The Hidden Shame: Telling Hetty Sorrel's Story

JENNIFER GRIBBLE

Adam Bede, despite its title, is centred on the story of Hetty Sorrel. And yet its essential action, Hetty's seduction and impregnation, and the birth and death of her child, remains untold, or is told only fragmentarily and belatedly in Hetty's 'confession' to Dinah. Brought to trial for infanticide, Hetty remains obdurately silent: 'very sullen... will scarcely make answer when she is spoken to.'[1] Throughout the novel, she is 'never herself articulate and given remarkably little direct speech', Gillian Beer remarks.[2] In what must be seen as deliberate contrast, her cousin Dinah, endowed with the gift of 'speaking directly from her own emotions' (p. 29) is that extraordinary phenomenon, a woman preacher. Their aunt, Mrs Poyser, notably 'Has Her Say Out' in chapter 32, and is much given to voicing it, too, along the way. Adam's mother Lisbeth Bede expresses in her querulous complainings a strong self-centred ego willing itself to be heard.

Hetty's story is, in its essence, an all too familiar one, both in folklore and in social history. The landlady of 'The Green Man' recognizes it instantly: 'it's plain enough what sort of business it is ... it 'ud have been a good deal better for her if she' been uglier and had more conduct' (p. 379), as does Hetty herself: 'she thought of a young woman who had been found against the church wall at Hayslope one Sunday nearly dead with cold and hunger — a tiny infant in her arms: the woman was rescued and taken to the parish' (p. 380). For Hetty, we are told, 'the parish was next to the prison in obloquy'. Hetty's inability to acknowledge and to tell her story brings her at last not to the parish but to the prison.

1 *Adam Bede,* ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1980), p. 446. All subsequent references are to the Penguin edition.

2 *George Eliot* (Brighton, Harvester, 1986), p. 63.

Most recent critics have seen George Eliot as 'sacrificing' Hetty, and would see her apparent marginalization in the narrative as evidence that she becomes for Eliot and for the Hayslope community, a 'scapegoat'. The ambivalence of the authorial narrator's tone, now sympathetic, now judgemental, is read as evidence of unresolved tensions in the author's life and in the novel's thinking about the ethical issues it raises. V.S. Pritchett was the first to comment on the 'shocking' treatment of Hetty Sorrel, and to speculate on George Eliot's inability to face the nature of sexual passion as the source of the novel's uneasy modulation between pastoral tale and moral fable.[3] Building on this insight, Ian Gregor describes Hetty as

> an inhabitant of the pastoral world who has strayed into the world of moral inquiry and tragic destiny [who] ... lives simply by the coercive morality of the community and when this is broken, she is destroyed: she has no life apart from this.[4]

This divided impulse has, in turn, been seen as reflective of divided attitudes to 'nature' shared by Eliot and her contemporaries. Is nature careless and indifferent, as Hetty's nature and story might seem to suggest, or beneficent and nurturing, as Dinah might seem to be: that contrast between the 'lower' and the 'higher' natures of which we read in chapter 15?[5] Or does Dinah's Calvinism in fact represent her antipathy to a nature conceived of as essentially corrupt, in contrast to the more tolerant theology of the Rev. Irwine, who lives in harmony with the natural world?[6] Hetty, whose

3 *The Living Novel* (New York, 1957), p. 62.

4 Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas, *The Moral and the Story* (Faber, 1962), p. 27.

5 U.C. Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: the Limits of Realism* (University of California Press, 1968), p. 118. In pursuing this contrast, Knoepflmacher argues that 'her creator has made this unnatural child of nature far too repulsive' (p. 120).

6 Christopher Herbert, 'Preachers and the Schemes of Nature in *Adam Bede*', *Nineteenth Century Fiction,* 29 (1975), 412-427, draws the comparison between Dinah's Calvinist retreat from the natural world

naturalness is often specified in the morally innocent images of young living creatures like kittens and downy ducks, is called to account by a narrator who finds the perfecting of nature in moral education. Nina Aeurbach has argued that narrative disapproval of Hetty masks her role as the artist's 'chief ally': that it was through George Eliot's own 'fall' (the social ignominy of her extra-marital sexual partnership with George Henry Lewes) that she was 'born into artistry', but at the price of her own 'fierce suppression of the impulse to self-pity and apologia'.[7] What Eliot is suppressing, according to Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone, are her own unacknowledged aggressive impulses, so that Hetty is scapegoat for the author and for Adam, Arthur and Dinah, whose missing or disappointing parent figures leave them with unresolved needs. In the 'sacrifice' of Hetty, 'the bad side of the author's self is banished from Hayslope and the novel.'[8]

Adam Bede does indeed initiate George Eliot's 'birth' as a novelist. Clearly, she first envisaged Hetty's story as another of the tales of rural life which came together to compose her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in 1858. Chapter XVII, at the start of Book Second of *Adam Bede*, reminds us of Eliot's commitment, in the novel as in the *Scenes*, to the kind of 'realism' she praises in the German writer Riehl,[9] 'faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence' (p. 179):

> I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed,

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and the Rev. Irwine's tolerant Anglican celebration of the natural abundance of Hayslope.

7 The Rise of the Fallen Woman', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 45.

8 *The Transformations of Rage* (New York University Press, 1994), p. 34.

9 'The Natural History of German Life', *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (1963).

> but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. (p. 178)

The assumption is that 'truth' begins in fidelity to the details of actual lives of ordinary people, 'real breathing men and women' (p. 195) and 'commonplace things' (p. 180). And Hetty's story had its source in an anecdote provided by the novelist's methodist aunt, on whom the figure of Dinah is based, the story of how

> she had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess — how she had stayed with her praying and how the poor creature at last broke into tears and confessed her crime.[10]

There is also an element of realist manifesto in Eliot's focus on the socially taboo figure of the 'fallen' woman. Eliot would have read, and have been aware of, the reception of earlier novels that braved this taboo, notably Francis Trollope's *Jessie Phillips*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.[11] As the anecdote grows into the novel, however, to embrace the whole community within which Hetty's story is set, 'truth' proves for the novelist, as for Hetty, not only 'difficult' but complex: what is inarticulated, inarticulable, suppressed, is as important as what can be elaborated in faithful detail. That Eliot is partly aware of this is indicated by what *Adam Bede* takes from one of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, 'The Thorn'.[12] Eliot's debt to Wordsworth is acknowledged in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, in which the theory of realism draws as fully on Wordsworth as on Riehl, in particular on the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, with its belief in the power of stories of 'humble and rustic life'. The debt is made explicit

10 'History of Adam Bede', journal entry for 30 November 1858, reprinted in Penguin edn, p. 540.

11 Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 66.

12 Eliot was re-reading Wordsworth as she began the writing of Adam Bede. See Stephen Gill, introduction to Penguin edn, xxviii.

in the novel's epigraph, from *The Excursion*, with its reference to 'such among the flock as swerved/ or fell ... Upon whose lapse, or error, something more/ Than brotherly forgiveness may attend'.

But it is Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, published in the year in which *Adam Bede* is set, that the novel takes as a textual authority equal in weight to the Bible, on which it also substantially draws. When Arthur Donnithorne dismisses the *Lyrical Ballads,* newly arrived in a parcel from London, as 'twaddling stuff' (p. 66) he can scarcely be expected to recognize that one in particular of its 'queer wizard-like stories' will have a chilling relevance to his part in Hetty Sorrel's story. It might be seen, however, as characteristic of Arthur's self-image of vigorous good-humoured sociability that he is drawn to Coleridge's sea-faring yarn 'The Ancient Mariner' rather than to stories drawn from the kind of rural community that might more nearly concern a future squire.[13] It is worth pausing to ask what it is that he might have learned from 'The Thorn', and what it is that *Adam Bede* takes from this poem of seduction and desertion.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of 'The Thorn' is that Martha Ray's story lies as deeply buried in the poem's narrative as the body of her long dead child lies in the mound of earth Martha has haunted and guarded for twenty years. Exactly what happened to the child and to the heart of Martha Ray ('grey-haired Wilfred of the glen/ Held that the unborn infant wrought/ About its mother's heart, and brought/ Her senses back again') can only remain the subject of speculation, dramatized by the reported voices of the villagers ('some will say', 'some say', 'all and each agree', 'I've heard') and by the speaker who attempts to tell the tale. His voice and attributes are strongly registered in rhythms and syntax that enact the dilemmas of half-knowledge,

13 John Goode, '*Adam Bede*', in Barbara Hardy (ed.) *Critical Essays on George Eliot* (1970), suggests that Arthur is incapable of learning from 'The Thorn' (p. 24).

hearsay, the baffled sense of human sanctities irrevocably violated: 'I cannot tell: I wish I could', 'More know I not, I wish I did', 'O wherefore? Wherefore? tell me why', 'I cannot tell how this may be'. And mingling with these voices there is the steady beat of Martha Ray's inarticulate suffering: 'Oh misery! Oh misery! / Oh woe is me! Oh misery!' that cannot, or will not tell. The known facts are just sufficient to tease gossip and superstition: Stephen Hill's courtship of Martha, his marriage to 'another maid' on the very day set for his wedding to Martha, Martha's pregnancy ('Her state to any eye was plain;/ She was with child, and she was mad'), the disappearance of her child. But the shamefully public must yield to the unknowable. And the poem begins in the one absolute certainty around which the unknowable story of Martha Ray seems to cohere:

> There is a Thorn - it looks so old,
> In truth you'd find it hard to say
> How it could ever have been young,
> It looks so old and grey.
> Not higher than a two year's child
> It stands erect, this aged thorn;
> No leaves it has, no prickly points;
> It is a mass of knotted joints,
> A wretched thing forlorn.
> It stands erect, and like a stone
> With lichens is it overgrown.

Mute witness to, and marker of, its tragic tale, the thorn comes to express, in the apprehension of the narrator and of the poem, some of the elements of that tale: the ageing associated with suffering, the blighted promise of growth ('not higher than a two year's child'), the endurance of Martha Ray in the face of an indifferent or hostile nature which seems to mimic her own divided impulses to 'bury this poor thorn for ever' or to 'clasp it round'. The poem persuades us that the retreat into silence is not only Martha's right (the sense of the injustice of her violation is strongly registered: 'gave with a maiden's true good-will', 'O guilty Father - would that death/ Had saved him from that breach of faith') but the only appropriate response to the mystery of

her suffering. The power of the poem lies in its giving utterance to what can be said, while exposing the inadequacy of every attempt to record Martha's experience in words. In the end, it is the voiceless images, the thorn, the pond, the little mound, that remain to tell her tale.

There are significant differences, of course, in Eliot's retelling of this story of the ruined maid. In setting Hetty's story within a fully imagined rural community (some of the novel's most detailed 'pictures' linger over the occasions and places of the Hayslope world: 'The Workshop', 'The Preaching', 'The Dairy', 'Church', 'The Birthday Feast', 'The Harvest Supper'), Eliot engages in more complex ways with the nature of social experience and structures. Hetty's 'fall' reverberates within the precisely drawn social hierarchy of Hayslope. Arthur Donnithorne abandons Hetty not to marry another maid but to serve his regiment; it is Hetty's suitor Adam Bede who persuades Arthur to spell out to Hetty that marriage with a dairymaid is not socially acceptable for the squire of Hayslope. The coincidence of the seduction with the communal celebration of Arthur's coming-of-age suggests that Eliot sees his dalliance with Hetty as a version of the ancient custom of *droit de seigneur*, in which the squire is entitled to the maidenheads of the village brides. Arthur's betrayal of his own (and the Rev. Irwine's) more idealistic version of the feudal role implicates him more personally in the experience of betrayal than Wordsworth's Stephen Hill.

But the essentials of the Wordsworthian story are there. The 'bright scarlet' associated with 'the thorn' in Christian iconography, reflected in the flowers that spring from the little grave, and in Martha's red cloak, colours Hetty's story too. In chapter 35, Eliot makes quite explicit the link between the two 'passions'. 'Sorrel', Knoepflmacher points out, is the name of a red plant, and Hetty, like Martha, wears a red cloak against the cold.[14] It is not only the proliferation of 'thorn

14 Knoepflmacher, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

imagery' in *Adam Bede*,[15] but the way in which images, most notably the image of the pool, suggest, in Eliot's novel as in Wordsworth's poem, depths of experience that can never be fully known or explained, revealing how particular places, visual impressions, 'spots of time', as Wordsworth calls them, carry within them the protean shapings of narrative, that indicate what Eliot has made of the Wordsworthian source.

How then, does this kind of narrative reticence relate to the other kinds of reticence or suppression critics have found in Eliot's attempt to tell her 'simple' story 'truly'? One obvious reason advanced for that reticence is the Victorian conspiracy of silence with regard to sexual experience, compounded, as Pritchett would have it, by Eliot's particular sense of sexual shame. Yet Eliot, as so often, makes effective use of Victorian convention, allowing a sense of the hidden, illicit, and private, dimensions of the sexual initiation of the lovers the more powerfully to resonate through hints and fragments. 'As for Hetty, she was soon in the woods again', we read after Dinah's sermonizing at the end of chapter 15. From the start of chapter 13, 'Evening in the Wood', the wood is established as a place where physical impulse may not be resisted. There is nothing to suggest that the sexual attraction that leads Arthur to 'give way' to his emotions will recognize any limits after the defeat of his impulse to 'confess' to Rev. Irwine at the end of chapter 16. Hetty's tearful longing for signs that he continues to desire her seem to licence his 'arm stealing round the waist', 'its tightening clasp', the bending nearer and nearer to the 'cheek', the meeting of lips, the sense 'that for a long moment time has vanished', the aroused passion of beating hearts (p. 136). The hidden realm of 'Eros and Psyche' (p. 136) becomes a

15 Clyde De L. Ryals, in 'The Thorn Imagery in *Adam Bede*', *Victorian Newsletter* no. 22 (1962), 12-13, discusses the contrasting pattern of flower and thorn, the use of the thorn as a metaphor for hidden moral impurities and miseries, the names 'Donnithorne' and 'Sorrel' ('a flowering tree of the heath variety which, like the thorn, bears nettles as well as thorns'), but does not see the connection with Wordsworth's poem.

place of assignation ('I shall be in the wood the day after tomorrow at seven; come as early as you can' — p. 289); a place in which the light and the dark hairs so shockingly exposed to the public gaze in the emblematic broken locket hidden beneath Hetty's dress, may fully intertwine. This graphic image of physical intimacy that so disturbs Adam Bede is anticipated in what seem like oddly diverse images for sexually active young bodies: 'such young unfurrowed souls toil to meet each other like two velvet peaches that touch softly and are at rest; they mingle as easily as two brooklets that ask for nothing but to entwine themselves and ripple with ever interlacing curves in the leafiest hiding places' (p. 131). The ripeness of 'velvet' peaches, suggestive of downy hair, modulates naturally, however, into an 'entwining' and 'interlacing' that suggests genital hair, as well as lips and limbs, in a physical acceleration conveyed by the verbs 'roll', 'touch softly', 'ripple', and the adjectival 'ever-interlacing'.

And the nature of the sexual awakening is explored in a remarkable scene in Hetty's bed-chamber, in chapter 15, 'The Two Bed Chambers'. The title announces at least part of the authorial intent: to juxtapose Hetty's self-worship with Dinah's outward-looking gaze from her window, and her concern for others, especially for Hetty. But as Hetty removes her gown and lets out her hair there is a new, and explicit, erotic element in her enjoyment of her own 'lovely image':

> O, yes, she was very pretty: Captain Donnithorne thought so. Prettier than anybody about Hayslope — prettier than any of the ladies she had ever seen visiting at the Chase ... And Hetty looked at herself to-night with quite a different sensation from what she had ever felt before; there was an invisible spectator whose eye rested on her like morning on the flowers. His soft voice was saying over and over again those pretty things she had heard in the wood; his arm was round her, and the delicate rose-scent of his hair was with her still. The vainest woman is never thoroughly conscious of her own beauty till she is loved by the man who sets her own passion vibrating in return. (p. 14)

Hetty's consciousness of the effect of her beauty (on Adam, on young Luke Britton of Buxton, on Mr Craig, the gardener) is now eroticized as physical response to the lover to whom she has given herself. The images that earlier defined her beauty in terms of the innocence of 'young frisking things' (p. 85) had the effect of absolving her from moral responsibility. But it is the attractiveness of that beauty, as Dinah perceives in a characteristically moralizing image ('the canker in a lily-white bud is more grievous to behold than in a common pot-herb' — p. 157) that makes Hetty vulnerable. She has turned towards Arthur 'as if she were a bud first opening her heart with wondering rapture to the morning' (p. 131). But that innocence is evoked in Hetty's gaze now only as something that has been lost. She sees herself now through the gaze of another. That 'invisible spectator whose eye rested on her like morning on the flowers' comes to her again in imagination, rekindling desire through the remembered seductions of 'soft voice' and 'sensation'. This desire must inevitably express itself, however, in the public world beyond the 'hiding place' of the woods. As Hetty adorns her nakedness with her best earrings and scarf, and adjusts her hair to look like the picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing room, she tells herself a story quite different from the story of the deserted mother she is later to recall — a story of secret marriage and social elevation like that she overhears the Doctor telling Mrs Poyser about his niece. The 'pretty things' Arthur gives her, the earrings, the necklace, the locket, will come to signify not the gentility their physical intimacy seems to promise, but destitution and social disgrace.

If the narrator is not entirely at ease with the voyeur's position explicitly shared with the reader in this chapter, it is not, then, because of Eliot's unease with sexual experience, her own or Hetty's. It is rather, I think, that the narrator feels obliged to communicate a gendered perspective on this experience, the masculine perspective announced by the pseudonym 'George Eliot':

> How pretty the little puss looks in that odd dress! It would be the easiest folly in the world to fall in love with her: there is such a sweet baby-like roundness about her face and figure ...
>
> Ah, what a prize the man gets who wins a sweet bride like Hetty. How the men envy him who come to the wedding breakfast, and see her hanging on his arm in her white lace and orange blossoms. The dear, young, round, soft, flexible thing! Her heart must be just as soft, her temper just as free from angles, her character just as pliant. If anything ever goes wrong, it must be the husband's fault there: he can make her what he likes — that is plain. And the lover himself things so too: the little darling is so fond of him, her little vanities are so bewitching, he wouldn't consent to her being a bit wiser; those kittenlike glances and movements are just what one wants to make one's heart a paradise. Every man under such circumstances is conscious of being a great physiognomist. Nature, he knows, has a language of her own, which she uses with strict veracity, and he considers himself an adept in the language. Nature has written his bride's character for him in those exquisite lines of cheek and chin. (p. 159)

The vista that brings this paragraph to an end in a pastoral 'golden age' 'when the men were all wise and majestic and the women all lovely and loving' (p. 152) is the culmination of a curious narrative instability, almost, one might say, a dramatized struggle to maintain narrative authority. Among the narratives entertained here are those of a sardonic imagining of Adam, uncharacteristically enjoying the envy of other men, of a 'lover' who pivots ambiguously between the figures of Adam and Arthur, conceived of as preening himself on the beloved's childlike clinging, and of a 'Nature' who seems to have written Hetty's story irrevocably in 'those exquisite lines of cheek and chin.' And yet the narrator, too, pausing to indulge a contempt for the follies of the lover that perhaps betrays the perspective of a distinctly *female* omniscience, also claims to interpret nature's 'language', to tell with a superior, unillusioned veracity, the story Nature has written for Hetty.

A second source of reticence in the telling of that story, then, lies in the recognition, in some of the novel's finest

scenes, of how narratorial smugness must dissolve when confronted by the ambiguities of hopeful feeling, as when Adam, encouraged by the departure of Arthur to see signs of Hetty's turning towards him, comes on her unawares:

> She started when she became conscious that some one was near — started so violently that she dropped the basin with the currants in it, and then, when she saw it was Adam, she turned from pale to deep red. That blush made his heart bend with a new happiness. Hetty had never blushed at seeing him before.
>
> 'I frightened you', he said, with a delicious sense that it didn't signify what he said, since Hetty seemed to feel as much as he did, 'let *me* pick the currants up'.
>
> That was soon done, for they had only fallen in a tangled maze on the grass plot, and Adam, as he rose and gave her the basin again, looked straight into her eyes with the subdued tenderness that belongs to the first moments of hopeful love.
>
> Hetty did not turn away her eyes; her blush had subsided, and she met his glance with a quiet sadness, which contented Adam, because it was so unlike anything he had seen in her before ...
>
> Not a word more was spoken as they gathered the currants. Adam's heart was too full to speak, and he thought Hetty knew all that was in it. (p. 220)

In the harmony of the shared currant-gathering, larger harmonies seem confirmed. Signs of feeling in Hetty inspire in Adam the narrative of hopeful love. Hetty's nature does indeed disclose this story, but Adam is as unable to read it as he is later unable to identify hopeful love in the signs of Dinah's physical and emotional disturbance. Absorbed completely in thoughts of Arthur, hearing in Adam's footfall the longed for return, Hetty has spontaneously betrayed sexual arousal and physical need, but her 'quiet sadness' registers that the sexual call, the need to be 'treated lovingly' has been answered by the wrong man. For all its apparent legibility, Hetty's story remains hidden.

But the most powerful exercise of reticence comes in the account of Hetty's lonely journey at the end of Book Fourth

and the start of Book Fifth. By Chapter 25, 'The Hidden Dread', Hetty's timorous movement towards Adam has been replaced by her complete isolation. Seeking only lonely paths where she may dwell unobserved on 'wretched thoughts', she is consumed by an unspecified horror. Its source is not elaborated. Instead, the narrator prepares for the new turn in her story by a series of general reflections on the disharmonies that underlie the apparent harmonies of nature in her most beneficent moods. Hayslope is enjoying bright February, an awakening to the sense 'that the beautiful year is all before one', in the rays of the sun, the songs of the birds, the green of the meadows that presages the green of trees and hedgerows, the dark brown furrows of earth ploughed to received the new seeds:

> What a glad world this looks like, as one drives or rides along the valleys and over the hills! I have often thought so when, in foreign countries, where the fields and woods have looked to me like our English loamshire — the rich land tilled with just as much care, the woods rolling down the gentle slopes to the green meadows — I have come on something by the roadside that has reminded me that I am not in Loamshire: an image of great agony — the agony of the Cross ... surely if there came a traveller to this world who knew nothing of the story of man's life upon it, this image of agony would seem to him strangely out of place in the midst of this joyous nature. He would not know that hidden behind the apple-blossoms, or among the golden corn, or under the shrouding boughs of the wood, there might be a human heart beating heavily with anguish: perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift advancing shame: understanding no more of this life of ours than a foolish lost lamb wandering farther and farther in the nightfall on the lonely heath: yet tasting the bitterest of life's bitterness ...
>
> No wonder man's religion has so much sorrow in it: no wonder he needs a suffering God. (p. 363)

Throughout *Adam Bede* the narrative claims the right to 'pause a little'. At this point, the narrator's expostulations and diction make an overt appeal to readerly sympathy. The feelings elicited are associated with several kinds of concealment: the anguish of hidden 'shame', the sense that

nature's beneficence conceals a darker side, the sense that the mystery of suffering finally baffles 'understanding'. Hetty's 'hidden dread' is alluded to in generalizing phrases that raise questions about how it might be responded to, now that the shrouding boughs of the wood conceal a heart that beats alone, heavy with anguish. Readers of Eliot's later novels will recognize that the honorific 'young blossoming girl' momentarily aligns Hetty with such nobly heroic protagonists as Romola and Dorothea. She is also aligned on the one hand with the 'foolish lost lamb' of the Wordsworthian epigraph, and with the crucified Christ on the other. Hetty herself, we have been reminded, has little time for lambs or children: 'Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs that the shepherd was always bringing to be taken care of in lambing time; for the lambs *were* got rid of sooner or later' (p. 154). Too much the child herself, the seventeen-year-old Hetty is herself brought to the slaughter in due course. And yet the language of Biblical parable, echoed in the Calvinist discourse of Dinah's formal and informal preachings, suggests that Hetty's story might be understood in terms of the narrative of sin and redemption signified by the Cross. This narrative, however, is here given no higher status than a story that answers to a need: a suffering God projected in the image of man's own suffering. This is of course a manifestation of the Comtean Positivism Eliot espoused after the loss of her Christian faith. So that while the role of Dinah in Hetty's 'confession' and redemption suggests a certain nostalgia for the consolation of the Christian narrative, the Cross in this passage seems, like Wordsworth's Thorn, simply to bear witness to the casual cruelties of Nature and the baffled human attempt at 'understanding'.

In its suppression of all explicit reference to Hetty''s pregnancy, and the birth and death of her child, the narrative of Hetty's journey dramatizes her sense of the need for secrecy, and of social transgression. The impulse that begins in solitary walks beyond Hayslope drives her at last beyond shelter. Community is recollected now only as loss — loss of

the known, the familiar, the comforts she has taken for granted: 'Hetty could conceive no other existence for herself in the future than a hidden one' (p. 373). 'Out of all human reach ... it was almost as if she were dead already, and knew that she was dead, and longed to get back to life again' (p. 388). In concentrating simply on the physical experience of the journey — its history, its geography, Hetty's sensations — Eliot's narrative seems released from the effort to provide explanation, and surrenders to its sense of the utter mysteriousness of human suffering. As in 'The Thorn', Hetty's narrative begins to inhere in particular, minutely described places, which become the markers of all that defies ready articulation.

In particular, the 'dark shrouded pool' in the Scantlands beyond Hayslope, 'so full with wintry rains that the under boughs of the elder-bushes lie low beneath the water' (p. 364) exercises a mesmeric pull: 'she has thought of this pool often in the nights of the month that has just gone by, and now at last she has come to see it' (p. 365). The pool is not only an image of the emotional bleakness of Hetty's despair and bewilderment, the moral nullity that causes her to deny her pregnancy as she is later to deny the reality of the child, and that beckons her into the oblivion of suicide. It is also an image of the pregnant body: mirroring Hetty's own 'dark eyes' and making vivid her sense of physical burden — the watery burden of tears, the weight of the growing child, its dark shroudedness in the watery concealment of the womb. These are the meanings acted out in the abandoned wanderings through open countryside that follow her discovery that Arthur has gone beyond reach. 'A pool like that in the Scantlands' replaces Arthur as the object of her quest:

> At last she was among the fields she had been dreaming of, on a long narrow pathway leading towards a wood. If there should be a pool in that wood: it would be better hidden than the one in the fields ... there was a break in the hedge; the land seemed to dip down a little, and two trees leaned towards each other across the opening. Hetty's heart gave a great beat as she thought there must be a pool there. She walked towards it

> heavily over the tufted grass, with pale lips and a sense of trembling; it was as if the thing were come in spite of herself, instead of being the object of her search.
>
> There it was, black under the darkening sky: no motion, no sound near. She set down her basket, and then sank down herself on the grass, trembling. The pool had its wintry depth now: by the time it got shallow, as she remembered the pools did in Hayslope, in the summer, no one could find out that it was her body. But then there was the basket ... (p. 386)

Soothed by food and sleep, she awakens to 'a strange contradictory wretchedness and exultation'; 'the very consciousness of her own limbs was a delight to her: she turned up her sleeves, and kissed her arms with the passionate love of life' (p. 389). Irrepressible self-delight, recalling the Hetty we see at work in the dairy, walking proudly to church, preening herself before her mirror, laughingly mocking Dinah's gravity of dress and manner, causes Hetty to cling to life. Awakened in the sheep-fold by the shepherd ('anybody 'ud think that you was a wild woman, an' look at yer' — p. 390), she is drawn again into human community only to recognize her alienation from it. The pool now becomes an image not only of the death she craves but cannot take, but of the living death of her despair:

> Life, now was as full of dread as death; — it was worse; it was a dread to which she felt chained, from which she shrank and shrank as she did from the black pool, and yet could find no refuge from it. (p. 390)

Hetty's vitality continues to betray her, but it is not until Dinah releases the springs of feeling in her that the remainder of her story is told, through her own halting words.

In Dinah's rhetoric, the darkness that engulfs Hetty is appropriated as a theological concept: 'she is clothed around with thick darkness', 'pierce the darkness', 'put a new fear within her — the fear of her sin. Make her dread to keep the accursed thing within her soul ... to whom the darkness is as noonday ... snatch this poor soul from everlasting darkness ... thou wilt breathe on the dead soul, and it shall arise from

the unanswering sleep of death' (p. 451). Dinah's God is a God of wrath, and it is by such rhetoric that Dinah has reduced Bessy Cranage, at the outset, to hysterical renunciation. What she releases here has all the authenticity of Martha Ray's 'O Misery!' At last we hear the voice of a motherless seventeen-year-old girl of limited imagination and shattered experience uttering her agony:

> 'I will speak ... I will tell ... I won't hide it any more ... I did do it Dinah ... I buried it in the wood ... the little baby ... and it cried ... I heard it cry ... ever such a long way off ... all night ... and I went back because it cried.'

The child buried in the wood has come to represent the buried passion and the hidden shame. It is a Hetty who as been compelled to act out the prolonged drama of social transgression: 'I couldn't have bore to look at anybody, for they'd have scorned me' (p. 452) (the scorching tongue of her aunt is recalled, and the proud sense of family honour of the Poysers, father and son). And it is Hetty who is compelled to hide the evidence of guilt, relinquishing her burden at last. Yet the impulse to bury the child is seen in all its complexity. As 'the hole under the nut tree' replaces the pool in Hetty's imagination, Hetty's own ambiguous wish for extinction is projected on to her child:

> I thought perhaps it wouldn't die — there might somebody find it. I didn't kill it — I didn't kill it myself. I put it down there and covered it up, and when I came back it was gone ... It was because I was so very miserable, Dinah ... I tried so to drown myself in the pool, and I couldn't. (p. 452)

This is the complex of feelings to which Hetty's narrative keeps returning: the death-wish represented in the pool, the clinging to the hopefulness of life (now also projected on to her crying child), the unutterable misery. Cold, destitute, 'very sick and faint and hungry', yearning for rest and sleep, the young mother with her newborn child momentarily recalls the Madonna for whom there was no room at the inn:

> 'I thought I'd find a pool, if I could, like that other, in the corner of the field, in the dark ... And I came to a haystack, where I thought I could lie down and keep myself warm all

> night. There was a place cut into it, where I could make me a bed; and I lay comfortable, and the baby was warm against me; and I must have gone to sleep for a good while, for when I woke it was morning, but not very light and the baby was crying. And I saw a wood a little way off ... I thought there'd perhaps be a ditch or a pond there ... and it was so early I thought I could hide the child there, and get a long way off before folks was up. And then I thought I'd go home ... (p. 453)

The flowering of Hetty's natural vitality is given its final tragic twist here, as maternal impulse and outward-looking concern are born in her by the very act that denies them. The crying of the child is importunate, unbearable, compelling, voicing its 'heavy weight': 'and yet its crying went through me, and I daren't look at its little hands and face' (p. 454). It is her crying child and the hole in the earth that now irresistibly draw her, as the pool has drawn her, and which haunts her imagination. 'Dinah, do you think God will take away that crying and the place in the wood, now I've told everything?' (p. 455). In returning to claim her child, Hetty owns and proclaims all that has been hidden.

If Hetty's story remains hidden in so many ways and for so long, it does so to a dramatic effect that Eliot fully exploits. Hetty's 'direct speech', when it comes, is the more powerful for its coming so late and so fully endowed with inchoate and unresolved feeling. The sometimes uneasy narrator abandons the role of onlooker and mediator, and there is something of Wordsworth's tact in the recognition that no outsider has the right to speak for such 'misery', and that there is a sacredness about the places that mark it and still partly conceal it to the end. It is, finally, the coercive morality of the village, the Christian consolation offered by Dinah, the view of nature as beneficently creative restored by the marriage of Dinah and Adam Bede, that seem 'marginalized' by the starkness of the story Hetty has to tell.