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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY

21 JUNE 1997

The Guest of Honour was Professor Carol A. Martin who gave the following Address: *The Reader as Traveller, the Traveller as Reader in George Eliot*

The nineteenth century was an age of travellers, including many famous British women travellers. Lady Hester Stanhope lived for years in the Middle East, Mary Kingsley explored the jungles of Gabon and died while performing medical work in South Africa, Isabella Bird Bishop journeyed around the globe and wrote books on Malaysia, China, Japan, the Hawaiian islands, the Sinai peninsula, and the valleys and peaks above 10,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

George Eliot was also a woman interested in travel, though in ways different from those of the women I have just named. Several of the earliest extant letters of the teenaged Mary Ann Evans refer to travel that is metaphorical rather than literal. A fervent Evangelical, as we know, she wrote to her teacher and friend Maria Lewis employing a metaphor common in mediaeval literature and in later Evangelical writing, the image of life itself as a journey, a pilgrimage. One of those letters, written 18 August 1838, describes as happiest those people 'who are not fermenting themselves by engaging in projects for earthly bliss, who are considering this life merely a pilgrimage, a scene calling for diligence and watchfulness, not for repose and amusement' (*Letters* 1: 6). The mature Marian Lewes, in her early life as George Eliot, employs the image of travel both literally and figuratively in her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*. Attempting to comfort his mother, who fears that old Thias Bede's irresponsibility and alcoholism will drive Adam to leave his parents' home, Seth Bede prays with her:

So the mother and son knelt down together, and Seth prayed for the poor wandering father, and for those who were sorrowing for him at home. And ... that Adam might never be called to set up his tent in a far country, but that his mother might be cheered and comforted by his presence all the days of her pilgrimage.... (Ch. 4)

Later in Book 1, foreshadowing her return to rescue Hetty from despair, Dinah Morris contemplates her impending departure from Hayslope and the life journeys of those she will leave behind:

... she thought of all the dear people whom she had learned to care for among these peaceful fields, and who would now have a place in her loving remembrance for ever. She thought of the struggles and the weariness that might lie before them in the rest of their life's journey, when she would be away from them. (Ch. 15)

Although George Eliot's own life journey took her away from the religious fervour of her youth, she never lost her interest in the life journeys of other human beings. The 'watchfulness' of her Evangelical years became a solicitude for the human condition; her 'diligence', the desire to bring greater understanding among human beings by stirring that 'fibre of sym-

pathy' with others that is the goal of art as she describes it in the famous passage in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. In her own journeys to the countryside away from the smoke and noise of London, or to Germany, Italy, Spain, or other sites on the Continent, she found both research materials and mental and physical respite and repose that strengthened her and George Henry Lewes and helped them resume their strenuous labours of writing and editing.

George Eliot's characters travel too. Usually their journeys are motivated by or at least result in something quite different from amusement, or even repose. These journeys give us, her readers, insight into the characters' growth and change. I think of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* whose honeymoon in Rome is anything but amusement; but the pain of that journey away from the familiar people and things of home brings her new knowledge of men and of herself, of the arts and their relationship to human life, that was denied her in what the narrator calls 'that dark period' when their music and art education consisted merely of 'small tinkling and smearing' (Ch. 7). In Eliot's last novel, Gwendolen Harleth travels to Leubronn to escape the temptation to marry Grandcourt in spite of her promise to Mrs Glasher. Alas, she returns no wiser. Her gamble, through her marriage, for higher stakes entails a risk exceeding any she encountered at the roulette table. That travel was beneficial, nonetheless, for one of the strangers who observes her play becomes the moral agent leading her to self-knowledge and acceptance of the claims of others. That stranger, Daniel Deronda, later journeys to Genoa, where new knowledge of himself and his heritage determines a path for his future life, one for which he has been preparing unawares in his journeys through the Jewish neighbourhoods in London's East End.

In the early novels, the journeys of George Eliot's characters are more circumscribed. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Tom Tulliver travels only fifteen miles from home to Mr Stelling's school, where his father hopes he will learn how to 'be a bit nimble with his tongue and his pen' and 'how to wrap things up in words as aren't actionable' (Bk. 1, Ch. 3), but the fifteen miles' distance is formidable enough that Mrs Tulliver laments its being too far for her to wash and mend for Tom. In the same chapter, the journey motif includes the young Mary Ann Evans's metaphor of the pilgrimage. The too 'cute' Maggie, listening all the while, demonstrates her claims to knowledge by describing the journey of Christian and the vividness of the devil depicted in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Some three years later, Maggie travels alone to Mr Stelling's to fetch Tom home, in a chapter whose title, 'The Golden Gates are Passed', reminds the reader of the inevitable end to the childhood part of the life journey. Tom's and Maggie's mournful return to the Mill marks a boundary less important geographically than psychologically: they enter into 'the thorny wilderness [where] the golden gates of their childhood had forever closed behind them' (Bk. 2, Ch. 7).

The eponymous hero in *Silas Marner* travels an unspecified distance from city to country and back – a fearsome journey to the homebound mind of Dolly Winthrop, who requires 'many assurances that [Silas's journey back with Eppie] would not take them out of the region of carriers' carts and slow wagons' (Ch. 21). With the wider knowledge we as readers are privileged to have, we know that Silas has travelled more perilously and more significantly in his inner life's journey, through the despair that first brought him from Lantern Yard to Raveloe and into the love and connection with others that begins when he finds Eppie on his hearth.

As we might expect from its setting in a rural village in 1799, the artisans and farm workers in *Adam Bede* are among the most homebound. Their work seldom carries them beyond their own fields, workshops, and village. Emblematic of this stationary life are the elderly inhabitants of Hayslope and Broxton who are brought in the 'waggin' to Arthur Donnithorne's birthday feast. The narrator tells us that they 'had never been so far down this side of the hill for the last twenty years' (Ch. 22). Even Adam has travelled but little. When Hetty asks him about Eagedale, where Arthur has gone to flee temptation, Adam, 'pleased to have her ask a question about himself', remembers – as if it were a rarity, as indeed it was – a journey taken ten years earlier with his father (Ch. 20). And after 'Mrs Poyser has her say out', the Poyseres fear that the old Squire will force them to uproot and move twenty miles off, a journey that will sever ties formed through generations.

But the physical distances are less important than what the characters' life journeys, actual or metaphorical, tell us about the human condition, the nature of our experience as human beings and as readers. We recall that section near the end of *Adam Bede*, when Adam, weary of waiting for Dinah's hoped-for change of heart, travels a second time to Snowfield. The first, we remember, was his journey to fetch Hetty back for their wedding, the terrible journey that leaves his hopes and beliefs in ruins, but a journey that will bring him to greater knowledge of himself and new sympathy with the weak and erring. This second journey, more than eighteen months later, recalls to him the first:

What keen memories went along the road with him! He had often been to Oakbourne and back since that first journey to Snowfield, but beyond Oakbourne the grey stone walls, the broken country, the meagre trees, seemed to be telling him afresh the story of that painful past which he knew so well by heart. But no story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters: and Adam this morning brought with him new thoughts through that grey country—thoughts which gave an altered significance to its story of the past. (Ch. 54)

Here George Eliot reminds us of several truths significant for book-reading people. The passage suggests one reason why we are drawn to read and reread her work, and why it touches and enlightens us anew with each new reading. George Eliot knew almost 140 years ago what reader-response critics have only begun to discuss, that, as her narrator says, 'no story is the same to us after a lapse of time'. We may have the same old worn, favourite, marked copy—but 'we who read it are no longer the same interpreters'.

Adam Bede cannot forget Hetty's suffering, nor can he rejoice that it has led to his knowing and loving a better woman, in Dinah Morris. At the height of his suffering, during the long night in which he and Bartle Massey watch and await the dawn that will, they believe, see Hetty hanged for child murder, he bitterly repudiates the notion that any good coming to others from her crime and punishment can cancel out or make up for the suffering that she has endured.

A year and a half later, when a less anguished Adam rides with fear and yet hope to learn Dinah's answer to his love, George Eliot's narrator reminds us, through this image of a jour-

ney, that we do not make our life journey alone; we cannot separate ourselves from others or from our early experiences, however much altered life may be for us personally:

That is a base and selfish, even a blasphemous, spirit, which rejoices and is thankful over the past evil that has blighted or crushed another, because it has been made a source of unforeseen good to ourselves: Adam could never cease to mourn over that mystery of human sorrow which had been brought so close to him: he could never thank God for another's misery. And if I were capable of that narrow-sighted joy in Adam's behalf, I should still know he was not the man to feel it for himself: he would have shaken his head at such a sentiment, and said, 'Evil's evil, and sorrow's sorrow, and you can't alter its nature by wrapping it up in other words. Other folks were not created for my sake, that I should think all square when things turn out well for me.'

I think of this passage sometimes when I see in the newspaper quotations from someone who has survived a disaster in which others have perished: 'God saved *me*'. Not an uncommon reaction, but one I think George Eliot would repudiate, for it says that *I* am separate from others: their suffering has nothing to do with me.

Some readers, including some among my students, have seen Hetty Sorrel as a frivolous and self-centred character and felt little sympathy with her; others have felt that George Eliot, or her narrator, is unduly harsh on her as a character. But it is precisely because she is frivolous and selfish – as some people both male and female are, including, of course, Arthur Donnithorne – that we need to feel that bond of human sympathy with them. The motif of the journey, which Eliot employs for both characters, brings the reader into awareness of Arthur and Hetty as individuals who will suffer, just as the 'more deserving' – Adam, his family, the Poysers, Mr Irwine – suffer from the wrong that these frivolous characters do.

In one of the brilliant structural arrangements of the novel, George Eliot follows the chapter depicting Hetty's trial and condemnation with the one describing Arthur's complacent, self-satisfied journey from Liverpool, anticipating his new status as landlord and the good he will do for all, but particularly for Hetty and her husband who will both have a 'special claim' upon him that will enable him to make up 'for any pain she had suffered through Arthur in the past', although, as he rolls along in his comfortable carriage, he concludes, that pain must have been slight or she would 'not so soon [have] made up her mind to marry Adam' (Ch. 44). The Sophoclean irony of these thoughts is palpable, for the reader knows the terrible revelation that awaits Arthur when he arrives home.

A different kind of reader engagement with the weak and erring has already occurred in the chapters called 'The Journey in Hope' and 'The Journey in Despair', which depict Hetty's futile journey to Windsor and back. There, we see and feel with the suffering Hetty; she is still limited, still blind to what is outside her, but for all that a human being like ourselves. What can be more powerful than watching her on that terrible night, as she wanders among the fields seeking a pond in which to drown herself. The pond is there but she is unable to take the fatal step. Cold and despairing, she finds shelter in a miserable shepherd's hovel, where a gruff old man wakes her in the pale dawn and tells her harshly to keep to the high road and not wander

about the fields. Houseless, friendless, utterly, desperately alone she longs for the home on which she had set too little value. We find out later that her desperate isolation has led her to abandon her baby in the hope of returning to the Hall Farm. But she is doomed instead to a transported felon's journey of exile.

So we, no more than Adam Bede, can celebrate simplistically and callously that he has a more worthy partner in Dinah. Like him, we feel our human fellowship not just with the productive, morally upright people of Hayslope, the Adams and Dinahs of the world, but with less admirable persons, even a vain and selfish child-murderer. In these days of so-called 'enlightened self-interest' and increasing divisions between rich and poor in some of our technologically advanced countries, it is easy to be as hard as Adam Bede before he knew better – to see people like Thias Bede or Hetty Sorrel or Arthur Donnithorne as deserving of their fates – best 'put out o' the world' as soon as possible, as the misogynistic, misanthropic Bartle Massey says should be done with such people (Ch. 41).

But *Adam Bede's* narrator, a well educated, well travelled person like the author, offers a wider vision. Calling upon us to imagine the wonder of a traveller from another world coming upon an early spring scene – a pastoral landscape such as surrounds Hetty just before she departs on her journey to Windsor, he says:

What a glad world this looks like, as one drives or rides along the valleys and over the hills! I have often thought so when, in foreign countries, where the fields and woods have looked to me like our English Loamshire – the rich land tilled with just as much care, the woods rolling down the gentle slopes to the green meadows – I have come on something by the roadside which has reminded me that I am not in Loamshire: an image of a great agony – the agony of the Cross. It had stood perhaps by the clustering apple-blossoms, or in the broad sunshine by the cornfield, or at a turning by the wood where a clear brook was gurgling below; and surely, if there came a traveller to this world who knew nothing of the story of man's life upon it, this image of agony would seem to him strangely out of place in the midst of this joyous nature. He would not know that hidden behind the apple-blossoms, or among the golden corn, or under the shrouding boughs of the wood, there might be a human heart beating heavily with anguish; perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift-advancing shame. (Ch.45)

George Eliot's work opens up to us the wider vision which calls forth greater tolerance, understanding, and fellow-feeling. Her novels become the source of wide travelling and broad vision even if our literal journeys only occasionally carry us much farther in miles than most of the people of Loamshire. And each journey through those novels is a newer and richer experience, because each reading finds us, like Adam, different persons in some way. But in all these journeys, these rereadings, two things remain constant: first, the affirmation that art is a means to understanding the human condition, to knowing people outside ourselves, people who may be vastly different from ourselves, and second, the importance of such knowledge, that we may be able to see ourselves as part of a larger human family whose members have claims upon us regardless of their individual merits or demerits.

As we come together today to celebrate the life of George Eliot, her message for our life's journey is one that will bear rereading as long as there are people to read.