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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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A B S T R A C T

In discussing the poetry of George Meredith critics invariably must grapple with the two outstanding features of his work -- his attitude towards nature and his poetic style. Although in some disagreement as to the relative merits of Meredith's 'philosophy of nature', almost all critics agree that he is a difficult and frequently obscure poet. His poems have been repeatedly described by such adjectives as "harsh", "crabbed", "obscure", "garrulous", "cerebral", "rough", and "didactic". The general consensus appears to be that George Meredith was a man with a message and that in his eagerness to communicate that message he sometimes ignored the rules of poetic diction. With the exception of "Modern Love", "Love in the Valley", and some minor lyrics, Meredith's poems are read primarily for the ideas which they contain, in particular, major poems such as "The Woods of Westminster", "Earth and Man", and "A Faith on Trial", are regarded more as didactic philosophical treatises than as poetic utterances. It is the contention of this thesis that Meredith forged a unique poetic style to express his personal vision of the unity and harmony of creation and that the Nature poems are expressions of Meredith's religious impulse rather than rational ex-

positions of a logically coherent philosophy.

The first chapter of the thesis discusses the problems with previous critical approaches to the poems, establishes the context of Meredith's ideas in terms of the dualistic reaction of nineteenth-century thinkers to Darwin's theory of Evolution, and outlines the major themes in his poetry. The second chapter then discusses Meredith's use of pagan mythology to embody his poetic vision. The third chapter examines Meredith's poetic technique with particular attention to "The Woods of Westermain" and "A Faith on Trial" in an attempt to show how he unites poetic content and poetic form through a careful use of language, metre, image, and symbol to embody a unified vision of the natural and supernatural worlds.

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Chapter I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

In discussing the poetry of George Meredith critics invariably must grapple with the two outstanding features of his work -- his attitude towards nature and his poetic style. The typical critical response to Meredith's poetry has been to admire the sanity and ingenuity of his 'philosophy of nature' while deploring the harshness and obscurity of the verse in which he expresses his thoughts on life. G.M. Trevelyan, an ardent admirer of Meredith's poetry, somewhat reluctantly acknowledges the problem: "Charges of eccentricity, never applicable to his thought, of which the 'harmonies are always sane', are sometimes too true of his style. The fault of obscurity, not absent from the novels, is conspicuous in some of the poems."¹ Mark Pattison, in a contemporary review of Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of the Earth, expresses a similar opinion: "Unfortunately, Mr. Meredith's healthy wisdom is veiled in the obscurity of a peculiar language which makes even his general drift doubtful, and the meaning of many score of lines absolute darkness."² Pattison goes on to suggest that the reason for this obscurity lies in the originality and uniqueness of Meredith's ideas: "as the moods he desires to suggest are remote from common experience, so also must the suggestive imagery be. Even the English language is inadequate to his requirements, and he tries to eke it out by daring compounds."³ Other

critics are less kind. An unsigned review in the Saturday Review, July 13, 1901, attributes Meredith's eccentricity to nothing more than a vain sort of literary snobbery:

He has so fastidious a fear of dirtying his hands with what other hands have touched that he makes the language over again, so as to avoid writing a sentence or a line as anyone else could have written it. His hatred of the commonplace becomes a mania, and it is by his headlong hunt after the best that he has lost by the way its useful enemy, good. In prose he would have every sentence shine, in verse he would have every line sparkle; like a lady who puts on all her jewelry at once, immediately after breakfast.⁴

All of the above critics attribute Meredith's obscurity to a genuinely poetic concern with style. His anxiety to find a suitable mode of expression for his ideas is pushed to the point where nothing short of remaking the language will suffice. As the anonymous review admits, Meredith's harshness is often merely the result of "a too urgent desire to be at once concise and explicit."⁵ J.B. Priestley, on the other hand, thinks just the opposite. Meredith's problem is that he is too much of a thinker and not enough of a poet, resulting in poetry "too frequently coldly didactic".⁶ According to Priestley "Meredith seems to us an excited talker rather than a moved and moving singer; the thought calls for a sublimity, a large symphonic movement, but instead of this, it is given a thin snip-snap, a brittle aphor-

istic manner. It provides us with a number of memorable aphorisms... but the lines have not that haunting quality peculiar to poetry." ⁷ C. Day Lewis, although he makes an exception of "Modern Love", agrees both with Priestley, that Meredith is too intellectual, and with our other critics, that his experiments with poetic style have been carried too far:

For the rest of his life he is versifying ideas: his poetry has become cerebral, laborious, over-stylized. We get a constant compression of thought: metaphors proliferate, struggle towards the light, choke one another in a jungle of verbiage: the language is elliptic and self-conscious, for ever taking short cuts or making elaborate detours towards some pre-arranged idea, but more often than not getting lost in the process -- it is not so much an exploration as a kind of steeple-chase. Compression of thought there is indeed; but seldom does concentration of poetic meaning result from it. ⁸

Implicit in these criticisms of Meredith's style is the critical assumption that poetry should be dominated by emotional rather than intellectual content. Thus, all the critics cited above, while respecting the integrity of Meredith's thought, believe him to be incapable of expressing himself through the medium of poetry.

Priestley accurately expresses the assumptions of most Meredith critics when he approvingly quotes Milton's statement that poetry is "simple, sensuous, and passionate", and then concludes that because Meredith's verse is "neither simple, nor sensuous, nor passionate", it is

not poetry.⁹

Despite Meredith's obvious literary genius, a fact which most critics willingly concede, the extreme complexity of his verse, which demands close and careful reading, is universally acknowledged as its major flaw. As J.H. Crees puts it, the poems "need the labours of the grammarian, the annotations of the commentator, and the paraphrase of a translator."¹⁰

Yet this same critic has described the very same poetry as: "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, expogitated, intense, everything but thrilling in their sheer beauty."¹¹ What Crees seems to be suggesting by his bewildering array of adjectives is that the poems are both fascinating and incomprehensible, and I would suggest that much of the critical confusion surrounding Meredith's poetry results from critics' uncertainty as to how to respond to what are undoubtedly unusual poems. Many critics sense a certain vitality and energy in the poems while finding the actual meaning elusive, and hence the perplexing result that Meredith is commended for the vigour of his

intellect and criticized for the complexity of his poetic style. But there is also disagreement over the quality of his intellect, and he has been described as both a sterile rationalist and an inspired, if somewhat vague, mystic. This tendency of critics to discuss Meredith's poetic ideas while dismissing the actual poems as stylistic failures, is not only an indication of a certain ambivalence in the critics' response to the poems, but does both the philosophy and the poetry a vast injustice. As G.M. Trevelyan was well aware, one cannot "dress out a poet's views of life in the clothes of a philosophical system,... without conveying a conception at once disagreeable and erroneous."¹² Presented as a logical philosophical system, Meredith's views on life seem both simplistic and naive, and it is relatively easy to find both flaws and inconsistencies in that system. He did not however, represent himself as a philosopher, but as a poet, and it is the consistency of his poetic vision rather than his philosophical system that we should be evaluating. I do not see how critics can discuss a poet's ideas when they find the poetry unreadable, and I suspect that the harsh criticism of Meredith's style reflects not so much the poet's incompetence as the critics' inability to comprehend his poetic purpose.

I would suggest that rather than reading the poems in order to extract from them certain ideas about life and nature, a better approach would be to accept the poet's ideas as the philosophical base from which he is working and focus on his poetic treatment of those ideas.

Meredith's views on life and nature are not the startling or unusual revelations which some critics have made them out to be. His belief in the benevolence of nature is very similar to that of Goethe, Wordsworth, and Emerson, while his optimistic faith in the process of evolution as leading to a higher, that is, spiritual, end, can also be seen in the poetry of Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne. Of the three poets, Swinburne is closest to Meredith in his deification of Mother Earth as the source and inspiration of man's being. While Tennyson and Browning cling resolutely to a Christian theological framework, merely incorporating the theory of evolution into the creative plan of the Deity for man's spiritual progress, Swinburne and Meredith reject the Christian scheme and return instead to pagan mythology as a means of embodying their vision of the self-sufficiency and creative vitality of earth. The pagan myths, depicting a natural scene inhabited by gods, goddesses, and countless minor deities, embody a spiritual element as

an intrinsic part of the landscape, and thus serve as much better symbols of the living spiritual presence of nature which Meredith perceives, than the remoter Deity of Christian theology. In his paganism, Meredith differs somewhat from Wordsworth, whose awareness of a living presence in nature, that of a transcendent spiritual power working through nature but separate from her, is otherwise not unlike Meredith's:

a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
("Tintern Abbey", ll. 95-102)

Meredith's awareness of the living presence of nature is more particular and concrete than Wordsworth's, though equally visionary. In "Outer and Inner" he describes with careful detail the insect life of the woods, and this close observation leads to a fanciful vision of the spiritual life of nature:

My world I note ere fancy comes,
Minutest hushed observed:
What busy bits of motioned wits
Through antlered mosswork strive.
But now so low the stillness hums,
My springs of seeing swerve,
For half a wink to thrill and think
The woods with nymphs alive.

I neighbour the invisible
So close that my consent
Is only asked for spirits masked
To leap from trees and flowers.

And this because with them I dwell
 In thought, while calmly bent
 To read the lines dear Earth designs
 Shall speak her life on ours.¹³

Wordsworth sees one separate spiritual power which exists outside of nature but works through her, while Meredith sees a separate and individual spiritual life in even the most minute of nature's creatures. This is part of the reason for the vitality and tremendous energy of Meredith's poetry. He envisions a world teeming with life, whose inhabitants, while all separate and individual, are yet united under one banner, as he says in "A Faith on Trial": "the dream of the blossom of good".

Meredith does not deny the existence of Wordsworth's transcendent spiritual power, but simply maintains that nature has a spiritual existence in her own right. He refers vaguely to "Nature's Master", whom he calls "Over-Reason" or "Beneficence", or sometimes just "Mind". Man cannot directly apprehend this power, but only its manifestation in nature. He says in "Earth and Man":

She [Earth] her just Lord may view,
 Not he [Man], her creature, till his soul has yearned
 With all her gifts to reach the light discerned
 Her spirit through.

(p. 245)

Spirit is apprehended through close and careful observation of nature and not through looking beyond or above her:

If he aloft for aid
 Imploring storms, her essence is the spur.
 His cry to heaven is a cry to her
 He would evade.

(p. 244)

Basically, what Meredith has done is to combine the Romantic worship of a benevolent nature, which occurs in Wordsworth and Emerson, with the scientific theory of evolution. In effect he transforms a strictly neutral scientific theory, which was devised to explain certain natural phenomena, into a new religion of earth which contains an imaginative vision of man's "evolutionary" progress from flesh to spirit. There is nothing in the scientific theory of evolution as expounded by Darwin and Huxley to justify the existence of a spiritual reality or to indicate that man will progress spiritually. Nineteenth-century poets took great liberties with Darwin's theory, frequently manipulating it to suit their own poetic purposes. Lionel Stevenson, in Darwin Among the Poets, describes the transformations which evolutionary theory was apt to undergo in an imaginative poetic context:

Any discussion of the relationship between evolutionary theory and nineteenth-century poetry must go far beyond the strictly scientific hypothesis which Darwin propounded. The Darwinian hypothesis itself suffered varying interpretations, ranging down to the vulgar belief that it meant man's descent from monkeys; the poets, if they did not quite agree with that simplification, were all inclined to emphasize particular

aspects of the idea which happened to impress them. Then to these selected -- and inevitably distorted -- elements of Darwinism they add mystical and philosophical ingredients of all sorts, invented by themselves, or derived from sources, ancient and modern.¹⁴

With the principle of evolution as his foundation, Meredith devised a metaphysical system which is presented poetically in a vision of the harmony and unity of creation. The desire to reconcile the disparate elements of his experience into a unified whole is the controlling principle behind Meredith's poetry, and he saw in the cyclical processes of nature, wherein summer and winter, birth and death, day and night, rain and sunshine, are all aspects of the same ongoing process, an objective physical image of the state he wished to convey. The real and the ideal, material and spiritual, are not separate and mutually antagonistic states but different aspects of the same thing. In Meredith's evolutionary vision of life, nature is working her way up from the instinctual animal level to the rational human level, and finally to a superhuman spiritual level; but each successive stage is dependent on the one before and, although lower stages are superseded by higher stages, the lower elements do not disappear. This is the principle behind Meredith's triad of blood, brain, and spirit as it appears in "The Woods of Westermains":

Pleasures that through blood run sane,
 Quickening spirit from the brain.
 Each of each in sequent birth,
 Blood and brain and spirit, three
 (Say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
 Join for true felicity. (pp. 201-2)

Although spirit is superior to brain and brain
 to blood, all three are necessary for the individual to
 function properly, and these three separate and distinct
 faculties must function in harmony to form a unified
 whole:

Are they parted, then expect
 Some one sailing will be wrecked:
 Separate hunting are they sped,
 Scan the morsel coveted.
 Earth that Triad is: she hides
 Joy from him who that divides;
 Showers it when the three are one
 Glossing her in union. (p. 202)

Man is the product of this triad of blood, brain
 and spirit, and represents the culmination of the
 evolutionary process to date. The relationship between
 man and nature is a major theme in Meredith's poetry,
 most explicitly defined in "Earth and Man". Man is a
 child of earth, "her great venture", and their relation-
 ship ideally should be one of close interdependence and
 interaction. Earth gives man life and nourishment,
 and man gives earth consciousness and is the means by
 which earth is improved:

Him she owes
 For half her loveliness a love well won
 By work that lights the shapeless and the
 dun,
 Their common foes.

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.

Through him hath she exchanged,
For the gold harvest-robcs, the mural crown,
Her haggard quarry-features and thick frown
Where monsters ranged.

And order, high discourse,
And decency, than which is life less dear,
She has of him: the lyre of language clear,
Love's tongue and source. (p. 243)

But man, by refusing to acknowledge earth as the source of his inspiration, defeats his own purposes. His cries to an invisible spiritual power to rescue him from the mortality of his human state are vain, for the spiritual sustenance which he seeks lies in nature:

If he aloft for aid
Imploring storms, her essence is the spur.
His cry to heaven is a cry to her
He would evade.

Not elsewhere can he tend.
Those are her rules which bid him wash foul sins;
Those her revulsions from the skull that grins
To ape his end.

And her desires are those
For happiness, for lastingness, for light.
'Tis she who kindles in his haunting night
The hoped dawn-rose. (p. 244)

Three important Meredithian concepts are contained in the lines quoted above; and they concern ego, work, and natural law. Human egoism, the frequent villain of Meredith's novels, is an equally evil force in the poetry. It is not an absolutely evil force, for ego has the

potential for good if properly handled. By ego Meredith does not mean merely the self, but as Norman Kelvin explains, something "closer to what Freud designated by the term 'id' ".¹⁵ Ego represents the passions and instinctual drives of the sensual self -- it is , in fact the raw energy of the life force which man shares in common with all nature's living creatures. This energy must be directed outward into the natural processes of nature rather than inward to gratify only the self. The desire for personal immortality, which is such a major concern of Tennyson and Browning, is, in Meredith's eyes, a selfish desire of the sensual self to prolong its fleshly existence:

Through terror, through distrust;
The greed to touch, to view, to have, to live:
Through all that makes of him a sensitive
Abhorring dust. (p. 242)

The ego cannot be destroyed, for that would mean self-destruction; instead, it must be directed outward to work for the good of humanity. Thus in "The Woods of Westminster" the dragon of self is not slain but tamed and controlled:

Wait, and we shall forge him curbs,
Put his fangs to uses, tame,
Teach him, quick as cunning herbs,
How to cure him sick and lame.

Change will strip his armour off;
Make of him who was all maw,
Inly only thrilling-shrewd,
Such a servant as none saw
Through his days of dragon-hood.
(pp. 198-9)

Work transforms the "scaly Dragon-fowl" of self into the "small self-dragon" which thrills "for service to be stamped". By immersing his personal desires in the needs of the race, man finds fulfillment, and the ego which was a destructive force becomes a positive good. Work is also important not only as an "antidote to egoism", as Kelvin puts it, but as a means of improving earth. Cultivation and civilization are earth's means of self-improvement; through the instrumentation of man, she gains the spiritual existence that she longs for. Earth thus participates in the gains of civilization, for earth and man cannot be separated; their destinies are one, and if he would stop fighting her and recognize her as an ally, he would progress faster:

She hears him, and can hear
 With glory in his gains by work achieved:
 With grief for grief that is the unperceived
 In her so near. (p. 243)

The third important concept is that of natural law -- the ordering and controlling principle of the universe. Nature's iron laws are the one absolute in a world of continuous flux and change. Even more important than as an indication of nature's permanence amidst mutability, the existence of natural laws is evidence, for Meredith, of a moral and spiritual

principle animating the universe. Evolution, in Meredith's eyes, was not the blind, blundering, mindless process which forms such a nightmare vision for Tennyson in lyrics 55-56 of "In Memoriam", but a defined and purposive process leading to a definite moral and spiritual end. It is through studying nature's laws that man may gain knowledge of the spiritual principle behind nature, a principle which Meredith calls "Over-Reason", "Nature's Master", "Beneficence", or "Mind". Love is the means of gaining spiritual understanding. By loving nature, we gain insight into her mysteries and come to understand her laws. This is the theme of the poem "Melampus", who through love of the simple woodland creatures gained the "key of knowledge". The same point is made in the closing stanzas of "The Thrush in February":

The spirit served by her is seen
Through Law; perusing love will show.

Love born of knowledge, love that gains
Vitality as Earth it mates,
The meaning of the Pleasures, Pains,
The Life, the Death, illuminates.

For love we Earth, then serve we all;
Her mystic secret then is ours: (p. 331)

What exactly Meredith means by "Over-Reason" is uncertain. Fairchild maintains that "Nature's Master"

is man: "As for 'the great Over-Reason', Meredith, like Emerson, is no more a genuine supernaturalist than he is a naturalist. We 'find' the Over-Reason by writing 'Mind' instead of 'mind'. Its 'beneficence' is an extrapolation of human love... The Master is Man!"¹⁶

Joseph Warren Beach, in his chapter on Meredith in The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry, has a more sophisticated solution:

We know perfectly well that Meredith had no faith in a conscious intelligence guiding the universe, -- that when he speaks of the Mind which our mind seeks, he is referring poetically to what we may call the Intelligibility of the universe. There is in the universe a great Over-Reason in the sense that our mind, in its study of nature, is not perpetually baffled by irrationality, but finds, over a wide range of observation, that the objective facts conform to the patterns of classification brought by the mind. This is, in spite of much metaphysical hair-splitting, the prime assumption of all scientific investigation.¹⁷

Beach admits, however, that Meredith goes beyond the scientific principle of "the Intelligibility of the universe" when he associates the Over-Reason with beneficence. He concludes that, because of the vagueness of Meredith's terms, it is impossible to determine exactly what Meredith had in mind: "it is quite possible that Meredith did not know himself how far he meant these terms to be taken literally -- that he never squarely faced the ultimate metaphysical consequences of his thought."¹⁸

It would seem that in order to postulate the existence of a moral and spiritual order in the universe, Meredith had to go outside of nature. Although he tried to identify spirit with nature, in the end he assumed the existence of a higher power than nature to account for the order of natural law. The exact nature of this higher power is uncertain, a possible reflection of Meredith's own uncertainty on the subject. Such speculation is, of necessity, highly conjectural and in the final analysis of not much importance in Meredith's poetic philosophy. Since the existence or non-existence of a spiritual deity has no effect whatsoever on human life on earth, Meredith believed that it was not worth worrying about, and that those who were concerned to find evidence of a spiritual deity were often guilty of an egotistical and selfish desire for fleshly immortality.

In conclusion, the essence of Meredith's attitude towards life and nature is a joyous sense of vitality and creative activity. In his poetry he delights in movement, progress, change, activity, because he sees in these qualities the essence of life. In "Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn", for example, he finds the experience of an evening storm to be wonderfully

exhilarating. He longs to be a part of Mother Nature's harmony, to participate joyously in her creative energy, and to submerge his personal griefs and desires in the larger life-process:

Great Mother Nature! teach me, like thee,
To kiss the season and shun regrets.
And am I more than the mother who bore,
Mock me not with thy harmony!

Teach me to blot regrets,
Great Mother! me inspire
With faith that forward sets
But feeds the living fire,
Faith that never frets
For vagueness in the form.
In life, O keep me warm!
For, what is human grief?
And what do men desire?

Teach me to feel myself the tree,
And not the withered leaf.

Fixed am I and await the dark to-be! (p. 176)

The poem is, in fact, a prayer for strength -- the strength to face the experiences and trials of life naturally, through joyous participation in the natural ongoing cycle of life and death. But in order to achieve this joyous participation, man must emulate nature; personal grief and desire must be subsumed in the larger natural process. In other words, man must work for the progress of mankind and not for the self. Individual men come and go, but mankind continues on "with faith that forward sets".

Meredith's faith in the benevolence of natural process and natural law is simply that -- faith. The same facts which alienated Tennyson and Arnold from the

natural world are Meredith's inspiration and consolation. Tennyson sees a savage nature "red in tooth and claw", from whom man must escape by developing his spiritual nature. While Tennyson wants to destroy the beast in man so as to develop the spirit, Meredith recognizes in the beast the source of man's vitality; to destroy that is to destroy the life force.¹⁹ Thus, he advises controlling the beast so that it may work with the spirit.

The key factors in Meredith's poetic thought are his apprehension of the harmony and unity of the universe, and his delight in the creative vitality of the natural world, and these are the two qualities which he tries to communicate in his poetry. To return to the critical question of Meredith's obscure and harsh poetic style which was raised at the beginning of this chapter, I will argue in this thesis that he utilizes all the resources of language, metre, image, and symbol to embody his vision of an actively creative, harmonious universe. Meredith's unique style is an integral part of his poetic vision and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to his purposes. He is doing far more than simply versifying ideas; he is attempting to recreate his own experience of life and nature. According to Lionel Stevenson, nineteenth-century poets saw their poetic role as one of

reconciling the split between science and imagination. Poetry was to serve an interpretive function, mediating between the rational and imaginative, material and spiritual poles of man's experience, "poetry reveals to man his own relationship with external phenomena".²⁰ The attempt to encompass all the disparate elements of his experience in a unified and harmonious vision of reality is exactly Meredith's poetic purpose. One's perception of life, the way one sees things, is thus of the utmost importance. The external facts are the same for Tennyson, Arnold, and Meredith. What is important is the way in which each poet sees and interprets those facts; and the whole purpose of their poetry is to make the reader see what the poet sees. Keeping Meredith's philosophical ideas and attitudes, as outlined above, in mind, I propose in chapter 11 of this thesis to examine Meredith's use of image and symbol, in particular the way in which he draws upon pagan mythology as a fund of poetic symbols, to embody his poetic vision. In chapter 111, I propose to discuss two major poems, "The Woods of Westermains" and "A Faith on Trial" to show how he unites poetic content and form to embody his vision of benevolent, purposive natural process. After such an examination, I hope to come to a more

satisfactory conclusion concerning the merits of Meredith's style and the consistency of his poetic vision.

Chapter II

MEREDITH'S POETIC VISION

Meredith's poetic vision works in two basic modes, the comic and the tragic, the difference between the two being primarily a matter of perspective. Tragedy, in Meredith's view, is written from a narrow human perspective and concentrates on one individual's personal grief or loss. "Modern Love" for example, is Meredith's idea of a tragic poem in that it describes the experience of one man's private anguish over the disintegration of his marriage. The tragic point of view is of necessity a limited one, and is contained within the comic mode which works from the broader perspective of the cycles of nature. Personal loss and grief are absorbed into the ongoing cycle of life and death, a fact which the husband of "Modern Love" acknowledges in lyric XIII:

'I play for seasons; not Eternities!'
 Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
 All those whose stake is nothing more than dust! '
 And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies
 She is full sure! Upon her dying rose
 She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,
 Scarce any retrospection in her eye;
 For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
 Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag -- there, an urn.
 Pledged she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!
 This lesson of our only visible friend
 Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
 Yes! Yes! -- but, oh, our human rose is fair
 Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
 When the renewed for ever of a kiss
 Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!

(pp. 138-9)

The tragedy in "Modern Love" lies in the inability of the lovers to participate in the ongoing process of life; in

their clinging fatally to a dead past. In other words, their love fails to grow; it is a static thing and is thus doomed to failure:

Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
(p. 155)

The human longing for permanence and stability is not only tragic, but unrealistic; life, as Meredith never tires of reminding us, is not a matter of fixed and permanent states, but a process of continuous change and growth. Tragedy focuses on the individual, comedy on the process, and in Meredith's view comedy is not only the saner but also the superior mode. He does not deny the validity of human grief or misery; on the contrary, as "Modern Love", "A Faith on Trial". Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life, and many other poems testify, he was keenly aware of the tragic element in life. He maintains rather, that one must also be aware of the broader picture. Individuals may experience failure and disappointment, but life goes on and civilization steadily advances. The tragic sense of personal loss or defeat is subsumed in the comic vision of continuous process and growth, the difference ultimately between the two visions a matter of perspective.

Meredith illustrates this point very effectively in "Bellerophon". Bellerophon was the Greek mortal who

tamed Pegasus, the winged horse of the Muses, and who was later thrown while attempting to fly up to Olympus. Traditionally, the story has been interpreted as an object lesson on presumption: Bellerophon is justly punished for seeking to become a god. Meredith's handling of the theme is quite different in tone, transforming the story into a myth about the human struggle for spiritual progress. Instead of an act of presumption, Bellerophon's flight is seen as a glorious attempt which failed.

The poem begins many years after the fall with Bellerophon now an old man, lame and blind from his fall, and half-crazed in his wits, who lives by begging. The emphasis in the opening stanzas is on the pathos and misery of the actual man, once a "martial prince", now "a broken arc" unable even to tell his story:

Maimed, beggared, grey; seeking an alms;
Of palsy doing task of thanks for bread;
Upon the stature of a God,
He whom the Gods have struck bends low his head.

Weak words he has, that slip the nerveless tongue
Deformed, like his great frame: a broken arc:
Once radiant as the javelin flung
Right at the centre breastplate of his mark.
(p. 310)

Although he is now a witless beggar, we are reminded that he was once "upon the stature of a God" and that the now broken arc was once whole. The contrast

between his past and present state is startling, and it is little wonder that the cottagers who give him food pay no attention to the crazy beggar's inarticulate prattle. Yet, despite Bellerophon's inability to communicate, the story of "a martial prince" who tamed the winged steed lives on, seemingly with a life of its own. Towards the middle of the poem, the myth of Bellerophon, the man who was almost a god, comes to the forefront, and the actual man himself fades into the background:

As men that spied the wings, that heard the snort,
Their sires have told; and of a martial prince
 Bestriding him; and old report
Speaks of a monster slain by one long since.

There is that story of the golden bit
By Goddess given to tame the lightning steed:
A mortal who could mount, and sit
Flying, and up Olympus midway speed.

He rose like the loosed fountain's utmost leap;
He played the star at span of heaven right o'er
Men's heads: they saw the snowy steep,
Saw the winged shoulders: him they saw not more...

(p. 311)

The myth of Bellerophon, as emblematic of mankind's spiritual quest, has a vitality and integrity which eclipses the actual man. The cottagers who give him food cannot possibly connect the inarticulate beggar and his crazy tale with the story of the prince who was almost a god, nor is it important that they should. His deed lives on, an inspiration to mankind, although

the man himself is forgotten and unacknowledged. In Meredith's poetic philosophy individuals have no importance apart from the contribution which they make to the progress of the race.

What is especially intriguing in this poem is the carefully balanced tension which Meredith maintains between the two points of view. On the one hand, "Bellerophon" is the pathetic tale of a half-crazed beggar; on the other hand, it is a glorious myth of man's reaching up to the gods. This tension between the personal and the universal perspectives is at the heart of Meredith's philosophy, his point being that the personal is always superceded by the universal. The poem concludes with the same tension between private and public perspectives:

Lo, this is he in whom the surgent springs
Of recollections richer than our skies
To feed the flow of tuneful strings,
Show but a pool of scum for shooting flies.
(p. 311)

The first three lines build up to a rich climax only to be followed by the anticlimactic fourth line, but although the poem ends with the half-crazed beggar's vision, the forceful surge of the first three lines both counteracts and seems to overcome the human limitations of the last line.

In "The Appeasement of Demeter", another mythological

poem, Meredith associates his comic vision with the fertility myth of Demeter and Persephone. Meredith's comic vision quite naturally allies itself with the pagan fertility myths in that both celebrate the perpetual renewal of life. The poem begins with a description of the devastation which Demeter inflicts upon the vale of Enna out of grief for the loss of her daughter, Persephone. Demeter's grief is a tragic and therefore private emotion; but because she is the earth goddess, all nature suffers with her. The Earth Mother sits wrapped in gloom; despite the importunities of her maid Iambe, she is indifferent to the sufferings of the starving inhabitants of the vale, until a horse and mare, in a feeble attempt at love-play, move her to laughter and the curse is removed:

She laughed: since our first harvesting heard none
 Like thunder of the song of heart: her face,
 The dreadful darkness, shook to mounted sun,
 And peal on peal across the hills held chase.
 She laughed herself to water; laughed to fire;
 Laughed the torrential laugh of dam and sire
 Full of the marrowy race.
 Her laughter, Gods! was flesh on skeleton.

Uprose the blade in green, the leaf in red,
 The tree of water and the tree of wood:
 And soon among the branches overhead
 Gave beauty juicy issue sweet for food.
 O Laughter! beauty plumped and love had birth.
 Laughter! O thou reviver of sick Earth!

 Good for the spirit, good
 For body, thou! to both art wine and bread!

(pp. 334-5)

Meredith's point here is to emphasize that the natural

This is very close to the sort of disinterested scientific inquiry in which Darwin himself engaged; its premise is the same as that from which Darwin, Huxley, and others worked -- that man has evolved from lower forms of life. The scientists looked upon the theory of evolution as a possible explanation of the origin of species -- but it was merely one theory among many which purported to explain the origins of life.

Meredith in his poetry transforms this scientific theory into an imaginative vision of the essential unity and harmony of creation. A scientific hypothesis thus becomes the foundation of a mystical vision of the meaning of life. While sleeping in the woods one afternoon, a brood of snakes which Melampus has saved, lick his ears, thereby bestowing on him the power to understand the language of the forest creatures. This power gives Melampus the key to understanding the mystery of life, and he sees the essential unity in the apparent diversity of creation, the basic underlying harmony behind apparent discord:

So passed he luminous-eyed for earth and the fates
 We arm to bruise or caress us: his ears were charged
 With tones of love in a whirl of voluble hates,
 With music wrought of distraction his heart enlarged.
 Celestial-shining, though mortal, singer, though mute,
 He drew the Master of harmonies, voiced or stilled,
 To seek him; heard at the silent medicine-root
 A song, beheld in fulfillment the unfulfilled.

(p. 229)

"The Master of harmonies" is of course Apollo, god of the sun and music, leader of the Muses, and a favourite

mythological figure of Meredith's. In "Melampus" Apollo's light is spiritual understanding, his music a symbol of the harmony of creation and of the wisdom and sanity which is at the heart of that harmony:

Him Phoebus, lending to darkness colour and form
 Of light's excess, many lessons and counsels gave;
 Showed Wisdom lord of the human intricate swarm,
 And whence prophetic it looks on the hives that rave;
 And how acquired, of the zeal of love to acquire,
 And where it stands, in the centre of life a sphere;
 And Measure, mood of the lyre, the rapturous lyre,
 He said was Wisdom, and struck him the notes to hear.

Sweet, sweet: 'twas glory of vision, honey, the breeze
 In heat, the run of the river on root and stone,
 All senses joined, as the sister Pierides
 Are one, uplifting their chorus, the Nine, his own.
 In stately order, evolved of sound into sight.
 From sight to sound intershifting, the man descried
 The growths of earth, his adored, like day out of night,
 Ascend in song, seeing nature and song allied.

(pp. 229-30)

In "Melampus" Apollo is a symbol of the harmony and unity of the natural world, but he is also associated with the achievements of civilization -- learning, medicine, and poetry. As sun god, he provides both the light and heat which make things grow and the spiritual illumination traditionally associated with the light of the sun. He is therefore, both a symbol of the progress of human civilization and of the harmony of the natural world. Apollo's descent to earth visually dramatizes one of Meredith's favourite themes, which is the marriage of earth and sky, representing the physical and spiritual elements of experience. Apollo represents

both the higher, rational conscious element of life and the essential harmony and unity of the totality. "Phoebus with Admetus", based on Apollo's year of exile on earth in punishment for killing the cyclopes, is a celebration of the virtues of rural life and the skills of husbandry taught to Admetus' household by the god. In this poem, Apollo's descent to earth represents the union of the creative civilizing force in man with the natural processes of nature in the form of fruitful labour. As the stanzas run through the seasons from summer to spring, each of the skills which Apollo has brought to earth is celebrated in turn: first husbandry, then crafts such as trapping beasts and shooting birds of prey, then story telling and dancing, and finally medicine and the music of the lyre, the final stanza ending in a celebration of the creative union of man and nature as epitomized by Apollo's year on earth:

You with shelly horns, rams! and promontory goats,
 You whose browsing beards dip in coldest dew!
 Bulls, that walk the pastures in kingly-flashing coats!
 Laurel, ivy, vine, wreathed for feasts not few!
 You that build the shade-roof, and you that court the rays,
 You that leap besprinkling the rock stream-rent:
 He has been our fellow, the morning of our days:
 Us he chose for housemates, and this way went.
 God! of whom music
 And song and blood are pure,
 The day is never darkened
 That had thee here obscure.

(p. 226)

"Phoebus with Admetus" celebrates the creative union of man and nature, with the emphasis on man's civilizing power to improve the natural world. "The South-Wester" is a celebration of natural process itself. The south-west wind is another favourite Meredithian image, usually symbolic of the creative force in nature. ¹ On the surface, the poem appears to be a simple description of a windy day:

Day of the cloud in fleets! O day
 Of wedded white and blue, that sail
 Immingled, with a footing ray
 In shadow-sandals down our vale! --
 And swift to ravish golden meads,
 Swift up the run of turf it speeds,
 Thy bright of head and dark of heel,
 To where the hilltop flings on sky,
 As hawk from wrist or dust from wheel,
 The tiptoe scalers tossed to fly: --
 (p. 321)

The opening lines skillfully manipulate the image of the clouds to create a unified vision of earth, sea, and sky. "Cloud in fleets" combines sky and ocean in one image, which Meredith follows with the "wedded white and blue", implying that the white clouds are wedded to the blue sky; and, because of his underlying sailing image, the sky is also the ocean. The same clouds which sail in the sky are then linked to the ground by means of the shadows they cast: "With a footing ray/ In shadow-sandals down our vale! --" . In the first five lines of the poem, the clouds unify earth, sea, and sky as well as reconciling light and dark, since the

white clouds cast dark shadows: "Thy bright of head and dark of heel". Meredith has thus found an ideal image in these opening lines to express his sense of the unity and harmony of creation. Besides presenting an image of the unity of earth, sea, and sky, the opening lines of the poem are imbued with a tremendous feeling of energy and activity. The same clouds which unite earth, sea, and sky, are also constantly in motion. Not only does Meredith employ such active verbs as "sail", "ravish", "speeds", "flings", and "tossed", but he transforms active verbs into nouns and adjectives: "fleets", "footing", "run", and "scalers". The first ten lines of the poem are thus a perfect blend of the vitality and unity which is at the heart of Meredith's poetic vision.

The next fifteen lines describe the birth of day from night, again reconciling opposing images of light and dark in terms of colour and dusk. The clouds on the horizon at dawn are described as "All dusky round thy cradled light", "wreathed as raven's plume", and "Dark eyebrows o'er a dreamful eye" which, with the coming of dawn, are transformed into "purpled vapours" that "crimson played/On edges of the plume and leaf" until they finally fly earth's breast white as "Earth's milk". Once again, the clouds link earth, sea, and sky. Clustered round the cradle of dawn, they are described as "brine-

born issues" about to be "in bloom/Transfigured".

Born from the sea, they inhabit the sky, and bloom on earth.

With the sunrise Meredith conceives of a new unifying image in the embrace of sun and earth, while the passage of the clouds across the sun's face creates a rapid alternation of sun and showers imaginatively portrayed as the alternation of summer and winter:

And she is in her lover's fold,
Illumined o'er a boundless range
Anew: and through quick morning hours
The Tropic-Arctic counterchange
Did seem to pant in beams and showers.

(p. 322)

While earth and sky are united in a lover's embrace, earth and ocean merge imaginistically as the woods take on the characteristics of water:

And sister was her quivered green
To sapphire of the Nereid eyes
On sea when sun is breeze; she winked
As they, and waved, heaved waterwise
Her flood of leaves and grasses linked:

(p. 322)

All the images of the above lines portray activity and movement. The swift alternation of sun and showers telescopes the movement of the seasons into one brief day, while the earth is pictured as possessing all the qualities of restless motion possessed by the ocean, traditional symbol of life's perpetual state of flux. To show the underlying order and harmony in this perpet-

ual motion, Meredith uses his favourite metaphor of music. Earth and sun are harp and harper united in song, which is both product of their union and source of the endless activity of life:

Heard we the woodland, eyeing sun,
As harp and harper were they one.

.....
For music did each movement rouse,
And motion was a minstrel's rage....
(pp. 322-23)

The very insubstantiality of the clouds, mere vapours constantly changing form, make them ideal images of the life process for, as Meredith repeats in poem after poem, there are no permanent states, only the ongoing process in which all things participate and from which all things derive their form and existence. As the clouds change their shape and blend into one another, so each living thing is a part of all other living things and ultimately blends into the total life process.

The poem closes with an imaginative vision of the gods on Olympus and the descent of Aphrodite, "that Lady of the hues of foam", to earth where she melts into the landscape. Love is the force which unites the universe, reconciling opposing states and welding all aspects of creation into a unified whole. Once again, Meredith combines earth, sea, and sky in one image, that of the heavenly goddess, born from the ocean, who descends to live on earth: "Melting she passed into the mind,/ Where immortal with mortal weds." We are

reminded that this poem is an imaginative vision, the product of the poet's mind and of his ability to perceive the creative harmony and vitality of the universe. As a conscious being, man both participates in and encompasses within his own mind the entire life process; and thus the poem concludes by eulogizing, not merely the creative vitality of nature, but the human poetic vision which is able to see the essential unity of creation:

Pageant of man's poetic brain,
 His grand procession of the song,
 It was; the Muses and their train;
 Their God to lead the glittering throng;
 At whiles a beat of forest gong;
 At whiles a glimpse of Python slain.
 Mostly divinest harmony,
 The lyre, the dance. We could believe
 A life in orb and brook and tree
 And cloud: and still holds Memory
 A morning in the eyes of eve.
 (p. 324)

In perceiving unity, man is also creating unity; while he sees, "A life in orb and brook and Tree/ And cloud", he also has the power to synthesize these perceptions within his mind into a unified whole. By means of the power of memory, he can unite both morning and evening into one cohesive vision. Apollo, as leader of the Muses, is a symbol of the creative power of civilization and its highest achievements, "the lyre, the dance", for these recreate on a human level the perfect harmony of natural creation.

Love is the force which gives man the power to perceive the unity, harmony, and beauty of the natural world, and to reproduce that harmony in story and song. As Meredith says in "The Thrush in February":

Love born of knowledge, love that gains
Vitality as Earth it mates,
The meaning of the Pleasures, Pains,
The Life, the Death, illuminates.

For love we Earth, then serve we all;
Her mystic secret then is ours: ...
(p. 331)

The rational intellect alone is not capable of interpreting earth's secrets; only when motivated by love, as in the case of the "good physician Melampus", can man's intellect decipher earth's "mystic secret". Love is also the force which binds the universe together, reconciling the opposing and disparate elements of nature into a harmonious whole. In "The Woods of Westermain" love is the "great volcano" which "flings/Fires of lower Earth to Sky". The volcano image appropriately captures Meredith's powerful sense of a physical force thrusting upwards to unite earth and sky, sense and spirit. Love is also described in "The Woods of Westermain" as "the Fount and Lure o' the chase". It is both the propelling force behind life's dynamic activity and the thing which all beings seek:

Fount unresting, Lure divine!
There meet all: too late look most.

Fire in water hued as wine
 Springs amid a shadowy host;
 Circled: one close-headed mob,
 Breathless, scanning divers heaps
 Where a Heart begins to throb,
 Where it ceases, slow, with leaps:
 (pp. 199-200)

The flaming fountain combines Meredith's volcanic image of love as an explosive image of desire with the traditional Christian image of the fountain of life, while the fact that it is a fountain "hued as wine" suggests both the Christian sacrament and the blood which that sacrament consecrates. The flaming fountain is the central unifying image of the poem in which the opposites of flesh and spirit, beginning and end, the source and the quest, are reconciled into one harmonious vision.

This concept of love as both the source of nature's creative energy, and the force which binds all the disparate elements of nature together, is crucial to the understanding of Meredith's poetry. It is only through the mediation of the power of love that life has any meaning whatsoever. He dramatizes this concept in a more concrete, and less esoteric fashion than in "The Woods of Westermain", in "The Day of the Daughter of Hades", a mythological poem of his own invention which tells the story of the one day on earth of the daughter of Persephone and Hades.

The story itself is fairly simple, but it contains all the crucial elements of Meredith's poetic thought -- the interconnection of life and death, the importance of love as the moving force of the universe and as the key to understanding earth's secrets, and the necessity of accepting the life process and one's own part in it, however small.

The youth Callistes runs out to greet the dawn in the now fertile vale of Enna when he witnesses the reunion of Demeter and Persephone. Callistes faints from astonishment at the sight, and awakens to find a beautiful maiden before him. She is Skiageneia, daughter of Persephone and Hades, who has hidden herself in her mother's chariot out of a burning desire to see the realms of light. The remainder of the poem describes their day on earth together, during which Skiageneia takes an intense interest in the minute activities of all earth's creatures. She finds joy only in those human activities, however, which are a part of the organic life process, such as husbandry and herding; for the martial arts, she has neither love nor interest. Her day culminates in a song of praise, addressed to Apollo, rejoicing in the light and life of earth:

Then with wonderful voice that rang
Through air as the swan's nigh death,
Of the glory of Light she sang,
She sang of the rapture of Breath.

Nor ever, says he who heard,
 Heard Earth in her boundaries broad,
 From bosom of singer or bird
 A sweetness thus rich of the God
 Whose harmonies always are sane.
 She sang of furrow and seed,
 The burial, birth of the grain,
 The growth, and the showers that feed,
 And the green blades waxing mature
 For the husbandman's armful brown.
 O, the song in its burden ran pure,
 And burden to song was a crown.
 (pp. 214-5)

Unfortunately, this song, which is a spontaneous outpouring expressing her love of earth and all its creatures, betrays her whereabouts to her father, Hades, who has noticed her absence. The landscape is instantly darkened as Hades comes in his fierce black chariot to fetch his daughter home. Callistes and the girl flee in terror, but there is no escaping the dark chariot of Hades which tears through land and water in a frantic search for Skiageneia. Callistes would resist if he could, but Skiageneia accepts the fact that her day on earth is over:

So stood she awhile
 In the gloom of the terror afield,
 And the silence about her smile
 Said more than of tongue is revealed.
 I have breathed: I have gazed: I have been:
 It said: and not joyless shone
 The remembrance of light through the screen
 Of a face that seemed shadow and stone.
 (p. 217)

She returns to the underworld, and Callistes is left to spend the rest of his days singing of the things which she loved so well, while pining away for his

lost love:

And Callistes to her beneath,
As she to our beams, extinct,
Strained arms: he was shade of her shade.
In division so were they linked.
(p. 219)

Through a skillful use of mythology, Meredith is able to dramatize both the unity of life and death, and the power which love exerts on the life and death process. Love is the driving force behind this poem: Persephone returns to earth each spring out of love for her mother, Skiageneia is drawn to earth out of a similar love of light and life. As the child of spring and death, she belongs to both realms, but she is drawn irresistibly to earth: "She was fire for the blue and green/ Of our earth, dark fire; athirst/ As a seed of her bosom for dawn." The counterforce to Skiageneia's love of earth is Hades' love of his daughter, which compels him to seek her out and return her to the underworld. Lastly, Callistes' songs of the harvest and the "rapt vision of Good" are inspired by his love for Skiageneia:

Our Lady of Gifts prized he less
Than her issue in darkness: the dim
Lost Skiageneia's caress
Of our earth made it richest for him.
(p. 220)

The poem is thus constructed on the basis of conflicting forces which are really all the same force,

though moving in opposite directions. Persephone draws Skiageneia up to earth, Hades pulls her back down to the underworld, and Callistes is caught in the middle, unable to accept either life or death. Within the poem itself, life, death, and love combine to intensify one's experience. Skiageneia's love of earth is intensified by her knowledge of death; a prisoner of darkness, she possesses a burning love of light. But despite her fierce longing for light, she is aware of and accepts the fact that she must inevitably return to the underworld. Both she and Persephone share the same wan smile, "like Sleep on its flood,/ That washes of all we crave: /Like the trance of eyes awake/ And the spirit enshrouded". The smile is a reflection of their knowledge of the conditions of life and death. Having looked upon both, they have learned to accept both as part of one continuous process. The knowledge of death makes life more desirable, but it also makes one aware of the impermanence of mortal existence and the necessity of accepting one's mortality. Callistes' encounter with "the Three" also intensifies his experience. His love for Skiageneia and her love for earth has made earth and its activities all the more

precious to him; because he is unable, however, like Skiageneia, to accept her exile to the underworld, he is cursed. While singing songs in praise of earth, he longs only for death. The knowledge of life and death should, if we would remain sane, "wash us of all we crave". The wan smile of Persephone and Skiageneia is a sign of acceptance; Callistes does not accept, and he is destroyed: "He wept not: he wasted within:/ Seeming sane in the song, to his peers,/Only crazed where the cravings begin".

"Hymn to Colour" has message similar to "The Day of the Daughter of Hades", presented imagistically rather than by means of fable. Jack Lindsay calls this poem an expression of "the dialectics of human change", presenting Life and Death as the "fused opposites of a single system of process", the unity of which is Love.² The poet walks between Life and Death when Love appears and the dawn begins. Life and Death bear the same relationship to Love in this poem as day and night do to Colour. Meredith's idea of the unity of process, in which all opposites are reconciled through Love, is presented visually in the fleeting image of the dawn which unites night and day in a burst of Colour. As the dawn proceeds, Life and Death, now interwoven into one shape, fade into the

background while Love tells the poet that, if he is not to be blinded by his own egoism, he must see Love in both Life and Death:

Then said: there lie they, Life and Death in one.
 Whichever is, the other is, but know,
 It is thy craving self that thou dost see,
 Not in them seeing me.
 (p. 362)

Love then goes on to illustrate his point in an eulogy to Colour, "the soul's bridegroom":

Look now where Colour, the soul's bridegroom, makes
 The house of heaven splendid for the bride.
 To him as leaps a fountain she awakes,
 In knotting arms, yet boundless: him beside,
 She holds the flower to heaven, and by his power
 Brings heaven to the flower.

.....

Death begs of Life his blush; Life Death persuades
 To keep long day with his caresses graced.
 He is the heart of light, the wing of shades,
 The crown of beauty: never soul embraced
 Of him can harbour unfaith; soul of him
 Possessed walks never dim.
 (p. 363)

As the brilliant but fleeting colours of the dawn unite day and night into one vision of beauty, so Love unites Life and Death into a meaningful whole. Colour represents the beauty which man perceives in the universe; Love represents the perceptive human faculty which captures this beauty in song. Love's memories prolong the moment of dawn into an eternity: in a similar fashion to the closing of "The South-Wester" where memory unites morning and evening:

Love eyed his rosy memories: he sang:
 O bloom of dawn, breathed up from the gold sheaf
 Held springing beneath Orient! that dost hang
 The space of dewdrops running over leaf;
 Thy fleetingness is bigger in the ghost
 Than Time with all his host!

Of thee to say behold, has said adieu.
 But love remembers how the sky was green,
 And how the grasses glimmered lightest blue;
 How saint-like grey took fervour: how the screen
 Of cloud grew violet; how thy moment came
 Between a blush and flame.

.....

They do not look through love to look on thee,
 Grave heavenliness! nor know they joy of sight,
 Who deem the wave of rapt desire must be
 Its wrecking and last issue of delight.
 Dead seasons quicken in one petal-spot
 Of colour unforget.
 (pp. 363-4)

Love has given men the power "To spell the letters
 of the sky and read/ A reflex upon earth else mean-
 ingless". It is the power which will reunite heaven
 and earth, with mankind "the attuning chord". Love
 ends his song, and the poet comes away transformed
 by his vision into a new awareness of the unity of
 the life process:

The song had ceased; my vision with the song
 Then of those Shadows, which one made descent
 Beside me I knew not: but Life ere long
 Came on me in the public ways and bent
 Eyes deeper than of old: Death met I too,
 And saw the dawn glow through.
 (p. 364)

The emphasis in "Hymn to Colour" is on perception and
 memory. Colour may be the vivifying force of nature,
 but only love can make the life process meaningful.

Love is the power which has raised man out of brutishness up "to stature of the Gods". More importantly, man's part in this process is vital; he is the "attuning chord" which links heaven and earth.

The power of love to alter one's perception and as the force uniting heaven and earth is also the theme of "Meditation under Stars". The poet, standing on earth, looks up at the stars and wonders what connection if any, they have with him. He sees the stars not as spiritual entities, their traditional role, but as mysterious orbs which defy the probing of man's inquisitive mind:

Implacable they shine
To us who would of life obtain
An answer for the life we strain
To nourish with one sign.
(p . 365)

Man has always looked to the stars for confirmation of a spiritual reality, but the human intellect has not the power to decipher their mystery:

Nor can imagination throw
The penetrative shaft: we pass
The breath of thought, who would divine
If haply they may grow
As Earth; ----
(p . 365)

The intellectual desire to know their nature is really another form of egoism, part of the futile human quest for personal immortality:

Those visible immortals beam
Allurement to the dream:

Ireful at human hungers brook
 No question in the look.
 For ever virgin to our sense,
 Remote they wane to gaze intense;
 Prolong it, and in ruthlessness they smite
 The beating heart behind the ball of sight
 Till we conceive their heavens hoar,
 Those lights they raise but sparkles frore,
 And Earth, our blood-warm Earth, a shuddering prey
 To that frigidity of brainless ray.
 (p. 365)

The intellectual attempt to understand the stars rationally, by means of scientific theory, reduces them to cold, merciless lights -- symbols of death rather than life. But if, instead of questioning the nature of the stars in a futile search for the meaning of life, we consider the nature of love, then those alien worlds are suddenly revitalized and joined with earth in one unified vision. When we look with the eyes of love, the stars are transformed; we see beyond the limitations of mind and the senses to understand that life is the same everywhere and that earth and stars are all part of the one life process whose interpreter is "the lord of Mind", love. The poem ends with a vision of love, "the grand impulsions", as the moving force of the universe. Furthermore, the same visionary power which links the stars to earth, also transforms our perception of earth:

So may we read, and little find them cold:
 Not frosty lamps illumining dead space,
 Not distant aliens, not senseless Powers.
 The fire is in them whereof we are born;
 The music of their motion may be ours.
 Spirit shall deem them beckoning Earth and voiced
 Sisterly to her, in her beams rejoiced.
 Of love, the grand impulsions, we behold
 The love that lends her grace
 Among the starry fold.

Then at new flood of customary morn,
 Look at her through her showers,
 Her mists, her streaming gold,
 A wonder edges the familiar face:
 She wears no more that robe of printed hours;
 Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.
 (pp. 366-7)

Love has the power to make the familiar look beautiful and strange, and it is this quality of altering one's perception of reality which Meredith wishes to convey in his poetry. There are two key factors in Meredith's poetic philosophy. One is his insistence that all elements of man's experience be united into one harmonious vision of a creative, benevolent process of existence. The other is his emphasis on the human mind as the agent which synthesizes the disparate elements of experience into a unified whole. Meredith's overwhelming message is that life must be seen as a process and that man is in the unique position of being able simultaneously to participate in that process and to envision the total pattern within his mind. Because of his dual role, man can view life from either the isolated perspective of the individual participant, which is a tragic vision, or from the general perspective of the total ongoing process, which is a comic vision. Although both the tragic and comic visions have their own validity, Meredith sees the former as essentially destructive and alienating, and the latter as essentially

creative and cohesive. The force which binds creation together into a unified and cohesive whole is love; and if man would participate in the natural life process, he must love Mother Earth and see her through the eyes of love. Love alone provides the key to unlocking nature's secrets. In "Meditation under Stars" the rational intellect cannot decipher the mystery of the stars, but love can unite both stars and earth in one unified vision of beauty. Meredith believes that poetry is the best medium of expression for such a vision because, as he says in a letter to a friend: "The treasure of verse is where thought embraces feeling, as the man the woman. Then you have joined the highest in mind with the deepest in nature. That is why Poetry is above philosophy: it is the voice of the essential man before the Gods."³ Poetry, in Meredith's opinion, recreates the essential life process. "Thought embraces feeling"; poetry is an act of love which reconciles the disparate elements of man's experience, mind and nature, into one unified vision of reality which in turn acts on the reader to produce a heightened awareness of the beauty and goodness of nature. In the final analysis Meredith's poetic vision is largely a matter of faith; he sees in nature a benevolent, ordered process because at heart he is an optimist who will believe that life is good no matter

what the evidence of his senses.

FORM AND CONTENT IN " THE WOODS OF WESTERMAIN"
AND " A FAITH ON TRIAL"

In this chapter I propose to examine the relationship between Meredith's poetic style and his theories about the life process and the importance of human perception. In chapter I of this thesis I have pointed out how critics have invariably misinterpreted Meredith's poetic purpose and, as a result, have harshly criticized his poetic style. Most critics assume, quite wrongly I believe, that Meredith is an intellectual poet, a versifier of ideas. Even G. M. Trevelyan, one of the more sympathetic and sensitive of Meredith's critics, assumes that his major poems are didactic expositions of a philosophic and religious creed: "Mr. Meredith's religion, philosophy, and ethics, which inspire and illuminate his novels, are expressed more fully and in more exact terms in his poems. Many of these are by nature didactic and not only invite but require exposition and debate."¹ I have argued in Chapters I and II of this thesis that Meredith is not trying to expound intellectual concepts, but, on the contrary, to reproduce in imaginative form his own experience of life as a benevolent joyous process leading to some ultimate spiritual end. The ideas behind the poems, that life and death are part of one continuous process, that there is an

essential unity amid the apparent diversity of the natural world, and that man must participate within the natural cyclical life process rather than looking vainly beyond to an unknown and perhaps non-existent spiritual reality, are fairly simple and commonplace ontological statements. What is significant about the poems is not the ideas which they contain but the presentation of those ideas. The essence of Meredith's poetic vision lies in his ability to see and to accept life as a meaningful process; and in his poetry he regards nature as emblematic of this benevolent life process. He is aware, though, that one's views on life and nature vary according to one's point of view. From the tragic perspective nature is far from benevolent and is often regarded as an openly hostile force. In "Modern Love", for example, nature, in the form of human nature, is the villain responsible for the disaster:

The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin in the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

(p. 152)

In "Modern Love", human nature is out of tune with nature itself, a state of disharmony which results in the destruction of the human pair. In a very real sense the lovers' inability to perceive and to participate in the natural life process is responsible for their grief. The logical conclusion, in Meredith's vision of things,

can only be that one is both happier and healthier to see life from a comic perspective. Ultimately one's view of external reality is a reflection of one's own inner state; life is tragic or comic depending on one's point of view, and Meredith's poetic purpose is to persuade his readers to adopt a comic perspective.

The key to Meredith's poetry, then, lies not in philosophical ideas but in the state of human perception, that is, in the mind's ability to organize external phenonema into a meaningful whole. Meredith's vision of a unified creative life process in which man himself participates, is conveyed not solely on an intellectual plane, in terms of philosophical ideas, but through an imaginative recreation of one's total experience -- combining thoughts and feelings to reproduce an impression of harmonious reality. Many of those critics who complain of the obscurity of Meredith's poetic style have misunderstood his purpose; they are trying to distill certain intellectual concepts from the poems, and find the dense style with its proliferation of metaphors, twisted syntax and rapid movement of thought from subject to subject annoying. The poems were not, however, intended to be read as rational expositions of certain philosophical concepts, but to produce a certain impression on the reader -- to alter,

if possible, one's view of the nature of reality. His poetic style embodies his poetic theory. All opposites, all disparate elements, are reconciled in one unified vision of reality.

I hope to illustrate the effectiveness of Meredith's style and how it is related to his poetic theory through a close examination of two major poems -- "The Woods of Westermain" and "A Faith on Trial". Both poems have been severely criticized as typifying Meredith's poetic faults -- obscurity, tortured syntax, and extreme didacticism, and both have been considered to be failures by all but a handful of critics.

In her excellent article on "The Woods of Westermain", Patricia Crunden summarizes the critical reaction to the poem, the common complaint being its "poor organization, tortured syntax, warped imagery, and oppressive didacticism".² Crunden disagrees with these assessments, and goes on to describe the poem as the very embodiment of Meredith's poetic theory: "Meredith's belief in the necessary union of thought and feeling, realism and idealism, mind and nature, is at the heart of the poem's meaning . . . the concrete images and the abstract formulations of the poem are inextricably involved with each other. The peculiar

density of Meredith's poetry which results from his characteristic use of metaphor is not simply an unfortunate affectation; it is the natural consequences of his belief in the natural interpenetration of realism and idealism." (pp. 267-8) I agree with Crunden's assessment of Meredith's poetic purpose in "The Woods of Westermmain", although I feel that the "peculiar density" of Meredith's poetry is the result, not only of his "characteristic use of metaphor", but also of his practice of compressing his syntax down to the barest bones of a sentence in order to heighten the intensity and energy of the lines. For example, the lines "Nothing harms beneath the leaves/More than waves a swimmer cleaves", are really a condensation of the following thought: nothing will harm you beneath the leaves of the woods any more than waves which a swimmer cleaves will harm him. Meredith has compressed the thought of this sentence into two short lines by dropping those auxiliary parts of speech which make the sentence conditional. The resulting compression of thought both increases the intensity and energy of the lines and demands the careful inflection of the speaking voice in order to communicate the conditional nature of the thought. In her article on "The Woods of Westermmain" Crunden provides a very thorough and intelligent discussion of the poem's

thematic organization, thus refuting those critics who have claimed the lack of any such organization, but she does not adequately handle the problems of alleged obscurity and tortured syntax. I propose to begin as Crunden does by first discussing the poem's thematic and imagistic structure and then to add some comments on Meredith's style to show how the "tortured syntax" and "warped imagery" are an integral part of this thematic structure.

"The Woods of Westermain" introduces Meredith's Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth with the invitation to "Enter these enchanted woods,/You who dare", and is one of the major poetic statements of Meredith's philosophy of nature. As Crunden explains:

The main theme is that the real woods of Westermain are also the enchanted woods, with both the wonder and terror that the word "enchanted" implies. But the challenge to "dare" to enter the woods cannot be understood until the poem has demonstrated the attitude of mind implied in the word "dare". Each section of the poem describes first the wonder, then the terror of the woods, and each offers reasons for the initially mysterious transformation of one into the other. Each section comments on earlier sections, further unfolding the implications of the wonder, the terror, and the dare. Further, the poem is divided so as to celebrate first the sensuous pleasure (section II), the love (section III), and finally the wisdom (section IV), which may be found in the woods. By thus appealing successively to blood, brain, and spirit, the poem enacts the union of the Meredithian triad which it recommends. (p. 271)

The metaphor of the woods of life which can provide either the innocent pleasures of pastoral romance or the terrors of Spenser's woods of error, depending upon the individual's response, gives concrete form to Meredith's basic theme of the duality of man's experience and the necessity of accepting and reconciling these dualities into a unified and meaningful whole. Every aspect of the poem contributes to the sense of doubleness inherent in the woods metaphor. The metre, as Crunden points out, enacts "the union of strong primitive energy with control which is part of the meaning of the poem". (p. 269)

The pulsating rhythm of the trochaic tetrameter catalectic, the same rhythm of the witches' spells in Macbeth and Blake's "Tyger", has an hypnotic incantatory effect upon the reader which, as Crunden says, "Rather than trying to teach a lesson ... tries to cast a spell over the reader". (p. 269) The poem's rhythm thus embodies in concrete form what Meredith explicitly tells us in section lll:

This is in the tune we play,
Which no spring of strength would quell;
In subduing does not slay;
Guides the channel, guards the well:
Tempered holds the young blood-heat,
Yet through measured grave accord
Hears the heart of wildness beat
Like a centaur's hoof on sward.
(p. 196)

The music of the poem unites the primitive energy of the centaur with the rational control necessary if that wild

energy is to have any positive direction.

As Crunden has pointed out, each of the poem's sections explores the duality of the woods in terms of wonder and terror, and offers possible explanations as to why this duality exists and how it is to be reconciled satisfactorily. Each subsequent section expands upon the previous sections so that the poem becomes more and more complex and abstract both structurally and thematically as it proceeds. Section 1 introduces the theme of the dual wonder and terror of the woods with the invitation to "Enter these enchanted woods,/You who dare", and then captures the precarious balance between the two in the image of the swimmer who finds the waves harmless, but only as long as his strength does not fail. There is a further duality in the pleasures which the woods afford in the contrast between the lark, a creature of the air, and the mouse and worm, humble creatures of the earth; one is able to enjoy either or both of these types of pleasure providing one fully accepts the hospitality of the woods:

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.

(p. 193)

The sudden transformation from pleasure to terror is triggered by the individual's own doubts and fears, whether one finds joy or terror in these enchanted woods depending upon one's attitude.

Section 11 continues this theme, first describing the sensuous pleasures of the woods in both concrete and imaginative terms. The snake stretched across the path "in his golden bath" is both an idealized vision of what is traditionally considered to be an unpleasant creature and an accurate description of a snake caught in a pool of sunlight. Similarly, the description of the squirrel's leap "Soft as winnowing plumes of Sleep" carries us from a visual image of a fluffy tailed squirrel into the imaginative realm of poetic analogy. Real and ideal, concrete and abstract, blend and merge in such a way that the differences become indistinguishable. As Crunden says:

Are the lines 'Yaffles on a chuckle skim/Low to laugh from branches dim' (11.17-18), metaphorical or a concrete rendering of the combined flight and song of the woodpeckers? The answer is that for Meredith there is no definite line between what the reviewers praised as 'freshness' of observation and what they condemned as overbold metaphor ... The profusion of metaphor in 'The Woods of Westermain' is not merely poetic apparatus; it is a means of creating in the mind of the reader the very habit of mind the poem advocates. (pp. 268-9)

The blending of the concrete observation of natural phenomena with imaginative poetic vision is part of the

enchantment of the woods, but one should always be aware that this peaceful harmony is easily disrupted: "But should you distrust a tone,/Then beware". Once again the sensuous and innocent pleasures of the woods are quickly transformed into a nightmare vision of horror and death. As the swimming analogy of section 1 implies, the woods are a source of innocent pleasure only for those individuals who have adapted themselves to their environment and can meet it on its own terms. If one is a strong swimmer, then one has nothing to fear from the ocean; if not, then one is in constant danger of drowning. In both sections the transformation from wonder to terror occurs when an individual expresses distrust or doubt. Meredith's point is that man must accept the conditions of his mortal existence.

Section 111, the first of the two long sections of the poem, begins by describing the unity amid the apparent diversity in the woods and then goes on to describe love as the force which binds these opposing elements into a unified whole. The opening lines give a detailed description of the woodland setting in which the various stages of natural flowering and decay are all present in the images of the strawberry, the star-flower, and the "Shredded husks of seedlings flown". In this opening passage all exists in tranquil

harmony except for the ominous hint of "Hasty outward tripping toes, / Heels to terror, on the mould", which suggests that some individuals have not as yet reconciled themselves to the fact of their mortal condition.

As Meredith will go on to illustrate, life and death are opposing parts of one cyclical process; the one cannot be accepted without the other. At the beginning of section IV, he explicitly tells us "You must love the light so well / That no darkness will seem fell"; in section III he demonstrates his point concretely by reconciling opposing and often contradictory images. The line "Rich of wreathing sun and rain" unites those two opposing states in the circular image of the wreath, suggesting both the perfection and harmony of the total process as well as its cyclical quality. The word "wreathing" also suggests an intertwining which not only reconciles these two opposing states but interconnects them in such a way that the one cannot exist without the other. Sound and silence, light and dark, are reconciled through a skillful use of both consonance and assonance in the line "Shadowed leagues of slumbering sound". Meredith then goes on to illustrate the unity amidst apparent diversity which is the essence of his

poetic vision in the image of the myriad colours which are all facets of the quality of light. Significantly the light is "caught in hoop", once again the circle being used as an image of unity and perfection; and within this circle of light are contained "Classic splendours, knightly dyes". Meredith summarizes his vision of the unity of process and the mind's ability to preserve this vision of harmony in the following description of sunrise:

You have seen the huntress moon
Radiantly facing dawn,
Dusky meads between them strewn
Glimmering like downy awn:
Argent Westward glows the hunt,
East the blush about to climb;
One another fair they front,
Transient, yet outshine the time;
Even as dewlight off the rose
In the mind a jewel sows.
Thus opposing grandeurs live
Here if Beauty be their dower: ---
(pp. 195-6)

In the image of the dawn Meredith illustrates how for one fleeting moment the opposing qualities of sun and moon, day and night, male and female, Apollo and Artemis, are reconciled and united; and paradoxically how this one transient moment is given a permanent and eternal existence in the poetic vision of the mind, which sees and preserves the unity of the moment. The dewlight on the rose, the very image of the insubstantiality and fleetingness of mortal existence is trans-

formed poetically into a jewel which will last an eternity.

The final part of section III discusses the age-old battle of the sexes and the love which will reconcile the two antagonists of male and female by putting them in tune with natural process. This passage thus offers the solution to the tragedy of "Modern Love" where the man and woman are unable amicably to reconcile their differences. But this idyllic state can be enjoyed only as long as the delicate balance of forces is maintained. One wrangling note, and the idyllic woods of love become the nightmare woods of hidden terrors; the serene harmony is destroyed and one is plunged into discord and despair.

Section IV, as Crunden points out, is the most abstract and complex of the poem's four sections, and describes the wisdom which allows man to accept both the wonder and the terror of the woods, an acceptance which is "the culmination of the 'joy of Earth' ". (p. 277)

The section opens with the paradoxical statement that one can truly love light only when one accepts darkness as its necessary corollary. In section III light is a symbol of "the underlying unity of nature. Here it is almost exclusively a symbol for life itself". (p. 278)

Meredith extends the light-as-life symbol to illustrate how change is the essential aspect of the life process and the permanence of essence despite change of form which is behind this life process. As Crunden puts it: "life, like a light that 'burns', is a process of consuming. Process is in fact the essence of life, which Meredith compares to a mill that consumes grain and transforms it to flour. The image of the mill echoes the sense of consuming in 'burn' but it emphasizes permanence of essence through change in form". (p. 278) Following a series of images emphasizing change as the essence of the life process, Meredith implies that these constant changes are moving towards some definite spiritual goal: "Change is on the wing to bud/Rose in brain from rose in blood". Change is the instrument of an evolutionary spiritual process by means of which man will progress from the bestial to the rational and finally in the future to a spiritual state. The only obstacle to this spiritual progress is the "scaly dragonfowl" of self. But he too shall suffer the effects of change and be transformed from the terror of the woods to the servant of mankind:

Change will strip his armour off;
 Make of him who was all maw,
 Inly only thrilling-shrewd,
 Such a servant as none saw
 Through his days of dragonhood.

(p. 199)

The poem then rises to a climactic vision of the force which simultaneously binds the diverse elements of nature into one essential whole, and promotes the endless changes of life process -- Love, "the Fount and Lure o' the chase". I have already briefly discussed in Chapter 11 the image of Love as a fountain of "fire in water hued as wine". In "The Woods of Westermain", the fountain, from which rises a throbbing heart, is the life source, the vision of which reveals to man the secrets of nature and how his own nature is mirrored in the larger life process. Each man's nature partakes of the larger whole:

And 'tis very strange, 'tis said,
How you spy in each of them
Semblance of that Dragon red,
As the oak in braken-stem.
(p. 200)

In the image of the fountain, the mystery behind the wonder and terror of the woods is revealed. Man must identify himself with the larger life process in order to overcome the terror and to enjoy the wonder of life. The fiery fountain is at one with "your come and go of breath"; it is the one source from which all life proceeds and to which all life returns. Having thus seen beyond his own mortal appearance to the source of all existence, man gains the wisdom to progress to a state of spiritual understanding. Nature is the

source of man's spiritual being; by fulfilling himself on the natural level of existence, he gains a "Footway to the God of Gods". A spiritual state is achieved not by denying the senses but by fulfilling them; spirit grows out of the flesh, and it is by fulfilling his function in the natural life process that man grows into spiritual awareness:

Pleasures that through blood run sane,
 Quickening spirit from the brain.
 Each of each in sequent birth,
 Blood and brain and spirit, three
 (Say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
 Join for true felicity.

(pp. 201-2)

That the gnomes, dwellers of the underground, should be the ultimate source of wisdom in the poem, epitomizes Meredith's attitude to life; he has faith in nothing which is not rooted in the senses.

In the closing section of the poem, Meredith's vision of man's ultimate spiritual fulfillment is captured in the image of a vine wound about a tree trunk. Although the vine ascends to "heights unmatched", it could not do so without the sturdy support of the tree trunk which is firmly rooted in earth. From the heights reached by the vine we view the entire world; its constant change and flux is portrayed in the image of a sea of wheat which undergoes the entire process of growth, fruition, and harvest. The harvesting of the wheat is compared to the suffering of mortal existence, the good only being

sorted from the worthless by undergoing rigours comparable to the threshing process of sorting the wheat from the chaff: "So flesh/Conjures tempest-flails to thresh/Good from worthless". The world, when viewed from the heights of spiritual wisdom, is still dominated by the Dragon of self and thus it appears to be mostly "dead marsh-damps", a place of death "Fit but to be led by Pain"; but in Westermain we see the scattered lamps of those who have learnt the lesson of nature. To these lights we are drawn as to a beacon:

Hither, hither if you will,
 Drink instruction, or instill,
 Run the woods like vernal sap,
 Crying, hail to luminousness!

There still lurks a danger in this vision of light, for man must be prepared to accept all that the woods contain -- both the joy and the terror, the light and the dark. One monster doubt, and the triumphant joy of the fiery fountain is transformed into a nightmare vision of horror and destruction in which the fountain pours out of the empty eye-sockets of a death's head. Whether the woods are a source of wonder or terror ultimately depends on man and his individual response; how one sees the woods is a reflection of one's own inner state of being. The doubt and suspicion and fear come from within, not from without, and if an individual

would enjoy the simple pleasures of the woods, he need only alter his own consciousness. If he enters the woods filled with suspicion and selfish egoism, these woods will reflect the horrors of his own internal state. Meredith emphasizes this point imagistically by describing the dragon of self as "Muffled by his cavern-cowl", which directly relates to the hooded eyeballs which "Shroud you in their glare" in the nightmare vision of the woods.

In the final analysis I would agree with Crunden that "as a whole, the poem is carefully constructed, interweaving form and content, image and didactic message with remarkable success from start to finish", (p.281) but some further comment on Meredith's twisted syntax and condensed metaphor is necessary since these aspects of Meredith's style have been so consistently and severely criticized and since Crunden has not adequately explained how this unusual style is a functional part of the thematic structure of the poem. Most of the syntactical problems in "The Woods of Westermain" arise from Meredith's habit of omitting auxiliary parts of speech. In the lines discussed earlier in this chapter, "Nothing harms beneath the leaves/More than waves a swimmer cleaves", those auxiliary parts of speech which make the line conditional were seen to be omitted.

Examples of such omissions abound throughout the poem, but not, it should be stressed, because Meredith is trying to be deliberately obscure. The effect of these omissions is to intensify the energy and impact of the poem's rhythm. As Crunden has pointed out, the metre of the poem creates an incantatory, hypnotic pulsating effect which captures the primitive energy of the life force. Meredith's condensed syntax merely heightens the pulsating intensity of the metre by charging each and every word with meaning. "The Woods of Westermain" is a poem which should be read aloud in order to capture the full effect of the intense energy of the lines; when the lines are properly read, the voice inflections of the reader supply the meaning which is sometimes obscured by the dense syntax.

In a similar fashion Meredith's condensed metaphors also increase the energy and intensity of the poem. The rapid succession of images in the poem intensifies the impression of energetic movement created by the metre, and requires careful attention on the part of the reader to follow the development of Meredith's thought. For example, consider these lines from section IV:

Whence the tidal world is viewed
 As a sea of windy wheat,
 Momently black, barren, rude;
 Golden-brown, for harvest meet;
 Dragon-reaped from folly-sown;

Bride-like to the sickle-blade:
 Quick it varies, while the moan,
 Moan of a sad creature strayed,
 Chiefly is its voice. So flesh
 Conjures tempest-flails to thresh
 Good from worthless. Some clear lamps
 Light it; more of dead marsh-damps.
 (p. 203)

The theme of this section is the wisdom gained by seeing beyond the constant changes of mortal existence to the underlying process which governs this state of flux. In the passage quoted above, Meredith's images capture both the sense of constant movement which is the dominant characteristic of natural process and the reconciliation of opposing states into a unified whole which is the essence of natural process. The world is compared to a sea of wheat, the poem thus capturing in the ocean metaphor the sense of constant flux involved in process, and capturing in the wheat metaphor the impression that this process will be fruitful or rewarding. The lines that follow alternately juxtapose seed-time and harvest, initially condensing the entire process first into two lines, "Momently black, barren, rude;/ Golden-brown, for harvest meet", and secondly into one line: "Dragon-reaped from folly-sown". Having captured both the flux and unity of natural process imagistically, Meredith goes on to draw his moral by investing the natural process with a spiritual meaning. The harsh conditions of mortal existence are necessary if mankind is to develop spiritually. As the threshing process

separates wheat from chaff, so the rigours of life on earth separate good men from worthless men. What appears to be an endlessly repetitive material process has a final spiritual goal represented by the "clear lamps" which light the "dead marsh-damps".

It is difficult to separate passages for discussion from this poem because, as in the passage considered above, the imagery is so closely interwoven that one cannot discuss a few lines without discussing the entire poem. Meredith himself uses a weaving image to describe the impression of the life process when viewed from the fountain source: "your senses drift;/'Tis a shuttle weaving swift". (p. 200) Individual sense impressions unite to form a completed pattern made up of many separate threads woven into one fabric. Meredith's condensed metaphors are thus an attempt to reproduce both the energy and the unity of natural process, and I would say that on the whole the attempt is remarkably successful. When judged by its own standards, in terms of what the poem is trying to accomplish, rather than by a reader's often arbitrary expectations of what a poem should be, "The Woods of Westermains" is a unique and fascinating poetic achievement.

"A Faith on Trial" is another of Meredith's major poems which has been severely criticized for its didacticism. C. Day Lewis, for example, observes that

this poem, "is long, garrulous, egotistical - a rambling appeal to Nature for comfort and reassurance: we should not call it insincere, but it is all somehow beside the point and seems to expose the final sterility of rationalism".³ Once again, Lewis and critics like him have misinterpreted Meredith's poetic purpose and as a result have misread the poem. "A Faith on Trial" was not intended as a rational statement on life, any more than was Tennyson's "In Memoriam". Both are poems about faith on trial, specifically about man's faith in the benevolent purposiveness of nature and about the basis for that faith. Both poems begin in despair, with the poet confronted by the death of someone very close to him, and both struggle through questions about the meaning of life and death and the existence of a meaningful spiritual reality, to end in an affirmation of the benevolence of nature and the spiritual progress of mankind. The important point in each poem is not the intellectual arguments put forward to justify each poet's faith, but the means by which each poet reaffirms his faith in nature and mankind. Ultimately, for both Tennyson and Meredith, faith is a matter of choice, both poets actively choosing to believe; and each poem re-enacts the process by which each poet comes to make his particular choice or affirmation.

"The Woods of Westermain" explores the dual aspects of nature and life in the form of the wonder and terror of the woods, illustrating how the appearance of the woods is dependent upon man's attitude; those entering the woods in a spirit of loving fellowship find them a place of innocent and peaceful pleasures, but those entering the woods in a spirit of selfish suspicion and mistrust find them a nightmarish place of hellish horrors. The very same woods are thus a source of both joy and terror, the determining factor being the individual's own inner state. "A Faith on Trial" explores this same duality within the mind of the narrator, who moves from a state of dull despair in which nature appears to be a hostile and alien force to a state of affirmative joy in which nature is "the greater whole" of which he is but a part. The means by which this transformation is achieved is the subject of the poem and establishes the basis of Meredith's faith.

The poet in old age and with a dying wife, goes for a walk on a spring morning, but his grief over his wife's illness and the memories of their past happiness destroy all pleasure in the spring landscape which surrounds him. As is the case in "Modern Love", nostalgia and sentiment are destructive and alienating

forces which isolate the narrator from the natural life process:

The memories tenderly bound
 To us are a drifting crew,
 Amid grey-gapped waters for ground.
 Alone do we stand, each one,
 Till rootless as they we strew
 Those deeps of the corse-like stare
 At a foreign and stony sun.
 (P. 347)

In his present state of grief the poet finds memories of a happy past a mockery and a source of torment rather than of comfort. Although his grief leaves him indifferent to the joyous renewal of the spring landscape, still a lifetime habit of close observation of natural phenomena remains with the poet. He sees and records the activity around him even though he feels himself to be isolated from the natural cycles:

I walked to observe, not to feel,
 Not to fancy, if simple of eye
 One may be among images reaped
 For a shift of the glance, as grain:
 Profitless froth you espy
 Ashore after billows have leaped.
 I fled nothing, nothing pursued:
 The changeful visible face
 Of our Mother I sought for my food;
 Crumbs by the way to sustain.
 Her sentence I knew past grace.
 (p. 349)

The problem lies in the fact that the poet is unable to accept nature's sentence; he wishes to prolong the happy days of the past and in so doing is trying to deny his own and his wife's mortality. He wishes to

preserve permanent and fixed states of being, but the overwhelming evidence of his senses tells him that life is a cyclical process.

It is the poet's habit of observing nature closely, "My disciplined habit to see" as he calls it, which provides the key to the solution of his dilemma. Throughout the poem the spring setting which provides the backdrop for his musings is portrayed as part of a continuous process of decay and renewal. Amidst the joyous and thoughtless renewal of the woods in spring-time, the narrator sees signs of the decay which supports this renewal. The spring buds grow out of "a mouldered beechen shroud", the blossoming service tree renews itself amidst "the sobre mounds of the yew", the sight of the dogwood flushing red in the spring causes the poet to look forward to autumn when the same tree "Now hale in leafage lush" will be "A bleeding greybeard". The poet sees and notes all these things, but because of his own private grief he fails to see any significance in nature's processes. The vigorous renewal of "young Earth's Bacchic rout" seems a meaningless mockery:

This earth of the beautiful breasts,
Shining up in all colours aflame,
To them [his feelings of grief] had visage of hags:
A Mother of aches and jests:
Souless, heading a hunt
Aimless except for the meal.
(p. 350)

He sees only a blind, relentless material process with no spiritual purpose whatever. It is this apparent lack of any spiritual quality in nature which is the cause of the poet's dismay; his faith in the benevolent purposiveness of natural process has been temporarily destroyed by his private grief over his wife's illness.

His grief, in fact, blinds him to the truth until the sudden sight of a wildcherry tree in bloom transforms his vision: "it struck as the birth of Light:/Even Day from the dark unyoked". The spiritual reality which he failed to see before, is revealed to him in the vision of the cherry tree -- a symbol of the perpetual renewal of spring:

I knew it: with her, my own,
 Had hailed it pure of the pure;
 Our beacon yearly: but strange
 When it strikes to within is the known;
 Richer than newness revealed.
 There was needed darkness like mine.
 Its beauty to vividness blown
 Drew the life in me forward, chased,
 From aloft on a pinnacle's range,
 That hindward spidery line,
 The length of the ways I had paced,
 A footfarer out of the dawn.
 To Youth's wild forest, where sprang,
 For the morning of May long gone,
 The forest's white virgin; ...
 She, the white wild cherry, a tree,
 Earth-rooted, tangibly wood,
 Yet a presence throbbing alive;
 Nor she in our language dumb:
 A spirit born of a tree;
 Because earth-rooted alive: ...

(pp. 351-2)

I have quoted this passage at length because it marks the climax of the poem and contains the key to Meredith's

poetic philosophy. Nothing has changed in this scene except the poet's perception of reality. The cherry tree is a link with the past, since he and his wife have always hailed it as a beacon of the coming spring; as a symbol of spring, however, it is also a link with the future and the ongoing process. The sight of the tree calls up memories of the poet's youth and "the morning of May long gone" when he also saw the cherry in bloom, and this time his memories do not alienate him from the life process, but instead help him to reaffirm his faith in life's perpetual renewal. The spirit which he sees in the tree is that of the life force -- the permanent essence which exists despite changes in form. Its perpetual blossoming is a triumphant symbol of the ultimate victory of life over death, not in the traditional Christian sense, but in terms of the ongoing process which contains both life and death.

The poet's faith in the goodness and purposiveness of life is renewed because he identifies himself with the larger life process and thus loses his own personal and private sense of grief:

But this in myself did I know,

 That natures at interflow
 With all of their past and the now
 Are chords to the Nature without,
 Orbs to the greater whole: ...
 (p. 353)

There follows a long section on religious faith and the desire for personal immortality which Meredith views as a manifestation of man's selfish ego in revolt against nature's laws. The desire for signs of a spiritual existence beyond death, in the form of religious miracles, he calls a cry of unfaith motivated not by man's quest for spiritual existence but by the wish to prolong his sensual existence. Traditional religious faith is nothing more than a manifestation of our own sensual fears:

Assurances, symbols, saws,
Revelations in legends, light
To eyes rolling darkness, these
Desired of the flesh in affright,
For the which it will swear to adore, ...
These are our sensual dreams;
Of the yearning to touch, to feel
The dark Impalpable sure,
And have the Unveiled appear; ... (p.354)

Such desires will only be met with frustration. It is useless to question the unknown; man's spiritual quest must be rooted in reality. In this way Meredith reaffirms the spiritual purposiveness of Nature:

For the road to her soul is the Real:
The root of the growth of man:
And the senses must traverse it fresh
With a love that no scourge shall abate,
To reach the lone heights where we scan
In the mind's rarer vision this flesh;
In the charge of the Mother our fate;
Her law as the one common weal. (p. 355.)

In order to do this, to see into the secrets of Nature's soul, we must subdue that "old worm", the dragon

of self, which demands personal immortality. Only by accepting fully, and by willingly participating in, the larger life process can we hope to gain any spiritual fulfillment:

By Death as by Life, are we fed:
 The two are one spring; our bond
 With the numbers; with whom to unite
 Here feathers wings for beyond:
 Only they can waft us in flight.
 For they are Reality's flower.
 (pp. 355-6)

As in "The Woods of Westermain", Meredith uses the image of the tree, rooted firmly in earth while blossoming in heaven, to embody his vision of man's spiritual progress. The vision of the poet in "A Faith on Trial" culminates in the simple realization "That from flesh into spirit man grows/Even here on the sod under sun". (p.357) This realization marks the achievement of the wisdom described in the last section of "The Woods of Westermain"; and like the former poem, "A Faith on Trial" ends in a triumphant vision of the permanent spiritual essence of nature which manifests itself in all the varied forms of creation:

'To love more than things of my lap,
 'Love me' and to let the types break,
 'Men be grass, rocks rivers, all flow;
 'All save the dream sink alike
 'To the source of my vital in sap:
 'Their battle, their loss, their ache,
 'For my pledge of vitality know.
 (p. 360)

This is the "dream of the blossom of Good" which leads to Nature's master "The great Over-Reason we name/Beneficence: mind seeking Mind" (p. 360). Although the language is somewhat vague, Meredith is implying that there is, after all, a spiritual reality which exists outside of or beyond nature and that the way to approach this unknown spiritual entity is not by denying the flesh but by rejoicing in it. The way to the spirit is through the flesh and the way to self-fulfillment is by losing one's self in the larger life process.

Meredith's somewhat paradoxical vision of Man's spiritual fulfillment reflects his extremely practical nature. One can view nature either as a hostile and alien force, as the poet does at the beginning of the poem, or he can view her as a benevolent process guided by fixed and meaningful laws. His belief in the latter option is a simple reflection of basic temperament; for Meredith it makes more sense to believe in the benevolent purposiveness of nature, his affirmation, as he was well aware, being a matter of faith not fact. "A Faith on Trial" is structured in such a way as to have the reader experience this process of affirmation. Meredith wishes to make his readers see and feel what he sees and feels. The religious imagery associated with natural phenomena and especially with the cherry tree, the imagistic emphasis

throughout the poem on the interrelationship between life and death in nature, and the importance of memory as a means of unifying one's personal experience, all combine to create a vision of life as a benevolent purposive process leading to some ultimate spiritual goal.

C O N C L U S I O N

I think it is abundantly clear that Meredith's poetry has never been properly evaluated in terms of his own poetic theory, which is that poetry should unite thought and feeling, real and ideal, material and spiritual, in one harmonious vision. It is only fair to judge, at least initially, a poet's work on the basis of what he hoped his poetry would achieve, and in this respect Meredith has been sadly misused. Critics have consistently approached Meredith's work armed with their own private assumptions about what good poetry should be, never stopping to consider whether their own views on poetry coincide with Meredith's. More importantly, because of Meredith's unusual poetic style, critics have persistently separated poetic content from poetic form when discussing his poetry. Older critics such as Trevelyan, Priestley, and Crees have admired and praised his philosophy of nature while criticizing the harsh style in which he expresses his ideas. More modern critics, such as Norman Kelvin, while finding Meredith's philosophy somewhat inconsistent, still persist in primarily discussing Meredith's ideas and relating them to major philosophical and intellectual trends of the period. Kelvin describes "The Woods of Westermains" as "the poem which, unhappily uneven and largely a poetic failure, contains so many of the important aspects of Meredith's

conception of nature".¹ By making such a statement Kelvin reveals his total ignorance of Meredith's poetic theory wherein form and content are inseparable. "The Woods of Westermain", in which structure and theme, abstract and concrete are inextricably interconnected, is the very embodiment of Meredith's poetic theory.

I suspect that many modern critics' dislike of Meredith's poetry reflects their lack of sympathy with his poetic aims. Meredith was attempting to unify a fragmented world, to recreate if possible, that mystical sense of the harmony and unity of natural creation which Arnold found so appealing in Wordsworth's poetry, and which Arnold himself was unable to reaffirm in his own poetry. Meredith's affirmation of the benevolence and spiritual purposiveness of natural process is, like Wordsworth's and Tennyson's, more a matter of faith than intellectual conviction. Meredith's philosophy of nature amounts to nothing more than a certain optimistic attitude towards life. His poetry tries to communicate this attitude, which I have called his comic vision, to his readers.

In his poetic attempts to communicate his comic vision, Meredith experimented freely with metrical and stanzaic form. His metrical accomplishments range from the lyrical joy of "Love in the Valley", with its lilting

rhythm and long stresses, and the more conventional sonnet-like structure of "Modern Love", to such daring metrical experiments as "The Woods of Westermain" with its pulsating rhythm and condensed syntax, and "A Faith on Trial", which has such an irregular rhyme scheme and line length that it seems to have hardly any form at all. Critics have almost universally acknowledged the genius and skill of Meredith's handling of poetic form in "Love in the Valley" and "Modern Love", but they have also almost universally condemned the style of "The Woods of Westermain" and "A Faith on Trial". It seems odd that a poet who has demonstrated such a mastery of language and poetic form as Meredith is attributed to have shown in "Love in the Valley" and "Modern Love", should only be seen to have written two good poems in a lifetime. Yet this is what most critics would have us believe. C. Day Lewis even goes so far as to say that the effort of writing "Modern Love" so exhausted Meredith's poetic powers that he was incapable of writing anything to equal it afterwards: "When we read through the mass of poems he wrote after 'Modern Love', we get the impression of a man from whom the blood has all run out. A great field of stubble they are -- arid, prickly, dun; one harvest taken, and not another in sight."² Such a conclusion seems to me

grossly unfair to Meredith. The poems which follow "Modern Love" are very different in form and content from "Modern Love"; before condemning them as poetic failures, however, critics should judge them on their own merits and not by the requirements of sonnet sequences (or whatever) in which a state of emotional despair on the part of the narrator seems to be the major criterion.

I think that I have adequately illustrated in Chapter III the effectiveness of the unusual metre and poetic form of "The Woods of Westermain"; and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the rather shapeless rambling form of "A Faith on Trial" is admirably suited to that poem's subject, the narrator's groping search through doubt and despair for his lost faith. The rather flexible form of "A Faith on Trial" allows Meredith the freedom to produce many subtle variations in mood and tone. In examining the poem closely, one is astonished at the variety of moods which the narrator experiences on his walk. There is first the cold despair of the following lines, in which the harsh consonant sounds emphasize the narrator's sense of alienation and despair:

The memories tenderly bound
To us are a drifting crew,

Amid grey-gapped waters for ground.
 Alone do we stand, each one,
 Till rootless as they we strew
 Those deeps of the corse-like stare
 At a foreign and stony sun.
 (p. 347)

From the despair, the range extends to the jubilant
 ecstasy of his vision of the cherry tree, and the lyric
 simplicity of his acceptance of nature's laws:

I bowed as a leaf in rain;
 As a tree when the leaf is shed
 To winds in the season at wane: ...
 (p. 356)

In between are many sensitive and evocative descriptions
 of nature, such as this of the beech tree in bud: "Weak
 out of sheath downy leaves/Of the beech quivered lucid
 as dew" (p. 346).

I would suggest that if critics were to consider
 Meredith's poetic style in relation to his poetic theory,
 they would find that many obscure poems gain new
 clarity and meaning. Certainly a great deal more work
 needs to be done in this area, since, so far as I know,
 no one except Patricia Crunden has even considered the
 possibility that Meredith's unique poetic style might
 have any functional poetic purpose.

Meredith also experimented freely with language in
 order to capture his vision of the unity of process. In
 "The Woods of Westermain" he uses language very
 effectively to combine abstract and concrete states, as,

for example, in the following passage:

Or, where old-eyed oxen chew
 Speculation with the cud,
 Read their pool of vision through,
 Back to hours when mind was mud;
 Nigh the knot, which did untwine
 Timelessly to drowsy suns;
 Seeing Earth a slimy spine,
 Heaven a space for winging tons.

In the opening line wherein the oxen "chew/Speculation", Meredith uses a physical image to describe a mental process, because his whole point is that ultimately there is no difference between the two. By tracing the evolutionary process backward we arrive at the time when "mind was mud", a process which may be a contradiction in terms for his readers, but certainly not for Meredith. One of the strongest tenets of his faith is that spirit evolves from the flesh. Furthermore, in progressing from flesh to mind to spirit, nothing is lost; the physical remains with the spiritual. Thus one can trace the process backward, like unravelling a string to the time when all was formless matter, earth "a slimy spine", and heaven, that spiritual abode, "a space for winging tons". The phrase "winging tons" combines the spiritual, ethereal quality of flight with the concept of inert physical weight, and reconciles the two in one image of masses of matter whirling in space. Meredith makes effective use of consonance and assonance in this passage to link opposing states, (mind-mud,

untwine-timelessly, slimy-spine), and weave a sound pattern which supports his thematic pattern.

Meredith was also in the habit of manufacturing new compound words in order to emphasize certain key concepts or phrases, such as "Earth-rooted", fountain-jet", "time-tumbled", "free-hearted". In "A Faith on Trial" he frequently uses compounds for descriptive purposes -- "ripe-wheat", "wolf-waters", "grey-gapped", "tune-footed". In these examples the compounds frequently yoke together very separate and distinct qualities, thus visually and verbally emphasizing his theme of the essential unity and harmony of experience.

As is the case with his experiments with metre, a great deal more work needs to be done on Meredith's use of language; such investigation would certainly prove Meredith to be a far more skillful and innovative craftsman than has yet been acknowledged. Meredith may not have always been equally successful in his poetic experimentation, but he has written a substantial body of work which deserves as much critical attention as "Modern Love", and "Love in the Valley".

N O T E S

Chapter 1

¹ George Macaulay Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, (1920; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 67.

² Maurice Buxton Forman, George Meredith: Some Early Appreciations (1909; rpt. London: Methuen, 1970), p. 227.

³ Ibid., p. 227.

⁴ Ioan Williams, Meredith, the Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 480.

⁵ Ibid., p. 480.

⁶ J. B. Priestley, George Meredith (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 96.

⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

⁸ C. Day Lewis, Notable Images of Virtue: Emily Bronte, George Meredith, W. B. Yeats (1954; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), p. 48.

⁹ Priestley, p. 99.

¹⁰ J. H. E. Crees, George Meredith: A Study of his works and Personality (1918; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1967), p. 79.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 72.

¹² Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, p. 105.

¹³ George Macaulay Trevelyan, ed. The Poetical Works of George Meredith (1912; rpt. London: Constable and Co., 1928), p. 340. Henceforth all quotations from Meredith's poetry will cite the page number as it appears in this edition within the text of the thesis.

¹⁴ Lionel Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), p. 37.

¹⁵ Norman Kelvin, A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 116.

N O T E S

Chapter 1

- 16 Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), V, 77.
- 17 Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry (1936; rpt. New York :Russell & Russell, 1966), p.484.
- 18 Ibid., p.487.
- 19 I do not wish to oversimplify Tennyson since I am aware of the fact that his philosophy includes the union of man's physical and spiritual natures; but it is a refined physical nature which Tennyson envisions as uniting with spirit at the end of "In Memoriam" to produce "one greater man". The raw and uncontrolled energy of the natural world which Meredith finds so invigorating, Tennyson finds somewhat upsetting, and it is this basic difference between the two poets which I wish to point out.
- 20 Stevenson, p.16.

N O T E S

Chapter 11

¹ see for example, "South-West Wind in the Woodland" and "Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn" where the wind expresses the spirit of Mother Nature.

² Jack Lindsay, George Meredith: His Life and Work (London: The Bodley Head, 1956), p.275.

³ "Letter to Mlle. Hilda de Longueuil" in The Letters of George Meredith, ed. C.L. Cline (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), II, 862.

N O T E S

Chapter 111

¹ George Macaulay Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith (1920; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p.2.

² Patricia Crunden, "The Woods of Westermmain", Victorian Poetry, 5 (1967) p.265.

³ C. Day Lewis, Notable Images of Virtue: Emily Bronte, George Meredith, W.B. Yeats (1954; rpt. Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1969), p.49.

Conclusion

¹ Norman Kelvin, A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p.128.

² C. Day Lewis, Notable Images of Virtue: Emily Bronte, George Meredith, W.B. Yeats (1954; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), p.47.

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