Delicate Beauty Goes Out: 
*Adam Bede's* Transgressive Heroines

By Lori Lefkovitz

The language in which George Eliot describes her heroines' beauty in *Adam Bede* records a transition in nineteenth-century values. Here, Eliot's physical descriptions facilitate the delicate heroine's going out in two senses of the phrase: going safely out into the market place and going out of fashion. Through her descriptions, Eliot not only frees the delicate heroine to go out without subjecting her to risks that the delicate heroine typically faces, risks of rape or death, but Eliot also attempts to reconcile competing and mutually exclusive styles of beauty by creating healthy delicacy, a beauty that is both spiritual and sexual. She does so by appealing to and undermining literature's codes of delicacy.

Eliot revises the connotations of delicate beauty by doubling and exchanging the Poysers' beautiful nieces for one another, as Hetty Sorrel and Dinah Morris displace one another, not only in the novel's economy and structure of desire but also as meaningful figures of beauty. Eliot changes the tradition of the delicate heroine by recovering a sense of delicacy hidden in the word's linguistic history. In Dinah's and Hetty's names, in the adjectives applied to each, and in the objects with which each is associated, Eliot alludes to a code of delicacy. Among the images in that code are the pet, the bird, the flower, the Medusa, and the corpse.

Insofar as the reader recognizes the connotations of these emblems, we apply the appropriate characteristics to the person described. In this reading of the novel's characterization through its descriptions, I will occasionally trace such an allusion, or pause to add something about the historical background against which references to such things as pets, flowers, and corpses emerge in *Adam Bede* as ambiguous figures for the delicate heroine's beauty. My point is that neglect of language's power to negate woman through ambiguous idealizations of her image has resulted in critical failures to understand the meaning of woman's delicate health in the nineteenth century.

Apparently in evidence in *Adam Bede* is the positive value of delicate health: Dinah is as morally strong as she is physically frail, Hetty as weak willed as she is robust. Illness seems to be redemptive: the guilty lovers, Hetty and Arthur, are each recovered in the eyes of the reader as they grow morally stronger in illness. One reader accordingly observes that "in Eliot's novels those unacquainted with infirmity... tend to have short memories and little imagin-
ation." Eliot will, however, exchange these religious values for naturalistic ones by challenging the time-honored dichotomies between sexuality and spirituality, health and delicacy.2

Shortly before Adam Bede begins, Dinah Morris, a Methodist preacher who lives among the poor in Snowfield, comes to visit her aunt and uncle Poyser in the relatively comfortable village of Hayslope. She had come to recover her health, which is naturally frail. Within the novel's first pages, her delicate beauty is the talk of the carpentry shop, where Seth Bede is teased for his affections, and soon the indelicacy of a young woman preaching is the buzz of the village. We see Dinah first through the eyes of a stranger, who is struck by "the absence of self-consciousness in her demeanour" as she preaches. The passage evokes an icon of the spirit; three times the adjective "delicate" is used; she is described as having a face of "uniform transparent whiteness with an egg-like line of cheek and chin"; a "lily" in Quaker dress, she has "one of those faces that make one think of white flowers with light touches of colour on their pure petals."3 The flower's purity and the egg's fragility define Dinah's characteristic qualities, both superficial and essential: the reader regards Dinah as characteristically pure and fragile.

In the novel's descriptions of Dinah, the references to the lily connect her to the beautiful heroines for whom Richardson is famous. Pamela and Clarissa and their lily-white descendants are, however, impossible contradictions. As one classic formula has it: "If the villain pursues her, she must not show either speed or endurance in her flight. Delicacy holds her helpless; chastity must be defended. It is an unfailing dilemma."4 Apocryphal literature provides another source for the connotations of floral delicacy. Susannah is a flower (her name means both lily and rose), the innocent beauty upon whom the elders spy, and a favorite subject of visual representation. Although this flower is accused of harlotry, her chastity is proven in a court of law. By the nineteenth century, flowers were literally associated with chastity and in the 1860s, flowers were "seriously suggested as a means of reducing the high rate of illegitimacy in Cumbria."5 While the lily connotes the delicacy of frail pallor, the rose wears the blush and bloom of health. In Adam Bede's descriptive system, Hetty and Dinah are rose and lily respectively.


85
As Dinah Morris speaks, vain little Bessy Cranage takes to "studying Dinah's nose, eyes, mouth and hair, and wondering whether it was better to have such a sort of pale face as that, or fat red cheeks and round black eyes like her own." Even small-minded Bessy has a vague notion that types of beauty are legible and that the difference between the look of frailty and the look of health is a difference in meaning.

The Poyzers are concerned both for their niece's frail health and her public displays, and when the Reverend Irwine and the young Captain Arthur Donnithorne pay an unexpected visit, Mrs. Poyser fears that Dinah will be duly chastised. Instead the Reverend is so impressed that he concludes to himself, "He must be a miserable prig who would act the pedagogue here," by discouraging her public preaching. When he asks aloud, "And you never feel any embarrassment from the sense of your youth—that you are a lovely young woman on whom men's eyes are fixed?" Dinah replies, "... I've preached to as rough ignorant people as can be in the villages about Snowfield—men that looked very hard and wild—but they never said an uncivil word to me."

By convincing the learned Reverend that only "a miserable prig" would disapprove of Dinah Morris and by emphasizing (several times in the novel) that she goes among "rough, hard and wild men" without provoking disrespect, Eliot undermines a tradition within literature that had long associated the beauty of female delicacy with domestic confinement. The reader, after all, would not wish to be characterized as a "miserable prig."

Betrayed in the question that the Reverend asks Dinah is the concern that exposing her beauty may lead to some harm. Eliot has another Dinah in mind, and Irwine's question may be motivated by his own recollection of the Dinah he would have read about in Genesis 34.

Dinah, only daughter born to the matriarchs and patriarchs, is not much of a heroine. We are told merely that she "went out to visit the women of the land; and when Shechem . . . the prince of the land saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humbled her."6 Shechem is so taken with his victim, however, that he determines to marry her and asks leave of Jacob to do so. The biblical narrator offers only one moralizing sentence: "The sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard of it; and the men were indignant and very angry, because he had wrought folly in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done."

Leah's sons, therefore, devise a plot. They agree to the marriage and to dwell as neighbors among Shechem's people on the condition that the Hivites agree to circumcise all of their males. On the third day following the operation, when the men would have been most sore, Simeon and Levi slaughter them and take "Dinah out of Shechem's house." When Jacob declares that his sons' deviousness has jeopardized his own position in the community, they protest: "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?"

---

In some contemporary biblical criticism, the story is understood as a political and historical parable. It accounts for, among other things, the decline of the tribes of Simeon and Levi. Although Dinah seems to function as the innocent victim of a rape for whose sake her brothers take excessive revenge, classical commentary derives lessons from the story that imply a more aggressive female actress.

In midrash, the literature of late antiquity that interpreted the Bible and much influenced artists who gave the Western tradition its images of biblical types, we find an origin for the blame-the-victim paradox. Commenting on the creation myth of Adam and Eve, one midrashist—remembering Dinah—understands why man must subdue woman: “Man must master his wife, that she go not into the market place, for every woman who goes out into the market place will eventually come to grief. Whence do we know it? From Dinah, as it is written, And Dinah . . . went out, etc.” “To go out,” in an age when women acted within the boundaries of the tent, was not an innocent activity.

If Dinah’s brothers are loathe to have her treated as a harlot, the rabbis have no such qualms. Because Job says that his wife speaks as a “vile woman,” the rabbis conclude that Job must be married to Dinah. Moreover, the rabbis imagine that Dinah is violated to punish Jacob for refusing to wed her to Esau and for his other acts of pride.

In the rabbinic imagination, not only is Dinah a harlot, but by extension, so is her mother, Leah: “A woman is not immoral until her daughter is immoral.” To the rabbi who expresses reluctance to call the matriarch a whore, Rav Kahana replies, “Even so . . . because it says Leah went out to meet him [Jacob], which means that she went out to meet him adorned like a harlot.” Dinah, therefore, simply follows in her mother’s footsteps. Each and every consequent disaster is blamed upon Dinah’s “going out,” which proves that in spite of God’s best efforts to make women modest, women are “frivolous,” “coquettish,” “gossiping,” and “wanton.” Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman explains that when Dinah went out, “her arm became exposed,” and that this display of her beauty was a conscious provocation. Given Dinah’s seductive designs, the rabbis do not interpret Simeon and Levi’s recapturing of Dinah as the welcome rescue that it seems to be in the biblical story; her brothers must drag her by force from Shechem’s house because “when a woman is intimate with an uncircumcised person, she finds it hard to tear herself away.” For Jacob’s sake, the rabbis wish that this only daughter had never been born, and while the Bible makes the point that the rapist did “what ought not to have been done,” the rabbis conclude that the moral of the story is that a woman should never “go out.” It is a moral with which we are very familiar.

While Dinah Morris’s friends have full confidence in her virtue, it is not surprising that they fear for her reputation. Working against a literary tradi-

tion in which delicate heroines come to evil, Eliot takes special pains to demonstrate that her Dinah invites no sexual harassment. The forbearance of a Reverend in a competing church is a strong indication to the reader that accusations of indelicacy are inappropriate. Though Eliot allows her model of frail beauty to take uncharacteristic liberties, Dinah’s friends wish her to stay comfortably at home.

As matters turn out, real reason for concern lies elsewhere, with the Poysers’ other niece, Hetty. Both concern and desire are misplaced in the early chapters of the novel, and Eliot will effect several reversals in order to set matters right.

While Dinah talks with remarkable unself-consciousness to the Reverend, Hetty tosses and pats her butter in the dairy, “slyly conscious that no turn of her head was lost,” on Captain Donnithorne. Here Eliot describes Hetty at great length, principally as a “kittenish” beauty who leads her beholder into a bog (pp. 89-91). John Berger reasons that zoos and pets became popular in the middle of the nineteenth century because man felt ambivalent about losing the wild. Thus, the look of a domesticated animal deeply disturbs. Hetty Sorrel’s wily beauty is repeatedly likened to that of a delicate pet kitten.

By this point in the novel, Dinah and Hetty are both fully described: both women are distractingly pretty, but Dinah distracts attention from the body and Hetty distracts attention from the soul. Dinah elevates; Hetty debases. As frail preacher and rosy farm girl, Dinah and Hetty are exaggerated antithetical types. Dinah may go out among rough men without incurring any disapproval from the narrator, and Hetty cannot go out even among the most refined gentry. It is only after Eliot fixes in our minds the virtue of the one and the wickedness of the other that she will temper her own commentary on each and humanize them both.

The suffering of Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne exemplifies, for Eliot, the problem of portraying feminine delicacy. If Dinah takes her name from the Bible, Hetty and Arthur get their names from The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne expresses a guarded admiration for Hester’s tender beauty as he raises her to the status of an angel while condemning her to years of misery for the crime of going out in the “midrashic” sense. Eliot responds to the implication that unprotected women provoke lust in the best of men. Because Hawthorne explicitly uses a dated model of healthy beauty, he succeeds in creating a heroine who is both spiritual and sensual. To a description of Hester’s beauty Hawthorne adds: “She was lady-like too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication.” Eliot, like Hawthorne, ultimately recovers the beauty of health, but

---


she spares her heroine pain by again distinguishing between sexual and spiritual beauty (Hetty and Dinah, respectively), a distinction that Hawthorne blurs.

That which Van Ghent has called the "leisurely pace" of Adam Bede affords Eliot the opportunity to describe both women at length. Dinah is often called a lily, a bird—the favorite Christian icon of the spirit—an angel, a sublime corpse. The beautiful corpse develops out of the paradox of delicate beauty. Like Clarissa and Little Nell Trent, Dinah seems to belong on that familiar list of Victorian types who are most beautiful in death. But Eliot qualifies the image. When Dinah first comes to visit Lisbeth Bede, Lisbeth mistakes Dinah for her sister's spirit come back from the dead. Her second guess is that this must be an angel, until Lisbeth is brought down to earth when she notices that Dinah's hands bear "traces of labour." She cannot be an angel if she is a "workin woman."

Recently, several feminist critics have argued that the delicate heroine or somnambulist is a model of strength, with power over the men who seem to control her. What these readings miss is that hers is the paradoxical power of the slave. The idealization of frail woman as an angel of the spirit keeps women domesticated, out of the markets. Indoors, the spirituality that is embodied in the asexual angel will come to no harm, and the sexuality embodied in the Medusa will do no harm. In either case, she must stay home.

When Adam hears a female voice in his home, he operates under the illusion that Dinah is Hetty until he is impressed "with all the force that belongs to a reality contrasted with a preoccupying fancy." The paradox that Adam will come to appreciate is that Hetty, a palpably robust beauty, is a fancy of her beholder's imagination, while Dinah, whose beauty seems vaporous, carries the force of reality.

Book One ends with a series of thematically paired chapters that structurally reinforce Eliot's twinning of heroine and villainess. The first two of these chapters belong to Dinah. Readers who are surprised by Adam's marriage to Dinah at novel's end miss the impact of the sentences that follow Adam's rude surprise (that Dinah is not Hetty) as Eliot describes Dinah's sexual awakening:

For the first moment he made no answer, but looked at her with the concentrated examining glance which a man gives to an object in which he has suddenly begun to be interested. Dinah, for the first time in her life, felt a painful self-consciousness; there was something in the dark penetrating glance of the strong man so different from the mildness and timidity of his brother Seth. A faint blush came, which deepened as she wondered at it.


Dinah is explicitly, but only symbolically, penetrated by Adam, while Hetty's literal penetration—which would have taken place at the same moment—passes unremarked.

The next two chapters describe Hetty's sexual awakening, her first kiss and the beginning of her clandestine affair. Two chapters follow which belong to Hetty and Dinah together. As the women return home, they meet one another en route. Dinah selflessly speaks to Hetty on behalf of Adam, but Hetty is preoccupied with fantasies of a future life with Arthur. The narrator comments: "it made a strange contrast to see the sparkling self-engrossed loveliness looked at by Dinah's calm pitying face."

Dinah and Hetty, both motherless girls, the latter a niece to Mr. Poyser, the former a niece to Mrs. Poyser, occupy symmetrical positions in the social structure of the novel's world, though Hetty desires to live above their station and Dinah desires to live below it. Each is adamant, and each is wrong. They return home to occupy adjoining bedchambers.

This chapter begins by presenting Hetty worshiping her image in the mirror, adorning herself in lace and ear-rings, and finally prancing about the room. Dinah is startled out of her spiritual reverie by the noise in Hetty's room. She goes to talk, and the narrator marvels:

What a strange contrast the two figures made, visible enough in that mingled twilight and moonlight! Hetty, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistening from her imaginary drama, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned with sublier secrets and a sublimer love. They were nearly of the same height.

Eliot might be describing the body and the soul doing battle, as in a metaphysical psychomachia. The juxtaposition exploits the paradox of the psychomachia as the two figures are mutually dependent. One sustains the other. The scene ends with Hetty pale and crying while Dinah "departs like a ghost." Next day Dinah leaves Hayslope. Soon after Hetty will leave as well.

In one of the many conversations on the subject of beauty in Adam Bede, the wealthy notables sit on high and chat lightly about the relative beauty of Hayslope's farm girls. Their discussion concerns delicacy as Mrs. Irwine remarks of Hetty: "What a pity such beauty as that should be thrown away among the farmers, when it's wanted so terribly among the good families without fortune." Reverend Irwine disagrees, but changes the case in point; of "that pretty Methodist preacher," he says: "Such a woman as that brings with her 'airs from heaven' that the coarsest fellow is not insensible to it." Mr. Gawaine interrupts Irwine, as he laughingly notices Bessy Cranage, a "delicate bit of womanhood." Gawaine undoubtedly uses the word delicate in its more rarified sense: plump, rosy Bessy, in her country finery, clearly loves delights.

Delicate has meant both dainty and sumptuous. A delicate aristocrat was once likely to have been a robust glutton, a lover of delights. When Shakespeare's Petruchio finds in the shrewish Katherina, a "Kate," because "dainties
are all cates,” he teases with a double pun. Once an emblem of sensuality, the delicate became an emblem of spirituality. Eliot, writing at a time when the delicacy that had just recently been a clear sign of feminine beauty and virtue had become increasingly “lamentable,” reminds us of the word’s older and antithetical connotations of physical strength. (Naturalist fiction creates another ambiguity: the “delicate” woman is either dainty and lovely or she is weak of mind and body, nervous and unfit.) Images of beauty, like descriptive language, can sustain inherent contradiction. Here Eliot gives the reader to understand that when it comes to bits of womanhood, there is more than one way to be delicate. Irwine emerges as Eliot’s touchstone of moral rectitude because when his mother speaks of Hetty’s beauty, he reminds the reader of Dinah. Irwine is not the only one to compare Hetty and Dinah on the basis of appearance. In the very terms that Bessy compared herself to Dinah, Mrs. Poyser compares her two nieces. “If Dinah had a bit o’ colour in her cheeks and didn’t stick that Methodist cap on her head . . . folk ‘ud think her as pretty as Hetty.” But Mr. Poyser knows better: “The men ‘ud never run after Dinah as they would after Hetty.” He does not explain why. Mrs. Poyser quotes no less an authority than Scriptures to back up her view that Dinah should eat and fill herself out: “You should love your neighbor as yourself.” Eliot agrees but will correct Dinah’s figure only after we are sure of her spirituality.

Adam, sensitive to the symptoms of Hetty’s vanity, also compares Hetty to Dinah, the woman who has “got the face of a lily”: when Hetty puts a flower in her hair, Adam tells her “why Dinah Morris looks very nice, for all she wears such a plain cap and gown. It seems to me as a woman’s face doesna want flowers; it’s almost a flower itself. I’m sure yours is.” Through the image of the flower, Adam associates the women, and his remark provokes the most broadly comic scene in the novel. Hetty puts on Dinah’s clothes and frightens Mrs. Poyser who thinks she sees a ghost. The jug breaks, and the children roar with laughter.

As the novel moves from the light trials of farm romance to genuine tragedy, Hetty’s appearance begins to change, and her masquerade in Dinah’s clothes begins to resonate. Adam sees in Hetty’s eyes: “something harder, older, less child-like.” When Hetty faints among strangers in her troubles, losing the rosy bloom that typified the farm girl, the narrator uses the same phrase that she had earlier applied to Dinah. Hetty is said to look “like a beautiful corpse.”

On the following day, we see a “face sadly different from that which had smiled at itself in the old speckled glass. . . . A hard and even fierce look had come into her eyes, though their lashes were as long as ever, and they had all their dark brightness. And the cheek was never dimpled with smiles now. It had the same rounded, pouting, childish prettiness, but with all love and belief in love departed from it—the sadder for its beauty, like the wondrous Medusa-face, with the passionate passionless lips.”

This description alludes not only to the Medusa, the icon of terrifying
beauty, \textsuperscript{13} but also to \textit{The Scarlet Letter}. The beauty of Hester and Hetty both depends upon love. Just as Hetty's appearance is hardened by absence of love, Hawthorne's Hester is alternately transfigured; she is a radiant beauty in her lover's presence and acquires an austere look in his absence. In this unnatural aspect, Hetty Sorrel commits the most unnatural crime imaginable in the world of \textit{Adam Bede}: she is guilty of infanticide.

After her baby's death, Hetty increasingly acquires the air of the delicate Romantic heroine. The narrator, who had spared no sarcasm in her earlier descriptions, is now moved to pity, as she emotionally declares "My heart bleeds for her as I see her." The identification of Dinah and Hetty is made explicit during the process of trying to identify the criminal. Irwine tells Adam that, the description of her person corresponds but that she is said to look very pale and ill. She had a small red-leather pocketbook . . . with two names written on it— one at the beginning, 'Hetty Sorrel, Hayslope,' and the other near the end, 'Dinah Morris, Snowfield.' She will not see which is her own name.

Eliot devotes most of the novel to contrasting Hetty and Dinah, only to bring them into an embrace. Dinah only acquires power in the presence of the lost soul, and Hetty, who will not confess, needs Dinah for spiritual survival. At the heart of \textit{Adam Bede} is the quickening of Hetty's weak spirit and the fortification of Dinah's weak body, as each beauty imparts to the other her characteristic strengths. The two women cling to one another in the scene for the sake of which \textit{Adam Bede} was written. Eliot wrote in a letter that Hetty's confession to Dinah in prison provided the starting point for the novel. It was a moment that had been described to Eliot twenty-five years earlier by her aunt. \textsuperscript{14}

In prison, Dinah and Hetty face one another and reflect one another's faces: "The two faces were looking at each other; the one with a wild despair in it, the other full of sad yearning love. Dinah unconsciously opened her arms and stretched them out . . . Hetty rose, took a step forward and was clasped in Dinah's arms." And so they remain, inseparable as body and soul, with overwhelming need for one another.

The crowd of onlookers who line the streets as the criminal is to be brought to justice have a double motivation in this case: "All of Stoniton had heard of Dinah Morris . . . who had brought the obstinate criminal to confess, and there was as much eagerness to see her as to see the wretched Hetty." The voyeuristic crowd sees two pale beautiful women clutching one another.

Adam sees the criminal Hetty as a "statue" of her former self, and Eliot thereby justifies transforming the virtuous heroine Dinah. If Hetty pales to the point of resembling her own corpse, Dinah, in Adam's presence, bears only a


family resemblance to herself: she blushed a "deep rose colour. She looked as if she were only a sister to Dinah." Persuaded that God does not mean for her to remain self-denying, Dinah does leave the poor to marry Adam and live more comfortably herself. When we see her in the novel's epilogue, she has acquired the only attribute of beauty that Mrs. Poyser found her lacking, a little extra fleshiness: "We can see the sweet pale face quite well now: it is scarcely altered—only a little fuller, to correspond to her more matronly figure." Hetty dies in exile, and Dinah marries the man who loved them both.

Hetty and Dinah are the two faces of the nineteenth century's Janus-faced woman, until Eliot produces beauty out of the synthesis of the healthy (but fatal, murderous) Medusa and the virtuous (but sickly, vulnerable) angel. Adam Bede, who loves first one woman and then the other, stands in for the reader. The narrator takes every opportunity to ask us to identify with Adam's feelings, motivations, and actions, however misguided they may be. Admira

able as he is, we are often told that he behaves typically of men in general when he misreads beauty. Through Adam, therefore, Eliot educates the reader.

Dinah is Eliot's response to the Victorian angel. Like Hawthorne, Eliot persuades us that a healthy heroine can be more virtuous than a frail one because she has a body strong enough for purposeful labor (an ideology for the middle class). Dinah is no angel because she works; Hetty's flawed character is expressed by fantasies of idleness when her strength is needed on the farm. Her end is fitting: Hetty cannot stand on her own feet.

Even as the fashions and ideals of the Victorian Age promoted feminine frailty, even as debility was a sign of beauty, absence of spirit or bloom was unlovely. Women were caught in the ambivalence contained in the idealized images of femininity, such as the images of the caged pet and the flower: beauty had to be fragile as the flower even as it required the bloom of health. Much as they admired frail women, Victorians legislated to ensure health. They associated "sanitary" and "sanity."115

The ideology of rugged individualism and survival of the fittest gave the body an edge over the spirit in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One consequence was a new image of man: the desire for, in Herbert Spenser's words, "a nation of healthy animals." Coleridge intimates the change in values that prepared England for the Byronic ideal and Darwinism alike when he observed that to call human vices "bestial" was to libel the animals. While this libel was current, one might suppose that in the realm of metaphor woman was flower to man's beast, but true to the contradiction that is woman, in this religious code, woman is represented as more beast than man. Infants are closest to animals, and women, as "breeders," come second only to the poor, "brutes in understanding."16

Victorian medical literature highlights another important contradiction

16Thomas, p. 259.
in the age's perception of women. Women were defined by constitutional weakness and were accordingly exempt from the Darwinian Revolution. Michelet characterized the nineteenth century as the age of the womb; one doctor put it that the Almighty took a uterus and "built woman around it."17 The fashions of the early part of the century were so flimsy that beautiful ladies often had "charming colds," and the corset created the condition of weak backs that it was designed to cure. More importantly, just as the metaphors of the pet and flower were taken literally in their applications, so too "a well-dressed woman whose stays were loose . . . was probably a loose woman."18

Eliot, unlike Hawthorne, is guilty of some purposeful anachronisms. In 1799, the year in which Adam Bede is set, mild Seth would have seemed more handsome than rugged Adam, and a noblewoman like Mrs. Irwine would not have been at all likely to select Hetty as "the perfect beauty." Hetty sports too much peasant "rude health." In 1859, however, the year in which both Adam Bede and Darwin's Origin of Species were published, urbanization made frailty a characteristic quality less of the upper-class beauty than of the sickly factory worker. The nostalgic memory of simple healthy peasant life provided a model for middle-class beauty sixty years later. Adam and Hetty are viable ideals in the time of the novel's publication, while Dinah (before her transfiguration) is an ideal of the time about which Eliot writes. Eliot's novel contrasts then and now.

By playing modern and discarded values off against one another, Eliot may depend upon her readers' discomfort with some of the choices that modernization made on their behalf. Were people ready to give up the spirituality that the delicate ideal embodied? Eliot transfigures the healthy rustic and the frail beauty before our eyes, giving us a healthy angel, a benign Medusa. By story's end, Adam and Dinah satisfy an 1859 readership as the industrious couple that was strong enough to meet the needs of changing times. But Eliot is not entirely satisfied with the compromises that the conventions of realism forced upon her novel. Having to choose between healthy sexuality and the freedom of asexuality as criteria for beauty, Eliot—not without some hesitation—chooses health. The narrator interrupts to qualify her conclusions.

Because Dinah becomes what Hetty had been, a sexual woman, Eliot is forced to impose a conventional morality on her. Having come to possess the health and comfort embodied in her fuller figure, Dinah is prevented from going out to the market as she used to. Mrs. Poyser is thus proven right on another score when Eliot puts a stop to Dinah's objectionable preaching. It is significant that the novel closes with a discussion of women preaching. Adam is given the last word on the subject when he responds to Seth's wish that Dinah had quit the Wesleyans to "join a body that 'ud put no bonds on Chris-

Christian liberty." Adam approves his wife's decision to be bound, catching the author's resignation when he says, "There's no rule so wise but it's a pity for somebody or other. Most o' the women do more harm nor good with their preaching and she [Dinah] thought it right to set the example o' submitting."

Eliot had been deliberate in her effort to lead the reader to believe that Dinah should be free to preach. By novel's end, Adam and Dinah agree that women should attend to matters of the spirit indoors. While Eliot tried to create a delicate woman who could both go out and not die to prove her virtue, she ends by concluding that some unspecified harm does indeed come of a woman's going out to preach. Irwine had intimated as much at the novel's onset.

In the physical description of heroes and heroines, novelists promote those cultural values that the idealized figure embodies. But because readers of narrative from Aristotle to Ian Watt have been trained to regard description as part of the effect of the real, important for its literal rather than its figurative meaning, little attention has been paid to physical description as a strategy of characterization.¹⁹

In *Word and Image*, Norman Bryson calls "optical truth" into question, explaining, "[I]t is clear that the term 'realism' cannot draw its validity from any absolute conception of 'the real,' because that conception cannot account for the historical and changing character of 'the real' within differing cultures and periods."²⁰ Bryson demonstrates that when we study realistic images in visual art, what we can discover is how a culture imagines its own reality, what it recognizes as the real.

So too with ideals of personal beauty, which so obviously change to accommodate the values particular to a time and place. On the other hand, portraits of beauty, as distinct from "realistic" images of the ordinary or the ugly, are conservative because beauty is conveyed by appeal to the authority of the tradition: "as beautiful as Adonis, or Venus, or the Madonna or Clarissa." Beauty, to use Roland Barthes's words, "cannot assert itself save in the form of a citation."²¹ Barthes does not, however, tell the whole story. He neglects the story itself, the fact that Adonis, or Venus, or the Madonna each displays a beauty that derives its meaning from narrative contexts; each is as beautiful as his or her characteristic qualities. Thus does beauty bear truth. Reading the inside by using the evidence of the outside is rhetorically enforced by the adjective's penetrating power, as, for example, clear eyes (whatever that means) signify clarity of vision. And, ironically, Barthes neglects the power of coding, to which he habitually directs our attention: dark hair and eyes, for example,


suggest the exotic or the demonic, depths of wisdom or of sorrow. When we read beauty, we trace allusions to the tradition.

Novelists do subject their models to revision. Those characters who are more complex than Theophrastan types are developed by appeal to competing codes and traditions, as fiction attempts to reconcile competing claims to value, competing definitions of humanity. In the invention and description of fictional characters, novelists record the tension between the pulls of the tradition and the urge towards innovation.

Because the values embodied in a character of beauty may be self-contradictory, the beauty of literature's characters is often unvisualizable (which may explain our inevitable disappointment with cinema's casting choices for our favorite fictional characters). Art historians have remarked that even in visual portraiture, the interest of a figure often lies in its subtle incoherence. In linguistic figures incoherence masquerades as complexity or development of character; codes compete, and the outcome of the competitions affects how the body is imagined and treated in the world.

Description transgresses the most fundamental boundary in the discourse of literary criticism, the opposition between the literal and the figurative. A figure is a face, a body, a personage, a metaphor. The fictional body is a playground for multiple shifting significances. Transfiguration is a symbolic operation that occurs on the body. Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, relates the body's situation with respect to language to its situation in torture and war. Cinderella teaches the desirability of a delicate foot. Freud teaches that the foot, an object of fetishism, displaces the site of female sexuality. Such displacements are endless and often scandalous. In *Adam Bede* Eliot succeeds in transposing the value of delicate health and that of healthy delicacy, but in doing so she must bring in the heroine who went out.

---
