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TRIANGULAR PATTERNS IN MIDDLEMARCH

by David Ball, Essex Institute of Higher Education

There has been no lack of awareness in modern criticism of the complexities and surprises of George Eliot 's careful structuring of Middlemarch, particularly when it is presented in terms of duality. I will quote here only one very representative example, from W.J. Harvey's introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel:

> It is not difficult to discern the pattern of this network (of parallels and contrasts). The contrast between Rosamond and Mary Garth, or between Rosamond and Dorothea; the combined parallel and contrast between the researches of Casaubon and Lydgate (both of them searching for a "key"); the way in which Brooke's butterfly mind and cluttered pigeon-holes become a comic analogue to their scholarly endeavours; the varying and unpredictable results of Casaubon's and Featherstone's wills--these are just a few of the strands in the total web.[1]

But the symmetrical quality of this kind of analysis, whilst undoubtedly elegant, may come to seem too static (whether it is Eliot herself or not who comes to be blamed as excessively schematic). The dialectics of nineteenth century history and sociology are productive, beyond simple duality, of third terms, in which synthesis may be less the resolution of conflict than its extension or evolution. The metaphor of "web" itself, used by both Eliot and Harvey, points beyond duality to a multi-pointed complexity.

Middlemarch begins, for Dorothea, with a triangular relationship, in which her sister, Celia, plays the role of resolving third party to the blocked embarrassment of her rejection of Sir James.

This relatively uncomplicated movement gives place to, and is indeed itself in part shifted by, a three-way tension of much greater importance to the heroine, involving her first in the maturing disillusionment of marriage with Casaubon, and then at last more happily, in the romance and sacrifice of marriage with Ladislaw.

This central triangle, in which Casaubon comes to play an ignoble and ludicrous part as jealous husband, may be offset by a more obscure relationship, in which Farebrother, George Eliot's surprisingly exemplary clergyman, plays a generous, pastoral role of self-effacement in his sustained, heroic encouragement of Fred Vincy to become worthy of Mary.

It is not perhaps surprising to find such three-part patterns in a novel which intends to make at last so full and honest an exploration of marriage. The bourgeois family, spreading out in variety and influence far beyond the bounds of Middlemarch, can be characteristically seen as triangular, from its sublimest manifestation in the Holy Family, to farcical presentations of adulterous lovers and deceived or outraged husbands. Even the mother-in-law of the stand-up comedian can be seen as having a place in this perspective.

George Eliot, in her own life, was fully, even painfully experienced in the triangularity of marriage. In her decisive relationship with Lewes, she was the second, illegitimate wife, opposed by the scandalous legitimacy of Agnes. She was also, in many respects more effectively than Agnes, the mother of George's grown, or growing children.

Her earlier involvement with Chapman had similarly been multi-triangular. His large house in the Strand, in which Marian Evans took a room in November 1850, already contained his wife, two of his children, and their governess, who was also Chapman' s mistress.

It was this mistress who showed herself most fiercely jealous of the newcomer, until it became clear that Chapman and Marian had subordinated whatever tenderer feelings they may have felt for each other to an intellectual collaboration, principally in the editing of the Westminster Review.

To return to Middlemarch, and its central couple, Lydgate and Rosamond--to be alone with Rosamond is Lydgate's dream, or one of them, to be " 'continually together' " he pleads with her, " 'independent of others, and ordering our lives as we will' " (p. 386). Of course, the novel slowly, luxuriantly demonstrates the impossibility of such a naive duality. Lydgate and Rosamond are seldom permitted to be simply Lydgate and Rosamond. There is her father, Mr Vincy, who is a part of their marriage. Lydgate's high-born cousin, the Captain, is an intrusive guest. Their more frequent guest, Will Ladislaw, might have been still more intrusive, but his influence, combined with that of Dorothea, is finally of a more healing, bracing kind.

But Lydgate's own infidelity--how shall we phrase it? Compared with the beauty of science, of a medical vocation, "to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world" (p.178), is not the beauty of Rosamond in the end no more than a parasitic basil plant (flourishing "wonderfully on a murdered man's brains", as he tells her on p.893)? Not Lydgate's reward, but his punishment; not so much his success, as his failure. Naturally Rosamond's views of the triangular claims of an intellectual passion do not rise to the necessary detachment or comprehension.

Within the medical profession itself, as presented to us in the novel, there is a three-way rivalry between Lydgate, Wrench (the apothecary, or country practitioner), and Sprague or Minchin (the physicians). Lydgate is above Wrench socially, professionally, medically, but his life and practice we find to be less well blended. The physicians too feel threatened by Lydgate's scientific innovation and perspicacity, just as they are consoled by the social or moral failure of his entanglement with Bulstrode.

On the political plane, Whig and Tory might seem a straightforward duality, but the eyes of both groups seem turned with a certain detached expectancy towards the crown and central government, which effectively synthesise their differences, in moderating the claims of change. These differences may anyway have been outweighed by similarities, e.g., of education and social class, between the main political protagonists on either side: Brooke, Bulstrode, Hawley, Ladislaw.

Of the three principal country houses about Middlemarch, it is Lowick which is particularly, negatively distinguished from Freshitt and Tipton. The three houses are briefly described at the beginning of chapter 9. Sir James's Freshitt Hall has a certain classical grace, appealing to Celia, whereas Mr Brooke's Tipton Grange is adorned with the statues and pictures which he had brought home from his Italian travels, bewildering to Dorothea. But Mr Casaubon's Lowick Manor appears characterised, to all but Dorothea, as insistently melancholy:

> The building, of greenish stone, was in the old English style, not ugly, but small-windowed and melancholy-looking: the sort of house that must have children, many flowers, open windows, and little vistas of bright things, to make it seem a joyous home. In this latter end of autumn, with a sparse remnant of yellow leaves falling slowly athwart the dark evergreens in a stillness without sunshine, the house too had an air of autumnal decline, and Mr Casaubon, when he presented himself, had no bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background. (pp.98-9)

The children, flowers, and open windows are an absent, indeed unplaceable third term (of life, or liberation, or fecundity) in relation to Mr Casaubon and his too fitting

domain, but they will become a part of Dorothea's world in another relationship (Ladislaw makes his first, incongruous appearance in this chapter at Lowick).

George Eliot's conservative morality of the immediate and the concrete, that before doing one's great work for the world, one must first do one's good small work at home, which applies to Lydgate on a tragic plane, applies to Mr Brooke and Tipton Grange on a farcical one. On two occasions Mr Brooke faces a close and discomforting comic image of his own naivety and incompetence. The first is on the occasion of his visit to poor Dagley, his tenant at Freeman's End, in chapter 39, where his public support of the "Rinform" is turned disconcertingly against him: that "'them landlords as never done the right thing by their tenants 'ull be treated i' that way as they'll hev to scuttle off.'" (p.432)

The second rejection of the public-minded Brooke is still more brutal: the almost Dickensian comedy of his election fiasco in chapter 51, where "a diabolical procedure" of caricature and ventriloquism by his Tory opponents forces him to quit.

A species of salvation comes to him and to Tipton in the capability of Caleb Garth, who takes over the management of the Freshitt and Tipton estates, at Sir James's request, in chapter 40, thus following conveniently, hopefully on the benighted insults of Dagley. Caleb's practice of "business" ("the skilful application of labour", p.596) might be considered an intermediate level of activity between the great public work, at which Mr Brooke, and others fail, and the good small work at a domestic level, at which Mary Garth, or Mr Farebrother, for instance, succeed.

There would be no difficulty in continuing to describe triangular patterns in the diversified world of Middlemarch. Such patterns, whether they are shaped directly to the problems of family life or not, may be given in criticism a typically static, symmetrical emphasis, or one rather of dialectical movement and inter-relatedness. There is no limit to our possible contributions (my own here I intend to be a limited one) to the reading and re-reading of so interpreted, and interpretable a work, doubly interpretable, both in its clarity and in its ambiguity. Bulstrode, in his relations particularly with his wife, and with Raffles, his diabolus, might make here a suitable point of conclusion.

Raffles achieves the ruin of Bulstrode at the price of his own destruction. It is after the silence of his death, at such futile cost to Bulstrode, that his words are heard most clearly in Middlemarch, and Bulstrode is called upon to justify himself before his fellows, with a failure as tragic as Mr Brooke's earlier dismissal by his electorate had been ludicrous. But Bulstrode's loss is in part at least his gain. It is not so much that the truth will surely make him a new or better man, as that as he shrinks, his wife grows, advances.

> A movement of new compassion and old tenderness went through her like a great wave, and putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder, she said, solemnly but kindly "Look up, Nicholas." (pp.807-8)

This is a powerful moment in the novel, echoing gestures of tenderness by Dorothea to Casaubon, and anticipating Lydgate's resigned acceptance of the fragile, pitiful burthen of Rosamond (p.858). Such moments concentrate a great deal of what George Eliot had to say on the subject of marriage in Middlemarch: its intimate, necessary duality, its open and moveable triangularity.

Note

[1] Middlemarch Penguin English Library, ed. W.J.Harvey (Harmondsworth, England, 1965), p.12. All subsequent references to Middlemarch are to this edition.