

## Family as Pastoral: The Garths in Middlemarch

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I N *Middlemarch*<sup>1</sup> there is very little description of place of the kind we have in *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*, no Dutch interiors or charming landscapes. As Quentin Anderson points out, "the affectionate sense of nature and the objects that man makes and handles which suffuses *Adam Bede* has been deliberately subdued here [in *Middlemarch*]," the natural has been transposed "into the moral and psychological."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, that part of the novel which is most like the earlier novels (the part dealing with the Garths) evokes a familiar pastoral feeling, one which the reader identifies initially by acknowledging the resemblance between the Garth household and the Poysers, and Caleb Garth and Adam Bede. What the Garths in fact represent, much more so than the Poysers, is an unusual attempt to make pastoral a function of character.

The Victorian home (even when it was not actually rural like the Garths') as a reaction to the city and business "was irradiated by the light of a pastoral imagination. It could seem a country of peace and innocence where life was kind and duty natural."<sup>3</sup> The Garth family is a repository of certain ethical values which George Eliot convinces us belong to a traditional, rural way of life, but which are well-nigh identical to the more philosophically-derived religion of humanity she herself espouses; the Garths' function is to provide from the outset an unambiguous moral yardstick for the other members of a society nonetheless modern for being provincial, a society with "no coherent social faith and order" (*Middlemarch*, Ch. 1, p. 3). Thus

the Garth strand of the novel is at once simple (that is, consonant with the unremarkable lives of virtuous yeomen farmers in Warwickshire), and complex (as a family the Garths are the repository of certain ideas about the individual and his relationship to his culture). In so being both simple and complex the Garth element conforms to the structural, Empsonian notion of pastoral, and more specifically is the embodiment of a particularly Victorian version of pastoral which revolves around the concept of family. Indeed the image and function of the family in Victorian England supersedes the *hortus conclusus* of early pastoral literature.

It should be pointed out here that the Garths are not an abstract and aloof embodiment of worth inaccessible to the other characters; their lives touch those of the other important characters in significant ways, most strikingly, of course, in the case of Fred Vincy, Mary Garth's suitor, whom the family educates out of his egoism. And where their destinies are not linked overtly with those of the other characters, as in Fred's case, they are linked thematically. The Garth family is to be considered, then, in its collective attitude to love, money, and work, very much in terms of an exemplary contrast with other inhabitants of the *Middlemarch* world.

The exemplary function of the Garth family has everything to do with their existence as a *family*: "At the center of Victorian life was the family"; the idea of the family life "was the conception of the home as a source of virtues and emotions which were nowhere else to be found, least of all in business and society" (Houghton, p. 341). The widely-accepted importance of the family in Victorian England is given a religious and philosophical justification in the religion of humanity to which George Eliot subscribed. The Comtian-Feuerbachian religion of humanity is basically Christianity without metaphysics, what Martin Svaglic calls the "ethical idealism" of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Comte

himself gives expression to the conviction that the family is the basis for the religion of humanity:

La vie domestique est la source positive de toute moralité et de toute sociabilité. Grâce à la famille l'homme émerge de l'égoïsme et s'élève à l'altruïsme: la vie domestique est le lien naturel de la personnalité à la sociabilité . . . . L'amour lui-même s'exprime en trois penchants sympathiques, propres à notre constitution mentale: l'attachement, la vénération et la bonté. Or ces penchants ne peuvent s'épanouir que dans la famille, où l'on a de l'attachement pour l'époux, de la vénération pour la mère et de la bonté pour la fille. Ainsi la moralité ne tombe pas toute faite du ciel.<sup>5</sup>

That the Garths are meant to represent standards in love and marriage has been pointed out before. W. J. Harvey notes the exemplary nature of the Garths' marriage: "the Garths are the one solidly happy family in the book and as such provide a standard whereby the failings of the other marriages can be measured."<sup>6</sup> The other marriages include, of course, the Vincys and the Bulstrodes, the Lydgates and the Casaubons. Yet George Eliot is careful not to succumb to the temptation of making the Garth strand of the novel a fulsome domestic idyll: Caleb's exaltation of work is treated with gentle irony, and his impracticality with regard to money is offset by the shrewdness of his properly subservient helpmate.

Mary's clear-sightedness about her lover is meant, in a similar way, to call to mind the misunderstanding and self-deception involved in the relationships between Dorothea and Casaubon, and Lydgate and Rosamond (Book Four is titled "Three Love Problems"). Which is not to say that Mary and Fred are more interesting than the other couples — on the contrary, there is some truth in Leslie Stephen's judgment that "the shrewd young woman and the feeble young gentleman whom she governs, do not carry us away."<sup>7</sup> But Mary's singular lack of egoism provides a welcome exception to that near-universal affliction in the world of George Eliot's novels, whether it be that subtle form of egoism which impels Dorothea into her disastrous marriage

with Casaubon, or the crasser and more obvious form which links Rosamond to Lydgate.

If the Garth family recalls the Poysers, though their functional importance is more clear-cut, then the Featherstones are reminiscent of the Gleggs and Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss*. The Waules and Featherstones and the whole clan of relatives who wait for Peter Featherstone to die show the same kind of comically dogged and lugubrious materialism as their cousins in the earlier novel, though they are less sympathetic creations because they are so much more obviously cunning and greedy. Peter Featherstone himself is a rustic counterpart to Bulstrode; they have radically different economic philosophies, as old Peter points out to Fred Vincy: "God A'mighty sticks to the land. He promises land, and He gives land, and He makes chaps rich with corn and cattle. But you take the other side. You like Bulstrode and speckilation better than Featherstone and land" (Ch. 12, p. 82). Yet whether they speculate or hoard their wealth, what both enjoy is the power over other people's lives granted them by their wealth. The existence of the Featherstones and their relations is a familiar qualification by George Eliot of her tendency to locate positive ethical values in the rural life. It is as though to remind the reader that she is not being conventional in creating such a repository of values as the Garths and the Poysers, since she knows and can also create beautifully the narrow and oppressive materialism which an empirical investigation of rural society would show to be, at the very least, as prevalent a philosophy as the humanity epitomized by the traditional way of life of the Poysers and Adam Bede and the Garths.

In *Middlemarch*, while money does not attain the independent, symbolic force it assumes in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, or as the silver does in Conrad's *Nostromo*, it is one indisputably strong thread in the web of relationships George Eliot traces in this novel, linking the destiny of one character to another, revealing their psychology,

illuminating their moral nature. Carlyle regrets in his *Chartism* the existence of cash as "the universal sole nexus of man to man,"<sup>8</sup> and Houghton observes that Victorian man "was haunted . . . by a spectre staring back at him in the mirror, a hard-faced, dwarfish caricature of himself, unpleasantly like the economic man" (Houghton, p. 345). The dehumanizing tendencies of business life could be temporarily offset, however, by the domestic life. It is hardly surprising that the model by which to judge men's attitudes to money in *Middlemarch* is the head of the Garth family, whose definition of business explicitly rejects the notion of "money transactions," and insists on its being understood as the "skillful application of labour" (*Middlemarch*, Ch. 56, p. 402).

Caleb rejects the cash nexus of society. When he is offered the post as agent for the estates of Sir James Chettam and Mr. Brooke, he observes to his wife, "It's a fine bit of work, Susan! A man without a family would be glad to do it for nothing" (Ch. 40, p. 295), happier at the prospect of the work than at the financial remuneration it will bring. His inability to deal with money is a sign of integrity, not improvidence: "he could not manage finance: he knew values well, but he had no keenness of imagination for monetary results in the shape of profit and loss . . . . He gave himself up entirely to the many kinds of work which he could do without handling capital . . ." (Ch. 24, p. 185).

Caleb's dedication to the kind of practical work that will benefit his neighbours assumes a religious significance. He is like his daughter, Mary, who admits to having "a dreadfully secular mind" (Ch. 57, p. 421), and "though he had never regarded himself as other than an orthodox Christian, and would argue on convenient grace if the subject were proposed to him, Caleb's virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings: his prince of darkness was a slack workman" (Ch. 24, p. 185). Caleb's practical religion yields positive

results (his administration of the Brooke and Chettam estates, for instance, involves great benefits for owners and tenants alike), and is set off against those ardent and "theoretic" propensities in Dorothea which led her to marry Casaubon, aspiring to help in his work, the ridiculous and arid "Key to all Mythologies." The practicality of Caleb's aspirations also forms a contrast with the grand scale of Lydgate's endeavour, his search for "the primitive tissue," and is the very antithesis of Fred's fecklessness and Ladislaw's dilettantism. The point is the rather familiar one elicited by comparing the simple virtue of the man who works on the land with the futile search for satisfaction that is so characteristic of a complex urban society. Indeed, Caleb is the only one who can be relied on to accomplish anything for that society — he comes to be engaged by Sir James Chettam, Mr. Brooke, and Dorothea, to put his practical schemes into effect on their estates. The knowledgeable Garth children greet the news of Caleb's reinstatement as Mr. Brooke's agent — this is a victory for Caleb's practicality as well as his patient virtue, for Mr. Brooke in engaging him is recognizing the folly of his own impractical Reform politics — by comparing their father to Cincinnatus.

The point of the comparison is important, if obvious. Caleb, like Cincinnatus, is the epitome of rustic integrity on whom society calls when a crisis needs to be resolved. While the crisis Cincinnatus is called on to resolve is rather more dramatic than the government of estates for the landed gentry which Caleb Garth undertakes, George Eliot reminds the reader of the public importance of the work of men like Caleb:

Wise in his daily work was he:  
 To fruits of diligence,  
 And not to faiths or polity,  
 He plied his utmost sense.  
 These perfect in their little parts,  
 Whose work is all their prize —  
 Without them how could laws, or arts,  
 Or towered cities rise?  
 (motto to Ch. 40, p. 292)<sup>9</sup>

The parallel with Caleb is clear in Livy's account of Cincinnatus, which stresses the importance and value of the pastoral life, its simple virtue and rewards by comparison with the muddled and futile scheming of life in Rome and moralizes on the way society must rely on the representatives of rural life in times of social crisis:

What followed merits the attention of those who despise all human qualities in comparison with riches, and think there is no room for great honours or for worth but amidst a profusion of wealth. The sole hope of the empire of the Roman People, Lucius Quinctius [Cincinnatus], cultivated a field of some four acres across the Tiber, now known as the Quinctian Meadows, directly opposite the place where the dockyards are at present. There he was found by the representatives of the state. Whether bending over his spade as he dug a ditch, or ploughing, he was, at all events, as everybody agrees, intent upon some rustic task . . . When he had put it on [his toga], after wiping off the dust and sweat, and come forth to the envoys, they hailed him Dictator . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Fred Vincy in particular desperately needs to acquire something of Caleb's religious veneration of work. For he is one of George Eliot's egoists, whose "optimism" reconstructs the world according to his own desires and expectations. For Fred the problem of work and vocation can be solved only by the legacy old Featherstone is bound to leave him; his egoism is, indeed, a form of gambling, as George Eliot points out:

Fred was not a gambler: he had not that specific disease in which the suspension of the whole nervous energy on a chance or risk becomes as necessary as the dram to the drunkard; he had only the tendency to that diffusive form of gambling which has no alcoholic intensity, but is carried on with the healthiest chyle-fed blood, keeping up a joyous imaginative activity which fashions events according to desire, and having no fears about its own weather, only sees the advantage there must be to others in going aboard with it. Hopefulness has a pleasure in making a throw of any kind, because the prospect of success is certain; and only a more generous pleasure in offering as many as possible a share in the stake. Fred liked play, especially billiards, and he liked hunting or riding a steeplechase; and he only liked it the better because he wanted money and hoped to win. (Ch. 23, pp. 172-73)

So, too, Fred shares with his sister Rosamond the half-belief that his father might pay for anything if he really

wanted, even though Mr. Vincy's protestations that he has no money are quite true. His great expectations from old Featherstone, who keeps Fred and a small army of relatives on tenterhooks about the final disposition of his will, reflect Fred's near-infantile conviction that "the wisdom of providence or the folly of our friends, the mysteries of luck or the still greater mystery of our high individual value in the universe, will bring about agreeable issues, such as are consistent with our good taste in costume, and our general preference for the best style of thing" (Ch. 23, p. 168). Fred's true education, his moral rehabilitation, progresses to the extent that he becomes associated with the Garth family, and finally assimilated into it by his marriage to Mary. This education is achieved largely through Mary's tutorial role and Caleb's paternal interest in Fred. So Fred comes to accept Caleb's distinctly humanizing doctrine of work, thereby implicitly rejecting his own father who is "one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt" (Ch. 34, p. 239), and is himself explicitly rejected by Mr. Vincy in a revealing economic metaphor: "I wash my hands of you. I only hope, when you have a son of your own he will make a better return for the pains you spend on him" (Ch. 56, p. 415).

As Fred's character is revealed in good part by his expectations from his uncle, so I think is Lydgate's in his relationship with Bulstrode. His self-deceiving lack of concern about the source of money useful to advance his work, or to rescue him from personal debt, compromises his moral nature terribly. Witness his unwittingly ironic equation of money with arsenic as he defends his association with Bulstrode to Farebrother:

. . . he seems to have good ideas about hospitals, and he spends large sums on useful public objects. He might help me a good deal in carrying out my ideas. As to his religious notions — why, as Voltaire said, incantations will destroy a flock of sheep if administered with a certain quantity of arsenic. I look for the man who will

bring the arsenic, and don't mind about his incantations.  
(Ch. 17, p. 130)

Yet he casts the deciding vote in favor of Bulstrode's candidate for chaplain to the new hospital, even though "his consciousness told him that if he had been quite free from indirect bias he should have voted for Mr. Farebrother" (Ch. 18, p. 139). And his self-questioning comes too late a second time, after he has compromised himself irrevocably by accepting a loan from Bulstrode in the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Raffles:

But if he had not received any money — if Bulstrode had never revoked his cold recommendation of bankruptcy — would he, Lydgate, have abstained from all inquiry even on finding the man dead? — would the shrinking from an insult to Bulstrode — would the dubiousness of all medical treatment and the argument that his own treatment would pass for the wrong with most members of his profession — have had just the same force or significance with him? . . . Alas! the scientific conscience had got into the debasing company of money obligations and selfish respects. (Ch. 73, pp. 541-42)

And as Caleb's paternity of Fred negates the exaltation of money and affirms an ethic concerned only with what is human, so his unequivocal rejection of the post offered him by Bulstrode contrasts with Lydgate's acceptance of the loan.

George Eliot finally acknowledges the importance of the Garths in devoting the last chapter of *Middlemarch* to them (including Fred, now safely married to Mary). There seems little doubt that she conceives of the Garth family as the locus for values essentially those of the Comtian-F Feuerbachian religion of humanity to which she herself subscribes, and that their conception of love, their attitudes toward work and money are meant to be exemplary. In this respect they are part of the familiar Victorian habit of thought, in which "the home as a storehouse of moral and spiritual values was as much an answer to increasing commercialism as to declining religion" (Houghton, p. 348).

The role of the Reverend Farebrother would seem to reinforce the Garths' moral perspicuity. Despite his dubious

habit (before he can gain a decent living) of playing cards for money, Farebrother is the only clergyman in Middlemarch to live up to his pastoral responsibilities; he compassionately tends to his own "womankind," plays moral tutor to Lydgate, as Mary does to Fred, and selflessly encourages the union between these two despite his own personal interest in Mary. If Farebrother's published work, like Fred's and Mary's, is modest enough to merit self-deprecation, it is more substantive than Casaubon's. And the moral awareness which Dorothea finally achieves as the novel closes is comparable to that embodied by the Garths and Farebrother. Her selflessness in the face of what she takes to be an affair between Ladislav and Rosamond, the practical help she affords Lydgate in his financial troubles, and her determination to "learn what everything costs" imply a humbled appreciation on her part for the practical virtues of the Garths' morality.

It seems likely, then, that George Eliot intended us to judge even those characters in *Middlemarch* who are more complex than the Garths by the moral standards this family represents. But the reader of *Middlemarch* is left with the uneasy sense that this morality is too simple and archaic to apply to such complex and modern characters as Dorothea and Lydgate. The Garths belong to the pastoral world of *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*, to the idealized Warwickshire of these novels which is untouched by industrialism and reform, and to the gallery of characters who inhabit that world. In a very real sense George Eliot's art in *Middlemarch* outstrips her moral convictions, for the reader ends up with too much sympathy for Dorothea's and Lydgate's aspirations, and too strong a sense of the complexity of their experience, to feel that their lives, and the recognizably modern society of Middlemarch, can be fairly judged in terms of the pastoral morality embodied in the Garths.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Riverside Press, 1956). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

- <sup>2</sup>Quentin Anderson, "George Eliot in *Middlemarch*," *From Dickens to Hardy* (Volume 6 of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*), 1958; rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp. 317-18.
- <sup>3</sup>Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 344.
- <sup>4</sup>Martin J. Svaglic, "Religion in the Novels of George Eliot," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 1954; rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 286.
- <sup>5</sup>Cited by Jean Lacroix, *La Sociologie d'Auguste Comte* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), p. 85.
- <sup>6</sup>W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 146-47.
- <sup>7</sup>Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), p. 182.
- <sup>8</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1840), p. 58.
- <sup>9</sup>For a discussion of this and other unascribed mottoes in George Eliot, see J. R. Tye, "George Eliot's Unascribed Mottoes," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, III (1967), 235-49. Tye concludes that mottoes whose source is not identified were composed by George Eliot; this particular motto replaced the original one of the MS. version which was an abbreviated form of *Ecclesiasticus* 38: 31-34, but remains clearly inspired by the Biblical passage.
- <sup>10</sup>Livy, *Works*, trans. B. O. Foster (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam, 1926), II, 89-90.