

## Henry James Visits the Priory: A Twice-Told Tale

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Henry James first met George Eliot in 1869, before he had published any fiction, and he did not see her again until 1878, by which time she was the universally admired author of *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and he had at last begun to make his name as a novelist, with *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1876–77), and *The Europeans* (1878). There are two accounts of the first meeting, one written the following day, 10 May 1869, the other shortly before James's death in 1916. The later account is a much-embellished version of the earlier; interestingly, both are striking for their writerliness. Both accounts reward close scrutiny, especially the later account, which has been neglected by scholars. Such scrutiny offers a fresh insight into the relationship between the two writers, and in particular makes it possible to revisit and re-evaluate James's criticisms of George Eliot's fiction.

### Henry James on George Eliot's novels

Though James wrote only seven reviews or notices of George Eliot's works, beginning with *Felix Holt* in 1866, when he was 23 years old, many of the phrases from his discriminating appraisals have become almost as famous as the works themselves. No one who talks of *Romola* omits the Jamesian *mots justes* in his review of John Cross's *Life of George Eliot* (1885) about it 'smelling of the lamp'.<sup>1</sup> Few commentators on *Middlemarch* forgo the opportunity to quote (either to agree or to protest) his remark in his 1873 review that the novel, though 'a treasure-house of details', is but 'an indifferent whole'. Many agree with James that there is 'nothing more powerfully real' or 'more *intelligent*' in English fiction than the 'painful fireside scenes' between Lydgate and Rosamond in *Middlemarch*. His comment that the novel 'sets a limit' to 'the development of the old-fashioned English novel' seems predictive, both of George Eliot's own narrative adventurousness in

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, review of John W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life, as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by David Carroll (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 490–504 (p. 500) (first publ. in *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1885, pp. 668–78).

her next and final novel *Daniel Deronda* and of James's own contributions, a few years later, to the house of fiction.<sup>2</sup>

About *Daniel Deronda* James was famously hilarious; in his critical essay 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation' he puts into the mouth of a hostile reader of the novel, Pulcheria, the unfeeling remark that 'there are some places' in the novel 'as amusing as anything in *Adam Bede* or *The Mill on the Floss*: for instance, where, at the last, Deronda wipes Gwendolen's tears and Gwendolen wipes his'. Through his mouthpiece, the wise Constantius, who prides himself on keeping a perfect balance between praise and censure of the novel, James allows that 'Gwendolen and Grandcourt are admirable'. Though *Daniel Deronda* is, in Constantius's opinion, 'the weakest of [George Eliot's] books', and he thinks the character of Deronda 'a brilliant failure', on the other side of the scale, 'Gwendolen is a masterpiece', 'known, felt, and presented, psychologically, altogether in a grand manner', while Grandcourt is 'a consummate picture of English brutality refined and distilled'.<sup>3</sup> James's admiration for the representation of Grandcourt is clear for all to see from his own creation, haunted by the picture of Grandcourt, of Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880–81).

James's literary criticism is characterized by doubleness, a tendency to praise and damn in a single phrase. That he does this more than anywhere else when reviewing George Eliot's novels reinforces our sense that she was for him the most important of English novel writers, one whom he needed to resist as well as imitate. The opening sentence of his shrewd critique of *Middlemarch* in March 1873 is an example. 'Middlemarch', he writes, 'is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels.' This rather astounding remark fortunately tends to be overlooked, or forgotten, by readers of James's review, because he proceeds to offer an intelligent, largely appreciative opinion, dotting his pages with superlatives — 'brilliant', 'exquisite', 'extraordinary', 'superior', 'rare', 'powerfully real', 'intelligent', 'genial', 'splendid' — even while he complains of the lack of sharpness in Eliot's delineation of Will Ladislaw and thinks the secondary characters 'produce rather a ponderous mass of dialogue', among other negative remarks. George Eliot clearly set the standard for his own fiction, especially through her psychological analysis of character and motive, and her marvellous way with dialogue, which he saw as her strongest points.

That it was important for James to believe he himself might outdo George Eliot as a novelist is suggested by the grudging element in his

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, review of George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, in *Eliot*, ed. by Carroll, pp. 353–59 (pp. 353, 357, 359), emphasis in original (first publ. in *Galaxy*, March 1873, pp. 424–28).

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', in *Eliot*, ed. by Carroll, pp. 417–33 (pp. 418, 422, 421, 424, 422) (first publ. in *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1876, pp. 684–94).

admiration for her. That remark in the *Middlemarch* review about the work setting a ‘limit to the development of the old-fashioned English novel’ is characteristic of James’s studiedly ambivalent attitude towards George Eliot. It suggests both that she had arrived at a summit never before reached in English fiction and that a new-fashioned, modern kind of fiction (James’s own, perhaps) would surpass the ‘old-fashioned’ genre in which, he fully accepts, she excelled. In 1873 this clever 30-year-old critic had not yet written more than a few short stories and a poor short novel (*Watch and Ward*, published in 1871 and later omitted from James’s collected editions). Yet he knew what makes for a good novel and was ambitious to write one himself. Even in 1869, on his first adult visit to England and Europe, his young man’s desire to meet the great novelist was balanced by a wish not only to show his own fine descriptive talents when recounting their first meeting to his eager family in Massachusetts, but also, it becomes clear from his letters home at this time, to ‘possess’ her in the description, to be the commanding subject viewing her as object, albeit an object of veneration. During this visit of 1869 James wrote to his brother William that he must make the most of his opportunity to see the great cities and historic places of Europe. Writing from Geneva on 30 May, he defended his relative idleness on the trip by explaining that it was imperative for him to achieve better health and to return home to America a ‘new man’. He asked ‘dear Brother Bill’ to explain this and exonerate him to his parents, who suspected him of extravagance and diletantism. It was vital for him to absorb every impression, and he vowed to ‘hang on to a place till it has yielded me its drop of life-blood’.<sup>4</sup> His account of his meeting with George Eliot shows that this intense desire applied to the people he met as well as the places he visited.

### The Priory

In the summer of 1863, George Eliot, lately made extremely wealthy by the £7000 she was paid by the publisher George Smith for *Romola*, moved with her partner George Henry Lewes into a house in North Bank, St John’s Wood.<sup>5</sup> They brought in the designer Owen Jones to modernize and decorate their new house, which was known as the Priory (Ashton, p. 267). George Eliot even allowed Jones to decorate *her*; she wrote to a female friend in November 1863 that at the house-warming party she, normally

<sup>4</sup> Letter to William James, 30 May 1869, in *The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1855–1872*, ed. by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias, 2 vols (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), II, 17.

<sup>5</sup> See Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), pp. 256–57.

so ‘dowdy’ in appearance, had hosted the party looking ‘splendid in grey moire antique — the consequence of a severe lecture from Owen Jones’ on her ‘general neglect of personal adornment’.<sup>6</sup>

The Priory would be their main residence until Lewes’s death in 1878, and here, as George Eliot became more and more famous and revered — especially after *Middlemarch* — they began to hold visiting afternoons on Sundays, when close friends were invited to take a meal with them and a carefully monitored and limited ‘open house’ policy operated for the rest of the afternoon. Men predominated on these occasions; only gradually did respectable men begin to take their respectable wives with them to visit the ‘strong-minded woman’ (Thomas Carlyle’s words for her) who was living with Lewes as his wife while he had a wife from whom he was amiably separated. Anthony Trollope and Robert Browning visited often, as did Herbert Spencer, George Meredith, and the portrait painter Frederic Burton, for whom a reluctant George Eliot sat during 1864 and 1865. A few intrepid feminists, including Barbara Bodichon, co-founder of Girton College, Cambridge, came along from the start, but George Eliot was careful to give no invitations to women, particularly married ones, who might feel obliged to refuse. By the late 1860s, now generally admired for *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*, George Eliot entertained several women who were willing to accompany their husbands; these included Georgiana Burne-Jones, Emilia Pattison, and Emma Du Maurier.<sup>7</sup> Others — Trollope’s wife, for example — paid no visits to ‘Mrs Lewes’.

Gatherings at the Priory were therefore quite exclusive affairs, though not in the usual sense. People did wish to be included in parties hosted by the most famous female writer of the time — and, after the deaths of Thackeray (1863) and Dickens (1870), indisputably the greatest English novelist *tout court* — but an air of unorthodoxy still hung about George Eliot. The paradox, as many of her contemporaries saw, was that there was nothing scandalous about her demeanour; on the contrary, a special sanctity arose around this proud, serious-minded, morally earnest woman who would have chosen, if she had been able, to be as respectably married as the next woman, however happy she was to be known as a freethinker in religion — the other area of her life in which she deviated from the norm.

That the house she inhabited from 1863 until 1880, the last year of her life, was called the Priory seemed an appropriate irony to not a few of her visitors. Many filled several pages of their memoirs in the decades

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Maria Congreve, 28 November 1863, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), iv: 1862–1868 (1955), 116.

<sup>7</sup> George Henry Lewes’s journals and diaries (in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University Library) regularly list the guests attending Sunday lunches and afternoon receptions.

after George Eliot's death with recollections of a Sunday afternoon spent there. Most played on the name of the house, describing the pseudo-religious solemnity with which George Eliot was surrounded (some attributing this to her demeanour, some to their own propensity to worship her, and others to a combination of both), and they often contrasted her dignified presence with Lewes's jollity. The house itself was described in some detail by memoirists. Interestingly, they often depict the building, outside and inside, in terms which tally with their opinion of its inhabitants. Thus Lucy Clifford, minor writer and wife of William Kingdon Clifford, professor of mathematics at University College London, recalled it in 1913 as 'an unpretentious detached little house of two storeys, with a moderate garden, hidden away from the road by a fence with a dark-painted gate'.<sup>8</sup> (The epithets 'unpretentious', 'moderate', and 'hidden away' in this passage could equally stand for the house's female occupant.) Since Lucy was an awestruck young woman being taken to the Priory by her brilliant husband, a friend of Lewes's, her account stresses the honour paid to her by the invitation to join the 'exclusive circle', and the trepidation she felt on first joining the 'intellectual bigwigs' who were frequent guests. She recalls the double drawing room on the ground floor as two 'booky comfortable-looking rooms, with more than a suggestion of [William] Morris colouring', and she remembers the serious talk about literature, philosophy, music, and art, interrupted at five o'clock by the arrival of tea, with which 'Mrs Lewes was reverently served'. 'Solemnity' is Lucy's watchword for George Eliot; 'cordial' and 'merry' her adjectives for Lewes (Clifford, pp. 110–15).

The minor poet Robert Buchanan, best known for his attack on Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871, also called the house 'unpretentious' in his reminiscence 'A Talk with George Eliot' published in 1887. Unpretentious is not an adjective which describes his prose:

The Priory, North Bank, Regent's Park, London, is a largish, not uncommodious, house, enclosed in its own grounds, of about an acre and a half, with trees and shrubs all round, a high front wall facing the street, to which it communicates through a massive doorway. The neighbourhood is quiet, abounding in the cots of those soiled doves who haunt what have been christened (for North Bank is a portion of St. John's Wood) the shady groves of the Evangelist.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Clifford, 'A Remembrance of George Eliot', *Nineteenth Century*, July 1913, pp. 109–18 (p. 109).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Buchanan, *A Look Round Literature* (London: Ward and Downey, 1887), p. 218. We know that Buchanan was a visitor on 25 January 1869 from Lewes's diary for that date. Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Repository, GEN MSS 963.

The phrase ‘not uncommodious’, the mention of the ‘high front wall’ and the ‘quiet’ neighbourhood, all suggest Buchanan’s perception of George Eliot’s desire to be socially unobtrusive. He goes on to talk of an afternoon at the Priory, giving himself quite a large part of the conversation he recounts, and not omitting to describe Lewes as ‘a little, narrow-shouldered man’ with a ‘manner full of alertness and intellectual grace’, not as ugly as he is reputed to be, though ‘no Adonis’ with his ‘bristly moustache’ and ‘coarse, sensual mouth’ (as befits a man who experimented in his youth with an open marriage, perhaps). Beyond Lewes, further inside the sanctuary at North Bank — behind its high wall, its unpretentious appearance, its hiddenness — sits, according to Buchanan, ‘the tenth muse, or Sibyl’, ‘a powerful-looking, middle-aged woman, with a noticeable nose and chin, a low forehead, a fresh complexion, and full and very mobile mouth’ (Buchanan, pp. 218–19). (Is sensuality being hinted at here too, albeit of a more sombre sort than Lewes’s?)

Buchanan was writing in 1887, some years after the deaths of Lewes and George Eliot. Other visitors, less hostile than Buchanan, also drew attention in their memoirs to the arrangement by which Lewes kept the company amused, while guests were taken up one at a time to converse more seriously with the great novelist, who appeared to more than one of them as a ‘Sibyl’, ‘hidden away from public gaze as in a nunnery’, in the words of one, the psychologist James Sully, writing in 1918.<sup>10</sup> Sidney Colvin, art critic and later keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum, was one of many observers who saw something equine in George Eliot’s face; he neatly added that Lewes’s face was more of the ‘simian’ variety, though he hastened to say in his memoir of 1921 that Lewes was ‘genial’ and ‘kind’, while George Eliot’s expression was ‘one not only of habitual brooding thought and intellectual travail but of intense and yearning sympathy and tenderness’. He, too, describes George Eliot as a sibyl to be revered by all visitors.<sup>11</sup>

All the memoirists remembered being taken by Lewes, one by one, to have a grave tête-à-tête with their hostess. And they all indicated, in one way or another, that George Eliot, though a brilliant writer, was remote socially, and inclined to soak up the homage which, as they also all agreed, the sprightly Lewes required them to pay to his life’s partner. One of the most interesting observers is Charles Eliot Norton, journal editor and art critic, soon to become professor of fine art at Harvard, whose first of many visits to the Priory took place in January 1869. His account was written not in a later memoir — in which the memoirist could ‘work up’ his or

<sup>10</sup> James Sully, *My Life & Friends: A Psychologist’s Memories* (New York: Dutton, 1918), p. 260.

<sup>11</sup> Sir Sidney Colvin, *Memories & Notes of Persons and Places 1852–1912* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), pp. 90–92.



her impressions without fear of offending the long-dead principals — but at the time, in a letter of 29 January 1869. Norton and members of his family had visited on two Sundays already.<sup>12</sup> After describing, as everyone did, the high brick wall surrounding the garden, Norton tells how Lewes received him and his party at the door ‘with characteristic animation’; ‘he looks & moves like an old fashioned French barber or dancing master, very ugly, very vivacious, very entertaining.’ ‘His talk is much more French than English in its liveliness, & in the grimace & gesture with which it is accompanied.’ (Lewes’s schooling took place partly in northern France and the Channel Islands; he had translated French plays and was an expert reviewer of French literature.) As for George Eliot, ‘one rarely sees a plainer woman; dull complexion, dull eyes, heavy features’ and a too-intense manner of talking, a consequence, Norton thinks, of her being accustomed to the ‘adoring flattery of a coterie of not undistinguished admirers’.<sup>13</sup>

### Henry James visits the Priory

It was thanks to the Nortons that Henry James got an entrée into the hallowed space occupied by George Eliot. His first of only two known visits to the Priory (there was a later meeting at the Leweses’ second home in Surrey) occurred on Sunday 9 May 1869, a few weeks after James’s twenty-sixth birthday.<sup>14</sup> James wrote to his father the following day, characteristically regretting the ‘popular delusion’ that Norton was ‘my guide[,] philosopher & bosom friend’, while acknowledging that his fellow American certainly opened doors for him. Of the long-anticipated visit to meet George Eliot he writes:

The one marvel as yet, of my stay, is having finally seen Mrs Lewes, tho’ under sadly infelicitous circumstances. I called on her yesterday (Sunday) afternoon, with Grace Norton & Sara Sedgwick [Norton’s sister and sister-in-law] — the only way in which it seemed possible to do it, as she is much hedged about with sanctity & a stranger can go only under cover of a received friend. I was immensely impressed, interested & pleased. To begin with she is magnificently ugly — deliciously hideous. She has a low forehead, a dull grey eye, a vast pendulous nose, a huge mouth, full of uneven teeth & a chin & jawbone *qui n’en finissent pas* [...]. Now in this vast ugliness resides a most

<sup>12</sup> According to Lewes’s diary they visited three times in January. See MS Yale University Library.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to George W. Curtis, 29 January 1869, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, v: 1869–1873 (1955), 8–9.

<sup>14</sup> The meeting in Surrey was noted in Lewes’s diary, 1 November 1878. MS Yale University Library.

powerful beauty which, in a very few minutes steals forth & charms the mind, so that you end as I ended, in falling in love with her. Yes behold me literally in love with this great horse-faced blue-stocking. I don't know in what the charm lies, but it is thoroughly potent. An admirable physiognomy — a delightful expression, a voice soft & rich as that of a counselling angel — a mingled sagacity & sweetness — a broad hint of a great underlying world of reserve, knowledge, pride & power — a great feminine dignity & character in these massively plain features — a hundred conflicting shades of consciousness & simpleness — shyness & frankness — graciousness & remote indifference — these are some of the more definite elements of her personality. Her manner is extremely good tho' rather too intense & her speech, in the way of accent & syntax peculiarly agreeable. Altogether, she has a larger circumference than any woman I have ever seen.<sup>15</sup>

Here are the familiar themes of sanctity and proud reserve in a woman protected from the outside world in her inner sanctum inside her unpretentious house within its high-walled garden, though interestingly James says nothing about the house and garden, while seeing more fully than most other observers the human being 'hedged about' with sanctity. Here too is the common description of George Eliot's equine ugliness, in James's version persistently, and of course now famously, elaborated. (This well-known depiction of George Eliot's appearance has contributed, I believe, to a completely mistaken view that George Eliot was large in general; nothing could be further from the truth, as anyone visiting Nuneaton Museum and marvelling at the small proportions of one of her dresses will know. An unwary reader might also think that when James says she 'has a larger circumference than any woman I have ever seen', he is referring to her physique. Of course, he means her brain.)

The passage is a tour de force, a piece of writerly writing about a fellow writer, done to impress his father and the rest of his expectant family back home, and coloured by his presuppositions about the personal characteristics he would be likely to find in this great English novelist, of whose novel *Felix Holt* he had written a brief, slightly ungenerous, review in 1866.<sup>16</sup> James's letters home in 1869 are marked by his anxious desire to prove to his father, who was financing his trip, that he was not wasting time or money, but improving his health and widening his experience by visiting well-known writers and artists, using his many letters of introduction from American friends. He stresses too his frequent visits to art

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Henry James Sr, 10 May 1869, in *Letters of Henry James*, ed. by Walker and Zacharias, I, 311.

<sup>16</sup> Unsigned review of George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, in *Eliot*, ed. by Carroll, pp. 273–77 (first publ. in *Nation*, August 1866, pp. 127–28).



galleries and museums, his outings to Oxford, and to some of England's cathedral towns. His accounts are designed also to demonstrate his literary abilities, to give promise of a literary career of his own. The precious time spent with George Eliot is therefore a vital part of his London experience. The expansive description of the great novelist has a further motivation. It is intended to please his adored young cousin Minny Temple, seriously ill with tuberculosis. She was to die in March 1870, aged 24, without seeing James again. When he visited Minny in February 1869, shortly before setting off for England, she told him of her great admiration for George Eliot and her wish that 'Harry' might see the great writer in London. James remembered in his autobiography, 'Notes of a Son and Brother' (1914), that he did 'soon see in London her admiration, and my own, the great George Eliot'. He added revealingly that it was a 'brief glimpse then, but a very impressive, and wellnigh my main satisfaction in which was that I should have my cousin to tell of it'.<sup>17</sup>

But what of the introductory remark in James's letter to his father in May 1869 that this momentous meeting — the 'one marvel' of his stay in England — took place 'under sadly infelicitous circumstances'? With coolly novelistic timing, James comes to that *after* giving his father the full blast of his excited and amused impressions of the great novelist. He now tells him:

The sadness of our visit was in the fact that Mr Lewes's second son, an extremely pleasant looking young fellow of about twenty four [Thornie Lewes was almost exactly a year younger than James; he had just turned 25], lay on the drawing-room floor, writhing in agony from an attack of pain in the spine to which he is subject. We of course beat a hasty retreat, in time to have seen G. H. Lewes come in himself in all his ugliness, with a dose of morphine from the chemist's.<sup>18</sup>

James's account of the visit ends with this remark. However, when dictating the final volume of his autobiography, 'The Middle Years', in 1916, the last year of his life, James revisited this Priory episode, adding to his memory of it in a passage which has been unknown to, or ignored by, James and Eliot scholars alike. Forty-seven years after the event, James works up the account, putting his younger self at the heart of the dramatic event he witnessed, poor Thornie Lewes's terrible suffering from tuberculosis of the spine. In this retelling, James and his female companions did *not* beat a hasty retreat, but rather stayed talking to George Eliot while Lewes ran off to find a chemist to sell him morphine. James claims to remember

<sup>17</sup> Henry James, 'Notes of a Son and Brother', in *Autobiographies*, ed. by Philip Horne (New York: Library of America, 2016), pp. 251–570 (p. 541).

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Henry James Sr, 10 May 1869, in *Letters of Henry James*, ed. by Walker and Zacharias, 1, 311–12.

a certain high grace in her anxiety and a frank immediate appreciation of our presence, modest embarrassed folk as we were. It took me no long time to thrill with the sense, sublime in its unexpectedness, that we were perhaps, or indeed quite clearly, helping her to pass the time till Mr Lewes's return — after which he would again post off for Mr Paget the pre-eminent surgeon; and I see involved with this the perfect amenity of her assisting us, as it were, to assist her, through unrelinquished proper talk.<sup>19</sup>

After this sinuous expression of sensitivity towards the distress of the Priory's inhabitants, James goes on to say that he knelt beside 'the injured young man', before offering to rush off himself to fetch Mr Paget:

Mrs Lewes's and our stricken companion's instant appreciation of this offer lent me wings on which I again feel myself borne very much as if suddenly acting as a messenger of the gods — surely I had never come so near to performing in that character. I shook off my fellow visitor[s] for swifter cleaving of the air, and I recall still feeling that I cleft it even in the dull four-wheeler of other days which, on getting out of the house, I recognised as the only object animating, at a distance, the long blank Sunday vista beside the walled-out Regent's Park. I crawled to Hanover Square — or was it Cavendish? I let the question stand — and, after learning at the great man's door that though he was not at home he was soon expected back and would receive my message without delay, cherished for the rest of the day the particular quality of my vibration. ('The Middle Years', p. 609)

Having written this extraordinary passage, striking for its references to the 'thrill', the 'vibration' he himself experienced as his hosts faced their family tragedy encumbered by surely on this occasion unwelcome guests, James brings his 'memory' to a close with an honest realization that the experience must have felt very different to the Leweses. 'So it was', he writes, 'that my "relation" — for I don't go so far as to call it "ours" — helped me to squeeze further values' out of his subsequent reading of *Middlemarch*, 'so soon then to appear', and *Daniel Deronda* ('The Middle Years', p. 610). Thornie had arrived home from Africa the previous day, when Lewes's diary noted that he and George Eliot were 'dreadfully shocked to see him so worn'.<sup>20</sup> George Eliot's journal entry for that Saturday simply reads, 'Poor Thornie arrived from Natal, sadly wasted by suffering.'<sup>21</sup> Thereafter

<sup>19</sup> Henry James, 'The Middle Years', in *Autobiographies*, ed. by Horne, pp. 571–632 (pp. 607–08).

<sup>20</sup> Lewes's diary, 8 May 1869, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, v, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Journal entry, 9 May 1869, in *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 136.

her journal falls silent, with no reference to the events of Sunday 9 May. Lewes's diary for the fateful Sunday does not contain its usual list of visitors; instead it describes 'a dreadful day — Thornie rolling on the floor in agony. Paget came in the evening and examined him. Up 4 times in the night to give him morphia etc.'<sup>22</sup> There is no mention of a young American visitor rushing off to find Dr Paget. Nor, indeed, had James included this part of the story in the colourful account at the time to his father. James appears to have invented his heroic part in the story in old age; as he died before this volume of autobiography was finished, it is possible that he might have chosen not to print the passage. His biographer Leon Edel, presumably embarrassed by James's story, makes no mention of it at all in his great five-volume *Life* of James. George Eliot's distinguished biographer Gordon Haight does refer to the passage from 'The Middle Years', but rather surprisingly accepts James's fanciful story. Haight, though asserting in a footnote that James had a tendency to 'fictionalize' in this last part of his autobiography, simply paraphrases James's account, writing that he 'flew away in a cab to leave the message at Paget's house'. That Haight had doubts about the truth of the account is suggested by the fact that he omits to *quote* any of the remarkable passage with its description of the 'thrills' and 'vibrations' experienced by the younger James at the idea of 'assisting' the Leweses in this way.<sup>23</sup>

While Haight chooses not to comment on the possible reason for James's fanciful account, we may see it as a continuation of that early fascinated admiration for George Eliot as woman and writer, alongside the equally early determination to retain his independence of her example. As for the Leweses, the particular circumstances of their first meeting with James in 1869 prevented them from getting to know the young American better, while their later meeting in 1878 also occurred at an unfortunate time, making it difficult for them to form or express an opinion of him as a novelist. In 1869 Lewes and George Eliot had known Henry James only as a young friend of the Nortons. When he visited the Priory again in April 1878, he had begun to be known as a novelist himself and was conscious that reviews of his early novels often suggested that his work was influenced by the example of George Eliot. He described this second visit to his brother William in terms much more subdued than those he had employed when writing to his father in May 1869, though he still asserts his right to be critical of his hostess. As before, he squeezes what he can *for himself* from the encounter, letting it 'yield [him] its drop of blood', to quote those earlier words to his brother from his first visit to England in 1869. Now in 1878 he tells William:

<sup>22</sup> Lewes's diary, 9 May 1869, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, v, 33.

<sup>23</sup> See Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 416.

The Leweses were very urbane & friendly & I think that I shall have the right *dorénavant* [from now on] to consider myself a Sunday *habitué*. The great G. E. herself is both sweet and superior, & has a delightful expression in her large, long, pale equine face. I had my turn at sitting beside her & being conversed with in a low, but most harmonious tone; & bating a tendency to *aborder* [embark upon] only the highest themes I have no fault to find with her. Lewes told some of his usual stories, chiefly French.<sup>24</sup>

What did George Eliot and Lewes know about James's early fiction? George Eliot's surviving letters and journals make no mention of his works at all. One single reference to him comes rather poignantly when she wrote in May 1880 from Milan, where she and John Cross were spending their honeymoon, noting that 'Johnnie had a graceful letter of congratulation from Mr Henry James'.<sup>25</sup> Lewes saw James more often, since both attended dinners given by John Cross at the Devonshire Club during 1878. Lewes's diary for October 1878 notes that he and George Eliot were reading *The Europeans*, newly published, though he adds no comment on the work.<sup>26</sup> The Leweses were spending time in their holiday home at Witley in Surrey. On 1 November James visited them there with a mutual friend, Mrs Greville, who lived nearby. Mrs Greville had apparently lent *The Europeans* to the Leweses. In a rambling section of 'The Middle Years', which immediately follows his fantasy about rushing off in a cab to find Dr Paget in 1869, James recalls this occasion. He remembers that at the end of the visit Lewes rushed back into the house to hand James 'the pair of blue-bound volumes' Mrs Greville had lent him, saying, 'Ah those books — take them away, please, away, away!'. The volumes were none other than 'the two volumes of my own precious "last"', given by him to Mrs Greville, and 'by her, misguided votary, dropped with the best conscience in the world into the Witley abyss, out of which it had jumped, with violence, under the touch of accident, straight up again into my own exposed face'. James concludes that 'our hosts hadn't so much as connected book with author, or author with visitor', leaving James to ruminate ruefully on his 'failure to penetrate there' ('The Middle Years', pp. 615–16).

Since neither Lewes nor George Eliot seem to have recorded more than the simple fact of James visiting and their reading *The Europeans*, it is difficult to know whether James's sensitive (if gamely amused) reaction reflected an indifference to him on their part. We have no idea of their

<sup>24</sup> Letter to William James, 1 May 1878, in *Letters of Henry James*, ed. by Walker and Zacharias, II, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Florence Cross, 25 May 1880, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, VII: 1878–1880 (1955), 285–86.

<sup>26</sup> Lewes's diary, 14–19 October 1878. MS Yale University Library.

opinion of his novel. We know that Lewes was sociable and talkative, and met on friendly terms with many people, including James, both at home and in the London club of his friend Cross. If Lewes was uncharacteristically dismissive on the occasion of this visit on 1 November 1878, the fact may well have had much to do with his serious ill health; he was to die of enteritis on 30 November. As for George Eliot, we know that, as James well appreciated, she was more reserved in her conversation, and more limited in the circles she moved in, since she was constantly aware of the anomaly of her relationship with Lewes. That she was unfailingly polite and kind to visitors is clear. There is nothing in her surviving papers to suggest what she made of Henry James.

By the time *The Portrait of a Lady*, a novel so clearly influenced by her example, began its serialization in *Macmillan's Magazine* in October 1880, Lewes had been dead for nearly two years and George Eliot, now married to John Cross, was soon to leave the Priory for Chelsea, where she died, less than three weeks after moving to Cheyne Walk, on 22 December 1880. Thornie Lewes had died in October 1869, five months after the events of that first Sunday at the Priory which were so momentous, in very different ways, for each of the parties present. We cannot know what George Eliot would have made of James the novelist if she had lived long enough to read more of his work. We do know what James made of her work in his reviews of her novels. A study of the personal and social context — his and hers — in which they interacted helps to explain, at least in part, some of the surprisingly negative elements in his otherwise laudatory analyses of the novelist whom he most admired and with whom he had most in common.