2009

George Eliot Birthday Luncheon, 23 November 2008- The Toast to the Immortal Memory

John Rignall
I have attended several birthday luncheons over the years and I am very pleased and honoured to have been invited this year to propose the toast. The fact that this is a birthday celebration has prompted me to wonder how George Eliot herself was wont to celebrate her own birthday, and from the evidence of the letters and the journals the answer to my wondering question seems to be that she was not inclined to celebrate it at all. Indeed, she was barely inclined even to acknowledge it. There is a revealing early letter to Maria Lewis, written she claims between nine and ten in the evening of the 22nd of November 1839, which gives an earnest account of her attempts, amid distracting domestic chores, to improve herself intellectually and spiritually through assiduous reading. It ends with a solemn wish to do better, and then after signing off, she adds a lapidary postscript: ‘Today is my twentieth birthday’ (Letters, I, 35). The birthday is an afterthought, not the main feature of the day. No cakes or parties, it seems, for the serious-minded young Mary Ann: and this appears to have remained the case even when she had begun to cast off the evangelical earnestness of her early years. Three years later on the 23rd of November 1842 she informs her new friend Sara Hennell that ‘My birthday (the 23rd) I celebrated yesterday much, I fancy, as the oysters on the rock celebrate theirs’ (Letters, I, 152). These solitary oysters are certainly not those that are traditionally accompanied by champagne.

Now Sara Hennell, whose birthday was on the day after Marian’s, the 23rd of November, is the one person to whom she did acknowledge her birthday, and the one person who always faithfully remembered it. The two friends maintained an exchange of affectionate letters around the dates of their contiguous birthdays even after their lives and opinions had grown completely apart. Indeed, they kept it up for the rest of the writer’s life (Sara, who was seven years older, outlived her by nearly two decades). Initially at least, it seems to have been Sara who was the more conscientious observer of the anniversary. In 1856 she sent Marian a portrait of herself as a present, which prompted the following response in a letter of the 22nd of November: ‘Do you know, I had never thought of <y>our birthdays! I have such an un-anniversary keeping mind’ (Letters, II, 276). And ten years later she demonstrates the truth of that self-description in another letter on her birthday to Sara:

> For a wonder, I remembered the day of the month and felt a delightful confidence that I should have a letter from her who always remembers such things at the right moment. You will hardly believe in my imbecility – I can never be quite sure whether your birthday is the 21st or 23rd and Charlie’s, is the 23rd or 24th. (Letters, IV, 314)

And this comes after nearly fifteen years of friendship and regular exchange of birthday letters. Charlie is of course Charles Lewes, G. H. Lewes’s eldest son, whose birthday was in fact on the 24th of November and was the occasion in 1863 of the only party recorded in the proximity of George Eliot’s own birthday – a party which was at the same time a 21st birthday and a housewarming party for the Leweses’ new home at the Priory. The stepson and the house, it seems, merited the celebration that the author’s own birthday never received.
Her lack of interest in, and reticence about, her birthday extend even to her relationship with Lewes. On the day after her birthday in 1857 she writes to Sara to say that:

I didn’t give your letter to Mr Lewes, or tell him it was my birthday, for except you, I don’t like anybody to say anything about it or make a fuss and congratulate me. Anniversaries are sad things – to one who has lived long and done little. *(Letters, II, 404)*

She had, of course, then been living with Lewes for more than three years without apparently disclosing this basic fact about her own life. And it was not until nearly ten years later, in the birthday letter to Sara of 1866, that she records how she finally broke her silence:

I have been telling Mr Lewes that it is my birthday, and at that news he smiled through the sad look of headache as he lay on his pillow. *(Letters, IV, 314)*

One wonders whether his smile was a knowing one – had he known all along? – or a smile of pleasure at being taken into her confidence after more than twelve years of quasi married life.

‘Anniversaries are sad things – to one who has lived long and done little’, she maintains in November 1857 just at the point when she has begun to do the things that have brought us to our celebration today; and it is noticeable that when, in her journals, she does begin to look back over the past year to record the progress she has made in her life and writing, she chooses to do so not on her birthday but at the end of the calendar year, as she does a few weeks later on the 31st of December. There she bids farewell to the year, ‘So goodbye, dear 1857!’, and in summing up her happiness and achievement, famously and touchingly concludes: ‘Few women, I fear, have had such reason as I have to think the long sad years of youth were worth living for the sake of middle age’ *(Journals, 72)*.

Her birthday, unsurprisingly, goes unmentioned in her journal, though there is one interesting entry on the 22nd of November in 1868:

The return of this Saint Cecilia’s day finds me in better health than has been usual with me in these last six months. But I am not engaged in any work that makes a higher life for me – a life that is young and grows, though in my other life I am getting old and decaying. *(Journals, 133)*

She acknowledges not her birthday but the Saint’s day with which it coincides; and, appropriately on a Saint’s day associated with artistic creativity, her mind turns to her work, her art. Even though her art is not the same as Saint Cecilia’s, Dryden’s celebrated lines from his Ode on St Cecilia’s Day list qualities some of which could, without too much license, be applied to the novelist:

At last divine Cecilia came  
Inventress of the vocal frame  
The sweet enthusiast from her sacred store  
Enlarged the former narrow bounds,  
And added length to solemn sounds,  
With Nature’s mother-wit, and arts unknown before.
Invention, enlarging former narrow bounds, wit, and arts unknown before, all these she could be said to bring to the form of the novel and provide the grounds for our celebration today. And by a nice coincidence her birthday, and Saint Cecilia’s Day, mark important steps in her career as a novelist at both ends of her creative life. It is on the 22nd of November 1856 that Lewes writes to John Blackwood to accept the latter’s offer to start publishing her first story, ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton’, in the January 1857 issue of Blackwood’s Magazine. Eighteen years later on the 22nd of November 1875 Lewes writes to Blackwood again, this time arranging for the publication of her last novel Daniel Deronda in eight monthly parts. And on the 22nd of November 1878, just eight days before the sad death of Lewes, Blackwood writes to George Eliot to declare himself delighted with the first chapter of Impressions of Theophrastus Such, her final literary work, and to make arrangements for its publication. Thus is her birthday bound up with the production of those works that outlive all birthdays and give us cause to celebrate, as she never did, the anniversary of this most ‘un-anniversary keeping mind’ by raising our glasses to the immortal memory of George Eliot.