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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY 17 JULY 2014

The Guest of Honour was Beryl Gray, who gave the following Address

Every one of us attending this ceremony in Poets' Corner today is surely conscious of a great debt of gratitude to George Eliot for the legacy of her works. This year, partly due to the appearance of Rebecca Mead's memoir, one particular work – *Middlemarch* – has been the focus of much attention; and of all George Eliot's books it's the existence of *Middlemarch* for which I am myself most grateful. It's therefore on that work that I shall be focusing today.

For many decades it has been generally accepted that *Middlemarch* is George Eliot's greatest novel.¹ The writer Julian Barnes's judgement is that it's 'probably the greatest English novel', while Robert McCrum said in the *Observer* earlier this year that *Middlemarch* 'looms above the mid-Victorian literary landscape like a cathedral of words in whose shadowy vastness its readers can find every kind of addictive discomfort, a sequence of raw truths'.² I don't know what kinds of addictive discomfort or raw truths you might individually find in the novel, but McCrum's description of it as 'a cathedral of words' seems particularly resonant when spoken here in the Abbey. But whether *Middlemarch* is simply *George Eliot's* greatest novel, or the greatest *English* novel, a measure of its greatness is the nature of its effects or influence, the potency of which is reflected even in the alternative titles of Rebecca Mead's book, respectively *My Life in Middlemarch* and *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot*.

Those of you who read *The Times* perhaps saw Melanie Reid's piece in the newspaper's Magazine of 21 June. Reid's weekly column is called 'Spinal column', a brave pun which embraces the fact that she is both tetraplegic (the consequence of breaking her neck and back falling from a horse) and a journalist. The 21 June article is concerned with the kindness of strangers. Two weeks previously, she had written about the struggle for survival of her local Riding for the Disabled group at Bannockburn. In response to the article thousands of pounds had been donated to the cause, and readers had offered all kinds of support. Reid wrote that the generosity of people had taught her 'that the real world is a much nicer place than [she] had ever realized. [...] That beneath the surface manifestation of power in politics, celebrity and wealth, lies something with far more heft – the ordinary spirit of humanity.' Among the many moving messages she received was one from someone called Pauline who told her that when she went walking in the Swiss Alps, she carried Reid's picture in her backpack so that the journalist could 'symbolically [...] share the peaks, meadows and Alpine air'. Pauline, we're told, then 'quoted *Middlemarch*, to express the purpose of life and organizations such as [Riding for the Disabled]: "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult [to] each other?"'³

George Eliot gave those words not to her novel's narrator, but – significantly – to its heroine, Dorothea. Dorothea speaks them in chapter 72 of *Middlemarch*, when her 'impetuous generosity' prompts her to vindicate Lydgate 'from the suspicion of having accepted money as a bribe'. It's true that that very impetuosity has to undergo 'a melancholy check'. Nonetheless, it is a fundamental element of the nature with which her creator has endowed her; a nature with which she is clearly deeply in sympathy. Not every reader of 'Spinal Column' will have read *Middlemarch*, but through Melanie Reid via her correspondent, Pauline, some element of the

novel's influence will have reached those readers too, as though in exemplification of what George Eliot says in the much-quoted last sentence of the novel about the 'incalculably diffusive' effect of Dorothea's 'being'. '[F]or the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts', George Eliot continues; 'and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs'. For it is important to remember that the words quoted by Reid, and which are taken – rightly, I believe – to represent Eliot's own attitude – are uttered by the character who disappoints many commentators because her author is considered to have devised an insufficiently distinguished career for her. And yet for Melanie Reid and for Pauline, it is that character who emerges from *Middlemarch* as George Eliot's spokeswoman, or even George Eliot herself – proof enough, I think, of Dorothea's effectiveness, and of the effectiveness of those who live as she is imagined to have lived.

Middlemarch is very much concerned with the idea of connection. 'I [...] have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven', George Eliot famously proclaimed in chapter 15 of the novel, 'that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe'. The artistry with which the 'belated historian' (as George Eliot describes her narrator) *creates* the very web she purports to be studying (the sub-title of *Middlemarch* is, we recall, 'A Study of Provincial Life'), is itself the study of many critics. She begins to weave it well before she overtly draws attention to its existence. In chapter 11, for example, she writes that 'any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another [...]. Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection – gradually, as the old stocking gave way to the saving-bank, and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct'. Those threads extend beyond the novel's fictional heartland, and beyond the time in which it was written. They connect the Midlands in which most of its action is set, with the London in which – much to Celia's disgust – Dorothea and Ladislav make their home. They connect the Warwickshire Mary Ann[e] or Marian Evans had left, but which George Eliot's imagination was never able to relinquish, with the London in which she and George Henry Lewes lived and wrote – and are buried, for the village of Highgate was drawn into London just a few years after her death. Many of you have travelled from Warwickshire to be here today. That fact alone testifies to the existence in the George Eliot scheme of things of a thread that continues stealthily to connect municipal town, rural parish, and the city in which we are all assembled.

- 1 See John Rignall's entry on the novel in *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* (Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 2 *The Observer* 9 February 2014.
- 3 However, as Reid reported on 27 December 2014 (*The Times Magazine*, p. 7), she was nevertheless unable to save her 'beloved Riding for the Disabled from being evicted by a merciless landlord'.