

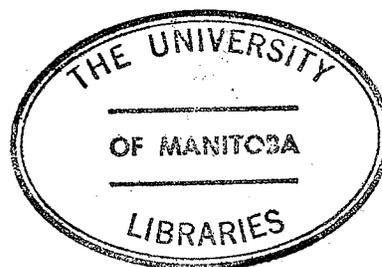
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FORM AND CONTENT IN THE POETRY OF GEORGE MEREDITH  
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## A B S T R A C T

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 Westerman", "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.

C O N T E N T S

Chapter I

Introduction Page 1

Chapter II

Meredith's Poetic Vision Page 22

Chapter III

Form and Content in "The Woods of  
Westermain" and "A Faith on Trial" Page 51

Conclusion Page 82

Notes Page 89

List of Works Consulted Page 93

## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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." <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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."<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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." <sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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 Westermain":

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 relationship 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-ropes, 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' ".<sup>15</sup> 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 Westerman" 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!"<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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."<sup>18</sup>

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