean, marriage drinks up all our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear - but it murders our marriage - and then the marriage stays with us like a murder, and everything else is gone.'

The unequivocal unease, the unacceptable truth, has been uttered. I find it profoundly moving, courageously honest. And I remember standing on this spot of native land a few years ago and reading an extract from one of the climactic scenes of *Middlemarch*, where Bulstrode, publicly disgraced, comes home to the private world where his wife knows of his degradation, his long-standing deceptions and hypocrisies, and accepts that she too is maimed and condemned to a 'poor lopped life', as George Eliot says. With scant pause for reflection, Harriet unhesitatingly and without recrimination then or in the future, asserts in moving reassurance her loyalty and her love for her degraded partner. I know of few moments in fiction - or in life - which touch the heart so simply, so warmly, so directly, as this. And I am aware of the art that makes it as well as the heart that fills it. Harriet Bulstrode's roots are in the Vincy ethos of trade or money, what Auden refers to in relation to Jane Austen as 'the economic basis of society'. But she has put down other roots of a loving spiritual strength in her marriage; its tender kinship has called out her integrity, humility, her fullness of being. Spiritual and moral growth which transcend the mores of convention mark George Eliot's own artistic and humanitarian growth in her final fictions. And in *Daniel Deronda* that growth takes new directions. The novel is partly an artistic failure but it is a profoundly human triumph. Daniel's roots are gradually uncovered and he finally sets off for a chosen spot of native land, one of the chosen people and not the English gentleman, admittedly under the rose, that he thought he was. Gwendolen discovers the roots of conscience and regeneration through intense personal suffering, guilt, and the enlightened prescriptions of Daniel, who intends to live for his people as he advises her to live for others. There is a final qualified optimism. Gwendolen's letter to Daniel on the day of his marriage to Mirah touches emotional and inspirational fibres in us rarely felt in fiction or, as I said earlier, in life. Gwendolen's will through the influence of Daniel is to be better, to make life better for others, effectively to reach out in a tender kinship beyond her previous practice or capacity. The ending is wonderfully open, for the discerning reader, the reader whose discernment has been enhanced by the quality of George Eliot's characterization and commentary, knows that Gwendolen may fail, or that Daniel may be disillusioned. We think not. The first line of the motto which George Eliot used in the Epilogue to *Felix Holt* is 'Our finest hope is finest memory', but in *Daniel Deronda* she makes it clear that the roots of the past must provide the sustenance of the future. There is what she calls most beautifully through Daniel a 'separateness with communication' in our levels of existence. The phrase fits George Eliot herself best of all. Separate from her past, she is often in vital and inspirational communication with it through her writing, bringing it to us from a rooted identification with imagination, knowledge and love. Of course she has failures among her works, and this is despite the sedulous milking of scholars and critics, but they are like our failures, errors of judgement, misguided emphases, the indulgence of obsessions that rule - or perhaps misrule - us temporarily, failures to communicate well because our heart rules our head or vice versa. But failure is only the obverse side of success, and her few aberrations are artistic not human. It may be a long time before she is big in Uruguay, but she is big in this

spot of native land and wherever literature of the highest order is read and appreciated. To read her is to know her and, I think, to love her. Enjoy her adapters - she might have called them with rather a different emphasis, 'transmitters' - who have obviously enjoyed her, but remember always that they are adapters and not the original. Enjoy too, those real scholars and critics who have tried without favour to enrich our appreciation of her learning, her art, her humanity, or any of the small particularities which help to make the sum total of her worth. Above all, enjoy George Eliot, and remember that despite all those names she answered to over the course of her life, there is only one George Eliot - and she is only to be found between the covers of the books which bear her name.