

Anniversaries Article [FINAL DRAFT]

George Eliot: For and Against Nostalgia

In the year in which Nuneaton celebrates the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Eliot, Helen Small considers ideas of place and nostalgia in *The Mill on the Floss*

Mary Anne Evans, better known under her pseudonym ‘George Eliot’, was born two hundred years ago in Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire (now part of Nuneaton). She lived in the area until she was 21, when the death of her father set her free to pursue her ambitions.

Bicentenary celebrations have been taking place in and around Nuneaton throughout 2019.

Funding has been secured for the Museum, the Library and the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in nearby Coventry to create new exhibitions and visitor activities relating to Eliot’s life and works. The George Eliot Fellowship is constructing a ‘special trail’ of quotations displayed about the town (including a famous line of advice about reading: ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’).

What Evans would have made of all this we can only imagine. She paid her last trip to Warwickshire in 1855 when she was 36. She had just returned from her European ‘elopement’ with the married writer and critic George Henry Lewes. Her decision to live with him and style herself ‘Mrs Lewes’ caused a 25-year break with her brother Isaac and put a strain on old friendships. From that time on, she was in voluntary exile from Warwickshire. She could have gone back but chose not to.

The Mill on the Floss

Our relationship to the place in which we are raised is a major preoccupation of Eliot’s fiction. It is a subject that provokes intensely conflicted emotions. The feeling that where we

start from exerts a special hold, perhaps an unbreakable hold, on us is especially intense in the early works written soon after her last visit to Warwickshire (*Scenes of Clerical Life* [1857], *Adam Bede*, [1859], *Felix Holt* [1866]). It is dramatized most fully in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Set in the fictional village of St. Ogg's around 1830, the novel tells the story of Maggie Tulliver's struggle and failure to live a larger life. It is saturated with Eliot's own ambivalence toward home. Maggie rails against the 'oppressive narrowness' of St Ogg's—a community of practical people, busily mercantile, without imagination—but one she is bound to 'by the strongest fibres' of her heart (Book Fourth, Ch. 1).

Cleverer than most of those around her and hungering for stimulus, Maggie suffers from having read just enough to know that a better life is possible (a life of 'real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew' [Book IV, Ch. 3]) but not enough to be make such a life her own. Her learning is too patchy, her books too few, and though she is not friendless she is without the guidance that Mary Ann Evans found in her own life: the key teacher, the tutor in languages, and the subsequent mentors who set her on a good path. As a result, all Maggie's impulses toward rebellion and escape go nowhere except inward in the form of depression (a condition linked to guilt and repressed anger, Freud tells us). Love offers a way out, but it is the wrong love. The man she is attracted to is engaged to marry her cousin. Rather than betray the other woman's trust (though she comes close), Maggie chooses to renounce the lover, embracing the idea of giving things up with a fervour that seems painfully compensatory. Renunciation is not the worst thing she could do under the circumstances, Eliot suggests, but it leaves her unable to see a way out of her situation.

Despite the ordinariness of the lives depicted, *The Mill on the Floss* is described as a tragedy. Its narrator keeps coming back to the word. This is, we are told, a tragedy of the 'unwept, hidden sort that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record' (Book III, Ch. 1). This is a generous view of tragedy that will resonate with every teenager who has

ever longed to escape home, or parents, or a small-town life, and hoped to start again and be freer and happier elsewhere. Eliot's great subject, in the *Mill on the Floss*, is the 'dreariness' that can weigh 'like a damp, thick air' on children (the word 'teenager' wasn't available to her—not coined until the early twentieth century).

Eliot was gifted at the language of contained emotions: desire, unhappiness, broiling resentment—lashing out occasionally only to be reined back in. Above all, she was great at capturing the feeling of not being able to put your finger on what it is that you want, yet having a sense that it is out there somewhere. Surges of eloquence change the gearing of her prose, moving away from the story in hand to state big moralising claims about the human condition. Like another great moment of eloquence in Eliot's most famous novel *Middlemarch*—'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat' (*Middlemarch*, ch. 20)—the 'unwept tragedy' passage just quoted shows us an ideal state of sensitivity to others' feelings but at the same time a problem with that ideal. We are asked to see tragedy as an everyday thing, happening whenever one generation limits the horizons of the next; but we are also told that there is a limit to how far it is possible to recognise such miseries. Most 'tragedies' will go unrecognised and 'unwept' because there is no writer at hand to put them on 'record', and even if there were there is only so much pain we can bear to be sensitized to.

On closer reading, we might want to be wary of the eloquence in *The Mill on the Floss*. While the appeal of the elevated language is clear, it is not Maggie's language but the narrator's. It doesn't necessarily do justice to the difficulty of her situation: feeling an intense love for family that seems so inadequately reciprocated that many readers are troubled by her self-repressive loyalty. She adores her brother Tom, but he is fighting his own battle against St Ogg's, and his vulnerability makes him unkind, contemptuous, bullying. It is a problem, then, that the narrative voice insists so loudly that the hold of home is a good thing—the first

source of all attachments, including attachment to life itself. Rapturous meditations on the child's bond with the natural world make an ecological point as well as a point about family: 'We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it,—if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers' (Book I, Ch. 5). The result is an oddly strained novel: one of the finest ever written about the 'griefs of children', but also one at excessive pains to wipe the griefs away and depict childhood in the colours of English pastoral.

The Problem with Nostalgia

The critic Svetlana Bok reminds us that 'nostalgia' has two Greek roots: νόστος/nostos ('return home') and ἄλγος/álgos ('longing'). She defines it as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'. *The Mill on the Floss* looks like a perfect test case for Bok's theory that what we are really in love with, when we feel nostalgic, is the power of our own fantasy—a fantasy that will only survive if we keep reality at bay. The soft edges of *The Mill on the Floss*'s representation of growing up are in keeping with that idea. The novel is framed by nostalgia. At its start, a strangely under-characterised narrator dreams of Dorlcote Mill, the place in which Maggie and Tom grow up, conjuring up its natural beauty as if out of a mist; at its end, we are given a soft-focus epitaph that erases all those disagreements and tensions between the siblings over the years ('In their death they were not divided'). More interesting than the nostalgia itself is the degree to which *The Mill on the Floss* fights to control everything that threatens the fantasy of home and family: all the anger, and the disappointment, and the felt injustice of the child and the young woman Eliot had been, and might have gone on being, had she not broken away.

Author Biography

Helen Small is the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford.

References and Further Reading

Sveltana Bok, 'Nostalgia', <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html>

Kathryn Hughes, 'George Eliot and the Midlands', *The Oxford Guide to Literary Britain and Ireland*, ed. Daniel Hahn and Nicholas Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Josephine McDonagh, 'Eliot's Early Novels', *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).