Adam Bede and George Eliot's Early Politics

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Adam Bede and the Work World

Adam Bede is marked by, among other things, its great romanticizing upon the rural world of labour, the representative of which is the titular hero, Adam Bede. The novel opens with the chapter entitled “the Workshop.” The first chapter concerns how Adam’s life is centered upon his labour-spot, Mr. Burge’s forge, and how happy and contented he is in there. The reader is made to discern the hero for the first time, not by his physiognomy, as is usual in Victorian fiction, but by his “baritone” voice singing a morning hymn, while working in the forge: ‘Awake, my soul, and with the sun /Thy daily stage of duty run; /Sake off dull sloth ...’(49; bk. 1, ch. 1).

The hymn is a typical Victorian song of eulogy upon labour. The song beautifully likens man’s working-pattern to natural rhythms like the

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1) George Eliot, Adam Bede, ed. and intro. by Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1980). Hereafter quotations cited from the novel refer to this edition. Because of the various editions of the novel, for easy reference Book and Chapter numbers will be included in the quotation.
movement of the Sun. And the first chapter also ends with another similar song by the hero: ‘let all thy converse be sincere, /Thy conscience as the noonday clear; /For God’s all-seeing eye surveys /Thy secret thoughts, thy works and ways’(57; bk. 1, ch. 1). Thus, Adam’s two songs at the first scene of the novel marvelously foreshadow the thematic kernel that Eliot seems to have tried to draw in the novel. Moreover, the songs include all those existential questions like nature, work, duty, conscience and God.

One of the main themes in the novel is how the ideal, working-life like Adam’s is a signifier of ahistorical, apolitical dimension, which transcends all the personal and social conflicts, being something complete in itself. In the first chapter, “The Workshop,” Adam, the ideal artisan, and the rest of the workers in the forge are deliberately juxtaposed as binary oppositions in their respective attitudes toward work. While Adam is indifferent to the finishing time of his daily work in his love of work, the other workers, including Adam’s own brother, Seth, are ecstatic over it. Obviously, it is one of the most impressive scenes in the whole novel that Adam a little too severely criticizes their lack of passion in work, along with his critique of the Methodism he thinks Seth seems to believe in:

‘Seth, lad; I’m not for laughing at no man’s religion. Let ’em follow their consciences, that’s all. Only I think it ’ud be better if their consciences ’ud let ’em stay quiet i’ the church – there’s a deal to be learnt there. And there’s such a thing as being over- spiritious; we must have something beside Gospel i’ this world. Look at the canals, an’ th’ aqueducs, an’ th’ coal-pit engines, ... a man must learn summat beside Gospel to make them things, I reckon. ... I know a man must have the love o’ God in his soul, and the Bible’s God’s word. But what does the Bible say? Why, it says as God put his sperrit into the workman as built the tabernacle, to make him do all the carved work and things as wanted a nice hand. And this is my way o’ looking at it: there’s the sperrit o’ God in all things and all times ... And God helps us with our headpieces and our hands as well as with our souls ... (53; bk. 1, ch. 1).