

Adam Bede, realism, the past, and readers in 1859

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY)

Open Access

Marshall, G. (2020) Adam Bede, realism, the past, and readers in 1859. English Literature, 6 (1). ISSN 2420-823X doi: <https://doi.org/10.30687/el/2420-823x/2019/01/002> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/89583/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Identification Number/DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30687/el/2420-823x/2019/01/002>
[<https://doi.org/10.30687/el/2420-823x/2019/01/002>](https://doi.org/10.30687/el/2420-823x/2019/01/002)

Publisher: Edizioni Ca Foscari

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading
Reading's research outputs online

Adam Bede, Realism, the Past, and Readers in 1859

Gail Marshall
University of Reading, UK

Abstract This article gives an account of the immediate publication context of George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, in terms of competing opportunities for leisure, anxieties about the reading of fiction, the publishing industry, and the social and political context of February 1859. It examines the way in which the novel engages with its first readers, specifically through its treatment of the experience of reading fiction, and the ways in which *Adam Bede* differs from readers' previous experiences. The article argues that the novel's impact is determined by its engagement with the past of its setting, and by the ways it which it encourages a historically-nuanced appreciation in its readers, and that these factors are integral to Eliot's articulating a new form of realist fiction.

Keywords George Eliot. Adam Bede. Queen Victoria. Mudie's leisure. Realism. Geraldine Jewsbury. Popular theatre.

Summary 1 Publishing and *Adam Bede*. – 2 Leisure in 1859. – 3 Reviewing *Adam Bede* and Popular Fiction. – 4 Realism, the Home, and the Poor. – 5 Aligning Past, Present, and Future.



Peer review

Submitted	2019-11-14
Accepted	2019-11-21
Published	2020-03-09

Open access

© 2020 | CC BY Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation Marshall, Gail (2019). "Adam Bede, Realism, the Past, and Readers in 1859". *English Literature*, 6, 33-48.

1 Publishing and *Adam Bede*

George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, was published on 1 February 1859. It was originally meant to have been published months earlier by Blackwood's, but had been held up by Edward Bulwer Lytton's tardiness in correcting the proofs of his 4-volume novel, *What Will He Do With It?*, written whilst he was Secretary of State for the Colonies. In a vivid reminder of the material conditions of writers working at the time, this meant that "about a ton and a half of the same type [that] was being used for *Adam Bede* was locked up" (Haight 1985, 267). With this novel, Eliot took Victorian fiction into a new phase of psychological complexity, via a deeply moral, realist aesthetic, and an ambitious reading practice that demanded not only serious critical attention, but a degree of committed, empathetic investment. With the novel, she herself entered into a contest for the form and status of fiction.

Adam Bede is a historical novel. It begins in 1799, and tells the story of Adam, an aspiring young carpenter in the Derbyshire village of Hayslope who embodies enterprise and dedication to work, which is for him a moral undertaking, and his love for Hetty, the niece of a much-respected local farming family, the Poysers. Hetty's head is turned by the handsome young squire, Arthur Donnithorne, who seduces her. Finding herself pregnant, Hetty leaves Hayslope to seek Arthur, who, unbeknownst to her, has left to serve with his militia unit in Ireland. Failing to find him, she gives birth miles away from her home. Hetty abandons her baby in a wood, where it dies, and she is subsequently tried for infanticide, found guilty, and sentenced to be hung. Our attention as readers is divided between Hetty's trials, and the sufferings of Adam, whose faith and love, as well as his confidence in himself, are devastated by Hetty's actions. She is saved by a last-minute reprieve brought to the gallows by Arthur, and has her sentence commuted to seven years transportation to Australia. She dies on the return journey. Throughout the novel, Hetty's vanity and day-dreaming are contrasted with Dinah Morris, a Methodist preacher, factory-worker, and another niece to the Poysers. It is Dinah who persuades Hetty to confess to her crime, and who accompanies her to the gallows. Following Hetty's transportation, Adam finds himself falling in love with Dinah, and the two eventually marry. Their happy ending sees Adam becoming an independent businessman, and effectively replacing the dissolute and broken Arthur as an authority in the village. Dinah is forbidden by the Methodists to preach any longer, and subsides into domesticity.

February's letters between Eliot, her partner, George Henry Lewes, and their publisher, John Blackwood, reveal the publishing business at the time to be a tough one; Eliot was lucky to have Blackwood's affability and shrewdness, and Lewes's experience, to help negotiate it for her. Amongst other things, they discussed how

to deal with the dominant position of Mudie's Circulating Library. Readers had been borrowing books from Mudie's since 1842, but the company's move to Oxford Street in 1851 had increased its influence and significance, which even extended to the content of the books it lent. In 1858, according to Judith Flanders, Mudie's bought 100,000 new books, a figure which nearly doubled to 180,000 three years later (Flanders 2006, 185). Mindful of Mudie's power, Eliot had queried anxiously why "Mudie has almost always left the C S [i.e. *Clerical Scenes*] out of his advertised list, although he puts in very trashy and obscure books? I hope it is nothing more than chance" (Haight 1954-78, 3, 7). Mudie was trying to drive a hard bargain over *Adam Bede*, initially threatening to take only 50 copies, but finally 'succumbing', to use John Blackwood's term, to 'taking 500 at our terms 10 per cent off sales, to which I think he is entitled when he takes so large a number'. Blackwood was finally satisfied with Mudie's decision, not least because, as he wrote to Lewes, he understood the lender's caution:

As I have often explained before, I felt distinctly that by *Clerical Scenes* a reputation with readers and men of letters was made, but not a public general reputation [...] When the reviews begin to appear and people who have read [*Adam Bede*] begin to *talk about* it the movement will take place.

This proved to be the case. Nonetheless, he assured Lewes that he was "sending copies to the Press in all directions" (Haight 1954-78, 3: 9).

2 Leisure in 1859

Publishing is a key part of the industrialisation of leisure, a trope that Eliot uses in her novel to describe her contemporary readers' world. She contrasts leisure's present state to the ways in which it used to be enjoyed:

Leisure is gone - gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow waggons, 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 theorizing 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. He was a contemplative, rather stout gentleman, of excellent digestion; of quiet perceptions, undiseased by hypothesis; happy in his inability to know the causes of things, preferring the things themselves. He lived chiefly in the country, among pleasant seats and homesteads, and was fond of sauntering by the fruit-tree wall and scenting the apricots when they were warmed by the morning sunshine, or of sheltering himself under the orchard boughs at noon, when the summer pears were falling. He knew nothing of weekday services, and thought none the worse of the Sunday sermon if it allowed him to sleep from the text to the blessing; liking the afternoon service best, because the prayers were the shortest, and not ashamed to say so; for he had an easy, jolly conscience, broad-backed like himself, and able to carry a great deal of beer or port-wine, not being made squeamish by doubts and qualms and lofty aspirations. Life was not a task to him, but a sinecure. He fingered the guineas in his pocket, and ate his dinners, and slept the sleep of the irresponsible, for had he not kept up his character by going to church on the Sunday afternoons?

Fine old Leisure! Do not be severe upon him, and judge him by our modern standard. He never went to Exeter Hall, or heard a popular preacher, or read *Tracts for the Times* or *Sartor Resartus*. (Eliot 1859, 3: 283-5)

Eliot's healthy, bucolic "stout gentleman" closely resembles Mr. Pullet, whom she would soon write about in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Mr. Jerome in "Janet's Repentance", one of Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*. He is a creature of the countryside, lacking intellectual curiosity, content to be guided by the seasons, and in complete contrast with the modern, London-based man of active leisure.

Peter Bailey uses Eliot's passage as an exemplar of modern leisure, where "change and modernity predominated over continuity, and where old leisure was communal, 'answering to the prescriptions of ritual and custom'" (Bailey 2012, 619). Leisure has been "severed from its traditional moorings in work, custom, and community" (622), operates within a different experience of time, and is often located not in the street and public space, but in the home. The reference to "scientific theorizing and cursory peeps through microscopes" might be an affectionately rueful reference to Lewes's scientific work, which flagged in the face of the demands of the couple's imminent house move: "My frogs mutely reproach me for neglect. My microscope gathers the dust of disuse" (Haight 1954-78, 3: 10-11). Modernity is defined by papers, politics, and the post, and a perceptible speeding up of sensation, enabled by the increasing industrialisation which in turn necessitated its workers' distraction.

In the same week as *Adam Bede* was published, popular preachers at St Paul's and Westminster Abbey, not to mention Exeter Hall on

the Strand, were another potential distraction for the reader. "The great room" of Exeter Hall "was well filled on Sunday night" for the preaching of the Rev Samuel Monton of Percy Chapel, Tottenham Court Road, who chose for his text "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich". He had to compete with the Rev John Stoughton of Kensington, who preached the same night at St James's Hall on "He restoreth my soul". "In a few minutes after the doors were thrown open the hall was declared full, and vast numbers were disappointed" (*Lloyds*, 6 February 1859, 6). Plenty of secular amusements were on offer too: Monday Popular Concerts and Barnum on "Money Making and Humbug" at the St James's Hall, Mr. C. Dickens reading "his CHRISTMAS CAROL and the TRIAL FROM PICKWICK" at St Martin's Hall, "Madame Delevanti's grand ascent on the Telegraph Wire" at the Alhambra Palace, Leicester Square, "The original and celebrated SPANISH MINSTRELS" at Winchester Hall on the Southward Bridge Road, and the men-only invitations to listen to "Short and interesting interludes between the Musical Portion of the Entertainment, embracing an amount of singular ability never before presented to the public" by "THIRTY VOCALISTS at Evans's Magnificent Music and Supper Rooms, Covent Garden", and to learn from lectures at Dr Kahn's Anatomical Museum on Tichborne Street: "OPEN DAILY (for Gentlemen only)" (*Lloyds*, 6). Many men were also present at the meetings discussing voting reform throughout the country.

This is to say nothing of the bills of the nineteen West End theatres advertising in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, dioramas of "the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky, the Prairies of Illinois, and the Scenery of Niagara" at the Royal Gallery of Illustration, the Ohio Minstrels, whose only fault is that "They betray too thoroughly their Anglo-Saxon origin", and the production of *The Gipsy Girl of Madrid; or, the Edict of Spain* at Astley's Amphitheatre, best-known for its equestrian spectacles (*Lloyds*, 6). Lest they miss out on the explosion in printed matter occurring in the 1850s, "Under the enterprising auspices of Captain Hicks, governor, a library is about to be formed in Whitecross-Street prison, for the use of the debtors confined in the prison" (*Lloyds*, 11). Even prisoners were not immune from the hectic leisure resources around them.

Eliot's description of "Leisure" gives a strong sense of the conditions in which novelists and publishers were having to compete for the public's attention, and of how their consumers might need to be guided through leisure's multiple attractions. *Adam Bede* appeared alongside the millions of words published weekly in newspapers, periodicals, and other new books. But Eliot's novel insists that time must be found for attentive reading. The genesis of *Adam Bede* was Hetty's distressing story, which came from a tale recounted to Eliot by an aunt, the bare bones of which appear regularly in newspaper columns telling of

illegitimate births, infanticide, the deaths or suicides of abandoned women, and the chaos that ensues. Eliot took the nub of that story, its “newsworthy” elements, and read them differently, as just one episode in a long narrative whose significance lay elsewhere than in its newsworthiness, and which demanded more consideration than anyone could give to the densely printed newspapers of the 1850s.

3 Reviewing *Adam Bede* and Popular Fiction

As literary insiders, Eliot and Lewes were particularly concerned with how *Adam Bede* might be reviewed, by whom, and how it would fare alongside more overtly popular fiction. An early review from the *Statesman* “disgusted and disheartened” Lewes as “it was laudatory throughout; but the kind of laudation was fatal [...] The nincompoop couldn’t see the distinction between Adam and the mass of novels he has been reading” (Lewes 1859, 153). Eliot herself condemned “damnatory praise from ignorant journalists” (Haight 1954-78, 3: 24) and charged Blackwood with making sure that no “hackneyed puffing phrase” be tacked to her book in advertising columns. She goes on:

One sees [such phrases] garnishing every other advertisement of Hurst and Blackett’s trash: surely no being ‘above the rank of an idiot’ can have his inclination coerced by them and it would gall me as much as any trifle could, to see my book recommended by such an authority as the writer in Bell’s Weekly messenger who doesn’t know how to write decent English. (Haight 1954-78, 3: 25)

We can only imagine Eliot’s dismay at the first review of *Adam Bede*, which appeared in the same *John Bull and Britannia* that praised *Onwards*. It was less than glowing, made no mention at all of its hero, and concentrated on Hetty’s attractions as a popular heroine (*John Bull and Britannia* 1859, 107).

Adam Bede went on to become the most widely reviewed novel of the year, and was often written of alongside more popular fiction. John Chapman’s piece in the *Westminster Review* began with a comparison between *Adam Bede* and the more usual run of novels of which he memorably wrote that, “Swinging on a gate is an intellectual amusement compared with reading most of them” (Chapman 1859, 488). Other critics responded discerningly to the novel’s innovations: Ann Mozley thought it unique in having “found its way into hands indifferent to all previous fiction, to readers who welcome it as the voice of their own experience in a sense no other book has ever been” (Mozley 1859, 434), whilst for Geraldine Jewsbury, *Adam Bede* was a work of “true genius”, “of the highest class. Full of quiet power, without exaggeration and without any strain after effect it produces

a deep impression on the reader, which remains long after the book is closed" (Jewsbury 1859a, 284).

Eliot recognised the tensions between different types of fiction, and frequently tried to educate her readers about them, most notably in *Adam Bede*'s chapter 17, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little". Eliot anchors readerly sympathies in the possibilities opened up by the absence of the more customary "sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves ridden by still more fiery passions" (Eliot 1859, 35) and her concentration on "faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence" which had been inspired by "Dutch paintings". *Adam Bede* is part of a dialogue between Eliot and popular fiction, which had been going on since 1856 when, just before she began her career as a fiction writer, she published a review on "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" in the *Westminster Review* (Ashton 1996, 163). The essay may be read as an apprentice's analysis of the contemporary conditions of the craft she aspired to, and as evidence of the writer's antagonism towards the "particular quality of silliness that predominates" in popular fiction by women (Eliot 1992a, 296). However, despite Eliot's own "higher" aspirations for her fiction and its readers, and some critics' responses, the relationship between silly novels and Eliot's own fiction is far from being so exclusive. Rather there is an energizing symbiosis between the popular and *Adam Bede*.

Adam Bede uses one of popular fiction's most ubiquitous plot structures: in the relationship between Adam, Hetty, and Arthur, Eliot employs a structural trope which underpins a great many other novels by women novelists of this year: the heroine's choice between a worthy lover (like Adam), and an altogether more dashing and exciting, though ultimately unreliable, prospect (such as Arthur). The triangular structure is a staple of romantic fiction. Sometimes the heroines of 1859 get a new chance at success with the worthier man after the flighty, sexier man has inevitably let them down, sometimes not; Hetty's infanticide, transportation, and death represent by far the most drastic punishment for a wrong choice. Some male characters are more despicable and openly calculating than Arthur, whose fault lies mainly in a selfishly lazy desire to indulge and to be indulged, yet which has results just as devastating as the more malign purposes of cold-hearted, often foreign, seducers. But in a twist on this popular model, Eliot cleverly develops the triangular structure by juxtaposing two such plots, one male- and one female-centred: in the first, Hetty opts for Arthur over Adam, only turning to the latter when it is too late, and she is already carrying Arthur's baby. With his first love gone, Adam can turn to Dinah, the woman he has respected from the beginning of their relationship, with whom he is allowed to grow old happily along with their children, and his gentle brother, Seth. This second triangle attempts, not entirely successfully, to re-calibrate the text, and shift its

centre decisively away from illicit romance to the achieved satisfaction of a marriage based in virtue and hard work. This, alongside Hetty's death, and Arthur's emasculation, represents both a chastening dose of Eliot's realism, and also the cost of the security of the novel's ending, which rests in large part on the expulsion of those aberrant and disruptive elements that are personified in Hetty and Arthur.

Eliot was anxious about the reading practices engendered by popular fiction, as were some of her contemporaries. W.R. Greg expressed his concerns in an article on the "False Morality of Lady Novelists". He writes warily of the influence and easy effectiveness of light literature, which as the "sole or the chief reading" of numerous readers in the "idler or more impressionable hours, when the fatigued mind requires rest and recreation", needed to be "watched[ed] with the most vigilant concern" (Greg 1859, 145). The young are most vulnerable to the influence of such fiction, as their experience and education are not yet robust enough to enable them to be discriminating readers, as are women, "who are always impressionable, in whom at all times the emotional element is more awake and more powerful than the critical, whose feelings are more easily roused and whose estimates are more easily influenced than ours" (145-6). The very ease of reading fiction is dangerous. In a metaphor that speaks to the current interest in the digestion and consumption of food, Greg writes that:

Histories, philosophies, political treatises, to a certain extent even first-class poetry, are solid and often tough food which requires laborious and slow mastication. Novels are like soup or jelly; they may be drunk off at a draught or swallowed whole, certain of being easily and rapidly absorbed into the system. (146)

The metaphor speaks to concerns about novels' being intimately ingested. Whilst he admits that novels can often deter wrong-doing by their "life-like pictures of sorrows endured and trials surmounted" (146-7), the fact that so many novels are written by young women, with inadequate moral development, immature judgement, and "superficial insight" (149) is cause for great anxiety. This is interesting evidence of the predominance of fiction in the literary landscape, and of the enthusiasm with which women were taking it up, as both readers and writers. One cannot help wondering this plea actually registers greater competition within this literary field than any other. Certainly a higher proportion of women writers worked in fiction than in any other genre (Tuchman 1989, 125).

Eliot was competing commercially, and in terms of popularity, with the creators of this fiction, those "lady novelists" whose work might have mis-educated Eliot's potential readers. However, whilst there were plenty of "silly" and barely readable novels published in 1859,

not all of them were by women, and female novelists were not as uniformly pernicious, or just plain bad, as Eliot and Greg suggested. *Adam Bede* appeared just after Geraldine Jewsbury's *Right or Wrong*, which was published by Hurst and Blackett, whom Eliot singled out for particular criticism in her letter to Blackwood. Whilst subsequent readers have generally taken for granted the usefulness and authority of Eliot's, and indeed Greg's, derogatory classifications of "silly novels" and their "lady novelists", we need to ask how far such a novel actually meets Eliot's definitions of 'silly novels' and what it is about them that she seeks to distance her work from.

Jewsbury's *Right or Wrong* and *Adam Bede* share an interesting insistence on the sacred importance of the home to their heroes. Adam's work is based in building and improving homes and their furniture; Jewsbury's novel goes into minute details of interior decoration ("The walls were light-grey, stenciled with a graceful trellis pattern, wreathed with green leaves") (Jewsbury 1859b, 2: 121) whilst she asserts the spiritual nature of the home that her hero Paul creates for his wife: "Paul had all along been aspiring after an ideal; to him a *Home* meant so much, something so noble, so sacred, such an innermost life, that the materials took, under his hands, a meaning and expression quite different to their actual existence as articles of furniture" (122-3). The home becomes both the measure and the means of his redemption at the end of the novel. The insistence on male investment in the details and spiritual nature of the home is striking, but perhaps not surprising given the prominence of such details in contemporary newspapers: *The Times'* advertising columns are full of adverts for furniture and domestic goods, and G.H. Lewes was just as invested in domestic purchases as Eliot. Jewsbury's novel insists on an attention to domestic details which closely echoes Eliot's emphasis on the quotidian in *Adam Bede*. Jewsbury's narrator continues:

If we could only realize our daily life instead of taking it as we do, hardened into common use and wont, it would be as when we look through a microscope and see the delicate and minute beauty which lies hidden from us in objects so common that we look at them without seeing. (125)

This moment speaks to the ways in which the technologies of the day, of which the microscope was newly readily accessible, literally offered new views of the world, and subsequently new means of conceptualizing it. Jewsbury attempts to encourage her reader's "realization" of daily life as the repository of wonder and beauty, as do Eliot and scientists of that year, like Lewes, Charles Darwin, and Philip Gosse, for whom the microscope was a revelatory instrument. Jewsbury and Eliot use the domestic as both the vehicle and the essence and substance of their approach to fiction.

4 Realism, the Home, and the Poor

Eliot's use of the home lies at the heart of the moral realist aesthetic which is exemplified in *Adam Bede* and which expresses more fully than Jewsbury, the implications of such microscopic attention to domestic detail. In "In Which the Story Pauses a Little", she writes of the "many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise" that,

I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her. (Eliot 1859, 2: 5)

In Eliot, reverence for the details of home is simultaneously a recognition and reverence of a shared humanity, a "deep human sympathy", which over-rides the claims of conventional physical beauty, which was celebrated in popular fiction:

All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children - in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy. Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by the celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world - those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions. 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. Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of

commonplace things – men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them. (7-8)

This is one of the most famous of Eliot's expressions of her aesthetic, of her conviction of the morality of a right apprehension of beauty in commonplace things. Properly employed, she argues, this apprehension will build cross-class understanding through art's engendering of "deep human sympathy". Fiction is being employed by Eliot to extend her readers' sympathies with and knowledge of unfamiliar groups within society, particularly the poor, with whom they might not come into contact. The social and political context of February 1859 shows exactly how urgently this was needed.

Two days after *Adam Bede* appeared, Queen Victoria made a speech in the House of Lords at the opening of the new parliamentary session. The State Opening was a glorious social occasion: the *Illustrated London News*'s account reported on the crowds who thronged the Queen's route to Westminster, security arrangements, the royal salute, and the procession of eight royal carriages. The overwhelming intention of the Queen's speech was to insist on the stability gained after periods of warfare in the Crimea and India earlier in the decade, and to steady Britain in the face of current European unrest. Victoria began her speech with surprising complacency: "I am happy to think that, in the internal state of the country, there is nothing to excite disquietude, and much to call for satisfaction and thankfulness"; specifically, "Pauperism and crime have considerably diminished during the past year, and a spirit of general contentment prevails" (*The London Gazette* 1859, 457). Unemployment was certainly at the relatively low level of 26% in 1859 (Hoppen 1998, 80), but it did not eradicate all social problems, as we will see. *Reynolds's Newspaper* directly disputed this part of Victoria's speech, describing the alleged decrease in pauperism and crime as "equivocal, and by no means supported by the experience of the judges or the state of the gaols" (*Reynolds's Newspaper* 1859, 1).

Victoria's grasp on the conditions of her country is limited by the extent to which she was exposed to her subjects, and the political leanings of her speech-writers. At dinner on 26th February, two days before the House of Commons began a debate on voting reform, Victoria was assured by Sir George Lewis that the "country was perfectly calm about [Reform] & most contented & peaceful" (Queen Victoria's Journal 1859). The Queen was in Windsor for most of February, going to London only for Parliament's opening and to attend the theatre, a favourite occupation of hers, and one which was not likely to expose her to the nation's real situation. This month she saw *Satanella, or, The Power of Love* three times at the English Opera. Billed as a "romantic opera" it is a light piece combining a

cross-class love-affair, the triumph of humble virtue over aristocratic scheming, the baffling of the devil, and the redemption of one of his female servants, the eponymous Satanella. She is lifted to heaven on a cloud at the finale, accompanied by a host of songs and supernatural effects, culminating with “the melody of ‘The Power of Love’ sung by an invisible choir as the curtain slowly descends” (Harris, Falconer 1858). Victoria also saw “the two last acts of ‘Macbeth’”, at Charles Kean’s Princess’s, which she described as “a stupid, though gorgeous Pantomime” (Queen Victoria’s Journal, 17 February); an *Unequal Match* at the Haymarket on the 24th, which she notes in her journal was the anniversary of the French Revolution (she refers to 1848, not 1789); and on the 28th went to see the popular comic actor Frederick Robson in a piece called *The Porter’s Knot*. As was often the case, the play was an adaptation by John Oxenford of a French play by Messieurs Cormon and Grangé. Victoria recalls:

There is such a funny song Robson sings in the last verse of which he speaks of what might have been his lot, had he been a cobbler’s son & sent to the “Foundling Hospital, where the boys are dressed in woollen clothes, to warm their little limbs, – & they smell of yellow soap & sing like Cherubims” –

This is at best a curious form of humour, and yet the piece is described in the *Illustrated London News* as having a subject “well calculated to appeal to English sympathies”:

The circumstances of the plot have been thoroughly Anglicised. The interest turns on the parental solicitude of an honest couple who, having earned sufficient means to live in respectable retirement, and to educate their son as a surgeon, are plunged, by the extravagance of that son, into unexpected poverty. The father carefully conceals the delinquency of the boy from his wife, and pretends that he himself has imprudently lost the money which the youth has squandered in unfortunate speculations. From this peculiarity much of the touching sentiment of the piece arises. The son departs for Australia to redeem his fortunes, and the old man returns to his porter’s knot as the means of procuring his subsistence. The phases of feeling that arise out of this self-sacrifice are distinctly, and with the utmost artistic skill as well as the greatest natural power, brought out by Mr. Robson. [...] Ultimately, his parental sufferings are rewarded by the success of his son, who fortunately and heroically redeems his honour and restores his parents to their comfortable home. The piece [...] promises to be a remarkable success. (*Illustrated London News* 1858, 549)

The English-ness of the play seems to rest in its quality of love and honour redeemed, worth and virtuous hard work rewarded, and the restoration of the prodigal son to the family home. In *Adam Bede* of course neither prodigal returns home unscathed. *The Porter's Knot* sentimentalises a story which was being less happily played out in the courts of London, where parents were unable to cover sons' losses, and where imprisonment, hard labour, and suicide were the more usual results of financial loss and the criminality it could lead to. No wonder Victoria enjoyed a play that enabled her to believe that "general contentment prevailed" even in the face of financial disaster.

Her comments on the play and its subject matter show how the plight of the poor was readily translated into entertainment for the middle classes, whether in the theatre, in the court reports of the daily newspapers, or in fiction. This is the situation that *Adam Bede* recognised and sought to remedy by directly challenging it, and trying to invoke an empathetic response in its readers which would surpass the easy satisfaction of popular art forms suggested by W.R. Greg, and that necessarily entail a form of critical and moral self-consciousness.

5 Aligning Past, Present, and Future

The broader aim of Eliot's realist novel is to bring past, present, and future into alignment. In an age all too conscious of its celebrated predecessors, the development of an active relationship with the past which yet did not preclude progress was vital. Eliot teaches both Adam and her readers that the past-present relationship is vital rather than lapidary, mobile rather than simply commemorative. This contrasts with Queen Victoria's speech to her government in February, where a different historical model is articulated which suggests that a fundamental aspect of success in foreign affairs was the ability to turn back the clock, and resume former relations with other states. The Queen highlights the resumption of good relations with Russia in the wake of the Crimea, cemented by the signing of a Treaty of Commerce, which is "a satisfactory indication of the complete re-establishment of those amicable relations which, until their late unfortunate interruption, had long subsisted between us, to the mutual advantage of our respective dominions" (Ensor 1882, 148). Trade both indicates and effects peace, and returns matters to an earlier state of being. In the case of India, the other most notable scene of recent hostilities, Victoria invokes the blessing of God on the valour of her troops in that country, and on the skill of their commanders, which has "enabled [her] to inflict signal chastisement upon those who are still in arms against [her] authority, whenever they have ventured to encounter [her] forces". She continues:

I trust that, at no distant period, I may be able to announce to you the complete pacification of that great empire, and to devote my attention to the improvement of its condition, and to the obliteration of all traces of the present unhappy conflict. (Ensor 1882, 148)

In a century later characterised by the drive to progress, this intriguing insistence on the pre-eminence of the past as something to aspire to, as a measure of success, might appear contradictory, but Eliot's aesthetic demonstrates how necessary a reconciliation with the living legacy of the past is. Eliot wrote to William Blackwood that when she had finished writing *Adam Bede* she had "arrived at a faith in the past, but not a faith in the future" (Haight 1954, 66).

In the novel, Hetty and Arthur are disruptive characters who threaten the virtue of Adam Bede, and Eliot represents their disruption through their tortuous relations with concepts of history when she shows that they are unable to live contentedly either in their own moment or in full acknowledgement of the shared past of their community. Rather, Hetty spends much of her time in a state of willed removal from that community, and its responsibilities. She lives instead in a world of fantasies of the future, untroubled by those memories of the past which for many of Eliot's characters are the enabler and guarantee of their empathy and moral responsibility. Hetty's fantasies,

are but dim ill-defined pictures that her narrow bit of an imagination can make of the future; but of every picture she is the central figure, in fine clothes; Captain Donnithorne is very close to her, putting his arm round her, perhaps kissing her, and everybody else is admiring and envying her - especially Mary Burge, whose new print dress looks very contemptible by the side of Hetty's resplendent toilette. Does any sweet or sad memory mingle with this dream of the future - any loving thought of her second parents - of the children she had helped to tend - of any youthful companion, any pet animal, any relic of her own childhood even? Not one. There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her and never cared to be reminded of it again. (Eliot 1859, 1: 286-7)

Likened to a kitten in the novel, Hetty is dehumanised by her lack of loyalty, and the impoverished imagination that can only project forwards, unhampered by thoughts of the past.

Arthur colludes in these fantasies, and this is expressed through time-based metaphors ironically derived from the type of classical

education he received, and which arguably ought to have divided him from Hetty, but which instead enables their mutual delusions. Where Hetty imagines an unrealistic future, Arthur imagines himself back into a past where he is ‘a rich sultan’, with Adam Bede as his “grand-vizier” (1: 110), or into a set of classical references where to Hetty, “quite uneducated - a simple farmer’s girl”, Arthur’s “white hand was dazzling as an Olympian god” (184-85). Classical and Eastern references combine with Hetty’s fantasies of the future to remove the characters from their quotidian lives and enable their devastating kiss in the wood, “just the sort of wood most haunted by nymphs” (239), which propels their relationship forward:

Ah, he doesn’t know in the least what he is saying. This is not what he meant to say. His arm is stealing round the waist again; it is tightening its clasp; he is bending his face nearer and nearer to the round cheek; his lips are meeting those pouting child-lips, and for a long moment time has vanished. He may be a shepherd in Arcadia for aught he knows, he may be the first youth kissing the first maiden, he may be Eros himself, sipping the lips of Psyche – it is all one. (254)

The characters are emotionally and temporally removed from their present, mired in a fantastical past, and thus the chaos of their relationship is unleashed. Eliot’s realism rather insists on the duties of recognizing the past’s determining, collective, and vital influence on the present, and does so in *Adam Bede* by inviting her readers in 1859 to see the continuities between their own present and the past of her characters. In her depiction of the budding businessman in Adam, the collapse of rural hierarchies in the face of Adam’s entrepreneurship, and the encroachment of factories into rural lives, Eliot was laying the foundations for the present of her readers. Thus, by reading sympathetically, by engaging with characters from the past, the reader creates a bridge to their own present that enacts Eliot’s edict about art’s being “the nearest thing to life [...] a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (Eliot 1992b, 263-4).

Bibliography

- "Adam Bede by George Eliot. In 3 volumes" (1859). *John Bull and Britannia*. 12th February, 107.
- Ashton, Rosemary (1996). *George Eliot: A Life*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Bailey, Peter (2012). "Leisure: Merrie to Modern". Hewitt, Martin (ed.), *The Victorian World*. London; New York: Routledge, 618-35.
- "Buckingham Palace, 3 February, 1859". *The London Gazette*, 4th February, 457.
- Chapman, John (1859). "Adam Bede". *Westminster Review*, 486-512.
- Eliot, George (1859). *Adam Bede*. Edinburgh; London: Blackwood.
- Eliot, George (1992a). "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists". Ashton, Rosemary (ed.), *George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 296-321.
- Eliot, George (1992b). "The Natural History of German Life". Ashton, Rosemary (ed.), *George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 260-95.
- Ensor, F.S. (1882). *The Queen's Speeches in Parliament*. London: Allen.
- Flanders, Judith (2006). *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain*. London: Harper Press.
- Greg, W.R. (1859). "The False Morality of Lady Novelists". *National Review*, 8, 144-67.
- Haight, Gordon S. (ed.) (1954-78). *The George Eliot Letters*. 3 vols. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Haight, Gordon S. (1985). *George Eliot: A Biography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Harris, A.; Falconer, E. (1858). *Satanella, or, The Power of Love: A Romantic Opera in Four Acts*. London: [published and sold in the theatre].
- Hoppen, Theodore K. (1998). *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jewsbury, Geraldine (1859a). "Adam Bede". *Athenaeum*, 26th February, 284
- Jewsbury, Geraldine (1859b). *Right or Wrong*. London: Hurst and Blackett.
- Lewes, George Henry (1859). *Journal*. Yale call no. GEN MSS 963. Section VI.
- Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* (1859). 6th February, 5.
- Mozley, Ann (1859). "Adam Bede and Recent Novels". *Bentley's Quarterly Review*, 1-2, 433-72.
- Queen Victoria's Journal online: <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org>.
- "The Queen's Speech – The Opening of Parliament" (1859). *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 6th February, 1.
- Tuchman, Gaye; Fortin, Nina E. (1989). *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*. London: Routledge.
- "The Theatres. Olympic" (1858). *Illustrated London News*. 11th December, 549.