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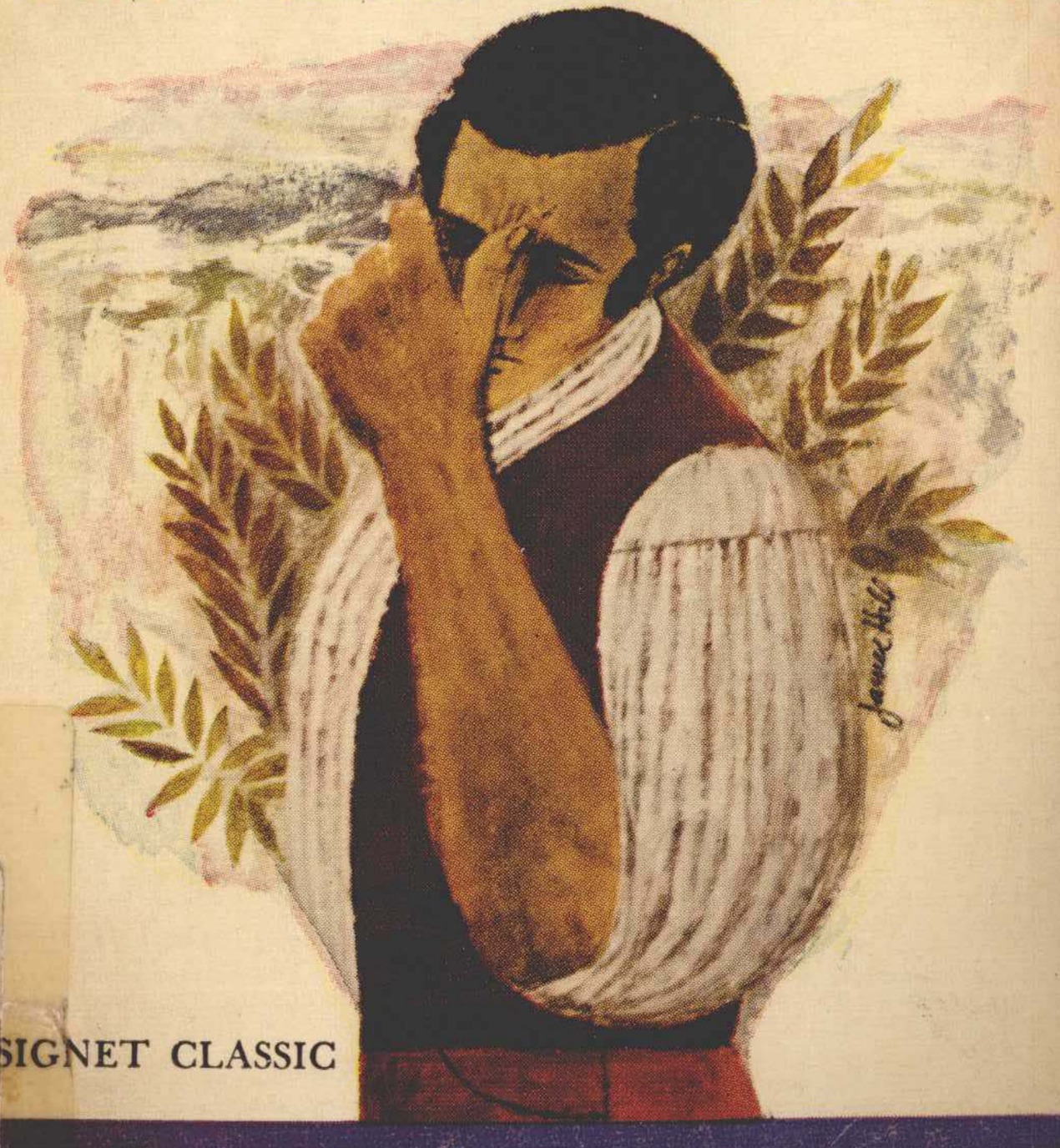
GEORGE ELIOT

ADAM BEDE



SIGNET CLASSIC

George Eliot

GEORGE ELIOT (Mary Ann Evans Cross) was born on November 22, 1819, at Arbury Farm, Warwickshire, England. She received an ordinary education and, upon leaving school at the age of sixteen, embarked on a program of independent study to further her intellectual growth. In 1841, she moved with her father to Coventry, where the influence of "skeptics and rationalists" swayed her from an intense religious devoutness to an eventual break with the church. The death of her father, in 1849, left her with a small legacy and the freedom to pursue her literary inclinations. In 1851, she became the assistant editor of the *Westminster Review,* a position she held for three years. In 1854 came the fated meeting with George Henry Lewes, the gifted editor of *The Leader,* who was to become her advisor and companion for the next twenty-four years. Her first book, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), was followed by *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861). The death of Lewes, in 1878, left her stricken and lonely. On May 6, 1880, she married John Cross, a friend of long standing, and after a brief illness she died on December 22 of that year, in London.

"So that ye may have
Clear images before your gladdened eyes
Of nature's unambitious underwood
And flowers that prosper in the shade. And when
I speak of such among the flock as swerved
Or fell, those only shall be singled out
Upon whose lapse, or error, something more
Than brotherly forgiveness may attend."

—*Wordsworth*

Adam Bede

George Eliot

With a Foreword by F. R. Leavis

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Contents

BOOK IV

BOOK V

BOOK VI

Foreword

In *Adam Bede* we can see George Eliot becoming a novelist—learning, that is, in the course of writing her first real novel, how a novel might be achieved. To put it in this way is to recognize that *Adam Bede* is not perfect, and that it is a very different thing from the almost contemporary French classic, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. But George Eliot was a greater creative power than Flaubert, and, in relation to any adequate conception of art (a word for which, significantly, we don't find ourselves using a capital letter when talking of her), a greater artist. She was in fact a novelist of the greatest kind. Though she started her novelist's career so late (at close on forty), she had all the gifts and a peculiarly rich and varied store of experience for her creative vitality to draw on. Her late first novel, a classic in itself, opened the way to a long, productive, and continually renewed development, so that her greatest work was produced at the close.

In *Adam Bede* we can see the promise of the things to come, and see also an illuminating case of one of the major original artists learning from predecessors. For George Eliot is widely and deeply rooted in literature of the past as well as decisively influential on major novelists succeeding her—e.g. James, Hardy, and Lawrence. She is at the centre of the creative achievement of the English language in the phase of its history to which we still belong, and incites to pregnant reflections on vital continuity in art: we see that there is indeed an English literature—something more than an assemblage of individual masterpieces or separate authors.

She began her career as a writer of fiction with the tales that compose *Scenes of Clerical Life*. The material for these was reminiscence of her young days. The more ambitious enterprise is announced to Blackwood in a letter of 1st September, 1857 (see J. W. Cross's *Life*):

> I have a subject in my mind which will not come under the limitations of the title "Clerical Life" and I am inclined to take a large canvas for it and write a novel.

She had meant to do another clerical type, Mr. Irwine, the cultivated gentleman-parson—representative of a higher worldly wisdom and a refined and genial human dignity rather than of any challenging spirituality. The traces of this beginning are to be seen in *Adam Bede* in the attention claimed for Mr. Irwine over and above what, in relation to his function in the novel, is strictly necessary. The idea of making the advance and writing a novel presented itself to George Eliot in terms of the possibility of bringing together in the one work a variety of other materials from her store of memories. Especially she wanted to use the memories she had cherished of her Methodist aunt, including the story of the confession got from the condemned girl-mother in prison. This entailed the seduction, and that brought in the Hall Farm and Mrs. Poyser, and gave George Eliot the freedom of the rustic world of her youth.

She had material enough, but she knew that it takes more than material to make a novel. Several years later, referring in a letter to Carlyle's *Memoirs,* she wrote:

> What a memory and what an experience for a novelist! But somehow experience and finished faculty rarely go together. Dearly beloved Scott had the greatest combination of experience and faculty—yet even he never made the most of his treasures, at least in his mode of presentation.

George Eliot here pays her tribute to the master from whom she herself had learnt to be a novelist, and at the same time records her realization that one of the main things she had learnt in starting with him as the exemplar was that his "mode of presentation" was not, after all, really adequate to the novelist she was meant to be. But who else was there? Thackeray, with his particular, very limited field, his clubman's wisdom, and what his critics in his own time called his lack of ideas, was of no use to her. Dickens' genius had little direct bearing on what she, with her interests, needed to find out how to do. But with the author of *The Heart of Midlothian* she had very deep affinities. His treatment of the remembered past, the strong imaginative piety that gives life and depth to his evocations, was wholly congenial to her. She too, in using her memories, places her action at a time she can only, in her childhood, have heard talked about. She herself was born in 1819, but the events of *Adam Bede* belong to the end of the previous century. She doesn't

need to go in for "historical reconstruction": her memories of England before the railway age *are* memories, but they have this peculiar atmospheric depth. The encouragement of Scott's example helped her too in her use of dialect. This she felt to be essential to her purpose, but she had to insist against strong opposition (Lytton, for instance, tried to persuade her to eliminate it), and the precedent of Scott was obviously a strength to her.

A manifestation of his influence that suggests, rather, the serious limits of his use to her is seen in the opening of the book. That stranger who reins in his horse and observes, for our benefit, what passes on the village green, is a "mode of presentation" from Scott: he has no part in the novel except to put in the same kind of appearance at the close.

George Eliot's own distinctive bent and quality of interest might in any case have been counted on to make that familiar Victorian convention, the seduction theme, something notably more than mere convention. One might have thought that this would have been done mainly through the intensity of her interest in Dinah, for the sake of whose part in the prison scene the story of the seduction was in the first place conceived. But actually, though the figure of the charming Methodist, moving with impressive quietness through the book, is memorably enough evoked, it clearly turned out that she could be made to yield only a very limited return to any treatment she invited from the developing great novelist. George Eliot's distinctive interest focussed rather on Arthur Donnithorne, and the inner drama of conscience in *him*. It is deeply characteristic of George Eliot: it is the theme, psychological and moral, that is to be developed in the study of Tito Melema in *Romola,* of Bulstrode in *Middlemarch,* and of Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda.*

Yet, characteristic as the bent of interest is, even here one can see her indebted, at least for stimulus and suggestion (of kinds that matter immensely to an artist engaged in self-discovery as George Eliot was), to a great predecessor. This time it was not the genial Scott, but the novelist of Puritan New England. George Eliot had read *The Scarlet Letter* when it came out, and (what doesn't surprise us) expressed a great admiration for Hawthorne. The idea that Hawthorne's influence can be discovered in *Adam Bede* was prompted, as it came to me, by the name Hetty. Once one thinks of Hester Prynne, the effect of the suggestion has its compelling significance, even if one is at first inclined to dismiss the echo

as mere chance. The treatment of the agonized conscience in Arthur Donnithorne convinces one before long that in the treatment of the seduction theme *The Scarlet Letter* has told significantly. This real affinity (for all the differences of temperament and art between the two authors) brings home to one, in fact, that the association of the names was more than a chance clue. One notes, further, that Hawthorne's male sinner is also Arthur—Arthur Dimmesdale for George Eliot's Arthur Donnithorne.

We have here, unmistakably, a case of that profound kind of influence of which the artist in whom it works is unaware. It is of the same order as that influence of George Eliot herself on Henry James which I noted some years ago in discussing *The Portrait of a Lady*.[1] The influence of Hawthorne on George Eliot was not so important for her as hers was for James, yet one would be rash to judge it a minor matter, of marginal interest. For a writer in George Eliot's position, with no obvious model to start from, a congenial hint that goes home deeply as a creative impulsion or reinforcement may have a disproportionate momentousness. And we have observed that Arthur Donnithorne opened for George Eliot a series of intensely characteristic studies: Hawthorne's influence, then, was at the centre and deep down. Since Hawthorne himself, we know, was a major influence on James, the three novelists together offer a suggestive illustration of the intimate creative relations that may exist between artists of widely different genius.

When we ask what influences told decisively in George Eliot's formation, helping her to become the distinctive major novelist she is for us, one to which we have to give an important place is not from the literature of her own language: it is Greek Tragedy. Notoriously she was an awe-inspiring intellectual, immensely learned and well-read. What has to be insisted on is that there must be no opposing of the intellectual in her to the novelist. The intellectual, the finely trained intelligence, and the knowledge entered naturally and vitally into the work of the creative writer who could win a general warm applause by evoking the humours of Mrs. Poyser's kitchen. She was inward with Greek Tragedy, but there is nothing assertively intellectual about the manifestations in *Adam Bede* (or elsewhere) of her interest in it. She responded above all to the Aeschylus of the *Oresteia*, the ef-

[1] See *The Great Tradition*, Chap. III, i.

fect of which, in being moral and religious, was for her intensely imaginative, and expressed itself in her sensibility. We feel it in *Adam Bede* in her treatment of the themes of guilt and retribution. And we have here again our introduction to something characteristic of George Eliot's treatment of life that appears in more mature forms in her later work. In the consummately done Transome drama of *Felix Holt,* for instance, we have unmistakably, in modern terms, a tragedy of Hubris and Nemesis. And in the tragic irony of Gwendolen Harleth's fate in *Daniel Deronda* we feel again the congenial, assimilated influence of the Greek.

In *Adam Bede* we can, again and again, put our finger on it locally in the way in which we are given the irony of Arthur's good resolutions, and in his anticipations of a happy life as the virtuous and well-beloved young squire. And we note that when, with the intention (doomed to defeat) of making a clean breast of his temptation in order to be fortified in resisting it, he comes in to breakfast at the rectory, Mr. Irwine has open at his elbow on the table "the first volume of the Foulis Aeschylus, which Arthur knew well by sight," and Mr. Irwine enlarges to him on the theory of Nemesis.

The George Eliot who found Aeschylus so congenial might be said to be the George Eliot who admired *Rasselas*—the influence of which can be seen in *Adam Bede.* But there would be more point in referring in this connexion to Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a great living fact behind the English novelists of the nineteenth century; he can be felt, in different ways, as a vital informing power in their work, and George Eliot was no exception. Her ability to absorb Aeschylus so naturally into her own art is inseparable from this basic and pervasive presence of Shakespeare. His name being mentioned, however, most people probably would first point to the affinity as being manifest in her rendering of English rustic life. And one needn't be concerned to deny that Shakespeare must count for a great deal there.

But what one thinks of is the original, characteristic genius of George Eliot working on her experience and observation. Memory, with its emotional accompaniments, recalling over the long gap of time, can be recognized as telling essentially in the effect. But the effect is the product of a creative writer's art; George Eliot is fully and consciously a novelist. She insisted, for instance, that Mrs. Poyser was *not* her own mother, even though suggested by her. In the

same way she insisted that the proverbial trenchancies and pregnancies that characterize Mrs. Poyser's speech were not actual rustic currency recorded, or actual remembered utterances. We readily believe her, since it is impossible that she should have set down from memory the rustic dialogue that figures so abundantly in her pages; and the racy vitality of that is clearly not a different thing from Mrs. Poyser's vivid analogical fertility. George Eliot had grown up in a community in which that traditional art of speech flourished —the popular, generally cultivated art of speech that made the English language that made Shakespeare possible. As a novelist, dramatizing rustic characters, she could do their utterance creatively.

In Adam Bede himself we have another influence that tells a great deal in this book, as elsewhere in George Eliot—that of Wordsworth. Adam, we know, though again not a portrait, was inspired by memories of her father. In the presentment of his simple strength and integrity there is an element of idealization, and the spirit of this is Wordsworthian; we think of Michael. Adam all the same—and there is of course, no paradox about this—consorts naturally with the other characters, convincing products as these are of creative memory in the novelist whose genius made her an incomparable social historian. It is indeed Adam who occasions one of her finest passages of direct reflection on the nature of pre-industrial civilization, the closing paragraph of Chapter XIX, giving George Eliot's account of Adam's representativeness:

> He was not an average man. Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans—with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skilful courageous labour. . . .

—And so to the end of the chapter.

But the historical value of *Adam Bede* doesn't lie mainly in such general records of observation, intelligent as George Eliot's always are. It lies in her novelist's creation of a past England—of a culture that has vanished with the triumph of industrialism. The England preserved for us in George Eliot's art, the England of before the railway, was locally rooted and, to an extent very remote from our experience, locally

self-sufficient. This we all know in a theoretical kind of way, but *Adam Bede* brings home to us what it meant in actual living—the feel and texture of daily life. There is a sense in which, paradoxically, the inhabitants of that so provincial England live in a larger world than their successors. The neighbouring shires have a most unquestionable reality; their hills can be seen, and everyone knows someone who has been there recently. But places twenty miles away are remote and known to be different—in speech, habit, and rural economy. Traffic passes along the roads through the length and breadth of England, the remoter parts are positively known to be there, and imagination has a good deal to play upon.

It might have been thought that life so rooted and spatially limited would be humanly starved—deadeningly monotonous and brutalized by poverty of essential civilization. But George Eliot makes us realize how very far the actuality was from being so. The Poysers, after the disgrace of Hetty's trial, are desolated at the thought of having to move into a strange country twenty and odd miles away and be buried in a strange churchyard ("We should leave our roots behind us, I doubt, and niver thrive again," says old Mr. Poyser). But everything in this book brings home to us that this local fixation doesn't mean mere clodlike dulness of human culture, or any vital poverty; that, in fact, rootedness has very decidedly its advantages. Old Lisbeth Bede's determination that her husband's body shall lie under the white thorn in the churchyard ("on account of a dream as she had") where she herself will, in due course, be buried too, illustrates the way in which, for the inhabitants, all the familiar physical particularities of the village and the environment become invested with particular values and form part of a human significance.

In that rooted community, too, not only is the typical workman master of a craft, practising a skill and serving a function that bring the man a sense of his meaning something in life; George Eliot shows us a world in which people possess and practise arts of living, the creative products of generations. For us, the one there is perhaps most point in insisting on is the art of speech. Not having the radio, television, newspapers, or literacy, they have speech, which *is*, George Eliot makes it impossible not to recognize, a creative art and an art of living. And she makes us realize the essential debt that literature and intellectual culture owe to it.

The gifts and qualities she shows here are not merely

sympathetic observation and insight and retentive piety; she is supremely intelligent, and we can see that the intelligence that serves her so well as a novelist is informed by wide knowledge and trained. She had been a distinguished intellectual long before she became a novelist and the novelist benefited. We see it, this intelligence of the supremely qualified *novelist* in what, for want of a less rebarbative word, we may call her sociology—an impressive aspect of her strength in *Adam Bede* as in her other novels. We have it, for instance, here:

> . . . the picture we are apt to make of Methodism in our imagination is not an amphitheatre of green hills, or the deep shade of broad-leaved sycamores, where a crowd of rough men and weary-hearted women drank in a faith which was a rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy. It is too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers, and hypocritical jargon—elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters. That would be a pity, for I cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else than Methodists—not, indeed, of that modern type which reads quarterly reviews and attends in chapels with pillared porticoes, but of a very old-fashioned kind. They believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions. . . .

As sociologist and social historian she is scrupulously precise. We see this in old Lisbeth who, belonging to an earlier generation than her sons, belongs also to an earlier world. The society in which she was formed was even more locally confined than that of the book. This is apparent in her speech—the dialect as she uses it is much less modified by contact with common educated English, and she is quite illiterate. Moreover, her superstitiousness is significant. She represents that pagan England which persisted through so many centuries of Christianity. But we are not *told about* her; she is presented in action and precise detailed living.

So with George Eliot's psychological insight, and her powers of rendering it. It is in the first place a native intelligence which cannot be distinguished from imaginative

sympathy, but in such characteristic passages as this we can see the strength she derived from her intellectual culture:

> Was there a motive at work under this strange reluctance of Arthur's which had a sort of backstairs influence, not admitted to himself? Our mental business is carried on much in the same way as the business of the State: a great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged. In a piece of machinery too, I believe there is often a small unnoticeable wheel which has a great deal to do with the motion of the large obvious ones.

The novelist who wrote that was not in need of instruction from modern psychologists. It points forward to *Felix Holt, Middlemarch,* and *Daniel Deronda.* What is extraordinary is that the author of these intellectual novels of educated and sophisticated life (and the corresponding comprehensive "sociology" is all there) should have been also the author of *Silas Marner,* that classic (Wordsworthian *and* Shakespearian) of the basic human simplicities in a traditional rural community of the days of the pack-horse.

The later novel immediately in view for us as we read *Adam Bede,* annunciatory as this is of George Eliot's later works in general, is *The Mill on the Floss.* The Poysers and their circle become the Dodsons and the tribe of kindred. We no longer feel there, as we do in *Adam Bede,* that the rural drama and its setting are seen from the metropolitan point of view. The idealizing and softening elements are gone. There is an immediacy of the author's own intimate experience—the living reality of a child's vision and reaction—in the presentment. At the same time the informing intelligence strikes one as anthropological rather than as being inclined to indulgent piety. But the cognizance taken of society in the book as a whole is less inclusive than in *Adam Bede.*

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