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WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN NUNEATON, 15 JUNE 1997

The Guest of Honour was Ruth Harris who gave the following Address (in the Museum, since torrential rain drove the gathering out of the garden into its shelter, a change that made the title of her Address – *George Eliot in the Open Air* – a source of amusement).

I am deeply grateful for the honour of being invited to lay a wreath in memory of George Eliot, and to lay it in a place that meant so much to her... Nuneaton. Before the heavens opened, I pictured us all gathered outside surrounded by green grass, trees and flowers, and able to imagine the spirit of George Eliot not in her study surrounded by books but out-of-doors, enjoying the fresh air. Some imagination is needed to visualize a little girl gathering flowers in the sunshine, or running towards a Round Pool after her older brother, or leaping with delight as she caught her silver perch in the Coventry Canal. But in spite of our enclosure within four walls, can we still reflect on 'George Eliot in the Open Air'?

I have just returned from a holiday in the Alps which began with a flight from Heathrow to Geneva. As the plane landed in Geneva, I thought of Marian Evans travelling to Switzerland with the Brays after the death of her father. They left England on 11 June 1849, and journeyed by way of Paris, Avignon, Nice, Genoa, Milan, Como, Lake Maggiore and Chamounix, arriving at Geneva in the third week of July. Cross says she stayed first at a pension, the Campagne Plongeon, which he described as 'a gleaming white house' with a meadow in front, sloping down to blue water and with 'an avenue of remarkably fine chestnut-trees, whence there is a magnificent view of the Jura mountains on the opposite side of the lake'. Marian Evans missed her friends in Warwickshire, grieved for her father and grew so thin that she wondered how much of her would be left by the following April: 'I shall be length without breadth', she wrote. Nevertheless in spite of physical and emotional frailty, she wrote in excitement to her Coventry friends: 'I am becoming passionately attached to the mountains, the lake If you saw the Jura today! The snow reveals its forests, ravines, and precipices, and it stands in relief against a pure blue sky. The snow is on the mountains only now, and one is tempted to walk all day ...'

'Tempted to walk all day' The picture of Marian Evans out-of-doors with the wind in her hair is a picture we more readily associate with Emily Brontë than George Eliot, but her love of the open air is apparent not only in Switzerland but also in the Scilly Isles where we find her striding out in 1857 and delighting in what she describes as 'a sense of freedom in those unenclosed grounds'. It is not difficult to link this feeling of liberation with the success of her first fiction and the joy of her loving relationship with Lewes. The weather was often wet and nearly always windy, but the energy of love infused her delight in the shapes and colours of the rocks, her feeling of exhilaration when the wind was at its height and she could see 'the white foam prancing round the reefs and rising in fountain-like curves above the screen of rocks'. Together, they looked up at fountains of foam towards a sky alive with larks. She wrote: 'I never enjoyed the lark before as I enjoyed it at Scilly'.

At Ilfracombe, the previous year, her *Journal* reveals that the influence of Lewes was even more penetrating: she looked through his eyes into rock-pools and hedgerows, eager to learn the names of living organisms in water and wild flowers in Devon lanes. In the Memorial Garden today, she could identify most of the trees and flowers from which we have fled. Her concern to give the right names to things reveals itself in her fiction as a passion for truth and clarity, a relish for exactness. She shares Lewes's triumph when he suddenly cries out, 'I see an anemone!' and her elation rings through the Latin name she gives it: 'we were immensely excited by the discovery of this little red *Mesembryanthemum*'. After that, the Latin names roll off her tongue with endearing pride – and pleasure that there is still so much more to learn. Even plants regarded as commonplace arouse her enthusiasm: 'These tide-pools make one quite in love with sea-weeds'. Her joy in natural discoveries is romantic as well as scientific, preparing one for her delicate description of a Devon sunset which she sees framed by a foreground of sharp rocks standing black against the vivid west. She writes in her *Journal*: 'How lovely to look into that brilliant distance and see the ship on the horizon seeming to sail away from the cold and dim world behind it right into the golden glory! I have always that sort of feeling when I look at sunset; it always seems to me that there, in the west, lies a land of light and warmth and love.'

The movement from close-up to distance, from silhouetted rocks to a faraway sunset, is characteristic of her imagination. (How she would have enjoyed using a camera with a zoom lens!) This pleasure in a change of focus is apparent in *Adam Bede*, when she describes the setting for her young Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris, on the village green. The narrator moves from the gently encircling meadows of Staffordshire and the distant dark hills of Derbyshire to the foreground of 'feathered grass', 'tall red sorrel', 'the white umbrels of the hemlocks', and ultimately to Dinah's 'small oval face', with its 'delicate nostril' and 'line of cheek and chin' curving as smoothly as an egg, a face that in the light of the descending sun 'seemed to gather a calm vividness, like flowers at evening'.

Many of the most memorable scenes in George Eliot's fiction take place in the open air: Janet Dempster shivering on a cold door-step; Hetty Sorrel travelling in hope and in despair; Maggie and Tom Tulliver by the Round Pool; Maggie meeting Philip among the Scots firs (and how wrong of the recent televised version to diminish the Red Deeps to a Hut!). I think of Maggie and Stephen drifting on the tide; brother and sister drowning in the flood; Romola fleeing from Florence; Daniel Deronda rowing at sunset on the River Thames; Gwendolen trapped in a small boat on the Mediterranean. The elements of air, earth and water are significant in these outdoor scenes, especially the element of water and all it symbolized for her. Even if characters are enclosed by rooms, nevertheless at critical moments, as Barbara Hardy indicates, they often look out through their windows towards wider horizons. The landscapes they see belong to the heart of England that George Eliot loved but saw as far more than merely local. In *Adam Bede*, there is a spiritual dimension to the Midland countryside that Dinah Morris sees through her bedroom window, its fields broad and peaceful under a 'large moon' rising above the elms. In *Felix Holt*, an enlargement of the self is suggested as Esther turns from room to window towards a wide Warwickshire view of sky and trees and ever-running moonlit river because she wants 'the largeness of the world to help her thought'. In *Middlemarch*, after her night of sorrow, there is a sense of the universal as Dorothea looks through her window at a

Warwickshire landscape in the early morning: 'Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold waking of men to labour and endurance'.

In George Eliot's novels, Nature is seldom 'red in tooth and claw' although she is aware of natural selection and the findings of Darwin. She is more inclined to see Nature as a chastening or consoling power, bringing a fresh perspective to a troubled spirit. At a simple farm, Caterina finds comfort in 'placid groups of cows', in 'contented, speckled hens, industriously scratching for the rarely found corn' and finds herself calmed by 'the unsentimental cheeriness of top-knotted pullets, unpetted sheep-dogs, and patient cart-horses enjoying a drink of muddy water'. After the death of Lewes's twenty-five-year-old son, Thornton, George Eliot felt 'so much shattered in mind and body' that 'nothing but the deep calm of fields and woods' could have restored her. In 1871, when *Middlemarch* was coming out and she felt anxious about its reception, she described in a letter her evening walks with Lewes: 'About six or half-past we walk on to the commons and see the great sky over our heads'. The reassurance that large, quiet presences in Nature can give is recalled in her portrait of the Rev. Humphrey Cadwallader in *Middlemarch*: he 'has that solid imperturbable ease and good humour which ... like great grassy hills in the sunshine, quiets even an irritated egoism and makes it rather ashamed of itself'.

George Eliot was a countrywoman at heart, and she never forgot her roots: when the rain poured down in London, her first thought was of wet hay and spoilt corn in the fields of home. Affectionate memories of the Midland countryside fill her writing from *Scenes of Clerical Life* to *Middlemarch*. Some recollections must have been poignant, even painful, and yet there was reassurance too in the landscape of her youth. She remembered the gardens of Arbury Hall brilliant with flowers, the Round Pool and the Red Deeps, hedgerows where 'wild convolvulus ... made a great curtain of pale-green hearts and white trumpets', and fields where each detail was dear: 'The ride to Stone Court, which Fred and Rosamond took the next morning, lay through a pretty bit of midland landscape, almost all meadows and pastures, with hedgerows still allowed to grow in bushy beauty and to spread out coral fruit for the birds. Little details gave each field a particular physiognomy, dear to the eyes that have looked on them from childhood'. The past is never lost to us so long as we can remember it; and George Eliot remembered that distant landscape, those country places enjoyed in the open air, and remembered them with love.

[The quotation on the Fellowship wreath was:

A weaver who finds hard words in his hymn-book knows nothing of abstractions; as the little child knows nothing of parental love, but only knows one face and one lap towards which it stretched its arms for refuge and nurture.

Silas Marner]