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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON, 22 NOVEMBER 2009
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

By Beryl Gray

2009 is the 150th anniversary of the publication of two works of fiction by George Eliot. As no one here could fail to know, throughout the year there have been all kinds of celebrations of her first – and wonderful – novel, Adam Bede (and the word has spread even to London of great Adam Bede happenings in these parts). On the other hand, I’ve heard of nothing commemorating ‘The Lifted Veil’, which appeared in the same year as the novel. While this strange, supernatural tale of an acutely sensitive, unproductive poet whose clairvoyance alienates him from his fellow mortals is by no means George Eliot’s greatest work, I’m reminding us of its existence because it had its place in her creative preparation for her second novel, The Mill on the Floss. I believe that writing ‘The Lifted Veil’, and submitting it to her publisher, John Blackwood, cleared the way for her to be able to return to the more important work she had already begun.

That work had begun by 12 January 1859, the day that George Eliot recorded in her Diary that she and George Henry Lewes had travelled into London to consult The Annual Register for ‘cases of inundation’: clearly she was already looking towards the tragic denouement of The Mill on the Floss, and needed to sustain her imagination with the evidence of history. So although the sesquicentennial of the emergence of the Mill isn’t until next year, it seems appropriate to think of this year as the 150th anniversary not only of the publication of Adam Bede and ‘The Lifted Veil’, but of the beginning of the novel that was to follow. The search of The Annual Register was made three days before George Eliot corrected the last proof sheets of Adam Bede, so the life of her second novel had started even before she had entirely relinquished her first; another indication of how intensely creative the year 1859 was for her. And I find it somehow pleasing that that chronicle of events should be associated with this earliest surviving indication of the Mill’s conception, for 1859 happens to have been the one hundredth anniversary of its first issue. The Annual Register is still flourishing, and celebrated its 250th birthday last month.

1859 was also the year that Dickens, a great admirer of both Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede, tried to enlist George Eliot as a contributor to All the Year Round, the weekly periodical he edited or – to use the words printed on the cover of every issue – that was ‘Conducted by Charles Dickens’, and that he had established in April as the successor to his Household Words. As you know, George Eliot declined the invitation, but we can deduce from her correspondence with Blackwood that if she hadn’t declined, and Dickens had therefore become her publisher, or one of her publishers, he would undoubtedly have found her as fiercely protective of her ideas and sense of form as Elizabeth Gaskell was of hers. Many of Mrs Gaskell’s stories and longer fiction made their first appearance in one or the other of Dickens’s twopenny weeklies, but since for him to Conduct meant to Control, he habitually tried to persuade her to make sometimes quite radical changes to her work, most notably to North and South. But Elizabeth Gaskell was not a submissive author, and her frustrated publisher was eventually driven to exclaim to his sub-editor, William Henry Wills: ‘If I were Mr Gaskell, O heaven how I should beat her!’ Faced with an equally recalcitrant George Eliot, would Dickens have found himself
declaring to Wills, ‘If I were Lewes’ (he would certainly have referred to the man George Eliot called ‘husband’ as Lewes), ‘If I were Lewes, O heaven how I should beat her’?

1859 was also the year of the death, on 15 March, of her sister Chrissey, who had been forbidden by her despotic brother Isaac from corresponding with George Eliot. Poor, ailing Chrissey did at last disobey Isaac, and a short time before she died had written to Marian; but although their mutual affection had been freshly acknowledged, the sisters were never to meet again. Stricken by the news of Chrissey’s death, George Eliot put her work on _The Mill on the Floss_ aside for a while, and wrote ‘The Lifted Veil’; so in remembering the lesser story, we are also reminded that 1859 was not only a very fruitful year for GE, but a year of unfulfilled reconciliation, and of sadness. It was a sadness that must have been exacerbated by George Eliot’s alienation from the rest of her kin, yet it was also a reaffirmation of her love for a twice lost sister.

If George Eliot’s own sense of alienation from her kin is reflected in ‘The Lifted Veil’, which she had herself described as a ‘slight story of an outré kind – not a _jeu d’esprit_, but a _jeu de mélancolie_’, the novel under way – acknowledged to be her most autobiographical work – would, despite its own sadness, commemorate the ties of affection and the power of human sympathy.

Today is not only George Eliot’s actual birthday; it is also the Day of St Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Since George Eliot often uses music and musical analogy as a way of measuring a character’s sympathetic capabilities, or lack of them, it seems fitting to celebrate her today especially as an author whose own revealed capacity for sympathy remains unsurpassed. Please raise your glasses to the immortal memory of George Eliot.