

The Impact of Otherness upon a Lunar Landscape (2003)

Fred Vincy was a likeable young man. He came from a comfortable home, his father being a prosperous manufacturer and mayor of the English town of Middlemarch (the fictitious location of George Eliot's novel of that name). But Fred was also irresponsible. He paid little attention to his college studies and had failed several exams. His real interests were horse racing and Mary (a childhood sweetheart, the daughter of the less well off family of Caleb Garth). In neither pursuit was he successful, because his gambling left him one hundred and sixty pounds in debt and Mary refused to marry him so long as he remained aimless.

Regarding his gambling obligation, he could not count on any help from his strict father. So Fred imposed on the kindly Caleb Garth to pledge security for the debt. This won him extra time to pay it off himself, but by the due date all Fred could come up with was fifty pounds - and so he had to shamefully visit the Garth household to remind Caleb of his pledge to provide the balance of one hundred and ten pounds.

The Garth family, of course, was not the kind to shirk its obligations. Despite their close to zero bank balance, they were able to give up ninety two pounds they had set aside for their son's apprentice training and Mary chipped in the other eighteen from her meager earnings. As for Fred, he was very apologetic. He kept saying things like: "I tried everything - I really did; I'm afraid you will have a bad opinion of me; you will always think me a rascal; I am so miserable; Can you ever forgive me?" Mary didn't put up with this whining for long. In effect she said, "What does it matter whether I forgive you? Would that make our now impoverished family situation any better?"

In this episode George Eliot wants to show how egocentric Fred was. He's not so much concerned about his impact on the Garth family as he is about his own image, the poor opinion people will have of him. Eliot then goes on to note how so many of us are brought up that way. We're educated to avoid wrongdoing not so much because it may hurt others but because we'll look bad or be punished or run the risk of "losing my soul" or because it will backfire on us or embarrass our family. It's that kind of narcissistic morality or piety that Jesus essentially opposes in this month's Gospel readings.

For example, applying them to myself, it dawns on me that Jesus would liberate me from my incarceration in a universe inhabited by myself alone. And first of all he would entice me simply to notice other people, to take in their features, become aware of them as something other than the supporting cast of my own stellar status.

He would then entice me to become curious about them, to note their particular qualities; to look for traces of the Holy Spirit; to pause and take them in as I might pause upon one of my walks to focus (if only for a couple of minutes) upon the fragile beauty of this wildflower or that. Finally he would educate me to sense their joy, rejoice in their gifts, feel their pain, awake to their needs - in other words, to identify with others; to care about them and the world around me even as I care about myself.

According to Jesus, only by thus leaving the lunar landscape of my narcissistic self will I ever come to discover my true self - the me that is merciful even as my heavenly Father is merciful; the me that is therefore finally alive.