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THE IDEA OF AN ENGLISH GENTLEMAN: MR KNIGHTLEY AND ARTHUR DONNITHORNE

by David Ball

My modest purpose in this essay is to develop the interesting suggestion of Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* that George Eliot's inspiration to write *Adam Bede* may well have lain in her attentive reading of *Emma*: that Adam Bede himself is the heroic and detailed portrait of Robert Martin that *Emma* has no place for. George Eliot's father, Robert Evans, was a man similar to Robert Martin and Adam Bede, in both status and ability, and the creation of Adam is Eliot's first fictional tribute to him. Ellen Moers also briefly compares Harriet Smith and Hetty Sorrel as sharing 'the same delectable rosiness' (Moers, 1978, p.51). But she does not mention Arthur Donnithorne. Her purpose is to illustrate the supportive relationships of women writers across time, whereas my own will be rather to explore social and political attitudes, by comparing the two characters who are socially central to their village worlds, Mr Knightley and Arthur Donnithorne.

We encounter Mr Knightley throughout Highbury, visible and convivial – his social presence confirms his moral openness, his opposition to whatever is calculating, secret and manipulative. But it is on the ownership of Donwell Abbey, an estate to which most of Highbury belongs, that his moral authority is based and centred, and for Emma the flattering recognition of his estate precedes her humbler acceptance of his judgement. On the occasion of the strawberry-picking at the Abbey, we view the house and grounds through her eyes and feelings. What she sees and approves is an ensemble of house, owner and family, and of her own relationship to them:

It was just what it ought to be, and it looked what it was – Emma felt an increasing respect for it, as the residence of a family of such true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding. (Austen, 1966, 353)

But the wider prospect which includes Robert Martin's Abbey-Mill Farm is presented directly by the narrator as 'a sweet view – sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive' (ibid., 355).

Lionel Trilling (1968) sees the focus of this prospect as the Abbey-Mill Farm itself, in silent reproof of Emma's snobbery in excluding so sharply Robert Martin and his family, when it was necessary for the development of English society to permit the upward progress of yeoman farmers into the ranks of the gentry. But Trilling surely here exaggerates, with characteristic generosity, the mobility and democracy of English society, then or later. Even Mr Knightley is quite clear that a sharp dividing line of social class separates the Woodhouses, or the Knightleys, from the Martins. 'His situation is an evil', he acknowledges to Emma in informing her of Harriet's final acceptance of Robert Martin, 'but you must consider it as what satisfies your friend; and I will answer for your thinking better and better of him as you know him more' (*op cit.*, 454)

In *Adam Bede*, a social occasion comparable to the strawberry-picking at Donwell Abbey is the celebration of Arthur's majority at Donnithorne Chase. A prominent feature of the festivities is Arthur's announcement that Adam will now have the management of the woods on the estate. Although this promotion owes as least something to Arthur's self-flattery, it is not an Emma-like misjudgement or confusion. Arthur is also generous and perceptive, and his endorsement of Adam is the reverse of a disqualification, as the events of the novel confirm.

On our first introduction to Arthur, the narrator emphasizes his attractive appearance, which appeals to a shared sense of national pride:

If you want to know more particularly how he looked, call to your remembrance some tawny-whiskered, brown-locked, clear-complexioned young Englishman whom you have met with in a foreign town, and been proud of as a fellow-countryman – well-washed, high-bred, white-handed, yet looking as if he could deliver well from the left shoulder, and floor his man. (Eliot, 1980, 105)

It is not until the beginning of chapter 12, 'In the Wood', just before Arthur's first fall, that the narrator begins to undermine our confidence in our fellow-countryman. Arthur is described as 'a good fellow', an optimist, satisfied that in any scrape he will take the blame. The narrator's ironical assurance that 'if he should happen to spoil a woman's existence for her, [he] will make it up to her with expensive *bon-bons*, packed up and directed by his own hand', (ibid., 170) is a broad warning, not only hinting at what is to come with Hetty, but also criticizing a higher society and its double standards.

Since the classic studies of George Eliot by Barbara Hardy and W. J. Harvey, Arthur has been chiefly seen as an ironical version of egoism. Barbara Hardy calls him a 'tragic egoist' (Hardy, 1963, 69), and W. J. Harvey refers to his 'irresponsibility, his easy optimism, his evasion of guilt and his sense that the future can be bribed with good intentions' (Harvey, 1961, 168). This generally moralistic approach derives of course from F. R. Leavis, whose great novelists, from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence, 'are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity' (Leavis, 1962, 17).

We might therefore turn to Raymond Williams for a perspective more socially based, to remind us that there are indeed differences between our two authors. In *The Country and the City*, he discusses *Adam Bede* as an examination of Jane Austen's world from below. The power of the old squire Donnithorne is here scrutinized from the more vulnerable point of view of the Poysers:

The politeness of improvement is then necessarily counterpointed by the crude facts of economic power, and a different moral emphasis has become inevitable. (Williams, 1973, 167)

The force of this moral emphasis is to condemn Arthur for a carelessness and selfishness which

are shown to be more than merely personal.

The particular circumstances of Arthur's failure in the novel lie of course in his secret relationship with Hetty, his seduction of and by her. She is his inevitable punishment: that he should be so attracted by such superficial charms, and that he should also be (if only in part) responsible for her cruel sufferings. But if we thus place *Adam Bede* within the category of the 'fallen woman' novel, we must to some extent exonerate Arthur, for the emphasis shifts to the necessity of feminine virtue, though with differing, and often confused, degrees of severity. The condemnation and death of Hetty must seem harsh, whilst Adam's forgiveness of her is clearly intended to be exemplary. Rosemary Ashton, in a detailed discussion of Hetty, whilst admitting the relative harshness of her punishment, has praised the sympathetic realism of Eliot's presentation of her pregnancy (Ashton, 1996, 201-04).

If we return to compare Hetty more closely with Harriet Smith, we may be surprised to note that they have initially several points in common, beyond their immediate prettiness. They are both marginal and vulnerable members of their village worlds, and they both tend to be weak and easily influenced. Harriet's head is almost as easily turned by unrealistic hopes of a wonderful marriage as Hetty's, but whereas Harriet is pliant and malleable through and through, Hetty's softness hides deceptively a hard, unyielding centre, the stone within the downy peach (*op cit.*, 198). Of course the destinies of the two young women are finally widely different. How is it therefore that Harriet is so safe from Mr Knightley (and he from her), whereas Hetty succumbs so readily to the flirtation of Arthur and to her own fantasies?

The answer would seem to point directly to a clear moral divide between Arthur and Mr Knightley, but it points also to a difference of their social experience, and of the particular worlds of Highbury and Hayslope. Mr Knightley is the actual squire, well established in all his responsibilities long before the appearance of Harriet Smith. He is also 'surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies', to use Henry Tilney's words in *Northanger Abbey* to assure Catherine Morland that his father is no Montoni (Austen, 1972, 199). Naturally nothing can ever be quite so open, certainly not in Jane Austen, and it is possible for Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax to maintain a secret engagement, despite the vigilance of their neighbours. But that relationship was begun and formed elsewhere, and is, apart from its secrecy, perfectly respectable. The element of selfishness and irresponsibility in Frank's behaviour, comparable, to a degree, with Arthur's, may be linked to the relative uncertainty, up to the conclusion of the novel, of his social position.

If the world of Highbury thus tends to appear 'tight' or 'narrow', then the world of Hayslope would tend to be appear more 'dense'. This is no doubt because we have more physical description of Hayslope, and a greater social variety amongst its characters. The gaps of Highbury are those of lower social class, whilst those of Hayslope are within its woods and hedges. There is in fact little opportunity for secrecy in either place, and both Adam and Mr Knightley have a shared and approved reputation for honesty and plain speaking.

The celebrated descriptions of Hayslope and its farming year have already placed *Adam Bede*

within another familiar category, that of the pastoral novel, where as such it has often been compared to *Far from the Madding Crowd*. But it may also be categorized as a bourgeois or middle-class novel, and it is that approach to it which I would now like finally to emphasize, having first acknowledged that all our categorizations must inevitably overlap. Ian Gregor (1962) has found an uncomfortable contradiction between the pastoral and moral aspects of *Adam Bede*, but I would argue for their relative harmony, as it is through his ruin of Hetty that Arthur becomes unworthy to lead and represent the pastoral world of the old village, and must be replaced by the newly promoted and middle-class Adam.

This is a very different middle class from that of Jane Austen, her village families of landed gentry, clergy and army or naval officers. The wealth and authority of Austen's middle class are its inherited land, or other unearned income, and the gentlemanly education of its clergy; whereas the middle class of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* owes its strength to a 'capital' of energetic ambition and expertise. This rougher, harder, more enterprising middle class pushes Jane Austen's into the position of an upper or aristocratic class, which is an enormous shift of the centre of gravity of English society, anticipated by George Eliot in *Adam Bede*, with the benefit of a hindsight of some fifty years, and of the example of fellow Victorian novelists, for whom such a shift was also a principal theme. Within the middle class of *Adam Bede*, the Poysers represent the element of continuity, and Adam that of change: the change of status that is open to a talent capable of improving ways of working. In John Goode's excellent phrase, 'through work [Adam] transforms egoism into creativity' (Goode, 1970, 35).

But to emphasize change in such a way might seem to be reading against the grain of so indulgently nostalgic a novel. Terry Eagleton calls Adam 'a reliant agent of the ruling class' (Eagleton, 1978, 114). But this scarcely does justice to his strength and centrality in the novel. He not only serves the interests of the ruling class; he provides also a standard by which they may be judged, found wanting, and at least partially replaced. The nostalgia of this novel is not for a once-fixed social order; it is rather the personal nostalgia of childhood memories of the countryside, and of the author's relationship to her father.

This piety is not perhaps at the centre of our interest in the novel today, but we must accept that such intense personal investment is very often a vital motivation in the creation of works of art, and remains active in various ways to assure their charm and appeal.

But our personal emphasis here will not be wasted, if we return to *Emma* better enabled to see its class-based solution to the problem of encountering the dangers of social change. David Monaghan has effectively, if perhaps a little too complacently, linked Austen's literary and political strategies:

In selecting the '3 or 4 Families' around which her representations of village life were to be constructed, Jane Austen did not attempt to present a demographically accurate cross-section, but rather to give emphasis to those groups which her contemporaries regarded as most important. Consequently, her heroes and heroines almost all come from the ranks of the landowners, partic-

ularly the gentry, the class to which Jane Austen herself belonged, because these provided society with its moral leadership. (Monaghan, 1980, 6)

Meenakshi Mukherjee has more sharply emphasized the static, Highbury-centred conservatism of *Emma*, as a novel which 'reconfirms class boundaries and spatial enclosure', (Mukherjee, 1991, 141) and Marilyn Butler too has consistently presented a Jane Austen generally committed to a defence of 'the old role of the gentry' (Butler, 1981, 108).

That the Tory squirearchy was the rock on which English society had been built, and could be rebuilt: George Eliot has no need to argue against so impossible a project. In the new relative openness of middle-class success, she can put forward her own solution: that of the gifted individual, both marginal and central in his flexibility, an example of tolerance and understanding. This is a personal, moral (and morally self-made) leadership, different from, and in part critical of, the class leadership of a Mr Knightley.

Despite his success in Hayslope, Adam's limitations for this role in comparison with later heroes are obvious. He lacks the wit and intellectual subtlety, the doubt finally overcome by generous commitment, which characterize most notably Ladislav and Deronda, and which may be found too in more tragic later characters, such as Maggie Tulliver. He also lacks the cosmopolitan dimension, that reproof to national complacency, of Deronda in particular.

Dinah notoriously falls silent at the end of *Adam Bede*, and so too, more discreetly, does Mr Irwine, at least partially discredited by a minor carelessness and complicity towards his protégé, Arthur. Who then, we may ask in conclusion, is left to articulate a Feuerbachian religion of humanity? Who else but the narrator himself? Only this voice, representative of the artist – Dutch painter, Romantic poet, or realistic novelist – can be both of Hayslope and beyond it, interpreting from within to without, and situating personal piety and morality within a necessary and accepted movement of social change.

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