


2002

Address at Wreath-laying in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey 10 June 2001

A.G. van den Broek

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van den Broek, A.G., "Address at Wreath-laying in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey 10 June 2001" (2002). *The George Eliot Review*. 428.

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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY 10 JUNE 2001

The Guest of Honour was A. G. van den Broek, Deputy Headmaster of Forest School, London. He gave the following Address:

In June 1990, the Revd Dr Edward Carpenter gave this address, exactly ten years after he, as Dean of Westminster, conducted the service when the stone memorializing George Eliot was unveiled. In his address Dr Carpenter reminded his audience that permission for an Abbey burial had been denied Eliot on religious grounds, but that it gave him 'great satisfaction and a unique pleasure' to help memorialize her a hundred years later. She was, he said, 'a person whom, in "character; manner and style", it is almost impossible to praise over much'.¹

It gives me great satisfaction and pleasure, as well, to see Eliot remembered in Poets' Corner, among

...those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search
To vaster issues.²

The poem, 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible', and some of the editorial details surrounding its publication, clearly show that Eliot saw it as expressing the *summum bonum* of her life's philosophy,³ and it is, therefore, very fitting that she finally attained her rightful place among this particular 'choir' of great artists.

Her determination to join others in '[urging] man's search / To vaster issues' was the result of a lifetime of study and reflection. And yet there was a time when she struggled to hold even Shakespeare in unreserved esteem. In one of her very early letters to Maria Lewis, dated 16 March 1839, she told her old teacher that writers of fiction should be approached with great care. Shakespeare, she said,

has a higher claim... on our attention but we have need of as nice a power of distillation as a bee to suck nothing but honey from his pages. However as in life we must be exposed to malign influences from intercourse with others if we would reap the advantages designed for us by making us social beings, so in books.

It is amusing to recall this grudging respect for an author of whom she eventually took so much notice in her own fiction.⁴ Now is not the time or place to recall Eliot's detailed reading of Shakespeare and others. But for the remainder of this address I want to summarize briefly and in general terms what I think she distilled from his work and the works of others – how other

great writers helped her to become the very fine writer we remember.

Once she shed her religious fervour which coloured her reference to the 'malign influences' of fiction, great writers like Shakespeare taught her to think about a world not dreamed of in her Evangelical philosophy, but one she continued to analyse and explore in her novels and poetry. Their art contributed to that analysis by showing her that there is often a necessary, complex and interconnected relationship between human behaviour and the events that shape people's lives. In demonstrating this, in giving her insight into some of the mysteries of life, without necessarily resorting to speculations concerning first causes, art became a substitute for her lost Christian faith.

With good reason, Eliot is often remembered for her extraordinary, rational intellect. However, it is interesting to remember that while she was translating David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, she kept a statue and engraving of Christ in her study, because, as her friends, the Brays, reported, 'she was Strauss-sick – it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion, and only the sight of her Christ-image and picture made her endure it'.⁵ The anecdote illustrates, I think, that a reverence for, and an emotional response to, art – in this case pictorial art – were as much a part of her as her dispassionate, intellectual nature. The critic John Paterson was surely right when he said,

Like Keats ... George Eliot celebrated the principle of negative capability: the ability to live without the luxury of absolute conviction as to the truth of life and nature. She in fact responded to the increasingly modern perception that ambiguity was the first principle of that life and nature.⁶

All of Eliot's novels examine the ambiguities of life and nature, and they usually indicate that people and/or societies are ultimately responsible for the way things turn out. Insofar as the art of great writers, such as the ones commemorated here, feature in Eliot's investigations, it can be said that they helped her to fill the gap left by her loss of religious faith.

The value of art, the fact that art can contribute to an understanding of the world, was something she distilled from the pages of Shakespeare and others. She once wrote, 'Artistic power seems to resemble dramatic power – to be an intuitive perception of the varied states of which the human mind is susceptible with ability to give out anew in intensified expression'.⁷ And elsewhere she made a special note of something that a French critic, Charles Philarète, said of Shakespeare concerning his dramatic powers. Philarète wrote:

Nothing is easier than to imagine – that is, to recall – a light-hearted or touching tale; it is done every day by the nurse wanting to entertain her child, the scoundrel trying to exonerate himself before his judges, the tippler wishing to amuse his friends. Genius consists of having a better understanding, a deeper insight, and shedding more light on something that everyone knows superficially or half comprehends. One of Shakespeare's special characteristics is his supreme indifference as to his subject. It is all the same to him: the master craftsman can make use of anything. At random he takes a stone, a piece of wood, a block of granite or marble. It matters little to him that someone before him has made an old king, disinherited by his daughters, act and speak on

stage: it is a fact like any other, worth no more and no less. Shakespeare will discover all the tears and strength in the heart of that old man.

Nowadays people pursue invention that lacks true originality: the latter is to be found in the artist, not the material he uses. All great men have had their material handed down to them by tradition, the people, the common heritage of ideas and customs. They have received them in their raw state; then they have melted, transformed and immortalized them. They have made a god out of a milestone, a statue out of a tree-trunk; like that Spanish painter imprisoned by the Moors, who, having no marble to shape and no Madonna to worship, took a log from his hearth and made it into the Holy Virgin.⁸

What I think Eliot really learned from Shakespeare and others, what she eventually used on her own pages, was not so much their material as their clear understanding of, and insight into, people and events. She considered that art's power lay in the re-working of inherited material, and she therefore readily compared, say, Esther Lyon and Dorothea Brooke with Shakespeare's Henry V or Rufus Lyon with Marlowe's Tamburlaine. Sometimes, there are references made in the novels to how carefully or otherwise characters read Shakespeare, Byron, Wordsworth and others; and here, too, we see Eliot using great writers as artistic and moral barometers with which to comment on or dramatize her subjects. Like Shakespeare, she was unconcerned about whether or not a subject was suitable enough. Her interest lay in discovering and portraying the character traits that people often share – despite their differing circumstances or social positions in life. In this way, she was able to point to life's continuities and historical processes, thereby indicating how people should conduct themselves in a world often found difficult if not incomprehensible. In other words, with the help of allusions and references to great writers' texts, she makes us see beyond the immediate concerns of individual lives and glimpse instead something more profound: the detailed workings of human nature.

For achieving so much it seems to me only right to honour her here amid this extraordinary 'choir invisible'. For like Shakespeare and other men and women remembered here, Eliot also has a high claim on our attention: there is indeed a good deal of honey on her pages.

Notes

1. The Revd Dr Edward Carpenter KCVO, 'Westminster Abbey Wreath-Laying, June 23rd, *The George Eliot Fellowship Review*, 22 (1991), 18.
2. George Eliot, 'The Choir Invisible', lines 2-9.
3. The poem was written in August 1867, although the surviving manuscript version is a fair copy and was written in violet ink, which she adopted in 1872. In both the 1874 and 1878 editions of *The Legend of Jubal* the poem appears last, suggesting that she meant it as a final statement on the one thing needful.
4. Shakespeare is Eliot's most frequently used source for chapter epigraphs, for instance:

he provided her with thirty-one, Wordsworth came next with nine.

5. Cited in Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), 58.
6. John Paterson, ed., Introduction, *Adam Bede* by George Eliot (1859; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), xii.
7. Cited in Paterson, xii.
8. M. Chasles Philarète, *Études sur W. Shakspeare [sic], Marie Stuart et L'arétin: Le Drame, les Moeurs et la Religion au XVI^e Siècle* (Paris: Amyot, Rue de la Paix [1851]). In the copy owned by the Leweses (now in the Dr Williams's Library, London), there are vertical pencil marks in the right margin beside the paragraphs quoted. The translation is by K. M. van den Broek.