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WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH LAYING
July 1st 1989

Our Guest of Honour was Dr. ROSEMARY ASHTON whose book George Eliot was published in OUP's Past Masters series in 1983. She is now working on a biography of G.H. Lewes. She gave the following address:

**GEORGE ELIOT AND THE WORKING-DAY
BUSINESS OF THE WORLD.**

One of the Shakespeare quotations most frequently used by George Eliot in her writings is an otherwise little-known phrase from As You Like It, Act 1 scene iii, where Rosalind, about to leave the court for the Forest of Arden, says, 'O, how full of briars is this working-day world!' In George Eliot's work the phrase is illustrative of her theory of realism in fiction, the theory most famously expressed in Adam Bede, where the author praises the truthfulness of Dutch paintings, describing the sympathy which is aroused in her by 'these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence', as exemplified by 'old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands' (Book 2, chapter 1). George Eliot's novels show that there is both truth and beauty to be found in everyday scenes among ordinary people. It is not a completely new idea about literature; most famously, Wordsworth had espoused it in the theory and practice of Lyrical Ballads at the beginning of the century. But the novels of the mid-nineteenth century were most often characterised by melodrama, coincidence, and extremes of the social scale, in novels of high life, such as those of Bulwer Lytton, or novels of Newgate, including Oliver Twist.

Of course, George Eliot's novels are not without their measure of melodrama - one thinks of the childmurder of Hetty Sorrel and her last minute reprieve from the gallows in Adam Bede, the Liebestod in the flood at the end of The Mill on the Floss, or the Dickensian elements in Felix Holt, such as the secret relationships in the Transome family, and the complicated legal arrangements which are gradually uncovered. But George Eliot also renders people in the home, at work, living ordinary lives (in which, as Wordsworth had also seen, there is plenty of drama mixed up with the monotony). One thinks of Caleb Garth and his family in Middlemarch, or of Adam Bede the carpenter, seen in the very opening chapter (entitled 'The Work-shop') of this first best-selling novel by the unknown 'George Eliot', actually at work, making a door. George Eliot is so much one of the great Victorian novelists, and we know that

many of those who came after her - Hardy, Meredith, Henry James - owed her a debt of influence, that we may tend to take such elements in her work for granted, even see them as typically Victorian. But she was doing something radical, and intentionally so.

In the autumn of 1856 she began writing her first piece of fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton', the first of three 'Scenes of Clerical Life' to be published in Blackwood's Magazine in 1857. At the same time she wrote the funniest of her many funny review essays for the radical Westminster Review, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', which was published in the October 1856 number of the journal. Let me read you first the opening of chapter 5 of 'Amos Barton':

The Rev. Amos Barton, whose sad fortunes I have undertaken to relate, was, you perceive, in no respect an ideal exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable, - a man whose virtues were not heroic and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace; who was not even in love but had had that complaint favourably many years ago. 'An utterly uninteresting character!' I think I hear a lady reader exclaim - Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction; to whom tragedy means ermine tippets, adultery and murder; and comedy, the adventures of some personage who is quite a 'character'.

But, my dear madam, it is so very large a majority of your fellow-countrymen that are of this insignificant stamp. At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-Britons returned in the last census are neither extraordinarily silly, nor extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise; their eyes are neither deep and liquid with sentiment, nor sparkling with suppressed witticisms; they have probably had no hairbreadth escapes or thrilling adventures; their brains are certainly not pregnant with genius, and their passions have not manifested themselves at all after the fashion of a volcano. They are simply men of complexions more or less muddy, whose conversation is more or less bald and disjointed. Yet these com-

monplace people - many of them - bear a conscience, and have felt the sublime prompting to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows, and their sacred joys; their hearts have perhaps gone out towards their first-born, and they have mourned over the irreclaimable dead. Nay, is there not a pathos in their very insignificance - in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share?

Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones. In that case, I should have no fear of your not caring to know what farther befell the Rev. Amos Barton, or of your thinking the homely details I have to tell at all beneath your attention. As it is, you can, if you please, decline to pursue my story farther; and you will easily find reading more to your taste, since I learn from the newspapers that many remarkable novels, full of striking situations, thrilling incidents, and eloquent writing, have appeared only within the last season.

And now follows the opening of her article on such recent 'remarkable novels':

Silly novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them - the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic. But it is a mixture of all these - a composite order of feminine fatuity, that produces the largest class of such novels, which we shall distinguish as the mind-and-millinery species. The heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond. Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb

contralto and a superb intellect, she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues. Or it may be that the heroine is not an heiress - that rank and wealth are the only things in which she is deficient; but she infallibly gets into high society, she has the triumph of refusing many matches and securing the best, and she wears some family jewels or other as a sort of crown of righteousness at the end. Rakish men either bite their lips in impotent confusion at her repartees, or are touched to penitence by her reproofs, which, on appropriate occasions, rise to a lofty strain of rhetoric; indeed, there is a general propensity in her to make speeches, and to rhapsodize at some length when she retires to her bedroom. In her recorded conversations she is amazingly eloquent, and in her unrecorded conversations, amazingly witty. She is understood to have a depth of insight that looks through and through the shallow theories of philosophers, and her superior instincts are a sort of dial by which men have only to set their clocks and watches, and all will go well. The men play a very subordinate part by her side. You are consoled now and then by a hint that they have affairs, which keeps you in mind that the working-day business of the world is somehow being carried on, but ostensibly the final cause of their existence is that they may accompany the heroine on her 'starring' expedition through life. They see her at a ball, and are dazzled; at a flower-show, and they are fascinated; on a riding excursion, and they are witched by her noble horsemanship; at church, and they are awed by the sweet solemnity of her demeanour. She is the ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces. For all this, she as often as not marries the wrong person to begin with, and she suffers terribly from the plots and intrigues of the vicious baronet; but even death has a soft place in his heart for such a paragon, and remedies all mistakes for her just at the right moment. The vicious baronet is sure to be killed in a duel, and the tedious husband dies in his bed requesting his wife, as a particular favour to him, to marry the man she loves best, and having already dispatched a note to the lover informing him of the comfortable arrangement. Before matters arrive at this desirable issue our feelings are tried by seeing the noble, lovely, and gifted heroine pass through many mauvais moments, but we have the satisfaction of knowing that her

sorrows are wept into embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, that her fainting form reclines on the very best upholstery, and that whatever vicissitudes she may undergo, from being dashed out of her carriage to having her head shaved in a fever, she comes out of them all with a complexion more blooming and locks more redundant than ever.