‘HETTY HAD NEVER READ A NOVEL’: *ADAM BEDE AND REALISM*¹

By Rachel Bowlby

It is not just the famous Chapter 17, ‘In Which the Story Pauses a Little’, which makes George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* one of the first candidates for any discussion of the tenets and aims of nineteenth-century literary realism. The question is opened in the very first paragraph of the novel – so very prominently, perhaps, and in so many dimensions, that we may miss its compacted meanings as we read on or rush on, past the beginning, to enter the narrative. Much of its meaning, of course, is not immediately available without the understandings that subsequent chapters will add, including the mid-novel manifesto; and much, as well, involves a significance that *Adam Bede* has acquired only in the light of later literary developments – what we might call, to adapt a word that occurs in a future historical flight towards the end of the novel, ‘post-time’.²

Here then is the opening of *Adam Bede*:

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance corner far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (ch. 1, p. 7)

The passage offers its historical vision in an extraordinary combination of magic and realism. Partaking of both, joining them together, the narrator situates himself exactly between the exoticism of the sorcerer and the precision of a specific historical date. At the same time, there is a kind of contract between the showman or historian and the reader: ‘This is what I undertake to do for you’. The past will appear, or reappear, in a promised future in which it is shown: it appears in reality, and it is a performance. In one way the past is a phantasmagoric spectacle, naturalized in the casual modern analogy of the diorama: while Adam works on his father’s coffin, ‘his mind seemed as passive as a spectator at a diorama: scenes of the sad past, and probably sad future, floating before him’ (ch. 4, p. 49).³ In another way the past is a matter of ordinary dimensions of space and time, the workplace and the working day, the place the same and one day much like another. With its continuities and repetitions, this is ‘a monotonous homely existence’ (ch. 17, p. 179). But Chapter 17 will seek to join the two perspectives, with the role of the sorcerer adopted by ‘men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them’ (ch. 17, p. 180): they draw out a natural illumination in the ordinary and everyday.

Of course this particular day is not, as it turns out, just any old day. Though the opening moves on to the promised ordinary scene in the workshop, at the end of the day, this will also become the night when Adam’s father drops dead as he makes his way home, his body discovered by his two sons the next morning when they carry a newly made coffin for someone else across the fields. If the modestly ‘faithful account of men and things’ (ch. 17, p. 177) is one aim of Eliot’s realism, it will always tend to be thwarted by the narrative expectation of something happening, of an unexpected event. It is one thing to conjure a moment of the past in a magical

illumination, or to ‘pause’ it, like Chapter 17, in the frame of a Dutch painting that shows ‘an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner’ (ch. 17, p. 179). But writing demands a movement beyond the still, a movement along the lines of words and time and beyond the indefinite pause and static place of the picture.

In *Adam Bede*, historical distance provides a means of maintaining, apart from the turbulent story, an image of settlement and relative changelessness. The events of the novel are set sixty years before the time of its writing, which then enables the initial gesture of conjuring evocation to have the appearance at once of resurrection and tranquillity. This past is dead, but it can be peacefully brought again to life in the form of the present account. It is to be an image of ‘still life’, framed as the past in the form of a pastoral world that has gone. The novel’s ending, placed eight years after the harrowing events it has recounted, remakes the village calm of the opening by offering a vignette of perfect family harmony, as Adam’s two children romp with their mother and uncle, while miserably dead and murdering Hetty is safely out of the picture.

Just four years after the publication of *Adam Bede* in 1859, Charles Baudelaire’s brilliant essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (*Le peintre de la vie moderne*) would take up the same motif of a celebration of real everyday life in the knowledge of its future or ongoing disappearance. The painter in question gives a value to the fleeting ephemera of metropolitan life, by sustaining them through his speedy sketches. But the time that passes in the two cases is entirely different in scale, with Eliot’s gap of sixty years reduced to the minimal lapse between one day and the next; for Eliot, one day in the lives of her pastoral, late eighteenth-century folk is meant to be much like the next, but for Baudelaire the point is the opposite: the city is in a state of perpetual change, every day looks different, and any present moment is in need of instant restorative reconstruction to avoid its permanent disappearance. What Eliot and Baudelaire share is a passionate insistence on the artistic value of the daily and seemingly trivial – what Baudelaire calls ‘the half of art’ that has been left out of the traditional emphasis on great art as linking the eternal and the ancient.4

These are preliminary frames for *Adam Bede* – preliminary in being at the novel’s own beginning, preliminary too in orienting a reading now, in the wake of a subsequent history of daily representation. But in fact we do not get more than one ordinary day in Jonathan Burge’s workshop, and even that one is already coming to its close in the opening scene. While there are several slow scenes which commemorate the simple festivities of Hayslope – the birthday feast for Arthur Donnithorne, the harvest supper at the Poysers’ farm – still, as Josephine McDonagh and others have pointed out, we do not see much in the way of old women scraping carrots or eating their dinner alone.5 In fact the four main characters – Adam, Arthur, Hetty Sorrel, Dinah Morris – are all young and beautiful – or ‘comelier’, as Gillian Beer fetchingly puts it.6 And the novel culminates in a dramatic and shocking event, Hetty’s murder of her baby and the ensuing trial. Before that, her seduction and subsequent pregnancy function in narrative terms as equivalent to the Fall. Before he pursues or she succumbs, the two of them are likened to the innocent toddlers the narrator is telling us that they cannot be:

Poor things! It was a pity they were not in that golden age of childhood when they would have stood face to face, eyeing each other with timid liking, then
given each other a little butterfly kiss, and toddled off to play together. Arthur would have gone home to his silk-curtained cot, and Hetty to her home-spun pillow, and both would have slept without dream, and to-morrow would have been a life hardly conscious of a yesterday. (Ch. 12, p. 129)

In the grown-up world the story cannot ‘pause’ indefinitely, in an endlessly repeated memoryless today, but has to have a tomorrow and a yesterday as well as a present. The kiss has consequences.

But if this is the real condition of life, it seems a far cry from the soft focus of the pictures described in Chapter 17. Hetty admires herself wearing the expensive new earrings that Arthur has bought her, and the narrator, himself (it is, very much, a himself) half admiring and half disapproving, sees her as on the brink of something called ‘a woman’s destiny’:

it is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman’s destiny before her – a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment, changing all at once her fluttering trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish. (Ch. 22, p. 251)

The destiny is not simply one of ordinary resignation to work, or boredom, or the loss of youth; it is not realism but tragedy. The fall takes Hetty with catastrophic suddenness (‘changing all at once’) from the pastoral nature of the ‘butterfly sensations’ to nothing less than ‘deep human anguish’. Given what lies ahead, for Hetty at least, it now appears as if the gentle, loving, eventless realism offered by Chapter 17 must itself be ruled out as something that cannot be available to Hetty. Her story is already marked out, ‘a woman’s destiny before her’, a cruel extrapolation that makes her individual fate into something that might be taken as a typical, even an inescapable female story.

Earlier in the novel, in one of many passages that in some way portend a fateful doom, it is suggested that some sort of literary education or experience, if Hetty had had it, might have helped her to see what was coming:

Hetty had never read a novel: if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her: how then could she find a shape for her expectations? They were as formless as the sweet languid colours of the garden at the Chase, which had floated past her as she walked by the gate. (Ch. 13, p. 135)

To begin with, the implied logic here is remarkable: that only the reading of a novel might give ‘a shape for her expectations’. Not only will a life-story be structured or shaped like a novel’s story, but without that novel’s moulding there will be no story in real life at all. The claim seems quite literally meant, as well: half way to reading a novel would be seeing the physical object, a bit like the volume of Aeschylus that Mr Irwine has by him (unopened) at breakfast in Chapter 16.

The valorization, if it is one, of novels, also seems at the very least surprising coming as it does from the author of ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, published three years before Adam Bede.
There, Eliot’s derision of a range of ostensibly typical feminine fictions, all in their own ways pretentious, idealizing and delusive in relation to the real conditions of life, is anything but a recommendation for novel-reading as an indispensable mode of life-education. On the contrary, the silly novels would create only silly ‘expectations’:

It is true that we are constantly struck with the want of verisimilitude in their representations of the high society in which they seem to live; but then they betray no closer acquaintance with any other form of life. If their peers and peeresses are improbable, their literary men, tradespeople, and cottagers are impossible; and their intellect seems to have the peculiar impartiality of reproducing both what they have seen and heard, and what they have not seen and heard, with equal unfaithfulness. ⁷

The criterion is straightforwardly one of realism, in the sense of ‘verisimilitude’, with the correspondence to truth being linked, as in Adam Bede’s Chapter 17, to a faithfulness (or ‘unfaithfulness’) of representation, and to direct experience or testimony: ‘what they have seen and heard’. A silly novel would be no use to a Hetty. But by the same token, if a properly unsilly novel would be representing what is likely or probable (‘their peers and peeresses are improbable’), there is no suggestion here that the probable needs its own prior novelistic representation in order to happen at all.

What other kind of novel than a silly one, whether or not by a lady, might Hetty be taken not to have read? Well, a novel by the new writer George Eliot, perhaps. Is that the kind of book that ought to have been seen on the Poysers’ kitchen table, as Hetty comes in from the dairy? If Hetty had read Adam Bede, say, would she have even recognized herself in this new kind of mirror? There is in fact one point at which an educative function is proposed within its pages, when the self-consciously male narrator bursts out to his community of readers of the same sex, at the time when the pregnant Hetty is desperately travelling to get to Arthur: ‘God preserve you and me from being the beginners of such misery!’ (ch. 37, p. 391). A man’s destiny, as a maker of a woman’s destiny, might be preventable from his reading of this novel; but the woman is not directly addressed as being able to turn her own story in another direction.

In fact, there is more shape or form to some of Hetty’s supposedly un-novelistic dreams about Arthur than the narrator’s dismissive remark might suggest. She imagines herself in the future dressed in beautiful clothes, and married to the squire, country girl as she is. She might not have read it in a novel, but she certainly could have, and even in a very good novel. The Cinderella story of cross-class marriage is one of the ancient themes of romance and fairy-tale, and it was taken up into the then newish genre of the novel in works like Richardson’s Pamela or, to a lesser degree, Austen’s Pride and Prejudice. Both these novels were classics by the time that Eliot wrote Adam Bede; Pamela, published a century before, was still popular and still coming out in new editions at the time when Adam Bede is set. ⁸ I don’t recall that Pamela had ever read a novel, or anything else for that matter (the girl has no time for reading as she’s always writing); but the plot of her novel depends on her knowing very well indeed the sorts of things that go on if a simple girl does not resist to the limit the advances of the rakish squire who employs her – and who offers her, after all his own counter-plots to her stubbornness, the ultimate reward of real marriage.
In this connection it is interesting that Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, a much later June-day novel, has a submerged modern echo of the *Pamela* plot. This occurs in a flashback in the mind of Peter Walsh, returning him to the embarrassment of the then eighteen-year-old Clarissa as she sat round the table with her friends:

> They were talking about a man who had married his housemaid, one of the neighbouring squires, he had forgotten his name. He had married his housemaid, and she had been brought to Bourton to call – an awful visit it had been. She was absurdly overdressed, ‘like a cockatoo,’ Clarissa had said, imitating her, and she never stopped talking. On and on she went, on and on. Clarissa imitated her. Then somebody said – Sally Seton it was – did it make any real difference to one’s feelings to know that before they’d married she had had a baby? (In those days, in mixed company, it was a bold thing to say.) He could see Clarissa now, turning bright pink, somehow contracting; and saying, ‘Oh, I shall never be able to speak to her again!’

The squire appears like a throwback to another century, but the passage, on many levels, is about the mutability of both stories of shameful liaisons and the response to them. Here the cross-class marriage offers scope for the upper-middle-class girl’s mockery, but the sexual embarrassment, in the end, is hers: it is she who blushes, not the new mother and wife. At one simple level, the marriage across the classes may really be more plausible or common than in the time of *Adam Bede*. The passage is framed by a sense of the shift in sexual expectations, with Peter’s comment that ‘In those days, in mixed company, it was a bold thing to say’. At the same time, the implicit reflection on the changing significance of sexual stories and changing sources of sexual shame is itself cast in the pages of a novel showing or at least implying that novels are not in fact the only source of stories about a woman’s destiny. The understanding (and thus the social fate) of the unconventional squire’s wife is shown to be set not so much by what happened in her life – she had a baby and she married – but by the various reactions to her story, and the possible modes of its narration. The destiny is unfixed because changing social and sexual mores are bound up with changing stories (including what is suppressed in them); the squire’s wife’s destiny is partly her fortunate wedding but it is just as much in the stories that subsequently seal or shake that fortune by their interpretations of it as a happy event or something else. Such narratives are not published novels – though novels, as here, may represent them; they are the general gossip and storytelling that is always and already a part of ‘real’ life.

The suggestion that Hetty might have been wiser for reading novels is all the more striking in that it goes against the tendency for novels to represent (other) novels as a bad influence on their characters, and thereby to press their own claims to telling reality like it is (not like bad novels tell it). George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893) has a particularly direct example of this. A working-class girl called Bella Royston gets pregnant as a result of an affair with a married man, and the severe feminist reformer Rhoda Nunn attributes her mistake to a single and definite source:

> All her spare time was given to novel-reading. If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea, we should have some chance of reforming
women.... What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women fall in love? 

Novels here generate a false experience; the ‘actual world’, untainted by novelistic fantasy, is one in which nothing happens. However, within The Odd Women, Bella’s novel-induced story is fully present, rhetorically indispensible to the claim about un-novelistic ‘real life’.

Of course, in the historical frame which Eliot sets up, Hetty could not have read Adam Bede any more than she could have read Mrs Dalloway. But it may well be that the novels that the narrator has in mind for Hetty’s non-reading are really the ones from which Eliot herself takes a critical distance in Adam Bede and elsewhere. Towards the end, after the completion of the tragic story, when some kind of provisional order has returned to Hayslope, the narrative pauses again, this time for a brief flight forward into an almost caricatural contrast between the time of its own writing and the earlier time of the turn of the century. Here, with Adam and Dinah on the brink of engagement and the harvest supper happening as usual, it is as though the horrors of Hetty’s fate can be dropped, and Hayslope can function once again – as it did at the start – as an image of pastoral peace:

Surely all other leisure is hurry compared with a sunny walk through the fields from ‘afternoon church,’ – as such walks used to be in those old leisurely times, when the boat, gliding sleepily along the canal, was the newest locomotive wonder; when Sunday books had most of them old brown-leather covers, and opened with remarkable precision always in one place. Leisure is gone – gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow wagons, and the pedlars who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons. Ingenious philosophers tell you, perhaps, that the great work of the steam-engine is to create leisure for mankind. Do not believe them: it only creates a vacuum for eager thought to rush in. Even idleness is eager now – eager for amusement: prone to excursion trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels; prone even to scientific theorising, and cursory peeps through microscopes. Old Leisure was quite a different personage: he only read one newspaper, innocent of leaders, and was free from that periodicity of sensations which we call post-time. (Ch. 52, p. 514)

The standard nineteenth-century rhetorical contrast between the speed of modernity and the slow tranquillity of the past, the pastoral past, is all the more striking for its place in a text which has itself just represented that past quite otherwise, in the form of disturbance and pain.

In the safer comparison, reading has its own place in the difference between a Sunday ritual – the old book a solid object seen in its unchanging domestic place – and the ‘exciting novels’ of the present, part of a whole array of fast-track contemporary writing (the periodicals, the many newspapers, the letters that arrive several times a day).

In Adam Bede, few characters read; or if they do, reading is not a major part of their lives. Bartle Massey gives literacy classes and is by implication the only serious reader in the village. Adam looks at his illustrated Bible on Sundays while his mother cooks the roast: ‘Adam was always at home, doing nothing but reading, an occupation in which she could venture to
interrupt him’ (Ch. 51, p. 498) – in other words, an occupation not as important to him as other ones. At one point we are given a list, documentary-style, of everything that he has ever read; there are no novels there. Dinah Morris is once seen reading in the Poyser’s kitchen. Arthur Donnithorne has just taken delivery of a newly published volume of poetry called *Lyrical Ballads* when he calls on the rector; it is cleverly planted, spot-on for a date-check the year after 1798. Two other details may also be intended as clues that can be read in retrospect as anticipations of what is to happen. Arthur himself singles out ‘The Ancient Mariner’ as the only good poem in his new book; its preoccupation with confession then shadows the visit to Irwine when he means (but fails) to confess to his flirting with Hetty. At that point, he has done nothing wrong, but subsequently, unconfessed and unadvised, he goes ahead and the seduction happens. The second anticipation is the presence within *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Thorn’, in which a pregnant girl is abandoned by her lover and there is a question that she may have killed her baby. In these connections, like scripture, modern literature provides coded analogues to the putative events of the present story. Unread by her, unmentioned by Arthur, the text of Hetty’s future life may be silently and semi-secretly present, not quite forewarning and not quite determining, but ominously loading the reader’s sense of inevitability.

But if Hetty had never read a novel, it almost goes without saying that she had never read, or seen, a tragedy. Like the possible allusion to ‘The Thorn’ concealed within the volume of *Lyrical Ballads*, various half-read or unread hints of Hetty’s future as a tragic one are scattered about, in actual books that are seen here and there or in seemingly casual narrative moments. Most of these hints will only take on their ominous, quasi-prophetic significance in the light of a reader’s later knowledge of what does befall Hetty; it is only by having happened that her destiny becomes her destiny, a woman’s destiny, and that more and more seemingly incidental details will turn out to have been pushing her towards it from the start. Early on, we are told that the Rev. Irwine likes Sophocles and Theocritus, in other words tragedy and pastoral, the two generic extremes between which this novel will fluctuate, narrowly averting or evading a final collision by the saving devices of the end.

In Chapter 16, when Arthur visits Mr Irwine for breakfast, that volume of Aeschylus is present but unread. There is a moment when the proto-confession (of possibility and desire, not yet of deed) almost happens, as mentor and former pupil engage in a semi-formal discussion of the hazards of love which, rather than finally reaching Arthur’s current situation, keeps to generalities – and here classical tragedy is considered: ‘I daresay, now, even a man fortified with a knowledge of the classics might be lured into an imprudent marriage, in spite of the warning given him by the chorus in the Prometheus’ (ch. 16, p. 170). That particular play of Aeschylus would have been in the very volume that is on the table in the room; it is thus doubly close to home, as Irwine is consciously or not adverting to what he suspects himself might be Arthur’s attraction to Hetty. Here, Irwine implies, even if someone has read a Greek tragedy, and read it for the pertinent instruction it does indeed offer on the very point that matters, that of cross-class marriage, still the real-life attractions may well be more compelling. ‘Arthur had never read a tragedy’ would be neither here nor there, since reading one, even though it may precisely convey and warn against it, brings no rescue from one’s fate or wrong choice.

‘Hetty had never read a novel’ further implies that there is a need for some sort of template with which to understand your situation; without it one has no story, or else one hurries towards ‘a
woman’s destiny’, or whatever destiny it may be, in blindness and ignorance. In a less tragic mode, the hypothesis that people require some external frame for understanding what is happening to them is also suggested elsewhere by Eliot in ‘The Natural History of German Life’. This is the long essay about Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl’s historical sociology of the German peasantry which was published in the Westminster Review in 1856, not long before she began to write Adam Bede. Following Riehl, she there describes how a peasant has no means of grasping the broader significance of the local changes he experiences; indeed has no means of understanding what a broader significance, for himself or for anyone else, might be:

He finds himself in a new element before an apparatus for breathing in it is developed in him. His only knowledge of modern history is in some of its results – for instance, that he has to pay heavier taxes from year to year.\(^\text{12}\)

It is part of his peasant condition that he has so such perspective or survival kit, just as it is part of Hetty’s ‘butterfly’ air that she lives from moment to moment, without reflective thought; otherwise the peasant would not be the peasant nor Hetty Hetty. And this is not a one-sided lack. Equally implicit in Eliot’s argument is that the institutional authorities that impose new conditions on the peasant – Eliot refers repeatedly to a ‘bureaucratic’ mode of government\(^\text{13}\) – themselves lack the historical understanding, of the kind that Riehl supplies, that would have enabled them to deal more sensitively with their subjects.

But at other times Eliot proposes the opposite theory, namely that the best sort of story derives not from the use of available models but rather from their rejection in favour of the authenticity of personal experience. The writers caricatured in ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ should have modestly contented themselves with putting their experience into fiction’, as ‘great writers’ do, rather than following some notion of what a novel ought to be.\(^\text{14}\) Experience is primary, and needs no external shaping from fiction or from any other model. In Chapter 17 of Adam Bede, the ‘modesty’ of this proposal is reiterated, as the narrator contrasts the ‘clever novelist’ that he claims not to be with the ‘faithful account of men and things’ (ch. 17, p. 177). At the end of the novel, Hetty’s reported telling of her own story, finally, in her confession to Dinah in the prison, ultimately endows her with the same testimonial authority as that of the narrator ‘as much bound to tell you … as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath’ (ch. 17, p. 177): Hetty is ultimately dignified with the status of the genuine teller of the true story.

Yet the difference between these two approaches does not fully hold. The advocate of a modest deployment of experience is not a little boastful in his proud and ironic rejection of the ‘lofty vocation’ of the ‘clever novelist’ (ch. 17, p. 177). ‘Lofty’, for Eliot, is invariably a word of mocking caricature, but she herself needs, at least rhetorically, the negative force of the rejected, ‘lofty’ model in order to assert the validity of her own, the one that is ostensibly no model at all, just ‘a faithful account’:

Considering these things, we can hardly think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy, accustomed as we may be to weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves ridden by still more fiery passions. (Ch. 3, p. 40)

In this world there are so many of these common, coarse people, who have no
picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. (Ch. 17, p. 180)

Rhetorically, the ‘world of extremes’ is just as necessary as ‘this world’ of ‘common, coarse people’: the ‘lofty’ high-life narratives show up the value of what they fail to record or see.

As with Rhoda Nunn’s outburst in The Odd Women, there is probably no manifesto for realism that does not in practice depend on just such a double structure, repudiating some current practice or genre which is thereby caricatured as manifestly inadequate for the representation of what the writer takes to be real life. The converse is arguably the case too: there may be no manifesto for any new literary mode that does not rely on a more or less explicit criterion of realism: this new form, it is claimed, will present life or reality as it really is, whereas existing or previous modes have idealized or in other ways distorted it. This is especially true, for instance, and against what is normally said, of early twentieth-century arguments. Though they may not use the word realism for what they are rejecting, and certainly do not use it for what they are proposing, modernist proposals still perform the classic realist move in their promise of a more authentic presentation of reality. A familiar example here would be Woolf’s dismissal of the factual details in the narratives of a novelist like Arnold Bennett, for instance in her essay ‘Modern Fiction’:

Is life like this? Must novels be like this?
Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this’.
Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.15

The structure is identical to George Eliot’s. First, there is the presentation of the type of novel to be rejected, and the dual assumption both that it is not like life and that novels should be like life. Second, there is the assumption that real life can be found in ordinary experience as witnessed by the self (‘Look within’). The modern internalization is anticipated in Eliot’s ‘faithful account of men and things’ – not merely seen out there, but ‘as they have mirrored themselves in my mind’ (Adam Bede, Ch. 17, p. 177).

Woolf will go on to stress the multiplicity and initial disorder of ‘impressions’ that come constantly pouring in, while Eliot’s model is more tranquil, without the sense of a turbulent outside world forcing itself in at every moment. But in both writers the mind is at the same time the recording instrument – it notes what comes its way – and also the reality check, a kind of testimony, against the false version put out by rival representers. Eliot says, to quote the passage at more length:

But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation, and that I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath. (Ch. 17, p. 177)
There is a gathering urgency here, as the self-consciously modest offer of ‘I aspire to give no more...’ becomes the compelling force of ‘I feel as much bound to tell you...’, and the passively instrumental mirrors, more or less accurate stable objects, give way to the testing time of a trial, in which what the narrator says, how he represents what he has witnessed, will have real future consequences. The telling of the story will itself have been part of the story, an event within it.

Eliot’s move from mirror to witness-box separates settled space from demanding time. The mirror-narrator contemplates what is securely deposited in his mind, reporting on what is there, and what is complete in itself. The old Dutch pictures to which Eliot likens this mode are not just images that fix a simple and ordinary moment of daily life. They are also historical, and their bearing on the present is indirectly educational, in the fostering of ‘sympathy’ and the suggestion that beauty is to be found in un-lofty life. The trial scene, by contrast, imparts crisis and pressure, and a present time of narration that makes a difference to how the future will be. The tension between these two orientations, the contemplative and the pro-active, the static picture and the critical moment, is beautifully captured in the chapter’s title, ‘In Which the Story Pauses a Little’, itself poised between the reflective and the urgent mode. The narrative turns away from the action, stops, and contemplates a broader general view that is apart from the pressure of ongoing narrative, apart from the impending events in the midst of which it is situated.

In the second part of Eliot’s paused chapter the narrator fast-forwards to interview a now much older Adam about Hayslope clergy and village religion then and now: this is the harmless, genial natural history of English village life, told by an Adam whose testimony is simply that of a typical social witness convened by the historically minded writer. There is a genuine respite and even a settlement here, beyond and away from the tragedy that, in the order of the narrative, has yet to occur. It is as if the story of Hetty and her baby had never happened or never was going to happen. But at the same time, this is surely the force as well of the two poles of the mirror and the trial—or pastoral realism and tragedy. Hetty’s is not the only story, even if it is the story on which this novel comes to be centred; there is also the continuing, regenerating, and slowly changing life of the community.

But still, even the part of the rural world that seems relatively happy may harbour the shadows, unseen and never perhaps acknowledged, of something like ordinary tragedy. There is a glimpse of this in the brief account of Mr Irwine’s sisters, who are nonentities in comparison with their formidable and much admired mother, a locally famous feature of her son’s drawing room. One of them is bedridden and the other is her carer. Unlike their mother, they do not figure as local subjects of interest—‘No one ever thought of mentioning the Miss Irwines’ (Ch. 5, p. 68)—except that they seem to know a lot about medicine and appear scary to children. And the narrator continues:

But for all those who saw them through a less mythical medium, the Miss Irwines were quite superfluous existences, inartistic figures crowding the canvas of life without adequate effect. Miss Anne, indeed, if her chronic headaches could have been accounted for by a pathetic story of disappointed love, might have had some romantic interest attached to her; but no such story
had either been known or invented concerning her. (Ch. 5, p. 68)

The sisters are introduced partly to give evidence of Irwine’s own sympathy for ‘obscure and monotonous suffering’, where neither events nor characters stand out: in an unchanging continuum of pain, nothing happens to anybody. By implication the narrator shares this attitude, consciously going against what is set up as the popular view. No one has ever bothered to imagine a story for these women; Eliot gives her own story a short pause in which to reflect on the meaning of lives without stories. For these sisters, the only likely story and explanation of present pain would have been a ‘romantic interest’; but Miss Anne’s ‘pathetic story’ is actually beyond this: that of never so much as having experienced a ‘pathetic story’ at all.

And there is more. The sisters’ unmarked existences are not just an isolated phenomenon, to be contemplated with sympathy rather than indifference as part of ‘the canvas of life’. The narrator continues:

Nevertheless, to speak paradoxically, the existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish, and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life. And if that handsome, generous-blooded clergyman, the Rev. Adolphus Irwine, had not had these two hopelessly-maiden sisters, his lot would have been shaped quite differently; he would very likely have taken a comely wife in his youth, and now, when his hair was getting grey under the powder, would have had tall sons and blooming daughters. (Ch. 5, p. 68)

The amplification of the paradoxical claim begins almost parodically, with its appeal to economics as the prime example of significant general effects in ‘the world’. But by way of a quite different order of cause and effect, with the simplified general character distinctions between selfish and sympathetic people, the sentence finishes with ‘the tragedy of life’. Unlike the other diverse illustrations from money and psychology, this is a condition not directly produced by ‘the existence of insignificant people’, but rather taken as fixed. The sentence that follows tells a specific story, that of the happy ‘lot’ that the Rev. Irvine has been fated not to enjoy. The tragedy is that of ordinary happiness unhappened, yet narratable in the negative form of what is grammatically and in this case poignantly known as an ‘unfulfilled’ conditional: what ‘would have’ been if he had not had these dependants (but he did, understood). In one way, Eliot’s narrator appears to drop or ignore the lifeless sisters in just the same way as the village community does, since it is not the likely story of their own unled lives that she sketches. But shifting the focus onto the habitually cheerful and locally significant character makes for a far bleaker general picture in which one kind of life story may be tragic in its own small way through the normally unspoken, submerged story that the actual life has ruled out.

Mr Irwine’s sisters are part of a large population of storyless characters tucked away in the bigger plots of nineteenth-century novels; these are the insignificant women who lurk on the upper or lower floors and rarely appear in the rooms where eventful discussions take place. They do not even get as far as sharing ‘the feelings of women in a drawing room’, for Woolf the experiential limit of female fiction. This everyday tragedy of ordinary lives, both
insignificant and less insignificant too, does not involve catastrophic changes or losses, but rather the missing of commonplace life-events. Such negative realism is just as much a feature of *Adam Bede* as either the much more recognizable tragedy of Hetty and her baby or, on the other hand, the pastoral tranquillity of the Poyser’s farm family or the happy group of Adam and Dinah and their two children (and uncle Seth) at the end.

Unlike ‘the tragedy of life’, the general fate evoked by the sentence which promises Hetty ‘a woman’s destiny’ appears to be tragic in an extreme and even a classical sense. Here is the passage again:

> it is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman’s destiny before her – a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment, changing all at once her fluttering trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish. (Ch. 22, p. 251)

Here the ‘rancorous poisoned garment’, almost a form of self-harming, as only Hetty herself has spun out her silly hopes, takes us directly to two Greek tragedies. Euripides’ Medea revenges herself on the deserting Jason by sending his new wife a bridal robe which is poisoned and causes her death (and her father’s); Medea then goes on to kill her own two children. The second poisoned garment is found in a play which also appears fleetingly in another passage of *Adam Bede*, already cited in part. Hetty is on her way home from her needlework lesson, hoping to have a second encounter with Arthur in the woods:

> It was as if she had been wooed by a river-god, who might any time take her to his wondrous halls below a watery heaven. There was no knowing what would come since this strange entrancing delight had come. If a chest full of lace and satin and jewels had been sent her from some unknown source, how could she but have thought that her whole lot was going to change, and that to-morrow some still more bewildering joy would befall her? Hetty had never read a novel: if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her: how then could she find a shape for her expectations? (Ch. 13, p. 135)

So if Hetty has never read a novel, it seems she has rather less realistically read Sophocles, since her fantasies take the form of a river-god’s courtship. In the backstory narrated at the start of *The Women of Trachis*, Deianira doesn’t marry her river-god suitor, who tries to abduct and rape her, but is saved from him by the man she does marry – Heracles no less. Many years later, in the time of the tragic action, she tries to woo back her now unfaithful husband by sending him a robe she has doused in what she thinks is a love potion; this had been given her by the unpleasant river-god after his fight with her future husband, to be used in appropriate circumstances. But the mislabelled potion is the river-god’s revenge: it is actually poison and causes Heracles’ death.

If *The Women of Trachis* really is the underwater subtext here, then Eliot is actually doing some complicated things with it, as the ripples of its plot seem to go in two different directions. After the river-god’s appearance in the passage just quoted, another semi-mythical comparison appears with the arrival of an accessory-rich treasure-chest, sender unknown, ‘full of lace and
satin and jewels’. The happy outcome, ‘some still more bewildering joy’, is represented as Hetty’s delusion. But in Sophocles’ tragedy, the wooing river-god, unpleasant as he is, does lead to a happy future for Deianira (Heracles is quite a catch, and she still loves him many years after). At the same time, though, the dubious delivery points to the play’s tragic ending when the wife’s surprise present brings about not a renewal of love but accidental death. In either case, for worse or for better, Hetty is not wrong to imagine that ‘her whole lot was going to change’; but there is no certainty as to which of the two it is.

What this passage may suggest, then, whether or not it was Eliot’s intention, is that even if Hetty had not read a novel, still less a tragedy, nothing would settle the meaning to be drawn from the reading of either. Rather like the casual coffee-table placement of the volume of Aeschylus on Mr Irwine’s side-table, the role of these passing tragic references, perhaps not even meant to be noticed as such, is not clearly that of a definite code for interpreting – or anticipating – the story of Hetty. Rather, they maintain something enigmatic and as yet unknown in ‘a woman’s destiny’.

Post-time

Finally, the time of writing of Eliot’s novel is now itself situated, for its present readers, in the dimming and differently revivable past of the century before the last one. But Adam Bede’s strikingly backward-looking beginning has had a future that Eliot herself, whether as sorcerer or as historian, could hardly have begun to foresee. Both Joyce’s Ulysses and then, a few years later, Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway, are reconstructions or resurrections of a single day – a single June day in both cases, dated as 4 June 1904 for Ulysses, published in 1922 (no exact day is given for Mrs Dalloway’s June day in 1923). Joyce’s cheeky elevation of a small-scale local advertising agent to the status of a hero from classical mythology is not so very far from the double dignity of the names that Eliot gives to Adam Bede, combining the Biblical original with the venerable Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical historian. In Between the Acts, her last novel, Woolf recreated yet another June day, with an even shorter gap from the time of writing than the one that separates 1923 from Mrs Dalloway’s publication in 1925. Set in June 1939, Between the Acts is shot through with the imminence – for its characters as well as its author – of another war; but like Adam Bede it evokes an ordinary English village world, one with its own forms of cruelty and violence, and its local continuities and changes. All three modern novels could be said to go one stage further than Adam Bede’s historical starting point because their own June days are also where the novel remains and ends, whereas Adam Bede covers several years around the century’s boundary to reach its final scene of harmony, having also stopped off in the middle to interview a by now aged Adam. From this point of view the one-day novel further concentrates Eliot’s call for the representation of everyday realities – of a world from which large events are absent and ordinary stories, written or unwritten, shape their people’s lives.

Notes

1 This essay is a revised version of a talk given at the Adam Bede conference at the Institute of English studies, University of London, in November 2009.

The narrator’s position and the novel’s play of past and present, death and afterlife, are further complicated here by the fact that dioramas did not yet exist at the time of the story; nor, if they had, would it be likely that Adam had been to a big enough city to see one, let alone for the experience to have embedded itself as the second nature that the comparison suggests. Dioramas, invented by Louis Daguerre, began in the 1820s in Paris; they were proto-cinematic shows of changing painterly images, displayed in specialised theatres to audiences up to several hundred. Anne Freidberg suggestively relates the diorama to ‘the pleasure of immersion in a world not present’, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 28.


Richardson’s Pamela was first published in 1746 but continued to be reprinted and to appear in new editions right up to the end of the century.


See Eliot, ‘Natural History’, p. 276, where ‘bureaucratic’ occurs three times and ‘bureaucracy’ once.

