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Adam Bede and Riehl's "Social-Political-Conservatism"

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George Eliot's *Adam Bede* is seen frequently to be a good, but flawed novel, an interesting precursor to the much finer *Middlemarch* and other later novels. U. C. Knoepflmacher, in *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism*, considers that, essentially, Eliot shared John Milton's purpose of justifying "Man's lot in the temporal world." Knoepflmacher adds: "Her own belief in scientific veracity did not allow her to create a supernatural world of essences; yet in her way she shared Milton's purpose." But then he says:

The epic strain that was to find its most complex embodiment in *Middlemarch* is introduced in *Adam Bede*. In its subject matter, in its treatment of vision and knowledge, in its temporal ironies, and even in the nature of its reconciliation,
Adam Bede displays George Eliot's intimate understanding of Milton's great poem. Whether or not Adam Bede can be seen as a secular parallel to *Paradise Lost* is not my concern. Nor do I want to consider whether or not Eliot's epic strain finds its most complex embodiment in *Middlemarch*. But what I do want to focus on, for the moment, are Knoepflmacher's reasons for considering why Adam Bede, by implication, is less "complex" than *Middlemarch*. The reasons boil down to this:

"Despite her Miltonic efforts (to justify man to man) George Eliot could not bring herself to impress mind and conscience on an order that remained unmindful and unconscious to higher feeling," as demonstrated by the severe way in which Hetty Sorrel is treated:

Adam Bede is ruled by a power as absolute as Milton's God. "Nature," the narrator informs us, "knits men together "by muscle and bone, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties our heartstrings to beings that jar us at every moment" (chap. 4, p. 55). This Nature stamps the personality of all men (chap. 12, p. 186) and "has a language of her own, which she uses with strict veracity" (chap. 15, p. 228). Those who dare to "extract the very opposite of her real meaning" (p. 229) will suffer for their mistakes; even those who submit to her buffets soon learn, as small children do, "not to expect that our hurts will be made much of" (chap. 27, p. 5). Though equally harsh and demanding, Milton's God had been just; moreover, His justice was tempered by the Son's mercy. By comparison, the exacting Nature whose ways George Eliot's narrator tries to justify seems capricious and indifferent.

Knoepflmacher, then, sees an "active principle" in Eliot's depiction of nature, a severe and indifferent version of the one which The Wanderer talks of in William Wordsworth's "The Excursion":

"To every Form of being is assigned,"
Thus calmly spake the venerable Sage,
"An active Principle: - however removed
From sense and observation, it subsists
In all things, in all natures; in the stars
Of azure heaven, the unenduring clouds,
In flower and tree, in every pebbly stone
That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks,
The moving waters, and the invisible air.
Whatever exists has properties that spread
Beyond itself, communicating good,
A simple blessing, or with evil mixed;
Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
No chasm, no solitude; from link to link
It circulates, the Soul of all the worlds.

(IX, p. 520)4

But is there an "active principle" in Eliot's nature,
as there is in Wordsworth's Nature? I do not think
so. There are some parallels between Eliot and
Wordsworth in their depiction of peasantry; however,
there are also important differences. Thomas Pinney,
in "The Authority of the Past in George Eliot's
Novels", says, "No novelist before George Eliot
shows his characters so deeply attached to places,
and to particular ways of life, so intimately linked
by association to a familiar world that the preserva-
tion of the relation, whether in memory or in fact,
becomes a condition of life itself";5 and I agree.
But Eliot's characters in Adam Bede do not become
linked to a familiar world because of an "active
principle" in Nature which somehow conditions their
behaviour. Wordsworth's characters may feel
impulses from vernal woods, but Eliot's do not. I
think that Knoepflmacher, in an otherwise useful
chapter on Adam Bede, is misleading when he talks
about a deterministic Nature that rules over
characters.

In a similar way, Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas, in
The Moral and the Story, I think, see things in
Eliot's handling of the novel's pastoral aspect that
simply are not there. They view the novel as an
unhappy blend of a moral story and a pastoral tale,
and draw a parallel to Thomas Hardy's Tess of the
d'Urbervilles. Both novels, they say, are concerned
with moral issues and have pastoral settings; but,
whereas Tess has a sad and pathetic ending, Adam
Bede does not. The latter's happy ending, they argue, can be explained thus:

... George Eliot has altered her fictional style from moral realism to pseudo-pastoral.... A tableau ending has been given to a novel which, for much of its length, has been concerned with the rejection of appearances. The objection is not to the marriage of Adam and Dinah, but to the facility of its realization. To invoke the 'pastoral pattern' is simply to reduce in status the moral drama which the novel has been concerned to describe. 6

The above, I think, can be taken to mean that they consider Eliot to have evaded the moral issues raised in the novel by resorting to an ending which is only found in stories about Arcadia. However, is Hayslope romanticized, like, say, the "hidden valley" in Wordsworth's "Michael"? To get to Michael's "Home", THE EVENING STAR, one must go out of one's way, and enter a world where time has not just stood still but, probably, will never move again:

If from the public way you turn your steps
Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll,
You will suppose that with an upright path
Your feet must struggle; in such bold ascent
The pastoral mountains front you, face to face.
But courage! for around that boisterous brook
The mountains have all opened out themselves,
And made a hidden valley of their own.
No habitation can be seen; but they
Who journey thither find themselves alone
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites
That overhead are sailing in the sky.
It is in truth an utter solitude.....

(11,1-13)

In contrast, Hayslope is not difficult to get to, and is not an "utter solitude":

That rich undulating district of Loamshire to which Hayslope belonged lies close to a grim outskirt of Stonyshire, overlooked by its barren hills as a pretty blooming sister may sometimes be seen linked in the arm of a rugged, tall,
swarthy brother; and in two or three hours! ride the traveller might exchange a bleak treeless region, intersected by lines of cold grey stone, for one where his road wound under the shelter of woods, or up swelling hills, muffled with hedgerows and long meadow-grass and thick corn; and where at every turn he came upon some fine old country-seat nestled in the valley or crowning the slope, some homestead with its long length of barn and its cluster of golden ricks, some grey steeple looking out from a pretty confusion of trees and thatch and dark-red tiles. (p. 28)

In this paper I wish to show that George Eliot's depiction of peasantry, despite Wordsworth's influence, is not at all romanticized, and that Adam Bede should be seen to render in artistic terms what Eliot called W. H. Riehl's "Social-Political-Conservatism". In praising Riehl's two books about the Bauernthum (peasantry), in "The Natural History of German Life: Riehl", she said:

Riehl's books are not dedicated merely to the argumentative maintenance of this or of any other position; they are intended chiefly as a contribution to that knowledge of the German people on the importance of which he insists. He is less occupied with urging his own conclusions than with impressing on his readers the facts which have led him to those conclusions. 7

Before turning to Eliot's response to Riehl, it is worth examining why some critics only see the similarities to Wordsworthian pastoralism in Adam Bede. No doubt, part of the reason stems from the novel's epigraph, which is taken from Book VI, "The Churchyard Among the Mountains" of "The Excursion". In this section of the poem, The Vicar, in response to questions from The Author, The Solitary, and The Wanderer, recalls the lives of some of the people who lie buried before them. The Author has just said that he would like to hear about people in "... one Enclosure where the voice that speaks in envy or detraction is not heard; Which malice may not enter; where the traces
Of evil inclinations are unknown;  
Where love and pity tenderly unite  
With resignation; and no jarring tone  
Intrudes, the peaceful concert to disturb  
Of amity and gratitude."

And The Vicar answers that he will tell of those
"... that excite
Feelings with these accordant; love, esteem,  
And admiration, lifting up a veil,  
A sunbeam introducing among hearts  
Retired and covert; so that ye shall have  
Clear images before your gladdened eyes
Of nature's unambitious underwood,  
And flowers that prosper in the shade.

And when
I speak of such among my flock as swerved
Or fell, those only shall be singled out
Upon whose lapse, or error, something more
Than brotherly forgiveness may attend;
To such will we restrict our notice, else
Better my tongue were mute."

The first story told by The Vicar is about a woman
whose superior intellect and eloquence was generally accepted, but who sought even as a child "To be admired" rather "than coveted and loved." As she grew older, two things became an obsession with her: "An unremitting, avaricious thrift;/ And a strange thraldom of material love..." which caused her to become uncharitable. However, before she died, she became meek and subdued in the face of "divine mercy." The next story concerns "hapless Ellen", who, like Hetty, "loved, and fondly deemed herself/beloved". She was made pregnant. Unlike Hetty, however, Ellen was "Serious and thoughtful" and was able to find a "meek resource" in reading, despite the fact that her lover deserted her. (Everyone described by The Vicar finds solace in a "meek resource" of one sort or another.) When the baby was born, Ellen and her mother delighted in looking after it, but within four months Ellen began to worry about her sin and the fact that her mother could not afford to keep her and the baby. She left with the child for a foster home, where, almost immediately, it was deemed best for her not to see the child.
anymore. Social pressures from an "ungentle mind" were responsible for this decision. Says the Vicar:

...... "'Tis, perchance,
Unknown to you that in these simple vales
The natural feeling of equality
Is by domestic service unimpaired;
Yet, though such service be, with us, removed
From sense of degradation, not the less
The ungentle mind can easily find means
To impose service restraints and laws unjust..."

During Ellen's absence, the child died after a brief illness. Ellen was left distraught, and was forbidden by her foster mother to visit the child's grave. She returned to her mother's house, and found some comfort in being able to confess her sin to the Vicar:

..... To me,
As to a spiritual comforter and friend,
Her heart she opened; and no pains were spared
To mitigate, as gently as I could,
The sting of self-reproach, with healing words."

Wasted by grief, sorrow and regret, Ellen died. Then there is the story of Wilfred Armathwaite, who, "braving Divine displeasure, broke the marriage-vow." He died from "remorse and grief... absolved by/ God [though] He could not find forgiveness in himself;/ Nor could endure the weight of his own shame." Finally, Book VI ends with the story of a couple who were blessed with many children. The mother, however, died whilst the children were young; yet the father's faith in God's goodness sustained him, and successfully allowed him to raise the children.

There are some similarities between Adam Bede and this section of "The Excursion". Hayslope is something of an "Enclosure", inasmuch as it is a tightly-knit community; Adam, Hetty, Dinah, and Arthur Donnithorne, like the people The Vicar speaks of, experience hardships and personal crises; and Hayslope is like "these simple vales/(where) The natural feeling of equality/ Is by domestic service unimpaired..." but where "The ungentle mind can easily find means/ To impose service restraints and
lack unjust..." However, Hayslope is not blessed with an "ideal Vicar who administers an ideal religion. Mr. Irwine "somehow harmonized extremely well with that peaceful landscape," but not "with sound theories of the clerical office" (p. 77). And although Dinah brings comfort in the form of her Methodist religion, Eliot makes it clear that, with Dinah, it is "the singer and not the song" that affects the Loamshire people:

She spoke slowly, though quite fluently, often pausing after a question, or before any transition of ideas. There was no change of attitude, no gesture; the effect of her speech was produced entirely by the inflections of her voice, and when she came to the question, "Will God take care of us when we die?" she uttered it in such a tone of plaintive appeal that the tears came into some of the hardest eyes.... She was not preaching as she heard others preach, but speaking directly from her own emotions and under the inspiration of her own simple faith. (p. 38)

For Wordsworth, "... there hath past away a glory from the earth," and life is only the next best thing to sporting on the shores of "that immortal sea" from whence we come "trailing clouds of glory..." ("Intimations Ode" 11. 18, 64, 164-7). That is not how Eliot presents life in Adam Bede. But she obviously admired some aspects of his ideas - particularly this:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory and the flower;

We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind....
("Intimations Ode" 11. 178-81)

Eliot's depiction of life, then, differs from Wordsworth's by virtue of its concreteness. "Art," said Eliot, "is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contract with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot." And because she considered the latter to be the artist's duty, she went on to say that the artist has a sacred task not to falsify the "life of the People":

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It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions - about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it is serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in life of our more heavily laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one.

This perversion is not the less fatal because the misrepresentation which gives rise to it has what the artist considers a moral end. The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks ought to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which do act on him. We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness.10

Wordsworth's Michael, and the leech catcher in "Resolution and Independence", I think, come close to being represented as peasants of the sentimental type. They are rather indistinct figures, from a dramatic point of view, and are seen more as emblems of solitude rather than characters. Not so in Adam Bede: for the most part, the characters, here, are more like the Bauernthum which Riehl talked of in Die Burgerliche Gesellschaft and Land und Leute - if Eliot's reviews are to be trusted. For her readers to understand what the Bauernthum is like, Eliot says, they must recall the English farmers of fifty years ago.11 Her essay on Riehl was written three years before Adam Bede, and thus the farmers to be kept in mind date back to the turn of the nineteenth century - the time of the action in Adam Bede. If it is objected that German peasantry should not be compared with the English variety, Eliot holds, "But the generic character of the German peasant is everywhere the same...."12 Thus what is said to be the case about the Bauernthum may be applied to the inhabitants of Hayslope. Says Riehl about peasants: they have distinctive physiques, dialects, phraseology, proverbs, songs, attitudes to religion and education; they are
agricultural people with "traditional modes of treating their domestic animals"; are guided by old customs and traditions, "which gradually disappear under the friction of cultivated circles" (even when some of the traditions are burdensome); they have the "smallest possible faith in theoretic knowledge"; they sometimes maintain feuds with other villages (although they may modify the way in which the feud is expressed); they have great "piety towards the old tumble-down house", but none towards "venerable ruins" (of castles or mansions); and, they know only of traditions that have immediacy while knowing little or nothing of their country's history. Such a peasant has a firm "foundation of... independence - namely... capability of a settled existence." "Custom with him holds the place of sentiment, of theory, and in many cases of affection." It is not difficult to see that Riehl's analysis of German peasantry is reflected in Adam Bede. Adam's distinctive physique is described as indicating a mixture of Saxon and Celtic blood (p. 18); all of the peasants speak the local dialect; Mrs. Poyser's phraseology especially is a source of constant delight; proverbs and songs have their places in Hayslope; and attitudes towards education and, more important, religion are themes in the novel. Mr. and Mrs. Poyser, on their way to church, are heard to discuss their shorthorned cows (pp. 186-7), giving us an indication of the way in which they treat their domestic animals; their dairy is lovingly described as a place where the traditional methods of making butter and cheese go on undisturbed and without threat of change (pp. 89 ff.); and, Adam "looked at the rough men painfully holding pen or pencil with their cramped hands, or humbly labouring through their reading lesson" (pp. 226-7), which indicates the extent to which theoretical knowledge is embraced in the community. Although there is no feud between Hayslope or Snowfield or Stoniton, all places besides Hayslope are viewed with instinctive distrust by most Haysloprians, who have never or rarely gone beyond the confines of their parish:

"The parish!" You can perhaps hardly understand the effect of that word on a mind like Hetty's, brought up among people who were somewhat hard in their
feelings even toward poverty, who lived among the fields, and had little pity for want and rags as a cruel inevitable fate such as they sometimes seem in cities, but held them a mark of idleness and vice - and it was idleness and vice that brought burdens on the parish. (p. 361)

And, finally, the "piety towards the old tumble-down house", which Riehl speaks of, is seen in Hall Farm, which has its roots in the "venerable ruins" of an old Hall:

The history of the house is plain now. It was once the residence of a country squire, whose family, probably dwindled down to a mere spinsterhood, got merged in the more territorial name of Donnithorne. It was once the Hall; it is now the Hall Farm.... The life at the Hall has changed its focus, and no longer radiates from the parlour, but from the kitchen and the farmyard. (p. 79)

Eliot considered that the England of her day had all but lost its "vital connection with the past", despite its many traditions, and she added that the past could only be recalled "by an effort of memory and reflection." Adam Bede obviously is an attempt to re-establish that connection with the past, but it should be seen also as a work designed to offset what she considered to be false accounts of peasantry; "The German novelists who undertake to give pictures of peasant life, fall into the same mistake as our English novelists: they transfer their own feelings to ploughmen and woodcutters, and give them both joys and sorrows of which they know nothing." Books I to III of Adam Bede are slow-moving in one sense because very little actually happens. Still, there is an attempt to give us first-hand impressions of Hayslope and its people, to make us experience as much as possible what it must have been like to live there. The narrator introduces us to Mr. Irwine's family and house as if we are there: "Let me take you into that dining-room and show you the Rev. Adolphus Irwine.... We will enter very softly and stand still in the open doorway...." And we are asked to verify things for ourselves, as if Eliot wants to prevent someone from complaining later on
that all the impressions we get are hers and not ours: "... the walls, you see, are new, and not yet painted..." (p.63). When "having a look" at the Hall Farm, we are similarly encouraged: "Put your face to one of the glass panes in the right-hand window; what do you see?" (p.79). The effect of this mode of narration is to give us a sense of participation, which is not, usually, compatible with the suspension of feelings of disbelief because, once having invited us to look for ourselves, it becomes increasingly difficult for Eliot to introduce anything which we would not expect, or could not accept. The technique then, creates a sense of realism. That is not to say that there are no difficulties: in some ways, the character of Adam never comes into sharp focus. From the first description of him in the workshop, where it is made evident that he is not like other men, it is difficult to come to grips with his nature. Somehow, he stands too far apart from Hayslope. Dinah, who is more accustomed to sensing "Divine love" as she walks over hills (p.96), immediately is affected by him:

Dinah, for the first time in her life, felt a painful self-consciousness; there was something in the dark penetrating glance of this strong man so different from the mildness and timidity of his brother Seth. A faint blush came, which deepened as she wondered at it. (p.120)

Later, the narrator says, "Adam, you perceive, was by no means a marvellous man, nor, properly speaking, a genius, yet I will not pretend that his was an ordinary character among workmen..." (p.208). Although unwittingly, such attempts to capture the complexity of his character contribute to the sense of his ambiguous nature. There is something of the Byronic hero seen in his air of brooding intensity and individuality, Thomas Carlyle's Hero ("Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans - with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skilful courageous labour..." (pp.208-9), and John Ruskin's simple artisan who is dedicated to, and finds simple reward.
in, work. Nevertheless, I think that Adam Bede probably does give an accurate picture of peasantry, and the type of defects that exist in the novel do not seriously impair that quality.

Riehl's scientific analysis of the Bauernthum led him to conclude that the geography and climate of a region, to a large extent, determine the cultural, spiritual, and social developments of its people. In those areas which are for the most part self-sufficient, or difficult to get to because lines of communication (railways, for example) are scarce, there is to be found "a sense of rank" which is not found in regions where the "original races are fused together." The true peasant is not concerned with his country's constitutional government because such an idea is beyond his conception of life. "His only notion of representation is that of representation of ranks - of classes; his only notion of a deputy is one who takes care, not of the national welfare, but of the interests of his own order." He finds no need for written laws; traditions are his living law. The sense of rank is fundamental to Hayslope's way of doing things, as it is to an understanding of the intensity of Arthur's sin, and why what appears to be an indiscretion is so disruptive in the community. Learning that Adam is to become steward, Arthur instructs him to "dine upstairs with the large tenants" (p. 251), who squabble among themselves about who is to be the president and vice-president of the dinner (p. 253). When Arthur walks in during the meal, everyone respectfully stands up (p. 256), and the tenant farmers politely listen to Arthur's theories about farming because one day he will become the squire (p. 257):

He was only a captain in the Loamshire Militia, but to the Hayslope tenants he was more intensely a captain than all the young gentlemen of the same rank in his Majesty's regulars - he outshone them as the planet Jupiter outshines the Milky Way. (p. 69)

The trouble with Arthur is that he is an "Aristocratic Proletariat", to use Riehl's term as translated by Eliot, and is typical of those noblemen's sons who
are "... usually obliged to remain without any vocation," and who always remain dilettantes. 18 And Arthur is the "invisible worm" in the rose that is Hayslope because he is of "the more territorial name of Donnithorne." His spiritual, cultural, and social developments are not only deficient but also impure: "... I will not be so much of a tailor as to trouble your imagination with the differences of costume, and insist on the striped waistcoat, long-tailed coat, and low top-boots" (p. 69). Says Riehl: a peasant "is rather inclined to look down on every one who does not wear a smockfrock, and thinks a man who has the manners of the gentry is likely to be rather windy and unsubstantial." 19 Again, during the dinner in his honour, Arthur's anomaly is alluded to:

... Mr. Irwine got up to speak, and all the faces in the room were turned towards him. The superior refinement of his face was much more striking than that of Arthur's when seen in comparison with the people round them. Arthur's was a much commoner British face, and the splendour of his new-fashioned clothes was more akin to the young farmer's taste in costume than Mr. Irwine's powder and the well-brushed but well-worn black, which seemed to be his chosen suit for great occasions; for he had the mysterious secret of never wearing a new-looking coat. (p. 259)

Significantly, Arthur's nearest relations are his Aunt Lydia and his grandfather, from whom he will inherit the estate. The lack of a father and mother in his life further illustrates the discontinuity he represents in the slow evolution of Hayslope's life.

However, Arthur should not be seen as being solely responsible for what happens to Hetty. Hetty, too, is an anomaly in Hayslope, as her narcissism makes clear. But she too may be partially exonerated because she was "quite uneducated - a simple farmer's girl, to whom a gentleman with a white hand was dazzling as an Olympian God" (p. 106). Nor should Mr. Irwine bear all the responsibility for not warning Arthur to stop his dalliance with Hetty, although as Arthur's spiritual advisor he must own up
to his particular failure in the affair. Again, just as Mr. Irwine is to be partially blamed for his complacency, Dinah has an equal share of blame for her myopic analysis of Hetty's plight. Having finally affected Hetty as she affected Bessy during the sermon on the Green, Dinah believes that she has found a convert:

Dinah had never seen Hetty affected in this way before, and, with her usual benignant hopefulness, she trusted it was the stirring of a divine impulse. She kissed the sobbing thing, and began to cry with her for grateful joy. But Hetty was simply in that excitable state of mind in which there is no calculating what turn the feelings may take from one moment to another, and for the first time she became irritated under Dinah's caress. (p. 161)

Eliot uses the metaphor of a ship to show the precariousness of Hayslope's existence, and how a series of events are necessary to upset it. Speaking of Arthur's reputation as "a good fellow", the narrator goes on:

The chances are that he will go through life without scandalizing anyone; a seaworthy vessel that no one would refuse to insure. Ships, certainly, are liable to casualties, which sometimes make terribly evident some flaw in their construction that would never have been discoverable in smooth water; and many a "good fellow", through a disastrous combination of circumstances, has undergone a like betrayal. (p. 128)

And, after explaining that Hetty intends to marry Adam after all, and meeting the objection that Hetty's resolve is strange, given her probable repugnance towards the idea of marrying him, the narrator says:

Yes, the actions of a little trivial soul like Hetty's, struggling amidst the serious sad destinies of a human being, are strange. So are the motions of a little vessel without ballast tossed about on a stormy sea. How pretty it
looked with its parti-coloured sail in the sunlight
moored in the quiet bay! (p. 326)

The moral story that grows out of the pastoral tale not only describes the ways in which people are temporarily, and sometimes permanently, "set to sea" when the fragile social ecology of their community is unbalanced, but also offers a deep understanding of what holds the community together. In his Autobiography, John Stewart Mill wrote:

When the philosophic minds of the world can no longer believe its religion, a transitional period of weak convictions paralysed intellects & growing laxity of principle commences, which can never cease but when a renovation has been effected in the basis of belief, leading to the evolution of another faith whether religious or not, which they can believe. Therefore I hold that all thinking or writing, which does not directly tend towards this renovation, is at present of very little value beyond the moment. 20

Similarly, Eliot recognized that communities need something to believe in, and that once that belief has ossified, or is broken, a period of spiritual floundering is inevitable. Referring to England, she wrote: "... many of us can remember country districts in which the great mass of the people were christianised by illiterate Methodist and Independent ministers; while the influence of a parish clergyman among the poor did not extend much beyond a few old women in scarlet cloaks, and a few exceptional church-going labourers."21 In Adam Bede we see a community experiencing a "crisis of faith" brought on by Mr. Irwine's brand of religion which has all but lost its spiritual comfort, and Dinah's which disapproves of all material possessions, such as land, which are fundamental to the community. Arthur deals the death blow, as it were, when he betrays the community by ignoring his responsibility of upholding the sense of rank on which it is structured. The period of disillusionment that follows Hetty's disgrace is beautifully described in the chapter "The Bitter Waters Spread":

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Before ten o'clock on Thursday morning the home at the Hall Farm was a house of mourning for a misfortune felt to be worse than death. The sense of family dishonour was too keen even in the kind-hearted Martin Poyser the younger to leave room for any compassion towards Hetty. He and his father were simple-minded farmers, proud of their untarnished character, proud that they came of a family which had held up its head and paid its way as far back as its name was in the parish register; and Hetty had brought disgrace on them all — disgrace that could never be wiped out. (p. 393)

But just as her disgrace could never be wiped out, so the community could not be wiped out: "What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws." Moreover, "Deep unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. . . . Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out of that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity" (p. 405). Again, here is seen another important difference between Eliot and Wordsworth. When Wordsworth says "We will grieve not, rather find/ Strength in what remains behind," he means, in effect, that we are forced to settle for the next best thing to "the hour/ Of splendour in the grass" ("Intimations Ode"). But such is the view of a sensitive poet. A peasant, "In all his coarse apathy," has neither the time nor the inclination to dwell for long on the past. Moreover, the process of history that has shaped the Loamshire way of life marches on, forcing individuals to adapt themselves to crises such as those brought about by Hetty and Arthur. Men like Adam, who have "grown up historically," Eliot would say, are like seaworthy vessels capable of weathering storms. The experience of the storm may influence the way in which the vessel is prepared for the next, and in the same way, Adam learns from his experience. But, happily, storms are the exceptions — for the most part, calm prevails.

That is why there is a happy ending, and why to draw attention to poor Hetty's treatment at the hands of
Nature, to my mind, is to misunderstand the novel. Arthur and Hetty are anomalies to Hayslope, and both are rejected, as it were, for the same reasons why Falstaff is rejected by Hal in Shakespeare's 2 Henry IV. Such people do not fit in, and disqualify themselves from their respective milieus. The theme of redemption in the novel parallels the biblical one, but, whereas the Bible and Wordsworth tell us that life is the next best thing to being with God, Eliot stresses the value of spiritual strength derived from one's experience in life. The marriage of Adam and Dinah, for example, is curiously enriched by the way in which they have been affected by events. Adam's love for Dinah grows out of his passion for Hetty: "You perceive how it was," says the narrator, "Adam was hungering for the sight of Dinah, and when that sort of hunger reaches a certain stage, a lover is likely to still it though he may have to put his future in pawn" (p. 498). The loss of innocence and strength of experience is suggested in the novel by the references to the tides of the year when certain events occur. The action of the novel begins on "the eighteenth of June" (p. 17); the crisis comes to a head on the thirteenth of July, Arthur's birthday ("... not the best time of year to be born in. Nature seems to make a hot pause just then..." (p. 241); and, Adam marries Dinah "... on a rimey morning in departing November..." although years later (p. 501). There is deliberate irony on Eliot's part to associate the crisis of Hetty and Arthur with the innocence of summer, and the bliss of Adam and Dinah with the bleakness of winter. However, from another point of view, having lived precariously in summer, Hetty and Arthur were ill-prepared to face winter, whereas Adam and Dinah can look forward to the relief of summer having ensured their survival in winter.

Summing up the conservatism evident in Riehl's books, Eliot said:

... (it) is not in the least tinged with the partisanship of a class, with a poetic fanaticism for the past, or with the prejudice of a mind incapable of discussing the grander evolution of
things to which all social forms are but temporarily sub-servient. It is the conservatism of a clear-eyed, practical, but withal large-minded man ... able and willing to do justice to the elements of fact and reason in every shade of opinion and every form of effort. He is as far as possible from the folly of supposing that the sun will go backward on the dial, because we put the hands of our clock backward; he only contends against the opposite folly of decreeing that it shall be mid-day, while in fact the sun is only just touching the mountain tops and all along the valley men are stumbling in the twilight. 23

Eliot may just as well have been describing the conservatism seen in Adam Bede. Unlike Wordsworth's romanticism, which is "tinged with the partisanship of a class, with a poetic fanaticism for the past", Eliot's does "justice to the elements of fact and reason in every shade of opinion and every form of effort". Whatever the artistic shortcomings of Adam Bede, of the type already alluded to, Adam Bede provides us with a deep appreciation of English rural life. And as such it is a valuable social study contributing to the understanding of English people. Like Riehl, Eliot insisted on the importance of such studies, for without them proper reform was not thought to be possible.

Notes

2 Knoepflmacher, p. 126
This edition does not give line numbers, and I have only used it for "The Excursion". References to "Michael" and "Intimations Ode" are taken from Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, eds., Romantic Poetry and Prose (New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973).


6 Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas, The Moral and the Story (London: Faber and Faber, 1962) p. 29


8 Morley, ed., p. 491. The italics are mine.


10 "Riehl", pp. 360-1. The same point is made in Adam Bede: "... it happens ... that my strongest effort is to avoid any ... arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind." (p. 174).

11 "Riehl", p. 363

12 "Riehl", p. 380

13 "Riehl", pp. 363-70.

14 "Riehl", p. 383

15 "Riehl", p. 372

16 "Riehl", pp. 385-9

17 "Riehl", pp. 379-60

18 "Riehl", pp. 394-5

19 "Riehl", p. 371


21 "Riehl", p. 376

22 "Riehl", p. 381

23 "Riehl", p. 336