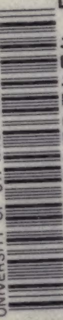
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GEORGE MEREDITH

A STUDY OF HIS WORKS AND PERSONALITY

BY

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PREFACE

NINE years have passed since George Meredith was united again to Earth, the subject and the inspirer of so many of his finest pages, and it seems worth while to essay a considered judgment of his contribution to literature. The present writer has walked all round his subject and taken a Meredithian elevation from different points of view. He must now leave it to others to decide whether his judgments are correct.

To live in and with Meredith, to read and reread the eighteen or so volumes of four to five hundred pages that he has left us, is an ordeal as well as an experience, a discipline as well as a delight. It may result in the student's being swept into the Meredithian orbit to revolve as an obedient satellite around a more powerful luminary. One may be ever miscarrying with abortive epigram. Yet a conclusion safely on this side of moderation would be, first that the art of novel-writing is an art which even in the hands of but a middling practitioner demands more respect than is always accorded it, and secondly, that Meredith himself, in his combination of most vigorous intellect with fervent

poetry and all the normal qualities of the novelist, in his creation of what is almost a new literary form—that of the didactic prose epos, the philosophy of history applied to life and its problems—is an unparalleled and wondrous phenomenon, one of those rarely appearing giants of speech and thought whose kinship in tenseness of intellectual life and myriad-mindedness win them the epithet Shakespearean.

With Meredith we climb to the Andes of the intellect, and the vastness of the prospect, the radiance of the sun illumining so many different intellectual kingdoms, atones for the touch of frost in the air. But the thin aether is a trial for weak hearts and lungs. Not all can scale these heights, still fewer can abide on these lone tablelands of intellect. Yet the hardened mountaineer will win full many a thrill of sudden discovery such as he can never gain in softer climes.

One must scale these ascents by oneself. Yet a word of recognition and of thanks is due to those who have climbed these altitudes before us. Mr. Trevelyan's handbook on Meredith's poems is of great service in one's earlier steps, and his fine essay in *Clio a Muse* is the more mature work of a critic who can now give free, easy, and delightful expression to his mellowed judgment. Dr. Verrall's brilliant essay, the work of a scholar whose gifts of heart and intellect would have made him a worthy comrade of any of Meredith's great intellectuals, does

full justice to the master's wit so well defined as "manipulation of meanings," though the friendly controversy waged by Mr. Trevelyan with him as to the difference between poetry and wit seems to dissolve into verbal legerdemain. Mrs. Sturge Henderson has made a painstaking study of the various novels. Mr. Clodd's *Recollections* would seem to contain many interesting things,[1] and Mr. le Gallienne's enthusiastic essay should not be neglected. Yet probably everyone who journeys through Meredith will prefer to tell his own story for himself, and to each his own experience will seem the thing of highest value. Here no *catalogue raisonné* of Meredith's novels and poetry will be attempted, but rather a study of the different elements in his personality which contributed to his greatness.

With Meredith a writer's difficulty is not lack of matter. The vein is rich; one quarries and quarries. One admires at first his cleverness, then his poetic ecstasy, lastly his noble soul. It was his poetry, he told Mr. Clodd, that he valued most, yet perhaps a study of his genius must take account chiefly of that to which his most strenuous efforts were devoted, his novels, and moreover his poetic power can be triumphantly demonstrated best in some of his novels. They treat of life's problems not with too rosy a view, but they stand far apart

[1] I have not seen the book. Two references taken from it are gleaned from a review.

from the novels of the stews, or the poetry of the overripe. It was his aim to treat life philosophically, to study character more minutely than before, to make the novel an aid to the art of living as well as an intellectual recreation.

How far does he rise to his own ideal? It would be needful to review each novel to answer fully. Not all have reached an equal height. Art abides constant but inspiration comes and goes, and few masters are always at their greatest. *The Egoist* is the Meredithian type supreme and unsurpassable, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is tenser, a rare example of the tragic, *Evan Harrington* is the finest example of the extravaganza, *Beauchamp's Career* stands not unworthily near *The Ordeal*, *One of Our Conquerors* is crammed so full of rich fare as to be difficult to queasy stomachs, *The Shaving of Shagpat* is an astonishing feat of virtuosity in style, *The Tragic Comedians* is a masterpiece of subtle psychology and impetuous narrative. And if we cease to enumerate we feel that it is unjust to slight the others, and then that much more than a passing word is due to the poems which—even the most abstruse—grow in force and meaning as we return to them. It is indeed an embarrassment of riches. Truly here is God's plenty.

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GEORGE MEREDITH

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

"Lo! of hundreds who aspire
Eighties perish—nineties tire;
They who bear up in spite of wrecks and wracks,
Were seasoned by Celestial hail of thwacks.

"Fortune in this mortal race
Builds on thwackings for its base;
Thus the All-wise doth make a flail a staff
And separates His heavenly corn from chaff."

So sang Meredith of the history of the reformer. His progress is encompassed by thwackings; thwackings are the milestones which mark his path, the rewards which celebrate his achievements. And such too often is the career of a writer of original force, who must educate the world before he can delight it, for in the realm of mind it is as hard as elsewhere to make the best of both worlds. Some great writers have won immediate immortality by limning once and for ever the age in which they lived, by recording legibly that all may read the ideas and aspirations of the present, elevated and

transfigured by that one touch of genius which makes all ages kin, changing the contemporary into the eternal. Others, perhaps of equal genius, but of less felicity, pioneers, harbingers of an age they never saw, have incurred a painfuller immortality, widening the bounds of men's thought, purging it of imperfections, bestowing on the world lasting delight and permanent profit for a daily wage of disesteem or contumely, toiling at a task which offered them the martyr's crown before the laurel wreath. Aeschylus, happy in the opportuneness of his birth, portrayed the Athens of the Persian War and the men of Marathon, *Μαραθωνομάχαι*, with their simple piety and homely heroism, even at the moment of the passing of that golden age; while Euripides, deeming no myth sacred, putting every view, however time-honoured, under the microscope, gained the jeers of Aristophanes and the mockery of the groundlings whose sons and successive posterity were to swear by him as the only tragic poet. The idol of the future is the Aunt Sally of the present. The pioneer of intellect ploughs a lonely furrow. He is assailed by invective, beset by contumely, the butt of ridicule, the San Sebastian of the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism. He is depressed by disregard, chilled by the icy waters of contempt, haunted by the dread of beggary, the recompense of stoutness of conviction. He has the bitter epithet of bungler hurled at him by far inferior rivals while his conscience forbids

the winning of an easy victory with their own weapons. And when detraction recites its palinode, his sole compensation is to reply (from the Elysian Fields) "I told you so." Music, better perhaps than any other art, affords examples of the trials and privations of genius born before its time. But literary greatness, too, follows a course directly opposite to worldly greatness. It passes from contempt to canonisation, from insulting disregard to the dubious honours of the cult. But yesterday none was so poor to do our genius reverence, to-day a miracle has come to pass and he awakens famous. We still stone our prophets and build them sumptuous memorials after. "Tantae molis erat," such a tribulation is it to inaugurate a new era.

Our aim is to portray the personality and to appraise the performance of such a harbinger of this latest age. Privation and dire poverty seem not to have fallen to his lot, and the breeze-swept châlet of Boxhill was a far happier habitation than the attics of Grub Street. Yet Meredith's path through life was painful enough to colour his views and to trammel his activities. Experience taught him to endure criticism with indifferent mildness, to submit to approbation with ironic patience. Enthusiasm for his work evoked good-humoured insouciance or amused surprise. Time doubtless brings with it callousness and genius grows accustomed to neglect. But that one who at thirty-one had given *Richard Feverel* to the world should win scant

honour before sixty is neither natural nor normal, and unheeding apathy, so much more dire a tribulation than the bitterest ridicule, must have chilled a man of Meredith's keen sensibility. It is *not* true that it made no difference to Meredith whether the world regarded him as a prophet or not. The scant success of his novels, the complete failure of his poems, had the inevitable financial results. Instead of writing poetry as he desired, Meredith must needs write "potboilers," which he detested; instead of writing great novels, he must, to win his daily bread, peruse bad grammar and sorry fiction for Messrs. Chapman & Hall, Apollo day-labourer to Admetus.

Yet painful as neglect must be to genius, neglect neither soured the sweetness of Meredith's disposition nor narrowed his range of interests. A man of great physical vigour, he delighted to excess in violent exercise. He flung himself with the keenest zest into numerous sports; his was a pedestrian Muse. He combined two characteristics, different if not contrary: he was a good Hampshire man but he was also a good European. The visionary ardour of the Celt flamed in an intellect of super-subtle keenness; he united with a romantic sympathy for nature an all-pervading irony, and a rare mastery of words. Rarely has one seen a more many-sided personality, rarely has there arisen a man of letters who came so close to nature. The felicitous union of these qualities was the

secret of his greatness. Passion and intellect were loyal yoke-fellows, fervour and reason hounds that ran in the leash together. This marriage of heart and brain marks a new epoch in the realm of novel-writing, pregnant with striking consequences.

Man is an animal that laughs. He may with equal truth be termed an animal that narrates. The saga instinct is one of the earliest symptoms of a germinating civilisation. As soon as man begins to tell tales, he has begun to free himself from the bondage of the actual, from the grossest physical necessities, from the tyranny of the struggle for existence. For however brief an interval he enjoys the delight of the artist in shaping facts, in bringing the world under his own dominion. The saga is the first link in the long chain which will reach to the Republic of Plato, that ideal system which is to educe cosmos out of chaos, to order the whole world.

There is plastic force latent in the saga, however spontaneous it may seem. Whichever camp of scholars claims us, for all its divine freshness of the morning dew, " Homer "—we must admit it—is the product of many nimble minds shaping and reshaping for centuries a legend which was ever being fashioned anew. It has grown rather with the silent yet unceasing processes of a living organism than by conscious ordered design. It seems at first artless enough, a tale devoid of *arrière-pensée,* a pageant of blithe scenes o'erbrimming with

the joy of life, but over all there looms the figure of War, bane of mortals, woeful and piteous, and the scene in which Priam endures to do that which none had brooked before him, and prays for Hector's corpse of Hector's slayer, contains much "criticism of life" implicit. No man indeed, child of whatever age, who tells a tale with any art at all, can fail to betray his thoughts on human life. The view may be implied or explicit, simple and naïf rather than profound and conscious, but view it is.

The novel is our modern epic. The story-telling instinct has at length—one knows not why—found a divorce from verse. Man's impulse to narrate is perennial, and to that extent the modern novel, with all its crudities, its falseness of sentiment, its distortion of view, is a more genuine growth than more pretentious literary forms. Its function is primarily and primitively to minister to the desire of the imagination to range far and wide with fancy free, banishing for a while all that cramps and confines it within the prisoning fetters of the daily round, to idealise the present and to make the real romantic, to give an individual touch to themes of world-wide interest. The mind is a thing which cannot work when severed from the body which confines it. So, too, the novel is a thing which cannot function without its framework of fact. A novel which is not a story is not a novel, but a treatise, a homily, or a vast essay.

Obviously, then, one dichotomy of the novel might be the technique of narrative and philosophy. The novelist must tell his story clearly and directly, he must make proper arrangements for the development of character, he must give his story a suitable beginning, a regular logical course, and a neat conclusion, he may enlighten it with wit, suffuse it with humour, embellish it—but sparingly—with digressions. Such is the technique of the novel, and though wit and humour are a rare equipment, the modern novelist has shown that in many respects he is well armed with the lower accomplishments of his craft, and that though the great artists are few, the good workmen are many. There are some perhaps who would almost restrict the novelist to these prosaic tasks. But literature is more than craftsmanship. Some great writers may have been engrossed rather in technical problems and the methods by which new difficulties may be overcome to the neglect of the great questions of life which demand not solution but pondering upon. They have merited the reward of those who have served art well; yet the world will with reason always love to linger beside the great man who meditates aloud or chats engagingly with his readers upon things in general rather than to con the cunning artificer who is prepared to cut up human things into so many lengths of cloth.

The narrative element, which, as we have said,

is the fundamental of a novel, naturally predominates in the history of a Tom Jones, or a Jonathan Wild, or a Peregrine Pickle. But as early as Fielding men had learnt to digress, to discuss their hero, and to moralise upon the world at large. The novel was loosely knit, and the leaning towards the picaresque accentuated the tendency to produce books whose sole unity consisted in their being the record of the successive adventures of a single hero. The tendency to concentrate, to exercise a more rigorous control, to *organise* the novel, has much developed, but it developed slowly. It needs, in fact, a more scientific mind and a more orderly temperament than the Bohemians of Grub Street could have attained, or an earlier century than the nineteenth could have fostered.

The contrast between the repute of the novel to-day and its status one hundred years ago is marvellous. Novels were held in contempt, deemed the fit pabulum only of weak intellects. To read novels, it was declared with justice, was a pursuit which gave one a distaste for more serious studies. Though novels may still have the defects of one century ago, the critic cannot, if he would, ignore the achievements of our modern novelists, In the opinion of one good judge, Professor Saintsbury, between the years 1840–1900 more was achieved in the novel form by writers who adopted that form than was achieved in any other prose form in any literature. The novelist is now not

merely a skilled narratôr whose art serves to beguile a weary hour. He is an earnest votary of the highest of all studies, a hierophant of humanity; like a great dramatist he holds the mirror up to life, he has the dramatic faculty with the necessary modifications, he not only transcribes, he improves upon nature, and all that he tells us is coloured consciously or unconsciously by his point of view. His greatest equipment is his own personality, and even his mastery over words and his constructive skill are not more important. An eminent living novelist[1] justly maintains that the novel has to-day no rival in the transmitting of the impassioned vision of life. Among the items of equipment are a sense of beauty—for the novelist is charmed and seduced by what he writes—and a passionate intensity of vision. Every fine emotion inspired in the reader must have been previously felt by the writer *in a far greater degree.* Nor is this all. The novelist must have fineness of mind. His mind must be "sympathetic, quickly responsive, courageous, honest, humorous, tender, just, merciful, permeated and controlled by common sense." His mind must have the quality of being noble. It is a formidable catalogue of qualities. Yet it is certain that without these qualities a really great novel cannot come into existence, and that in the short list of writers who possess such gifts George Meredith will take his stand unchallenged.

[1] Mr. Arnold Bennett.

Poetry has been defined as criticism of life. The definition will suit the great novel even better. Beside and beyond all Meredith's interest in his characters, his working out of an elaborate intrigue, his brilliancy of expression, we find an eager, unsleeping observation of the world of man, an incessant sensitiveness to all that can react upon the writer in life's vast variety of interests. Meredith drives a coach richly adorned and heavily laden, but he moves to a definite though distant goal. To change the metaphor, a Meredithian novel is a rich banquet, set by the author for his guests, in which the variety of meats is bewildering, leading sometimes to dyspepsia. A banquet it is in truth, a symposium, in which all personages contribute either by word or deed their view of certain definite problems, a gathering which evokes the complaint, if there be complaint at all, that the fare is too sumptuous rather than too meagre. For with Meredith the critical, analytic faculty is always at work. Criticism of life provokes always further criticism. Dickens criticised life and was called a radical, Thackeray criticised life and was branded as a cynic, Meredith in his turn is dubbed by those without the pale an intellectual whose work is caviare to the general. But there is one solid result. The novel, once a mere anodyne to dull the sense of pain at "times so out of joint," or a narcotic whose kindly stupefaction delivers us from the malady of thought, is, or can be, a great

branch of literature, as weighty as the *Decline and Fall*, as profound and eloquent as the *Republic*, as impassioned as *Romeo and Juliet.*

What we may call the philosophising tendency, implicit doubtless from the beginning, remains in embryo until the nineteenth century. The vogue of the historical novel did much to aid this tendency. The true historical novelist feels himself obliged more frequently than others to expound and interpret, and the works of Scott are obviously addressed to a constituency which appreciates the compliment of being taken seriously and which is well content to pause from time to time while the historical background is explained. The passage of philosophy from historical romance to plain unadulterate fiction is easy. We next find Thackeray delighting for a brief interval to leave his puppets, as he calls them, to chat to his readers with that delightful ease, that mellowed wisdom, that clear perception of life's irony which is the hardest-won crown of the artist in human life. The showman, as he calls himself, moralises, incorrigibly sentimental, upon the whimsies of mortality. His creations are not exactly types—they are too intimately known to him for that—but his reflections are bound to develop into generalisations. And with his successors the delineation of character becomes profoundly modified. So far we have been inclined to look at life upon the surface, or at any rate chiefly to describe the histories of not very

profound personalities. But now we must probe deeper. The science of psychology has been initiated, and initiated rather by men of letters than by the man of science. In proportion as men grow sophisticated, the analyst of mental processes becomes more subtle. The novel is no more the novel of incident but the novel of character, true though it may be that no novel can consist exclusively of character or of incident but must comprise the two. We pierce the depths of the human mind with our scalpel, we put its subtlest parts beneath our microscope. The art of the novelist has suffered a change similar to that experienced by the art of the musician, which in little more than a century has made the transition from Glück and Handel to Brahms and Wagner. We are learned, almost academic. The Alexandrine age has come.

In this passage from the simple to the supersubtle, from the depiction of the most ordinary types to the delineation by a thousand touches of the most finished products of a most artificial society, the culminating figure is George Meredith. The transition from Fielding to Meredith, the extreme points in our line of masters, is one which can be easily traced despite occasional breaks and even chasms. At the end philosophy, not the mere telling of a tale, must now predominate. Life is no more a gay raree-show, a kaleidoscope of many-coloured hues, a vivid panorama. It may be all

this, but philosophy has now annexed the novel too. The novelist, like the philosopher, must now declare that the untested life is not worth living. He sets out to expound the science of human life in many volumes, and if the science of human life is the apex of all sciences, the novelist is suddenly hoisted to the topmost place in the literary hierarchy.

Such is the new conception of the novel first clearly conceived and explicitly enunciated by Meredith himself. *Diana of the Crossways* contains the *locus classicus*. The art of the novelist has not yet attained its majority, being neither blushless infant nor executive man. We must—oh! shades of Smollett and of Sterne—attain a theory of life, penetrate to life's core, and rose-pink and dirty drab shall pass away. Our insight must be unerring, unplagued by the distortions of sentimentalism, that refusal to see facts as they are, the arch-enemy of all progress and of true knowledge. We must advance towards this goal, with a giant's stride if we can, a century a day. "Peruse your Realists," learn even from them. "Be wary of the disrelish of brainstuff. The brainstuff of fiction is internal history, and to suppose it dull is the profoundest of errors." The example only is needed and our paladin is content doubtless to set it, ready if need be to have a dozen for audience as a beginning. "History without Philosophy is the skeleton map of events, Fiction a picture of figures modelled on no skeleton anatomy."

Such was Meredith's manifesto to the world. He wrote content with little more than his specified dozen for audience, satisfied if only the enlightened, the intellectual, would give him an occasional round of applause. The first chapter of *Diana,* written when he was verging towards threescore, only summarises in vivid language those principles which he laid down for himself in early years, and which he followed, despite abuse, neglect, and contumely, until on the threshold of old age the world at length found that it had been harbouring an extraordinary genius unawares.

. . . . . .

"Be wary of the disrelish of brainstuff." It is a phrase to mark a new epoch, it is the sign of the advent of the intellectual as novelist, it heralds an age in which science is to be literary, and literature scientific. The stuff of literature is the whole of human life, the fittest object of cognition. It is a difficult task, the ordering of human life, the interpretation as well as the amassment of a vast multitude of particulars, the synthesis at a white heat of science and imagination. And, strangest of all, the man whose vision can pierce deepest into the penetralia of human nature is not the scientist with all his apparatus and ingenious technique, nor even the professed philosopher with all his subtlety of analysis, but the great literary artist who comprises within his larger nature both scientist and philosopher, and subconsciously, by

mere intuition, arrives at judgments and gains glimpses of reality which scientist and philosopher can only seize upon, study, and laboriously justify. Dryasdust has not enthroned himself in the art of human life as he has in the art of making history. He recognises, it may be, his limitations, and prefers to transcribe, or even annotate, a mediaeval charter. We have to learn that those who seek profound acquaintance with man and his psychology must seek it in the pages of our greatest writers, in the *Iliad*, *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, *The Divine Comedy*, or *Don Quixote*. The insight of the genius of the past shone out in flashes ; the genius of the future will have more system, he will make many more discoveries, he will indeed be always making fresh discoveries. He will husband his gains, too precious to be flung away in prodigal profusion ; he will attempt himself a science of human life, or at least enunciate some of its principles ; he will be always and consciously psychologising. He will write novels with a purpose, but his purpose is to demonstrate human life in action ; he aims to make the novel the highest, truest form of life. He will demand the mental energy, the universal range of a Shakespeare, the powerful reasoning and ordered science of a Newton, the philosophic breadth and artistry of a Plato, the soaring rapturous enthusiasm of a Shelley. That it is possible to catalogue thus the qualities which the novelist of Meredith's vision will need without rendering Meredith himself

entirely ridiculous is no slight evidence of the success with which he met the exacting claims made upon him by his exalted conception of the novel's range.

It is a wondrous mind that we shall find portrayed for us when we come to an examination of the Meredithian novels, a mind fertile, teeming in metaphor beyond most writers, over-brimming with imagery, learning, brilliant phrase, and lyric ecstasy. It is not a Protean mind like Shakespeare's, for in the kingdom of Meredith all things must be subjected, all things must be moulded and fashioned before they become Meredithian creations. Those who were privileged to enjoy his converse tell us that it was rich in the same qualities which are so noteworthy in the novels, notable in its wit and humour, lambent with a gentle satire, marked in its broad manysidedness by keen interest in contemporary topics and a glowing hope in the progress of the future. But yet he is depicted for us better in his books than by the best of Boswells. No man ever attained a more perfect unity of thought and deed, a completer consistency of theory and practice. His life, at least his spiritual life, is recorded for us, clearly and lucidly, in his eighteen volumes:

> "quo fit, ut omnis
> votiva pateat veluti descripta tabella
> vita senis."

CHAPTER II

THE COMIC SPIRIT—THE SENTIMENTALIST

I. The Comic Spirit

We crudely divide life into tragedy and comedy, though we are nearly always conscious that life is too large for cross-section views, that most lives partake of both tragedy and comedy, and that tragedy and comedy, comedy and tragedy are blended in rich variety. Most great writers, however, group themselves under the banners of either Democritus or Heracleitus. Our own author, though the writer of *Rhoda Fleming* could never be described as lacking in seriousness of view, loves irony far more than tragedy. He is fascinated by that wondrous incongruity which marks the deeds of men, he archly smiles at the pranks of Willoughby or the high strategy of the Poles, and leaves others as a rule to delineate the mournful destinies of such as Richard Feverel or Dahlia Fleming. He is ever communing with the Comic Spirit; like an angel aloft he marks the impish tricks of those with whom he chiefly deals, the highly sophisticated types of a mannered age. He is not the humorist, for there is nothing whimsical or odd about him;

he has too clear a sense of logic. He is not an exemplar of Laughter holding both his sides, for he holds in some contempt the boisterous energy of those who would assault his sense of the discordant, and he insists on subtler methods. He is just a supramundane spirit with the clearest insight and a real though detached sympathy, who grows to tolerate the fool by describing him, whose features just yield in a faint smile, who is rarely perturbed, never lacking in charity, who pins his victims like butterflies on a card, but does not belabour them with his horsewhip like a furious farmer. He will not harrow us; he simply teaches us what we are, believing that there is man's best punishment and fittest corrective.

Comedy, then, is something which with a keen sense of the incongruous wages truceless war against the unreal masquerading as the true, against pretence in the guise of reality, against the cowardice which refuses to look life in the face. These different phases of one great defect of human nature Meredith groups under the one head, Sentimentalism. To this he gives no quarter; against this, as he confesses in his letters, he has an invincible prejudice. He loves the youth ardent and courageous who has the courage of his convictions, the fair maiden gifted with a woman's finest charm who refuses to base her dominion on sex or superficiality, not content in matters of the mind to be man's obedient slave. For such as these he has tender-

ness and sympathy in failure or in error, but for those who have raised the banner of sentimentalism in any way he vows implacable hostility. Vittoria is unformed, immature, a bundle of impulses rather than a mature woman, but even in her crudity she is a nobler creature than the three Misses Pole with their make-believe, their imposture, their blinking at the truth. Willoughby is doubtless a gallant gentleman who rules a county and a country-house, a princely person of great address, of fine presence, who in short "has a leg," but it is Willoughby whom the imps of comedy incessantly torment, and it is Vernon Whitford, "Phœbus Apollo turned fasting friar," who wins the heart of Clara Middleton.

A true instinct urged Meredith to devote himself to comedy. His conception of life accords in the main with the dictum of Socrates that "no one willingly errs," that it is lack of intelligence, *ἀμαθία*, which causes more than half the troubles which afflict the world. One cannot rage furiously against those who are not as wise as we; one can only smile gently at their failings, or even laugh heartily, diverted to the top of one's bent. Thus though *The Ordeal* reaches a true tragic pitch, though *The Tragic Comedians* ends in utter downfall, Meredith as a rule is satisfied if his characters—all who deserve it—attain after thrilling adventures and hairbreadth escapes peaceful deliverance from the imps of comedy. He leads them many a dance.

Many of his comedies—*Evan Harrington*, for instance—are extravaganzas whose drollery forbids the question whether mirth has not banished verisimilitude. Meredith is the novelist of the young. He loves to take a character unformed, expose it to the whirligig of fortune, trace the gradual development of the heroic in a hero, and dismiss him with his benediction. He has not quite the same range of emotion as other novelists, but within the circle which he has drawn for himself he is supreme.

If there had been any doubt as to Meredith's conception of the true aim of the novel, his *Essay on Comedy* would have dissipated it. Theorist and practician combine felicitously in Meredith, who has distilled his philosophy into this brilliant analysis of the Comic Spirit, the most lucid exposition of the scope and function of Comedy from the Meredithian point of view. The Comic Spirit ever held Meredith, and with him it annexes the English novel. We must first define it by negatives. It is not the farcical, nor the humorous, nor the rollicking, things often confused with it. It is based upon the finest perception of the incongruous, it requires a most subtle delicacy, it flourishes rarely and only in a society of cultivated men and women. Those who do not skim the cream of life, who are attached to the duties, yet escape the harsher blows, make acute and balanced observers. The Comic Muse is one of woman's

best friends, and flowers best in a state of society where men and women can meet equally and freely. "Where the veil is over woman's face, as in the East, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous, and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst." The fool is Comedy's true mark. "Folly is the natural prey of the Comic, and it is with the springing delight of hawk over heron, hound over fox, that it gives her chase, never fretting, never tiring, sure of having her, allowing her no rest." The Comic Muse has too rarely flowered. In England we have been agelasts or hypergelasts, Puritans or Bacchanalians. And yet no country needs the Comic Muse more, or would reap greater benefits from it. "Prosers would be cut short in the street and left blinking, dumb as pillar posts." The strength of the Comic Muse is no doubt its weakness also. It appeals to the intellect, its laughter is impersonal; its test is that it awakens thoughtful laughter. It "sits above the world humanely malign, and casts an oblique light on the objects of its consideration followed by volleys of silvery laughter." Class distinctions are doubtful and changeful, but here is one aristocracy that has sharp lines of demarcation, an aristocracy of perceptions. "Not to have the Comic Spirit is to be bull blind to the spiritual, to have it is to have a high fellowship. Look there for your unchallengeable upper class."

An aristocracy no doubt, but an aristocracy

which will require all its wealth of intellect to counter-balance its weakness in numbers. The votaries of the Comic Spirit are like the *σοφοὶ* of Euripides, the inner circle of the initiated. Yet it is superhuman rather than inhuman, for it is truly said, "Estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less." And the prophet of this narrow aristocracy combines his delight in the hunt of Folly with a strain of ardent poetry.[1] It is a perpetual antithesis, a contradiction which we joyfully accept.

In any case the Essay puts us at once in possession of Meredith's standpoint, and his novels are only a more copious exposition of his views. He appeals to us not by boisterous joviality or mechanical puns, but by a subtle perception of contrasts, by an exquisite sense of the irony of things. It is a reflection of the terrestrial in one who dwells in a higher sphere, noting and recording with a smile of perfect kindliness the follies of an inferior race, noting them for a race of superterrestrials, his kinsmen in the Comic Spirit. It is not the jolly pastime of those who eat roast beef and drink beer; it is the diversion of those in whom the spiritual prevails over the grossly sensual, whose veins are filled with ichor, and whose food is ambrosia.

[1] Meredith himself is emphatic upon this point, and sees even in Comus a "mild moon's ray" of the Comic Spirit.

II. The Sentimentalist

Even the greatest soul has its own *bête noire*. "If I did not take sentimentalists for objects of study, they would enrage me past any tolerance. The Tempter of Mankind never has such a grin as when he sees them mix the true and the false." It is an age when the sentimentalist is abroad. Fine shades and nice feelings are to be found everywhere in a time of artificial civilisation, and they give our philosophical novelists the easiest of targets, being "the product of a fat soil, that mental attitude which despises gold the child of gold." In *Sandra Belloni* we have an elaborate study of the sentimental trinity, Arabella, Cornelia, and Adela Pole, or as the irreverent called them, Pole, Polony, and Maypole.

They are sketched by a master-hand with gentle but deadly satire. But the satire is the philosopher's *κάθαρσις*. "Man is the laughing animal, and at the end of an infinite search the philosopher finds himself clinging to laughter as the best of human fruit, purely human, and sane and comforting." The Poles are emotional snobs. They are highly cultivated, too highly cultivated for a rough world, and they find the crudities of their nearest rivals, the Tinleys, almost as distressing as the aitchlessness of their parent. They desire to play the Lady Bountiful in their social realm, to be the arbiters of elegance within a radius of ten

miles; they soar in imagination not to coronets—for marriage is still a distasteful far-off contingency—but to the social prestige of coronets; they are, shocked though they would be to hear it, sublimated presentations of Mrs. Leo Hunter. In their campaign they make great progress, though they are retarded by a bibulous Irish grocer's widow named Mrs. Chump, who brings them back to *terra firma* at once. Mrs. Chump, blind to the fine shades, a flouter of the delicate feelings, was once the inamorata of Mr. Pole, over whom she still has some mysterious hold, and when she installs herself at Brookfield she drinks champagne with her unhappy host till he is distracted.

Still another contrast is found in Emilia Belloni, a girl with a wonderful voice who is too near to Nature to be romantic or sentimentalist. She combines rich contralto notes with a sometimes untied bootlace; she sings in a wood by night, but only because her landlady objects to music indoors; she has a most wonderful father who is an irritable violinist and sometimes throws potatoes at his wife and daughter. She soon wins the admiration of Cornet Wilfrid Pole, another sentimentalist who rides the hippogriff, "one of those who travel to Love by the road of sentiment" and go on "accumulating images and hiving sensations till such time as (if the stuff be in them) they assume a form of vitality, and hurry them headlong." In a word, Wilfrid is one of Meredith's impressionable young

men who flutter from flower to flower in a chaos of conflicting sentiment. The novel, stiffer and less spontaneous than other of Meredith's novels, develops in interesting fashion this conflict between sentiment and reality, between those who are based on solid realities like Emilia, even on things of the earth earthy such as potatoes (the poor child's usual diet in hard times), and those who would ignore such vile things. Wilfrid well symbolised these last when in headlong pursuit of his lady-love he rushed full tilt against a potboy, became nothing but an exhalation of beer, and strove to remove the traces of his calamity by copious application of Alderman's Bouquet, "setting a perfume to contend with a stench, instead of waiting for time, change of raiment, and the broad lusty airs of heaven to blow him fresh again." The moral is drawn delightfully, for the philosopher is usually tender in his treatment, as is proper. "For if sentiment which spurns gold is the child of gold, so the fantastic philosopher who anatomises Sentiment could not exist without Sentiment, wherefore let him be kindly-cruel."

Deep feeling and "sentiment," things so alike to those who deal only in the superficial, are deadliest enemies. The former feels, feels to its inmost fibres, but it is slow to indulge in the luxury of melancholy or in sensuous reverie, it is shy of demonstrations, and will not wear its heart upon its sleeve. It is a real thing, based upon realities,

with a clear vision of the real. Sentimentalism is a sham, masquerading as a lover of glorious emotions, yielding to them, passing no farther, wilfully blind to unpleasant reality, hiding, like Wilfrid Pole, a stench beneath a perfume. Its votaries float upon the void like Icarus, and do not know that their wings of wax will melt at the first heat. Despite its imperfections, its stiffness, its longueurs of philosophic disquisition, *Emilia in England* works out not ineffectively the subtly suggested contrast between the laboured futility of the three fair sentimentalists in chief, the coxcombry of Wilfrid mounted on the hippogriff, the despair of Sir Purcell Barrett the dreary organist who could not face the world with a brave front and who is so indistinct of character that we scarcely visualise him, and the eager ardent impulses of Emilia, unformed and immature indeed, but sincere to her inmost soul, and nobly unconventional. The Poles would fain hide their Mrs. Chump, but they struggle in vain, and the party on Besworth Lawn witnesses both their grandest triumph and their startling fall from greatness. They are compelled, in order to save themselves from ruin, to flatter Mrs. Chump, to entreat her, to lie to her—and to drink champagne with her *ad libitum*. Indeed the widow, maudlin, vulgar as she is, is nearer Nature than the nymphs who, perhaps so justly, despise her. The real is here in full cry after sentimentalism, but the elusive quarry scarcely finds its deathblow, even

though the author forgets at times his admonition to be kindly-cruel. For feeling and "sentiment" are truceless foes, and Meredith, gazing at the unholy masquerade, yields to fiercest wrath, and cannot forbear from tearing the simulacrum to tatters if only in a novel.

Sentimentalism, then, is a timorous apprehension of realities, sometimes of realities in the world at large, sometimes in reference to a person's immediate environment. If Comedy indeed "proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us," it cannot fail to deal some of its heaviest blows upon the man who lives in a self-centred world. Of this activity of the Comic Spirit *The Egoist* is the supreme example. Willoughby, as Meredith once declared to a perturbed friend who feared that he was Willoughby, is each one of us. Yet the most perfect examples of the man concentred all in self are to be found in the landed class, for "little princes abound in a land of heaped-up riches" and Comedy deals "with human nature in the drawing-room of civilised men and women where we have no dust of the struggling outer world"; "it is a game played to throw reflections upon social life," and therefore we need a lordly setting such as Patterne Court can give. *The Egoist* is a book of hairbreadth escapes and thrilling evasions not less humorous because the happy ending is within an ace of tragedy.

It is a marvellous exposition of that art which is the opposite of the realistic method, that "conscientious transcription of all the visible and a repetition of all the audible," a method which is mainly accountable for our present "branfulness." *The Egoist* is the *tour de force* of a virtuoso revelling in an ironic fantasia, an amazing pattern of verbal sleight-of-hand, such as only a highly-civilised, perhaps a super-civilised, age could either bring to birth or admire. Incident follows thick upon incident. We are on probability's verge, but we are tolerant and our tolerance is amply rewarded.

The Egoist has a genuine hero, and he is marvellously analysed. A hero indeed he is, the hero of a whole county, its richest landlord and its finest gentleman; worshipped with incense and oblation since his youngest days. The whole county awaits his marriage choice with awe and much patience, it venerates, though a mutinous section has an uncanny penetration into his faults. Willoughby has in outward seeming all the virtues and all the gifts of Fortune, splendid health, courtliness, an apt turn of phrase, a fine figure, quickness of perception. In fact "he has a leg," though we need not follow the author into his two-page disquisition on it. A fine equipment, but alas! he is blind in one eye. He is egocentric, revolved around by the whole world. He must lord it over all with sovranty unquestioned, whether it is his

future wife, his protégé, or rather Vernon's, Crossjay Patterne, or the unhappy Flitch who in a baleful hour of independence left Patterne Court for the great world. Humour him and, as Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson said, you can do anything with him, but every religion has its heretics. There was Constantia Durham, "the racing cutter," who eloped with Harry Oxford in preference, for though it is not given to every man to be a hero to his lady-love, Willoughby insisted on being hero. Why was it then that he seemed to some intolerable, filled others almost with loathing? Minute analysis of his character seems fitting, for it is his own first pastime. He is generous by aim, or perhaps impulse and disposition, as Clara Middleton suggests; he hates deceit; he loves "silver purity, the fruit of the full bloom"; he cannot endure a hostile public opinion, perhaps for this reason eschews politics; he is implacable, it is admitted; but ridiculous, kind Heaven, never! And so the whole novel displays a struggle to keep him in perfect balance, poised on his self-constructed pedestal. Constantia's jilting—dare we use the word?—had been a deadly blow, but a marriage with the adorable Clara would be ample consolation. However, the egoist's course of true love never did run smooth. At first the thought, at length the word, the fateful, ominous, hideous word "twice" reverberates with ghastly echoes down the labyrinths of his mind. Constantia had

forsworn him for another, Clara never shall. Eloquence, pertinacity, crafty hints of maiden jealousy, manœuvres in which all things from fourteen-year-old boys to ninety-year-old port play their part—no artifice is left untried. For the egoist is the father and child of himself. He is so highly civilised that the tiniest suggestion of ridicule is cruellest agony. He has "an appalling fear on behalf of his naked eidolon, the tender infant elf, swaddled in his name before the world. . . . . There the poor little loveable creature ran for any mouth to blow upon, and frostnipped and bruised it cried to him, and he was of no avail." Through such sensitiveness he had refused to live in town, had barred himself in his mansion, encircled by a band of adoring satellites. So too in conversation he sought accordant notes, "that subservient harmony of another instrument desired of musicians when they have done their solo-playing." So too he loved to throw out characterisations of himself in self-defence. He is unpoetical; poetry, as it is proved to demonstration, is of no account. The very intensity of his perceptions debars him from the bays. "Call me a positive mind." Having plumped for science, in this a *rara avis* amongst country gentlemen, "he has escaped the vice of domineering self-sufficiency peculiar to classical men." His egoism has its attractive side. Yield to him, and he is a Prince Charming who loves to be generous; thwart him by accident or deliberately,

and he will "cut" gallant Captain Patterne of the Marines—an act inexplicable to poor Crossjay—will tell Clara of Vernon's unhappy secret marriage, will expel Crossjay without ceremony from the Hall after having nearly ruined him by indulgence. As a Scientist he has early adopted the principles of Eugenism, and that is why he scrutinises Laetitia Dale's complexion so closely, for he has a deep solicitude for his babes yet unborn. He is a complex character to which no delineation much shorter than the actual novel could do justice; but despite that shivering before public opinion which leads to all manner of disguise, he is fathomed—it is strange how clearly—by his train of worshippers.

The Egoist is from one point of view the history of the development of an antipathy. Clara Middleton, a maiden of eighteen, is described by Meredith, the first of a host of adorers, with all his wealth of poetic metaphor as "a Mountain Echo, one who carries youth like a flag," and a dainty rogue in porcelain withal. She has money, health, and beauty, "the triune of perfect starriness which makes all men astronomers." Willoughby is the impassioned lover at first sight. He carries the fortress by storm, and fixes the date of the marriage six months hence. Clara and her father, Dr. Middleton, the great scholar, come to stay at Patterne Hall—and familiarity breeds aversion. In his folly Willoughby reveals all his variety of weaknesses, and apologises for them in the boastful

strain of the true egoist. The maiden hints the possibility of alienation, Willoughby indignantly denies it. The lady's distaste increases, but her father, a rare enthusiast for good wine, has been vanquished by the craft of the self-lover. Patterne Hall contains in its cellars port such as only the connoisseur can appreciate, "wine such as can light up candelabras in the brain, to illuminate all history, and solve the secret of the destiny of man." In a brilliant chapter we behold the scholar overcome by this grand vintage, overcome in metaphor not in fact, for, as he proudly tells us, he can carry three bottles—and his departure is postponed *sine die*. Willoughby meantime is conscious of the danger of the situation, "intuitively a conjurer in self-defence," conscious too that Clara has tried to escape by train to a girl-friend. His dulness of vision into the heart of his enemy was compensated by his agile sensitiveness obscuring but rendering him miraculously active. "He offers his hand again to Laetitia Dale, who refuses him. But Crossjay, locked out of his bedroom owing to his treachery towards Willoughby and snugly ensconced beneath the ottoman, is a hearer, and reveals enough to De Craye, the Irishman, to enable him to disseminate the news. We are now nearing the amazing finale, which hurries on with overpowering gusto. In a scene which seems visualised in the manner of a playwright, we find different personages entering in succession: Lady

Busshe and Lady Culmer, blest pair of vultures who can always scent trouble in the breeze; Mr. Dale the invalid, who stands, as he pathetically complains, between two locked doors; Dr. Middleton, Willoughby, and Vernon,—all grouped upon the boards by an amazing feat of stagecraft. The game of cross-purposes is played to the heart's content. Willoughby, to do him justice, is a great general and has a proleptic mind. Interrogated as to whether he has proposed or not, he looks at Mr. Dale, expressively saying, "There are situations, Mr. Dale, too delicate to be clothed in positive definitions." Lady Busshe is dealt with on the principle that a nod is as good as a wink to a Lady Busshe, and so the complication draws to its *dénouement*, the faithful lover is rewarded, and Vernon wins Clara. "Sitting beside the lovers, the Comic Muse is grave and sisterly. But taking a glance at the others of her late company, she compresses her lips." It is a proper note to end on, for the brilliance of Meredith is never devoid of feeling, and Meredith with all his intellect has a knightly devotion for damsels in distress which does not fail to show itself in time of need. Yet it is the analysis of character by an infinity of subtle touches that gives *The Egoist* its unique place in literature. It is the perfect example of Meredith's view of Comedy carried to a conclusion which, in its intricacy yet complete triumph, has all the beauty of a consummate chess ending

or a problem of the higher mathematics. The fine shades and delicate feelings were never more convincingly portrayed. "It is the finest essence of comedy—the ballast being reducible to moisture by a patent process—the laughter of reason refreshed"—a deed of the mind which will be a joy for ever.

CHAPTER III

YOUTH

I

AND yet our great exponent of the Comic Spirit is not untouched by or insensible to the ardours and fervencies of youth. Youth, with its profound inexperience, its divine seriousness, its love of the extreme, can provide the student of the Comic Spirit with as fertile a theme and as copious material as anything in this mortal life. It is fair game, for it can always see others' follies, though never its own. It is a perpetual source of jest to the Adrian Harleys of this world, to hearts less selfish than the Epicurean of Raynham Abbey an ever-welling spring of some humaner pleasure. Yet it has a noble side. If it is charming in its follies, it bears itself with a divine air amid its failures. Great writers and noble natures are aware of this. Meredith would have been a much smaller man and a far inferior writer had he not estimated his progress in perception of the comic by his ability, true to his own monition, still to love those whom he ridiculed. Even while he noted every minute folly and traced every far-branching ramification of stripling absurdity, he could thrill in noble sympathy with everything sublime in youth's progress to the higher wisdom, with everything tragic in its

passage through calamity perchance and crashing failure to a clearer vision. "Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait." It is an agelong lamentation. But one author dowered with the genius of perpetual youth *did* know and "could." An eager, overbearing sympathy, a "feeling with" his heroes of the early twenties, possesses him as he beholds them tried in passion's fiery furnace, passing onward to that "ordeal" which is appointed every man. He could delight in their boyish ardour, their henchman sage, their devoted Sancho, or at need their Ripton Thompson, as he rides forth to squire them in their venturous essay to storm the world. He will expose their weaknesses but not forget to celebrate their strength, point the due moral, indite the worthy epitaph. When Beauchamp fights Bevisham, his uncle Lord Romfrey, and all his friends at once, when Richard Feverel defies his father and—still worse—his father's system, it is Meredith who stands chief mourner at the glorious failure of a forlorn hope, it is he who strews lilies on their tombs with bounteous hand. For though the cynic's wisdom tells us that 'tis but a pace from the sublime to the ridiculous, Earth's "deepest gnomes" aver that with all gallant souls but one short step divides the ridiculous from the sublime. As we stand beside the bier of Meredith's young heroes and gaze at their calm features they take a godlike serenity. We think of them in the words of another poet of youth:

> " They have outsoared the shadow of our night ;
> Envy and calumny and hate and pain,
> And that unrest which men miscall delight,
> Can touch them not and torture not again ;
> From the contagion of the world's slow strain
> They are secure, and now can never mourn
> A heart grown cold, a head grown gray in vain ;
> Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,
> With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn."

But let us view the hero as lover, Romeo in the nineteenth century.

II

> " Ay me ! for aught that I could ever read,
> Could ever hear by tale or history,
> The course of true love never did run smooth. . . .
> Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
> War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
> Making it momentany as a sound,
> Swift as a shadow, short as any dream."

More than three centuries ago love was portrayed in its swift dazzling course from birth, first rapture, to untimely end. Since then *Romeo and Juliet* has stood the incomparable expression of love's ardours and its thrills, a wondrous picture wrought in flaming fervour by a genius himself aflame. It had remained without a rival, almost without a counterfeit, for though love be changeless and eternal, man's esteem of it is ever changing. The laboured lubricity of the Restoration, the more controlled transports of " the age of reason " were not likely to produce the peer of Romeo. Yet in time's course the soul of Shakespeare was to find an avatar. Our own age too can claim a supreme and almost sole example of *νοῦς* conjoined with passion, a poet who was to touch the same lyre, pass through the gamut of

love's emotions, reproduce triumphantly in a prose form the same white heat that glowed in the greatest of our poets, fling down the gauntlet and depart unbeaten from the lists of tragic passion, image forth a second Romeo, fiery and impetuous, and a heroine, tender, loyal, and courageous.

Yet *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is more even than a great love-romance. It is a sumptuous banquet for the mind as well. The author has a problem of perennial interest to propose, and it is this. Given a child, what is his best upbringing ? Shall we devise some cunning system, imprison him knowingly or unknowingly within four walls of precept and aphorism, formula and theorem, or shall we yield to the haphazard method of flinging him headlong into the maelstrom of a Public School, to sink or swim as best he can ? Shall Science rule, or Chance ?

After an unhappy matrimonial experience Sir Austin Feverel found the problem confronting him. Sir Austin is the composer of *The Pilgrim's Scrip*, a selection of well-culled aphorisms. He is a man of considerable insight and great powers of expression, wanting, to make his composition perfect, only laughter which "had relieved him of much of the blight of self-deception and oddness and extravagance." He has a system, a system only dimly adumbrated, but apparently amounting to this. His son must be segregated from everyone and everything unfit—the very servants must be modest in their love-passages. Every moment

must be sedulously devoted to his perfecting, no impure influence is to be near him, nor aught that might excite or stimulate unlawful impulses. The result is a boy, healthy, ardent, and generous, but impetuous and self-willed, fond of the rôle of youthful king, the ruthless tyrant of his entourage; yet, as Mrs. Berry observed later, as fine a boy as England can produce. How will he fare when he must, as indeed the system itself prescribes, go forth enfranchised into life?

On his fourteenth birthday he gives us matter upon which to ground a judgment. In company with Ripton Thompson, "the boy without a character," he concerts the burning of Farmer Blaize's rick, and thereby almost secures Tom Bakewell lifelong transportation. Thence follow tortuous stratagems, in the course of which Sir Austin, Adrian Harley, and Richard all visit separately the obdurate farmer, who, wroth at the burning of his ricks, wroth still more at the tampering with his witnesses, demands full confession. Richard, confessing in the nick of time, learns his first lesson. "The liar must eat his lie; the Devil's mouthful." Is it not written in *The Pilgrim's Scrip*?

Time passes. Richard writes poetry, outlet for idle humours. He is ridiculed, injudiciously, and the poet ceases. But one day he beholds Sir Austin bending over the fair hand of Lady Blandish, and love was ever infectious. At first Richard is like Romeo, in love with love, but he is set on fire by a

chance meeting under romantic circumstances with Lucy Desborough, the niece of Farmer Blaize, the girl whom he had so scornfully ignored when the liar went to eat his lie. In a pastoral modestly styled " a diversion on a penny whistle " we have a passionate outburst of soaring poetry which in the fervour of its impulse perhaps none else but Shakespeare could have written, and which in its appeal to natural beauty recalls to us Theocritus. Ferdinand has landed on an island of the still-vexed Bermoothes, and finds Miranda eating dewberries. . . " When Nature turns artist, and produces contrasts of colour on a fair face, where is the Sage, or what the oracle shall match the depths of its lightest look ? " " Then truly," we may agree, " the system triumphed." Two souls, both fresh in their experience, pure, ardent, and loyal, become one. They meet, talk, caress, and laugh, for better than sentiment " laughter opens the breast to love." Let them laugh therefore, says our author.

The system had not provided for this spontaneous love-match. The lovers are separated. Finally Richard, by a happy accident, bears off Lucy from a London railway-station and marries her, aided by Ripton Thompson, " the dog " who is so faithful to Lucy. Sir Austin, in gloomy dudgeon, refuses at first to see his heir, and then endeavours to separate him for a while from Lucy. The course of the alienation of the two lovers is then narrated, an alienation partly due to a Delilah named Mrs.

Mount. Richard tears himself free, but will not go back at once to a wife of whom he is not worthy. Then after he has consented to return he is involved in a duel. He comes to his wife, who is now at the Abbey high in Sir Austin's favour, merely to part with her. He survives the duel, but the shock has killed Lucy, and the story ends with Richard bereft of consciousness on a bed of sickness, hovering between life and death, striving to image on his brain the wife who is his no more.

The conclusion of the novel gave Meredith much trouble and it is undeniably forced. But accepting it as natural, or at any rate possible—and it is not more forced than the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*—we must needs confess that the catastrophe is Shakespearean in its tragicality, and that few things have been conceived more thrilling and more overwhelming than the final scenes of *The Ordeal*. Richard is involved in direst calamity, and not less distressing is the situation of the unhappy author of the system who finds it, and his whole life, fallen in ruins. His very earnestness, his very zeal to make his son as perfect as possible, by some tragic irony results in this colossal overthrow.

But despite the system, our interest centres in Richard. Our hero is a real hero. He illustrates Aristotle's dictum that the proper end of tragedy is to depict some heroic figure which through some single flaw in its composition comes to ruin. His fatal weakness is the fault of the

Sophoclean Ajax, *αὐθάδεια*. Once he has determined upon action, nothing moves him. All things must bend to his will upon pain of his displeasure. He will storm at his cousin Clare, who is secretly in love with him, for marrying a man much older than herself, rescue his mother from her aged paramour "Sandoe," and lie on a magnificent scale to further his design of gaining Lucy. His stubbornness is wonderful, and it gives us a character of amazing force.

The Ordeal then deserves, if any novel does, the title of Shakespearean, written as it is with a Shakespearean verve and energy of impulse, with an exuberance of poetic feeling, and a keen joy in verbal wit such as are found in combination elsewhere only in Shakespeare. It resembles *Romeo and Juliet* in its passionate fervour, its general outlines, and in the forced nature of its plot, and also in its Mrs. Berry, who is worthy of a place beside the nurse of Juliet —perhaps upon a ducking-stool, for she is a vulgar old lady. Incessant as the wit is, the heart prevails over the intellect. *The Ordeal* is the portraiture by a noble soul of a soul not lacking many of the elements of nobility, of one who fell, but did not fall so low as "to feel base and to accept the bliss that beckons," of unbounded courage not blended always with discretion, of a fervour which scorned the limitations of a compromise that is so often moral evasion, and flouted the dictates of what the world calls commonsense. Alas! that all

should come to wreck and ruin! But "Love the charioteer is easily tripped, while honest jog-trot Love keeps his legs to the end." Of the structure of the book, the artistic grouping of characters, the fertile invention of incident, the riotous opulence of irony, that consolation of the wise, one could not speak with less enthusiasm. Rarely have such gifts of heart and brain been manifest.

By way of contrast Sigismund Alvan, the Tragic Comedian, stands forward as a less noble Romeo possessed by a less pure passion. He is a Continental rather than an English type. English thought is sometimes reproached with being too insular. We shroud ourselves in our island mists, and involve ourselves in our own virtue. Our morality is a native product, so too is our hypocrisy. We are Philistines, slaves of conventions, we show the shopkeeper taint in our passions, we prove by our journals that we are turning to fat, and ideas are unknown to us and unwelcome. There is much truth in these charges. Like the Greeks whom Tacitus describes, we admire nothing except our own productions. Continentals seem to us as eccentric as we do to them. Yet some of our writers have influenced all Europe, some have even been influenced by Europe. Among the last is Meredith, who, true Anglo-Celt as he was, was touched by many foreign influences and has translated the French *esprit* into eighteen volumes. In *The Tragic Comedians* we have a study of a truly Continental

personality—one of Byron's men—Sigismund Alvan, Ferdinand Lassalle as his actual name was, the richly endowed Socialist leader, who is enamoured of a high-born beauty, and suffers shipwreck through the frenzy of his passions.

It is a "you and I" between Alvan and Clotilde von Rüdiger (Hélène von Racowitza). The other persons scarcely count, so lightly are they sketched. We have here one episode in the story of the adventures of "that wandering ship of the drunken pilot, the mutinous crew, and the angry captain called Human Nature." Clotilde, young, beautiful, "golden-serpent," with a petulance and waywardness which she mistakes for wit and profundity, hears herself compared with Alvan, the magnetic revolutionary, who bids fair to overthrow the existing fabric of things, a leader who has followers who swear by him, and whose personality has triumphed over every difficulty. She resolves to meet him, and both are taken by storm. An inferior Romeo and an inferior Juliet encounter. Clotilde is overwhelmed. "Oh to match this man's embracing discursiveness, his ardour, his complacent energy, the full strong sound which he brought out of all subjects! He struck and they rang. There was a bell for everything in him. He spoke of himself as the towering Alp speaks out at a first view, bidding that which he was be known." And she, who was she save Paris, "the symbolised goddess of the lightning

brain that is quick to conceive, eager to realise ideas, impassioned for her leader but ever putting him to the proof, graceful beyond all rhyme, colloquial as never the Muse, light in light hands, but valiant unto death for a principle, and therefore not light, anything but light in strong hands, very steadfast rather, and oh! constantly entertaining."

It is the old theme of love at first sight with a sinister pair of lovers. Alvan had lived the lives of three, the sins of thirty were laid to his charge. He has been on the wrong side of the moon. "I have seen the other face of it—a visage scored with regrets, dead dreams, burnt passions, bald illusions, and the like, sunless, waterless, without a flower." Clotilde comes to him, sweet as the breath of the young Spring, and their first night's converse is wonderfully described—penned at a white heat of passion and intellect fused together, not smacking of the midnight oil, but savouring of the lonely exaltation of the silent small hours, the work of an author intoxicated by his own genius. It was a duet, a mingled concert of rivulets, "meeting and branching, running parallel, uniting and branching again, divided by the theme, but unerring in the flow of the harmony." Barriers are for those who cannot fly: it is a proud maxim characteristic of the man's superb confidence. He almost bears her off in the dawn. But no! he will not be centaur; he will come and ask for Clotilde in due form. The thought dismays her "My

father is not very well,—my mother, she is not very well. They are neither of them very well; not at present. Spare them at present." We read her character in these words.

The coquette gains a few days' respite, and to get news of Alvan caresses Prince Marko, the Indian Bacchus, who is deemed her lover. She falls ill and does not meet Alvan until she is convalescing in Switzerland. She is urged to fly to Italy. Let them proclaim their republic on those heights. But Clotilde must be won according to the rules. They have much talk about the future, in the course of which we are assured with grim irony that Alvan will never fight a duel.

At length the parents discover the situation, and the battle is begun. In desperation Clotilde rushes to Alvan's hotel, and now he plays an inverted part. There shall be no subterfuge. Alvan's wife shall not run to her nuptials through rat-passages. He takes her to one of her friends, and there her mother appears. Alvan gives Clotilde back to her mother "bent on winning a parent-blest bride—one of the world's polished silver vessels. It is an act of horribly empty sublimity." Clotilde, who had learnt to rely on Alvan blindly, is now left to brave the tempest in her own frail skiff. She is marched through the streets by an irate Teuton father, who clutches at her hair and locks her in her bedroom. "This was a manifestation of power in a form more convincing than the orator's." Of course she yields in appearance.

Alvan spends a night in agony, finely described. Not the perfect knight, but a giant going through a giant's contortions, he is fleshly as the race of giants, and gross, coarse, dreadful, likely to be horrible when whipped and stirred to the dregs. "He was a true man, a native of earth, and if he could not quit his huge personality to pipe spiritual music during a storm of trouble, being a soul wedged in the gnarled wood of the standing giant oak, and giving mighty sound of timber at strife rather than the angelical cry, he suffered, as he loved, to his depths." And when Clotilde renounces him he is "the shirted Heracles." He raves and curses. "There's three of beast to one of goddess in her." He raged against that ancient, poisonous thing, the woman. Then by an abrupt transition, "Poor fool! The letter is a flat lie. The whole continent shall be up." A little later he would not have the letter unwritten. "I love it! She is plastic in my hands. You cannot exaggerate her for good or for evil. She is matchless, colour her as you please." He goes off to a Minister to demand admission to her. Such is the spectacle of a Titan in the toils.

And he obtains an interview! The Tragic Comedian batters at doors and volleys close arguments, pleading in no troubadour fashion. General von Rüdiger's official superior obtains permission for Tresten and Störchel to see Clotilde on Alvan's behalf, to elicit whether she renounces him or not.

Alvan is triumphant. At first he deems two hours sufficient space to win her, then he wagers that he will have her on her knees in half an hour. Nay! he swears to strike her to the heart in ten minutes. "I promise to fold my arms and simply look. She points to me straight, but of course if you agitate the compass, the needle's all in a tremble; and the vessel is weak, I admit, but the instinct's positive. To doubt it would upset my understanding." In other words, things must happen because they must happen. "She is a Pyrrha, Lydia, Lalage. I see her in the Horatian ode as in one of those old round shield-mirrors, which give you a speck of the figure on a silver solar beam, brilliant, not much bigger than a dewdrop. She is a New Comedy girl, a 'To-morrower.'" But oh! pregnant irony, "it must end to-morrow, though I kill something." He goes on to talk of Paris for the honeymoon, and of his bride's trousseau. "I warrant her mine and all mine, head and heels at a whistle, like the Cossack's horse. I promise her another forty manful working years."

Such was Alvan on the eve of the fateful day. Like our author, he was a lover of nature and even then could calm his soul on "a Mont Blanc evening." He could for an hour stand "disfevered by the limpid liquid tumult, inspirited by the glancing volume of a force which knows no abatement, and is the skiey Alps behind the great historic citied plains ahead." He slept well but lightly and

awoke in the stillness of morning. Once again he pictured the future, in poetic dreams he gave "our simple civilised ambitions," wife, children, the citizen's good name, a concrete form as he lovingly dwelt on her "the only wife! the wild man's reclaimer! the sweet abundant valley and channel of his river of existence henceforward." He goes forth to see a glorious morning gloriously described. "Morning swam on the lake in her beautiful nakedness, a wedding of white and blue, of purest white and bluest blue." He watched the early workman and was led to ponder on the future course of politics. How careful of himself he would be! He gives Tresten his final instructions, and then the hour of waiting for the news. "His vivid imagination could enact the whole scene." "Ah! Tresten, this is worth a struggle! Love does this, this." He dreams of deep eyes "that give him in realms of light within light all that he has dreamed of rapturousness and blessedness." And so he lingers, and Meredith describes him in an image used by Homer and Shakespeare before him. "He waited, figurable by nothing so much as a wild horse in captivity sniffing the breeze, when the flanks of the quivering beast are like a wind-struck barley field, and his nerves are cords, and his nostrils trumpet him; he is flame kept under and straining to rise."

And thus we leave him to the *περιπέτεια*, his agonies of disillusionment, his disappointed frenzy.

No artist could have raised the tension to a higher pitch after the previous description. Meredith therefore with the finest tact tells us the sequel only through an interview between Tresten and the Baroness, once Alvan's beloved. Clotilde repelled Tresten and Tresten repelled Clotilde. She refused to see Alvan, though coquette-like she had promised to write to Störchel, a hint which he did not understand. Alvan in his fury challenged her father, and Marko takes up the challenge. It seemed an insoluble riddle. Alvan "was like some great cathedral organ foully handled in the night by demons." Clotilde is compassionate towards Marko who is doomed to be killed; she has a sentimental sympathy; she is overcome by the pathos of it. She too has now her waiting period, less thrilling since she has less soul. But it is Marko who returns to tell of Alvan's wound. She laughed scornfully, but the truth remained, and on the third day Alvan is dead. Marko is duly rewarded, but his bride buries the consumptive conqueror within a few months. She wrote her version of the story, "not sparing herself so much as she supposed," and now, with Meredith, we may suffer her to leave the scene.

Tragic Comedians are they both, grand pretenders, self-deceivers, whom we must long scan to distinguish where their characters strike the note of discord with life. Complex and gigantic, they call truly for the junction of the two Muses to

name them. "And being Tragic Comedians they give rise, of course, to no Tragedy but to Tragic Comedy," not a colossal downfall of Titans, but to a fiasco, which, like all fiascos, has its ludicrous side. Alvan lies floating many a rood, and our author helps us to circumnavigate him. He was "a house of many chambers," and we lament that "that mass of humanity profusely mixed of good and evil, of generous ire and mutinous, of the passion for the future of mankind and vanity of person, magnanimity and sensualism, high judgment, reckless indiscipline, savagery, chivalry, solidity, fragmentariness, was dust." A stormy blood made wreck of a splendid intelligence. He was a twofold personality: hence his ruin.

No artist is always inspired. He sets himself to various tasks, some easier, some harder, some thrown off with gusto, some carried through by grievous toil. Technique rarely deserts him, but inspiration, the spark which sets him all aflame, is sometimes lacking. Yet when the perfect marriage of theme and craft is achieved—and perfect marriages are as rare in the realm of ideas as in real life—then the result abides for ages to admire. *The Tragic Comedians* is a masterpiece. It is a feat of consummate virtuosity, an astounding proof of Meredith's intellectual opulence, of the firmness of his line. Love—the passion at its highest when it is a madness almost divine, perilously near the beast yet safely sundered—always summoned

Meredith's highest creative faculty. It is so in *Feverel* in the immortal rhapsody on a penny whistle. It is so in this rhapsody of almost Oriental fervour not for a penny whistle, but for a whole orchestra. We have portrayed a tyrannous passion, such as the women in the *Medea* pray may pass beside them that seizes on Alvan, a passion with its brutish side as well as its romantic glory, for is he not a centaur? "Love and man sometimes meet for noble concord; the strings of the hungry instrument are not all so rough that Love's touch on them is indistinguishable from the rattlings of the wheels within; certain herald harmonies have been heard. But Love which purifies and enlarges us and sets free the soul, Love visiting a fleshly frame, must have time and space, and some help of circumstance, to give the world assurance that the man is a temple fit for the rites." The paroxysms of his passion, the first meeting —love at first sight recalling *Romeo and Juliet* so clearly—his fury when Clotilde gives him up, his waiting for the final interview, are described with more than tragic force and lyric intensity. "The course of true love never did run smooth." The quotation worthily describes a passion which none else but Shakespeare could have portrayed so fervently. Rarely has such tragic tension been so powerfully achieved, and though we perceive at once the difference between the methods of the playwright and the novelist, such scenes take

us back to the greatest things in our greatest dramatist.

Adjectives are unsatisfying for Meredith at his best. The art of the book is not less great than its passion. The plot is simple and the *dramatis personae* few. The author is all the more able to unravel all their complexities, to limn their character in every hue, to miss no single touch. It is Clotilde and Alvan and nothing else. Alvan is an embodiment of that boundless confidence which is the leader's finest equipment. He cannot conceive a rebuff, his persuasion is overpowering. He has strength enough to dominate a whole people and to shatter a throne; he can even persuade Clotilde's parents to accept the Jew-revolutionary as their son-in-law. He will reassert his ascendancy over Clotilde in two hours, a space of time which under his imperious logic comes down by quick descents to half a minute. If he cannot he is a "flat-headed Lap." His vitality is amazing. He is forty and still exuberant in his vigour, looking forward to another forty years of increasing labour. And yet his confidence is his weakness too. When such a man loses faith the crash is all the greater, "he is a grinning skull without a brain." He did not understand women. "He regarded them as ninepins destined to fall, the whole tuneful nine, at a peculiar poetical turn of the bowler's wrist." After a single figure "all your empty noughts count with women for hundreds, thousands, millions,

noblest virtues are but sickly units," for first impressions are everything. He falls in colossal ruin, shivered to atoms. Misunderstanding Clotilde's impish tricks, he gives up all hope and abandons all his principles to fight a duel with her father. He is overcome by an adversary who has had only two hours' practice and who is himself doomed to perish by consumption shortly. His egotism overawes but sometimes amuses even himself, as when his roseate vision of octogenarian strenuousness receives a nod from the Baroness "from the palsied summit of ninety."

So he falls, the Colossus, in grievous ruin. Yet there are few *lacrimae rerum*. Titan is overwhelmed, but we of a later, feebler race find it difficult to weep for one who was cast in the biggest mould, despite his grossness and his egotism. And yet how strange an irony that his end is due to his very abdication of the centaur, his yielding to the "simple, civilised ambitions," his desire to satisfy the conventions, and to be as the Philistines! But for his own empty sublimity, his theatrical surrender of Clotilde to her mother, his purpose would have been achieved. He commands Clotilde to go with her mother. Going, she marks who is the conqueror, and, like many a frail fair, before and since, drags down to ruin a mightier lover. True love is flaming, but it consumes all thoughts of self, all traces of the primaeval savage. Our Tragic Comedian never reached this height. What Alvan

said of Clotilde is strangely true of him, "there's three of beast to one of god in him." "A veritable ancient male—a man of angels and devils." Alvan loved as the Titan loves, Clotilde never loved at all. We reach the last page thrilled and marvelling, but we find in it no pathos. The art is transcendent, the characters inhuman. "The laughter of the gods is the lightning of death's irony over mortals."

III

> "The Youth, who daily from the east
> Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day."

Youth, we have said, is divinely charming. It is self-absorbed, it is lacking in humour, it is devoid of balance, but it has a marvellous something which can atone for all its defects, something which is far better than all the calculations of the worldling. All life is not, alas! the early twenties. The impetuous youth develops into the unattractive crank with a bee in his bonnet, or even into an unprepossessing charlatan; but till the vision splendid has faded away, he is possessor of a spell subduing all who come within the circle of his influence, constraining them by some mysterious magnetism to further all his ends. Such is Beauchamp, twin-brother of Feverel, a midshipman who, with intense seriousness, issues a challenge to Messieurs les Colonels de la Garde Impériale,

who demands that his beloved Rénée de Croisnel should give up her elderly suitor, the Marquis de Rouaillout, and almost prevails; who fights an election as Radical and insists upon no insincere compliments and no halfcrowns for doubting electors—in the course of which election he is summoned to France by the distressed and married Rénée, an odd interlude for the candidate of naval defence and purity of all sorts—who demands from his uncle, Everard Romfrey, upon whom he is entirely dependent, an apology for the outrage upon Shrapnel; who coerces Rosamund Culling into denying that she has been insulted by Shrapnel, thus securing from Romfrey the required apology, who, in short, will defy the whole world if it opposes him, and almost storms it by his very wilfulness. He is the darling of the gods, destined therefore to an early death, even though the final despatch is not the happiest example of the author's skill. Beauchamp at fifty, a warped, one-sided visionary, with all the attractiveness of youth departed, a relentless propagandist of one idea, the acrid editor of a monomaniac review, this would have been a sorry spectacle.

Beauchamp, as we have declared, is brother to Feverel. He has been in the Navy and has there learnt not to act the little prince, a discipline denied to Feverel, but either might have acted very similarly in similar circumstances. Beauchamp is by training less self-centred, readier to devote himself to a common cause. He dies in the attempt to

save a waif from drowning, a bit of the flotsam and jetsam which haunts the riverside. His death would have seemed more fitting, and have been dramatically more effective, had he not previously gone through a critical illness, recovered, married, and begotten a son. Dramatic justice demanded Beauchamp's death, but his creator was hard put to it to inflict the sacrificial stroke. The hero is spared the pains of age, and age's disillusioned pessimism; his end has all the poignancy and all the beauty of youthful death. His faults are glaring, but Romfrey judged aright when he declared that Neville was one of the true Romfrey breed, and that few in England were his peers. At the final moment, when, with Shrapnel and Romfrey, we look at "the insignificant bit of mudbank life remaining in this world instead of him," we involuntarily re-echo their silent thought, "This is what we have in exchange for Beauchamp." Beauchamp has failed of lasting achievement, but it has been a glorious failure, and his memory is green, and will flower in the hearts of his friends.

But Beauchamp does not always die young, and then there comes the age of disillusionment, either for himself or, if the hero prove a quack, for his idolisers. We shall do well to consider for a moment enthusiasm in the middle age. In *Harry Richmond* we have the *ἀριστεία* of a quack. Fiction, like History, is always repeating itself.

Who cannot detect in Augustus FitzGeorge Roy Richmond, adventurer, star of courts and baronial halls, dazzling the more vulgar with his manner and his noble presence, impersonator in bronze —fit metal—of Marshal Fürst von Eppenwelzen, and then again by fortune's caprice pursued of duns, grand seigneur out at elbows, orator truly "intoxicated by the exuberance of his own verbosity," a Cagliostro convinced by the spell of his own eloquence, something of the ready wit of Falstaff, something of the rotund style of Wilkins Micawber? The novel is a history of the art of mystifying, a tract upon the final impotence of quackery, the story of a colossal fraud such as oft duped the credulous of the Victorian Age.

The "claimant" is indeed a fine figure. He is kingly in his mien, possessor of all the address and tact in the management of men which we associate with exalted personages. Wonderful is his resource whether in words or deeds, his mental agility responds to every call. He can cajole annuities out of a sister-in-law, suppers out of a pastry-cook from Richmond, Yorks, can even throw sops to Cerberus, broker's men of villainous ferocity, most difficult of all tasks, we are assured. He borrows from you with an air of superb magnanimity, and you thank him for his condescension. He can secure an interview in a royal library between a princess and his son, and to mask the alarm of an irate duenna sets fire to it. He

almost achieved a marriage between Harry and this princess, the Princess Ottilia of Eppenwelzen-Sarkeld, which neither the contracting parties nor their relatives desired. And all this could he do because he was first convinced of his own greatness and his lofty birth. Prick the bubble, reveal to him at last that his annuity paid with such secrecy comes not from princely coffers but from Dorothy Beltham's careful savings, and his reason is shattered. He passes by a fiery death into the elements, a fit ending for a modern Empedocles.[1] And yet he *is* a hero, of quackery and (yellow) plush breeches doubtless, yet a hero who has attained middle age, and by his knowledge of the world and its weaknesses can entrance the weaker sex, at least, with the spell of his glamour.

A hero indeed, yet heroes age so quickly. Men and the gods love them, and the gods call them, from Achilles downwards, to their banquets early. A Feverel or Beauchamp, flushed with the radiance of youth, is gloriously attractive. In imagination he can storm heaven, or drive his chariot through the constellations, but how soon the visionary splendour fades, how soon the idealist shrinks and withers into the fanatic crank! Still more melan-

[1] We feel constrained to quote Meredith on Empedocles:

> " He leaped. With none to hinder,
> Of Aetna's fiery scoriae
> In the next vomit shower, made he
> A more peculiar cinder."

choly the declension when the ideal is no ideal, but merely self-exploited, the foisting of another member upon the house of Guelph.

Richmond is a self-seeking Beauchamp—if the contradiction in terms is pardonable—projected into later life, quintessentially inane, fervidly optimistic, builder of skiey palaces which dissolve leaving no rack behind, a projector for whom no ambition is too vaulting, no scheme too hare-brained, leader of a party and unable to convince his own son, an acrobat in perpetual inequilibrium, rescued from crashing collapse by perpetual mobility. But we weary at length of this faded flower. Even our author, "complacent penman," feels the turn of the tide, "a sign that the end, and the delivery of reader and writer alike, should not be dallied with."

But youth is not always so resolute and determinate. Its struggles are not always with the outer world; it has sometimes to struggle with itself, to bring itself to birth. As we read we wonder whether Wilfrid Pole will ever pass from Sentiment to Passion, from coxcombry to manliness. *Evan Harrington* has a like issue: we are perplexed whether Evan will triumph over himself, or miss full manhood. The problem is worked out, not merely symbolically, in a tailor's shop, and with the particular question is linked the more general theme of snobbery.

Snobbery is a theme which has inspired the in-

vective of the satirist and the jest of the humorist. Dreadful indeed is trade, and even in this nation of shopkeepers those who have made fortunes out of it are most ashamed. In this delightful scherzo the master, himself the grandson of a grand tailor, has let his wit play with lambent flame upon the subject. The "snip"—the slang must be tolerated—and the "snip's" goose, his fractional humanity, the horrors that association with him cause in every well-bred soul—it is a theme that Meredith gambols with like a sportive kitten. The dreadful skeleton in the Harrington cupboard, the awful suspense which racks all the accomplices in a monumental hypocrisy, their guilty fears, the innuendoes of their foes, the final revelation of imposture, form a tragedy inverted. If all ends happily in bold defiance of the laws of probability, who will be captious and churlish enough to grudge Evan and Rose Jocelyn their wedding-bells and nuptial felicity?

The story opens with the death of the great Melchisidec Harrington, who bears a striking resemblance to Melchisidec Meredith, the author's grandfather. Mel is a man of marvellous gifts (Alcibiades and Mirabeau combined), who, despite his tailordom, goes into society, comporting himself with dignity, and by no means "that efflorescence of divine imposture" which Lady Jocelyn styles him. His daughters, beauties all, have won in a crescendo of gentility, a captain in the Marines,

that ever-affronted arm of the Service, a brewer, and a Portuguese count! However, the path of gentility too often leads to bankruptcy. It remains for Evan to redeem his father's name. But he has been in Portugal consorting with an English diplomatist and his family, to whom he has been introduced by his sister, the Countess de Saldar, now a lady of high fashion. Mrs. Harrington, a woman of great decision, insists that Evan shall turn tailor and go to Mr. Goren of London to learn his system. The Countess vows that he shall not, while Evan is for the moment swayed by either in turn. On his way to Mr. Goren by some freak of Fortune he meets the Jocelyns again, and with his sister is invited to stay at Beckley Court. In that mansion the wonderful generalship of the Countess has full scope. Her dead father, she discovers, was Sir Abraham Harrington of Torquay, recently deceased, a fib which costs her much trouble in the end. Now Evan, stopping at the Green Dragon of Fallowfield, had fallen in with Harry Jocelyn and his friends Laxley and Forth, all of them inferior to Evan as gentlemen, as their conduct proves. In an amusing altercation he had declared himself a tailor's son. With amazing skill the Countess passes this off as a jest, but a group forms against her which seeks every opportunity to keep the story alive, and even organises an investigation party which shall go to Lymport. Meanwhile, the attachment between Rose Jocelyn and Evan develops

itself and its avowal is not checked by the hostility of Rose's parents. The clouds thicken at a picnic described with great skill, the battle of the bull-dogs, for Mrs. Harrington appears, resolved to reveal everything. It is a staggering blow, even though the Countess as a slight compensation has procured the appearance of a mad and deserted husband, and a betrayed damsel, incidents which overwhelm two members of the hostile group. But to accomplish these ends the Countess had been compelled to forge a letter. Evan discovers the fact, and as honour compels him to disclose the forgery he roundly delares himself the forger. He necessarily leaves Beckley next morning, as does his sister, though her retreat—a retreat made only under protest and perforce—is conducted with consummate skill. Rose is lost to Evan, but Juliana, an ugly little consumptive who has been fascinated by him, still believes in him, or still loves him, which comes to the same thing. When she dies, which of course soon happens, she leaves her estate, including Beckley Hall, to Evan, now engaged—on the part-time system at any rate—in tailoring. Evan nobly surrenders his heritage to Lady Jocelyn. The family go and thank him in the tailor's shop—a well-staged scene. Rose abandons Laxley, and she and Evan are happy ever after.

In such a diverting extravaganza, a plot is merely tiresome, an indispensable something which is a nuisance. "Let the Comic Muse for once strain

human nature rather toughly," say we with Meredith. He burst all shackles, and, with a delightful opportunism that at every crisis seems to have something up its sleeve, surrenders himself to every impulse that the moment brings, "a cork on the wave of the minute," content if only he and his readers are sufficiently diverted. And indeed they are. The scene at the Green Dragon, the thrilling series of ever more and more elaborate complications of falsehood at Beckley Court, the picnic, they are the spirit of Fun incarnate. But it is not merely mirthfulness unrestrained, though we have this in plenteous store. There is a serious aim lurking beneath the perpetual jests at tailordom. It is the revenge of the brilliant grandson of a tailor who has risen superior to the false shame of spurious sentiment upon a world that gibes at a deserving trade, and jeered at the wonderful Mel; it is a bathing in the humorous which demonstrates that Meredith had got past Evan's early attitude and had shaken himself free from the sentimentalistic attitude which, though "the child of gold, abhors gold." And there is much charming romance. Meredith had a soul which was nobly and beautifully responsive to the slightest touch of genuine sentiment. To him nothing is a greater joy than to depict the attachment of two youthful, ardent creatures. He leaps at once to the lyrical when his characters permit it. Evan is long in developing. He had good fortune, and is let off easily by the favouring

goddess. But he is modest and—rare gift of youth—content to play second fiddle. "Are you impatient with this young man? He has little character for the moment. Most youths are like Pope's women, they have no character at all, and indeed a character that does not wait for circumstances to shape it is of small worth in the race that must be won. To be set too early is to take the work out of the hands of the Sculptor who fashions men. Happily a youth is always at school, and without mark two or three hours ago he will have something to show you now."

If Meredith always surpasses himself with love as theme, what shall one say when wine, or even ale, inspires him? His rhapsodic enthusiasm for the latter takes a full fling in the Green Dragon scene. It is magnificent. From the opening subtlety as to "good evening" and "good night" right through the dithyramb on ale, the speeches, the by-play between the "gentlemen" and Raikes, it is the screaming comic, the author's highest success in the rustic manner—a manner in which he does not always succeed—a far more brilliant achievement than the Ipley and Hillford revel. Raikes, the maniac, who elsewhere confesses that "it is curious thing that the seduction of a duchess has always been one of my dreams," the unsuccessful histrion who can always act well *off* the stage, has a Pistolesque ranting style which is entirely in keeping with the situation.

Despite his rôle of second fiddle, Evan rightly gives his name to the book. He has been tested in the crucibles. He is in the way of becoming the true metal. He is "not banished from the help which is always reached out to us when we have fairly taken the right road; and that for him is the goal to Lymport. Let the kingdom of Gilt Gingerbread howl as it will! We are no longer children but men; men who have bitten hard at experience and know the value of a tooth; who have had our hearts bruised, and cover them with armour; who live not to feed, but look to food that we may live! What matters it that yonder high-spiced kingdom shall excommunicate such as we are? We have rubbed off the gilt, and have assumed the command of our stomachs. We are men from this day!"

We will pass by Dudley Sowerby, a dubious hero of that youthfulness which always seems middle-aged, and Algernon Blancove, young but an entire fool, and consider for a moment Shibli Bagarag, the last of our young heroes. He is, unfortunately, an allegory, but will perhaps for that very reason illustrate the better the Meredithian view of youth. In his ardour Shibli ventures on a hazardous emprise, the shaving of Shagpat, the son of Shimpoor, tailor of Bagdad, scion of a house that had been tailors from time's dawn. The intent is laudable, but youth must be schooled to moderate its ambitions, or rather to proportion ambi-

tions to faculties. How shall Shibli be taught this? By that discipline which ever chastens vaulting pride, the discipline of thwacks. The shaving of Shagpat is a deed necessary, ordained by fate, but the panoply of the doer must be forged by the gods, the task is not to be accomplished by the gay insouciance of a light-hearted stripling. Needing the aid of Noorna bin Noorka, in seeming a crone of illest favour, he betroths himself to her. She is transformed, "nor know we anything so fair as is the smile upon thy face." Shibli must gain the sword of Aklis, and to gain it he must have three charms, the phial of the well of Paravid (insight), the hairs of the horse Garraveen (enthusiasm), and the Lily of the Lovely Light (idealism).[1] He is confronted by many illusions, many are those who have failed in their quest and gone to people the realms of Rabesqrat, or are beasts in Aklis, or have gone to feed the Roc in the abyss beneath the Bridge of Rocs' Eggs. But there is virtue in Shibli, and aided by Noorna, who is steadfast in her assistance, he makes good progress on his perilous course, coercing the genie Karaz (sworn defender of abuses) to aid him by potent spells. He makes us tremble when he mounts Garraveen and is carried away by windy conceit. Noorna is in despair. She bids Karaz fling him off and thus

[1] The interpretation of the allegory by Mr. James McKechnie (Hodder & Stoughton, 1910) is very skilful, and has been mainly followed.

loses Garraveen, but Shibli sees clearly now. Later he reaches the Hall of Aklis, and passes into the Hall of the Duping Brides (popularity) and they beguile and crown him. Happily he gazes in a mirror, and lo! his crown, it is bejewelled with asses' ears stiffened upright, and skulls of monkeys grinning with gems. He is convulsed with laughter and loosed from the throne. Thus may humour, the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us, deliver us from destruction even when all speak well of us. He flags in vigilance, he is beset by other troubles, but ever at such times—a noble thought! —there comes to him the vision of Shagpat lording it at Bagdad, and he is filled with zeal anew to carry out his purpose. The end comes. Despite the machinations of assembled quackery Shibli frees mankind from its slavish bondage to illusion, shaves Shagpat by the sword of the spirit of the age and the triple spells of insight, enthusiasm, and idealism. So may the enthusiasm of youth, preserved till death by such as Shibli's creator, aided by mind, clear vision, steadfast will, achieve tasks that seemed impossible.

There has been profit, one would trust, in lingering on these different portraitures of the youthful and of gallant spirit. Great fiction, it has been declared, is autobiographic at least in the sense that it is based on personal experience. The author sets down what he sees and feels within, not what is external to him. Carrying this view

to exaggeration, some have found two characters only in Shakespeare, Shakespeare himself and Mary Fitton. Regarding our own author, we would suggest that there is much of Meredith in these most attractive presentations of the ardent, and that a great author must largely create in his own image. In this loving sympathy for youth we can discern not a little of the lineaments of an author marked even at fourscore by youthful ardour, by his freshness of interest, and his receptivity. What his heroes were in the realms of his volumes, that was Meredith in his own intellectual world. In his composition was much of Beauchamp, much of Feverel, much of Shibli. (Is this not true indeed of all great Liberals?) He had besides the mastery of words that stamps the literary artist, the wisdom of the sage, and till the end the glow chivalric of a Spenserian knight roaming through Faëryland, combating strange monsters, champion of distressed maidens.

CHAPTER IV

MEREDITH'S POETRY

"Enter these enchanted woods,
You who dare.
Nothing harms beneath the leaves
More than waves a swimmer cleaves.
Toss your heart up with the lark,
Foot at peace with mouse and worm,
Fair you fare.
Only at a dread of dark
Quaver, and they quit their form:
Thousand eyeballs under hoods
Have you by the hair.
Enter these enchanted woods,
You who dare."

YOUTH takes us straight to poetry; Romeo the poet is almost as natural as Romeo the lover. Our novelist was also a poet and perhaps first a poet. He hymned youth's heroisms with lyric fervency, himself a pattern of perpetual youth. Of Meredith the poet the fourteen novels are sufficient proof. But in the intervals between his novels Meredith wrote and published—at his own expense—several volumes of poems which throw much light upon his personality and philosophy. He regarded the division of him into poet

and novelist as unnatural, and with some reason. Poems and novels are obviously the creations of one mind and have a unity resulting therefrom which none can mistake. Yet it is convenient, and even natural, to consider his poetry apart from his prose, and in this chapter we shall consider its differences and its similarities.

Poetry is a thing of diverse manifestations and multitudinous characteristics. With some poets it has been the expression of their sense of the beautiful, the outpouring of their sensuous delight in all that surrounded them, the carolling of the lark, the passionate strains of the nightingale, the record of a series of thrilling sensations enshrined in language that cannot die. With others it has been a vehicle for direct criticism of life, a vivid commentary, forceful, humorous, sardonic by turns, lit up at intervals by strains of loftiest eloquence. With some we range for ever through fair pleasaunces, gazing down pleasing vistas, beholding ravishing panoramas, we seem to journey through a land of magic, a realm of spells and sorceries, of faëry Queens and gallant Princes, and casements opening upon perilous seas forlorn. Or again we yield yourselves to a sterner mastery and a loftier theme as we listen to organ notes which tell of war in Heaven and justify the ways of God to man; or, finally, we may even with our later Alexandrian chase "mystic wrynesses," sometimes with little satisfaction from the quest. Of

Meredith's poetic faculty there can be no question. Yet it is strange that that poetic rapture which gleams ever and anon in his freer numbers should in his verse so often veil itself within impenetrable cloud. The poems are the poems of a modern Empedocles, a hierophant of the Earthly impalpable, suggestive, mystic, vague, oracles with all the oracularity as well as the raptness of the tripod. They are expositions of the new creed of Earth, rhythmic chants of the Meredithian cosmogony, didactic, excogitated, intense, everything but thrilling in their sheer beauty.

Meredith has his own test of poetry, perhaps suggested by a fine passage in Carlyle.

> "*Is it accepted of Song?*
> Does it sound to the mind through the ear,
> Right sober, pure sane? has it disciplined feet?
> Thou wilt find it a test severe;
> Unerring whatever the theme."

It is a test which Meredith will not always pass unchallenged. It is just in this matter of rhythm, of triumphant, overpowering flow that he often fails. His thought does not carry him through a poem in one sweep, he is retarded by the heaviness of his impedimenta, the very massiveness of his cargo delays him. It is partly due to his metres. He is at times overcome by his anapaests, a measure which has since Mr. Swinburne exercised such a tyrannous and disastrous sway in English literature. No poet could help failing with such a vile jigging

rhythm as "If courage should falter, 'tis wholesome to kneel," the right butterwoman's rank to market. But the defect must go deeper than that. The deepest gnomes of Earth tell us that "blood, and brain, and spirit, three join for true felicity." It is true of poetry as of life. But in Meredith it is brain which is ever present and ever dominant. He has given us puzzles instead of poetry; we looked for an ecstasy and found a headache.

It goes without saying that a man like Meredith could not write some thousands of lines without saying many fine things and without being frequently inspired. His sonnets on "Modern Love" gain the reader's attention at once with their splendid plunge *in medias res*; *Love in a Valley* is a charming youthful description of a young lover's beloved such as Richard Feverel would have delighted to pen before parental satire chilled him. The many sonnets contain striking thoughts and phrases; *The Woods of Westermain* is a fine piece of symbolism; *The Nuptials of Attila* has a strange, striking wildness; the *Ode on the French Revolution*, and *France 1870* are wonderful examples of the interfusion of poetry and the philosophy of history. But even the finest poems may at times melt away into the vague, and there are some which are far harder to construe than a poem of Pindar's or a choric ode from Aeschylus. The *Ode on the Comic Spirit* might—as has been said by one of Meredith's

greatest admirers[1]—have been expressed better in prose, has in fact been better expressed in the *Essay on Comedy.* A consideration of the characteristics of the poems and a comparison with the novels may help us to discover the causes of these failures.

The poetic chariot, like other aerial means of transport, may be too heavily weighted. It needs ballast or it flies in a trice to the cloudy inane, but it leaves the treatise or the precept to the pedestrian Muse. Poetry is a matter of nice equipoise, and this due equipoise Meredith rarely achieved. He achieves it more frequently in his short poems, particularly in his sonnets, perhaps because his philosophy had not time to get under weigh; but too often his pronunciamentos on ethics and theology merely illustrate the fatal defect of the didactic poem. He has arresting phrases and striking thoughts, but even a thousand freshly-minted phrases cannot hide the fact that *The Empty Purse* is a mere homily to prodigal youth, a fearsome Shrapnel letter which could have been better and more intelligibly put in Meredithian prose. It is not a mere paradox that Meredith's verse is often more prosy than his prose, his prose more poetical than his verse. He has magnificence and splendour at times, but he lacks beauty and song-like melody. He is too absorbed in his discourse, has too much

[1] Mr. G. M. Trevelyan, in his admirable book *The Poetry of George Meredith.*

to say, to think of graces of expression, and what is even more important he has so much to say that he cannot organise it. In poetry as elsewhere it remains true that you cannot get a quart into a pint-pot.

It is curious that Meredith is more didactic in verse than in prose, but it is undoubtedly the case. His whole philosophy of Earth, only hinted at in his novels, finds expression in various poems, and if for no other reason those who wish to understand Meredith will always have to "peruse" his poems. In such a fine poem as *Earth and Man* Meredith rises to grandeur as he deals with—

> "he the wind-whipped, anywhither wave
> Crazily tumbled on a shingle-grave
> To waste in foam,"

who must needs find as he speculates upon Nature's riddles—

> "ever that old task
> Of reading what he is, and whence he came,
> Whither to go, finds wilder letters flame
> Across her mask."

And yet Nature owes something to Man, for he has made a glorious return.

> "He builds the soaring spires
> That sing his soul in stone: of her he draws,
> Though blind to her, by spelling at her laws,
> Her purest fires.
>
> "And order, high discourse,
> And decency, than which life is less dear,
> She has of him: the lyre of language clear,
> Love's tongue and source.

In passages so finely conceived and expressed as this we find a force and fervour which is lacking in Tennyson's melancholy musings on Man's destiny. We may perhaps apply to Tennyson Meredith's own words of criticism. "Why, this stuff is not the Muse, it's Musery. The man has got hold of the Muse's clothes-line and hung it with jewelry." After all it is true that philosophy is the palace of thought, and a poem without philosophy fails even more than the poem packed too full with philosophy.

But such an ode as this has its counterpart in the frigid *Ode on the Comic Spirit*, or *The Empty Purse*, and if the finer poems are difficult enough, the others will, it is to be feared, continue to "the general" unreadable.

Prophets can vex by repetition. We get tired of the Earth philosophy, and we find that its preachers can be just as dogmatic as those of any other theory, that agnosticism can be just as emphatic as orthodoxy. We may not believe in God, but we must believe in Good, and though the extra letter makes much difference, disbelief in this unsubstantial abstraction finds rebuke as definite as the denunciations of a more definite creed.

> "Then let our trust be firm in Good,
> Though we be of the fasting;
> Our questions are a mortal brood,
> Our work is everlasting.
> We children of Beneficence
> Are in its being sharers;
> And Whither vainer sounds than Whence,
> For word with such wayfarers."

And if creedlessness is rebuked, Meredith is whole-hearted in his censure of the turbulence of passion. We even reach the striking conclusion that "the hoofed half-angel in the Puritan nigh reads her (Nature) when no brutish wrath deters."

> "Sin against immaturity, the sin
>   Of ravenous excess, what deed divides
> Man from vitality; these bleed within;
>   Bleed in the crippled relic that abides.
> Perpetually they bleed; a limb is lost,
>   A piece of life, the very spirit maimed."

But, as Meredith goes on to say, our laws must be based on some natural foundation or they have no real sanction.

> "But culprit who the law of man has crossed
>   With Nature's, dubiously is blamed;
> Despite our cry at cutting of the whip,
>   Our shiver in the night when numbers frown:
> We but bewail a broken fellowship,
>   A sting, an isolation, a fall'n crown."

In other words, as Weyburn said to Aminta, such people offend against good citizenship but against no divine law, such perplexed problems will arise until we can read Nature aright, for—

> "Not till Nature's laws and man's are one,
>   Can marriage of the man and woman be."

There is much moralising on Nature, but there is in compensation much close observation of Nature, and in particular close observation of

wooded Nature. We note as soon as we enter the enchanted woods the snake in his golden bath, the mossy-footed squirrels, the yaffle and the moth-winged jar, as we step over the dry twigs and cones, and the other debris of a forest, we note even the shredded husks of seedlings flown, mine of mole and spotted flint. We find this observation even in the earliest phase. The enamoured youth of *Love in the Valley* can botanise beneath his beloved's bedroom and has a keen eye for colour. He notes the birdfoot-trefoil in the grass glades and the large and smoky red dropping from the sun's cold disk, and a breath of the south-west can always make his Pegasus fly over the sward. Elsewhere Meredith delineates with marvellous accuracy the "song seraphically free of taint of personality" of the lark ascending—

> "As up he wings the spiral stair,
> A song of light, and pierces air
> With fountain ardour, fountain play,
> To reach the shining tops of day
> And drink in everything discerned,
> An ecstasy to music turned."

It is a marvellous piece of observation and, as Mr. Trevelyan has observed, much nearer a description of the lark's song than the work of other great poets. Yet it seems permissible to point to the converse truth that Shelley and Keats, who perhaps did not observe the lark so closely, have produced something which for sheer poetry

must be awarded a higher place, in giving us the unpremeditated rapture rather than the studied observation.

But from such fine passages we come back too soon to difficulties and abstrusenesses, for which occasional striking lines are not sufficient compensation. If poetic excellence consisted merely in the power of forging striking lines, Meredith would stand higher. But it is something more than this, and a succession of pregnant aphorisms retard the movement of a poem. Strangely enough, Meredith's poetry is more abstract than his prose, and his narrative poems are few. The result is unfavourable to poetic delight. The fine lines are not so frequent as the fine phrases in the novels, and some of his ideas have been better put by Meredith himself in his own vivid prose. Comparisons are odious. Not a great number of Meredithian passages would deserve inclusion in an anthology containing only the very finest achievements of English Literature. His poems cannot be neglected, but, fine as they can be, we do not feel that they hold the unique position of his greatest novels. Some will even regard them as valuable chiefly as containing a fuller revelation of Meredith's manysidedness and a fuller exposition of his philosophy than we get elsewhere. They need the labours of the grammarian, the annotations of the commentator, and the paraphrase of a translator. Poetry is often a sort of shorthand revelation in

a stanza of a wealth of thought and passion such as a whole chapter in prose might scarcely express. With Meredith the process of compression is carried still farther, and then the shadows of Heracleitus are nothing to his gloom. When intellect and emotion contend for mastery with him, intellect generally prevails. But intellect, which has its place in poetry, has not the highest place, and hence the curious result that the *ἐνθουσιασμὸς*, which lends such a glory to many of his novels, seems in his verse to be over-weighted, cumbered by the massy coach of learning, philosophy, and historic insight that it has to draw. It is an Orphic revelation, vocal to the prudent, and understanded by the epopts, but by them alone. There are of course flashes of lyric power, intermittent gleams of highest poesy, but the light which never was on sea or land does not shine in Meredith's poems. The poet says many striking things, he coins many an arresting phrase, but he does not realise that if the novelist must not be didactic, still less may the poet. The *Ode on Comedy* is a true and subtle appreciation, but a Greek critic would have described it as "frigid." Like many English odes, it lacks afflatus. Meredith evangelises, but the evangel of Nature and Earth the Mother is a cold creed, and the evangelist preaches his delight at us, and strives to convert us by dogma and assertion rather than by the contagion of sympathy and admiration. To Lafcadio Hearn, who greatly

admired Meredith, his religion of Nature seemed terrible, "the more terrible that we feel it to be perfectly true, it is the religion of a thinking man of science, who is almost incapable of any sentimental weakness." Meredith is unforgiving like Nature. Life is a race with forces which have given man life, but will give him death if he stops running. Even the gospel of Nature will not stand too much of the *ex cathedra* style, "that sly temptation of the illumined brain, deliveries oracular, self-spun," a temptation shunned by Meredith yet yielded to. He loses thereby contact with the ordinary appreciative reader and thus illustrates his own dictum:

> "Who sweats not with the flock will seek in vain
> To shed the words which are ripe fruit of sun."

If then it be true, that much that Meredith says in verse he has also said better in prose, the conclusion would seem to follow that his verse is lacking in the finest sense of form, and that the poet in pondering over his message failed to find its aptest vehicle, forgot that when one preaches courage it is not necessary to use the vile rhythms of "If courage should falter, 'tis wholesome to kneel," and that one is not bound in inculcating moderation to dance to the broken measure of—

> "Our political, even as the merchantman,
> A temperate gale requires
> For the ship that haven seeks";

lines which are neither grand, novel, nor Pindaric. And thus though we are delighted by striking lines and splendid thoughts, we are rarely borne away by the poet's impulse, and are impressed by the poet's reason rather than by his imagination. Philosophy for the lyric poet is a good servant, but a bad master.

It has been best perhaps to consider the unfavourable aspects of Meredith's verse first. But there is much to be said on the other side. To Lafcadio Hearn it seemed that Meredith's permanent place in literature would be due rather to his poetry than to his prose, and that the virtue of his poetry lay in that solid matter which has repelled "the general." Swinburne, in his enthusiastic and just eulogy of *Modern Love*, describes Meredith as one of the three or four poets now alive whose work, perfect or imperfect, is always as noble in design as it is often faultless in result. Robert Louis Stevenson declared that the sheer beauty of one stanza in *Love in a Valley* made him drunk with delight. Only long quotations could justify this enthusiasm, but it would be possible to produce such passages. Let those who desire to know what Meredith could do read amongst others of the longer poems *Love in a Valley, Modern Love, The Nuptials of Attila, The Woods of Westermain*, and they will find much to delight the careful reader. Among his fine sonnets, those on *Lucifer in Starlight, The Spirit of Shakespeare, The Discipline of Wisdom, The World's Advance, A Later Alexandrian*

are finely conceived and finely expressed. And one ode, *France, December 1870*, rises to the magnificent. It is a wonderful piece of philosophy-history raised by intense imagination to a great height of Poetry.

> "We look for her that sunlike stood
> Upon the forehead of our day,
> An orb of nations, radiating food
> For body and for mind alway.
> Where is the Shape of glad array;
> The nervous hands, the front of steel,
> The clarion tongue? Where is the bold proud face?
> We see a vacant place;
> We hear an iron heel."

If Meredith had poured forth oceans of poetic lamentation he could not have said more, or said it nearly so nobly. Compression and reticence have here attained the grand style.

So in passing judgment upon Meredith's poetry we find ourselves suspended between unqualified eulogy and bewilderment or even censure. Mr. Trevelyan, in his most interesting account of the poems, shows that even a disciple finds it necessary to be apologetic at times, and to paraphrase his master before he considers him intelligible. A fine critic like Dowden can speak of the poems as only "a slender affluent" of his novels; and Mr. le Gallienne compares them to "a mass of rich yarn that awaits the weaver, full of threads of wondrous colour but still yarns," and declares that there is more poetry than poems in this author who lacks high economy of form. We do indeed at

times feel tempted to aver that it is the raw material of poetry that has been given us rather than poetry itself. And yet again we feel that such a judgment is ungrateful when we consider the mass of noble thoughts and fine phrases, and the abundance of poetic feeling that the poems contain. It is a hard task to put a new philosophy into verse, and at the same time to create the highest poetry. Wordsworth alone in modern times has been able to give expression to a new view of Nature and at the same time largely to extend the bounds of poetry. And yet how tedious he can be, how often he gives us words instead of thoughts and prose in place of philosophy. It would be rash to compare Meredith with Wordsworth in respect of poetic achievement and the creation of a new kind of poetry, but he is, like Wordsworth, a man who will let his views at times overpower his inspiration, and he is, again like Wordsworth, a pioneer. He sought to add new elements to poetry, and he not infrequently succeeded nobly. His defence is that which the husband of *Modern Love* makes for a certain novel:

> "Unnatural? My dear, these things are life;
> And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse."

Life is in very truth worthy of the Muse, and the poet need not apologise if he is ever seeking to gain a deeper understanding of these problems.

> "More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
> Utterly this fair garden we might win."

CHAPTER V

PHILOSOPHY

It is not our ambition to construct a Meredithian system of ethics, teleology, or metaphysics, and with most novelists any such elaboration would be impossible or futile. But in dealing with the achievement of a mind which has pondered deeply over human life in all its bearings, and which was ever actively engaged in putting—we will not say solving—problems relating to humanity, it is right and proper that we should dwell upon certain aspects of its views and certain guiding principles which it had attained. Man, his fortunes here on Earth, his past, his present, and his future, the problems of existence, the end of human efforts, history, politics, sociology and theology, all these varied aspects of man's intellectual life were matters of keen interest to Meredith. He had at least a creed, instinctive rather than matter for logic, and his creed, though not reduced to arid formulas, was coherent and logically developed. He lived in a mental universe fashioned and shaped into some semblance of uniformity by his unwearied efforts.

Almost first with Meredith was the question of the relation of the sexes, involving as it does so many questions of morality, the Woman's question, not so limited an aspect of it as the Suffrage, but the much wider, deeper problem of Woman, her place in the world, her attitude towards Man, Man's attitude towards her, the mode and form of their association, the right conception of marriage. We can all quote glibly such epigrams as "Men may have rounded Seraglio Point, they have not yet doubled Cape Turk," "I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilised by Man" (the utterance of a wounded husband whose wife had betrayed and left him). But more than a few casual epigrams are needed to solve so weighty a matter, and perhaps a preliminary glance at a few Meredithian heroines will help us to a definite view, for a novelist's heroines should show best his conception of Woman.

The youngest shall have place of honour. They are often honoured with the title Shakespearean, and if we mean by this most womanly in their sweet girlishness, gay yet not boisterous, witty yet not pert, keen intellects yet no bluestockings, receptive, true mates of their partners in very mood that sways them, no dainty Lydia Languishes but creatures of flesh and blood, nurtured on "good beef and good bread" with sound digestions and healthy appetites, not frail and sickly therefore but of perfect health this side the Amazon, spirited yet

no hoydens, pure but no prudes, reverent yet keen questioners of the world's deeds, brave, devoted, resolute and nobly sincere, Meredith's heroines have indeed the charm of Shakespeare's finest conceptions. They are devoid of the petty and the narrow, the typical fault of woman, they bear around their head Romance's halo, but even the keenest tracker of the sentimental can find no trace in them of that. They have too clear a vision of realities, their intuitions never fail them. The progress of refinement and the advance of intellect have even added charms which were lacking in Shakespeare, and have removed some things which displease and jar on us in Juliet and Rosalind. Meredith's heroines step into his volumes, ideals impersonate in living creatures, noble incarnations of the noble English woman—perhaps Earth's finest type—and at their entrance they conquer all men's hearts and constrain them to follow in their train with reverent adoration. We have, thank Heaven ! left far in our rear the age of Dora Spenlow, and even Jane Austen, consummate artist as she was, is behind the fashion ; she would have shuddered at Clara Middleton's wet feet and clothes, and even swooned at Carinthia jumping out of windows twelve feet high and walking o'er the Tyrol heights. But now our maidens have bodies as well as souls, they are daughters of the gods divinely tall, and passably strong. Would that a novelist could make such paragons walk the earth, not merely tread within

the enchanted walls of his own world. There might be fewer bachelors.

Of these creations Clara Middleton, Rose Jocelyn, and Lucy Desborough are the most charming, if maidens so peerless may be placed in order. Clara at eighteen is overwhelming; she carries youth "like a flag." She soon penetrates Willoughby, and the struggle to extricate herself at once begins. Its long course is followed with rapt interest; we feel with Clara, we draw the breath when she does, we too are harrowed by suspense. But we dimly feel that such a glorious maid is not destined for Willoughby, and our anguish therefore is never tragic. She gives herself to Vernon Whitford, the scholar of the unhappy past, a man of modest self-effacement and prudent, loyal counsels, who, we feel, has been well-deserving and is extraordinarily lucky. Quite as fortunate, if not more so, was Evan Harrington in winning Rose Jocelyn. Rose is a noble, resolute girl whose insight pierces to the heart of the indeterminate and undetermined Evan, and detects beneath all the surface of weak resolve a foundation of strength and manhood. She loves him as he loves her, and it is she who, caring little for conventions and little for worldling prudence, carries through the match. The meeting of the lovers beside the boathouse is as charming though less impassioned than the lovers' scene in *The Ordeal*. Rose is unreserved but never forward, and despite or through her charming

inconsequence can move her parents as she pleases. At times indeed we wonder whether such broadness, such generosity, such boldness of resolution, are not beyond the Woman which convention has shaped, but we are silenced by the statement that Rose Jocelyn did tread this earth, known by the name of Janet Duff Gordon; we are told, too, by her creator, that Janet was an even finer creature than Rose.

Lucy Desborough, Richard Feverel's beloved, demands a note. She has not the "character" of either Rose or Clara. She is womanly, true lover, loyal to the death to Richard, and for the first part of *The Ordeal* has simply to receive his protestations and caresses. But she grows in the school of human life, and when occasion calls for strength and draws it out, she is shown growing and ever growing in firmness of resolve.

But thinking upon Meredith's heroines soon takes us into the less easily fathomed depths of sex questions. Many of his woman are touched however slightly by these matters. Clara escapes the yoke of a tyrant sentimentalist, Lucy Desborough, Carinthia Kirby, and Diana Merion suffer from the faithlessness, the tyrannous humour, or the suspicion of a husband; Dahlia Fleming is ensnared into an irregular union, queenly Natalie Dreighton and Aminta Farrell (Browny) enter deliberately into such unions, Nesta, the child of Natalie and of Victor Radnor, brought face to face

with man's brutality demands to penetrate beyond convention. In no case is a moral clumsily enforced nor morals clumsily inculcated, yet it is every moment plain that the author is grappling with hard facts, and urging us to do the same. He will not follow Mrs. Grundy as lawgiver; he has, like all great writers, the godlike insight that pierces through the external to the core of things, he can plumb the depths of inmost soul. He has no tolerance for the "false sensations, peculiar to men, concerning the silver purity of woman, the lost innocency, the brand of shame upon her which are commonly the foul sentimentalism of such as can be too eager in the chase of corruption when occasion suits and are another side of pruriency nor absolutely foreign to the best of us in our youth." He will not austerely turn aside from erring woman and let the man go free.

The novel in which the deceived woman is most prominent is *Rhoda Fleming*, the most gloomy and the most didactic of Meredith's novels,[1] one in which he often meditates upon "the human act once set in motion (which) flows for ever to the great account." He is more lenient than father and sister ever could be to the unhappy Dahlia, ensnared by the villainy of Edward Blancove, weak and imprudent but no wanton. For him the antithesis between rose-pink and dirty drab is unreal. He seems

[1] Except perhaps *The Amazing Marriage*, which teems with the didactic.

with no small measure of the inspiration of the original context to bid him that is without sin cast the first stone. Robert Armstrong, for all his faults and inexplicable errors, knows better than Farmer Fleming and treats poor Dahlia chivalrously. "The young man who can look on them we call fallen women with a noble eye is to my mind he that is most nobly begotten of the race, and likeliest to be sire of a noble line." He can condemn with a severity equal to his tenderness for the fallen grandmotherly laws—

> "Giving rivers of gold to our young
> To furnish them beak and claws."

The later history of Dahlia after her ensnarement is very beautifully worked out. Edward Blancove sees his wickedness and is sincerely penitent. But Dahlia, like Clarissa, will not suffer her wronger to right the wrong, which is in truth impossible. With splendid chivalry for the distressed, Meredith paints Dahlia as chastened and purified by suffering and calamity, rising to heights of character that otherwise she might not have attained. She is not a dubious person to the changed Edward, nor is she to us. She is neither quite right as Ann Veronica would deem her, nor by any means quite sinful as Mrs. Grundy would pronounce. It is indeed possible "both to think her saintly, and have the sentiments inspired by the unearthly in her person. For she has the

capacity to suffer evil and to pardon it. She had come out of her martyrdom stamped with the heavenly signmark." We feel that Dahlia must die, that one with her experience cannot ever return to the placid humdrum of her happier youth. Yet her passing is not abrupt, but gradual. We learn as we gaze at her to hate "the sham decent" and we feel that her dying words are also Meredith's adjuration. "Help poor girls." We feel, too, how near the novelist in his tender treatment has come to the words in which the great poet of Nature meditates over a similar sad story.

> "Blest are they
> Whose sorrow rather is to suffer wrong
> Than to do wrong, albeit themselves have erred.
> This tale gives proof that Heaven most gently deals
> With such in their affliction."

Lord Ormont and his Aminta tells a story of haughty neglect and reserve, ending in a wife's sudden rending of the marriage tie. Lord Ormont, who has married Aminta Farrell, a dark beauty, will not let the world know that she is his wife. He evades somewhat wrathfully Aminta's attempts to secure a public avowal, and his sister, Lady Charlotte Eglett, is an entire sceptic as to the marriage. The fault is due to Ormont's opinion of the sex. "He quaintly minimised women and reduced them to pretty insects or tricky reptiles. . . . He must be generous in his own way, and at his own time."

At length there comes the frequent result. To

Meredith as an independent thinker convention *quâ* convention meant nothing. He is not, however, one of those moralists who regard the Rape of Helen as a brilliant act of emancipation, or put Paris on the highest pedestal of fame. He pleads for a more thoughtful consideration of life's problems, and a less mechanical harshness of judgment, but he does not suggest that there is necessarily anything noble in stealing another man's wife. He does not admire "the terrible aggregate woman of man's creation, who exhibits virtue with face of waxen angel, with paw of desert beast, and blood of victims on it." "Her subjects are the mixed subservient, among her rebellious are earth's advanced who have cold morning on their foreheads, and they would not dethrone her, they would but shame and purify by other methods than the druggist. Undoubtedly she dislikes the vicious. On that merit she subsists." But Weyburn and Aminta are not unnecessarily idealised. As Weyburn himself puts it, "We offend against good citizenship, not against Divine Law."

In *One of our Conquerors* we have a similar problem. Victor Radnor is wedded before attaining his majority to a wealthy old lady, Mrs. Burman. But she has a beautiful girl-companion, Natalie Dreighton, who captures the impressionable heart of Victor. They live together true mates, and Mrs. Burman (Radnor) "flew her flag with the captain wanting" It was Victor's eloquence,

histrionic self-deceiver as he was, that swept Natalie away, a flower detached on the river's bank by swell of flood sailing "through beautiful scenery, with occasionally a crashing fall, a turmoil, emergence from a vortex, and once more the sunny whirling surface," as we are told in a striking image. Mrs. Burman is implacable. She condemns the lovers for living in open sin, but will not grant them a divorce. It would have mattered little if Victor had been content with seclusion and merely domestic happiness, but he with his "itch to be the bobbing cork on the wave of the minute" demands nothing less than recognition as a leader of society. The result is a series of evacuations and retreats from positions each more imposing than the previous. Victor has withdrawn from Craye and Creckholt owing to the assaults of the enemy led by Mrs. Grundy and inspired by Mrs. Burman, but Victor will be victor in name and in deed. As a pleasant surprise for wife and daughter he builds, regardless of expense, a splendid mansion in the Home Counties, for he is now a City magnate whose inspired recklessness has made him immensely rich.

But the situation is complicated by his daughter Nesta, a girl of virginal freshness who knows nothing of her parents' past. Victor's triumph will be complete only when he has achieved a splendid marriage for her. But how can he accomplish this without informing both the happy

lover and his beloved? This is the problem which ever weighs down Natalie, and grips her at the heart. Victor had whirled her away, but she could still think. Without regretting the step which had led to a noble, almost ideal, union of true lovers, she had not the sanguine disposition which enabled him to conquer difficulties by ignoring them. She had not the stout heart which is capable of braving the world; she was in the car with a racing charioteer—up beside a more than Titanically audacious balloonist, "a goldfish in his globe, and a pot on the fire with a loose lid," as Meredith calls him when the metaphors run riot. She was ever hanging back, feebly attempting to resist Victor's bold designs without avail. The Honourable Dudley Sowerby falls in love with Nesta and asks for her hand. Natalie at last acts. She sees Sowerby, and enlightens him. Still her agony continues. Mrs. Burman is fighting a battle with death; she has strange fancies. Victor, who has wonderful power over men, has won her doctor, her lawyer, and her butler, but Mrs. Burman is still implacable, and the bulletins reveal her tenacity. She sends an emissary to the great concert at Lakelands on August 23—the date of her dream—forbidding the occupation of that mansion. Later she summons Victor to meet her. He goes, accompanied by Nesta—a strange scene powerfully portrayed—and it is plain now that Mrs. Burman is *in extremis*. She dies, but she dies five hours and a

half after Nesta had succumbed to the strain of an incessant struggle. The blow overthrows Victor, who loses his reason. Such is the fate of One of our Conquerors.

So the problem is this. Given two kindred souls, one already bound by the marriage bond, the other free, can they be united, can they defy Mrs. Grundy and all her terrors? Or rather can Victor brave all conventions and consort with the conventional, can he both eat his cake and have it? Our conqueror fails, but he fails partly because his beloved has not the same superb confidence.

This, then, is the main theme, but there are complications. Natalie the stately, the noble, a queen among women with her stature and her glorious voice, is still the adherent of the conventional in spite of her own defiance of it, and "has a provincial gentlewoman's tradition of manners." Her daughter Nesta, true child of such parents, impulsive, ardent, relying with no misgiving on "the genial sense of youth" to whom "love was an unerring light and joy its own security," has an instinct for doing the right thing. She has, to quote a beautiful image, "a heart of many strings, open to be musical to simplest wandering airs or to the gales." While on a visit to the Misses Duvidney, quaint old ladies of a "Chippendale elegance," she meets a Mrs. Marsett, a woman of a dubious past—and present—who has been wronged by a certain Major. Nesta is kind and sympathetic to this

vulgar, yet ill-used woman, who reverences in Nesta the lofty innocence which is not hers. Natalie is angered and distressed with a mother's anxiety at the bare possibility of such association. And yet Nesta in being kind to Mrs. Marsett has simply manifested her noble nature. In her resolute facing of the problem which such people as Mrs. Marsett present, and the thoughts to which such troubles give rise, Nesta finely typifies the modern tendency of the best and bravest amongst women to look boldly at evils and seek to relieve them, rather than to blink and pass by in prudish modesty. It is perhaps not without design that Meredith lavishes all his powers in depicting as the child of parents whose union was not blessed by traditional rites this beautiful and noble girl—a worthy peer of Rosalind and Miranda, though not so witty as Rosalind—whose goodness was an intuition and not a lesson painfully learnt. If this be so, it is a splendid piece of irony. To Meredith, as to all great minds, marriage was a sacrament. There is, however, a lofty height from which even the noblest of earthly institutions may appear but formalism, and some, few only, can rise to a plane from which even a marriage ceremony and the signing of a register are but a ritual, husks and externalities, mere outward visible signs of that inward sacramental grace which ennobles every true marriage. Of the tribulations which encompass those who tread this perilous path, of

the inevitable undoing of those who flout convention and yet demand its approbation, of the difficulties on top of difficulties which beset those who battle against the world, Meredith says nothing. His story tells us but too clearly. *One of our Conquerors* is a novel with both a hero and a heroine, but we sharply distinguish between them, the one from the other. For Victor's *débâcle* we feel less sympathy; his defects are obvious. We are sorry for his failure but we are not harrowed. For Natalie our feelings are very different. "The shallowness of the abstract Optimist is indeed exposed enough in Victor's history, but perhaps we may accept the verdict that (looking on their child) father and mother had kept faith with nature." But of Natalie alone we can say more. "An incorruptible beauty in the woman's character claimed to speak for her memory. Even the vigorous in defence of righteous laws are softened by a sinner's death to hear excuses, and may own a relationship, haply perceive the faint nimbus of the saint." Death among us proves us to be still not so far from "the Nature saying at every avenue to the mind, *Earth makes all sweet.*"

We associate the intellectual with the town, especially the great town, we naturally assign him a place in some great library or museum into which the hurricane and the frost, the sunshine and the flowers never enter, a place where the atmosphere is deoxygenated or of artificial purity.

How infinitely invigorating, then, is it to find as we open the door into one of Meredith's novels the winds of heaven rushing to meet us, to hear entrancing pastorals of birds, the murmurings of rustling boughs, to find that our intellectuals live in "civilised Arcadias," country houses from which the enchanted woods of Westermain are never far distant, to discover that we may wander by the riverside with Richard and Lucy, that with Vittoria and her retinue of patriots we may scale the Motterone, with Carinthia Kirby admire sunrise in the Tyrol and Carinthia herself, be drenched with Vernon Whitford and Clara and, if we will, partake of dubious jorums as a remedy. The southwester which blew with such fervour around the châlet at Boxhill is in the novels the prevailing wind, and Meredith's prose eulogies will give the south-west an honoured place among those many winds which poets so capriciously have hymned at different times.

No novelist can expel Nature from his novels, no novelist, if he is wise, will invoke Nature too frequently; man is his proper study. In the Wessex novels we find a minuter observation achieved with marvellous fidelity, we find indeed in almost every modern novel some laborious efforts in word-description, but in none save Meredith do we find the novelist at times thrust aside by the poet, vivid broad stretches of colour giving us in a few bold strokes a picture unforgettable.

Nature is the eternal background in Meredith, ever ready to return though thrust forth by the pitchfork, for Meredith lived to the full, joying in flesh and blood and that expressive "Earth," as intensely as in the things of mind, an athlete in both brain and body. He loved Nature with a surpassing love and in all her moods, but his keenest joy was to describe English scenery, and of English scenery to a Hampshire man Hampshire came first—and those other counties which took the south-wester in all its freshness ere it passed on to London. How well one remembers Cecilia and Beauchamp's daylong ride across the Downs, those swift-running coursers which kept pace with their steeds, on the morning when, as Romfrey had hoped, they were to plight their troth; or Redworth's ride to the Crossways on a November night—the Downs "like floating islands, like fairy-laden vapours, solid, as Andrew Hedger's hour of eating; visionary as too often his desire!"—or the February south-wester of the same novel, when "a broad warm wind rolled clouds of every ambiguity of form in magnitude over peeping azure, or skimming upon lakes of blue and lightest green, or piling the amphitheatre for majestic sunset . . . daughters of the wind, but shifty daughters of this wind of the dropping sun that have to be watched to be loved in their transformations"; or Fleetwood's walk with Carinthia "at that hour of the late afternoon when south-westerly breezes, after a

summer gale, drive their huge white flock over the fields fresh as morning on the march to pile the crown of the sphere, and end a troubled day with grandeur." Truly "he who would have the secret of a strengthening intoxication must court the clouds of the south-west with a lover's blood." Nature is the background of that scene upon which all the intellectuals and Olympians appear to play their parts, to fight their battles, and to find their full development, Nature in all its aspects from the beauties of the Italian landscape which we descry from Motterone, or the storm in a German forest which so powerfully affects Richard Feverel, to a Hampshire snowstorm, the peace of a Kentish bucolic picture, or the Turner glories of a London skyscape, or the joy of a swim in the sea with Matey Weyburn and Aminta, that extraordinary passage in which the lovers, reduced for a time to the semblance of bobbing corks for Neptune's sport, resolve finally on their future course.

The sea is almost as dear to Meredith as the land, and it makes its entry with triumphant effect even in the trifling story of *The House on the Beach.* For Meredith might with Landor declare, "Nature I loved, and after Nature art." It was Meredith who found "quick pace the sovereign remedy for the dispersing of the mental fenmist," the tireless walker who with "the Tramps" coursed over the Home Counties on so many summer Sundays, loved to climb the Tyrolese heights, traversing thirty

miles a day, and delighted even to excess in such feats of physical strength as later led to spinal weakness. It is with much pathos, though without unmanly repining, that he writes to console Leslie Stephen on the latter's deathbed. "We who have loved the motion of legs and the sweep of the wind, we come to this. But for myself I will own that it is the Natural order. There is no irony in Nature." For he had loved Nature in all her moods and aspects, sun and shower, snow and cloud; fleeing from London, after all "the largest brothpot of brains anywhere simmering on the hob," he had preferred to build a house upon the Boxhill heights exposed to all the fury of the south-west blasts, he scorned actually as well as metaphorically the "comforter," "trusting to the spin of the blood," giving his work thereby that intense vitality, that exuberance of energy, that all-round sanity which can arise alone from entire *εὐεξία*, from rich streams of blood warm coursing through the veins, from oneness with Nature. A half-century before, Wordsworth had given to poetry a new motive, a new outlook in his realisation of an imaginative union with Nature in all her moods and all her phases, and had thus widened Literature's boundaries. It cannot be maintained that Meredith was a pioneer of such achievement. But in him too we breathe deep draughts of the fresh air, our faces once again can "feel the wind and rain." Nature has forced her way into the arid, enervating region of the novel.

Nature has blown away the cobwebs of the brain, has given a spin to the blood, colour and vitality to all around us.

But it is Nature with a difference. To Wordsworth Nature is some unknown, mysterious, far-off Power, which despite its distance consents to reveal herself to some few devout worshippers, binding them to her in some vague shadowy association. With Meredith we *are* Nature, we are *quodcumque vides, quodcumque moveris,* the Lucanian definition of God, we are the sons of Earth, true autochthons, derived aeons ago from Earth, deriving still all power and force from Earth and from Earth's contact. One in an universal brotherhood with all creatures that have life and breath, one even with the inanimate, evolving slowly but surely from primal slime to such glorious races as only the future shall reveal, depending for our progress entirely upon our insight into Earth our mother, basing, if we are wise, all our morals, all our principles of conduct on such purpose as we can descry in Earth, taking as our watchword the Stoic *ζῆν κατὰ φύσιν,* life in conformity with Nature, with a profounder understanding of its meaning, thus shall we hold our onward course. But what others call Nature, Meredith more often chooses to call Earth. The difference is significant. It emphasises his belief that we are sprung from the soil, of the earth earthy, but in some higher sense, that as we come from Earth so we are dissolved

again into Earth. It is Pantheism once more, given a new meaning and an added force, and a strenuous purpose, made into the intellectual basis of man's outlook. The inert majority do not require an intellectual basis for their morality, and Pantheism is too vague, too unsatisfying, too poetic for the ordinary man. Yet vague as this Pantheism is, it gives scope for prayer. Shrapnel in that long screed which shocked Romfrey's house-party has much to say upon its efficacy. As Matey kneels beside his dead mother he feels the helpfulness of prayer "as a little fountain." "We must pray," Meredith says often in his letters; "without prayer we are unable to bear truth." Such a creed will not fit itself with ease into the framework of a vast organised religion. It is and must be the belief of a few who, like Shelley or Meredith himself, are raised far above the ordinary feelings of mankind. It has few priests, it makes few proselytes. And yet to understand the Meredithian point of view, and thereby to gain fresh insight into his novels, we must needs linger for a moment over this new religion of which Meredith was hierophant.

Pantheism being the basis of Meredith's religious view, what effect has it on the problems of conduct such as confront the ordinary man? Pantheism is a religion without a revelation, and therefore its votaries must work out their conclusions in accordance with the vague principles from which they start. Though Meredith's views on ordinary

questions of morality are not seldom as definite and as clear-cut as the plainest burgess's, though in many questions of casuistry he may seem rather to march with streaming banners into battle in defence of the right and the noble than to put forth a balanced judgment of pros and cons from the tribunal, his definiteness hardly seems the product of his creed. He trusts, one would assume, largely to instinct. Instincts are given by earth, and when they are not obviously destructive or perverted or inconsistent, one can safely follow them. It may be inferred therefore that no natural instinct can be entirely wrong. Instinct may be perverted, it may need the shackles or the leash, it may need instruction or illumination, it may need to be brought into relation with other even higher instincts, but it cannot be ignored, it must not be defied. Asceticism will find no favour in such a system. Life is something to be enjoyed in all its richness; pleasure is not inherently wrong. But some pleasures are nobler than others, and there are some things termed pleasures which the best and noblest turn from with contempt. Because we tread new paths of thought it will not follow that the systems of morality and the standards of conduct which have been evolved during the long line of ages are substantially wrong; it may be that our civilisation with all its faults is fundamentally "based on common sense." Meredith emphatically held that it was. But all systems of belief have

the petrifying tendency—the letter tyrannises, the spirit is forgotten or ignored. The poet, the thinker, the philosopher, even the novelist, of every age must submit creeds and conventions to new tests, must reinspire them with spiritual force, infuse them with new life, if necessary slay them, for out of their dead bodies new creeds and new beliefs of greater potency spring up.

Hence the perpetual conflict between, not morality, but the dubious interpretation of moral principles, and the bold insurgent who is so often in reality a moral pioneer, that marks every generation which is not spiritually dead. The insurgent passes, dies often in the odour of sanctity—like treason, heresy never prospers—what was permanent in his teaching is incorporated with orthodoxy's received creed, till once again its true meaning is obscured, and fresh heresies and fresh combats come. In these battles the great writer too will take his place. He will be jeered at as a crank, denounced as impious, abhorred as impure, though often it is his intense ardour for purity which leads him onward to the charge. Finally, his heresies will be discovered to be platitudes, and again as ever wisdom will be justified of her works. So in Meredith we find hard problems boldly treated. Life has its noisome corners as well as its open plains and windswept mountainlands. The philosopher must explore all life. But those who love to dawdle over filth, who advance

with the watchword of "Art for Art's sake" on their lips what time they assault our nostrils with the odours of the dungheap, get from Meredith nothing but disgustful censure. The knowledge of the world which comes "from having sifted and assorted a lot of our dustbins is not the highest or the truest form of knowledge. It is the sheer refuse of the abominable. The world imagines those to be at our nature's depths who are impudent enough to explore its muddy shallows." He thought himself that much of his strength lay in painting morbid emotion and exceptional positions, but of the former there is scarcely a trace in him. "My conscience will not let me so waste my time. . . . My love is for epical subjects—not for cobwebs in a putrid corner though I know the fascination of unravelling them." He speaks with horror of the French realists. "Who reads must smell putrid for a month . . . a nocturient, cacaturient crew . . . sheer Realism is at best the breeder of the dungfly." The third-rate novelist always wants us to see, not life in the nude, in its awful purity, but life *en déshabille*. Meredith is not of that sort. Perhaps, like Squire Beltham, he would have put all prudish talk of "chastity" into the women's linen-basket; but to him true love is a nobler, more awful thing than the furtive, hole-and-corner intrigues of certain exponents of "Life." "Love," he says in his letters, "is the renunciation of self; Passion is noble strength on fire." Though marriage troubles

are frequent in his novels, he lets one of the distressed, Victor Radnor, say with all his emphasis that seven-year marriages are "donkey nonsense." "Love and man sometimes meet for noble concord, the strings of the hungry instrument are not all so rough that Love's touch upon them is indistinguishable from the rattling of the wheels within, herald harmonies have been heard."[1] He looks onward with eager hopefulness to a noble picture of the right union of women and men from the roots to the flowering heights of that rare graft. A character like Diana gives Thomas Redworth and us a new comprehension of Love, "a word in many mouths, not often explained. With her, wound in his idea of her, he perceived it to signify a new start in our existence, a finer shoot of the tree stoutly planted in good gross earth; the senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction. In sooth, a happy prospect for the sons and daughters of Earth, divinely indicating more than happiness: the speeding of us, compact of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools, to the creation of certain nobler races, now very dimly imagined."

If we must not be ascetics, we may of course have our cakes and ale, our Old Veuve, our dry still Sillery and our yet grander ancient port of ninety years, if there be such a vintage. Meredith's

[1] Previously quoted p. 52 (from *The Tragic Comedians*).

Dionysiac ecstasies may seem unreal to some, yet had he followed Mr. Pempton in vegetarianism and Miss Priscilla Graves in anti-alcoholism, he would merely have accentuated his aloofness from ordinary humanity. His love of beer was at least one point of contact with the working man, and without it the marriage of beef and beer at Ipley, and the kindred picture of the Green Dragon's midnight supper would never have found creation. But Meredith generally rises above such homely fare. The kitchen takes its place amongst the things which give men rapture. "There is no more responsive instrument than man to his marvellous cook," says he in describing the great feats of Armadine at Lakelands; but wine has called forth more numerous rhapsodies, one at least immortal. Victor is a good judge of a fine wine, and when he meets Colney Durance in the City they enjoy it together. Old Veuve has "extracted a spice of individuality from the saccharine," and there is no more work for Victor after luncheon on that day. Wine is "the celebration of the uncommon nuptials of the body and the soul of man," and Meredithian characters all are given their suitable vintage. Matey Weyburn, faring forth on a sad journey, is given by Lady Charlotte Eglett as a stirrup-cup some "toned old Burgundy happy in the year of its birth, the grandest of instruments to roll the gambol march of the Dionysiac through the blood of this frame and sound it to the spirit." But most wondrous of all is that

port stored in Willoughby's cellars, worthy of the most dithyrambic of Meredithian dithyrambs, a wine which softens even Dr. Middleton's stern connoisseurship to enthusiastic admiration, and at once arrays him beside Willoughby in the contest with the divine Clara. But despite the authority of Cratinus, and of father Ennius, who never sprang forth to sing of arms save when "well-drunken," wine did not always inspire Meredith's praise of wine, as conviviality did not always inspire Dickens's praise of good fellowship. It is distressing to find him saying, in his later years at any rate, "I take wine rarely; it does not help labour of the brain, but leads to flashy, trashy stuff." Such is the difference between rhapsody and creeping prose.

A mind so keenly interested as Meredith's found utterance on many things, sometimes the finished disquisition, sometimes the *obiter dictum*. Of politics he was an eager follower. Acutely critical, elaborately analytic, he could detect much that was faulty in the framework of society in its present constitution. By the carefulness of his examination he illuminated many dark places, enabling those that came after to ameliorate the condition of things. With his keen perception of national deficiencies, and his ardent desire that they should be made good, he was at once brought up against that impenetrable stone wall, the English temperament. Himself a Celt with the true Celtic fervour, he sometimes becomes impatient, but at any

rate he sees the difficulty. No doctrinaire himself but master of a swift, bold, logical, intuitive mind, he saw how the lumbering Englishman with his instinctive dread of logical conclusions, with that intellectual timorousness which always lingers at the halfway house of compromise, sunk in an agelong lethargy of mind, needed above all the stimulus of ideas and the guidance of general principles. The Englishman of this type—thank Heaven not the only type—is clearly impersonate in Dudley Sowerby, who on an important occasion lost his train—and in consequence his lady-love. The political Englishman who is neither Liberal nor Conservative but the dubious Liberal-Conservative of the mid-Victorians, not a "Trimmer" with a "Trimmer's" definite standpoint, but a thinker who exalts the swing of the pendulum into a sacred dogma, a man without a reasoned creed or rules of conduct, with prejudice, caution, almost cowardice as their only substitute, who mistakes procrastination for balance and inarticulateness for profundity—this Englishman is always missing trains. Reform, Catholic Emancipation, Social Redress, National Defence, these are a few of the trains which he has missed. Meredith cannot endure that his beloved England should feed upon "the pap of Compromise." He delighted in "the man of hope and forward-looking mind," and portrayed with gusto and without antipathy the grand old English squire—perhaps the nearest modern equivalent of the Horatian

"iustum et tenacem propositi virum"—with his ingrained obstinacy, his manly love of fair play, and his massive feudalism, the Romfrey or the Beltham, harsh yet kindly; but he reserved all his satire, tingling though not ferocious, for the formal, uninspired, and uninspiring mediocrity, the man whose dull lack of intuition, as in the case of Diana's husband, leads to cruelty and moral wrong, or for the quarter-sessions mind, Sir Twickenham Pryme with all his mangolds. He admired English massiveness, squat though it might be rather than foursquare to the winds, and the English power of getting things done; he loved with a particular admiration that noble type of the English man of action the "sahib," a Dartrey Fenellan or an Austin Wentworth, who comes floating in from another quarter of the globe to infuse a breeze of freshness into the most rarefied atmosphere and to succour, or even marry, distressed maidens, and in the eternal conflict between theory and practice, between the idealist and the man of facts and figures, in which neither is entirely right, yet neither altogether wrong, Meredith was, we may say, a strict umpire, albeit his secret bias was for the bold leap forward into unknown country.

The conjunction of Celt and Saxon, their antipathies and their antagonisms, perhaps best draw out this aspect of the English character. In *Celt and Saxon*, which we must presumably call a novel, a brilliant chapter, an "inter-drone," while ruining

whatever dramatic effect the novel might or could have had, vividly summarises England as it appears from an intellectual's standpoint. We were not always so. A great Englishman and a great poet of two hundred and fifty years ago described us as "a Nation not slow and dull but of a quick, ingenious, piercing spirit." Of this nation the intellectual centre was London. "Behold now this vast city, a City of Refuge, the Mansion House of Liberty." There are not more anvils "than there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving . . . a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies."

But after followed the second Charles and bigot James and then Dutch William, and in the reign of good Queen Anne John Bull was brought to birth. Why have we idolised Bull and the bulldog? Possibly it is the national characteristic of self-depreciation—a virtue too, but in cultivating it we have become Bull-ised. The contrast between Bull, braggart and poltroon, and the historic England is painful. We must banish Bull; we have appeared bottom-upward to mankind for half a century. Preferable is "a splendid, fire-eyed, motherly Britannia—a palpitating figure alive to change, penetrable to thought, and not a stolid concrete of our traditional old yeoman characteristics." England seems at times "the donkey of a tipsy costermonger, obedient to go, without the gift of expression. The only voice it has is the puritan bray."

Celt and Saxon is not a novel developing to any climax or crisis. It is a disquisition upon national characteristics of much subtlety and considerable, sometimes fatiguing, wit. England and Ireland—it is an odd union effected by bribery, cemented by coercion. Contiguity maketh a nation acquainted with strange bedfellows, who cannot procure a divorce *a mensa et thoro*. Male insensibility and feminine quickness, or even shrewishness—it is an incongruous match which needs must rouse the quick mind of Meredith, friend of both nations, conscious that each has something to bestow upon the other.

Bull, the Bull of admiring cartoonist and self-complacent publicist, the rubicund grotesque, the full-grown Golden Calf of heathenish worship, "impervious . . . to whatsoever does not confront the sensual eye of him with a cake or a fist," the derision of Europe, the execration of the Celt, he is a poor type to honour. Why have we so lovingly idealised our lowest and our grossest characteristics, giving enemy and neighbour cause to blaspheme? Philistines are we indeed, as Matthew Arnold so often declared, provincials in the great world. The thesis is hammered out stroke after stroke with a wit which is boundless and crushing. The sin of stupidity, how hard it is to cure, for even Heaven fights vainly against the vice. And here our man of genius steps forward, makes a few rapier strokes which get past the guard, but are no more

than pin-pricks to the elephantine foe, irritating but futile, and so the contest ends in which they both are victors. Yet perchance those who by careful dieting try to reduce Bull, to purge him of his grossness, to develope his embryo of a brain, will some day achieve something. Such, at any rate, is Meredith's fervent prayer.

Of the hesitating, timorous Englishman, Dudley Sowerby will serve as a type. This peer's son "of an old warrior race, beneath the thick crust of imposed peaceful maxims and commercial pursuits and stiff correctness," is described with much insight and not without sympathy. He has many sound qualities, but his mind moves too slowly, he cannot adapt himself. He has stupidity, or rather the Latin *stupor* which may be defined as failure to react quickly to one's environment. "He wore his morality cap-à-pie, like a mediaeval knight his armour." He needs maxims and moralities as measuring rules; he cannot trust to his instinct. He is "like the man who escapes cold by wrapping in comforters instead of trusting to the spin of the blood." He is too "safe." No sooner has he recovered from the shock of Nesta's birth than he hears of her association with Mrs. Marsett. He lost his train to London—his most typical action. We will hope that he won a "safe" bride. He lost Nesta.

Men fail in the "ordeal" from want of courage as well as from precipitance. It was fitting that

Diana should have been writing her romance *The Man of Two Minds* at the time that Percy Dacier was courting her. "He is courting but," like Dudley," he is burdened with the task of tasks. He has an ideal of womanhood and of the union of couples, a delicacy extreme as his attachment, and he must induce the lady to school herself to his ideal, not allowing her to think himself less devoted to her person." But sudden weakness, startling disclosures of the frailty of his idol, a hasty act, expiable to Meredith at any rate, bring disharmony which nothing could remedy save some performance like the Suttee. Percy beside his pietistic Constance and her prie-dieu chairs and crucifixes, "a devious filmy sentimentalist," seemed to unfavourable eyes "the effigy of a tombstone gentleman, fixed upright, and civilly proud of his tombstone bride." He had taken undoubtedly the woman best suited to him, for was he not "a man to prize the altar-candle above the lamp of day"? To Meredith, Dacier would have seemed more admirable if he had gone through with his plan and borne Diana away, even after her betrayal of a Cabinet secret to Mr. Tonans. But this is too much in the manner of the Old Buccaneer and Countess Fanny, and commonsense—the basis of our civilisation—replies to our author that it is not always easy or desirable to imitate this gallant pair.

The Dudleys and the Percys have their female counterparts. If they are young and opulent,

they may be a Miss Constance Asper, a symphony in white that symbolises purity, wealthily religious with a sham spiritualism, a person whom Diana always eclipses and Meredith—a rare thing—cannot tolerate. If they are older and somewhat more of the burgess type, behold a Mrs. Cramborne Wathin, a "lady of incisive features bound in stale parchment," with all the rewards, together with the expectations of the virtuous. "Her appearance and her principles fitted her to stand for the Puritan rich of the period, emerging by the aid of an extending wealth into luxurious worldliness, and retaining the maxims of their forefathers for the discipline of the poor and erring."

Such people fail through lack of feeling and lack of imagination. They are desirous to do well, but they cannot distinguish between the true and the sham; they are even kind and helpful, but they are always on the wrong side. Respectability is their idol and convention their fetish, and by some fatality they ever back the Constance Aspers and the Percy Daciers and the Mr. Warwicks rather than the Dianas who are worth a thousand of their wrongly cherished protégés. They have great aspirations, they dwell in the odour of sanctity, and they are the greatest obstacles to progress. Describe their virtues without extenuation—as our author does—and the remorseless chronicle is their condemnation. Mrs. Wathin is a really virtuous woman of the world, and her piety

is as great as her worldliness, her worldliness is equal to her piety. She is "lucky in having had a guided girlhood, a thick-curtained prudence, and in having stock in the moral funds, shares in the sentimental tramways," and at fixed hours, as Meredith wittily says, "even as she washed her hands, she abjured worldliness, a performance that cleansed her. If she did not make morality appear lovable to the objects of her dislike, it was owing to her want of brains to see the origin, nature, and right ends of morality." Limned by such a master as Meredith, she is at once condemned.

Yet such types do not convince us that the English are past all hope and that the Celt is perfect. Carinthia with her stranger eyes saw, like Meredith with his Celtic eye, the "clean hearts of the English," with the "no spot of bad blood to vitiate them." On her strange bridal day she had seen the great battle of Ines and Todd, "the two strong Englishmen at shake of hands that had spoiled one another's faces," [and] "she was enlightened with a comprehension of her father's love for the people seizing the spiritual of the gross ugly picture, as not every man can do and but a warrior Joan among women." In *The Amazing Marriage, Sandra Belloni,* and elsewhere Meredith is the enthusiastic Welshman. Merthyr Powys and his sister, and Owain Wythan are patriotic performances whose insubstantiality is wrapt in a Welsh mist. We will credit these characters with all the virtues attributed to

them, but we must deny them vitality. Again, for the Irish Meredith had plainly a fellow-feeling, but they are rather good-humoured airy rattlers of the De Craye type, or bellicose fire-eaters like Mr. Sullivan Smith who lack ballast, and thus they fall below even a Sowerby. They are clearly sketched and have charm, even though Harry Lorrequer almost peeps out of them at times. As for Diana, brilliant, witty, noble creature as she is, she typifies Erin in her lack of solidity, and her English mate is indeed her true complement. Her final union with Redworth is morally as well as dramatically fitting. It is one of the elements of Meredith's greatness that he could look all round a nation or an individual and show us all sides of them, not one. Redworth is a magnificent example of what the Englishman can be, resolute, practical, a good sportsman, one who counts the costs before he embarks upon an undertaking, but never falters once he is involved in it. There is a delightful blend of romance and practicality in his deliberations when he is first captivated by the Irish beauty. Even as he talks to her he meditates upon his financial position. He talks to Diana of the best English letter-writers, but his mental obligato is " eight or ten hundred. Comfortable enough for a man in Chambers. To dream of entering as a householder on that sum, in these days, would be stark nonsense." Or, as he tells her that one ought to cross St. George's Channel oftener, a gentle delirium enfolds his brain. " A

householder's life is often begun on eight hundred a year; on less, on much less—sometimes on nothing but resolution to make a fitting income, carving out a fortune. Eight hundred may stand as a superior basis. That sum is a distinct point of vantage." It means security, and if the heart of the man is strong and sound . . . and then he relapses into the dots and dashes which Meredith condemns in a less favoured character.

We see the irony of it, with Meredith, but we admire—and surely too with Meredith once more—this steady grip at once of romance and reality, this steadfast resolve to hitch his waggon to a star, and the equally firm purpose not to allow his waggon to capsize into the nearest ditch or to be shattered against the nearest stone wall, the faithfulness which knows no wavering and no changefulness, the solidity which is carried down even to his Christian name. One who is neither Irish, Scot, nor Welshman, but English, will exult that Meredith could and did paint an Englishman in these colours, and fondly think, with Meredith, that if all were like him we should sweep the four quarters of the world.

To Meredith progress is a very real thing. He had no belief in immediate perfectibility, but he had a distant vision of the human race going forward and ever forward, and he did believe that there was such a thing as civilisation, *founded on common-sense,* and that it would win fresh triumphs. But he

had no illusions. Progress is slow, sometimes painfully slow, and for any particular observer it is the process and the struggle which make things worth while. *E pur si muove.*

One cannot doubt that "in many estimable and some gifted human creatures it is the quality of the blood which directs the current of opinion, and pens us within party confines," or to put the matter otherwise, optimism and pessimism too often merely denote states of digestion. The contrast between Victor Radnor and the satirist Colney Durance seems to illustrate this assertion. Colney thinks ill of his fellowmen and flogs them in consequence. It is to him doubtless high morality, but to Meredith "our satirist is an executioner by profession, a moralist in excuse or at the tail of it." Colney loved the lash too devotedly to be a persuasive teacher. His *Whipping Top* is destined to failure, and his description of England seems to some "a portrait of himself by the artist." Victor, "histrionic self-deceiver" as he was, is no nearer the truth, and it shows Meredith's greatness, wisdom, and breadth of view that he is tolerant of the weakness of humanity while he never ceases to press for amendment. "Keep the young generations in hail and bequeath them no tumbled house." It is part of his greatness that, keen critic as he is of civilisation, he believes its basis to be *commonsense*, and while he believed in progress he knew that it might be one step in one hundred

years instead of a giant's stride one hundred years a day; that while he believed it the duty of the novelist to probe the problems of human life, he left the reader to think out the solutions, and that, keen votary of progress as he was, he formulated no Newcastle Programme.

Meredith escapes the formula therefore and the systematiser. After all, ideas, like everything spiritual, are intangible though real forces, and as we try to grasp them they evade us like the aeriest breezes. But though neither a complete system nor a complete survey of Meredith's ideas is possible, there is a certain interest in noting various points of view which appealed to him. His letters tell us that he took an emphatic view on the question of National Defence. "Our stiff-necked people must pass under this yoke" (Conscription). Neptune's divinity, he tells us, has been killed by steam. Several of his heroes and others of his personages hold such views. Beauchamp and a friend hold that the navy is totally inadequate and that our island, "the female annuitant of nations," is defenceless against a determined foe. They mournfully explore the Home Counties in the search for a suitable line of defence, and they discover spot after spot, each in a scene of extreme pastoral beauty, where the final stand before unfortified London is destined to be made. Lord Ormont, an earlier personage in point of time, had carried his views still farther. He doubted the efficacy of Nelson's crowning mercy of Trafalgar.

Skepsey, "that queer little water-wagtail," was a living personification of John Bull pavescens. His views, which are a source of amiable amusement to his friends, lead to his beating his wife, and thereafter appearing in a police-court, practising the noble art of self-defence, and challenging all comers—with like results, for when there is an enthusiasm for National Defence, all roads seem to lead to the police-court. Meredith was an advocate of some form of conscription long before the view was anything but a rare crotchet. The enemy in those days was—France. We were to shiver in our shoes at—France; we were destined to destruction, did we not take the due precautions, at the hands of—France; we must summon all our strength for the overthrowal of—France. Prophets can, we suppose, be judged only by the sequel. The French invasion never came, and the soundest principles of naval strategy declared then as now that an island's best defence is a supreme navy, which perhaps then we did not possess. However, Meredith, detecting our naval weakness, cried for the wrong solution, and in the light of recent events we may congratulate ourselves that the struggle between France and England anticipated by so many of Meredith's characters never came. Even in this matter Meredith's humour did not desert him. Possessed as he was with the notion that we were defenceless, he knew too well the ridicule which besets the scaremongers, and that it is well not to cry wolf

too often and in too tragic tones. It is worthy of note that Meredith makes all his advocates of national regeneration by military service go to extremes, and it can have been by no accident that this great master of the ludicrous gives all these propagandists a ludicrous setting.

Yet Meredith was no Gallophobe ; Mrs. Lovell's attitude was doubtless his. "She liked the French, she liked their splendid boyishness, their unequalled devotion, their merciless intellects ; the oneness of the nation when the sword is bare and pointing to chivalrous enterprise. She had her imagination of them as of a streaming banner in the jaws of the storm, with snows among the clouds and lightnings in the chasms." He admired ardently the intellectual clarity so different from our own confused ferment passing for thought. After 1870 he could not but feel deeply for that "prematurely buried glory, that heaves the mound oppressing breath and cannot cease, and calls hourly, at times keenly, to be remembered, rescued from the pains and the mould spots of that foul sepulture." He devotes one of his grandest poems to France and its oppressor—

> "We see a vacant place,
> We hear an iron heel."

And yet unhappy France is still "thrilling like a lyre."

If others failed, statesmen, men of affairs, and publicists, at least our great man of letters in his study

descried the coming Germanism, and his intuition casts many flashes upon it. The striking description in Colney Durance's satiric serial, "the European emissaries" of Dr. Grannius, "entomologist, botanist, palaeontologist, philologist, and at sound of horn a ready regimental corporal, wearing good manners as a pair of bath-slippers," draws blood. The nation, as we read in the *Essay on Comedy*, has had no comic training, they whirl clubs in controversy, they are Orsons who badly need the discipline of the comic training. It is a truism now, but it needed clear insight to see this nearly forty years ago. Meredith, who had received some of his education in Germany, knew the German professor; Dr. Julius von Karsteg has the true German contempt for everything English, and does not shrink from telling Harry Richmond of the faults of his nation. Prince Hermann, in the same novel, is a great empire-builder. "Mistress of the Baltic, of the North Sea, and the East, as eventually she must be, Germany would claim to take India as a matter of course, and find an outlet for the energies of the most prolific and the toughest of the races of mankind—the purest, in fact the only true race properly so-called out of India, to which it would return as to its source, and thus create an empire magnificent in force and solidity, the actual wedding of East and West." Here we have the true German union of high vaulting ambition and fustian, the same conviction of a divine mission

which none else can see. Truly Teutonismus is no child of recent date.

Yet Meredith saw the German's strength as he saw his defects. He had, as his letters show, "a certain solid intellectual appreciation of the race, and disgust of their manners; admiration of their strength and a sense of their spiritual flatness; great respect for them and a hesitation to determine whether they are now at their full growth, or that there is light above them to conjure higher and higher. If the latter, they are the world's masters."

The great democrat, especially if he is an intellectual, often sees and smiles at the weaknesses of the great British public, its submission to the scaremonger, its ready acquiescence in the monitions of the journalist, between whom and the man of letters there rages incessant even if unacknowledged feud. No doubt England's cherished bard is the leading article, but the bard is a bondman. Simeon Fenellan is eternally grateful to Victor Radnor, who "saved me from living on the produce of my pen—which means, if there is to be any produce, the prostrating of yourself to the level of the round middle of the public." Alvan more comprehensively declares, above all things "I detest the writing for money. Fiction and verse appeal to a besotted public, that judges of the merit of the work by the standard of its taste; avaunt. And journalism for money is Egyptian

bondage." The journalist is sometimes accessible to social influences. Lady Charlotte Eglett can persuade an editor *not* to publish the letters of a beloved brother who is making a fool of himself with his "curry and capsicums." The editor gets valuable information by various methods. If a statesman like Dacier confides in his beloved, she may rush off to see Mr. Tonans at the place where To-morrow is made. Flattering reviews can be won by skilful management, as Redworth finds when the lady of his heart writes novels. But the rewards of the journalist are instant and immediate; the writer for the future pities him in self-defence and the pity has a spice of contempt. Rickney in *Celt and Saxon* is no unfavourable specimen of the journalist. "Physician, spiritual director, man-at-arms," he moulds that fearsome thing, public opinion, by "the Biscay billow of the leading article, Bull's favourite prose-bardic construction of sentences that roll to the antithetical climax, whose foamy top is offered and gulped as equivalent to an idea." "It is a poor life. . . . A man of forethought who has to be one of our geysers ebullient by the hour must live days of fever. His apprehensions distemper his blood, the scrawl of them on the dark of the undeveloped dazzles his brain. He sees in time little else; his very sincereness twists him awry. A shepherd on the downs is more a man. As to the gobbling age, it really thinks better of him than he of it." Still, it must be confessed that the

halfpenny paper of to-day does not seem vastly inferior to the penny paper of Meredith's time. Then, as now, the press delighted in scares, in none more than in the periodical National Defence scare. For all his belief in the need of greater preparedness, Meredith can describe with incisive wit the gradual crescendo of demand and outcry, the formation of a few volunteer corps, the delivery of a score of patriotic speeches, and the calming of the tempest by the same hands as those which raised it. If Meredith was a great Liberal, it was not because he could not see clearly or describe remorselessly the weaknesses of a popular government. The scare in the political world has its counterpart in the slump of the financial world described vividly in *Celt and Saxon* and *One of our Conquerors*. Even the democrat, especially if he has the Puck-like spirit of Comedy, will acknowledge at times what fools these mortals be. He will not lose his love for humanity; he will still be in his politics "with the active minority on behalf of the inert but suffering majority." In spite of eloquent articles on the need of educational reform, in spite of a succession of heaven-sent Ministers of Education—one per annum—the world dislikes and will continue to dislike ideas, and its great men will continue to play the rôle of schoolmaster to an idle and inattentive class, satisfied perforce if their pupils move forward one foot a century.

CHAPTER VI

MEREDITH THE ARTIST

So far we have dealt with what Meredith had to say, with the vast wealth of matter which, if it is to become literature, must be beaten into form, hewn out into something more precise, more clearly cut. Unless he has the shaping, plastic faculty, the greatest thinker must be ineffective, and his work will prove null. It is time now therefore to consider Meredith's technical equipment as a literary artist, and the examination will resolve itself into two parts—the study of those qualities of style or expression which are common to all who practise the writer's craft, and the study of those specific qualities which mark off the novelist from other penmen, the power of telling a tale, of constructing a plot, of developing it and carrying it to a climax, and of achieving a successful *dénouement*, of delineating characters while and by telling a story.

Style is the man. It is the expression of his individuality, of his *differentia*, of those things in and by which he is contrasted with other men. Those who have any individuality at all, and who allow this individuality to develop, must, whether

in speech or in the written word, attain to something individual. It is therefore, as a rule, useless to criticise a person for writing differently from other people, and it is more profitable to consider how well any style expresses an individuality, and how far these individual characteristics are worth expressing. Now, individuality is often slow in developing, and its literary expression is still more tardy in development. We should not therefore criticise writers who are slow in achieving self-expression. It takes long to fathom a personality —to "find one's self," to use an expressive phrase —and then the plastic process must be carried through. Music perhaps affords the most striking parallel. All composers begin by expressing whether their own ideas or the ideas of others in the language which they have learnt and the phrases which they have caught, just as the clever child will reproduce, sometimes very aptly, the phrases of its elders long before it has analysed their meaning. The apprentice composer writes then as he has been taught to write, but soon he passes from this phase. He discovers himself, first in faint glimpses, then in a clearer image, and in a joyful fervour he begins to create. Soon, if his equipment is complete, a new thing of beauty has been added to the world's treasures. Thus it is with words also. We all must at the outset use a lingua franca, often a jargon containing many phrases useful only as counters, the confused expression of anonymous England,

or anonymous France, of you and me and all the world. The counter has it uses. Originality of speech is out of place in the purchase of a railway ticket or a mutton chop, perhaps even in the proposal of a vote of thanks. But he who is endowed with a fine sense of style must often note the inadequacy of the hackneyed phrase, and feel for other methods, of expression. Not to do so is rather spiritual indolence than love of the precise and unpretentious. If such a seeker after utterance hits on worthy methods, he becomes a classic, a master of style; if his methods are grotesque, he wins a place in the literary museums of later Dryasdusts, their theme and admiration. Pitfalls lie in the path of the artist in words. Great is individuality; yet none by taking thought can add a cubit to it. It can be fostered, cherished, brought to its full development, but the fable of the bursting frog has its warning. When a small man strives to become a giant, his labours have their issue in the ridiculous mouse; if a great man strains inspiration at the unappointed moment, he merely parodies himself.

No man had ever a more individual style than Meredith, the mirror of his varying moods and points of view; no style could suit more aptly his method and his outlook. By what discipline it was attained we know not, but it exists already when *The Ordeal* appears, written when Meredith was thirty-one. It is a style which requires vast learning and vast powers of thought, unusual

swiftness of perception, a striking faculty of compression, a style which makes no less demand on reader than on writer. Such judgments may be passed on many of the greatest stylists, but it particularly fits the prophet of the intellectual who wrote for a select half-dozen. The style has been called both "terse and redundant," and the description is apt. None ever thought more quickly or boasted such a teeming fancy. The wealth is poured forth by a prodigal, but the prodigal has a bank balance which will never be exhausted, and is lord of a Pactolus which never will run dry. Not even Tacitus himself can pack more thought into a sentence, none is more sinewy. This terseness and redundance is a contradiction which could arise only in an intellect of extraordinary range and fertility. The style has been called obscure. Obscure it is no doubt to those who have been nourished on the potato bread of inferior journalism, but it is for those who have no disrelish of the brain, and take pains to sharpen their intelligence. If in course of time education is a possession widely disseminated, then will Meredith have his tens of thousands of appreciative readers. As it is, he is not too difficult for any men of real education to understand and to appreciate, and his circle of admirers is widening every year, especially amongst the young. Even now passing into a Public Library and taking his volumes from the shelves one finds in thumbmarks, corrections of

his spelling,[1] and pleasing grime the evidence of careful study. Obscurity is a matter of standards. Caesar is obscure to a third-form boy, Shakespeare still more so—and indeed to many others would they confess it—Milton is repellently obscure to those who have no classics, and Browning is obscure to those who do not profess the Browning cult. Yet when we have passed the tyro stage, the obscurities of these writers become fewer and fewer, and unless we hold the view that reading is a species of shower-bath under which the reader sits drenched and passive, entirely dependent upon the kind offices of the bathman and taking no hand in the operation himself, and that to hold communion with an author should be as easy as smoking a pipe, we shall not attach too much importance to the charge of obscurity. Obscurity, child of lack of thought or of a muddled mind, first in the list of Literature's deadly sins, is never found in Meredith. His obscurity is born of excess of thought, not lack of it.

It almost necessarily follows from the need of more precise analysis of character that Meredith was constrained to adopt elaborate or even laboured methods of expression. Meredithian obscurity proceeds from high-strained intellectual activity, not from laziness or incompetence. It is the clever man conversing with his auditors and assuming that they have the same intuition of the logical

[1] His spelling of such words as loveable and developeing is a sore puzzle to readers of the "ex-seven" standard.

nexus that he has; it is a desire to progress quickly which leads him to skip some of the necessary steps in the demonstration. But merely to characterise Meredith's style as obscure is to shirk the duties of a critic. Its greatest quality is in the oldest sense of the word "wit." Never were sentences written so compact of deep thought, skill in manipulation of words, keen observation, aphoristic pregnancy. It is the greatest style which has ever been devoted to the writing of the novel. It is unerringly precise, too precise for the dull reader, packed with meaning, philosophic in the sense that it is always seeking to deduce the universal from the particular, rollicking in the farcical lyrical or impassioned, in the description of ardent feeling or of natural scenery. It lacks except in the greatest moments but one thing, rhythm; it has not that lightness and ease of movement which the greatest prose has beside all its other charms. It at times reminds us of the pantechnicon rather than the chariot of Phoebus.

Of this style perhaps the greatest characteristic is the epigram. The epigram we have always with us. It is the one weapon of the young Varsity scholar, it is the mechanical product often of the literary hack. Yet mankind likes to have its ideas presented to it in an attractive dress, and the epigram is thought's pleasing wrapper. The faults of the epigrammatist need not be dilated upon. He strains after point and glitter, he hunts for brilliance

rather than reality, he avoids the obvious truth to quest for the far-fetched paradox. Dangers beset him on every side, not least the danger that he may prove tedious to his readers for all his wit. From such dangers Meredith finds an escape more easily than some could. For one thing, epigrams are not forced with him, but the natural expression of a mind which thinks in pictures and reasons by analogies. It is rare to find an unmeaning epigram in Meredith, common to find one which casts a dazzling, brilliant light upon a truth which we had never before realised and which had lain concealed.

Such condensed thought-processes therefore find their proper vehicle of expression in the epigram, of which no master of such greatness has appeared since Bacon, himself a consummate exponent of the art of terse expression, of packing into a sentence as much as it will hold. One soon gets tired of verbal fireworks, and can be bored as sadly by the wits as by the dunces, wearied by a cascade of brilliancies as the eye is dazed by continual flash and glitter. Meredith himself depreciates the epigram and its paper popgun pellets, "a torch to see the sunrise." "There is more in the world than the epigrams aimed at it contain," but perhaps this depends upon the aimer of the epigram. The epigram can be merely a display of verbal sleight-of-hand; it was not so with Meredith. Possessed in this respect of the most wonderful brain of recorded history, he wrote epigrams as easily as most

people sign their names; indeed a Meredithian epigram *is* a sign-manual. His brain functioned in epigram, and his works should interest the professed psychologist by the extraordinary mentality revealed in action. Wit, defined by Verrall in his fine appreciation of Meredith as "manipulation of meanings," is the product of a subtle mind, the admiration of a subtle age, of an age resembling the age of Euripides, in whom we can find many analogies to Meredith. It possesses an extraordinary mastery of the half-tones of language, it despises the crudity of calling a spade a spade as it scorns the vulgar embellishment of "agricultural implement," and in the end perhaps calls it neither. "You should imply things, Van," said the Countess de Saldar, herself a mistress of the art, and implication is almost the basis of Meredith's technique. Sometimes the hint is complete in a single word, sometimes the process of suggestion lasts some pages, as in the scene where the burning of Farmer Blaize's ricks is discussed, or where Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer make a visit to Patterne Hall, or where Mr. Dale, standing "between two closed doors," strives in vain to learn whether Laetitia has accepted Willoughby. Sometimes the wit will have its reverberations, which return again and again like references to a theme in music; at times the jest will be a piece of symbolism, an acted pun, as when Dudley Sowerby misses a train, or De Craye presents "the dainty rogue"

with a piece of porcelain, promptly to be smashed by dereliction of the hapless Flitch. The enemy will call it merely a new word-game, but he will not really hit the mark. In his great novel-symphonies of human life, Meredith must have his scherzos, just as the mightiest of all composers can find room for his scherzos in his most tragic works. Meredith does not prank out his style in epigrams; he writes wittily, simply because he cannot help it, because it was easier to write them than to abstain from them. They run in the conduits, as the wine was to do in Jack Cade's realm when Jack was seated on the throne.

Though a Meredithian character denounces analogies as "the sapping of language," the epigrams owe much of their force to an amazing command of metaphor. In rapid passages from one image to another there is a disdainful disregard of the censure that mixed metaphors bring—a Celtic quality due to exuberance of imagination. At times there is a superfetation of imagery, as when Natalie, united to the impetuous Victor Radnor, is described as being "in the car with a racing charioteer—up beside a more than Titanically audacious balloonist," a flower detached from a river's bank and swept along in its current past every obstacle; or Victor himself is, amongst other things, a goldfish in his globe, and a pot on the fire with a loose lid, in the same breath; while the unhappy Reverend Septimus Barmby is "the Inchcape Bell, the

curfew, the cathedral organ, a whacker of the platitudes," merely because he has a fine bass voice many fathoms deep. Profuse images compare Vernon Whitford to "Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar," the goat in the cave beheld of Robinson Crusoe, and, more poetically, "a far-seen solitary iceberg in Southern waters." Willoughby, Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson declares to us, "has a leg." The phrase is witty, and its hidden possibilities lured the author to a two-page exposition of all that it implies, which might seem to some an overriding of the good steed Epigram. Wit is not often forced in the Meredithian world, but our author, perhaps too eager to improve the conversational art so little practised, fails to impress us with his transcript of the conversation at Diana's dinner, even though "they had not wrangled, had never stagnated, and were digested, refreshed, making the hour of the feast a balanced recreation and a regeneration of body and mind." But how rare are these instances of comparative failure compared with those in which the use of metaphor is admirable in its truth and aptness, its force and humour. We are taken by storm when we read of Clara "carrying youth like a flag," and need no further description of her beauty; we are at once attracted when we read that Nesta had a heart "of many strings open to be musical to simplest wandering airs or to the gales"; we have the most vivid impression of Sandra Belloni stamped upon

our minds as the girl with the hair like a "wreath of black briony" and a face "like the after-sunset across a rose-garden." Those pests of London who would force their undesired attentions upon fair maidens are impaled for ever as "Cupid's footpads"; and who can resist the droll image which describes the sadly sweet countenance of the Countess de Saldar? Even so "you may behold some majestic lighthouse glimmering over the tumult of a midnight sea." How true is Alvan's "barriers are for those who cannot fly," and how it at once paints the temperament of the man; how true that those who avoid the region of Romance "escape the title of Fool at the cost of a celestial crown," that friendship "if it is not life's poetry is a credible prose, a land of low undulations instead of Alps," or, to come to smaller things, that "advertisement is the plush of speech," and that "the modern club is the Baron's Castle minus the Baron." When Dudley Sowerby "wears his morality cap-à-pie," or Willoughby on his grand tour "holds a review of his maker's grotesques," or John Bull is called a "rubicund grotesque impervious to all that does not hit the sensual eye of him with cake or fist," the aptness of the comparison enforces Meredith's vision of them and sets these characters in a new light. When Meredith declares that Alvan was like a cathedral organ foully handled by demons, he is doing more than uttering an epigram, he is coining a phrase which

plumbs Alvan to his depths. If "a little mouse of a thought scampered out of one of the chambers of [Redworth's] head and darted along the passages," we are struck by the boldness and the strangeness of the comparison, but we recognise that nothing could have hit the truth better. The explosive and expansive force of ideas finds its exact resemblance in the image of the "smoking brimstone to the nose, dread Arabian afrites invisible in the air jumping out of vases armed for the slaughter of the venerable and the cherished, the ivyclad and the artistically haloed"—a wonderfully terse example of a metaphor within a metaphor. Our author is indeed one who "springs an image with a word, and paints lasting pictures." He vignettes a character in a phrase when he talks of "a dainty rogue in porcelain," or of another maiden who bears "a romantic tale on her eyelashes," when he gives the three beauties of *The Amazing Marriage* each their image, Carinthia "a beautiful Gorgon, a haggard Venus," Henrietta Fakenham "a sun going down on a stormy noon," and Countess Livia "a moon riding through a stormy night." He epitomises a volume when Mrs. Lovell celebrates the splendid boyishness of the French, "their unequalled devotion, their merciless intellects, the oneness of the nation when the sword is bare and pointing to a chivalrous enterprise. She had her imagination of them as of a streaming banner in the jaws of the storm, with snows among the clouds and lightning

in the chasms."[1] The test of an epigram is the question whether it is the invention or the imagination which has brought it to birth. If it be the child of the latter, it is an added dazzling glory, illustrating the truth that in the higher arithmetic of genius two and two do not always make four. A Meredithian epigram is not usually "a torch to see the sunrise," but a brilliant searchlight of the soul, casting gleams of brightness into the world's darkest places and wresting their secrets from the unfathomed depths. It is not the product of the midnight oil, it has no smack of nails bitten to the quick ; it is the free outpouring of a fertile mind and joyful commerce with the elements. And then his use of metaphor is so bold, unhackneyed, poetic, unconventional, and all by turns. He will bear you to Alpine heights of poetry, and then deposit you without more ado on dear Mother Earth. He has no sham dignity, and if broth-pots and bath-slippers will drive in his point, let London be the one and Dr. Schlesien's politeness the other. If he wishes to depict a man of choleric temperament whose savage breast is soothed by music—no uncommon combination—then Colney Durance must take to his music "like an angry little boy to his barley-sugar with a growl and a grunt" ; or the active little Skepsey—what better presentment could there be of him than the "queer little water-wagtail,"

[1] Quoted previously, on p. 124, to illustrate Meredith's view of the French.

truth and a glimpse of Westermain together? We are thrilled, and overjoyed by the best of such images; the epigram is here not a pleasurable titillation of the intellective faculties, it is a beam of light which illuminates wide regions of the dark.

Meredith does not linger, as a rule, to elaborate a formal simile; he hastes from one metaphor to another, leaving the reader to work them out. But some fine instances of simile occur, notably the comparison of Alvan to the mettled steed.[1] On the other hand, few authors take more delight in allegorising whether at a volume's length, as where he figures the overthrow of illusion to the Shaving of Shagpat, or in a thumbnail sketch, as in the vivid swift comparison of Human Nature to the ship with the "mutinous crew, the shattered timbers, and the drunken captain." Youth has its full share in these allegories. Youth's soaring pride and dreamful imagination are aptly limned in the description of Demogorgon and the Hippogriff. Meredith lived in a world of pictures, he personified abstractions and visualised airy nothings, and such was his swiftness of mind that the allegory was fully fledged in an instant. Much of his force is due to the vividness and impetus of his imagination when he seized a thought and in a flash clothed it with flesh and blood.

In one case we have declared that the allegory ran to a volume, and that is sufficiently demonstrated by Mr. McKechnie's thoughtful working

[1] Quoted on p. 49.

out of it. The master himself sometimes denied the soft impeachment, sometimes confessed, according to his mood, but there really seems no doubt. It is a noble conception nobly worked out, and were we to accept the negative opinion, *The Shaving of Shagpat* for all its brilliance would be a tedious exercise in the Arabian style, a fatiguing *tour de force*. It is these gleams of deeper meaning rising from time to time which encourage us to pursue our quest, which induce us to tolerate the machinery of Afrites and magicians, and which give a richer zest to the great wit and humour of the book. The modern world cannot endure a Märchen of over two hundred pages even at Meredith's hands unless it contains something more than an odd tale. *The Shaving of Shagpat* is a wonderful piece of wit and phantasy, but it has its profound philosophy and piercing imagination as well. As he draws to the end of Shibli's enterprise he fuses all together. The tale proceeds with an overpowering impulse, the style *flows* on with impetuous force, it has something of the smooth virtuosity of De Quincey, it runs on smoother wheels than usually. When we reach the Great Hall and sit with the King and all his ministers and share the anxious interest of Bootlbac the drum-beater and Areep the dervish, Zeel the garlic-seller and Krooz el Krazawik the carrier, Dōb the confectioner, Sallâp the broker, and Azawool the builder, we feel that we are witnessing a great drama in the history of

humanity with a climax and a *περιπέτεια*. We are whirled along by the impetuous sentences with their long-drawn harmonies, we feel nearly as Baba Mustapha who was "shot off violently, and whirled away like a stone from a sling, even into the outer air beyond the city walls into the distance of waste places." Finally, the wonderful transformation scene told in short racing sentences is accomplished. "Shibli Bagarag had smitten clean through the Identical. . . . Day was on the baldness of Shagpat."

> "Some doubt Eternity; from life begun,
> Has folly ceased within them, sire to son?
> So ever fresh Illusions will arise
> And lord creation, until men are wise.
>
> "That is a distant period; so prepare
> To fight the false, O youths, and never spare!
> For who would live in chronicles renowned
> Must combat folly, or as fool be crowned."

But the truest test of style is not its excellence in momentary flashes, but its effect in the mass, its effect first in the sentence, next in the paragraph, then in the chapter, and finally the cumulative force of the whole work. That no style could more adequately express its author's personality has been already enforced. It reveals a mind teeming beyond most minds in images, of incomparable fertility, marked by its learning, master of phrase and lyricism. It remains to analyse it more minutely.

Style must have range and variety, variety that may match the various moods fleeting like clouds

across the heaven, it must have contrast, and it must have economy. The range of Meredith's style is not as wide as that of some. The style is chiefly concerned with the minute analysis of subtle characteristics and reflections upon such analysis. It can be brilliant; it can be profound; it can be impassioned, soaring with perfervid rapture; it can be ironic, archly mirthful, playing with words as a kitten with a ball of thread; it can abandon itself to fantastic inventions and to comic situations which defy all probability with a gusto that bears its readers away upon the tide of the farcical; it can be vividly descriptive and impetuously rapid; it rises at once if only for an instant to poetry when Nature comes upon the scene; it is pathetic rarely, harrowing in the manner of *Othello* or *King Lear* never. It lacks ease and rhythm, for the epigrammatic style is a series of bounds and detonations rather than the full strong flow of ordered narrative proceeding like a mighty host to some appointed end. It has never the divine simplicity which marks the style "absolute in its numbers" and which is found so often in Greek and particularly in Homer, nor the noble austerity of Wordsworth at his best. The philosopher is always on the rostrum, and though he expounds sufficiently he never steps down and talks to us in Thackeray's delightful style. He is restrained in dealing with the emotions, and eschews the tearful mawkish and the moist-eyed sentimental; he never belabours

his readers with great thumpings of the pathetic nor does he splash them as he wallows in the sentimental, as Sterne delights to do. But in the exercise of the intellect he is uncontrollable. He gives free rein to fancy and invention, he can be elaborate and even laboured, he walks too quickly for those who attend him, he will be abstruse and lose all contact with his readers, but goes serenely on, and makes a solitary mountain excursion till they are nearer. Yet he has a fine imagination not too sharply curbed, he storms us by the brilliance of his poetry, he bestows on us in armfuls goodly jests as any could desire who is not addicted slave of the rough-and-tumble of the practical joke, and his people are splendid. He is sometimes volcanic and then sweeps everything away in streams of boiling lava, but he prefers to sap a solemn sentimentalist with an arch smile. He excels in the reflective, and makes the prentice effusions of an untaught genius like Dickens seem childish and unreadable by comparison. He is his own best commentator and explains his own persons with subtlety, wit, and incomparable learning, reigning supreme in his own world. If we grow faint beneath the teacher and fail to understand, the fault is ours for living in a different universe. These things "are interesting to philosophers, if not maidens" and the rest of us. And yet it is a pleasant land could we but reach it, the halls, the cloisters, of Alexandria swept by an English south-

wester, with a distant vision of snow-capped Alps or austere Dolomites tinged by the glow of sunrise.

As for fine scenes, every novel will contain examples of Meredith's strength and weakness. Let any reader con the scene in the Scala theatre when Vittoria sings the great song of Italy revived, or the duel in the mountain passes in the same novel, the idyll of Wilming Weir in *Sandra Belloni*, the love-scenes in *The Ordeal*, or the final scene of all, *The Tragic Comedians*, almost in its entirety, but particularly the first meeting of Alvan and Clotilde and Alvan's fever of suspense, Beauchamp's delirium, the operation upon Lady Dunstane, or, in other genres, the campanile of Lugano with its produce of insomnia, the fight between Ines and Todd—worthy of comparison with Hazlitt's similar picture—Beauchamp and Rénée on the Grand Canal, Beauchamp and Cecilia Halkett's dialogue on the yacht, Evan and Rose Jocelyn's talk by the bathing-house, Matey and Aminta's swim, the luncheon visit to Willoughby of Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer to select Clara's wedding present, the picnic—"the battle of the bulldogs"—and the supper at the Green Dragon in *Evan Harrington*, Nesta's railway journey in *One of our Conquerors*, Algernon Blancove waiting for his dinner, the midnight dialogue between the Misses Duvidney with reference to Victor Radnor's child, when the two ladies, each on her separate bed, are moved to ruth by Tasso's fall from grace,—and after such a banquet he will

not question our author's mastery of language and extent of compass. When he fails to hold, it is through wit's excess, or wire-drawn subtlety, or through a certain lack of contrast. There are no failures through complete misjudgment, as when Dickens discourses on spontaneous combustion or sheds big tears o'er little Nelly's bier. Monotony is art's gravest error, and brilliant monotony wearies as much as any other kind. Of excellence in shorter passages a few examples may be given.

Nature can always cast a spell over Meredith, and generally over his readers, as in the exquisite poetry of this nocturne. "Eastward on her left behind a cedar the moon had cast off a thick cloud and shone through the cedar bars with a yellowish hazy softness, making rosy gold of the first passion of the tide, which writhing and straining on through mazy lights grew wide upon the wonderful velvet darkness underlying the wooded bands." The lovers meet and are influenced by the beauty of the scene.

"'I will look at you. Only take my hand. See, the moon is getting whiter. The water there is like a pool of snakes; and then they struggle out, and roll over and over and stream on lengthwise. I can see their long flat heads and their eyes; almost their skins. No, my lover! do not kiss me. I lose my peace.'" The meeting comes to its conclusion told in language still of silvery beauty. "So now the soft Summer hours flew like white doves from off the mounting moon, and the lovers

turned to go, all being still; even the noise of the waters still to their ears, as life that is muffled in sleep. They saw the cedar grey-edged under the moon; and Night that clung like a bat, beneath its ancient open palms. The bordering sward about the falls shone silvery. In its shadow was a swan. These scenes are but beckoning hands to the hearts of lovers waving them on to that Eden which they claim; but when the hours have fled they know it; and by the palpitating light in it they know that it holds the best of them!" It is a strain of softest music in which seems distilled the essence of all the delight which faëry moonlight has awakened in all the generations of those who joy in beauty and have found delight in love.

Or again a lover—son of a Methodist worker in leather to be precise—meditates from a height above a German spa on the high-born queen of his heart below him. "Beneath this roof lay the starry She. He was elated to lie beneath it also; and he beheld his heavenly lady floating on the lull of soft, white clouds among her sister-spheres. After the way of imaginative young men, he had her features more accurately now she was hidden, and he idealised her more. He could escape for a time from his coil of similes and paint for himself the irids of her large long grey eyes darkly rimmed; purest water-grey, lucid within the ring beneath an arch of lashes. He had them fast; but then he fell to contemplating their exceeding rareness; and the mystery of the

divinely grey swung a kindled fancy to the flight with some queen-witch of woods, of which a youth may dream under the spell of toil, East or West, among forest branches. . . . She had the effect on the general mind of a lofty crag-castle with a history." It is a prose rendering of an Elizabethan's sonnet to his mistress's eyebrows with a dash of modern philosophy thrown in.

In all these finer passages Nature is somewhere, if only in the background, giving to everything a subtle proportion and a subtle harmony. It is so in the beautiful last pages of *Vittoria*, when she travels o'er the mountains to seek her husband. "Soft dreams of sacred nuptial tenderness, tragic images, wild pity, were like phantoms encircling her, plucking at her as she went, but they were beneath her feet, and she kept them from lodging between her breasts. The thought that her husband, though he should have perished, was not a life lost if their child lived, sustained her powerfully. It seemed to whisper at times almost as it were Carlo's ghost breathing in her ears, 'On thee!' On her the further duty devolved and she trod down hope, lest it should build her up and bring a shock to surprise her fortitude; she put back alarm.

"The mountains and the valleys scarce had names for her understanding; they were but a scene where the will of her Maker was at work. Rarely has a soul been so subjected by her own force.

"Yet when her eyes lingered on any mountain

gorge, the fate of her husband sang within it a strange chant, ending in a key which rang sounding through all her being, and seemed to question heaven. This music framed itself; it was still when she looked at the shrouded mountain-tops. A shadow meeting sunlight on the long green slopes aroused it, and it hummed above the tumbling hasty foam, and penetrated hanging depths of foliage, sad-hued rock, clefts, dark green ravines; it became convulsed where the mountains threw forward in a rushing upward line against the sky, there to be severed at the head by a cloud."

Such passages will stand comparison with the finest. Our author's richest harmonies are won in prose not verse, in novels not in professed poetry. Philosopher and intellectual as he is, he knows the inspiration of the tripod, and ever and anon the poet in him bursts forth and claims a hearing.

But literature has, too, its architectural side, its form and design, and some whose faculty of expression is glorious, lack the organising faculty which sets everything in its proper place, and gives the finest passages a heightened effect through the aptness of their contest, achieving a unity in diversity. The plot of novel or of play is a sore burden, a difficulty rarely triumphed over even by the greatest writers, for a plot is in appearance an unnatural division of one section of the broad stream of human life from all the others. Human life is a continuous performance. The craftsman who can

cut up life neatly into so many lengths often can do little more. He has mastered his puppets, but they are still puppets and the life is not in them. The greater the artist's creative power, the greater his difficulties. He has conceived characters which are rich in life and interest, and which, like wayward children, are so conscious of their independence that they proceed regardless of their creator, who is so often compelled to slay them to bring matters to an issue. A writer will often manifest great skill in the development of his plot, will show his mastery of dramatic effect and achieve a fine climax. But alas! by an inevitable law which Aristotle first perceived, a play (or novel) must have beginning, middle, and end. It is the *dénouement* which gives trouble, and accident, despite all canons to the contrary, will here play its part. Feverel accidentally meets Lord Paulet and fights him, losing as a sequel wife and reason, Edward Blancove accidentally arrives too late to stop the marriage between Dahlia and Sedgett, Lord Ormont makes restitution just when Aminta has departed for Switzerland with Weyburn, Beauchamp dies by a deplorable misadventure, just as Romeo and Juliet die by accident and *Hamlet* ends with a glaringly improbable series of catastrophes. In comedy, the sense of probability being less keenly roused, we heed the matter less. If Evan gains Rose by the death of Juliana who has left him Beckley Court, if Clara by some

marvellously just dispensation falls to Vernon Whitford, we merely thank the author for the diversion bestowed upon us by the way, and are lightly concerned at the huddling together of the last chapters. Great authors curiously resemble great conquerors. They trample upon all precedents and blithely cut the Gordian knot. A plot is, after all, a mechanism for the display of human life, and the exposition of human character. It is a house rigged up for men to dwell in. Great writers bribe our perceptions to dupe our intellects. If their personages interest, we look no gift horse in the mouth, we do not scrutinise the novelist's dolls' house with the rigour of a building inspector. The story moves, and moves easily. We are satisfied and do not watch too closely the final sleight-of-hand.

A plot is as necessary to a novel as a body to a soul. But just as there never was a perfect man, so there has never been a perfect plot. It is because human life refuses to reduce itself to a formula, because we are arbitrary in our choice of a beginning and arbitrary in our choice of an end, even though all may have lived happy ever after. Every novelist is confronted with the same difficulty of exhibiting the characters which he has conceived under a series of circumstances which bring out in the clearest light the chief traits in those characters. Some have overcome the difficulty better than others, some have been

badly in need of a *deus ex machina*, who has not offered his services. Some, like Thackeray, having once conceived their characters in outline have yielded themselves to the impulse of their plot, their characters have developed an independent existence, the author gives them the reins. Such a method or absence of method has sometimes been highly successful. It resembles the spontaneous working of nature, though nature can be disordered, though she produces rank weeds as well as trim rose-gardens. Others have resorted to the startling or to the improbable to bring their fictions to an end. Others boldly ignore the need of an ending and merely stop, and if they have carried through their tale with verve and gusto we forgive them. The author who deals in the comic has perhaps an easier task. We tolerate more readily the unreal and the forced in a work devoted chiefly to our amusement, we concede with alacrity the *plaudite* which is sought of us, and we are not extreme to mark what is done amiss. In truth man lives a double life, the outer life conditioned by hard facts and grim realities, the bed of Procrustes on which stern Nature flings us all, and the inner life in which the ego blossoms into full completeness and the fancy luxuriates in the most glowing dreams. There is a duality sometimes ironic, sometimes tragic, between what a man is and what he would be, and in seizing and portraying that man the literary artist is beset with the same difficulty.

Meredith, being mortal, is subject to the same troubles with his plots as other people. He was born too late for the splendid carelessness of the novels flung forth by Dickens, Thackeray, and the eighteenth century, but, like his predecessors, he must end his volumes somehow. In any case he never scamped his work. He never disrelished brain-stuff, and where he failed, he failed by reason of the inherent difficulties of the particular problem. But he has enough skill to persuade us to palliate improbabilities, and in many cases he does more than that. *The Tragic Comedians,* a story based on real events, is well enough constructed; *The Shaving of Shagpat* has an obvious unity, though with supernatural machinery the task is rendered easier; *Diana of the Crossways* comes to no improbable conclusion. At other times we are less satisfied. The latter part of *Vittoria* contains no very lucid exposition of motive; *Celt and Saxon* is scarcely a novel at all; Weyburn and Aminta as co-heads of a Swiss boarding-school on advanced lines for both sexes are a bold defiance of the natural. The missing of one's way in a London suburb (*Rhoda Fleming*), a duel in *The Ordeal,* the death of a consumptive heiress (*Evan Harrington*) are obvious expedients for tying up loose ends. Yet after such glorious exuberance of phantasy, as we find in *The Egoist* and *Evan Harrington,* we are in no censorious mood. In others again the texture is more closely knit, and save for some one grave improb-

ability we may regard the *dénouement* as skilfully and artistically procured. However, if no novel might be written unless it had a perfect plot, the numbers published would be small, and these in interest and in power would be immeasurably inferior to masterpieces which have no mechanical perfection.

But returning to the analogy of architecture, we must declare that it is a narrow criticism which examines too vigorously the mechanism of a novel and which concentrates this examination entirely upon its end. We shall find many stable, many noble, and many beautiful buildings, which if we listen to the purists of construction have no right to stand at all. After all, a novel well started will finish itself somehow. Meredith can develop his theme and bring us to a crisis in the master's manner. *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* down to the marriage of Richard is a splendid example. He does not digress, though he "interdrones" with a current analysis of character, and his expositions are quite different from the colloquies of Thackeray and Fielding with the reader. If we consider the commentary on his characters as an integral part of his novels—and Meredith insisted that it was—there is little which is inessential, though passages like Algernon Blancove's wait for his dinner have been criticised as delaying the main course of the story. His analysis and explication of motives are generally satisfying. We do not, however, understand Richard Feverel's sudden cooling towards his young bride,

nor the dual personality of Robert Armstrong, nor Lord Fleetwood's treatment of his newly wedded wife; perhaps in a novel entitled *The Amazing Marriage* we must accept that *ex hypothesi*. In *One of our Conquerors* we have an extraordinary wealth of material which has been criticised as ill-arranged. Yet no novel is richer in suggestion or in the play of a diverting fancy. Colney Durance's satiric serial is an example of a briliant *jeu d'esprit* which appears and reappears like a thread of brilliant hue in different chapters. It is undoubtedly true that the tale is not an integral part of the novel, but it adds much to its rich complexity, and few could wish that it had not been ingrafted in the history of Victor and Natalie. In the same novel the Brighton episode of Nesta and Mrs. Marsett dealing with society's treatment of injured women runs to some length, but it certainly has its bearing on Nesta's development. Jenny Denham in *Beauchamp's Career* seems an unnecessary personage—even though Beauchamp marries her—in view of the number of fair women who were prepared to take her place.

So might run the verdict of a piecemeal criticism. But a general survey leads us to the conclusion that Meredith's books are unities not a congeries of men and matters. Episodes are sometimes inserted which give richness to the texture, or, as in *The Shaving of Shagpat*, in imitation of the Oriental style, but they are not alien matter after the mode of Fielding and of Smollett, padding to swell

a volume. There are many brilliant and striking scenes: the duet of the Misses Patterne in which Clara makes a trio, the concluding scene in *The Egoist* so wonderfully "staged"—for Meredith has a fine dramatising sense—the departure of the Countess de Saldar from Beckley, Dr. Middleton and the grand vintage, the interview between Roy Richmond and Squire Beltham, the conversation concerning the hayrick at Raynham Abbey, the bombshell of Richard's wedding cake in which Adrian Harley again plays a prominent part, the scene where Sedgett demands his wife Dahlia, and her attempted suicide, and many others. All these arise quite naturally from the action and in some cases are of great importance in its development. In the more unmixed manifestations of the Comic Spirit the author has more scope. He can set complication upon complication to heighten the intrigue, and our diversion suspends our critical faculties. Such examples are *The Egoist* and *Evan Harrington*, in both of which Meredith appears as a light-hearted charioteer who gives his steeds free rein, yielding to the moment's fancy, snatching by inspired opportunism triumph after triumph out of the most difficult situations. Such is the power of gusto which by a resolute and consistent shutting of the eyes to the probable gets more and more venturesome in each successive crisis, and at the end loudly and boldly hails the *deus ex machina* who is waiting hard by in readiness.

In the construction of isolated scenes the ability to write effective dialogue is all-important. Here Meredith's great advantage is that he can invent more brilliant dialogue than any man before him. It is a disadvantage, too, for the natural result is that every character is tinged with the Meredithian colour. We do not in real life talk like Meredithian characters; would that we could at intervals! The exchanges are marvellous, almost exhausting, like nothing so much as an incessant rally between two tennis players of marvellous brilliancy, in which stroke follows stroke so quickly that the spectator almost misses them. Even the working man, who indeed by nature has much power of "explosive repartee," gets something of this faculty, and rounds for instance upon Victor Radnor for his "punctilio." There is keen delight in watching these ideal patterns of the art of speech, and profitable study. Conversation, the worst neglected of all arts in England, can be a fine art indeed. As we listen to Diana and Percy contesting at Caen, Willoughby engaged in combat (especially in the final scene), the various encounters of the Countess de Saldar, we get glimpses of the possibilities of dialogue as rapid, terse, pointed, forcible as the Greek stichomythia, and far less stilted. Dialogue of this kind can arise only amid the intellectual leaders or the aristocracy of rank long trained in diplomacy. A fine example of the power of wit, "manipulation of meanings," occurs in *The Amazing*

Marriage. Fleetwood is the young nobleman who must never be thwarted but is yet the slave of his word. He plights himself in haste, and keeps his troth to the letter only. "My Lord, I drive to your church-door on the 14th of the month at 10 a.m. to keep my appointment with Miss C. J. Kirby, if I do not blunder the initials. Your lordship's obedient servant, Fleetwood." Such is the prelude. We are to behold one who can be artistically brutal, studiedly insolent, selfish and unscrupulous, and withal a grand seigneur. It is a type which requires all the author's skill, but extenuations are subtly suggested if we look closely enough. There is madness in the family, and Fleetwood's final retirement to a monastery suggests the torture of a self-lacerated intellect, the triumph of long-quelled pangs of conscience. He is conceived in the grand style. We feel that manners *can* make the man, and that speech, that wonderful contrivance for expressing thought, *does* flower in the palaces of such. They are artists in language by heredity, supremely skilful in half-tones, Olympians indeed who can cast over all their weaknesses and cruelties a dignity which robs them of their grossness. The consummate dialogues between superb husband and wronged wife, striking both in what is said and left unsaid, are noble examples of Athenian *σοφία*.

But novels are written to show characters in action and development. If we are merciful to a weak

plot, we require at any rate the compensation of consummate portraiture. Character has been delineated since Homer, if not earlier. Men first portrayed unconsciously character as it displayed itself in deeds; men later learnt to reveal it by converse as well as action. The latest method is to evolve it by a running commentary and elaborate analysis—a method not the best, but suited best to an analytic age, the only method for those who, like Meredith, are penetrated by the importance of subtler delineation. Not once but many times Meredith pauses to defend his elaborateness. His effort is "to render events as consistent to your understanding as a piece of logic, through an exposition of character. Character must ever be a mystery, only to be explained in some degree by conduct, and that is very dependent on accident." Present inexactness will not do for Posterity. "Posterity . . . will have studied and developed nature so far as to know the composition of it or not in equal mixture of the philosophic and the romantic, and that credible realism is to be produced solely by an involvement of those two elements. Present methods will not do ten centuries hence. For the English, too, are a changeable people in the sight of ulterior time." Instead of objurgating the timid intrusions of Philosophy, we are prayed to invoke her presence. Character is worth studying, but its analysis must be carried much farther than it has been in the past.

Such a mode of delineation is obviously suited to the complex characters of an artificial age, to men, thoughtful, meditative, shy of revealing their inmost nature, men whose motives need much analysis, men whose high rank, great possessions, and ample wealth, have enabled them to develop the more highly civilised qualities, rather than to the portraiture of a son of the soil, a cockney, a vulgarian, types such as Dickens might love to handle. With Meredith all countrymen seem to grin through a horse-collar. It is not that our author flouts or despises any man. It is merely that he is so clever, he looks down from such a distant elevation upon the insignificantly small, that his vision is unable to reproduce it without grave errors of refraction. Gammon is a marvellous character. He is a bit of primaeval nature striking in himself and adapted with magnificent art to the general ensemble of the characters concerned in Dahlia Fleming's tragic story—the one true example of humanity which gives us the everyday point of view in scenes of harrowing distress, as in his way does the drunken porter of Macbeth. But he is a trifle unreal. There is just a soupçon of the menagerie which would not have been suggested by a novelist of far less skill who was in closer touch with ordinary man.

It is not true that in the pre-Meredithian age the delineation of character was unknown. Yet it is clear that such immortal creations as Trulliber, Squire Western, and others, are more justly styled sketches

of superficial characteristics carried through with a spirit beyond all praise, and that Scott, that master of the grandly simple style, preferred to paint by broad sweeps, not by an elaboration of minute touches, and that others like Dickens and Smollett merely caricatured. Women again, except when portrayed by their own sex and by such great writers as Jane Austen and George Eliot, tend to be spiteful viragos or sweetly superficial Amelias whether of Fielding or of Thackeray—Dora Spenlows, Arabella Allens—a curious anticipation of the "flapper"—*et hoc genus omne*. The truth is Meredith is chiefly concerned with the depiction of a new type of character, heroically impetuous or sweetly charming, but intellectual, surrounded by intellectuals, responsive to all the movements of an age of change, careless of Mrs. Grundy and neglectful of early Victorianism, men and women for whom that queen, as far as her point of view is concerned, is almost as dead as Queen Anne; witty and appreciative of art, mellowed into philosophy if they have reached middle age, gentle, satiric, and even mildly cynical, keen observers of the foibles, emancipated from the prejudices of those of lower rank or inferior education, types whose delineation does indeed require new methods of exposition and a new kind of novel. In other words the novel has followed History and claims to rank, in part at least, as one of the sciences, and just as the measuring sciences have advanced or are advancing to greater precision

and to the fifth decimal place, so human nature too must have its Ordnance Surveys, its large-scale maps, and the surveyor of human life must cock his vernier at Snowdon and the lesser heights.

Those writers who are equally skilled at portraying all mankind's varieties may be counted on one hand. Meredith is not one of these. His great achievement—and it is a unique achievement—is to have succeeded with a new type, the type which has just been described, the intellectual. All Meredith's novels have a unity, the best of all unities, which is that they have proceeded from one organising mind. He has thought out his own universe and all within it is in harmony. Not that all his characters are philosophers, his heroes and heroines are too youthful. But they are one and all steeped in the atmosphere of the intellectual, and if they are not intellectuals they are as often as not poets fiery and ardent, morally intrepid, fearless of nothing, not even of thinking things to their logical conclusions—in a word, lovers in the romantico-poetic phase which seems to Meredith as to Plato the best prelude to philosophy, incarnations perchance of the youthful Meredith, or of the heroine of *Love in a Valley*, most charming of all maidens these since the Forest of Arden passed from the ken of man and the enchanted isle of Prospero sank below the waves. So Meredith's great difference from all other writers is that his heroes are real heroes, neither Tom Joneses nor Henry

Mortons, nor Edward Waverleys,[1] and his heroines real heroines who escape from tameness and insipidity. A writer who has achieved this has achieved enough to win him immortality. Moreover, our youthful heroes and heroines are encompassed by a galaxy of intellect, their monitors and spectators, warning them too late perhaps—the philosopher does not always shine in action—but ever stimulating thought, ever affording us a picture of society risen to a high level. For these no treatment can be too subtle. We watch them with profound attention, we listen with delight to the brilliant game of speech, so sore a toil to an inarticulate race. Adrian Harley, Vernon Whitford, Dr. Middleton in his steam-hammer style, Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, De Craye and Willoughby himself, what a notable gathering of brilliant people all in one single volume! Colney Durance, Simeon Fenellan, Adrian Harley, Stukely Culbrett, Lady Charlotte Eglett, Mrs. Lovell, Agostino, Shrapnel, the Countess de Saldar—not to be rejected though she has more craft than intellect—Diana, wit by profession unfortunately, as one reviews the novels and takes a wider sweep, they come trooping past, characters such as none had conceived before and none had wit to shape. At length we have an author who can do justice to brain, giving it its rightful place in novels which claim to be a presentment of the whole range of human life. At length we have an author who can give his clever

[1] Harry Richmond is a notable exception.

people free rein in speech without making the contrast between presumed wit and the reality too glaringly discrepant, for we have an author who must find some vent for his wit or perish.

One result is that almost every novel is provided with an epigram safe-conductor as a means of delivering the author from the mass of epigrams with which he is surcharged. Sometimes there is a book like Sir Austin Feverel's *Pilgrim's Scrip* or *The Book of Egoism,* at other times it is a wit in person, Colney Durance, Gower Woodseer, Diana herself, Stukely Culbrett. It is a device, but a legitimate device, for the man who says brilliant things may now win entrance into the novel, and the balance is redressed even yet to but a slight extent. But beside the professed wit we have the scholar, Vernon Whitford, or the heavy-metalled Dr. Middleton, a more pedantic type—the author knows that wit and wisdom are not always found in union —or an inspiring force like Shrapnel, whose Carlylean style and sentiments so greatly horrify Romfrey Hall. These men of the study win Meredith's admiration, and this admiration comes out clearly in the portraiture of Vernon Whitford, a justification and a eulogy of the life within a library. Vernon is a sketch of Leslie Stephen, one of Meredith's best-loved friends, " a sketch but merely a sketch, not doing him full justice, though the strokes within and without are correct." He is a scholar and a gentleman who may have academic doubts as to

whether he should woo the divine Clara, but who is always ready with wise and resolute counsel in a crisis whether at railway-stations or elsewhere, who, though he sees his weaknesses clearly enough, permits Sir Willoughby to act the lordly patron, but refuses to let him ruin the youngster Crossjay. Nobly reticent, quietly resolved, he is of more heroic stuff than Willoughby the Magnificent; had it been otherwise his creator would not have bestowed Clara upon him. And Meredith does more than that. The romantic tale of "the Sleeping Beauty" is reversed. It is Vernon who sleeps in the hammock beneath the white cherry-blossom, and it is Clara who gazes at him and is unconsciously filled with a sentiment which develops and reveals itself only some time after. It is not fanciful to detect some resemblance between Vernon and George Warrington, and the resemblance extends to more than an unhappy first marriage. But the contrast is as great as the resemblance, and a study of the two characters will reveal much of the different treatment by Meredith and Thackeray of two kindred types.

A man of similar characteristics and a real hero is Matthew Weyburn, though modesty forbids the assumption that all schoolmasters are scholars of the Whitford calibre. Weyburn is the strong man, who does not lead cavalry charges, or act the hero—for he is one in whose case arms have yielded to the toga—but resolute, unshakeable, clear-visioned, a born leader. At school he was the natural ruler, strenuous both at

work and games, exercising unquestioned sway, with a few pointed sentences dominating his fellows as he pleased. His father dies while he is a schoolboy. Matey, unable to go into the army, resolves to be schoolmaster, to his friends' amazement, for there still persists that attitude of the world which led the Eton master of the tale to disguise his departure to resume his work at Eton as " a visit to some friends in Bucks." But Weyburn has ideals and plans for the future which he can set forth with much skill when he unbosoms himself to Lady Charlotte Eglett, who for all her prejudices is a good judge of a man. " Rhetoric haunts and Rhetoric bedevils the vindication of the clouded," but our author is a stout champion of the distressed schoolmaster. He joins in the jest at Weyburn, but he is laughing at the laughers, and, despite all temptations and despite his own title, he has fixed on his hero, who is not a Peninsular veteran with a peerage but a plain schoolmaster. " The schoolmaster ploughs to make a richer world. He has to be careful not to smell of his office. He must like all boys and it's human nature not so far removed from the dog ; only it's a supple human nature, there's the beauty of it." It is finely said, and we in due course hear much of interest upon the profession, including some views of the Classics. " Latin and Greek must be drilled-in, languages we filched from, converting in tokens not the standard coin." As we behold a schoolmaster seated for the first time on

this elevation it is gratifying to reflect that it was a schoolmaster, Dr. Jessopp of Norwich, who was among the first to detect the greatness of *The Ordeal.*

But not all men are scholars or even schoolmasters. Meredith's world is peopled with many normal, average Olympians, by no means lay-figures, all portrayed as precisely as the general economy of the novel permits. They are generally persons of wealth and position. Of them Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson is a type. Elderly, more witty than most, diplomatic, by tactful management of Sir Willoughby she almost rules the county, holding the important position and influencing the tone of her neighbours in the way that women of her type often do. Lady Blandish, the *grande dame,* sentimentalist, keenly perceptive in many ways, and receptive up to her limits; Lady Jocelyn, no blue-stocking but a woman with a fine intellect and a broad view which makes her neglectful of convention; the Countess Livia; Lady Dunstane, who reads Latin by herself,—these are all portraits by a master even when regard for the general scheme of the particular novel debars Meredith from finishing them too elaborately. Such characters have an important rôle; they are needed to help on the current of things. It is rarely that, as in *The Tragic Comedians* or *Lord Ormont and his Aminta,* we can dispense with figures of the middle ground. Turned off in boundless variety, vividly and clearly

depicted, they show Meredith's art as well as his genius and powers of observation, and they illustrate his view of women as equals, essential to the life of any society worth having and to the development of the Comic Spirit. One type he loved with a tender malice, the female annuitant, the single lady who vegetates upon an income from the funds. The Misses Patterne, those darling aunts of Sir Willoughby, who by Sir Willoughby's gracious permission worship him devoutly, who are paragons of abnegation and self-effacement (unlike some aunts), who duet so charmingly to Clara when they suggest at Willoughby's own impulse their speedy evacuation of Patterne Hall—how delightful they are, how many a volley of silvery laughter do they excite! The Misses Duvidney with their Chippendale elegance and their devotion to their Tasso, Tasso's fall from grace on his journey out to say "his evening hymn," their resulting sleeplessness and their nocturnal converse about Victor in the chaste seclusion of their bedroom are not less pleasing. In contrast with them come the grand old squires Romfrey and Beltham, the less striking Blancove, the doctors, lawyers, and Irishmen, the men about town like Sir Lukin Dunstane, who is the heavy dragoon sketched to the life, and last the fools, of whom Algernon Blancove is the most perfect example. Them, too, the great intellectual can delineate without savagery, e'en though they be those "who are simply the engines of their appetites, and to the

philosophic eye still run wild in woods." For "one learns to have compassion for fools by studying them." We are not told Algernon's fate. "My son's a rascal, everybody knows that," is the paternal judgment on him. We rejoice to know that his prospective sojourn in the colonies is *not* to be cheered, as he had hoped, by the companionship of Rhoda.

Such is the class, the wealthy, landed, and often cultured class, with which Meredith mainly concerns himself, and it clearly shows that "high social breeding is an exquisite performance on the instrument we are." Few of its members have money difficulties, still fewer are poor. For the actually impecunious we must go to Patterne the marine and Anthony Hackbut, characters from another stratum. As a rule the novels, unlike those of Thackeray, do not treat of the vice of snobbery, especially of snobbery in its vilest and most vulgar form, the view that wealthy marriage is all in all for a girl. The hunting of vice in *Evan Harrington* is genial, not envenomed. The great tailor's Christian name Melchisidec is almost the biggest jest of all, for if Melchisidec is Evan Harrington's father, he is George Meredith's grandfather. "I too will take a hand in this," the author seems to say. Laxley is indeed a snob—and much less of a fine gentleman than the tailor's son—but the people of Beckley Court are almost unnaturally indifferent to matters of status. In the snobbery of the Misses Pole—

three *précieuses ridicules*—transported into a later century and a different *milieu*—there is a subtle intellectual element which sets them in a different class from the snob pure and simple. To Lord Fleetwood, the haughty patrician, whose title, wealth, and estates put him far above the common herd, all men, at any rate below the peerage, are equal. "He prized any form of rareness whereever it was visible;" he could listen with pleasure to the talk of an East-end Dissenting preacher [1] sewing boot-leather. Greatly attracted by the aphorisms of Gower Woodseer, son of this preacher, he adds him to his entourage, treats him as an equal, and makes even Sir Meeson Corby, who has to fetch him soap, treat him as an equal.[2] Such is the Olympian attitude to lesser mortals. Yet even in this world we get glimpses of a bourgeoisie, Philistines who alone "breed these choice beauties, put forth these fresh young delicate buds of girls," but in this case it dwells in Germany. A more Britannic view is given by Mrs. Nargett Pagnell, one of "the known worthy good intolerable women whom the burgess turns out in regiments." *She* does not mince the matter. "Oh that upper class! It's a garden, and

[1] One may remark in passing how much finer and more sympathetic is Meredith's delineation of this type than Dickens's violent caricature of it in Chadband and elsewhere.

[2] Sir Meeson should have done what a satellite of a Scottish nobleman did under similar circumstances, whistled. Dr. Johnson (see Boswell's *Tour of the Hebrides*) was greatly pleased at this example of address.

we can't help pushing to enter it, and fair flowers indeed but serpents too, like the tropics." But the struggle for entry does not take place in our author's peaceful precincts.

We pass with a leap to the sons of toil, yeomen like Farmer Fleming or Robert Armstrong who need not detain us, "cits" like Skepsey and Hackbut, or toilers at Mother Earth. The townsmen bear a family likeness. Skepsey is Hackbut a little less crazy and minus a charming niece, Hackbut is a crazier Skepsey without a wife to beat. They both have bees in their bonnets, and both are slightly caricatured, not in the same style as that in which Dickens would have exhibited these somewhat Dickensian characters, yet viewed a little aslant. In Dickens they would have constantly repeated one phrase, in Meredith they are always repeating one idea which buzzes in their ears. They are monomaniacs, Skepsey on the subject of national defence—Meredith's own fad, as he playfully seems to recognise—Hackbut on the vast potentialities of wealth and his (non-existent) millions. The twain have been picked up in the streets of London, but in the course of their development the types have been refined upon.

The sons of Earth are more interesting. True son of Earth himself, Meredith loved the countryman, his racy talk, his dialect, his homely sense, his beer, but he surveys him from a distant elevation and through a telescope. The rustics are extraordinarily lifelike

and vigorous, but they dwell not in Hampshire but in Meredithland. Unlike the carefully drawn rustics of another master who lives in Wessex, they grin through a horse-collar, idealisations not of the stupid but of the earth-born, the bovine,[1] the slow of thought, shrewd, pithy of speech, sententious, obstinate. Of all these Master Gammon is the most marvellous creation, an artistic triumph if not a transcription from Nature, for he is more ideal in his perfection than Nature ever permits. He has "the grand primaeval quality of unchangeableness —a sheep-skin old Time writes his nothings on"— one who is never upset and takes as his sole relaxation a visit to a funeral—"it'll give me an appetite"—one whose capacity for apple dumplings and cups of tea is almost unlimited. Such men in their grand steadiness are the butts of the lighter wits, who ask them to multiply 52 by 21, and are steadfastly denied. With his saurian eye, and three green front teeth, and his box of savings so nobly bestowed upon his master, £1 17*s.* 0*d.* in copper coinage Lycurgean and severe, he is a great conception. And subtly, he contributes much to the general composition, the equilibrium of the

[1] We are reminded of the striking lines in *The Woods of Westermain*:

> "Or, where old-eyed oxen chew
> Speculation with the cud,
> Read their pool of vision through,
> Back to hours when mind was mud."

novel. In a world of betrayed beauty, highborn knaves and fools, cruel Indian widows, and pig-headed yeomen, he is Nature's simplest and best representative, and we may take him as the measure of everything else. We are brought down by him at a moment of tragedy from romance and woe and vague philosophy to simple reality. "It's the heart kills," said Robert. "It's d——d misfortune," murmured the farmer. "It's the wickedness in the world," thought Rhoda. "It's a poor stomach, I reckon," Master Gammon ruminated, naming a factor much more effective than we are willing to admit. Happily his three green teeth save this hater of the sentimental from personal experience of the throes of poor digestion.

But despite the skill and force shown in such creations, our satisfaction is not complete. There are other things to be heard in the country besides "whack! gie them follol." Meredith's rustics may be bovine, but this is not, as he would make us think, their essence. Andrew Hedger "could eat hog a solid hower." But though hog was his feed, hog is not Hedger's essence as the author suggests, but only perhaps his most remarkable accomplishment and his most strongly developed taste. We have Andrew as he appears to an intellectual, but not Andrew as he appeared to the world at large and to his missis, a being with striking powers of assimilating hog undoubtedly, but still a useful member of society. The racy,

graphic, homely talk of the countryman in some rich fruity dialect, which can so often make the casual encounter of two cronies upon a country road or in a country market-place so interesting to the passing observer, is reproduced in Meredith, but the wit is still terser, and subtilised, not quite so obvious and pungent in its force in consequence. The folk of Warbeach River perhaps illustrate this defect most clearly, but the battle of Hillford and Ipley, the Yellow and Blues of the Junction Club and their rivals, the supper at the Green Dragon, are glorious. Here Earth has brought her great son and her more homely children into perfect understanding, and that beer which moistened *their* clay as well as Meredith's has inspired and united both. It is a prose Euripidean chorus from a modern Bacchae with the appropriate dash of Aristophanes.

A vast and glorious gallery it is that Meredith displays to us. Novels and plays must have their ephemerids, their transient characters, their "supers." The novel as a representation of life would be incomplete without its Barmbies and De Crayes, its Hippias Feverels and Chillon Kirbies, Zeel the garlic-seller, Dōb the confectioner, and Bootlbac the drum-beater, its butlers and errant cab drivers, its postilions "who are not drinkers," its ladies' maids like Danvers, its Ripton Thompsons, boys without character who become faithfullest of dogs, its Braintops—beware of a disrelish of Braintops!—its Arthur Rhodeses, youthful poetic adorers

from solicitors' offices of the queenly fair, its public-house proprietresses, its doctors, and the rest. All these personae are characters, not mere masks, well sketched and vividly conceived. We cannot forget Flitch or Mrs. Sumfit, or Raikes, or Sir Purcell Barrett, or Mrs. Chump. Narrow as the author's range is alleged to be, if we enumerate his different characters and their different occupations we shall find them a varied gathering and a numerous host. In the grouping of characters, in sketching a figure so that it may not destroy the balance of the whole, but in developing itself may help by contrast the development of someone else, there can be shown an art as consummate as, and still more subtle than, that demanded in the delineation of one or two outstanding figures. In *The Egoist* we have a large number of characters set with great skill around Clara and Willoughby and their immediate compeers. The way in which all are mutually adjusted deserves high praise. One feels at times that Meredith's imagination was pictorial and that he visualised them all upon some stage, grouped and combined after the manner of a great painter-dramatist. He is particularly skilful in describing the inhabitants of a great country-house, Patterne Hall, Raynham Abbey, Beckley Court, turning out pattern after pattern in inexhaustible variety. *One of our Conquerors* is a novel with its imperfections, but its imperfections are the excess of genius, not the lack of it. The "composition" of Victor's circle,

Victor himself, Natalie and Nesta with their fine voices, Sowerby with the sugared-acid of his closed mouth and his plodding and conscientious flutings, Barmby of the wondrous voice, Mr. Peridon, Miss Pempton the anti-alcoholist, Mr. Graves the vegetarian, Colney Durance the satirist scathing everything with his drop of acid, Simeon Fenellan the ready speaker with the gift of explosive repartee, all so different, all linked together by their common love of music, is a feat of extraordinary mental exuberance. It is not the mere number of figures—any novelist can supply lay figures *ad libitum*—it is because they are so carefully sketched in, because all the detail is so precisely worked in and yet not overloaded, that the result is so brilliant. On the other hand, in *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* and *The Tragic Comedians* Meredith can create his effects by making two or three figures stand out so strongly that the others scarcely matter. The author's force of intellect is shown as much in the less obvious matter of the construction of his novels as in his brilliance of expression and power of climax. His faculty of inventing apt names is notable. Sir Willoughby Patterne—how apt the designation from title to surname! Almost would one think that some *ἰδέα* had been laid up in the heavens, that that Christian name and that surname had waited through all eternity for this predestined perfect union. Everard Romfrey, Chillon Kirby, Natalie

Dreighton, Clara Middleton, Rose Jocelyn, Laetitia Dale, Tracy Runningbrook—he is a poet—Richard Feverel, Neville Beauchamp—how gracefully they flow from the lips, what a serene beauty almost reaching the Hellenic is there about them! Or to turn to the more ignoble, Sir Meeson Corby, Skepsey, Anthony Hackbut, Mrs. Burman Radnor, Chump, Nicodemus Sedgett (Meredith's one villain), Mrs. Berry—how appropriate the Mrs! such people never have Christian names—Mr. Quintin Manx, a double-barrelled mediocrity who is a punctual M.P. if nothing else, Mrs. Cramborne Wathin of the Puritan rich, Constance Asper—how one shivers at her icy purity—Shrapnel, fit name for pioneer idealogue, Ines the boxer, Stukely Culbrett, Jenny Denham, evidently not a Diana but a charming damsel, Baskelett blatant and bullying, Jane Mattock a six feet representative of modern healthy womanhood, John Mattock her brother, who rejoices in a magnificent designation for a railway-navvy millionaire, Van Diemen Smith with dignified Christian name and plain patronymic—almost too perfect a description for a deserter returned from the colonies—Percy Dacier with a hard icy sound, Constantia Durham, a racing cutter who races us away indeed, Tom Cogglesby, an old gentleman who has obviously escaped from one of Dickens's novels, Strike the Marine—who does so, as fair Caroline could tell us—Mrs. Nargett Pagnell ("we rhyme with spaniel"): no novelist

has shown a finer sense of the fitting in the christening of his children.

We note, if we care to, a certain repetition in Meredith, just as History is said with precisely as much truth and as much falsehood to repeat itself, and just as Nature with its same universal combination of hill and dale and plain, rock or forest, cloud or sunshine, weaves her inexhaustible variety of enchanting patterns, or out of the same hundred elements produces all the wonders of the material world. The jaded critic despises the hackneyed plot, although he knows that all the plots have now been invented, and should know that from the most hackneyed and familiar of stories Greek dramatists, following convention, not scorning it, produced the most perfect specimens of tragedy. An adverse critic can point out if he will that *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* and *The Amazing Marriage* are both based on the same foundation. If he cares to proceed farther, he will find that the treatment in the two novels is so different that the parallel scarcely occurs to the reader. He will find an indefinite number of squires and landed proprietors, wits, beautiful women, but he will also find that Meredith's creative powers so far approach to those of Nature that, like her, he never creates twice alike, that there are no replicas, that his figures are not types but individuals. Our author was a man of fine nobility of soul, and a profound thinker, but he was great artist too.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

"When we are knapsack on back we come to eminences where a survey of our journey past is desireable." The time has arrived when we must cast a backward view upon the volumes which we have reviewed, the pageant of stately, homely, normal, and abnormal figures which has passed before us, the argosies of wit and fancy that have sailed by fraught with such treasures of the intellect. It has been a rich experience, and we must now endeavour to garner our impressions. Great literature is the expression of great personality, and Meredith's personality has surely projected itself into his works. He did not cultivate the impersonal, he did not shrink from the *obiter dictum*, yet formal utterances may give us the mere outward trappings, not the essence of a man's truest self. That we must strive to seize elsewhere. It will be expressed more clearly in unconscious revelations than when he is himself the orator. Some Willamowitz-Moellendorf of centuries hence with all the Teuton's subtlety will divide the Meredithia into the productions of an epic poet, a lyricist, an epigrammatist, an anatomiser of character, and the world will subserviently follow, for it will be obvious

that there are different "strata" and that no one man could have achieved such different triumphs.[1]

We find a mind of wondrous richness, subtle, fecund, nimble, forceful, an abiding *vivida vis*—the passion of the poet, the vehemence of the orator, the serene wide outlook of the philosopher, the arch-smile of the Comic votary, the phantasy of the Euphuist, the wittiness of the Athenian, combined in one prodigious mental whole. It took some four men of supreme talent to produce the genius of Meredith. He is, first, the poet described by Shakespeare—looking into himself—with his eye in a fine frenzy rolling, with his fiery glance that gazes at both earth and heaven, and misses neither the richness of the universal mother nor the glories of the firmament, neither the infinitely great nor the infinitely small, bodying forth in his imagination shapes unseen before, giving the vital flesh and blood to insubstantial phantoms, impassioned with a romantic glow, writing not sonnets but whole novels to a mistress's eyebrow, gifted with the reasoning powers of a mathematician, the calculation of a chess master, and the profundity of a philosopher. There is the finest, subtlest equipoise in this felicitous union. Poetic rapture, bordering as always upon madness, is compatible with the view that civilisation is based on common-sense; romance will hold no truce with senti-

[1] At times one is reminded of Dryden's lavish panegyric on Milton, "The force of Nature could no farther go."

mentalism; the wit is quintessential wisdom. He has a noble charity and a generous patience, he is intense and earnest, he jests at all the world, and sometimes at himself. He illustrates better than any since Shakespeare that impetuous mental energy which Matthew Arnold deemed the source of our literary greatness. Indeed, the aptest parallel to Meredith at his greatest in pregnancy of thought, opulence of language, lyric fervour, and tenseness of the mind, is a Shakespearean sonnet. No man has ever been endowed with richer gifts. The gods have heaped their favours on him, and he is to outshine all mortals—but on one condition. Cassandra was inspired with prophetic vision, but none was to believe her. Meredith was to have all gifts of mind, but it was ordained that few should understand him. He is a composite of various nations, Celtic, English, and even French. He was born at Portsmouth, lived in Westermain, and loving Hampshire did not fail to love England. His English ballast of commonsense steadied the lightness of his Celtic ardour, its quick responsiveness and ardent sensibility; his Celtic fervour in turn found equipoise in something of French logicality and *esprit*. His works are one vast exhibition of these qualities. He was his own Shrapnel, teacher, inspirer, rugged oracle, harbinger of the coming age, but he was still more a Merlin, wizard, prophet, gallantly tender to fair maidens.

There is a steed of magic potency which he

himself describes to us. It is the Hippogriff, the steed on which young genius mounts to survey the world. "Around the height he soars to he can see no barriers nor any of the fences raised by men. . . . Desires wax boundless, obstacles are hidden." He who rides on Hippogriff can speed in fancy wheresoe'er he will. He leaves the limits of the universe, and far beyond the bounds of time and space he ranges, "accumulating images, hiving sensations," conqueror, explorer, and inquirer. But the steed has one defect; it must return to earth. Woe to the rider when he does so! The radiancy of his erstwhile vision is equalled by the murkiness of the gloom which now besets him. His visions, ecstasies, and conquests have fled from him, a poor mortal now confined in time and space, weak, timorous, and fitful, and imagination's glorious hues have faded into sober drab of everyday. Piteous past all endurance would be now his fate did not soon the steed return to him, and again he mounts for his aerial journey, again his visions and his ecstasies return.

Be sure that in his youth Meredith rode many a league upon the Hippogriff, ranging the confines of the universe, viewing the sum of things, making triumphal progress. In later years though the fine frenzy languishes into arch persiflage, it is quelled, not vanquished. Let him but see ardent youth or winsome maiden, and gloriously it flames forth again. For he is lord of language

and can flash out the thrilling phrase, strike the most poignant chord, or clothe himself in kingly majesty of words. But he prefers to move on lower levels. He will not soar into the empyrean, intoxicating but perilous delight; he will seat him on some Idaean eminence, and watch enthroned the tide of human things, serene, composed, gazing chiefly on men's follies, greeting them with silvery laughter.

The literary firmament has its accessions. Fresh comets blaze across the heavens with fiery tresses and burn out, new planets are discovered of various magnitudes, sometimes even a new sun with all its system and its satellites reveals itself to us. Doubtless when a new luminary swims into his ken it is easy for the watcher after long hours of expectation to delude himself, and to adore it with an undeserved homage. Yet he may not be wrong. The immortals were once mortals who ate and drank and slept, and went up and down their cities like the rest of men. "Others abide our question, thou art free." Yet the greatest light of all was once to his friends but honest Will Shakespeare, with advancing fame the witty playwright Mr. William Shakespeare, and then—his earthly apotheosis—transformed into W. Shakespeare, Esqre., of New Place, Stratford. Ten generations have bestowed most lavish homage, but rare Ben, loving him, truly enough, "this side of idolatry," gruffly chid him or praised at pleasure. And it is so with us. Free

enough with our commendation and the superlatives which mean nothing, having banished from our midst for good and ill the old snarling critic, we hesitate to put our men of eminence upon pedestals, or to conduct them within our Pantheon. We imitate the prudence of the Roman Church and delay our canonisation for a few centuries. We cannot bring ourselves to think that one whom many of us knew or might have known, who dwelt in a concrete, visible house at Boxhill, whose children are still living, who, as the casual passer-by might see, would go abroad in a bath-chair, or sometimes rode—the climax of the commonplace—in a friendly motor-car, is the peer of them we never saw, authors whom the dust of centuries has obscured and transfigured. It is so with those of the preceding generation. Wordsworth—we cannot yet quite canonise the stamp-collector of Rydal or place him in the small group which encircles Shakespeare in the Elysian fields; Shelley has won his godhead and has become a mythus only by the romance of his death. Yet great men have lived *after* Agamemnon, and their fame is uncertain, because of the very cloud of witnesses. Meredith, lauded neither by too many nor too few—for of the esteem of those who counted he was always sure—draws nigh the august precincts of the Immortals, and judgment must be passed on him.

It may be early to attempt the task, yet it shall be attempted. First let us speak a moment of the

verdict of his own generation. To that he was for the most part caviare. His poetry was unsaleable; his novels, for long years disregarded by most critics, failed even to win disdainful comment. America first appreciated, but England did not widely recognise his fame until he verged upon old age. We may adopt two attitudes towards these facts, and be regretful or be unconcerned. It may be argued with much force that literature is not a branch of commerce, that all great writers should be amateurs and write to please themselves, and that a man of letters ought not to expect by heaven-sent genius to make a fortune which merely ranks him with the vulgar parvenu. Can we desire that great literature should sell like hot cakes? The simile is just, for publishers, like bakers, prefer to sell their wares when fresh, and they prefer to sell new batches, for after six months is not to them every book a dead book, to be replaced by others? The booms and campaigns of the advertiser with his constant succession of "best-sellers" have nothing to do with literature, whose motto is *nihil nimis*, and whose pose a proud reserve. The man of letters knows too little of the world to gain his share of profits such as accrue at times to the astute bibliopole, and he continues in consequence to believe with Byron that Barabbas was a publisher.

Yet failure or qualified success may bring as baneful consequences as triumph. To know that the public, and the publishers, will gulp down anything

that he flings to them, to have that rarest alchemy which can transmute a vein of genius into thousands of golden sovereigns, is a persistent goad to haste, to over-production, and scamped work, for no great literature can be produced without racking labour of the brain, and frequent intervals of repose. Commercial success will sometimes kill an author's genius; at others it merely kills the author, as it killed the unhappy Dickens or the more tragically fated Scott. Yet if we are spared the mournful spectacle of genius scrambling for gold, or, apeing Midas, fluttering moth-like round the flame of monetary reward, sour grapes are bitter still, and unrewarded merit has its grievous pangs. We marvel sometimes that success leaves an author unspoiled, but it is as strange that ill-success should not wound the spirit and mar the labours of one who is conscious of exalted powers which only a minority of one can recognise. Meredith cultivated an equanimity which doubtless rose to the serene, but it was a loss to him and to the world as well that the philosopher became a hermit and his châlet a cloister. The effect is visible in two diverse ways. Master of irony, creator of consummate novels that no one read, he turned his persiflage upon himself. He submits to the eulogies of his scanty admirers with patient gratitude, but, he insinuates, they are wrong. For himself he does not attach too much importance to his work—indifference is pride's armour against the world's

contempt. He is humbly grateful for this exaggerated praise and this perhaps mistaken adoration. As for study of his novels, they are not worthy it. Is *The Shaving of Shagpat* an allegory? Yes, no, no, yes, according to his humour. It is not worth considering. Yet despite the cloak of jaunty carelessness, Meredith *did* care. No man whose sensibilities are cultivated to the exquisite pitch of the creator of *The Egoist* or *The Ordeal*, no virtuoso such as he who achieved *The Shaving of Shagpat*, is insensible to the indifference of his fellow-men, or callous to the fate of the products of his ecstasies and pangs of travail. But the great nature of the man which prevented him from taking himself too seriously or too tragically saved him from all trace of cynicism, saved him from the evils of the coterie and its cult, the gravest doom that can befall a writer. Most of the great Liberals have not been men of the people. They live in a world of ideas, they have no graces of the demagogue. Yet Meredith knows the dangers of such isolation. He does not seek it though he patiently endures it, and warns men to avoid all spiritual pride.

> "You with others gathering more,
> Glad of more till you reject
> Your proud title of elect."

So he proceeds calmly, earning a competence by reading bad novels for a firm of publishers, as elevating, stimulating, fascinating an occupation as

that of tea-taster, and left men to admire or to contemn according to their pleasure. For Meredith had gone ere Shibli into the Hall of the Duping Brides. The thought of wearing a crown had taken possession of his soul. He had cried, "Crown me, O my handmaidens, and delay not to crown me, the circle of my head itcheth for the symbols of majesty." He had sat upon the throne calmly, serenely, tempering the awfulness of his brows with benignant glances; he had beheld the crown on his forehead what it was, "bejewelled asses' ears stiffened upright, and skulls of monkeys grinning with gems."

Meredith was first, then, possessor of in some ways the most consummate intellect that has ever been devoted to literature. In mere cleverness and wit in the Elizabethan sense he is supreme. Though the birthday book compiler has already gathered fair garlands of poesy and Mr. Trevelyan has garnered bulky sheaves of aphorism, lexicographers have not yet pored over his volumes and dissected them. Doubtless in after-time they will tell men of the limitless range of his vocabulary, their industry will classify and catalogue his epigrams, their computations, if the task be not beyond weak mortals' power, will enumerate his metaphors. It is a treasure-house that we enter, and, like the Athenian at King Croesus' court, we come out packed and stuffed with precious dust of gold, gorged even to the mouth. Great wit to genius is not always kin; the converse some-

times holds. But this student of the fine shades and delicate feelings, who sees as far into the brick wall of human personality as anyone, this anatomiser of human character, this intellectual euphuist who will rhapsodise on a hero's leg as well as write sonnets on a heroine's eyebrow, can ever and again give us a sudden thrill of sheer delight and overcome all sophistication by the spell of Nature. For he loved the south-wester, and Earth was kind to the most brilliant of her children.

Style is like a chemical solution ; it cannot carry more than a certain amount of thought, the rest it must deposit as a sediment. The very force and range of Meredith's thoughts at times impair their artistic expression. The human brain, no more than the human stomach, thrives on concentrated food. From this point of view even the inessential may have its dietetic value as a preventive of mental constipation. At times Meredith will lecture on his characters. On occasion, deep in elaborating some new thought, he moves calmly on, serenely unconscious that his readers have lost contact with him. It is right to aim, not at approximation to a character but at supreme accuracy, it is good to see farther than other men, and to see more minutely ; but there are other, sometimes better, ways of studying mankind than through a microscope. He meets this criticism in advance. He pleads for that " garrulous, super-subtle, so-called Philosopher who so frequently rushes to the

footlights," and the pleading is often necessary. The philosopher can be as abstruse as Pindar, as obscure as Aeschylus, and the commentator who has won his spurs in elucidating the difficulties of either of the ancients might then well turn his attention to the first chapter of *The Egoist*, in some places *obscurior tenebris Heracleiti*, clear though the general drift may be. Candid friends declare that to break the secret of the ballads "you have often to take to yourself a dark-lantern and a case of jemmies." Admiring expounders of his poems like Mr. Trevelyan must first translate them for their readers' benefit. To read a Meredithian novel is not an idle dalliance with three hundred pages, but a strenuous labour, a soul-stirring exercise. But the searching ordeal of "wit" is a stimulating gymnastic demanding as much hard thinking as a dialogue of Plato, and though at first we study Meredith rather than read him, the process is worth while. All great literature makes its demands upon the intellect. It does not fade away into ravishing harmonies, or evanesce in gushing sentiment. Meredith was right, fundamentally and incontrovertibly right, when he claimed a place for "brain" within the novel.

We seek not to gainsay that there are passages in Meredith more difficult to construe than the hardest of Thucydides. The fault is partly due to the language in which he wrote. Modern English with its "structureless comminution"

and its shapelessness of syntax is a heart-breaking language for the expression of subtle thoughts. The lack of noun and verb terminations, the awkwardness in English of the periodic sentence, that splendid instrument for the expression of complex organised thought, our consequent failure to delimit the boundaries of the different clauses, compel one often to read three times a phrase or sentence dealing with some abstract point before one grasps the sense. The fault of obscurity is plain in much English of the present day. It is found in Meredith, who increased the difficulty by expressing himself with Tacitean brevity, and who, holding the disjointed, snappy style of Macaulay in reasonable disdain, oft gives his readers pause as when he talks of sentimentalism "despising gold itself the child of gold," a phrase capable of easy expression in a language like Latin. Meredith is not much harder than the later Shakespeare, who was admired doubtless by the groundlings for the wrong reasons. And, on the other hand, much of his alleged obscurity is detected only by mental accidia or lack of mental alertness.

Meredith's sign-manual is found on every page of his. If Johnson made his little fishes talk like whales, Meredith would have made his nightjars or yaffles talk like philosophers of the twenty-first century. He has no all-round style fit for all purposes. He has not the noble simplicity of Homer, nor the seeming simplicity and grim irony of Swift,

nor the suave ease and finish of the Spectator, though in matter he is worlds above the accomplished Addison. But the age of simplicity, which may be noble, but which can be merely sprightly, has passed away. We have reached the age of *σοφία*, which sometimes means sophistication, and the style of the anatomist must differ from the style of the mere sketcher.

And how delightful is the spectacle of "brain" once we begin to plumb our author's depths! How wise and noble, how serene and patient is he, how great a master of thought! The epigram is at all times easier to condemn than to eschew, and when the epigram is a sudden flash of light in the darkness, the distilled wisdom of one of the wisest of all minds, the free unforced result of highest mental activity, in what other mood shall it be greeted than in the thankfulness of grateful acceptance? How would Meredith have delighted in the converse of Euphues, equalled his subtlety, loved the balance of his clauses, capped his conceits with better! Assume his premisses and his style is aptest for the purpose, a full-bodied vintage of sharp taste. It has not the light rhythm or the easy flow of some who have less to say; it is perhaps rather a series of detonations, or a succession of flashes, or even, to a hostile mind, a sequence of bumps. Yet he can be rapid with the swiftest. Some similes in the true Homeric strain show what an epic he might have written in a less complex age. Shagpat's shaving is a virtuoso's feat which

resembles the finest achievements of De Quincey in everything except their most impassioned notes. There is not a rhythm but a ῥυμή, an impetuous sweep, in *The Tragic Comedians* which bears all before it. Wine lifts him ever to the true Dionysian fervour; there is in *Vittoria* often a sweet, sustained, melodious melancholy. Every quality has its defect, cannot exist, perhaps, without it. Brilliance becomes fatiguing, elevation becomes isolation, learning becomes a burden, elaborateness may suggest the wire-drawn subtleties of the pedant, philosophy tends to the obscure. Yet Speech without the Meredithian novels would be less wonderful than we now deem it. How strong our airman is on the wing. He might have boasted, like Pindar, that he had arrows winning persuasion. How aptly his own description of the "swallow flights" of Alvan and Clotilde in converse would apply to his finest passages as they range "to right and left and far afield, now soaring into the blue of heaven, now with a sudden downward sweep skimming a foot above the earth."

But in his quality of novelist we can best judge him by comparison and contrast. Widely as they differ, Dickens and Meredith have some common characteristics. They both see vividly and quickly, (sometimes what is not there,) they have much energy of temperament; an aura of eager vitality surrounds them. The more indolent, the less trained mind will cherish Dickens. Dickens hits

the errand-boy every time; the errand-boy has scarcely come within Meredith's ken. As the Marchioness is to Clara Middleton, so, might the proportion continue, is Dickens to Meredith. Dickens marks the advent of Miss Bella Wilfer into literature, Meredith ignores her; Dickens is funny, Meredith ironic. Dickens, prince of the smack-in-the-rib style of humour, ministers to the loud guffaw which in literature as elsewhere typifies the vacant mind. Meredith, disdainful of the humour which borders on the rough-and-tumble of the practical joke, smiles quietly to himself, or if the jest be droll, volleys of silvery laughter are heard. Dickens is the supreme example of the achievement of untutored genius taken from the streets. He is an effective lightning caricaturist with a great power of catching the farcical, but in some departments of the writer's craft he never passed beyond pothooks and hangers, in some respects he has the mental equipment of a child. He will present you with a Surrey theatre villain motivelessly malignant like Quilp,[1] and with his *ad captandum* morality requires your hisses in the manner of "the gods" of that home of melodrama, or demands your gushing tears for Little Nell. He oscillates between the roystering farcical and the dripping lachrymose, and loves to lead you to a "strong" melodramatic *dénouement* in which some *deus ex machina* of the Father Christmas type appears, for Messrs. Cheeryble Brothers have

[1] Compare Iago and note the difference.

branches in every novel of Dickens. Meredith, whose learning is as extraordinary as his taste is fine, does not bethump us with the mawkish or pump up in bucketsful the pathetic. His unreality, where it occurs, is the unreality of the recluse student, not of the half-taught child of genius. Thackeray the typical educated man with a literary turn, had shown a charming gift of easy moralising which is in sharp contrast with the unreadable effusions of Dickens, stilted and laboured like the work of a literary apprentice. Meredith was to display a faculty of still profounder yet kindly generalisation. If it is dangerous for the novelist to be yoked with the philosopher, Dickens has shown that the novelist and the Tribune of the Plebs do not run well in harness. Dickens had a noble sympathy for the industrious poor, but in depicting a character like Kit Nubbles he will assume a controversial tone to which the only answer is his own phrase, "Who's a denigeing of it, Betsy?" In truth he doth protest too much. We hear shrill, vehement, and incessant the tones of the little boy in the blacking warehouse who maintained that Kit Nubbles was as good as a lord, and better, and ended by sending his own sons to Eton. The Caricaturist of the Dickens sort enjoys one great advantage. We always laugh; whether at the caricature or at the caricaturist it matters little. Compare the noble Verisopht, a typical example of Dickensian naive and childish caricature, with Algernon Blancove. Meredith presents a

type which he has studied; he gives us the real thing, not a stuffed figure from Mrs. Jarley's waxworks. There is, of course, no need to depreciate the greatness or the richness of Dickens's achievement. His vital energy would carry to a triumphant end works that had far more numerous faults. Yet the contrast of two such masters is at least of interest. Meredith too can be almost roystering. *Evan Harrington* is conceived in a Pickwickian vein, instructive in its differences, and these two masters of the Comic well illustrate what education can do and cannot do for genius.[1]

The danger of too much education, or perhaps of too much learning, is best illustrated by a great woman novelist, George Eliot. Though she stands far below in brilliance, in romantic fervour, and in power of expression—qualities which one would regret to call adventitious, yet qualities not entirely essential to the novelist—her keen eye for character, her skill in grasping it, especially female character, and in delineating it, place her in not unworthy proximity to Meredith. No abler woman ever wielded the pen, perhaps no abler woman ever breathed. But her intellect and her passions were never fused. She could not wear her learning lightly as a flower—few women can;

[1] It is instructive to note that Meredith has no characters similar to those of Dickens who constantly repeat pet phrases. Meredith's more subtle characters—*e.g.*, Hackbut and Skepsey, Dickensians with a difference—have pet ideas which are always running in their heads.

and her career is a history of the encroachment of the intellectual faculties upon the imaginative to the detriment of her novels. Had she been less learned she would have been more successful. For all the learning, philosophic grasp, and largeness of mind which compel one to admire the woman, or perhaps the intellect, have quenched or stifled the flame of passion ; the play of the imagination, the subtle though restrained humour which constituted the greatness of *The Mill on the Floss* and above all of *Adam Bede,* in *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* are overweighted by the writer's learning and her elaborate psychological analysis. Meredith's learning is still greater, his range of allusion is extraordinary, but it is the obedient servant of his imagination and his emotions. His energy carries him through a novel unwearied and unjaded, and, despite all his intellect, there is an *élan* vital, an ease and even spontaneity which early deserted George Eliot. Yet this master of her own genre could have taught Meredith something which he lacked. In depicting ways and thoughts of the English provincial middle-class she is supreme. The Garths and Featherstones still live, and may with suitable variations of dialect be heard each week in Gloucester market, or in the Newent train, or the Hardwicke carrier's cart, or many another place. The Bulstrodes and the Vincies and all their clan still go their way magnificently detached from the furious tendencies of progress, for Middlemarch is only a synonym for

provincial England. George Eliot in this respect is as near to actual life as we may hope to get, although a modern novelist who should know [1] reminds us that no one can ever get within a million miles of it. *Adam Bede* treats of a kindred subject to *Rhoda Fleming*, and the general conclusion is the same, though perhaps gloomier than even that of Meredith's sombre novel. It is interesting to speculate how *Rhoda Fleming* might have been treated in the *Adam Bede* manner. Gammon would have been less marvellous but more real, Mrs. Sumfit would have been much as she is or better, the talk of the folk of Warbeach would have been homelier and nearer life, Fairly Hall and Mrs. Lovell would have been less prominent, Anthony Hackbut might have been eliminated, and the loving study of Algernon Blancove would have suffered many modifications. The women would have been truer to life, the men less true and less intellectualised. Meredith could not have given us such an accurate portrait, but George Eliot knew nothing of Meredith's diviner gust—Phaethon in his chariot with Apollo at his side, dashing all over the heavens and never coming to grief. The creatress of *Daniel Deronda* goes on her way heavily and cannot get her spavined Pegasus to gallop; a second Mrs. Poyser would have been welcome, but we look in vain for that lady's cheering presence in the later psychological treatises. But the two authors have each their individual

[1] Mr. Arnold Bennett.

outlook, their individual methods, and we must have now the specialist in the novel as everywhere. It is one of the greatest joys of the true lover of literature to admire the different qualities of different yet somewhat similar masters of the same craft without wishing to belittle either, certainly without assuming the badge of the partisan.

But the true antithesis of Meredith would be Scott, the great improvisatore. Meredith has nothing of the grand and almost epic simplicity of Scott, and not that complete sympathy with all sorts and conditions of men which the novels of the noble Tory reveal. Scott himself tells us somewhere that he had ever been wont to converse with his fellow-men where'er he met them, and to this habit is due not a little of that grand impartiality and noble disinterestedness which mark his work whether he is sketching Puritan or Cavalier, Habbakuk Mucklewrath or Claver'se, Cromwell or Prince Charles. It was Burns who preached that "a man's a man for a' that," but it was Scott who practised it in literature, and this enamoured Feudalist and Medievalist sheds all his prejudices when he sits down to write. The simple and the subtle are very different, and to jaded palates the simple may have lost its savour. Scott is the man of vast assimilation and keen imaginative power when the past is concerned, but his vision is blindness when he deals with the future or the present. He has the well-filled mind and his readers gain the

well-filled mind, but he has nothing that we can set beside such richness of reflection as we find in Meredith. The stream of epigram and metaphor is absent, though when he could escape the jargon of the sham archaic which he too often assigns to his medieval characters Scott could construct effective dialogue. Yet in the range of his sympathies there is something which has rightly earned for him the adjective Shakespearean.

One judges, then, that Meredith might stand comparison with some of the great ones of the past. Compare him with the ultra-modern and he will stand still higher. He cannot describe a rustic so truly to Nature as Thomas Hardy, the other contemporary master of the novel, but if Meredith could not have written *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy could not have achieved *The Egoist*. Meredith never chose to describe a landscape so exactly as Hardy, but his width of range and philosophy give him higher rank. Those who find Meredith obscure or accuse him of narrowness of appeal, might well pass on to Mr. Henry James, the novelist of the nebulous, and they may find that even obscurity is preferable to the void, and that the limitations of the "up-town" novel are even more pronounced.

Turning to novelists still living, we find the contrast still more glaring. The present age of literary men always believes that it is superior to the ancients, and when one is a novelist who together with this natural tendency combines a

contempt for the rich store of the past, the result is interesting. In the author of *Ann Veronica* we have a writer who is convinced that in Science a new instrument of Culture and Progress has been found which will supersede the exploded fancies of the Humanities, and who desires to substitute Biology for the study of civilised man. Let us examine the result. Mr. Wells has considerable industry, a conscientious resolve to do his best, and a high conception of the novelist's function. He has a certain power of generalisation which is too often based on the floating newspaper talk of his time, some faculty of delineating character, considerable constructive skill, no richness of setting, and scant power of writing effective dialogue. His dialogue indeed is a literal transcript of modern talk at its poorest and slangiest, and its one occasional brilliancy is an iterated "Oh! damn!" Wit is nil, humour nil, vitality slight. In other words, such works are the product of an entirely commonplace mind, commercially effective, but not destined to any permanence. Set Ann Veronica beside Clara Middleton (with many apologies to that peerless maiden for the contamination) and Capes beside Beauchamp, and their creator shrivels into nothing despite the ledgers of his publishers. This is partly Mr. Wells's misfortune, partly his fault. He rises, it is no compliment to say so, to a higher intellectual level than the man in the street; he is fully abreast of modern thought,

as it finds itself expressed in current journalism. If he had not, like many other votaries of "Science," cut himself adrift from the main-stream of world-thought by contemning everything before Huxley and Darwin, he might have gone farther. Meredith, on the other hand, in whose eyes there is no opposition between Science of any sort and Literature, and who took an eager interest in all new tendencies, is the heir of all the treasures of the past, and has the serene dignity of those who are not uneasy champions of a revolutionary tendency, but who have preserved unbroken continuity and cherished worthy traditions while ever adapting themselves to the new. He has too the poetic force, the fervour, and eloquence of which the latest generation gives no sign. In another point also there is a contrast. No man shrank less than Meredith from moral problems. But he could always treat them with a fine dignity and restraint. A novel is not to him a laborious essay in prurience; he will not chronicle the scabrous sensations of wanton amorists. Life is not to him as it is to Mr. Capes, F.R.S., a "shabby, furtive business," and the "spiritual guttersnipe" is the last person one would expect to find amongst his creations. Mr. Wells's heroes have their fling and are yet unhappy. They are ineffective in love, ineffective in everything. Beauchamp and Feverel are noble even in their failures. Of a truth, as Mr. Arnold Bennett says, we are not cleverer than our fathers.

Conclusion

There have been great novelists before Meredith. The history of the English novel reveals a line of great ones each with his own peculiar genius, each the hero of some fresh development. Meredith's own contribution will begin to be clear. It is the establishment of "brain" in unquestioned supremacy within the region of the novel, the manifestation of a particular point of view based on a belief in "brain," and of a conception of human life coloured by the Comic Spirit which he did so much to expound. The novel is still a story, but it is a story of many strands richly interwoven. Narrative, brilliant dialogue, pregnant aphorism, radiance of metaphor, the gusto of the Comic Spirit, poetic rapture, criticism of life—with such an equipment Meredith transcended the novel form, he strained his mould to breaking-point. His heroes are Olympians, but after a course of cads and vulgarians such as the circulating libraries acclaim we are delighted at the contrast. They have not to earn their bread and butter—Meredith cherishes them as Redworth cherishes Diana and will not hear of their enduring the chill of penury—they are magnificently detached from the sordid, and live in Epicurean exemption from mortal cares. We need not apologise for the Meredithian type. Clever men are in their natural *milieu* in a Meredithian novel, they are lawful expedients which enable him to liberate himself from his mass of generalisations, they are entitled in any representation of life to be portrayed

with other types and, strongest point of all, they have never before had their chance in the novel. At length intellectualism—a phenomenon unknown to our earlier novelists—has found an utterance, at length in fiction we have attained a type rich and diverse in its varieties, yet a type not learned in the professional sense but lover of learning, witty, inquiring, curious minds, which have passed beyond academic lumber to wisdom, which are both scholars and men of the world. Beside them all previous representations of intellectual ability sink into the sorriest caricatures. Dr. Middleton, the great scholar, is by no means the type which we are describing—he is too learned—but compare him with Scott's Antiquary or any other scholar except George Eliot's Casaubon and mark the difference. Vernon Whitford is a finer type, but around him and such men are gathered many who, if not learned according to academic standards, have yet intellectual tastes. Feverel wrote poetry, Nesta and Natalie were skilled amateurs of music, Beauchamp penned letters in French to the Imperial Guard, even Willoughby, being of a positive mind—not, we will hope, a disciple of Dr. Archimedes Silverpump—was lord of a laboratory. The heroes of Meredith have active busy brains, they do not idle like Pendennis or fall in love with Miss Costigans. His heroines are glorious creatures of flesh and blood and brain. A woman like George Eliot portrays her heroines more closely than

a male observer. She idealises less, but she is not less sympathetic, perhaps more, and she is much less superficial than many novelists. Meredith may slightly idealise—he is certainly a courtly gallant to his bevy of fair ones—but he never superficialises. His heroines have learnt to inquire; they are true, brave mates, fearless alike of wind, weather, and Mrs. Grundy. Clara can run races with Crossjay; Lucy's love for Richard does not prevent her from making a good breakfast. Indeed a dozen eggs, so Adrian avers, were consumed by Romeo and Juliet between them at one sitting, but we are approaching the mytho-poeic. The Meredithian maidens do not elegantly toy with a few morsels in the style of Miss Blanche Amory, but all—not the fair Flemings only—owe their strength and their good looks to "good bread and good beef."

Where such heroes and heroines prevail we arrive naturally at the Socratic conception *οὐδεὶς ἑκὼν ἁμαρτάνει*.[1] In other words, we deal with follies and foibles rather than with vices, and we are amused at men's failings rather than wrathful. We lack inevitably the Tragic forces of sorrow and distress, we do not rise to the Shakespearean heights of Othello and King Lear. Great men's minds are crucibles. To win the richest experience they must have troubles and be harrowed, and out of

[1] "In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within."

the strange alchemy of sorrow comes the sad, exquisite joy of tragedy, something passing rich and strange, a κτῆμα ἐς ἀεί. Such, we need no telling, was Shakespeare's passage through life, such was not Meredith's. He had the minor ills to endure, indifference, even potboilers such as make the brave shudder, but he was able to secure an assured competence. Men's minds are like instruments which resound to tones of certain pitch and are silent to others. Meredith rarely answers to the pathetic. There is little in his volumes which even slightly corresponds to the rare beauty of the Adsum scene in *The Newcomes*. But those who treat of scenes like this tread a slippery path beside a precipice, and often fall from Mount Sublime into the ravine Ridiculous. And the region below is peopled by Little Nells and other heroines of the mawkish, and little Paul Dombey incessantly desires to know what the wild waves are saying and will not be satisfied. Meredith perhaps chose wisely. He preferred to be subtle rather than to be crude, to sway the intellect rather than to thrill the emotions, to worship the Comic rather than the Tragic Muse, and to be kindly cruel to sentiment. He lacked the faculty of anger, the fury of Juvenal, and the bitter hate of Timon, but *The Egoist* and *Evan Harrington*, which neither Juvenal nor Timon could have conceived, will console us. He lacked the sublimity of Aeschylus, but Sophocles would have admired his εὐκολία and his subtle

mastery of language, Aristophanes would have hailed him as fellow-votary of the Wine-god, and Euripides would have almost envied him his σοφία.

The quality visible in every mood is the philosophic strain. "Fiction," he told a literary aspirant, "is the fruit of a well-trained mind." It was a startling revelation perhaps to his youthful correspondent, it would be an overwhelming paradox at any rate to most youthful novelists, and it is a hard saying for the circulating libraries. But Meredith would have gone farther. He would have asserted, one is confident, that besides all the qualities of heart and sensibility demanded, the novelist of the future, if he is to achieve enduring fame, would not be unduly equipped even with the brain of a Newton or a Plato and the power of generalising of a Darwin, and that to plan and carry out his conceptions the wide range and powerful sweep of the logic of these great men would be required. Philosophy, philosophy, how often are its virtues hymned! We are reminded of the greatest of the Roman poets who sang in words that even in this early phase of his development have a strange mystic ring:

> "nos ad beatos vela mittimus portus
> magni petentes docta dicta Sironis
> vitamque ab omni vindicabimus cura,"

and who yearned, like his master Lucretius, to know causes of things, and whose unrealised hope

was to dedicate himself to philosophy after the completion of the Aeneid. Meredith had the same delight in the quest for cause and effect as Virgil, though he was singularly free from mystic yearning. What Aristotle had profoundly said of poetry, that it was a finer, more philosophic thing than history, Meredith determined to make true of the novel. All novelists of recent times have vaguely realised the possibilities in this direction. Even the third-rate and the tenth-rate practitioner dimly envisage the novel as being amongst other things a branch of the great and noble science of casuistry, which deals with the ever-changing problems confronting humanity and its students. Meredith is a Doctor in this Science, though he denies his questioners too definite an answer. Truth, the product of an artificial age, differs from the truth of unsophisticated Juventus Mundi as a daisy from an orchid. Humanity is becoming subtler, the play of motive is more complex. We know that white and black are not so clearly defined as a simpler age believed, that men are in the mass neither saints nor sinners, that the antithesis between rose-pink and dirty drab is generally unreal.

Men's actions as well as their bodies must go beneath the microscope. "In our fat England the gardener Time is playing all sorts of delicate freaks in the lives and traceries of the flower of life, and shall we not note them?" There is such a thing as a Science of Human Life, and our poor

England, vaguely stirring in its mental sleep, must be awakened and called upon not to fear ideas. Such was the message of our author, such would it have been now, the need of more Science, not the Science of our friend of the lecture-room and the laboratory, the knowledge of the precise quantity of tri-nitro-toluene which placed on a certain mark will send a thousand to eternity—important as that knowledge may be in certain distressful epochs—but the conception of an ordered Universe and of an ordered life, in which the inheritance of the past, the needs of the present, and the possibilities of the future are all taken in one wide view, the thinking out of problems and the determination neither to shirk nor to blink, to be interested in the Now and to exult in the vision of the Hereafter, neither to be unduly dismayed nor to be unduly overjoyed, to be nobly serious and to be nobly merry. Of Meredith, if of anyone, could it be truly said :

> " And he was happy if to know
> Causes of things and far below
> His feet to see the lurid flow
> Of horror and insane distress
> And headlong hate be happiness."

An earlier classic has traced both with the sympathy and repulsion of genius the outlines of the intellectual of the future in words of a finer and more delicate music than Meredith could make. It is an exquisite pleasure to mark for a moment

how the great Catholic, to whom religion was a mystic sacramental thing, not a matter of Science however accurate, nor of Philosophy however wide of range, has expressed with perfect beauty the ideal of such an one as Meredith himself or of his noblest men of intellect. "The perfection of the intellect is the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things as far as the finite mind can embrace them, each in its place, and with its own characteristics upon it. It is almost prophetic from its knowledge of history; it is almost heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; it has almost supernatural charity from its freedom from littleness and prejudice; it has almost the repose of faith, because nothing can startle it; it has almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things, and the music of the spheres." Wonderfully prophetic and wonderfully true.

The content of Meredith is greater than with most authors, and it is the necessary result of the principles on which he proceeded. For Meredith designed nothing less than to lay the foundations of a science of human nature (a new psychology), and he is therefore bound to be a "problem novelist." Other writers have dealt at times with problems of everyday life—notably Dickens—but the results have been usually, from the artistic point of view, disastrous. George Eliot again, in her later phase,

packed her books with learning and somewhat heavy philosophy. The task of synthesising is terribly difficult, yet Meredith has met with no small measure of success. He of course offers no cut-and-dried solution of the problems which he poses. He leaves the problem presented to the reader in a concrete (not abstract) form for the reader himself to ponder over. He suggests or hints rather than enunciates the manner in which the problem may be solved. He takes a wide outlook upon life and manners, and from his high plateau of intellectualism he surveys mankind, and without the bitterness of a disappointed nature, without rancour, and with an unquenchable optimism for the future, he treats of life and all its problems.

Meredith, though proud to be a Celt, is profoundly conscious that he lives in John Bull's island. All nations, despite that real unity which they present to the detached distant observer, are sometimes a duality, sometimes a congeries of innumerable atoms. But one may, if it pleases, divide a nation at any moment into two parts, its half-dozen men of genius and the rest, its Falstaffs without the humour or the power of terse expression, sometimes without the geniality, of that character. The men of genius impersonate the nation in its highest moments, they represent it rather flatteringly to the foreigner, and after their death they are honoured with statues and their heterodoxies suddenly become platitudes. The great man is always fighting

a winning battle but never winning ; he is always getting Pisgah views and being mocked at as a visionary on his Pisgah elevation, or rather, as a St. Simeon Stylites on his pillar ; he is always trying to make the triumph of to-morrow the victory of to-day. He is, if we may believe Meredith, the Celtic element in a nation. It is he alone who is concerned with ideas ; his shopkeeper fellow-citizens, the rubicund grotesques whom, strangely enough, both caricaturist and eulogist have pictured in John Bull, to some a hero, to others anathema, continue to amass wealth and to live like fat pigs. What Matthew Arnold riddled with satire and undermined with sarcasm, the panoply of Philistinism in which the Englishman loves to arm himself cap-à-pie, that Meredith in a more abstruse but equally definite manner attacked, and perhaps blunted his sword upon. There is nothing that Meredith's heroes are more emphatic upon than the need of ideas, and nothing that his heroes, and heroines too, exemplify better. As for Meredith himself, he is a more genial Dr. Shrapnel, a man whom all his intimates revere, and whom the crowd contemn or ignore, a man whose thought has all the explosive character that the Doctor's name has come to suggest.

But ideas in the lump are no better than any unassorted mass of things good, bad, and indifferent. The question is, what ideas ? To Meredith human life is a spectacle of progress, slow, laborious progress in which advance is a matter of centuries, but still

progress. Shagpat is a man of fearful strength, a formidable foe, but Shibli Bagarag will come at last and prove his mastery of the event. Things are bad but they will be better, and the process of struggling upward is man's noblest and most joyous task. The process is slow, but the novelist's optimism remains unchequered, his glad spirit unsoured. It is to Meredith's poetry that we must go if we would learn his thought on that secular process which we do venture to call a climbing upward. It is there that we get some taste of the "rapture of the forward view," some flashes of insight into problems which most poets have feared to tackle. Woman is constantly in his thoughts. "Men may have rounded Seraglio Point; they have not yet doubled Cape Turk," is one of the most famous epigrams in his works. What has man made of woman? Is she a helpmeet, a true mate, or is she still a bird within a cage, thoughtless, frivolous, and aimless because man has not desired that she should be anything else? All his heroines insist on thinking things out for themselves, on being at least a trifle heedless of convention, on being most delightful in their womanly or their girlish charm, but yet resolute and courageous in their desire to pierce to the depths of things, to have done with the old conception of woman such as prevailed in the time of that worshipful Mr. B., who honoured Pamela with his hand.

Politics play no inconsiderable part in Meredith's novels. Meredith is of course a Liberal, and his

heroes are generally Liberals. But there is a fine broadness about their actions and their views, they refuse to stand on the strict party ticket, they neither rant nor truckle to the groundlings, and they are above all both by birth and conduct gentlemen. The duty of national defence is frequently insisted upon, and all Meredithian heroes get excited upon this point. Marriage again is of necessity a subject on which Meredith has much to say, having pondered deeply. Matrimonial misfits are not, however, his sole stock-in-trade, as is the case with so many inferior artists. Aminta, Diana, Carinthia, all have their troubles, and all act in different ways. Our author takes a middle stand. Man and woman should be equals, mates; marriage should be the highest form of union, a blending of sympathy, a concord of tastes, and yet a mystery in which individuality and oneness are in some transcendent way combined together. It is the marriage of the spirit, however, that Meredith regards, not the marriage in name in which love has gone and only the embers of passion remain. He knows that even convention plays a useful purpose, and when his characters disregard it they do not flout it.

Meredith was a poet, and his ideas on many things find their fullest interpretation in his poetry. His religion is a kind of one-ness with nature, a pantheism in which man rapturously recognises his kinship with Earth, Earth the mother of all, Earth that "makes all sweet." It is no ignoble ideal

that Meredith portrays in his life according to nature, *convenienter naturae*, it has no taint of the satyr though it exults in the freeness of the senses, it moves between the rock of asceticism and the whirlpool of the senses and looks forward to a nobler race as the result of an overthrowal of a merely conventional morality.[1]

The longer one lives and the greater one's store of experience, the more one feels that, with all deference to grammarians and the 'ologies, the only learning ultimately worth having is the lore of human life discovered and interpreted by the supreme masters of literature. They are, in Plato's noble words, "spectators of all time and of all existence." They sit godlike on an eminence, they view the strife of battle and the fury of conflict from an elevation which saves them from the blindness of the partisan and the envenomed spite of puny minds, and the narrowness of the conventionalist. One of our greatest writers was rebuked for making God the Father discourse like a School Divine. It would be as grave an error to make Him speak in the accents of Mrs. Grundy. It has been said that the command "Judge not" applies with special force to novelists. The dictum is just, at any rate, to the extent that the writer must not adopt the methods of the Old Bailey advocate, though sometimes we hear decisions from him

[1] See the passage from *Diana of the Crossways* quoted on p. 108.

falling in the measured tones of the judge upon the bench. Judgment implied or explicit is almost inevitable, but it should almost seem the sentence of another world.

> "Ye watch like gods the rolling hours
> With larger other eyes than ours
> To make allowance for us all."

So Meredith is a true Olympian. He sits with Zeus on the Idaean mount, and surveys the combat as it sways from side to side. He has his darling children, heroes who make frontal attacks on life, impetuous, self-willed, yet dazzling in their glorious youthfulness. But, like Sarpedon and Achilles, even his best beloved must die, if so the fates, the issues of their character, ordain. It is not so with other novelists. Thackeray is to his characters an uncle—and what a splendid uncle! —who in his kindness of heart "tips" his nephews and nieces in accordance with his precept to his readers. We cannot fear *him*. He is only Mr. Arthur Pendennis got past the cynic stage. He does not let his characters flame out in Phaethon wise. Pendennis is saved by his creator from his follies and becomes a mild married cynic. To Thackeray all young men were fools—they are perhaps—but that touch of the god which Meredith saw and loved so well was never revealed to Thackeray. But of Meredith we stand in awe. He knows so much, he is so wise, he loves his characters but he loves them as a god, knowing that it is the issues

of fate,[1] πείρατ' ὀλέθρου, which must settle life and death. He is a dweller in another sphere, benign but detached.

And yet he is their kindly guardian. He can be indulgent in the behalf of an ardent youth, and with what fine courtliness, what magnificence of gesture does he come to aid a distressed maiden! One at least of his novels deserves the title "*All for Love, or the World Well Lost*." Yet Dionysian as he may be in his impassioned moods, we rather return to the conception of him as the Olympian who has learnt *securum agere aevum*, and as *we* "walk the higher ground knapsack on" we too may hope to get a clearer, wider, truer view of life and all its problems.

Meredith has nothing of the *saeva indignatio*, a quality which misleads as well as inspires; he has nothing of the Infinite, for his hopes are set in Earth, not Heaven. Yet, like all great humorists, he founds his humour on a serious view of life. Detached though he is from human frailties, we may assert that he, alone of all great novelists, would have been willing to go to the stake for a positive creed. The grand lines on France show a fine intellect, but they also reveal a great heart throbbing at the griefs of "her that sunlike stood upon the forehead of our day." The comparison

[1] Fate is man's character. Meredith would have scoffed at "the irony of fate" and such phrases as much as Thomas Redworth.

of France's humiliation in 1870 to a premature burial shows passion touched by the imagination, or rather imagination kindled by passion. But if he cannot be angry, he cannot hate. There is, it has been said, one villain only in his novels, Nicodemus Sedgett. The claim is true. Willoughby, the Meredithian type, is not a villain. He merely lives in an unreal universe of his own creating. Meredith had the tense mental activity of Shakespeare, but neither Hamlet's furious sense of times that are out of joint, nor the passionateness of a Beethoven, nor the inspired fury of a Michelangelo. He saw too clearly, and in consequence he never created a King Lear or a C minor Symphony, though he is not so completely tamed as Mr. Henry James, whose most violent adjectives are "poor dear."

Such moderation alarms us by its aloofness. Yet though we stand in awe of Meredith, clearness of insight is an exquisite quality, and wisdom *is* more precious than rubies. The more one cons it the more one does admire his wisdom, the more one deems it even his most marvellous quality. He was the first poet to write novels, and yet the divine madness which so often characterises poets turns out, when we regard it closely, to be sublimated commonsense. He rises far above convention's standards; he did not hate, nor did he fear John Bull and his wife Mrs. Grundy. He dislikes the sentimental, but he does not ply the scourge too brutally. He has

proved that the novel can stand beside the loftiest forms of literary art; he has not failed in the arduous venture of putting life between the two covers of a book. He has shown that the content and the significance of the Cinderella of literary forms can be as vast as that of *Hamlet*. He has used an almost godlike power of speech to express himself. Mr. Wells believes that the world would be redeemed from its follies if we all joined the Fabian Society. Meredith is far wiser than that. He knows that if you expel Nature with a pitchfork it will return.

So we come to think of Meredith's rightness rather than of his brilliance or even his poetic imagination and his vast range of powers. We deem him the Sage learned in the deepest lore of the humanity, though he smilingly refuses to be Sir Oracle and to answer our "posers." We regard him as a teacher, a schoolmaster even, who seeks to cure our mental, moral, and social rigidity. It is not a mere exercise in the fantastic to find some parallel to him in Samuel Johnson. That truly great Englishman, whose massive intelligence had reached the same conclusions as the nimbler mind of Meredith, that our civilisation was founded upon *commonsense*, is in his wisdom, his broadness—despite some obvious prejudices—his tolerant humanity, and his hatred of cant, true peer of our novelist. Johnson, few men more, despised the unreal, the mock-sublime, the hollow sentimental.

It was he who in a moment of relaxation so aptly satirised the insincere sentiment of his age :

> " Hermit hoar, in solemn cell
> Wearing out life's evening gray,
> Smite thy bosom, sage, and tell,
> What is bliss ? and which the way ?
> Thus I spoke, and speaking sigh'd ;
> Scarce repress'd the starting tear ;—
> When the smiling sage reply'd,
> Come, my lad, and drink some beer."

Meredith himself could not have jested more humorously at the man of feeling, and by no one would the sage's exhortation have been hailed with more enthusiasm than by the chronicler of Hillford and Ipley's epic deeds. And the sturdy eighteenth-century moralist who bluntly said that patriotism was the last refuge of the scoundrel—he might have added that it is an early haven of the amateur, the incompetent, and the swindler—who tested protestations of deep grief by the appetite of the grieved one, who rebuked Mrs. Thrale for affectation of a nice refinement of thought, would have hailed the ceaseless tracker-out of sentimentalism as a true descendant, much as a considerable part of Meredith's manysided nature would have been inexplicable to him. There is at times a nobleness in defying commonsense, that rarest, most elusive, and least definable of the virtues, but it is magnificent, not war ; and all who charge upon its massive front must pay the penalty of destruction, even the best beloved of Meredith's heroes. The

hero, if he is not to die an early, poignantly pathetic death, must be rich in "saving commonsense." Then, like Redworth, he may win the witty and the fair Diana, and even prosaically live happy ever after. It is such men as he and Dartrey Fenellan, men of action and decision, who bear off belike the fairest damsels. Romance has wings, but they may fail like those of Daedalus, and creeping commonsense by no means always creeps. A world either of Beauchamps or De Crayes will never do.

Even in his *ἐνθουσιασμὸς* Meredith is magnificently sane. There is nothing mawkish about his heroes. They have no morbid introspection. They do foolish and even silly things, they ride the hippogriff like Wilfrid Pole. But they are all teachable, all capable of improving. We admire them, and still better we like them. Meredith has succeeded in making his heroes *de iure* heroes *de facto*. Who ever cared for Henry Morton or Edward Waverley? What reader ever said that Beauchamp or Feverel was uninteresting? In a well-known passage[1] Keats has spoken of the stage of ferment through which most men pass between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five when the character is "undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted." Through such a stage passed Evan Harrington and Wilfrid Pole, and their creator would have agreed with Keats

[1] Quoted by Mr. Compton Mackenzie, introduction to *Sinister Street*.

that this is man's appointed time of ordeal. Heroes of this period of life have been common, never perhaps more common than at present. They will not always pass the test of attractiveness. We cannot admire or even be interested in Michael Fane, prig or even decadent, we cannot set Tom Jones upon a pinnacle, though he is more of a man and less of a dilettante voluptuary. Still less can we admire those who devote their activities to finding nice phrases for nasty things, for unabashed naturalism is a stage above mawkish romance or sneaking lechery. We are wearied by the strenuousness of those who turn over dung-hills steaming hot, and assault our nostrils and brandish their muck-rakes as they advance to battle with the war-cry "Art for Art's sake." We are fatigued by the laborious transcripts of over-conscientious novelists who—to use an image of Mr. Henry James's—love the squeezed-orange style, an orange too of many pips. Meredith, courageous and emancipated critic of the conventional, had yet no taste for poking into Mother Nature's bowels. He has always a noble serenity and a noble delicacy. If it were the custom to affix musical phrases to novels or their chapters, he might justly have claimed as his own the favourite legend of England's finest contemporary composer, *nobilmente.* It is his quality through and through. He does not idolise his characters, but he is nobly charitable, and of course too subtle a master of speech to indulge in common-

place tirade when the finer methods are available. He does not chide Diana for her grave error, he even pleads for her. But he knows, as she knows, that she has erred, as she lies in her darkened room fasting two days and nights, until her friend Emma comes and rescues her from her despair. He passes judgment even in his own despite, and even though he briefs himself as counsel for the defence for Diana, or stands chief mourner at Beauchamp's funeral, the hero may think that he does not "sow the thing which happens," but Meredith knows better. He knows, too, that Victor Radnor, type of the sentimentalist who strives to make the best of all worlds, seeks the impossible; he knows, moreover, that, despite the perplexities of any marriage law, convention is right nine times out of ten, or even more. His wit is also wisdom, and he is in line with the great ones of the past, which a novelist like Mr. Wells, despite his painstaking talent, is not. He has shown that subtlety and profundity are not inconsistent, and his profundity perhaps lay largely in his subtlety, even in "the shadow of one-tenth of an inch in the customary elevation of an eyelid."

The ironic attitude leads easily to cynicism, a fault ruinous in a novelist. Meredith, like all great novelists,[1] is free from it. "Cynicism," he tells

[1] It may be stated in passing that whether a man does or does not regard Thackeray as a cynic may be taken as a criterion almost infallible of whether he has or has not any insight in literary matters.

us, " is intellectual dandyism without the coxcomb's feathers." Still less inclined is he to misanthropy. As he finely says of those who are always denouncing the world, " one might as well have an evil opinion of a river; here it's muddy, there it's clear, one day troubled, another at rest. We have to treat it with commonsense." It is the profound sense of life and its significance which is ever present with Meredith as he moves what other writers have playfully called their puppets.[1] As one studies Meredith one finds the characters grow bigger and bigger and more significant. They transcend our everyday existence; without losing their vitality and individuality they take on the character of types illuminating vast principles. Their vitality, as that of all great creations, is due to their creator. In truth all the characters which men have loved to ponder over and to hand down to succeeding generations of admirers are *οὐσίαι*, existences in the mind of their inventors, characters which live and, as it seems at times, alone have real existence, stripped of the impermanent and inessential, living not in time or space but in some fourth dimension. Such are Meredith's greatest characters. They have the element of

[1] Not Meredith's designation of them. " I never outline my novels before starting them. I live day and night with my characters. As I wrote of Diana and other leading types I drew nourishment as it were from their breasts " (Mr. Clodd's *Recollections*).

the timeless, they illustrate abiding principles, not party shibboleths.[1] The more one studies Meredith the more humane and kindly he seems, the wider and longer his vision. He dwells in his own intellectual universe, and his novels have all the unity which attaches to the products of a single mind.

. . . .

Our pilgrimage is ended. We have passed o'er hill and dale, through cloudland too, and we have traversed Meredithland at length. We have been jolted at times, perhaps with one critic we have thought that we barked our shins against our author's wit. What picture is there left within our minds of him who wrought these palaces of phantasy? Surely we feel that we have been communing not merely with a great writer but with a truly great mind. Beyond denial hosts of phrases which are merely the overflow of a rich tide of fancy might serve as texts for chapters if not for volumes, and many a single paragraph will contain more brilliance and profoundness of reflection than the *opera omnia* of Mr. Hall Caine. But the appeal of mere cleverness soon wanes. We are struck, if we but care to study him, with the beauty and the unity of our master's life, we rise from his

[1] Meredith keeps his views well under control. It is interesting to note that, despite his decided opinions, in all his novels there is but one policy definitely inculcated, that of conscription—a course which to many minds would not seem to have the element of the permanent but rather of the transitory.

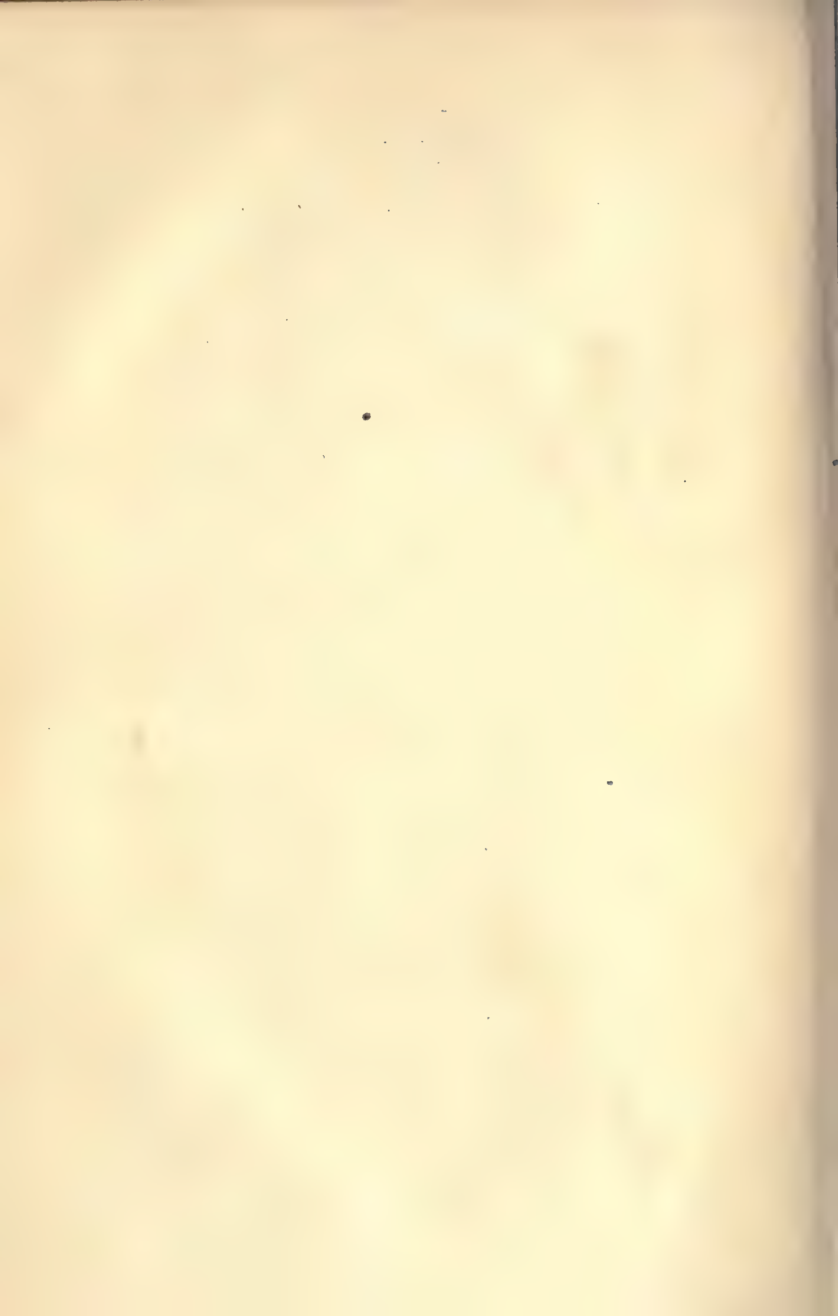
works with a widened outlook and a refined consciousness. He is a moral teacher; there is a moral beauty about his finest sayings. There is a truer truth and a realler reality about his greatest utterances than we find in life's confused medley of conflicting aims. There is "fine filmy work" of analysis in *The Amazing Marriage*, yet it is not the subtlety of the analysis but the nobility of those reflections of the unhappy Fleetwood on his sure passage to the austerities of penance and the maniac tortures of the monastic cell which even at times calls *Hamlet* to our minds. "The years are the teachers of the great rocky natures, which they round and sap and pierce in caverns. There is no resisting the years if we have a heart and a common understanding." Such are the utterances not of a great writer but of a great man. Genius is attuned to genius, and one will answer to another o'er the vasty deeps of space. But genius and the common man can scarce agree; even a succession of heaven-sent Ministers of Education will not alter nature's ordinance. Yet some day—ten centuries hence, he would declare in persiflage—we shall not need the half-penny picture paper or the musical comedy to divert ourselves. The Comic Spirit in that far-off time will have its temple in every heart, but he will need time, and above all time.

> "Rich labour is the struggle to be wise,
> While we make sure the struggle cannot cease."

And we must be kindly patient too;

> " Judge mildly the tasked world; and disincline
> To brand it, for it bears a heavy pack. . . .
> 'Spiral' the memorable Lady terms
> Our mind's ascent; our world's advance presents
> That figure on a flat; the way of worms.
> Cherish the promise of its good intents,
> And warn it, not one instinct to efface
> Ere Reason ripens for the vacant place."

It is the Master himself who speaks.



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