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Jonathan G. Ouvry

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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY

21 JUNE 2000

(20th anniversary of the unveiling of the memorial stone)

The Guest of Honour was Jonathan G. Ouvry, President of the George Eliot Fellowship. He gave the following Address:

When Gabriel Woolf was standing here a few years ago, he told us the various things that he was not, in relation to George Eliot; for example that he was not an author fresh from the triumph of the latest biography or other learned work, or an academic (though there I think he does himself an injustice). I too am not any of the things which very often distinguish the wreathlaying guest on this important occasion in the George Eliot Fellowship's calendar. Among the many things which I am not, is any kind of blood relation of George Eliot. Had the divorce laws been different in the middle of the nineteenth century I might have got as near as being George Eliot's step-great-great-grandson. George Eliot and George Henry Lewes were of course careful to avoid having any children. It seems unlikely that they ever speculated on the possibility of having a child on the lines of, was it Ellen Terry (a Coventry girl) suggesting to George Bernard Shaw that they might have a child combining her beauty with Shaw's brains, a suggestion turned down by Shaw on the ground that the offspring might have her brains and his looks. Of course, in the case of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes, the question of inherited beauty would not have arisen, though on the basis of his portraits I'm not sure that George Henry Lewes was that bad looking. Nevertheless I do rather enjoy the idea of being descended from 'the ugliest man in London'.

Looks apart, it might be interesting to speculate on what kind of progeny the two would have had, had they had any. Would any practitioner of phrenology, a 'science' in which George Eliot was much interested when young, have owned a pair of callipers large enough to encompass the gigantic brain which must inevitably have resulted. What a bump of humour such a child would have had. The combination of George Henry Lewes's capacity for telling funny stories (I wish I had it – I can never remember a joke for five minutes) and the sheer funniness which leavens George Eliot's novels must, if inherited, have produced someone well worth knowing!

My reading life can be divided into two periods, BGE and AGE (Before George Eliot and After George Eliot – or perhaps that should be DGE, During George Eliot, as I try to re-read one of the novels every year). In the BGE period one of my favourite authors was P. G. Wodehouse, and if I ever thought about George Eliot at all it was probably as a dry as dust and not much read (if not positively unreadable) Victorian author, vaguely interesting because of some connection with some forebear or other. After the death of my grandmother Elinor, who bequeathed the copyright in unpublished material to me in her Will, I took a little more interest.

What really woke me up to George Eliot was what happened here twenty years ago, when the 100th anniversary of George Eliot's death was celebrated so splendidly in the Abbey, and this

fine memorial stone was dedicated in the fitting surroundings of Poets' Corner. The very pleasant coincidence of my having my office next door led not only to my introduction to the George Eliot Fellowship (why had I not come across it before? I wonder) but to the series of enjoyable tea-parties next door on this occasion each year, until my retirement two years ago. I should say here that the Fellowship is very grateful to the Dean and Chapter for enabling us to transfer the tea-party from 1 The Sanctuary to the Jerusalem Chamber, a privilege that we much enjoy.

In the last twenty years I have learned a great deal about George Eliot, have read most of the biographies as they have appeared, have learned a great deal about George Henry Lewes and his family (not least through Rosemary Ashton's superb biography), have listened to many talks and entertainments about George Eliot including wonderful readings such as we are enjoying here today, and have had the immense privilege of acting as President of the Fellowship for some sixteen years which among other things has allowed me to indulge my enjoyment of reading aloud at the annual wreathlayings — not something to be undertaken lightly in the presence of professionals.

Before I end I would just like to say, looking at these two Eliot memorial stones so near each other here, how much I prefer to hear or read of our Eliot as, in full, George Eliot. A tendency seems to have crept in of referring to her simply as 'Eliot' — let's leave that for Thomas Stearns. And to end I would just like to say 'thank you' to the George Eliot Fellowship, and of course particularly to Kathleen and Bill Adams who embody it as Secretary and Chairman, for opening up to me, as to so many, the life-enhancing pleasure of the experience of George Eliot.