GEORGE ELIOT: THE WRITER AS MONUMENT AND WRITING ABOUT MONUMENTS

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Different witnesses agree that going to visit George Eliot in her later years at her famous Sunday afternoon receptions at The Priory in Regent's Park was a solemn experience. Henry James recalled that there was "a kind of sanctity in the place, an atmosphere of stillness and concentration, something that suggested a literary Temple" (Carroll 502). In a letter to George Henry Lewes, Dickens once facetiously remarked that he would be attending service at The Priory the following Sunday: an expression that Lewes himself later took up, writing tongue-in-cheek to Lord Houghton in February 1872 about their "Sunday Services for the People" (Haight 9: 41). George Meredith, looking back irreverently from the late 1890s, could see in all this only comedy and a subject for satire, "with the dais, and the mercurial little showman and the Bishops about the feet of an erratic woman worshipped as a literary idol and light of philosophy. No stage has had anything so poignant for satire" (Cline 3: 1460). But worshipped she certainly was, in particular by those adoring younger women like Edith Simcox, Elma Stuart and Georgiana Burne-Jones, for whom she was the object of a cult whose officiating high priest was the "mercurial little showman" Lewes. And even for her more temperate contemporaries she was, in her final decade, firmly established on a metaphorical dais as England's greatest living novelist.

It was this elevation of George Eliot to something like a Victorian monument in her own drawing room that particularly incensed her less successful rival as a woman writer and novelist, Eliza Lynn Linton. In the memoir she published in 1895, long after George Eliot's death and shortly before her own, Eliza Lynn Linton contrasts the monumental George Eliot of the later years with the gawky young woman she had met at John Chapman's house in the Strand in 1852: "essentially under bred and provincial [. . .] She held her hands and arms kangaroo fashion; was badly dressed; [and] had an unwashed, unbrushed, unkempt look altogether" (Linton 445). And she contrasts her, too, with the altogether more attractive person she recalls meeting again in 1855 after George Eliot had returned from Germany with Lewes and was in the full flush of her new love, "frank, genial, natural and brimful of happiness" (446). What she later became was, for Lynn Linton, something artificial and unreal, entirely devoid of spontaneity, and carefully measured and guarded in speech, gesture and attitude. This deliberately "self-created Self" who never threw aside "the trappings or the airs of the benign sybil" was indeed a kind of monument: "She was always the goddess on her pedestal–gracious in her condescension–with sweet strains of sympathetic recognition for all who came to her–ever ready to listen to her worshippers–ever ready to reply, to encourage, to clear from confusion minds befogged by unassimilated learning, and generous in imparting her own" (446). One has to allow for a good measure of jealousy at the far greater success of a rival woman writer in Lynn

Linton's acid portrait, but what she took exception to was what others consciously strove to create, in particular George Eliot's "widow" Johnnie Cross in the years immediately following her death. It was this sibylline figure on a pedestal that Cross's *Life of George Eliot* did so much to promote, while only succeeding in creating a target for the iconoclasm of a younger generation around the turn of the nineteenth century (men such as W. E. Henley, Edmund Gosse and Arnold Bennett) for whom such Victorian monuments were the tokens of a past that was to be scornfully rejected. Indeed, the construction of George Eliot as a Victorian monument was an important factor in the decline of her reputation after her death, a decline which all those who continued nevertheless to write about her never failed to remark upon.

The creation of a monumental, sibylline George Eliot in the 1870s and 1880s is a curious phenomenon in the light of the radical, freethinking, iconoclastic young intellectual she had been in her early years in London (although of course the image of the solemn sibyl can be seen in one sense as a deliberate attempt to banish the scandalous figure she cut in her mid-thirties as the woman who had run off with a married man). William Hale White, responding critically to Cross's *Life* in a letter to the *Athenæum* on 28 November 1885, famously described the Marian Evans he had known at Chapman's in the early 1850s as "one of the most sceptical, unusual creatures I ever knew" and describes her, unimaginably far from dais or pedestal, correcting proofs with her hair over her shoulders and her feet over the arms of her easy chair in front of the fire in the dark back room at 142 Strand (Ashton 4-5). At that stage of her life she showed herself to be refreshingly irreverent in her attitude to objects of conventional piety and respect, such as the monarch herself. There is the well-known letter from the revolutionary year of 1848 where she refers to "our little humbug of a queen" (Haight 1: 254), and another from 1852 where she describes seeing Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at a concert and draws a sharp contrast between the two: Albert, whom she "fell in love with," "was unusually animated and prominent": "He has a noble, genial, intelligent expression and is altogether a man to be proud of. As for the Queen, she is deplorable–worse and worse the more one looks at her–so utterly mean in contour and expression" (Haight 2: 28). The grounds for her contempt are, significantly, aesthetic rather than political: what the Queen lacks is stature, grandeur, nobility: indeed, any of the qualities that one might associate with the monumental. Where Albert is noble and commanding, Victoria is merely mean. The kind of figure that, George Eliot implies, the dumpy little monarch ought to be but fails to be, is suggested by another woman from the opposite end of the social spectrum, glimpsed at Swansea in June 1856 and described in her Ilfracombe Journal. This was a cockle woman, "the grandest woman I ever saw–six feet high, carrying herself like a Greek Warrior, and treading the earth with unconscious majesty" (Haight 2: 251). The very terms in which this imposing figure is described–six feet high rather than six feet tall–imply the dimensions of a statue or monument rather than of a human being; and Hugh Witemeyer in his pioneering work on *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* relates this incident to the novelist's taste in painting and sculpture, claiming that she was particularly fond of "heroic and monumental images of women" (89). However, it is important to note that for George Eliot real people tended to be more impressive than sculptural images, and as she goes on to describe this figure more closely, the features of an individual working-class Welsh woman begin to emerge, weather-beaten and wizened but with bright piercing eyes. And finally it is the human energy and action of the cockle woman that she stresses in an apparently admiring comment that follows the initial description: "one of the porters had been insolent the other day to a cockle woman and she [. . .] immediately pitched him off the platform into the road below." The monumental can also be dynamic, and it is the dynamism rather than the statuesque appearance that receives the final emphasis. As a very young woman in 1840 she had seen and described the statue of Samuel Johnson at Lichfield (an actual Victorian monument erected in 1838) but considered it inferior to the one in St Paul's, which, although stylised and neo-classical in form, had shaken her "almost as much as a real glance from the literary monarch" (Haight 1: 55). The most powerful monument for the young George Eliot, it seems, was that which approximated most closely in its effect to living reality.

If she was particularly susceptible to the appeal of massive Amazonian figures, one of her best documented encounters with such a figure was her visit to Ludwig Schwanthaler's colossal statue of Bavaria while she and Lewes were staying in Munich in 1858. The Bavaria statue had been formally unveiled in 1850, two years after Schwanthaler's death, and was thus still a relatively new addition to the city's architecture. It stood, and stands, 15.75 metres high on a pedestal of at least 10 metres, and represents the country of Bavaria as a woman holding in her left hand above her head a wreath of oak leaves, and in her right hand a sword. Dressed in a simple tunic with a bearskin over it, she has a lion, the heraldic beast of Bavaria, sitting at her feet on the right hand side. The journal entry for Monday 12 April 1858 runs as follows:

> Monday 12. After reading Anna Mary Howitt's book on Munich, and Overbeck on Greek art, we turned out into the delicious sunshine to walk in the Theresien Wiese, and have our first look at the colossal Bavaria, the greatest work of Schwanthaler. Delightful it was to get away from the houses into this breezy meadow, where we heard the larks singing above us. The sun was still too high in the west for us to look with comfort at the statue except right in front of it, when it eclipsed the sun. And this front view is the only satisfactory one. The outline made by the head and arm on a side view is almost painfully ugly. But in front, looking up to the beautiful calm face, the impression it produces is sublime. I have never seen anything even in ancient sculpture of a more awful beauty than this dark colossal head looking out from a background of pure pale blue sky. We mounted the platform to have a view of her back, and then, walking forward, looked to our right and saw – the snow-covered Alps! Sight more to me than all the art in Munich, though I love the art nevertheless. The great wide-stretching earth and the all-embracing sky – the birth-right of us all – are what I care most to look at, after all. And I feel intensely the new beauty of the

> sky here. The blue is so exquisitely clear, and the wide streets give one such a broad canopy of sky. I felt more inspirited by our walk to the Theresien-Platz than by any pleasure we have had in Munich. (Harris and Johnston 311)

The narrative sequence of experiences is revealing. The initial impression of ugliness when seen from the side gives way to the sublime: the beautiful calm face and colossal head looking out from a background of pale blue sky (an image reminiscent of a passage in the letters where she talks respectfully of the "big calm gods" of Egypt: Haight 4: 362). The monument is awe-inspiring but it is the background, the sky and the gleaming alps in the distance, that finally steals the show. The true sublimity is nature's which in the end dwarfs all the artistic treasures and monuments that Munich has to offer. The inspiring effect of the all-embracing sky is a repeated motif of George Eliot's letters, especially in the late 1850s and 1860s when she and Lewes move from one London address to another and she is becoming a somewhat reluctant Londoner and finding relief in excursions to the country. As she puts it in a letter of August 1863 to Barbara Bodichon: "the wide sky, the not-London, makes a new creature out of me in half an hour" (Haight 4: 102). The phrasing from the Munich passage in the journal seems to suggest that she found in the vista of the cloudless sky and distant mountains some kind of earthly equivalent for the divine transcendence she had long ceased to believe in. It is this transcendent and almost ineffable beauty of the immanent world, of the here and now, that seizes her attention and imagination. And on two other occasions in that week in April when she and Lewes set out to see the statue at sunset, they find themselves diverted by other sights and attractions, by the rich variety of life, the spectacle of the here and now, that Munich affords. On the first occasion, finding that they are too early, they go on into the Hofgarten where the chestnut buds are beginning to burst and drink a glass of coffee: on the second they are surprised by a shower of rain and take refuge in a pretty house near the Hall of Fame. There they see a "charming family group":

> a mother, with her three children; the eldest a boy with his book, the second a three-year old maiden, the third a sweet baby girl of a year and a half; two dogs, one a mixture of the setter and pointer, the other a turnspit; and a relation, or servant, ironing. The baby cried at the sight of G. in beard and spectacles, but kept turning her eyes towards him from her mother's lap, every now and then seeming to have overcome her fears and then bursting out crying anew. At last, she got down and lifted the table-cloth, to peep at his legs, as if to see the monster's nether parts. (Harris and Johnston 312)

Once again the glimpse of the here and now distracts them from their original goal in a way that is indicative of the bent of the novelist's imagination – an imagination more readily seized by the lively details of the social scene than by the monolithic fixity of the colossal statue.

This visit to the Bavaria monument and its implications for the nature of George Eliot's imagination and aesthetic sensibility invite comparison with one of the most famous constructions of her as a monumental sibylline figure, Frederic W. H. Myers's account of her in the Fellows' garden of Trinity College Cambridge on the grey evening of a wet day in May, most probably in 1873. Myers is the first to draw the sibylline parallel, and the occasion that he is recalling comes fifteen years after the Munich experience and belongs to the period after the publication and success of *Middlemarch* when George Eliot's public image as the great sage and foremost English novelist of her day was firmly established. Myers is of course looking back from 1881 after her death and may well be exaggerating and dramatising the episode for the kind of effect appropriate to a memorial article, but his rhetorical treatment of the scene is nevertheless instructive and shows a very different kind of imagination at work and a very different perception of the world. His whole article, entitled "The Portrait of George Eliot," stresses the "strenuous seriousness" (59) of the novelist he admires: her look is that "of a strenuous Demiurge, of a soul on which high tasks are laid, and which finds in their accomplishment its only imagination of joy" (61). A far cry, one might think, from the visitor to Munich so easily and enjoyably diverted by the passing scene. The most famous passage of the article describes her solemn pronouncement in the gathering dusk:

> she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men, – the words, God, Immortality, Duty, – pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third. Never, perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrecompensing Law. I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned towards me like a sybil's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise, and left me with the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates. And when we stood at length and parted, amid that columnar circuit of the forest-trees, beneath the last twilight of starless skies, I seemed to be gazing, like Titus at Jerusalem, on vacant seats and empty halls, – on a sanctuary with no Presence to hallow it, and heaven left lonely of a God. (62-63)

There are elements in common here with the journal entry on the Bavaria monument – evening, the majestic face, the surrounding natural world – but the rhetorical treatment is very different. The grave majestic countenance turned towards Myers like a sybil's in the gloom may bear comparison with the calm face and colossal head of the Bavaria monument at sunset, but here it is the monumental figure which dwarfs the background, her solemn and awful words draining meaning from the natural world represented by the forest-trees and starless skies, and leaving her listener gazing into a frightening void. There is none of George Eliot's own delight in the immanent world, for Myers is still too deeply in mourning for the death of God; and even nature seems to get transformed into a form of monumental architecture in the "columnar circuit of forest trees," surrounding the oracular sage like the pillars of a Pantheon. Nature is here subordinate to the monumental figure, not a source of independent delight. The passage, and indeed the whole article, bears the imprint of Myers's particular sensibility, that of a man whose Christian faith has only recently been overthrown by the implications of Darwinian science and who still bears the mental scars of the trauma. He had apparently undergone an intensification of his faith in the late 1860s before succumbing to agnosticism, but, as this article implies, he was still deeply exercised by the question of the afterlife, the question of what might survive of the individual after death. This concern, or rather obsession, led him to help found the Society for Psychical Research in the following year and into working on a book, which his widow published after his death, entitled *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). In contributing to the monumental image of George Eliot he seems to have been working in a sense for the survival of her personality, as he constructed it, after her bodily death.

In the same year as this famous encounter in the Fellow's Garden, Nietzsche was writing the second of his *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* or *Untimely Meditations*, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life," published in February 1874, in which he identifies three species of history, three types of attitude or approach to the past: the antiquarian, the critical, and, the one that is most pertinent to George Eliot in this context, the monumental. Nietzsche's meditations are untimely in the sense of turning against the historical grain of nineteenth-century thinking and arguing that a culture may have too much of history for its own good. The value of history for him is measured by how far it can serve life in the present, and, in identifying three types of history, he weighs up their usefulness and disadvantages in this respect. The monumental form of history expresses a fundamental faith in humanity and a protest against the transitoriness of things, for the person who demands such a history believes not only that greatness has existed in the past but that greatness may be achieved again in the present. In the monuments and monumental figures of the past such a person "finds inspiration to imitate or do better" (68). He or she is conscious of fighting a great fight and needs "models, teachers, comforters and cannot find them amongst his contemporaries" (67). Myers appears to have been just such a figure, finding in George Eliot a great model, teacher and comforter in the emptiness of a godless world where he nonetheless still seeks authoritative moral guidance. And in some respects George Eliot herself also takes the monumental attitude to the past in her honouring of what she referred to as the "great dead." Visiting Comte's apartment was , for instance, the most interesting sight in her June 1865 visit to Paris with Lewes: "Such places, that knew the great dead, always move me deeply" (Haight 4: 176), she wrote; and earlier she had been similarly moved by visiting Schiller's and Goethe's houses in Weimar. And the great dead are, of course, an inspiration to emulation: in relation to Comte's apartment she observed that "I flattered myself that I could have written better in the little study there than in my own." Yet what separates her from Myers is her apparent awareness of the kind of drawbacks to the monumental view of the past that Nietzsche proceeds to identify. And despite the German philosopher's notorious contempt for George Eliot and those like her who cling on to Christian ethics whilst no longer believing in a Christian God (which is exactly what Myers, too, was doing), her mind is far closer to his in its capacity for sinuous interrogation of a topic from different angles than he could ever acknowledge. One of the disadvantages of the monumental view of history for Nietzsche is that it deals only in approximations and generalities: "how much of the past," he points out, "would have to be overlooked to produce that mighty effect: how violently what is individual in it would have to be forced into a universal mould and all its sharp corners and hard outlines broken up in the interest of conformity" (69). Another disadvantage is that such a history "runs the risk of being beautified and coming close to free poetic invention. Indeed some ages have been incapable of distinguishing between a monumentalised past and a mythical fiction" (70). From the evidence of her letters and journals and, of course, her fiction, George Eliot recognizes these drawbacks, and that recognition distances her from the monumentalising treatment she herself was subjected to.

In a letter of 1854 she passes a comment on the Crystal Palace: "What a creation it is! [. . .] Shakespeare, our navy and the Crystal Palace are the most *eigenthümliche* things we have produced." And then she goes on to imagine another kind of monument to Victorian energy, an entry in a Biographical Dictionary for 1954 for her friend Herbert Spencer: "Spencer, Herbert, an original and profound philosophical writer, especially known by his great work xxx which gave a new impulse to psychology and has mainly contributed to the present advanced position of that science [. . .] The life of this philosopher, like that of the great Kant, offers little material for the narrator" (Haight 2: 165). That, perhaps, is the trouble not just with Spencer but with monuments in general from the point of view of a novelist: they offer little material for the narrator. She knew her Lessing, of course, and accepted and admired his distinction between the narrative and the plastic arts, and her ultimate commitment is, naturally enough, clearly to the former. She may, as Witemeyer suggests, have a taste for statuesque female figures, but where such figures appear in her fiction, as with Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, the statuesque is only part of the story. When Dorothea is likened in chapter 10 to Santa Barbara in the completeness of her "air of repose" (86), George Eliot is clearly recalling Palma Vecchio's painting of the saint in the church of Santa Maria Formosa in Venice, described in her "Recollections of Italy" as "an almost unique representation of a hero-woman, standing in calm preparation for martyrdom" (Harris and Johnston 365). But the parallel is immediately qualified by an insistence on Dorothea's potential for energy and action rather than monumental passivity: "but these intervals of quietude made the energy of her speech and emotion the more remarked when some outward appeal had touched her" (86). Self-contained repose is only an interval in a dynamic life that will not quietly succumb to martyrdom. The resemblance to Palma Vecchio's "hero-woman" is only momentary, and it is clear that George Eliot's realism is ultimately opposed to monumental notions of the heroic and the fixity of the statuesque. The episode in the Vatican museum in chapter 19 underlines the point. Dorothea, "a breathing blooming girl" (186), is juxtaposed to the reclining statue of Ariadne and immediately seen by the painter Naumann as an ideal subject for an allegorical painting. But in the altercation with Ladislaw that follows, the latter persuasively presents the superior claims of language, the medium of narrative art, over painting in a way that seems to have the endorsement of George Eliot's narrator: "Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent perfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is a difference in their very breathing: they change from moment to moment" (189). The dynamic, changing and elusive qualities of the living individual woman are the real object of interest for this male gaze, and by implication for the gender-neutral gaze of the narrator and the realistic vision of the author.

On different occasions the relative evaluation in this passage is taken a stage further, as far as an equation of the monumental human figure, the statue, with the immobility not of the single frozen moment, but of death itself. In "The Lifted Veil" Latimer's nightmare vision of Prague takes the blackened statues on the Charles Bridge, with their blank gaze, ancient garments and saintly crowns, as the real inhabitants and owners of the place; these "grim stony beings" (9) suggest a city trapped in its past and incapable of breathing life in the present. Similarly, in Dino's terrible vision in *Romola*, the antiquarian obsession with the past is seen as a desert peopled only by monumental figures, "men of bronze and marble" (157) that mockingly hold out cups of water, which turn to parchment when put to human lips. Monumental history's dismissal of the individual is here configured as deadening and deadly. It is not so much a mode of honouring the past as of stifling and strangling the present. Like Nietzsche, George Eliot sees that humankind can suffer from too much history, that the historical spirit can be inimical to life in the here and now. Such, of course, is the experience of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* when she visits Rome, "the city of visible history," on her honeymoon and finds herself oppressed by the weight of the past, its ruins, monuments and statues: its "strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar" (190), and "long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world" (191).

Such statues and monuments are inimical to the living reality captured in narrative art, and their oppressive presence in George Eliot's fiction raises the question of whether there is any narrative equivalent of the monumental in her work. One answer may be found in the lives of those female characters, like Dorothea Brooke, Maggie Tulliver and Gwendolen Harleth, who are frequently described as statuesque in appearance (see Witemeyer 89), but who are more truly monumental in their strenuous moral pilgrimage, in the way they struggle through vicissitudes and ordeals to self-realisation and self-awareness. It is not their statuesque physique which makes these female characters approximate to the monumental, but their experience of struggle – a struggle which is never concluded except in death. Indeed, in dramatising this struggle George Eliot appears explicitly to question the fixity and finality of the monumental and the statuesque as they appear in the plastic arts. The scene of the *tableau vivant* in *Daniel Deronda* illustrates the point with dramatic conciseness. Gwendolen's imitation of the statue of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* – an expression of her aspiration to be a tragic actress – breaks down when Klesmer's chord on the piano causes a wooden panel in the wainscot to swing open to reveal the picture of the dead face and fleeing figure which has disturbed Gwendolen before and which now, suddenly reappearing, makes her cry out and collapse in terror. Klesmer may applaud this as "a magnificent bit of *plastik*" (57), but in fact it neatly represents the triumph of narrative over plastic art. The fixity of the statue gives way to the strong and turbulent currents of Gwendolen's inner life; and that life is one which, in the famously open ending of the novel, is brought to no definitive conclusion but left resolutely unfinalised.

It is, indeed, in her endings that George Eliot most obviously eschews the fixity and finality of the monumental. *The Mill on the Floss* may end with a monument, but the tomb of Maggie and Tom is an equivocal memorial whose effect is not so much to set the seal on the lives of brother and sister as to keep alive the problematic nature of their relationship. In proclaiming their union in death – "In their death they were not divided" (522) – the inscription on the tombstone serves simply to emphasise how bitterly divided they were in life. Rather than creating closure, this concluding monument turns our attention back to the narrative that has just been concluded and reminds us of the issues and conflicts that it has dramatised but left unresolved. The ending of *Middlemarch*, on the other hand, dispenses with monuments altogether, and, indeed, takes a stand against the monumental attitude to history by affirming the value of unhistoric and unrecorded acts and eloquently maintaining that the growing good of the world is half owing to those who, like Dorothea in her second marriage, live hidden lives and rest in unvisited tombs. The emphasis is characteristic. At the end of her greatest novel, the monumental novelist refrains from putting her heroine on a pedestal and proclaims the value of lives that escape the monumentalising treatment that she herself received and against which, on occasions, she protested, as she did in the last year of her life when she said to Georgiana Burne-Jones: "I am so tired of being put on a pedestal and expected to vent wisdom" (Burne-Jones 2: 104).

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