Knowable

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THE concept of a "knowable community" was first introduced by Raymond Williams to name the central organizing problem of the nineteenth-century English novel. "Most novels," he writes in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, "are in some sense knowable communities."[1] Williams's style of presentation, however, courts certain misreadings that have not failed to arise. Indeed, the concept is indissociable from the wrong turns of interpretation to which it has been liable.

One such wrong turn is to take Williams's "knowable" as referring solely to a dimension of the object. Something is then knowable if it can be grasped by an observer, or else unknowable if the object eludes empirical or experiential capture. This somewhat positivist emphasis is (misleadingly) entailed by the way Williams introduces the concept. He makes a contrast between Jane Austen's fiction, where "most actual people are simply not seen," and the more inclusive vision of George Eliot, who "extended the real social range of the novel—its knowable community" (*EN* 24, 82). It might seem as if Williams was applauding Eliot for democratizing the novel, awarding her points over Austen for a broader representation of society. But Williams is clear that what is knowable is not simply a matter of more precise observation of a bounded object: "The problem of the knowable community . . . is not only a matter of physical expansion and complication. It is also and primarily a problem of viewpoint and of consciousness" (26).

The "knowable community" is also liable to misreading in the other direction, as pertaining to an authentic sphere of social interaction: the "transparent" mutual perceptions that are still possible in a country village, with its primacy of "direct relationships: of face-to-face contacts within which we can find and value the real substance of personal relationships" (*EN* 17). The knowable community is understood here along the lines of *Gemeinschaft*, where everyday, organic belonging has not yet slipped into anomie and rupture. But Williams expressly states

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that the knowable community is not primarily a sociological category of this kind. The difference between Austen's community and Eliot's is "not . . . a problem of [historical] fact."[2]

What must be emphasized is the dialectical quality of what is knowable for Williams. The knowable community is neither a kind of good object (social life laid bare to accurate demographic reporting) nor a kind of good subjectivity (everybody here knows one another). Williams specifies that "what is knowable is not only a function of objects—of what there is to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers—of what is desired and what needs to be known. A knowable community, that is to say, is a matter of consciousness as well as evident fact" (*EN* 17). But consciousness and fact are not separable; the "standpoint from which community can . . . be known" is a position produced *by and within* the community's own structures of ongoing life and its representations thereof (17). The standpoint of knowing, as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is immanent to what it would know. What matters therefore "is not only the reality of the . . . community; it is the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known" (*CC* 165).

A sharper dialectical focus on the knowable can help bring out an aspect that is missing even from Williams's account of the English novel, particularly in the transition from George Eliot to Thomas Hardy. Eliot figures there as a novelist of "disconnection," of "divided consciousness," of "dislocation" (*EN* 79, 84, 91). Hardy, on the other hand, stands for the opposite tendency. Whereas in Eliot, "division," "isolation," and "separation" are the positive terms of moral growth, in Hardy the same terms stand for the punishing exigencies of tragedy (117). This entire argument turns on how *close* the authors (in their language and consciousness) are to their characters. Whereas "Eliot is not *with*" any one of her characters in a mode of unmediated belonging (*CC* 169), Hardy on the other hand "moves closer" to Tess and Jude, even to the point of "affirmation" (*EN* 118). The problem, put in the starkest terms, is that Eliot "abandons" a character like Hetty Sorrel, while Hardy tenaciously perseveres with Tess (82).

However, Williams's own conception of the knowable as elaborated above opens the possibility of a different reading of Eliot and Hardy, not based on space (closeness, distance, dislocation, disconnection) but on time. Williams draws our attention to a splitting of consciousness in Eliot. On one side there is the knowable community—the ordinary working people who make up her dramatis personae, the background of "common life" (*EN* 82). What is *knowable* is brought under the "inherited

sympathy of general observation" (78). On the other side there is the "known community" (82). Eliot bridges the gap by a technique of what Melanie Klein calls "projective identification."[3] In order to be *known*, characters first have to be inhabited by Eliot's own isolated, intense feeling and her analytical mode. Eliot "gives them, by surrogate, parts of her own consciousness" (*CC* 170). However, this gap is constitutive, written into the entire structure of her fiction. "Irony is the objectivity of the novel."[4] Thus Maggie Tulliver, endowed by Eliot with a full helping of the author's own "ardor," and unable for that reason to find a determinate place in the social, is at last drawn back into the bosom of her creator in the flood at the end of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). What cannot be known is merely subsumed. Contra Williams's own reading of *The Mill on the Floss*, this dead end is not a hasty fantasy arising in the absence of real social solutions but is built into the way Eliot posits the knowable.

On the other hand, in Hardy's fiction, the separation of the narrator's omniscience from the tragic embeddedness of his characters is a produced *result* not given at the outset. According to Williams, work and meaning in Hardy "are in a single dimension" (*CC* 212). But when Tess Durbeyfield and Michael Henchard are thrust into the raw and unprotected open at the end of their respective novels, this new precarious zone of exile, "outside the gates of the world," has opened up as the outcome of social and economic processes traced in the fiction.[5] Tess, in particular, is left dissociated, adrift, and unsheltered by forces of capitalist abstraction. This final Tess is no longer knowable in the ways that Williams proffers, where work serves as a bulwark of human meaning vainly striving to hold off the alienation of the "divided separating world" (*EN* 117). Rather, in the final chapters of the novel, Tess is as if released from all pitiless structuring perceptions of her. She becomes nearly unrecognizable to Angel Clare when they meet again, just as Stonehenge is encountered by their groping in the dark as some vast alien obstacle. The novelistic knowable, in other words, shares the same boundary as the harmful objectification from which Tess at last escapes. A last reminder that the "knowable" is only ever a record of its own "crisis" (*EN* 16).

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

1. Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 14. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text as *EN*.

2. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 169. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text as *CC*.

3. Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975).

4. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 90.

5. Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887; London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 44.