



GEORGE MEREDITH AS A POET AND DRAMATIC NOVELIST

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## PREFACE

The scope and nature of this Thesis excludes at once the possibility of dealing exhaustively with so towering and complex a genius as George Meredith. He is so wholly sui generis that neglect of him involves neglect of nothing else, implies no deficiency of taste, no literary limitation. He cannot be placed. He has no derivation and no tendency; and yet he bridges the gap between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries as though the Victorian era had never been. It has, therefore, been natural to concentrate attention on the man's work itself rather than on its relation to that of contemporary or succeeding craftsmen. Consideration of space have made it necessary to isolate certain of his essential conceptions and salient characteristics. These have been considered analytically. While not claiming real novelty for many of the views set forward, there is a considerable degree, especially in the last two chapters. Needless to say, the portions of Meredith about which the critics are agreed, are much more important than anything "new" that can be said about him. For this reason the aim has been to go to the man's work so far as it was compatible with a moderate array of authority. Originality has been sought by going to origins rather than in eccentricity of opinion.

## Chapter 1.

### MEREDITH'S EDUCATION AND PERSONALITY.

George Meredith is one of those dazzling figures who are never considered to have had an environment or history such as other men. He flashes before us like those splendid Renaissance figures, unaccountable and almost superhuman. His own remarkable reticence on all matters pertaining to his early life gave rise to many legends, none of which he was at pains to dispel. The consequence is, that concerning George Meredith who lived from 1828 until 1909 when the lives of great men were subjected to minute scrutiny, we know for certainty, not much more than we know of Chaucer, Spenser or Shakespeare. We know that he was born at Portsea, that his grandfather and father were Welsh and Irish respectively. His contemporaries did not know that he had filled "Evan Harrington" with many facts about himself and his family. They rather supposed that "Harry Richmond" contained his story. And they were right, insofar as it describes a most unhappy and unfortunately circumstanced little boy. We may account for Meredith's reticence partly on the grounds of his unhappy childhood and partly on the grounds of a dark oracular tinge in his temperament, which in spite of his intellectual honesty, taught him a love of mystery.

Meredith's mother died when he was only five. He early developed an hostility to his father which was never mitigated till the end. When he was fourteen the executors of his mother's small estate sent him to the justly celebrated Moravian School at Neuwied. Here, in this live, cultured part of the Rhine country, he remained continuously for two years. To the careful student of Meredith's life and work these two years will appear to be the largest single influence in his life. It must be remembered that in 1848 a new current of fresh ideas and noble emotions was sweeping through the educated classes of Germany. Romantic liberalism had penetrated even to Theology and the youth were imbued with a fine enthusiasm for social service. That Meredith was bathed in this atmosphere, instead of that of the Apostles Club at Cambridge, explains how he escaped the complacent attitude of the isolated provincial, which was undoubtedly the greatest vice of Victorian England.

At Neuwied he got more than the inspiration for "Farina" and the German scenes in "Harry Richmond". He was confirmed in a large romantic enthusiasm for great and healthy men and deeds and books. Through even the most analytical portions of his high social comedy there stirs constantly a breeze from this spirit. Here too, he commenced his familiarity with Jean Paul Richter and Goethe and German metaphysics. The influence of Jean Paul Richter is as patent in Meredith as in Carlyle and is the reason why Carlyle and Meredith have sometimes been compared. It was not entirely fortunate that the German writer con-

firmed these men in a wilfull love of the fantastic, which often dilapidated their structure and style.

The second, and perhaps last, formative influence traceable in Meredith, commenced when at twenty-two he married a brilliant and gifted widow of thirty, Mary Ellen Nicholls was a daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. The tragedy of the deep incompatibility of this marriage is adumbrated in "Modern Love". Thomas Love Peacock, the scholar and epicure, portrayed in "The Egoist" as Dr. Middleton, had an even more notable effect on <sup>the</sup> turn or determination given to Meredith's genius. It was probably Peacock who turned the attention of the romantic young poet to intellectual comedy, as well as to the spiritual refinements of the higher gastronomy. Peacock was an ardent follower of the Comic Spirit and an enthusiastic student of comeny in all its forms, as his novels show. It is unlikely that Meredith could have been in close contact with a forceful and fascinating personality like Peacock without incurring some debt of influence. "Meredith's long service to the Comic Spirit, to which he dedicated a richer mind and greater genius than ever Peacock possessed, probably began over the madeira and port in Peacock's study. The marriage with the daughter may have been a disaster to Meredith the man, but the association with the father was undoubtedly a godsend to Meredith the writer". (1)

(1) George Meredith by J. B. Priestly. "English Men of Letters"...p.16.



It is perhaps to his friendship with Frederick Maxe, a young naval officer of distinction, who is portrayed in the character of Nevil Beauchamp (1), that we can trace the swift development of Meredith's radical sympathies. This life-long friendship was cemented while Meredith was planning "Richard Feverel". As this work shows, he was now complete in his development as a man, if not as an artist. The romantic, the comic and the radical features are all represented.

Throughout his life a wide and constantly increasing circle of friends and acquaintances bespoke his keen interest in men, and also supplied him with endless matter for character portrayal. There is no character, great or small in his novels that is not owing to his direct observation. But if he was owing to them for many vivid subjects, we are owing to them for accounts of the character and personality to Meredith himself. To those who knew him he always appeared greater in life than in his works. Sir Francis Burnand expressed a common sentiment when he burst out, "Damn you George, why don't you write as you talk?" (2). The exuberent energy and joy, combined with resilient intellectual fibre, that went into his chief characters, was even more characteristic of Meredith. "He came to the morning meal after a long hour's stride in the tonic air and fresh loveliness of the cool woods and green slopes, with the brightness of sunrise upon his brow, re-

(1) "Beauchamp's Career".

(2) "George Meredith" by S. M. Ellis...p. 163.

sponsive penetration in his glance, the turn of radiant irony in his lips and peaked beard, his fine poetic head bright with crisp brown hair, Phoebus Apollo descending upon us from Olympus. His voice was strong, full, resonant, harmonious, his laugh quick and loud. He was born with much power both of muscle and of nerve, but he abused muscle and nerve alike by violent gymnastic after hours of intense concentration in contracted posture over labors of brain and pen". (1).

Exuberent vitality of body and mind was the most notable thing about him. Chesterton has pointed out that the parents of the grotesque are energy and joy, (2) and Meredith is a further confirmation of this. The sad and pessimistic Hardy displays nothing grotesque in his style, but the joyous and optimistic Meredith is often harsh and peculiar.

Justin McCarthy did not see Meredith until he was past middle life, "and yet he had the appearance and movements of one endowed with a youth that could not fade; energy was in every movement; vital power spoke in every gesture.....He seemed to have in him much of the temperament of a fawn: he seemed to have sprung from the very bosom of nature herself.

"His talk was wonderful, and, perhaps, not the least wonderful thing about it was that it seemed so very like his writing. Now it was Richard Feverel who talked to you, and now Adrian Harley, and then Beauchamp--not that he

(1) "Lord Morley". Recollections. Vol. 1, p.37.

(2) Robert Browning, by G. K. Chesterton, "English Men of Letters"...p.148.

ever repeated any of the recorded sayings of these men, but that he talked as one could imagine any of them capable of talking on any suggested subject.....He was a man of strong likings and dislikings in letters and in art; his very prejudices had a charm in them because they gave him such admirable opportunities for scattering new and bewildering fancies around his subject.

".....it amazed me when I first used to visit him, to see a man, no longer young, indulge in such feats of strength and agility. It delighted him to play with great iron weights, and to throw heavy clubs into the air and catch them as they fell and twirl them round his head as though they had been light bamboo canes". (1)

William Sharp, the naturalist, was amazed at Meredith's knowledge of life in field and forest. "It's never safe with our wily friend, to take for granted that he doesn't know more about any subject than anyone else does!" (2) Not even Richard Jeffries, who gave his whole thought to what is in Meredith only a background, knew nature more intimately.

The unanimous testimony of all who heard him, ascribed to Meredith a pre-eminence in conversation and talk that must rank him among the greatest of all time. He was not a monologist like Coleridge or Carlyle, but preferred, like Johnson, to allow his company to choose the theme. "His talk like his best writing, had an

(1) "George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism". J.A. Hammerton...p. 58.

(2) Ibid...p. 67.

immense range, and was crammed with wit and observation, poetry and humour. He had a trick common to most of the best literary talkers of allowing his humorous fancy to go soaring into the very blue of absurdity, sometimes, as one of his friends relates, raising an account of the life and character of an acquaintance into a monstrously comic and entirely imaginary biography, in which, however, truth of character would be observed to the very end. Like Dickens, he lived intimately with the chief personages of his novels, having imagined them intensely and would talk of them as if they were real people." (1) The lively play of his spiritualized face, along with a resonant and exquisitely modulated voice, which played lightly and easily with great sentences, combined to produce an unforgettable experience for his audience. And no less notable was his magnificent capacity and love for "thunders of laughter, clearing air and heart". (2)

No matter from what point Meredith is viewed, he shows strength and brilliance, and to follow his mixed fortunes as he flashed into English society and letters, is to be no less fascinated than by the romantic histories of the gallant social adventures he so delighted to portray. The Countess de Saldor (3) and Richmond Roy (4) were no more daring or consummate in their generalship than George Meredith, the self-educated son of a tailor, who by the sheer force of his genius carved for himself an unique and lustrous position in English letters. It is

- (1) Priestly. op. cit...p. 50.
- (2) "The Spirit of Shakespeare".
- (3) "Evan Harrington".
- (4) "Harry Richmond".

true that he made one mistake fatal to his popularity. He assumed that the world was craving for enlightenment on certain perplexing problems, whereas it was seeking obscurity and forgetfulness. But it was a mistake any man would like to have made. And so, while he never attained and never will attain popularity, true fame is his by indefeasible right. "For fame is not popularity. The shout of the multitude, the idle buzz of fashion, the venal puff, the soothing flattery of favor or of friendship; but it is the spirit of a man surviving himself in the minds and thoughts, undying and imperishable. It is the power which the intellect exercises over the intellect, and the lasting homage which is paid to it, as such, independently of time and circumstances, purified from partiality and evil-speaking. Fame is the sound which the stream of high thought, carried down to future ages, makes as it flows--deep, distant, murmuring evermore like the waters of the mighty ocean". (1) No caprice of fashion or opinion can deprive Meredith of fame in this deeper sense.

Many critics have observed that in some peculiar manner Meredith does not "date". His work has a timeless quality that is all the more extraordinary when one considers the numerous and abortive compromises which so definitely mar the thought and work of his Victorian contemporaries. He is of the truly great who "have all one age, and from one visible space shed influence!"(2) And he has all the joyous freshness that belongs to the morning of the world, besides the inspired commonsense that is

(1) Lectures on the English Poets by William Hazlitt.  
"Everyman". P. 144.

(2) "To A Gentleman" by S. T. Coleridge.

sadly associated with that twilight in which the owl of  
Minerva commences its flight.

## Chapter 11.

### MEREDITH'S ART AND STYLE IN PROSE AND POETRY.

Most critics have been content to speak of Meredith as an artist in whose work great faults struggle with rare beauties for the ascendant, and provided that they have been able to quote passages that are clearly faulty and others that are indisputably beautiful, they conceive that justice has been done. By comparing Meredith with Browning at certain points in this chapter, it will be shown that these men who were alike only insofar as they were not easy reading, were badly misunderstood by the generality of their critics. For it is no more true to say that Browning is a great poet in despite of his grotesqueness than to say that Meredith is great in despite of his frequent harshness and intense compression. Browning has been triumphantly vindicated by many understanding admirers. But Meredith, while in many respects equally deserving, has not been so fortunate.

In attempting to display Meredith's true artistry it will be more effective to pay particular attention to his poetry. For "his prose achievement is a natural growth, while his work in verse is the product of deliberate choice. His speaking voice is an affair of organization, his singing voice is the result of careful training".

(1) And while there is no essential feature of either his

(1) Hammerton. op. cit...P.263.

poetry or prose that is not exhibited in either, it is true that he regarded his prose as secondary. "The novel is my brawny scullery jill." (1) Speaking late in life to his friend Edward Clodd, he said: "Chiefly by that in my poetry which emphasizes the unity of life, the soul which breathes through the universe do I wish to be remembered: for the spiritual is the eternal. Only a few read my verse and yet it is for that for which I care most.....I began with poetry and I shall finish with it." (2) He was forced to novel-writing by practical considerations. And some will think this an excellent argument against the leisured, scientific utopias of the future.

It was once thought very profound to say something like this of Browning: The poet's processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis; the sudden conclusion that he imposes upon them is transcendental and inept. There are many equally curious examples of a similar inability to appreciate Meredith. Of these W. C. Brownell is a typical instance: "His perversity is a natural bent toward the artificial. Its delight is in disappointing the reader's normal expectations. Simplicity is its detestation.....He does not love the obscure but hates the apparent.....and as one cannot always avoid the obvious, especially if one is also extremely prolix, he does his best to obscure it.....He can be crispness or curtness itself at need,.....He loads a phrase with meaning but it is apt to be compression without pith.....His devotion

(1) Letters...p. 390.

(2) "Memories". Edward Clodd...p...186.



to the trickery spirit of comedy led him early to emulate her elusiveness.....The obscurity lies in his whole presentation of his subject. He doles it out grudgingly and endeavors to whip your interest by tantalizing your perceptions.. ....It is impossible not to conceive that he is enjoying himself at your expense, at least that he is the host having a good time at his own party.....His artifice is mainly mystification. It is the coquetry of comedy, not its substance." (1)

And yet, the most angry critics of both men freely admit that they are great, and that they are sincere in their desire to communicate their thoughts and feelings to their readers. They would, no doubt, subscribe to Buffon's "Le style c'est l'homme"; but they have not the patience or desire to see how that truth applies to Browning and Meredith.

Meredith published a series of works, both prose and poetry, vigorous, perplexing and unique. The critics read these and then say at great length: "As a writer he has mastered everything except language; as a novelist he can do everything except tell a story; as an artist he is everything except articulate." (2) And Mr. Priestly has a conception of poetry according to which Meredith's poetry reminds him of "an excited talker rather than a moved and moving singer." (3) They describe him as a poet in his novels, and as a philosopher in his poetry; and a critic

(1) "Victorian Prose Masters". p...253.

(2) "The Decay of Lying" by Oscar Wilde. Nineteenth Century. Jan. '89.

(3) Priestly. op. cit. p...98.

and psychologist who pulverizes both his prose and poetry by excess of thought. Then they proceed to show that his philosophy is unphilosophical and that it is really a poetical attitude to life. But there is no wisdom in quarreling with genius. It speaks and goes away. Those who wish to understand will follow, and in the case of Meredith this latter company has been a very small one.

And since all the clever phrases and antitheses framed by those who had some idea of what they wanted him to be, fail to account for him, let us try to discover whether he is not more valid in the capacity he professed, that of poet and artist.

Aristotle believed that the poets mind was distinguished by a spontaneous use of metaphor. (1) And if metaphors vivid and exuberant did by themselves constitute poetry, Meredith could have no rival. "His metaphors sometimes strive, one on the back of another, like fierce animals in a pit, and deal each other dismembering wounds in the struggle for existence". (2) But his occasionally fatal fertility of metaphor is the symptom of an impetuous imagination. Before he had tamed or disciplined this power, as for instance in "The Shaving of Shagpat", it rushed rioting and clamorous across the twice-enchanted sky of Eastern Romance. The same power, chastened and restrained except for brief revolts, illuminates the whole of his prose. "It is his imagination

(1) Poetics. Chap. 22.

(2) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...10.

that makes his psychological novels so very different from those of other great psychologists; in the midst of exact dissection he bursts into the impetuous splendor of poetry." (1) It is this power which gave us his splendid heroines and the great Richmond Roy (2) and wrought "The cloudy symbols of a high romance". (3) into the texture of his most intellectual comedy.

"It is the characteristic of George Meredith as a writer both of prose and verse, that poetical inspiration and intellectual power are developed in him each to the same degree. In most writers one is the handmaid of the other. But in Mr. Meredith they contend or unite on equal terms". (4) Now this is the real key to the difficulties incident to appreciating Meredith. It explains why there is such variety in his poetry and why some poems have one kind of merit and some have another. "Love in the Valley" is a joyous song of simple feeling, such as might have been composed in the Garden of Eden. It is a song of the morning of life, and its haunting music is perfectly wedded to the feeling. But there are others like "The Woods of Westermain", where all beauty of sound has been sacrificed to compressed meaning and vivid thought. Moreover, it is the contention of imagination and intellect which accounts for Meredith's constant experimentation with verse forms, and his unwillingness to allow the simple rhythm of the inspiration itself to dictate the form. And finally this contention explains the unique intellectual quality of his metaphors.

- (1) Trevelyan, op. cit. p...9
- (2) "Harry Richmond"
- (3) Keats: "When I Have Fears"
- (4) Ibid. p...9

"It is the peculiarity of Mr. Meredith's metaphors that they are not sensuous but intellectual". (1) He does not wish slowly to fill the mind with a picture as Shakespeare does in "Venus and Adonis":--

"Full gently now she takes him by the hand  
A lily prisoned in a gaol of snow,  
Or ivory in an alabaster band;  
So white a friend engirts so white a foe."

Meredith wishes simply to strike a spark from our minds by a brief image, which comes like a sharp deft blow. And so he describes the tough, fierce, veterans of Attila as:

"Grain of threshing battle-dints". (2)

We catch for an instant the intended effect of hard hammering of swords on armour, but no picture of either threshing-floor or battle has been pointed. Again:

"We drank the pure daylight of honest speech". (3)

It is always the poetry of advancing action. We cannot pause on one image if we are to seize the next. Take for instance the celebrated description of Carlyle's style: "resembling either early architecture or either dilapidation, so loose and rough it seemed; a wind-in-the-orchard style, that tumbled down here and there an appreciable fruit with uncouth bluster; sentences without commencement running to abrupt endings and smoke, like waves against a sea wall, learned dictionary words, giving a hand to street slang, and accents falling on them haphazard, like slant rays from driving clouds; all the pages in a breeze, and the whole book producing a kind of electrical

(1) Trevelyan op. cit. p...7.

(2) "The Nuptials of Attila" - Complete Poems edited by Trevelyan. p...237.

(3) Modern Love. XLVIII - p...133.

agitation in the mind and the joints". (1) As Trevelyan says, "you are meant to catch the first light that flies off the metaphor as it passes; but if you seize and cling to it, as though it were a post, you will be drowned in the flood of fresh metaphor that follows". (2) There has been an attempt made by various people to establish some affinity between Meredith and Donne and the other "Metaphysical" poets. They have abundant wit and ingenuity in common. (3) But Meredith thinks and feels so much that his wit always subserves his deeper intention. While the "Metaphysical School" have "not enough iron for their forge or grist for their mill" (3) and they find something to say only to twist it into a thousand shapes. They cleverly weave the most diverse metaphors and images into a single pattern, whereas Meredith uses metaphors and witticisms simply as stepping-stones in his rapid unfolding of an idea. When he describes some of our honorable but rather helpless and pessimistic sages who quail before the modern mob mind, he says:

"Philosophers.....desponding view  
your many nourished, starved my brilliant few;  
Then flinging heels, as charioteers the reins,  
Dive down the fuming Aetna of their brains.  
Belated vessels on a rising sea,  
They seem: they pass! But not philosophy!" (4)

Another salient feature of Meredith's style and art is

- (1) "Beauchamp's Career". Chap. 11.
- (2) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...13.
- (3) Ibid. p...16.
- (4) "Foresight and Patience". Poems. op. cit. p...413.

his constant concern to cut away everything unessential and irrelevant to the heart of the matter in hand. It is this desire that gives him such constant recourse to metaphor. "I use the metaphorical to avoid the long-winded". (1) And again, "I think it preferable, especially in these days of quantity, to be largely epigrammatic rather than exuberant in diction". (2) There is no doubt but that this quality in his work has stood in the way of his popular success. But while it often creates difficulty and obscurity, more often it is the means of attaining an intellectual beauty and strength, otherwise impossible. "In the didactic and philosophical parts of his work, if it is often observing, it is as often invaluable, because it does away with longueurs and the atmosphere of the pulpit, too well known in the case of other great masters of poetry when they ascend to preach". (3)

If we take the opening lines of "Napoleon", we shall have a short example of certain effects attained in Meredith's poetry alone:

"Cannon his name,  
Cannon his voice, <sup>he</sup> became.  
Who heard of him heard shaken hills,  
On earth at quake, to quiet stamped.  
Who looked on him beheld the will of wills."

The driver of wild flocks where lions ramped ."

This is a good type of his method rather than a supreme instance of its best effect. What we have to note is the aptness and brevity of a rapid succession of images flashed

(1) Hammerton. op. cit. p...175.

(2) Ibid. p...174.

(3) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...14.

before the mind. There is scrupulous economy of phrase, and yet when familiarity with this method enables us to follow the images quickly there ensues a mental excitement composed of novel moods and suggestions that are unaccountably satisfying. It is undisputable, as regards Meredith's prose and poetry, that first acquaintance is simply exploration. The rich rewards come only to those who read him the third and fourth times. And there is an extraordinary haunting quality about certain poems, and lines, and chapters, that induces us to return again and again. As in the case of Blake, Meredith's hard and often fantastic lines, suggest things utterly beyond the scope of smooth classic melodies. "As in some of Michael Angelo's statues, the Titan is only half-way out of the marble. But it is a Titan and not a ballet-girl. The mere vision of his mightiness coming out suggests more than a complete Canova." (1)

It is the great amount of thought packed into his verse and prose that confers on them their distinctive quality. In three lines we are told the reasons for Napoleon's failures. Within all "his huge enginery" the human being showed a dwarf stature:

"Hugest of engines, a much limited man.

Enormous with no infinite around,  
No starred deep sky, no muse." (2)

And if poetry is, as Matthew Arnold maintained, "a criti-

(1) Trevelyan. op. cit. P...16.

(2) Napoleon. Poems op. cit. p...477.

cism of life" (1) and not a mere rhapsody of words. Then the value of intellect in poetry is immense. It is intellect combined with majestic and lyrical qualities in his verses which enchanted Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch who was "compelled by the wizardry of single lines and a certain separate glamour which hangs about each of them." (2) It is impossible to give instances from the prose but the testimony of R. L. Stevenson is perhaps enough: "Talking of Meredith, I have just re-read for the third and fourth time 'The Egoist'. When I shall have read it the sixth or seventh I begin to see I shall know about it. You will be astonished when you come to re-read it; I had no idea of the matter,--the human red matter--he has contrived to pack and plug into that book.....I see more and more that Meredith is built for immortality." (3)

Now, the compression that is a characteristic of Meredith's poetry appears in the novels but with a difference. There is present the same pithy, epigrammatic, and metaphorical manner in separate sentences, but there is also a ruthless exclusion of all the comfortable padding of detail which we expect in a novel. Writing to Stevenson he said: "I have read pieces of "Prince Otto", admiring the royal manner of your cutting away of the novelist's lumber. Straight to the matter is the secret." (4) But since this is related to his whole manner of narrating I shall reserve it for consideration in the next chapter.

(1) "The Study of Poetry"

(2) "Hammerton". op. cit. p...266.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.



It is, however, true that he wrote novels as a poet, and has no regard for mundane circumstances, any more than has Moliere. "The mass of stuff that takes up so much space in most fiction and gives to most readers an illusion of reality, the multitude of things, the houses and streets, and furniture, the incomes and bank balances and loans and mortgages, the tangle of business and professional relations, is entirely missing from Meredith's fiction". (1) He was entirely justified in thinking of himself as being first and last a poet.

One of the most memorable and most deeply imagined chapters in "Richard Feverel" is the scene of the youthful lovers.(2) The same penny whistle, with its two stops, piped an immortal air in "Love in the Valley", which is beyond dispute. "The loveliest love-song of its century", (3) as Quiller-Couch calls it. But in "Modern Love" psychology, comedy, tragedy, irony, philosophy, wit, and beauty are so marvellously commingled within the space of fifty 'sonnets', "That scarcely, except by a certain greater master, has a single tune been played upon so many stops. Yet the whole poem is an instrument, an artistic construction of perfect unity". (4) There is no feature of his novels that is not fittingly illustrated in this poem, which Swinburne said, was "above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author". (5) We are told

(1) Priestly. op. cit. p...161.

(2) Chap. XIX "A Diversion Played Upon a Penny Whistle".

(3) Hammerton. op. cit. p...266.

(4) Trevelyan. op. cit. p.19.

(5) Spectator. Juen 7, 1862.

with harrowing psychological detail of the most maddening of all forms of tragedy, the growing up of evil where good was planted. It is the story of how two noble people, man and wife have ceased to love and how they torture each other with growing hate and lingering love. But never for a moment does the poem descend from the majestic heights of tragic poetry. "Here is one of our own modern 'problems' treated like some ancient tragedy, with the same kind of spiritual and intellectual beauty as saves Othello from being morbid, and Hamlet from being decadent". (1) And this is because Meredith, as I have shown, accepted life whole-heartedly, believed it had its basis in commonsense, that "life is worthy of the Muse". (2), and so,

"He probed from hell to hell  
of human passions, but of love deflowered  
his wisdom was not". (3)

It is now time to attempt to give a more adequate and satisfactory account of his obscurity than is current. For if it is true, as many hold, that Meredith was affected and that he deliberately set out to offend and puzzle the critics, then he cannot be justified as an artist or poet. It cannot be questioned that his work might have been better had he found early appreciation and encouragement. The writer who gets no effective response from his readers tends to exaggerate and parody himself, as for instance Browning and Meredith often did. We read in a letter that: "I am hopeless of our public. The English have hardened

- (1) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...21
- (2) "Modern Love". XXV. Poems. op. cit. p...133
- (3) "The Spirit of Shakespeare". Ibid. p...189.

me outside and there has been a consequent process with-  
in". (1) But no amount of injured pride could account  
for Meredith's obscurity. It is essential as Browning's  
is not. It is "the very form and vehicle of his genius", (2)  
as Coleridge observed of Rabelais' fantastic tricks. There  
is another passage in Meredith's letters which is more  
illuminating: "I have no style, though I suppose my work  
is distinctive. I am too experimental in phrases to be  
other than a misleading guide. I can say that I have never  
written without having clear/<sup>in</sup>vision, the thing put to  
paper; and yet this has been the cause of roughness and  
uncommonness in the form of speech". (3) It is extra-  
ordinary that whole volumes of criticism have been written  
to elaborate the original error of thought committed by  
George Eliot. In 1857 she wrote accusing him of sacrific-  
ing "euphony and almost sense to novelty and force of ex-  
pression". (4) Henley was another true admirer who felt  
compelled to admit that "he seems to prefer his cleverness  
to his genius.....He fatigues and bewilders where he might  
more easily attract and explain". (5) Everyone seems agreed  
that at his best his work is of the first order, and even  
at its worst, it is brilliant. But for the bright minutes  
there are many dull half hours.

All of this sort of criticism is vague and unmean-  
ing. It is the mere record of impressions and trails off  
into smoke when examined. The effect of it all is simply

- (1) Letters. p. 142.
- (2) "Lectures on Shakespeare". Everyman. p..268.
- (3) Hammerton. op. cit. p...174.
- (4) "Westminster Review". Oct., 1857.
- (5) Pall Mall Gazette, Nov. 3, 1879.

to accuse Meredith of lacking the pellucid periods of Hardy or the splendid perspicuity of Tennyson. It says, he may have tireless invention and novel and forceful collocations of phrase, but one misses the repetitions of Arnold. He is often subtle and pithy, showing amazing insight into the human mechanism, but one searches in vain for the eerie, wistful, symbolism of Maeterlinck. He is judged not because he often failed to reach his own ideal but because he failed to reach every other writer's ideal.

Meredith's style may be a good style, and yet it may be possible to discover many instances of its abuse. Like Browning, Meredith often parodies himself. Every poet with a highly original manner occasionally exhibits the tendency to parody himself. As for instance Browning when he wrote the line:

"Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the  
maw-crammed beast?" (1)

and Meredith when he wrote:

"She called on the bell motion of the head  
to toll forth the utter night-cap negative". (2)

If the performance is not always equal to the inspiration, this deliberate attempt at the artificial is often felicitous as in the description of Sir Willoughby about to embrace Clara: "The gulf of a caress hove in view like an enormous billow hollowing under the curled ridge. She stooped to a buttercup, the monster swept by". (3) And when Dacier discovers with horror and amazement, Diana's

(1) "Rabbi Ben Ezra".

(2) "One of Our Conquerors". Chap. XXIII.

(3) "Egoist". Chap. XIII.

treachery, "He read and his eyes became horny". (1)

This is curtness itself, and the high comic manner Meredith wished to maintain, demanded it. But obviously the phrase is on the confines of taste. It is perhaps a failure to achieve the different ideal he set himself. But it is a failure in form and not indifference to form and here is his justification as an artist.

I have shown that many of the difficulties in Meredith's manner proceed from the contention of great imagination and powerful intellect on equal terms. His boundless energy of mind caused him to compress his metaphors and to foreshorten his ideas till they are the merest hints. "He is never caught on the way, but is always at the end of an intellectual journey". (2) As for instance when he describes the lover who, though without hope feels that spiritually he is in possession of 'her heavenliness',

"Beyond the senses, where such love as mine,  
Such grace as hers, should the strange fates withhold  
Their starry more from her and me, unite". (3)

'Their starry more' is a perfect instance of Meredith's ruthless weeding process of which the effect is "reticence, dignity, and force". (4) And in the novels the speeches "leap and break, resilient and resurgent, like running foam-crested sea waves;.....in their restless agitations you must divine the immense life abounding beneath and around and above them". (5) But when full allowance has been made for his constant experimentation "with a language part of which is dead matter" (6) in order to strengthen it as a

- (1) "Diana". Chap. XXVlll
- (2) Priestly. op. cit. p...61.
- (3) "Grace and Love". Poems op. cit. p...183.
- (4) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...44.
- (5) Hammerton. op. cit. p...151.
- (6) Letters. p...321.

vehicle for the description of "nature and natural emotions", (1) the essential reason for his obscurity has still not been touched. There has never been a keener or more appreciative student of every sort of prose style, and poetical form, and their possible uses, than Meredith. (2) Every time he had a new idea or poetic impulse he sought to discover a new form for that idea. No one, except Browning, can show as many varieties of form and meter as Meredith. Both failed frequently, but occasionally there is splendid success. Take for instance "Dirge in the Woods" which is a daring bit of free verse. It was Meredith who invented the hammer-beat that gives such peculiar quality to the poems where it is used. It occurs in the second and fourth verses of the following:

"Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping  
Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.

    ... ..  
Lone on the fir-branch his rattle note unvaried,  
Brooding o'er the gloom spins the brown eye-jar". (3)

It introduces a certain downright solidity into an atmosphere of romance, as may be seen in "Cargoes". Masefield has used this metrical device with an extravagance that success alone could justify:

"Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine,  
    ... ..  
Topazes and cinnamon, and gold moldores  
Dirty British coaster with salt-caked smoke-stack  
    ... ..  
Butting through the channel in the mad March days  
Fire-wood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.

- (1) Letters. p...321.
- (2) Ibid. p...542
- (3) "Love in the Valley". P...230.

The poet who is original in the sense of adding something new and valuable to poetic art "does not merely create himself--he creates other poets". (1)

It is, therefore, not possible to account for Meredith's obscurity as if it had simply grown from his quarrel with the critics. He could write as smoothly and perspicuously as Arnold, as his letters often show, whereas Browning could not write a telegram intelligently. "It was part of the machinery of his brain that things came out of it, as it were backward". (2) And Chesterton later conjectures that if Browning had recorded the thought,

"We needs must love the highest when we see it",  
it would have become:

"High's human; man loves best, best visible". (3)  
The things Browning had to say were not difficult. No "inspiration caught from dubious hues filled him, and no mystic wrynesses he chased". (4) "Browning is simply a great pedagogue with an impediment in his speech. Or rather, to speak more strictly, Browning is a man whose excitement for the glory of the obvious is so great that his speech becomes disjointed and precipitate". (5) But "the works of George Meredith are, as it were, obscure even when we know what they mean. They deal with nameless emotions, fugitive sensations, subconscious certainties and uncertainties, and if really requires a somewhat curious and unfamiliar mode of speech to indicate the presence of

(1) Browning. G. K. Chesterton. p...137

(2) Ibid. p...67

(3) Ibid. p...147

(4) "A Later Alexandrian". Poems. op. cit. p...187.

(5) Chesterton. op. cit. P...156.

these". (1) Meredith knew perfectly well what he was about. He said of his characters, "They are actual but uncommon". (2)

In their reverence for and vital use of superficially insignificant detail, Browning and Meredith are the supreme embodiments of their time. Browning set out to show the relations of man and God by telling an utterly forgotten story from an old and forgotten book. "The characteristic of the modern movements par excellence is the apotheosis of the insignificant.....Maeterlinck stricken still and wondering by a deal door half open, or the light shining out of a window at night; Zola filling note-books with the medical significance of the twitching of a man's toes, or the loss of his appetite; Whitman counting the grass and the heart-shaped leaves of the lilac; Mr. George Gissing lingering fondly over the third class ticket and the dilapidated umbrella; George Meredith seeing a soul's tragedy in a phrase at the dinner table; Mr. Bernard Shaw filling three pages with stage directions to describe a parlor; all these men different in every other particular, are alike in this, that they have ceased to believe certain things to be important and the rest unimportant.....Their difference from the old epic poets is the whole difference between an age that fought with dragons and an age which fights with microbes". (3) The profound thought which Chesterton commenced here, he completed in another place. In an essay devoted to Meredith he shows how small writers have been swamped by detail, have lost touch with the

(1) Chesterton. op. cit. p...156.

(2) "Beauchamp's Career". Chap. XLV.

(3) Chesterton. op. cit. p...164.



central cove of things and when they are not displaying "mere moods and manners" they exhibit a sort of "psychological Barnum show". But towering above these stand "two or three great men out of the age of giants. They have all the interest of the moderns in the fascinating divisions, in the beautiful incongruities between man and man. But they still retain out of a greater time a greater memory. They remember this, that however deep, however wild, however baffling and bizarre be the difference between man and man, still it is a difference between man and man, and not a difference between Centaur and Hobgoblin.....Of these great men, the links between all that was good in the old philosophy of man and all that is good in the new study of men, the greatest is George Meredith.....Meredith stands alone in combining with his minutiae and insight that ancient sense of human fraternity which makes him like Scott and Dickens and Fielding, more a brother to his villains than the modern novelist can be to his hero". (1) That is Meredith's secret, and Chesterton, alone among his critics, has recorded it. Meredith's subtlety does not evade large issues but probes deeper into them. That is what he does in "Modern Love" of which the majestic last sonnet contains four lines which explicitly confirm this idea. Having spoken of the waste apparent in the midst of the splendor of human life, he says:

"In tragic hints here see what evermore  
Moves dark as yonder midnight's ocean force,  
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse  
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!"

He records the same belief in "Richard Feverel": "An audience will come to whom it will be given to see the elementary

(1) "Some Aspects of George Meredith". Great Thoughts.  
Oct. 1904.

machinery at work: who, as it were, from some slight hint of straws, will feel the winds of March when they do not blow. To them will nothing be trivial, seeing that they will have in their eyes the invisible conflict going on around us, whose features a nod, a smile, a laugh of ours perpetually changes. And they will perceive, moreover, that in real life all hangs together: the train is laid in the lifting of an eyebrow that bursts upon the field of thousands. They will see the links of things as they pass and wonder not, as foolish people now do, that this great matter came out of that small one". (1)

In order to illustrate the great laws of consequence which Meredith perceived to be ingrained in social life and applied to his novels, it would be necessary to quote one of them at great length. But it is a superficial criticism which brands the conclusion of "Richard Feverel" and "Beauchamp's Career" as perverse and inept. It is of course true that there is none of the obvious and simple machinery of cause and effect that one finds in George Eliot. And as a brief illustration of the refined subtlety of thought and feeling that permeates his prose work I have taken as passage from the second chapter of "The Egoist":

"Mrs. Montstuart was a lady certain to say the remembered, if not the right, thing. Again and again was it confirmed on days of high celebration, days of birth or bridal, how sure she was to hit the mark that rang the bell; and away her word went over the country: and had she been an uncharitable woman she could have ruled the county with

(1) "Richard Feverel". Chap. XXV.

an iron rod of caricature, so sharp was her touch. A grain of malice would have sent county faces and characters awry into the currency. She was wealthy and kindly and resembled our Mother Nature in her reasonable antipathies, to one or two things, which none can defend, and her decided preference of persons that shone in the sun. She looked at you, and forth it came; and it stuck to you, as nothing labored or literary could have adhered. Her saying of Laetitia Dale: "Here she comes, with a romantic tale on her eyelashes", was a portrait of Laetitia. And that of Vernon Whitford: "He is a Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar", painted the sunken brilliancy of the lean long-walker and scholar at a stroke.

"Of the young Sir Willoughby her word was brief; and there was the merit of it on a day when he was hearing from sunrise to the setting of the moon salutes in his honor, songs of praise and Ciceronian eulogy.....he excited his guests of both sexes to a holiday of flattery. And, says Mrs. Mountstuart, while grand phrases were mouthing round about him: "You see he has a leg".

"That you saw, of course, But after she had spoken you saw much more. Adulation of young Sir Willoughby's beauty and wit, and aristocratic bearing and mien, and of his moral virtues, was common.....almost vulgar, beside Mrs. Mountstuart's quiet little touch of nature. In seeming to say infinitely less than the others, as Lady Isabel Patterne pointed out to Lady Busshe, Mrs. Mountstuart comprised all that the others had said, by showing all that the ness of allusions to the saliently evident. She was the aristocrat reproving the provincial. "He is everything you

have had the goodness to remark, ladies and dear sirs, he talks charmingly, dances d<sup>v</sup>inely, rides with the air of a commander-in-chief, has the most natural and grand pose possible without ceasing for a moment to be the young English gentleman he is. Alcibiades fresh from a Louis IV perruquier, could not surpass him. I could outdo you in sublime comparisons, were I minded to pelt him. Have you noticed that he has a leg?"

"So might it be amplified. A simple seeming word of this import is the triumph of the spiritual and where it passes for a coin of value, the society has reached a high refinement: Arcadian by the aesthetic route". (1)

During the space of four more pages this phrase is reviewed and heard in different lights and tones. It is made the occasion of a subtle yet just and effective estimate of the virtues of the Restoration period as compared with the plodding drabness of our own time. It is puzzling and annoying, somewhat like the prefaces of Fielding, on the first perusal; but it savours more exquisitely on each successive reading.

As with ideas so with description. Marvellous lightning flashes give us just enough to complete the whole situation in our minds if we are alert. Take the description of Renee: "her features had the soft irregularities which run to varieties of beauty, as the ripple rocks the light; mouth, eyes, brows, nostrils, and blooming cheeks played into one another languidly; thought flew, tongue followed and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night-lightning. Or oftener to speak truth, tongue flew, thought followed: (1) "The Egoist". Chap. 11.

her age was but newly seventeen and she was French." (1)

In his novels where he is dealing with character and outward circumstance, his manner of producing his novel effects and of communicating his intricate ideas, is to make phrases bear an unusual weight of meaning. They are usually common words, however. But in his poetry he strikes out an entirely new set of symbols to convey his emotions and ideas. He follows no tradition, whatever, and he has had no imitators. Take for instance some lines from one of his perfect lyrics, "Wind on the Lyre":

"That was the chirp of Ariel  
You heard as overhead it flew,  
The farther going more to dwell,  
And wing our green to wed our blue"...

"Green" and "blue" are symbols for earth and heaven or blood and spirit. The gorgeous "Hymn to Color" is compact of new symbols that cannot be defined, but which can be richly enjoyed and understood, when they are bathed in the light of Meredith's total attitude. "The thought is so intimate, so subtle, so spiritual, that it could not be expressed more exactly. It would 'break through language and escape' if the author might use no words but those which a school-boy could understand". (2) And then Trevelyan adds significantly: "Yet this is the class of ideas for which the call has now come, if further spiritual progress is to be made. The army of human thought is advancing in two bands: one marches along the high road under the bright hard light of science; but the other is struggling into the dimmer shades of intricate psychology, into "haunted woods", the birth place

(1) "Beauchamp's Career". Chap. XXXIV.

(2) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...83.

of new aspirations, prophecies and religions, which can find no expression in dogmatic statement, but only in the inspired language of beauty, suggesting the undefined and making the unseen felt. Mr. Meredith has long been a leader in this direction". (1) Indeed many brilliant young modern writers feel that Meredith has distanced them hopelessly in his handling of both Nature and character. Meredith is the greatest and most comprehensive of the "link between all that was good in the<sup>old</sup> philosophy of man and all that is good in the new study of man". (2) He was too huge a man to have imitators, and like Browning and Blake, he was too individual to be the founder of a new tradition.

It is necessary to point out one other feature that distinguished and relates his poetry and his prose. As shall be shown, in the last chapter, Meredith's women are synonymous with Nature. They are the mystical embodiments of high romance. There is an aura about each one of them. In his poetry he has not tried to represent Nature or Earth through his women, but Earth is directly presented in a vision transfused with high emotion:

"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". (3)

The "Hymn to Color" (in which Light, Darkness and Color answer respectively to Life, Death and Love) is the supreme instance of this manner. Elsewhere in his poetry are passages that are conceived in the same spirit as the

(1) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...83.

(2) Great Thoughts. op. cit.

(3) "Meditation Under the Stars", Poems. op. cit. p...365.

nature description of his novels. In these he does not describe nature, so much as allow it to describe itself:

"Golden lie the meadows: golden run the streams; red gold is on the pine stems. The sun is coming down to earth and walks the fields and the waters.

"The sun is coming down to earth and the fields and the waters shout to him golden shouts. He comes, and his heralds run before him....

"Sweet are the shy recesses of the woodland. The ray treads softly there. A film athwart the pathway quivers many-hued against purple shade fragrant with warm pines.... the little brown squirrel drops tail, and leaps; the inmost bird is startled to a chance tuneless note. From silence into silence things move". (1)

Let the words of Mr. Priestly conclude this chapter: "He was able to see man against the background of Nature, and to see man against the background of a very complex social life. He could rhapsodize over a skylark as well as Wordsworth could, and yet could pounce upon an absurd remark as quickly as Jane Austen. He could be as observant and contented in the fields as Richard Jefferies, and yet be as subtle in the drawing-room as Henry James. As a poet he comes perhaps closer to Nature, not only in his talk about her but in his actual appreciation of her sights and sounds, his feeling for her moods, than any other poet in our literature. As a novelist, he handles the significant minutiae of intercourse in a highly sophisticated and complex social life perhaps more exquisitely than any other English writer. As a philosopher, he was able to link up (1) "Richard Feverel". Chap. XIX.

both these unusual capacities, to join together the wildest woods and the wittiest dinner-tables, to take us through the darkest thickets of introspection and subtle analysis and yet keep the south-west wind still blowing about our ears and the sunshine still pouring down upon our head". (1)  
All this is condensed in Chesterton's remark that "he combines subtlety with primal energy and criticizes life without losing his appetite for it". (2)

- (1) Priestly. op. cit. p..84.
- (2) Great Thoughts. op. cit.



### CHAPTER III

#### MEREDITH'S ATTITUDE TO NATURE, MAN, AND SOCIETY

Had Christianity never been heard of, no one could have been freer from any vestige of its influence than George Meredith. "Meredith was perhaps the only man in the modern (1) world who has almost had the high honor of rising out of the low estate of a Pantheist into the high estate of a Pagan. A Pagan is a person who can do what hardly any person for the last 2000 years could do: a person who can take Nature naturally. It is due to Meredith to say that no one outside of a few of the great Greeks has ever taken Nature so naturally as he did. And it is also due to him to say that no one outside of Colney Hatch ever took Nature so unnaturally as it was taken in what Hardy has had the blasphemy to call Wessex Tales".

His comprehensive and self-consistent views enabled him to surmount the antinomies and uneasy compromises of his day. He was at once a rationalist and the poet of creative evolution. "He joins the eighteenth to the twentieth century as if there had never been a Victorian gap". (2)

(1)-Trevelyan op cit P.-104  
(2)-Hammerton op cit P.-350

It is impossible to label a true poet with the categorical phrases current in philosophical, and pseudo-philosophical, circles. "The attempt to compress his view of a question into a single formula involves the neglect of much that he has said. It is wholly beside the mark, for instance, to christen him Optimist or Pessimist, Materialist or Idealist. He does not use the language or think the thoughts which provide us with these terms; and if he did, we should have to define him as belonging to all camps or else to none. He is not on the side of religion, or on the side of science.....In ethics he is equally devoted to liberty and law. He is both stoic and epicurean; joy and duty, self and others, flesh and spirit, each has a real place in his ordered but progressive conception of right living". (1) And yet the complexity of his views, when applied to life, proceeds from a central core where thought and feeling are one. For instance Nevil Beauchamp becomes a violent radical. But there is another and very different radical in the same story. He is Dr. Shrapnel. Now most writers have exhausted their reserve of sympathy when they present two different sorts of men fighting for a just cause, and yet for different reasons. But it is only part of Meredith that got expression through Nevil Beauchamp and Dr. Shrapnel. There was in him a deep perception of the source and value of the Tory position and temperament. No one has ever drawn a more noble and dignified Tory than Everard Romfrey in the same novel.

(1) Trevalyan op cit P.104

Meredith knew that the grandeur and dignified strength of character, such as Romfrey possessed, was the effect of the proud lineage, and aristocratic responsibility. But Col. Halkett Blackburn, Tuckham, and Seymour Austin, in the same novel, are also Tories. Each is at once <sup>a</sup>distinct individual and a type or epitome. All illustrate different phases of the same general position, and all are worthy men. It is therefore, impossible to call Meredith either radical or conservative. He has a poet's sympathy with both positions.

"Mr. Meredith, both in verse and prose is the poet of common sense, the inspired prophet of sanity. He holds the middle path, observing of mankind that-----

"here they are wild waves

and there as marsh descried".-(1)

It is a further proof of the fundamental and essential Greek Paganism of Meredith that the central fact in his philosophy is the doctrine of the golden mean. He did not derive this from the Greeks but from the original source from which they drew their knowledge. That is, of course, Mother Earth. The doctrine of moderation has never attracted any brilliant English poet before Meredith, and merely as a doctrine it is very dull. But just as Browning is the inspired poet of the conventional and commonplace, Meredith is unflinchingly imaginative in proclaiming the greatness and romance found in simply obeying the laws of our physical and social nature. Yet both these men have won themselves reputations with the "rabble many" as being eccentric and difficult. "It is only the smaller poet

(1)-Trevelyan op cit P.-64

who sees the poetry of revolt, of isolation, of disagree-  
ment; the larger poet sees the poetry of those great agree-  
ments which constitute the romantic achievement of civilization<sup>(1)</sup>.

So Meredith is ardent and headlong in his conventionality, and  
in his desire to consolidate our present position as a means  
to social advance. He begins his celebrated description of  
the Comic Spirit:- (2)

"If you believe that our civilization is founded in common  
sense, and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it---

----" This is indispensable to "the speeding of us, compact  
of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual  
whirlpools, to the creation of certain nobler races, now very  
dimly imagined." -(3).

The importance with which he regarded  
this may be gathered from his own restrained and self-disci-  
pline:- "I strive by study of humanity to represent it:

not its morbid action. I have a tendency to do that which I  
repress: for in defineating it there is no gain. In all my,

truly, very faulty works, there is this aim. Much of my  
strength lies in painting morbid emotion and exceptional pos-  
itions; but my conscience will not let me so waste my time----

my love is for epical subjects--not for cobwebs in a putrid  
corner; though I know the fascination of unravelling them."(4)

To one acquainted with the spirit of his writings, this is an  
astonishing revelation. But it is characteristic of his high-

{1}-G. K. Chesterton, Browning op cit P.-99

{2}-An essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit--  
Modern Library P.141.

{3}-"Diana" Chapter(XXXVII)

{4}-Letters P. 171

mindedness in all matters. He says--

"You must love the light so well  
That no darkness will seem fell"--(1)

"It is truly difficult for his commentator to find a suitable order in which to arrange his thoughts since each springs from the same attitude towards the world, but no one follows from any other as a step in logic"--(2). Meredith is not a philosophic speculator but a philosophic moralist. He has not the philosopher's interest in disembodied thought, or thought uninformed by any practical issue. He has rather the poet's concern with thought as it concerns human passions and motives. He has an attitude towards Man, and Earth, and Nature, rather than an hypothesis which is amenable to logical demonstration.

The poet always places implicit trust and faith in his temperament, for he seeks to render an account not of the mechanism, but of the spirit of Heaven and Earth. Faith, for Meredith does not consist in the adoption of any views about the cosmos, or concerning life and death. "His faith is an attitude of trust and joy in the good elements of a world which, whatever optimist or pessimist may say, clearly contains both good and evil."--(3). But this Faith of his is contemptuous of him who is fearfully bent on

"Reading what he is and whence he came,"--(4)

for,

"On her great venture, Man,  
Earth gazes while her fingers dint the breast

(1)-Woods of Westermain, P.-193

(2)-Trevelyan op cit P. 105

(3)-Trevelyan op cit P. 106

(4)-Earth and Man P. 240

Which is her well of strength, his home of rest,  
And fair to scan.  
More aid than that embrace,  
That nourishment she cannot give: his heart  
Involves his Fate; and she who urged the start  
Abides the race."-(1)

It is not brain or thought alone, that can misread, or read  
aright the lessons of the great Mother. "Blood" and "Spirit",  
the health of body and soul are needed to teach us joy and faith  
in Earth and Man.

"The lover of life knows his labor divine  
And therein is at peace.  
The lust after life craves a touch and a sign  
That the life shall increase.  
The lust after life in the chills of its lust  
Claims a passport of death.  
The lover of life sees the flame in our dust  
And a gift in our breath"-(2)

Logically and rationally speaking this is pure agnosticism,  
though of sturdy stoical mould. But it attracted both the  
stern, dour Carlyle and the joyous, exuberant Meredith. The  
faith of both is not concerned with the mechanism of the uni-  
verse, but with the everlasting now. "Do the duty which lies  
nearest thee", say Carlyle in "Sartor Resartus" (3) . The  
duty which lies nearest to thee is that of joy and frank  
acceptance, says Meredith in effect.

"What is dumb  
We question not, nor ask  
The silent to give sound,  
The hidden to unmask,  
The distant to draw near" (4)

Shall we therefore base our hope and felicity in life on a

- { 1 } "Earth and Man" P.240
- { 2 } "In the Woods" P.342
- { 3 } Book II Chapter IX
- { 4 } "Woodland Peace" P.338



vain effort to know what we should not understand if it were told to us? A way he says with "unfaith clamoring to be coined to faith by proof". (1)

"on the other hand, Mr. Meredith's faith can never believe anything which Reason, the brain, shows to be false; nor can it refuse to accept anything which Reason has definitely shown to be true. There must be no playing with supernaturalism". (2)

"His cry to heaven is a cry to her  
He would evade." (3)

Meredith sees no antagonism between Faith and Reason. Faith is rather Reason transcendant, it is

"Reason tiptoe at the ultimate bound of her wit". (4)

Temperamentally Meredith is as optimistic as Browning, but their creeds are very different. The earth philosophy of the one displays

"An unpurchased devotion  
To the dream of the blossom of Good  
As our banner of battle unrolled  
In its wave and current and curve"

A devotion calm in the shout for some triumph won, and steadfast amid wounds and death and personal failure. (5)

But Browning was optimistic in creed as well as in temperament and in his summing up of experience, "He held the great central liberal doctrine, a belief in a certain destiny of the human spirit beyond and perhaps even independent of our own sincerest convictions. The world was going right he felt, most probably in his way, but certainly in its way". (6)

- (1) "Earth and Man" P.240
- (2) "Trevelyan op cit P.108
- (3) "Earth and Man" P.240
- (4) "A Faith on Trial" P.345
- (5) "Trevelyan op cit P.108
- (6) G. K. Chesterton (Browning) op cit P.86

How utterly polar is Meredith's conception of a world in which progress has been won effortfully by brain, to that of his equally great contemporary who, "If he could by waving his hand in a dark room, stop the mouths of all the deceivers of mankind forever, would not wave his hand". (1)

Meredith, for all his progressive radicalism, is, in creed, essentially a reactionary. He escapes much of the narrowness of his time by being outside it; but in creed he paid the price of being two thousand years behind Browning. However, the great value of his work as man, poet, and novelist, is largely independent of his consciously adopted conceptions.

The poet, plants himself upon his instincts and permits his temperament sovereign sway. And he has quite as much right to do this as the philosopher has to trust his thought processes. In his table talk, Coleridge noted that all men, insofar as they are rational, are born either Platonists or Aristotelians. (2) There are similarly, in all times and places, definite types of temperament, displaying consistency of conformation. The literary or artistic expression of such temperament has properly the same validity as has the philosophizing of the Idealist and the Realist. It is therefore beside the mark to sneer at the faiths of Browning or Meredith by saying that they can largely be explained by their possession of good digestions. It is precisely analogous to say that Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" can largely be explained by his possession of a vigorous intellect, or that he was never

(1) G. K. Chesterton (Browning) op cit p.86  
(2) "Table Talk"



insane at any time during his life. What Chesterton says of Browning temperament is entirely applicable to Meredith:

"I cannot in the least understand why a good digestion--that is, a good body--should not be held to be as mystic a benefit as a sunset or the first flower of spring.-----Browning held himself as free to draw his inspiration from the gift of good health as from the gift of learning or the gift of fellowship. But he held that such gifts were in life innumerable and varied, and that every man, or almost every man, possessed some window looking out on this essential excellence of things." (1)

Now for Meredith the road to this excellence, and to joy in Earth, is through action rather than through speculation.

"He may entreat, aspire,  
He may despair, and she has never heed.  
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,  
Not his desire." (2)

not at all

"Shall man into the mystery of breath,  
From his quick beating pulse a pathway spy.  
Or learn the secret of the shrouded death  
By lifting up the lid of a white eye." (3)

He has no sympathy with the spirit of perpetual enquiry common to philosophy and science.

"The questions that sow not nor spin,  
" " " " " "  
The questions, the broods that haunt  
Sensation insurgent.

"They see not above or below;  
Farthest are they from my soul,"  
Earth whispers: "They scarce have the thirst,  
Except to unriddle a rune;  
And I spin none; only show,  
Would humanity soar from its worst,  
Winged above darkness and dole,

- (1) G. K. Chesterton (Browning) op cit P.180
- (2) "Earth and Man" P.240
- (3) "Hymn to Color" P.362

How flesh unto spirit must grow.  
Spirit raves not for goal." (1)

He has the moralist's dislike of questions of an ultimate nature:-

"Then let our trust be firm in Good,  
Though we be of the fasting;  
Our questions are a mortal brood  
Our work is everlasting.  
We children of Beneficence  
Are in its being sharers;  
And whither vainer sounds than whence,  
For word with such wayfarers." (2)

We are "children of Beneficence", not the jests of some vast Imbecility, such as Hardy conceived. But Meredith thinks it misleading to postulate of the universe what we know only of Earth. Even if we do make the best of things here, he does not hold that Good will triumph everywhere. As far as he is willing to make statements about such matters at all, they steer a middle course between optimism and pessimism. "But the body of his ethical doctrine is larger and more important than his necessarily vague cosmology, which at its best is only a poetical form to convey the essence and temperament of his ethic". (3)

Some people weakly suppose that because a man has won to an optimistic ethic that he can offer them some short-cut to the same goal. Mental quacks and practitioners have led them to expect some patent medicine for their ills. But in "The Day of the Daughter of Hades" Meredith writes:-

"He who has looked upon Earth,  
Deeper than flower and fruit,  
Losing some hue of his mirth,  
As the tree striking rock at the root,  
Unto him shall the marvellous tale  
Of Callistes more humanly come  
With the touch on his breast than a hail  
From the markets that hum." (4)

- (1) "Faith on Trial" P.345
- (2) "The Question Whither" 339
- (3) "Travelyan op cit P.112
- (4) Poems op cit P.205

and again:-

"Carry your fever to the Alps, you of minds diseased: not to sit down in front of them ruminating-----" (1). The optimistic view is the effect, not of drugs and synthetic creeds, but of exercise and habitual cheerfulness.

It is now possible to **step** within the portals of Meredith's beliefs, since we have seen something of their external semblance. What does he mean by talking of Earth quite as intimately as though she were liberally our fleshly Mother. "The mighty pronoun "she" recurs in his poems, sometimes rather to the bewilderment of the uninitiated". (2) It might be explained simply by saying that Meredith felt and lived on the inside of what Darwin in his evolutionary hypothesis described the outside. He is the poet of evolution.

In his attitude to earth he differs profoundly from Wordsworth. If Wordsworth is, as Arnold called him, "Nature's high priest" (3) then what is Meredith? For he worships earth and nature with undivided spirit. But Wordsworth says:-

"The homely nurse doth all she can  
To make her foster-child, her inmate, Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known  
And that imperial palace whence he came." (4)

Wordsworth versifying Plato, with some modifications, claims that his "high instincts" are eternal patterns of excellence independent of Earth. But in effect, Meredith says; Man's spirit and brain, no less than his body, are earth-born. We are not dropped down from Heaven above. We are autochthonous. Earth of which we are a part, is spirit as well as matter, flame as

(1) Harry Richmond Chapter LIII

(2) "Trevelyan op cit P.114

(3) "The Study of Poetry"

(4) "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality"

well as clod. What is spiritual comes out of Earth as well as what is fleshly. It is the unusual sympathy that Meredith shows when interpreting this that caused G. K. Chesterton to write:-  
"The presence of soul and substance together involves one of the two or three things which most of the Victorians did not understand--the thing called a sacrament. It is because he had a natural affinity for this mystical materialism that Meredith, in spite of his affectations, is a poet: and in spite of his Victorian Agnosticism (or ignorance) is a pious Pagan and not a mere Pantheist" (1) Meredith regarded man as a harmony of three elements--blood, brain and spirit, or body, mind, and soul. He tells us in "The Woods of Westermain":- (2)

"Each of each in sequent birth,  
Blood and brain and spirit, three  
(Say the deepest gnomes of Earth)  
Join for true Felicity.  
Are they parted, then expect  
Someone sailing will be wrecked:  
Separate hunting are they sped,  
Scan the morsel coveted.  
Earth that tried is: she hides  
Joy from him who that divides;  
Showers it when the three are one,  
Glassing her in union-----"

First in order of evolution is "blood", which he sometimes calls the 'body or the 'senses'. It is animal vigor but should not take precedence of 'mind' ('brain'). Woe to the man whose senses still usurp the station of their issue, mind. (3) For brain is superior to body marking a stage of evolution out of the primitive slime of our Mother Earth,

"Nor broken for us shows the mould  
When muscle is in mind renewed:  
Though farther from her nature rude,  
Yet nearer to her spirit's hold. (4)

- (1) "Victorian Age in Literature op cit P. 229
- (2) Poems op cit P. 193
- (3) "Earth and Man" P. 240
- (4) "Hard Weather" P. 318

These two, 'blood' and 'brain' come first. But, the 'spirit' or 'soul', coming last in order of evolution, cannot exist without the other two. Indeed, as Trevelyan finely says, "The soul is the flushing of the brain by the blood, of the cold intellectual by the hot animal." (1) It is irradiated thought, or it is noble strength on fire. Trevelyan continues:- "To Mr. Meredith the soul is a spiritual reality, but it is not something preternatural breathed into our clay from above. On the spiritual plane it is passion guided by reason". (2)

The soul is not simply a rosy feeling-tone, or rapturous sensation growing up in solitude and retreat. It must be "a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending" (3)

It is, as we shall see, no little part of Meredith's task as a novelist to show us how these three are often parted. He has many people who when "Sailing" are either wrecked or speeded "between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools" (4) at the last gasping moment.

One is occasionally puzzled by Meredith's use of his terms, and it is necessary to focus on nearly all portions of his work the illumination of his total philosophy. Like the Greeks, Meredith always kept his eye on the harmonious development of the whole man. But often he uses the word "brain" in a sense as narrow and ascetic as does Mr. Bernard show. In "Modern Love" he cries, "More brain, O Lord, more brain". (5) and later, "Never is Earth misread by brain". (6). There he would seem inconsistent to the extent of severing the activity of the brain from the body. But he does not mean simple "intellect", in such passages, "The observing, classifying, analysing faculty untouched by emotion--

(1) Trevelyan op cit P. 178

(2) Ibid

(3) "Diana" Chapter I

(4) Ibid Chapter XXXVII

(5) "Modern Love" XLVIII P.133

(6) "Hard Weather"

but the universal rationalising power that gives man true insight and enables him to bring harmony into his life" (1)

Similarly it is not always easy to define the meaning attached by Meredith in the words Earth and Nature. Sometimes Earth means the planet Earth; sometimes it is merely a poetical phrase for the ethical precept which he is laying down. There is a resulting confusion; but as Trevelyan says, it is "a confusion which answers to the mixed good and bad in the real facts of the Universe. For he regards the planet Earth and the Nature of which she is a cognate part, not as wholly good but only as containing good elements.....we must render the homage of hostility to evil.....His ideas of Duty are less formal and more vital than those of the Lake School, but he knows better than Shelley and Browning that the laws of conduct necessitated by the imperfect conditions of Nature often run counter to our natural impulses and must be preferred to them under penalty". (2)  
Man should be

"Obedient to nature, not her slave:  
Her lord, if to her rigid laws he bows,  
Her dust, if with his conscience he plays knave  
And bids the Passions on the Pleasures browse." (3)

Spiritual progress or

"Strength is not won by miracle or rape.  
It is the offspring of the modest years,  
The gift of sire to son through those firm laws  
Which we name Gods; which are the righteous cause.  
The cause of man, and manhood's ministers. (4)

In his splendid Sonnet entitled "Lucifer in Starlight" we are told that God is law.

"On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose  
Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend  
Above the rolling ball in cloud part screened,  
Where sinners hugged their spectre of repose.

- (1) Priestly op cit P. 78
- (2) Trevelyan op cit P.125
- (3) France, December, 1870 P.497
- (4) "A reading of Life" P.529

Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.  
And now upon his western wing he leaned,  
Now the black planet shadowed Arctic snows.  
Scaring through wider zones that pricked his scars  
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,  
He reached the middle height and at the stars  
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank.  
Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank,  
The army of unalterable law." (1)

God is at once Law, Invincible Right, and Right Reason. Note that the inimical and irrational element which Lucifer inspires in mortals is "His hot fit of pride." It will be seen how important a place this "Hot fit" occupies in Meredith's treatment of Egoism.

Throughout his work Meredith speaks of moral and physical laws as "The gods of this world." "In the Woods of Westermain" they are "The deepest gnomes of Earth." He had the original poetic impulse of the Greek pagans to personify important but elusive qualities that are midway between earth and spirit. The most notable of all is of course "The Comic Spirit", which is to be dealt with in the ensuing chapter.

But even the spirit of gossip, which is very pervasive in the incidents of "The Amazing Marriage", becomes "Dame Gossip", and presides over the whole novel much like the ubiquitous heath in "The Return of the Native". An even more striking instance of his poetic impulse to personify all aspects of his Earth philosophy, and to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name, occurs in his daring and grotesque poem "Jump-to-Glory-Jane". (2) To Jane, the peasant founder of a Shaker Sect, jumping has become the very way of life. She has been visited with sensations of bodily health and vigor that

(1) Poems op cit P.181  
(2) Poems op cit P.372

open spiritual vistas. She has sensations that 'are to her as the beings of angels in her frame'. She and her followers wait on a Verbose Bishop and implore him

\*In jumps that said, Beware the pit!  
More eloquent than speaking it--  
That said, Avoid the boiled the roast;  
The heated nose on face of ghost,  
Which comes of drinking: up and o'er  
The flesh with me! did Jane implore\*.

Jane and her jumping sisters are nineteenth century Bacchanals who are drunk with the discovery that there is no ultimate discord in the elements of which we are made. But that here on earth we can sight union, life, law, joy and impulse.

The Bacchae sing

\*Knowledge, we are not foes!  
I seek thee diligently;  
But the world with a great wind blows,  
Shining, and not from thee;  
Blowing to beautiful things,  
On, amid dark and light,  
'Till Life, through the trammelings  
Of Laws are not the Right,  
Breaks, clean and pure, and sings  
--Glorying to God in the height!\* (1)

Meredith might have written this himself, so entirely consonant is it with his poetry. He also knew

\*The rapture of the forward view, (2)

and kept 'till the last

\*The youth of souls who pitch their joy in this old  
Heart of things\*. (3)

Although many have, like Priestly, perceived that Meredith "Seems to breathe Hellenic air, and turns on the body the clear unshadowed eyes of the nobler Pagans", (4) none have been sufficiently consistent to apply his paganism to his novels.

- (1) "The Bacchae" Euripides (translated by Murray)
- (2) Thrush in February P.327
- (3) Ibid
- (4) Priestly op cit P. 75



They have forgotten the rock beneath the flowers, and eclectically supposed that they might have the vital earthy exuberance of paganism without its stern agnosticism and Nemesis. Priestly calls the tragic denouement of "Richard Feverel" "a sudden savage gesture of The Comic Spirit.....It is out of key, like a splash of black or crimson oil paint in a water-colour...It is sheer perversity" (1) Yet Priestly is willing to grant that Meredith is not anti-Christian but simply non-Christian or pre-Christian. We have become accustomed in Fielding Thackeray, Scott, and Dickens to a Christian ethic where repentance finds grace and forgiveness. This is meaningless to Meredith who knows God as a system of laws. In all human relations he shows that no action can fail of its consequences. "Men can forgive each other, but deeds never forgive. The person whom you have wronged may pardon you, but the crime he has pardoned will take some blind vengeance, either on you or on others. It is an engine which you have set going and cannot stop. In Meredith's novels are so many different instances of this law at work". (2) That is to say the law or type is superior to the individual.

"Our life is but a little holding, lent  
To do a mighty labor: we are one  
With heaven and the stars when it is spent. (3)

Half way through "Richard Feverel" when the joy of Richard is in full glow there remains no obstacle to the felicity of all concerned except past actions. But suddenly Meredith flashes a warning to us about the seizure of happiness at the expense of others:-

(1) Priestly op cit P.160  
(3) Vittoria Chapter XXI

(2) Trevelyan op cit P.127

"When we have gone out and seized it on the highways, certain inscrutable laws are sure to be at work to bring us to the criminal bar sooner or later.....Richard Turpin went forth, singing "Money or Life" to the world: Richard Feverel has done the same, substituting "Happiness" For "Money", frequently synonyms. The coin he wanted he would have, and was just as much a highway robber as his fellow Dick, so that those who have failed to recognize him as a hero before, may now regard him in that light. Meanwhile the world he has seized looks exceedingly patient and beautiful. His coin clinks delicious music to him. Nature and the order of things on Earth have no warmer admirer than a jolly brigand or a young man made happy by the Jews." (1) According, therefore, to the iron law of consequences, or the decree of "The Gods", Richard and his father must pay for their sins and innocent Lucy must suffer as well. Writing of the humiliation of France in 1870 Meredith saw simple retribution for the excesses of Napoleon:-

"Forgetful is green earth; the Gods alone  
Remember everlastingly: they strike  
Remorselessly, and ever like for like.  
By their great memories the Gods are known, (2)

and by their short memories and hurried studies are the accusers of Meredith known. Meredith may have been wrong but he was never capricious or inconsiderate. The pagan nemesis that destroys Lucy Feverel (3) and Nevil Beauchamp (4), and which sends the critics into a rage, is impersonal but not arbitrary.

- (1) "Richard Feverel" Chapter XXXII
- (2) France 1870 P.497
- (3) "Richard Feverel"
- (4) "Beauchamp's Career"

As a Pagan philosopher Meredith is not concerned to weigh in man, all

"The world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's  
amount". (1)

The purely Pagan view is stated by Meredith when he is describing The Comic Spirit. "Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does" (2)

Meredith is not concerned with the motives nor the longings of people. He is concerned simply with the shapeliness of their acts, and not the

"Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies that broke through language and escaped (3)

those trying to superimpose the Christian ethic on Meredith's novels might as easily attempt to drive an automobile in the fourth dimension. No one would think of searching for Christian optimism in Hardy. But it is not any more sensible to look for Christian hope in Meredith, simply because he has the Pagan health. Meredith's hope and faith reside in the sure unfolding of Nature and the development of man on earth. As for the individuals,

"Enough if we have winked to sun  
Have sped the plough a season;  
There is soul for labor done,  
Endureth fixed as reason." (4)

Our individual separateness he regards but as a means of progress and not an end in itself. Each of us is

- (1) Rabbi Ben Ezra
- (2) An Essay on Comedy op cit P.142
- (3) Rabbi Ben Ezra
- (4) The Question Whither P.339

"The vessel of the thought.

The vessel splits, the thought survives. (1)

"The only personal survival of which we are certain, says Meredith, is survival in the memory of those who knew us, and whom we influenced and encouraged" (2)

Meredith objects on moral grounds to the attitude expressed in Browning's "Prospice" :-

"If we strain to the farther shore  
We are catching at comfort near.  
These are our sensual dreams;  
Of the yearning to touch, to feel  
The dark impalpable sure,  
And have the Unveiled appear." (3)

This he calls the cry of "unfaith", the 'lust after life' which 'craves a passport of death'. (4) Right reason and true shapeliness in the present, and a striving after harmony with earth and man are the best lamps of life, says Meredith.

"For love we earth, then serve we all;  
Her mystic secret then is ours:  
We fall, or view our treasures fall,  
Unclouded, as beholds her flowers. (5)

"We do not get to any heaven by renouncing the Mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is best to believe that earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations" (6)

As the poet of evolution "the rapture of the forward view" (7) and the vision of "the creation of certain nobler races, now very dimly imagined", (8) and they play a prominent part in his strong insistence on faith and acceptance in the present.

- (1) "Thrush in February P.327
- (2) Trevelyan op cit P.155
- (3) "A Faith on Trial" P.345
- (4) "In the Woods" P.342
- (5) "Thrush in February P.327
- (6) Lord Ormont Chapter XIV
- (7) "Thrush in February" P.327
- (8) "Diana" Chapter XXXVII

He casts his eye back on a rugged time before man in  
his struggle with Nature had half transferred the  
battle to his brain. (1)

From bloody ground  
Nor broken for us shows the mould  
When muscle in mind renewed:  
Though farther from her nature rude  
Yet nearer to her spirits hold. (2)

Earth has gained by "her great venture, Man,.

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 store: of her he draws,  
Though blind to her, by spelling at her laws,  
Her purest fires.

And order, high discourse,  
And decency, than which is life less dear,  
She has of him: The Pyre of language clear,  
Love's tongue and source. (3)

But, says Meredith, let us not practice any sentimental  
deceit. History shows that man has travelled a red and  
gory track in his advance. God is immanent in nature  
and in man but it is a slow and terrible path by which  
we climb towards Him. "The sufferings by which callow  
youth wins wisdom and strength, if the victim is not  
broken to pieces in the ordeal, are the central

- (1) Earth and Man. Poems op. cit. p...240.  
(2) Hard Weather. p...318.  
(3) Earth and Man. p...240.

theme of Mr. Meredith's novels. And personal history is the epitome of the history of the race." (1)

It is this that we must digest if we are not to quail before the dwarfed lives, the perverted energies, and the sick misery of millions in our cities. For there is waste and slaying in the city only less than in primitive nature. Earth is still.

A slayer, yea, as when she pressed  
Her savage to the slaughter-heaps: (2)

But the bravest, the keenest, and most fortunate, come forward for voluntary self-sacrifice:-

To sacrifice she prompts her best:  
She reaps them as the sower reaps. (3)

Seeing that there is progress, Faith accepts the horrors of the path forward. In this sense 'acceptance' is Earth's command.

Accept, she says; it is not hard  
In woods; but she in towns  
Repeats, accept; and have we wept,  
And have we quailed with fears,  
Or shrunk with horrors, sure reward  
We have whom knowledge crowns;  
Who see in mould the rose unfold  
The soul through blood and tears. (4)

Although Meredith is the high priest of Nature and the lover of the out-of-doors he knows that the young time with the life ahead lies in London "The City of smoky fray" and that there

Our battle urges; there  
Spring heroes many: issuing thence,  
Names that should leave no vacant air  
For fresh delight in confidence.

(1) Trevelyn. op. cit...p.119.

(2) "Thrush in February" op. cit. p..327.

(3) Ibid. (4) "Outer and Inner" p..339.



In the magic "Woods of Westermain", which stand allegorically for Life itself, Meredith tells us what is the right and what is the wrong attitude towards Life:

Enter these enchanted woods  
 You who dare,  
 Nothing harms beneath the leaves  
 More than waves a swimmer cleaves.  
 Toss your heart up with the lark,  
 Foot at peace with mouse and worm,  
 Fair you fare.

But,

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.

Once the position of Meredith is understood and its organic simplicity perceived, it becomes a matter of great difficulty to set out his views. Almost everything he has written in verse and prose could be pertinently adduced to illustrate any true statement about him. It is impossible to challenge the validity of any part of his faith or creed without challenging the whole. It is everywhere consistent and integrated, presenting as in an organism, an infinite complexity of structure yet great simplicity of function. Like all true poets, his poetry presents various aspects of his own life, and it is not possible to argue about an honest life and yet be wise. Life is to be lived rather than examined.

Who sweats not with the flock will seek in vain  
 To shed the words that are ripe fruit of sun. (1)

But if poets, who are sui generis, cannot be considered philosophically, they can be evaluated. In the world, as

(1) "The Discipline of Wisdom."... p..185.



in books, we know when we are in the presence of great living. No one can read far in Hardy without knowing that there was very little of his great talent that was not serving bad uses. And no one can read far in Meredith, whether in agreement or not, without seeing new riches in life and new sweetness in Earth.

A wonder edges the familiar face:  
 She wears no more that robe of printed hours;  
 Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her  
 flowers. (1)

There are two more matters that it is necessary to relate to Meredith's "philosophy". He refers often to the efficacy of prayer in his novels and the casual reader often supposes that it is a concession of the stoical moralist to a good element in Christianity. But, he says of France,

The Mother of the many laughters might  
 Call one poor shade of laughter

To show herself the naked absurdity of her attitude in  
 face of the Prussians,

Demanding intercession, direct aid  
 When the whole tragic tale hangs on a broken blade. (2)

But there is a sense in which Meredith considers prayer the highest function of the soul, the source of life to it, and the spring of conduct. Old Shrapnel, the radical free-thinker writes his friend Beauchamp as follows:

"So, in our prayers we dedicate the world to God, not calling him great for a title, no--showing him we know him great in a limitless world, lord of a truth we tend to, have not grasped. I say prayer is good. I

(1) "Meditation under the Stars." ...p..365.

(2) "France, December 1870." ...p..497.

counsel it to you again and again: in joy, in sickness of sickness of heart. The infidel will not pray; the creed-slave prays to the image in his box.----- We that fight the living world must have the universal for succour of the truth in it." (1)

If courage should falter, 'tis wholesome to kneel.  
Remember that well, for the secret with some,  
Who pray for no gift, but have cleansing in prayer,  
And free from impurities tower-like stand. (2)

So prayer does not depend, in Meredith, on any definitions of God, or any attribution of personality to Him. It is known in churches, chambers and streets. "But in communion with the beauty, the strength and the vitality of Nature, the face of our Mother Earth and of the sky, prayer comes in its greatest power." (3)

The other matter is Egoism, the "dragon self", whom every man must slay. In the light of his conception of Mother Earth, from whom we spring and who yet does nourish us, this main subject of his novels is not difficult to understand. The history of the race is repeated in the individual, says Meredith, and since he has sympathy and respect even for the tooth and red claw in nature so he is not savage towards the beast in man. "He has a sympathetic acquaintance with the creature and his ways, and shows him a wise, fatherly tenderness, paring his claws, taming civilizing, and ennobling his qualities." (4) But Meredith does not seek to cast out self, to deny or murder it.

- (1) Beauchamp's Career." Chap.xxix.  
(2) "The Empty Purse." ...p..438.  
(3) Trevelyan. op. cit....p..137.  
(4) Ibid. p..161.

Oft has he been riven; slain  
 Is no force in Westermain.  
 Wait and we shall forge him curbs,  
 Put his fangs to uses tame. (1)

He would retain the driving force in "self," for a man is often saved from his worst by an appeal to personal pride. "And in a higher stage, the grand change of ripening years comes when youth loses the Egoism but not the force of his primitive qualities." (2)

You a larger self will find:  
 Sweetest fellowship ensues  
 With the creatures of your kind. (3)

It is therefore that as a preacher and moralist that Meredith in his novels is primarily concerned with young people in whom this process is going on. He does not represent life simply for its own sake but always with his attention on this primeval war, of Egoism with spirit. It is when, the senses

Still usurp the station of their issue mind,  
 That Egoism the "wily elf" becomes

That captain of the scorned:  
 The coveter of life in soul and shell.  
 The fratricide, the thief, the infidel,  
 The hooped and horned. (4)

Egoism involves sensualism and pride on one hand, but on the other hand asceticism is equally bad. "His position has twofronts: against asceticism and complete self-sacrifice on the one hand, and against mere seeking for happiness and self-development on the other." (5)

- (1) "Woods of Westermain". ..p..193.  
 (2) Trevelyan. op. cit. ..p..162.  
 (3) "Woods of Westermain". ..p..193.  
 (4) "Earth and Man." ..p..240.  
 (5) "Diana". Chap. XXXVII.

He is the poet of the golden mean who aims at the "speeding" of us, compact of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirl pools." (1) If we deny nature by proceeding to any extreme then she "will force her way, and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she comes up not the fairest part of her foremost!" (2)

Meredith is the prophet of sanity and of the joy and beauty of Earth. But "he does not, like Fra Angelico and Bur~~er~~<sup>er</sup>-Jones, seek beauty and joy by shutting out all ugly and painful realities from his studio. Like Zola, Ibsen, and Tolstoi, he goes down into the dark places; but he does not live there always and he carries his lamp with him." (3)

You must love the light so well  
That no darkness will seem fell. (4)

We must find out evil in order to fight it, and not, as many have come to think, in order to contemplate it. "We feel, as we read Mr. Meredith's best novels, that if life is without interest or joy to us, it must be because we ourselves are dull or cowardly.-----His works are a medicine for our poor, nervous, melancholic modern world, so pitilessly stretched on the rack by its other intellectual giants." (5)

Laughter,

At pasture----- broad as ten thousand bees  
Thunders of laughter clearing air and heart, (6)

is what Meredith prescribes as a cure for pessimism and facile optimism alike.

"If the Comic idea prevailed with us the vapors

(1) "Diana". Chap. XXXVII. (2) Ibid. Chap. I.

(3) Trevelyan. op.cit. .p..163. (4) "Woods of Westermain

(5) Trevelyan. op. city..p..164. p..193.

(6) "Spirit of Shakespeare" p. 84

of unreason and sentimentalism would be blown away before they were productive. Where would Pessimist and Optimist be? They would in any case have a diminished audience." (1)

And so, says Trevelyan, by this wary, but kindly Odysseus, "the one-eyed Polyphemus of Despair is left cheated and shouting after the white track of his departing vessel." (2)

In Meredith the wit and reason of the eighteenth century mingled with the Nature worship of the nineteenth century; and yet in 1926 Priestly said "he is still ahead of most of our contemporaries-----it is precisely his ideas that are slowly permeating the mass of cultivated opinion." (3)

But Meredith has not the hallmark of any age upon him. He belongs to the morning of the earth when the Sons of God threw up their spears and shouted for joy. All the great Victorians as Chesterton remarks (4) are curiously lop-sided. They constantly give the feeling of strain and incompleteness; but Meredith "is at once complete, compact and buoyant, and his attitude is, as it were, all of a piece. We do not encounter him groaning to achieve some kind of synthesis: he springs out upon us an Athene, fully grown and fully armed." (5)

- (1) An Essay on Comedy. op. cit. ..p..168.  
 (2) Trevelyan. op. cit. ..p..170.  
 (3) Priestly. op. cit. ..p..62.  
 (4) Victorian Age in Literature. op. cit. ..p..156.  
 (5) Priestly. op. cit. ..p..63.

## CHAPTER IV

### MEREDITH AS A COMIC WRITER.

If poetry is essentially a criticism of life, comedy--at least high comedy--is explicitly a criticism of social life. It is, therefore, that I include in this chapter some mention of Meredith's views of men and women in society.

In his "Dialogue of the Banquet", Plato relates how Socrates compelled Aristophanes and Agathon, though most reluctantly, to admit that it was the business of one and the same genius to excel in tragic and comic poetry. (1) And it has been shown by references to "Modern Love", which is Meredith in epitome, that as Henley said of him, "he is one of the very few moderns who have the double gift of tragedy and comedy". (2) But his forcible and essentially comic genius has often been obscured by its exuberant, yet subtle expression. I think a sentence of Coleridge will take us most quickly to the heart of the matter: "The tragic poet idealizes his characters by giving to the spiritual part of our nature, a more decided preponderance over the animal cravings and impulses, than is met with in real life: the comic poet idealizes his characters by making the animal the governing power, and the intellectual the mere instru-

(1) Symposium.

(2) Pall Mall Gazette. Nov. 3, 1879.

ment". (1)

Now, Meredith's whole Earth philosophy emphasizes the utter dependence of the spiritual and mental aspects of Man in society on his physical being. He spurns as worthless the whole of Byron's gloomy egoism because,

"The cities, not the mountains, blow  
Such bladders; in their shapes confessed  
An after-dinner's indigest". (2)

The comic is easily distinguished from the humorous by its essentially earthy and finite character. The one deals with recognizable social types, while the other is concerned with the display of individual character, for its own sake. The one proceeds principally from the head, the other from the heart. Whereas "there is always in genuine humour an acknowledgement of the hollowness and force of the world and its disproportion to the godlike within us". (3) This is what we find in Sterne and Dickens. But the infinite in Man is sharply excluded in the pursuit of the comic ideal. "Men's future upon earth does not attract" the Comic Spirit; "their honesty and shapeliness in the present does". (4) The Comic character is found among men in developed society, the Humorous character is found more frequently on the confines of society--as for example, Sir Roger de Coverley. The comic character is a representation of certain tendencies in man as a social being. The very titles of Moliere's plays tell us that: "Le Misanthrope", "Les Femmes Savantes". And so in Meredith's "The Egoist", or some of the various diseases of what is

(1) "Lectures on Shakespeare". op. cit. p...15.

(2) "Manfred". Poems. op. cit. p...286.

(3) "Lectures on Shakespeare". op. cit. p...261.

(4) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...142.

purely personal to a man, yet which affects his fellows, is present in all his novels. But Meredith had extraordinary range and has given us a great humorous character, Richmond Roy, (1) besides many smaller ones like Mrs. Berry, (2). The difference being that the humorous character has a life of his own, as Uncle Toby and Mr. Pickwick. There is a life within them that gives a specific individual quality to their words and acts. The comic character is a puppet manipulated for a definite purpose. Nearly all Meredith's men are puppets or comic characters, and strangely enough they are most real when they are least admirable. His model gentlemen, his Austin Wentworths (3) and Vernon Whitfords (4) are colorless because they are not objects of the "silvery laughter". (5)

Coleridge has perfectly distinguished between tragedy and comedy when he cites "an old critic" who said that "tragedy was the flight or elevation of life, and comedy (that of Menander) its arrangement or ordonnance". (6)

That Meredith understood the theoretical and philosophic basis of comedy is attested to by numerous reflections, scattered throughout his novels by his preface to "The Egoist", by a long "Ode to the Comic Spirit" (7) and by his brilliant "Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit". In "Beauchamp's Career" he anticipates the brilliant and convincing thesis that Mr. Bergson elabor-

(1) "Harry Richmond"

(2) "Richard Feverel"

(3) Ibid.

(4) "The Egoist".

(5) "An Essay on Comedy", op. cit. p...142.

(6) Coleridge. "Lectures on Shakespeare". op. cit.p...16

(7) G.K. Chesterton. "Victorian Age in Literature".

op.cit. p...150.



ated in his analysis of "Laughter". Speaking of a certain man's power to make others appear ridiculous he says:  
"Captain Baskett was gifted with.....the art of strapping his fellow man and so posturing him as to make every movement of the comical wretch puppet-like, constrained, stiff and foolish". And then he proceeds to show that the true comic stands only one leg in the laughable, this comprehending and transcending Bergson: "You look on men from your own elevation as upon a quantity of our little wooden images.....the automatic creature is subject to the laws of its construction, you perceive.....it cannot leap out of its mechanism. One definition of the art is, humour made easy, and that may be why Cecil Baskett indulged in it, and why it is popular with those whose humour consists of a readiness to laugh". (1) It seems to me that Meredith's Earth philosophy particularly strengthens his position as a comic writer. Not only does it keep him close to the heart of laughter which is finite, but his conviction that the spiritual and infinite in Man was born of the harmonious conjunction of blood and brain, made it possible for him to commingle lyrical love and penetrating comedy, as it has never been done except by a certain greater master. Just as the enchanting presence of mysterious Nature in his pages relieves the rigors of psychoanalysis and ferocious intuition, so a flame of intense and genuine love warms the background when the comedy in the foreground is sternly unmerciful.

Let us examine Meredith's idea of comedy:

"There are plain reasons why the comic poet is not

(1) "Beauchamp's Career". Chap. XI.

a frequent apparition, and why the great comic poet remains without a fellow. A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current, and the perceptions quick, that he may be supplied with matter and an audience. The semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities, and feverish emotional periods, repel him; and also a state of marked social inequality of the sexes; nor can he whose business is to address the mind, be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity". (1) All of Meredith's novels are written in just such surroundings. I need only indicate the society at Raynham Abbey in "Richard Feverel", the cultured Sir Austin, the courtly epicure Adrian Harley, and the educated but slightly sentimental Lady Blandish. It is extraordinary how prominent a part widowed ladies play in Meredith's novels. He found them useful because of their mastery of social life and manners. Some, like Mrs. Mount in "Richard Feverel", and Mrs. Lovell in "Rhoda Fleming", seem to have direct commissions from 'The Prince of Darkness'. But there are others as different, yet as benevolent, as Mrs. Berry (2) and Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson. (3) A most interesting chapter might be written on the important part they play in Meredith's comedy. Mrs. Mountstuart is the nucleus of just a society as Meredith though indispensable to High Comedy--a society where the lift of an eyebrow or, "you see he has a leg" are loaded with significance. "A simple-seeming word of this import is the triumph of the

(1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...75.

(2) "Richard Feverel".

(3) "The Egoist".

spiritual, and where it passes for coin of value, the society has reached a high refinement: Arcadian by the aesthetic route". (1)

"Moreover, to touch and kindle the mind through laughter, demands more than sprightliness, a most subtle delicacy that must be a natal gift in the Comic poet..... People are ready to surrender themselves to witty thumps on the back, breast and sides; all except on the head--and it is there that he aims. He must be subtle to penetrate. A corresponding acuteness must exist to welcome him. The necessity for the two conditions will explain how it is that we count him during the centuries in the singular number."

(2) Such conditions were fulfilled, thinks Meredith, by the arrival of Moliere at the witty court of Louis XIV.

With a poet's imagination, and yet an intellectual precision that weighs each word, Meredith has described the Comic Spirit:

"If you believe that our civilization is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upwards from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken as a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sages brows, and the sunny malice of a fawn lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big

(1) "The Egoist". Chap. II.

(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...76.

round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws that bind them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mixed with conceit, individually, or in the bulk; the spirit overhead will look humanly malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

"Not to distinguish it is to be bull-blind to the spiritual, and to deny the existence of a mind of man where minds of men are working in conjunction." (1)

Every phrase in the above citation could be <sup>the</sup> subject of an essay to show how Meredith illustrates it in his writings. Since such treatment is not appropriate to this thesis, let us briefly consider the phrase, "mind of man" whose nature is determined by the "minds of men working in

(1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...141.

conjunction". For both here and in other matters Meredith relates himself to the English Hegelians. These were a group of philosophical reformers and idealists prominent during the third quarter of the Nineteenth Century, who introduced Hegel to the Liberal party. They were optimistic reformers, or men who believed that society was sound at the core, and eminently worth improving. They form a strange contrast to the pessimistic writers and reformers, the Hardys, Butlers, and Gissings who were "so disgusted that society was not immaculate that they wanted to plunge it into chaos". (1) One group hails the divinity of life, while the other searches out its disease and says life is not worth living until all negative abuses have been removed. Such pessimists Meredith regards as the legitimate quarry of the Comic Spirit, for their Egos have waxed huge. And he sings gaily of the famous leap of just such a man, Empedocles:

7  
 "He leaped. With none to hinder,  
 Of Aetnas fiery scorial  
 In the next vomit-shower, made he  
     a more peculiar cinder.  
 And this great Doctor, can it be,  
 He left no saner recipe  
 For men at issue with despair?"  
 Admiring, even his poet owns,  
 While noting his fine lyric tones,  
 The last of him was heels in air!" (2)

The general position of Hegel coincides with that of Meredith. Both thought life was intended for achievement rather than for happiness. But more particularly Meredith seems to have given vitality and form to what is in Hegel entirely abstract. Now Hegel develops a most convincing

(1) Priestly. op. cit. p...113.

(2) "Empedocles". Poems. op. cit. p...44.

thesis that we can understand reality only by taking it in all its concreteness. Reason is not an external criterion but exists only as embodied in the phenomena of experience.

We have only to observe the facts of experience as they unfold, and detect, if we can, the laws involved in them.

Reality exists, and that reality reveals itself in History. (1)

Compare this with what Meredith says: "I think that all right use of life, and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us; as to my works, I know them faulty, think them of worth only

> when <sup>they</sup> point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our  
> fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead <sup>to</sup> to great civilization. I have supposed that the novel, exposing and illustrating the natural history of man, may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts." (2) And such was Carlyle's purpose in writing History. Hegel felt that the task of philosophy was simply to interpret the manifestation of the universal spirit as it has already embodied itself in social institutions. And his principal effort was aimed to show that truth was embodied in the actual, that between thought and reality, between the ideal and the real, there is no separation.

Meredith was convinced of the truth of this idea, which his own work splendidly illustrates. He remains on the highway of human experience and yet with a difference which some call artificiality and some call imaginative elevation. "Between realism and idealism there is no natural conflict. This completes that. Realism is the basis of

> (1) James Royce. "Spirit of Modern Philosophy". *passim*  
(2) Letters. p...398.

good composition: it implies study, observation, artistic power, and (in those who can do more) humility. Little writers should be realistic. They would then at least do solid work.....A great genius must necessarily employ ideal means, for a vast conception cannot be placed bodily before the eye, and remains to be suggested. Idealism is as an atmosphere whose effects of grandeur are wrought out through a series of illusions, that are illusions to the sense within us only when divorced from the ground work of the real. Need there be exclusion the one of the other? The artist is incomplete who does this. Men to whom I bow my head (Shakespeare, Goethe; and in their way, Moliere, Cervantes) are Realists au fond. But they have the broad arms of Idealism at command. They give us Earth; but it is earth with an atmosphere.....Does not all science (the mammoth balloon, to wit) tell us that when we forsake earth, we reach up to a frosty inimical Inane? For my part I love and cling to earth, as the one piece of God's handiwork which we possess. I admit that we can refashion, but of Earth must be the material". (1)

It is further possible to parallel the attitude of Hegel and Meredith to Nature. In Man Reason is self-conscious. He is its highest category. But in Nature Reason is completely externalized, and these two, Man and Nature, are mutually interdependent.

Earth was not Earth before her sons appeared. (2)  
The course of history is the process, not simply by which man comes to a consciousness of God and of the world, but that by which God comes to a consciousness of Himself.

(1) Letters. p...156.

(2) "Appreciation". Poems. op. cit. p...185.

(Browning has this idea in "Saul"). It was Hegel's conception of development which gave the explicit impetus to nineteenth century Liberalism, and it is by his conception of how this development takes place that I wish finally to relate Meredith to him.

Hegel believed that Reality is not any particular stage of development, nor even the end of development, but rather the process of development in its entirety. This is the well known "concrete universal". "The bud disappears in the bursting forth of the blossoms, and it may be said the one is contradicted by the other;... the fruit is judged to be its truth in the place of the flower. These forms not only distinguish themselves from one another, but likewise displace one another as mutually incompatible. But their transient and changing condition also converts them into moments in an organic unity, in which not alone do they not conflict, but in which one is as necessary as the other; and this very necessity first constitutes the life of the whole." (1) In this development, the oppositions and contradictions of the world are not denied and annulled, but combined in a richer whole which gives each of them a relative validity. It was because he regarded political and social history in this light that Meredith treated all past achievement with reverence. He even limited some of the themes of his novels because he believed there was much of real value in the social veils and prudery of his time. (2) The mere rebel he rightly regarded as being in some measure demented. "If you believe that our society is founded in

(1) Quoted by A.K. Rogers. "Students History of Philosophy" p...451.

(2) Priestly. op. cit. p...131.



common sense, and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it....." (1)

Hegel read individual and social history as a schema of three stages, in which thesis is followed by antithesis, and that again by the synthesis which includes them both. We have all had opportunities to recognize the fact that any ordinary truth if pushed too far, is apt to encounter contradictions, which in time may amount to an antithetical position. The overemphasis of the rights of the individual in the last century, has produced in this century a strong doctrine that the state alone has rights, while the individual has only duties. There are even now signs that some synthesis doing justice to both sides will in time be achieved. Similarly, in the last century science had a thesis to which Religion appeared antithetical. Now in our time, a synthesis has been reached, emergent evolution, or > mystical materialism which is richer<sup>perhaps</sup> and more satisfactory than either. Actually, of course, the simple external forms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis do not/<sup>do</sup>justice to the extraordinary complexity of the processes of mental and social life. But they do account for salient features of that life, as Meredith, quite independently of Hegel, perceived.

The first opposition which Meredith stresses is that of Man and Nature which find their synthesis in Society. As soon as Society develops it immediately forms an infinite series of oppositions between Man and Man. And as each of these is surmounted or synthesized, society becomes more highly organized, but new oppositions appear constantly.

(1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...141.

"Rich labour is the struggle to be wise  
While we make sure the struggle cannot cease." (1)

The whole development of the race is repeated in each individual. The opposition of Man and Nature takes the form of the contention of "blood" and "brain" whose synthesis is "spirit", as shown in the second chapter. And just as mind, soul, or spirit is the effect of an indefinite number of syntheses in the individual, so the Comic Spirit is the spiritual emanation of a developed society. It is "the mind of man where minds of men are working in conjunction". (2) And it is possible to claim for it a purely idealistic and philosophic basis. It is the "perceptive, the governing spirit" (3) over the community of men through which are being realized the purposes of Earth or Hegel's Universal Spirit.

This whole matter is dealt with by Meredith in one of his last poems, called "Forest History". (4) It is the poet's equivalent of Hegel's "Philosophy of History". He differs, however, in limiting himself to England. He describes first man's struggle with the primeval wilderness:

"Old Earth's original Dragon; there retired to  
his last fastness;"

Then follows an account of social development--the monasteries in the forests, the feudal castles, and Robin Hood and the hunters of the deer, and fairy legends. Then after all these came Shakespeare, deep in whose mind was rooted this forest history, but who was, besides, half-townsman:

"Came then the one, all ear, all eye, all heart;  
Devourer and insensibly devoured;  
In whom the city over forest flowered,  
The forest wreathed the city's drama-mart.  
.. .. .

(1) "The Discipline of Wisdom". Poems. op. cit. p...185.  
(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...142.  
(3) Ibid. (4) Poems. op. cit. p. 549.

Now deep in woods, with song no sermon's drone;  
 He showed what charm the human concourse works:  
 Amid the press of men, what virtue lurks  
 Where bubble sacred wells of wildness lone." (1)

So Shakespeare showed us, what Meredith too showed us, how rich harmony is to be won from the oppositions of thought and feeling, and how the needs of society and of solitude are to be woven together in our lives.

It has not been necessary to take other than the essential views of Hegel and Meredith in order to maintain the parallel. And while the parallel has not been indicated before, the value of carrying it too far is doubtful because Meredith would obviously have held precisely the views, and done the same work he did, whether Hegel had existed or not. But the mere fact that Meredith should have spontaneously embodied in the concrete and creative forms of art, conceptions which Hegel's mighty intellect developed in the abstract, is, I think, a tribute to the Englishman that is of some worth. Moreover it reveals a dignity and depth of conception in the Comic that forever frees it from the charge of heartlessness and of triviality. Meredith says that "the comedy of Moliere throws no infamous reflection on life. It is deeply conceived and therefore it cannot be impure". (2) But comedy can never be popular any more than Hegel's works can ever be popular. "The life of comedy is in the idea. As with the singing of the skylark out of sight, you must love the bird to be attentive to the song, so in this highest flight of the comic muse, you must love pure comedy warmly to understand the Misanthrope; you must be receptive

(1) "Forest History". Poems. op. cit. p...549.

(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...96.

to the idea of comedy. And to love comedy you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good! (1)

It now remains to consider as briefly as possible, the uses of the Comic Spirit. For Meredith these are co-extensive with social life. These are the opening lines of the "Ode to the Comic Spirit":

"Sword of Common Sense! -  
Our surest gift: the sacred chain  
of man to man: firm earth for trust  
In structures vowed to permanence: -  
Thou guardian issue of the harvest brain!" (2)

"The Comic Spirit which often comes to the rescue of the oppressed, whether man or woman, as effectively as the deliverer armed with eloquent thunders, is a holy thing; it is not banished as profane even from the most sacred relations of life. Love welcomes it as his counsellor." (3) And Trevelyan refers to this passage in the essay: "You may estimate your capacity for Comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes". (4)

There is a passage in the prelude to "The Egoist" which condenses much that could be said about the Comic Spirit and the emotion of love. If "she watches over sentimentalism with a birch rod, she is not opposed to romance. You may love, and warmly love, so long as you are honest. Do not offend reason. A lover pretending too much by one

- (1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...106.
- (2) Poems. op. cit. p...394.
- (3) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...190.
- (4) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...133.

foot's length of pretence, will have that foot caught in her trap". (1) And in all his novels Love is the Egoist's trap. Men never expose themselves more completely than in their opinions and attitude toward women. Love is the great test of Richard Feverel, as of all his central characters. "Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man, or they shoot us higher than the topmost star." (2)

The pretentious, selfish, unnatural love is both sensual and cowardly; and Meredith wars against this common thorn in the flesh of society under the head of sentimentality. "You know my feeling about sentimentalists. If I did not take them for subjects of study, they would enrage me past any tolerance; and as it is, I find the temptation to fling too heavy a word at them hard to restrain. The tempter of mankind has never such a grin as when he sees them mix the true and the false". (3) He saw sentimentality and cant everywhere around him, in his time, just as we do in ours. "Sentimentalists are they who seek to enjoy without incurring the immense debtorship for a thing done," (4) and "they fiddle harmonics on the strings of sensualism". (5)

The whole matter can be made plain by two passages from the novels. The first is from "The Egoist":

"The love-season is the carnival of egoism, and it brings the touchstone to our natures. I speak of love, not the mask, and not of the flutings upon the theme of love, but of the passion; a flame having, like our mortality,

- (1) "The Egoist". Prelude.
- (2) Ibid. Chap. XXIII.
- (3) Letters. p...345.
- (4) "Richard Feverel". Chap. XIII.
- (5) Ibid.

death in it as well as life, that may or may not be lasting. Applied to Sir Willoughby as to thousands of civilized males, the touchstone found him requiring to be dealt with by his betrothed as an original savage. She was required to play incessantly on the first reclaiming chord which led our ancestral satyr to the measures of the dance, the threading of the maze and the setting conformably to his partner, before it was accorded to him to spin her with both hands and a chirrup of his frisky heels. To keep him in awe and hold him enchained, there are things she must never do, dare never say, must not think. She must be cloistral. Now, strange and awful though it be to hear, women perceive this requirement of them in the spirit of the man; they perceive, too, and it may be gratefully, that they address their performances less to the taming of the green and prankish monsieur than to the pacification of a voracious aesthetic gluttony, craving them insatiably through all the senses, with shrieks of the lamentable letter, "I" for their purity." (1)

The other passage is from "Diana of the Crossways". The false love is mined with self-love, but genuine love is rooted in Earth. The one is turned in, the other out:

"Now Redworth believed in the soul of Diana. With her, or rather with his thought of her soul, he understood the right union of women and men, from the roots to the flowering heights of that rare graft. She gave him comprehension of the meaning of love; a word in many mouths not often explained. With her, wound in his idea of her, he perceived it to signify a new start in our existence, a

(1) "The Egoist". Chap. XI.

finer shoot of the tree stoutly planted in good gross earth; the senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction. In sooth, a happy prospect for the sons and daughters of Earth, divinely indicating more than happiness: the speeding of us compact of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools, to the creation of certain nobler races now very dimly imagined." (1)

It has been indicated that the first synthesis Meredith traced in our history was that of the opposition of Man and Nature. The next was of Man and Man. And now, he says, the new opposition is between Man and Woman and the hope for a richer more worthwhile society depends upon the development of women to meet their new opportunities:

"Eastward you have a total silence of Comedy among a people intensely susceptible to laughter, as the Arabian Nights will testify. Where the veil is over women's faces you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst. Arabs in this respect are worse than Italians--much worse than Germans; just in the degree that their system of treating women is worse....."(2)

He laments that women are ignorant of the truth that "The Comic Muse is one of their best friends. They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that where they have no social freedom, Comedy is absent: where they are household druses the form of Comedy is primitive: where they are tolerably in-

(1) "Diana". Chap. XXXVII.

(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...116.

dependent but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them.....But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty--in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilization--there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions." (1) Comedy is the sword of commonsense and the instrument of social improvement. But since it is a close reflex of society and knows men intimately, it has neither contempt for human folly nor absurd hope for human improvements. Referring to the poet who invokes the Comic Spirit, he says: "To understand his work and value it, you must have a sober liking of your kind and a sober estimate of our civilized qualities". (2) And Meredith sees in Comedy the only means of consummating the synthesis of the present <sup>dualism</sup> dual of men and women: "Comedy is an exhibition of their battle with men, and that of men with them; and as the two, however divergent, both look on the one object, namely, life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance. The Comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker; just as the philosopher discerns the similarity of the boy and the girl, until the girl is marched away to the nursery". (3)

No one has dealt so creatively and completely with

- (1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...118.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Ibid. p...93.



the dangerous social situation caused by the improved conditions for women. He perceived better than anyone, that unless women changed as quickly as their circumstances were changing, they would lose rather than gain ground. In the eighteenth century, women were objects of the chase. In the nineteenth they ceased to run and flutter and began to contest their ground with men. And we, Meredith saw, must either teach them how to capitulate on equal terms or else we will be plunged into chaos. The Comic Spirit, he thinks, can more than anything else, tell directly in this struggle. For "Comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. The higher the Comedy the more prominent part they enjoy in it. Dorine, in "Tartuffe" is common sense incarnate, though palpably a waiting-maid. Celimene is undisputed mistress of the same attribute in the "Misanthrope"; wiser as a woman than Alceste as man. In Congreve's "Mirabell", the sprightliest male figure of English Comedy.....the heroines of Comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted: they seem so to the sentimentally-reared only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot". (1)

And such are the heroines of Meredith's novels. They have spirit, wit, and an unforgettable charm of which I can more relevantly speak in the last chapter. But throughout it is made clear that they are no longer to be regarded as a "possession, the sensualist's ripe fruit, the senti-  
(1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...92.

mentalist's nodding image, the values about them are apt to change. Chastity takes precedence of conventional purity. The clean mind is of more importance than the untarnished reputation". (1) The old view of woman is perpetually assailed and a plea made for a new understanding of them. This is the theme of "Emilia in England", of "Rhoda Fleming" and "Diana of the Crossways". And his last three novels form a great trilogy in which Meredith's heroines are openly at war with the society that supports the conventional views. ("Lord Ormont and his Aminta", "One of Our Conquerors", and "The Amazing Marriage".) However, Meredith is far too profound to be a mere feminist. He never hints that women are, can be, or should be self-sufficient. His heroines may escape the snares and pitfalls of egoists and sentimentalist, but they always become the wives of strenuous philosophers. For them as well as men the highest life is married life. Meredith asks for more freedom for women because he believed society would be the richer for some infusion of their common sense and native health of mind.

In Meredith's novels, his heroines are never the object of the "silvery laughter" of the Comic Spirit. But they are always the means of evoking that laughter at the expense of the central male figure. Sometimes a woman is used as a touchstone for falsity and sham in a whole group of characters. Such is one function that Emilia performs in "Emilia in England". She is a standard of judgment, a criterion of truth, beauty and goodness, for everyone she meets in the novel. She is not only a daughter of Earth

(1) Priestly, op. cit. p...132.

but a symbol of the vigorous health and sanity of Nature herself. And Priestly has truly observed that the general pattern of Meredithian Comedy, present, with endless variations, in all his novels, might be designated: "The Self-Coddler sent out Naked", or "Revenge Through the Hand of A Woman". (1) Lucy takes such a revenge on Sir Austin Feverel, the system-monger in "Richard Feverel". And just as in the first novel, so in the last we have Lord Fleetwood who through bad-tempered pride deserts his Carinthia. She pursues and he is infuriated because it renders him ridiculous. But he ends by pursuing her far more frantically himself, making himself a spectacle for the gods, and all in vain. And we are told:

"Mr. Philosopher argues that the abusing of woman proves the hating of Nature; names it "the commonest insanity and the deadliest", and "men are planted in the bog of their unclean animal condition until they do proper homage to the animal Nature makes the woman be.....Men hating Nature are insane. Women and Nature are close. If it is rather general to hate Nature and maltreat women, we begin to see why the world is a mad world." (2)

(1) Priestly. *op. cit.* p...135.

(2) "The Amazing Marriage". Chap. XXXI.

High Comedy is the product of the very highest genius, and apart from Shakespeare, in whom it is mixed with other qualities, Congreve's "Way of the World", and the novels of Jane Austen, there is no such comedy in English until Meredith. He alone can rank with Moliere in this matter. The high quality of his Comic conception can be added to his difficult style as a cause of Meredith's unpopularity. But there is yet a more fundamental cause that will always retard the free circulation and understanding of his work. For the English are proverbially a race of humorists. "Where Germany would relieve the monotony of mankind by paying serious respect to an artist, or a scholar, or a patriotic warrior, or a priest--it was always the instinct of the English to do it by pointing out a Character. Dr. Johnson has faded as a poet or critic but he survives as a Character." (1) The English generally will appreciate Meredith not before they have understood and agreed with his brother Celt, Bernard Shaw. When Shaw first read Meredith's "Essay on Comedy" in 1897, he demurred to Meredith's statement that "the English have the basis of the Comic in them: an esteem for common sense." (2) And he wrote in reply as follows:

"If it were to be my last word on earth I must tell Mr. Meredith to his face that whether you take them generally or particularly--whether in the lump, or sectionally as playgoers, churchgoers, voters and what not--they are everywhere strengthened and made strong by the band of their common nonsense, their invincible determination to tell and be told lies about everything, and their power of dealing

(1) G.K. Chesterton. "Victorian Age in Literature".

op. cit. p...150.

(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...129.

acquisitively and successfully with facts whilst keeping them, like disaffected slaves, rigidly in their proper place: that is, outside the moral consciousness." (1)

It was while Meredith was writing "The Egoist", his masterpiece of Comic art, that he wrote his "Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit". It was during the same period (1877) that he wrote a play which was anonymously produced. (2) It must have failed completely because he left no known copy of it. The stage, is, above all, the place where simplicity of design and perspicuity are needful, and Meredith truly wrote of himself when he said: "I have contracted the habit of listening to my own voice more than is good". (3) Perhaps a deeper reason lies in his whole method and aim. "The art of the stage seems as utterly opposed to his slow, deliberate and penetrating method of characterization as that of the scene painter to the miniaturist." (4) Personally, I think Hammerton exaggerates the inelasticity of Meredith, because when we take up one of his three short stories, "The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper", we find something that retains much that is characteristic of Meredith's best and wittiest comic, and yet there is no mental anatomy, and no weird phraseology. The General's egoism is revealed by action rather than speech and I think every reader feels the truth of what Barrie wrote:

"Of these two delightfully contrasted characters it may be said, as Mr. Meredith himself has written of Miss Austen's Emma and her lover, that they might walk straight into a comedy, were the plot arranged for them; indeed there

(1) Hammerton. op. cit. p...294.

(2) Letters. p...275.

(3) "Beauchamp's Career". Chap. XLVIII.

(4) Hammerton. op. cit. p....35.

is scene after scene in the story which leaves the vivid impression of an acted play". (1)

What Barrie writes of this short story is true in large measure of the effect of all Meredith's work. It leaves a vivid impression of vital mental drama. Most novels are told from the point of view of an observant on-looker, but Meredith's are told from inside the mind, of now one character and now another. "He gives us not the fact but the fact colored by emotion and distorted by thought". (2) Meredith knew better than his critics what he was about. They ranted because he would not tell a story, but he wrote: "My method has been to prepare my readers for a critical exhibition of the personae, and then to give the scene the fullest of their blood and brain under the stress of a fiery situation.

"Concerning style, thought is tough, and dealing with thought produces toughness. Or when strong emotion is in tide against the active mind, there is perforce confusion. Have you found that scenes of simple emotion or plain narrative were hard to view? When their author revised for the new edition, his critical judgment approved these passages. Yet, you are not to imagine he holds his opinion combatively against his critics. The verdict is with the observer.

"In the Comedies, and here and there where a concentrated presentment is in design, you will find a 'pitch' considerably above our common human; and purposely, for only in such a manner could so much be shown." (3) All narrative

- (1) "Scot's Observer". Nov. 24, 1888.
- (2) Priestly. op. cit. p...164.
- (3) Letters. p...398.

in Meredith really exists for the sake of these scenes. For it is the business of Comedy always to develop by climax towards some highly dramatic scene in which we are left alone with the chief characters. Meredith first prepares us by a chapter of subtle allusions to the significance of what is to occur, and then we are plunged "under the stress of a fiery situation". It is another instance of mistaken criticism that Meredith's critics, with a few honorable exceptions, have called these vivid scenes "anti-climaxes" and have ascribed the admittedly undramatic conclusions of his novels to his flagging interest and energy after a long time on the wing. But as Meredith's own words have revealed, he is not engaged in telling a tale. And once he has exhibited his principal characters "in the fullest of their blood and brain under the stress of a fiery situation", (1) he is not further concerned with them.

It is his preoccupation with the mental world where exist, and where are daily and hourly violated by men "the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another". (2) It is this that gives his novels a timeless abstract air that some readers call "unreal", and just as the scenes of his novels seem to be detached from the common world as Shakespeare's Arden and Illyria, so the diction and wit of his characters are "à 'pitch' above our common human.....for only in such a manner could so much be shown". (3) These, the last words of his last novel should make all clear:

"So much I can say: the facts related, with some

(1) Letters. p...398.

(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...142.

(3) Letters. p...398.

regretted omissions, by which my story has so skeleton a look, are those which led to the lamentable conclusion. But the melancholy, the pathos of it, the heart of all England stirred by it, have been--and the panting excitement it was to every listener--sacrificed in the vain effort to render events as consequent to your understanding as a piece of logic, through an exposure of character!" (1)

"The Egoist" is generally admitted to be the strongest if not the most attractive of Meredith's works. And he gives us the reason himself: "As it comes mainly from the head and has nothing to kindle the imagination, I thirsted to be rid of it soon after conception." (2) All that part of him which the purely Comic conception of "The Egoist" forced him to exclude is what can only be called the Romantic Meredith. This aspect of the man will be treated briefly in the last chapter.

"The Egoist" is very carefully planned. It was deliberately designed as a Comedy, for the useful sub-title tells us it is "A Comedy in Narrative". Previously to this work and subsequent to it he mixed his scenes of Comedy and Romance rather carelessly. But in "The Egoist" the action is swift and inevitable, the scene does not change and there are no long lapses of time, once the stage has been set. The last chapter bears the significant title "The Curtain Falls" and there is no descent into the narrative usual in such a place. Priestly says that "in this one novel, Meredith, working at last with his eyes open

(1) "The Amazing Marriage". Chap. XLVII.  
(2) Letters. p...300.



no longer seeking an uneasy compromise between what he really wanted to do and what he thought a novelist ought to do, really made the form his own. The new turn he gave to fiction was completed." (1) Mr. Hammerton says the same thing even better: "The Egoist" must not be judged by the ordinary standard of prose fiction, since it is one of those rare creations of literature in which a great artist has performed the feat of expressing in terms of one art the spirit and purpose of another. Pure Comedy is here embodied as a novel, through which the author pursues things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

There are the opening words of the Prelude to "The Egoist":

"Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing. > Credulity is not wooed through the impressionable senses; nor have we recourse to the small circular glow of the watchmaker's eye to raise in bright relief minutest grains of evidence for the routing of incredulity.. The Comic Spirit conceives a definite situation for a number of characters, and rejects all accessories in the exclusive pursuit of them and their speech. For, being a spirit, he hunts the spirit in men; <sup>vision</sup> and ardour constitute his merit; he has not a thought of persuading you to believe in him." (2)

- (1) "Meredith" by Priestly. p...152.  
(2) "The Egoist". Prelude.

Concerning the absence of "violent crashes to make the correctness of the representation convincing," I think it should be pointed out that because the atmosphere in which the Comedy must take place is necessarily rare and sparsely peopled, it is not, therefore, "artificial", any more than Milton is artificial in any bad sense. And let Meredith's own words answer the carping superficial critics who have hounded him because his men are not "convincing" or "credible" specimens. Writing of Moliere, Meredith says: "He did not paint in raw realism. He seized his characters firmly for the central purpose of the play, stamped them in the idea, and, by slightly raising and softening the object of study, generalized upon it so as to make it permanently human. Concede that it is natural for human creatures to live in society, and Alceste is an imperishable mark of one, though he is drawn in light outline without any forcible human coloring." (1) Such is Sir Willoughby and his fellow egoists in "The Egoist". He is "a compendium of the personal in man". (2) And R. L. Stevenson writing of the same book said: "It is yourself that is hunted down; these are your faults that are dragged into the day and numbered with lingering relish, with cruel cunning and precision. A young friend of Mr. Meredith's (as I have the story) came to him in an agony. "This is too bad of you", he cried. "Willoughby is me!" "No, my dear fellow," said the author, "he is all of us". I have read "The Egoist" five or six times myself, and I mean to read it again;

(1) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p. 86.

(2) Henley in the "Athenaeum". Nov. 1, 1879.

fer I am like the young friend of the anecdote--I think Willoughby an unmanly but a very serviceable exposure of myself". (1)

"The Egoist" is so deeply conceived and is, for all its comic machinery, so highly serious, that many have maintained that it is a tragedy. Sir Willoughby "is Mr. Meredith's great study in that Comic Muse which he invokes in his first chapter, and yet he hardly keeps the table on a roar. At least laughter is not the only emotion he excites; tears and terror rainbowed by laughter might figure our complicated impression. A tragic figure discovered for us through the eye of comedy." (2) Gallienne speaks here for many of Meredith's readers. But I have shown that according to Meredith's conception of the Comic Spirit there is no need to suggest that there is some alien admixture of tragedy in order to account for the probing of the depths and heights of human passion. It is simply the restraint with which these are handled that constitutes the Comedy. It is difficult for many critics to perceive that there is very little that is funny in High Comedy. The laughter, if any, is the "thoughtful laughter of the mind". (3) "The Egoist" surely inspires pity. He who would desire to clothe himself at everybody's expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the actual person. Only he is not allowed to rush at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation." (4)

(1) Hammerton. op. cit. p...222.

(2) Ibid. p...300.

(3) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...146.

(4) "The Egoist". Prelude.

Meredith's interest in Comedy, and the novel as a means of criticising life in Matthew Arnold's sense, resulted in the creation of a new kind of novel. Instead of describing action from the point of view of a disinterested spectator we are, as it were, continually viewing it from inside the mind of one of the actors. He tossed aside the traditions followed by Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, and even George Eliot and made something quite new. "Richard Feverel" is indisputably the first modern novel and Priestly thinks it doubtful if it is ever equalled by those who have unconsciously had to employ its method: "In 'Richard Feverel', narrative has taken a new turn, something has been added to the compass of the instrument.....Other and later novelists, following willy nilly, on Meredith's tracks, have given us highly subjective narratives of this kind, but none has risen to such heights of romantic wonder and ecstasy. The poet in Meredith when the reins are loosed, outdistances them. Yet he being a creator of Comedy as well, was also able to accomplish something not attempted by, or beyond the reach of other subjective writers". (1) We are dealing with a poet of high rank who was also unrivalled in his knowledge of men in all the complexity of their personal and social relations. He paved the way for the psychological novelists, for Henry James, and Lawrence and Huxley. He anticipated and comprehended what has become in Shaw and the socialists, fanatical and theoretical social reform. All the neo-classicists <sup>men like</sup> ~~men like~~ Lowes Dickenson, Havelock Ellis and ~~Huxley~~ Aldington--who preach the balanced life of the mind and

(1) Priestly. op. cit. p...165.

senses, derive from him. T. S. Eliot, Aldington and the  
7 imagist poets are directly linked to him. And because all  
these styles were mingled harmoniously in Meredith they are  
greater than when in mere isolation. They are rendered more  
significant because they were all part of the life of a  
single mind.

But the greatest part of him has so far only been  
mentioned--I refer to the lyrical--poetical part that he  
infused into his work and which made his creations really  
creative and alive. It was this Romantic Meredith who  
wrote "Harry Richmond" and who breathed life into the  
"Great Mel" (1), Lucy (2), Renee (3) and Diana that I  
shall write of, briefly, in my last chapter. And from  
this part of him derive R.L. Stevenson and Joseph Conrad.

- (1) "Evan Harrington".
- (2) "Richard Feverel".
- (3) "Beauchamp's Career".

## CHAPTER V.

### MEREDITH THE ROMANTIC WRITER.

It is necessary to make clear what the word "Romantic" is here taken to signify. Perhaps the most satisfactory elucidation is that of Coleridge: "I have named the true genuine modern poetry the romantic; and the works of Shakespeare are romantic poetry revealing itself in the drama. If the tragedies of Sophocles are in the strict sense of the word tragedies, and the comedies of Aristophanes comedies, we must emancipate ourselves from a false association arising from misapplied names, and find a new word for the plays of Shakespeare. For they are, in the ancient sense, neither tragedies or comedies, nor both in one, --but a different genus, diverse in kind, and not merely different in degree. They may be called romantic dramas or dramatic romances". (1) Now it has been shown how nearly and completely Meredith came to being a pious Pagan. On his conscious side he was entirely a Greek. But the human subconscious mind has changed in the past two thousand years, if only by the accumulation of more experience than was open to the Greeks. And in all great human genius since Dante, whether in philosophy, or religion, or the arts, this has manifested itself in the presence of developed

(1) Coleridge. "Lectures on Shakespeare". op. cit. p...26.

imagination. And since pagan times imagination and romance, in the sense of an infinite and unsatisfied human longing, have been inseparable. Speaking of the ancient drams, "the representation of which was addressed preeminently to the outward senses", Coleridge continues: "and though the fable, the language and the characters appealed to the reason rather than to the mere understanding, inasmuch as they supposed an ideal state rather than referred to an existing reality,-- yet it was a reason which was obliged to accommodate itself to the senses, and so far become a sort of more elevated understanding. On the other hand, the romantic poetry--the Shakespearian drama--appealed to the imagination rather than to the senses, and to the reason as contemplating our inward nature, and the workings of the passions in their most retired recesses". (1) In short, there has been, if not a considerable advance or elevation of the whole of human consciousness since the Greeks and Romans, at least a shift from the outward contemplation of the workings of an inscrutable Fate, to an inner contemplation of the nature of consciousness and free will. It is the difference between Oedipus and Hamlet.

We must not forget the truth of Mr. Trevelyan's observation, that, "It is the characteristic of George Meredith as a writer both of prose and verse, that poetical inspiration and intellectual power are developed in him each to the same degree. In most writers one is the handmaid of the other. But in Mr. Meredith they contend or unite on equal terms". (2) It is this which accounts for the fact that

(1) Coleridge. "Lectures on Shakespeare". op. cit. p...26.

(2) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...7.

the same man who created the wonderful woman Nataly Radnor (1) could recommend companionate marriage. (2) The intellectual and conscious Meredith was often wrong in his specific remedies for social troubles, but the unconscious romantic Meredith was always right. For if he often spoke foolishly of emancipating women, when neither himself nor his readers knew what he meant, he far more often expresses women, so that everyone knows he is profoundly right. In one case he would free women because they are kept in ignorance of their potential greatness, but in the other case he portrays them as the highest and most mysterious expressions of Earth. Though they are "captive" we perceive that they are queens, who, like Helen of Troy, should and will, ever rule and determine the destiny of our race.

Meredith was proud of nothing so much as his Celtic ancestry. His father was Welsh and his mother was Irish. Only one of a host of brief revelations of his fair pride of race occurs in "Emilia": "All subtle feelings are discerned by Welsh eyes when untroubled by any mental agitation. Brother and sister were Welsh, and I may observe that there is human nature and Welsh nature". (3). Meredith derives his chaste reverence for womanhood, and his particular cast of imagination, from his Celtic ancestry. Renan writing of "The Poetry of the Celtic Races" says: "Woman appears therein as a kind of vague vision, an intermediary between man and the supernatural world. I am acquainted with no literature that offers anything analogous to this. Compare

(1) "One of Our Conquerors".

(2) Hammerton. op. cit. p...81.

(3) "Sandra Belloni". Chap. XXVI.



Guenevere or Iseult with these Scandanavian furies Gudrun and Chrimhilde, and you will avow that woman such as chivalry conceived her, an ideal of sweetness and loveliness set up as the supreme end of life, is a creation neither classical nor christian, nor Teutonic, but in reality Celtic". (1)  
The temperament of the Celt<sup>is</sup>/deeply imbued with failure. It derives its chief romantic interest from the falling short of supreme achievement, constantly suggesting as it does, "The Grand Perhaps". (2) "The touch of fancy, of beauty, of melancholy, of pathos, of the marvellous, the mysterious, the vague, the obscure in all our literary work, descends to us as an heirloom from the elder and less successful race in these island. From it we derive our Carlyles and our Merediths". (3)

Had Meredith given his temperament full play as Hardy did, in building up the world of his novels, he would undoubtedly have filled them with an air of sweet regret, often rising to a level of mysterious yet ineffable greatness. He might have been a much greater W. B. Yeats who, like most Celts, stand for failure, and derives his chief romantic interest from falling short of supreme achievement. I have already quoted Meredith to the effect that; "I strive by study of humanity to represent it: not its morbid action. I have a tendency to do that which I repress: for in developing it, there is no gain". (4) His conviction was that the study of the corporate life of men in society was more valuable than the worshipful watching of what Yeats calls

(1) "Harvard Classics". Vol. 32. p...149.

(2) "Bishop Bleughram's Apology". Browning.

(3) "The Celt in English Art". Grant Allen. Fortnightly Feb., 1891.

(4) Letters. p...171.

"that little, infinite, faltering, eternal flame that we call ourselves". (1) When he was commencing to write, and before he had gained that intimate knowledge of men that determined the bent of his genius towards comedy, he conceived first, "The Shaving of Shagpat", and next, "Farina, A Legend of Cologne". "Farina" is a Gothic tale of terror, farce, and vague allegory, not very happily commingled. But there is no doubt that "Shagpat" is a work of great genius and powerful imagination. It is, in the opinion of Lafcadio Hearn, "one of the greatest of fables.....I imagine also that the fable will live, will even become a great classic,-- after all his novels have been forgotten.....as Mr. Gosse observes, the Arabian Nights seem to us cold and pale beside it. You cannot find in The Arabian Nights a single page to compare with certain pages of "The Shaving of Shagpat"; and this is written in a tone of extravagant humour.... yet he has done much better than the orientals who took their subject seriously.....It is one of the most delightful books ever written". (2) This book alone proves beyond question the greatness of the romantic Meredith. Moreover in 1879 Meredith wrote R. L. Stevenson that "The Egoist" was "a Comedy, with only half of me in it, unlikely, therefore, to take either the public or my friends.....I am about one quarter through, "The Amazing Marriage", which I promise you, you shall like better." (3) He commenced "The Amazing Marriage" before he had completed "The Egoist", simply in order to give expression to that part of him which he had with difficulty managed to exclude from "The Egoist". It

(1) W. B. Yeats. "Stories of Red Hanrahan", p...78.

(2) Lafcadio Hearn. "Interpretation of Literature".p...381.

(3) Letters. p...297.

is difficult to account for the fact that the deep, sad, spirit of Celtic Romance that broods over the whole story has not been noticed by any writer. It is quite easily the most deeply and completely romantic of all his stories, and, > yet it has been treated with comparative indifference because it was published after "Lord Ormont" and "One of Our Conquerors". In fact it is scarcely known that this, the last published of his stories, was commenced almost twenty years before, when he was at the height of his power.

In all of his novels there is an epical largeness of design which imparts a sense of majesty even to his representation of comic character. His conceptions are massive in outline even when the outline is irregular and incomplete. "My love is for epical subjects, not for cobwebs in a putrid corner". (1) And this quality rescues even his most disjointed narratives from any sense of failure. As it has been shown, however, his narrative becomes irregular only when he pursues the Comic which demands "scenes". Hammerton did not clearly understand Meredith's Comic art but he knew that Meredith possessed the story-teller's art which is inseparable from one endowed with a genius for the Romantic: "That the art of the story-teller is at the command of the novelist, when he has chosen to curb his 'overmastering cleverness', such a masterpiece of tragic drama as "Rhoda Fleming" proves as completely as "Sandra Belloni" illustrates his proneness to prolixity and the inconsequent." (2) He gives full rein to this gift in the first part of "Harry Richmond", in the first chapters of

(1) Letters. p...171.

(2) Hammerton. op. cit. p...229.

"Evan Harrington", in parts of "Vittoria" (a thrilling account of the struggle of Italy for her freedom) and throughout "The Amazing Marriage".

It is necessary to make some attempt to present some sample of the tremendous gusto of our author when swayed by Romantic imagination. The following passage concerns the newly wedded countess Fanny and Captain Kirby with whom she elopes. The Countess of Cresset is a spirited girl who swam across the flooded Shannon and back for a wager. Kirby, it is sufficient to say, was intended to portray that extraordinary figure, John Trelawny. (The friend of Byron and Shelley.)

"She met him at Richmond in Surrey, we know for certain." ("We" is the personification of hearsay whom Meredith dubs "Dame Gossip", and who tells most of the story). "It was on Richmond Hill, where the old King met his lass. They say Countess Fanny was parading the hill to behold the splendid view, always admired so much by foreigners, with their "Ach's" and "Hech's" and surrounded by her crowned courtiers in frogged uniforms and mustachioed like sea-horses, a little before dinner-time, when Kirby passed her, and the Emperor made a remark on him, for Kirby was a magnificent figure of a man, and used to be compared to a three-decker entering harbor after a victory. He stood six feet four, and was bread-shouldered and deep-chested to match, and walked like a king who has humbled his enemy. You have seen big dogs. And so Countess Fanny looked round. Kirby was doing the same. But he had turned right about, and appeared transfixed and like a royal beast angry with his wound. If ever there was love at first sight, and

a dreadful love, like a runaway mail-coach in a storm of wind and lightning at black midnight by the banks of a flooded river, which was formerly our comparison for terrible situations, it was when those two met.

"And, what! you exclaim, Buccaneer Kirby full sixty-five, and Countess Fanny no more than three and twenty, a young beauty of the world of fashion and she was in love with him! Go and gaze at one of our big ships coming out of an engagement home with all her flags flying and her crew manning the yards. That will give you an idea of a young woman's feelings for an old warrior never beaten down an inch by anything he had to endure; matching him, I dare say in her woman's heart, with the Mighty Highnesses who had only smelt the outside edge of battle. She did rarely admire a valiant man. Old as Methuselah, he would have made her kneel to him. She was all heart for a real hero."

All this takes place at the turn of the nineteenth century in the old days of the Regency. The story of Kirby's life is told magnificently and of their elopement also, but both are too long to quote. With their two children the remaining story is principally concerned. One of the most stirring things in all fiction is the account of the ride of twenty-four Welsh cavaliers mounted and armed, who escorted the Countess of Fleetwood from Wales "across the swollen Severn, along midwinter roads up to the Kentish gates of Esslemont". (1) The Countess of Fleetwood, she of the amazing marriage had "disgraced" herself by pursuing the husband who deserted her. But in Wales, a swift heroic

(1) "The Amazing Marriage". Chap. XXXIV.

action of hers won the Welsh esteem. When she was called to Esselment by her lord, twenty-four Welshmen from north and south, forgetful of their feuds (and of the Industrial Revolution), mounted to escort her. It was a great Romantic gesture and Meredith heightens it greatly by showing the Earl of Fleetwood as one not to be outdone. Like Macaulay, the great Romantic historian of England, he sees to it that his heroes have worthy foremen.

"Nine English cavaliers, then, left London early on a January or February morning in a southerly direction, bearing East; and they were the Earl of Fleetwood's intimates..... That they met the procession of the Welsh, and claimed to take charge of the Countess' carriage, near the Kentish borderline, is an assertion supported by testimony fairly acceptable.

"Intelligence of the advancing party had met the Earl by courier, from the date of the first gathering on the bridge of Pont-y-pridd; and from Gloucester, along to the Thames at Reading, thence away to the Mole, from Mickleham, where the Surrey chalk runs its final turfy spine north-eastward to the slope upon Kentish soil.

"Greatly to the astonishment of the Welsh cavaliers, a mounted footman clad in the green and scarlet facings of Lord Fleetwood's livery, rode up to them a mile outside the principal towns and named the inn where the earl had ordered preparations for the reception of them. England's hospitality was offered on a princely scale. Cleverer fencing could not be.

"The meeting, in no sense an encounter, occurred close

by a thirty-acre meadow, famous over the county; and was remarkable for the punctilious exchange of ceremonial speech, danger being present; as we see powder magazines protected by their walls and fosses and covered alleys. Notwithstanding which there was a scintillation of sparks.

"Lord Brailstone, spokesman of the welcoming party, expressed comic regrets that they had not an interpreter with them.

"Mr. Owain Wythan, in the name of the Cambrian chivalry, assured him of their comprehension and appreciation of English slang.

"Both gentlemen kept their heads uncovered in a suspense; they might for a word or two more of that savour have turned into the conveniently spacious meadow, to enter the channel of English humour, by hearing Chumley Potts exclaim: "His nob!" and all of them laughed at the condensed description of a good hit back, at the English party's cost." (1)

The rest is told in an inimitably allusive manner,--scraps and hints of reports from the servants of Esslemont of how the Welshmen were entertained and of the things that were said and were done, and the seas of wine that flowed. Then,

"With an undesigned reluctance, the countess, holding Mr. Owain Wythan's hand longer than was publicly decent, calling him by his christian name, consented to their departure. As they left, they defiled before her; the vow was uttered by each, that at the instant of her summons he would mount and devote himself to her service, individually or collectively.

(1) "The Amazing Marriage". Chap. XXXIV.

She waved her hand to them. They ranged in line and saluted. She kissed her hand, sweeping the cavaliers' obeisance, gallantest of bows, they rode away." (1)

The Romance of Scott and Dumas consists in action, but Meredith is concerned with it as an idea, a spirit. It thrills our depths in precisely the same manner as Chesterton's great sonnet "Who Goes Home?". It discovers great unsounded realms of the human spirit and sets deep calling unto deep.

W. C. Brownell writes of "Harry Richmond" as follows:

"In imagination "Harry Richmond" certainly stands at the head of the modern fiction that essays the difficult task of enduing with vivid realistic intensity material of the most exceptionally romantic character. It was probably the first of the genre. "Kidnapped", "Treasure Island", "Prince Otto", "St. Ives" derive from it very strictly." (2)

The great opening scene of the story occurs at midnight when "Richmond Roy" calls and removes his son from Riversley Grange. While it is often referred to, it can scarcely rival "The Amazing Marriage". Richmond Roy is truly a great humorous character in the proper sense of that word, he is a magnificent romantic adventurer, but he does not ascend the same heights as Captain Kirby.

If "Treasure Island" and a whole genus of fiction owes much to the spirit of Romance invoked in the opening chapter of "Harry Richmond", it has not been pointed out that Meredith's wonderful capacity for bathing childhood retrospection in an atmosphere of high Romance, is original

(1) "The Amazing Marriage". Chap. XXXIV.

(2) Brownell. op. cit. p...279.



and unique until the time of Stevenson. Consider this passage from "Harry Richmond":

"That night stands up without any clear traces about it or near it, like the brazen castle of romance round which the sea-tide flows. My father must have borne me miles along the road; he must have procured food for me; I have an idea of feeling a damp forehead and drinking new milk, and by-and-by hearing a roar of voices or vehicles, and seeing a dog that went alone through crowded streets without a master, doing as he pleased and stopping every other dog he met. He took his turning, and my father and I took ours. We were in a house that to my senses, had the smell of dark corners, in a street where all the house-doors were painted black, and shut with a bang. Italian organ-men and milk-men paraded the street regularly, and made it sound hollow to their music. Milk, and no cows anywhere; numbers of people, and no acquaintances among them;-my thoughts were occupied by the singularity of such things.

"My father could soon make me forget that I was transplanted; he could act dog, tame rabbit, fox, pony, and a whole nursery collection alike.....When I was at home I rode him all round the room and upstairs to bed. I lashed him with a whip till he frightened me, so real was his barking; if I said "Menagerie" he became a caravan of wild beasts; I undid a button of his waistcoat, and it was a lion that made a spring, roaring at me.....His monkey was almost as wonderful as his bear, only he was too big for it, and was obliged to aim at reality in his representation of this animal by means of a number of breakages; a defect that brought our landlady on the scene.....

"Great Will", my father called Shakespeare, and "Slender Billy", Pitt. The scene where "Great Will" killed the deer, dragging Falstaff all over the park after it by the light of Bardolph's nose, upon which they put an extinguisher if they heard any of the keepers, and so left everybody groping about and catching the wrong person, was the most wonderful mixture of fun and tears. Great Will was extremely youthful, but everybody in the park called him "Father William"; and when he wanted to know which way the deer had gone, King Lear (or else my memory deceives me) punned, and Lady Macbeth waved a handkerchief for it to be steeped in the blood of the deer; Hamlet (the fact was impressed on me) offered him a three-legged stool; and a number of knights and ladies lit their torches from Bardolphi.....Great Will remembered his engagement to sell Shylock a pound of the carcass; determined that no Jew should eat of it, he bethought him that Falstaff could well spare a pound, and he said the Jew would not see the difference; Falstaff only got off by hard running and rearing out that his unclean life would make him taste like pork and thus let the Jew into the trick." (1)

Such is the extraordinary "Harry Richmond", with its wonderful Richmond Roy, its gipsies, who are as fascinating as Bowrow's, and its German Princess Ottilia, who is "like a statue of twilight". (2).

Dickens was the first to portray the pathos of childhood, but Meredith was the first and greatest of those who have portrayed the romance of boyhood. Nowhere in all his

- (1) "Harry Richmond". Chap. II.
- (2) Ibid, Chap. XXV.

novels is the existence of a small girl so much as suggested, but where are such boys to be found as Richard Feverel and his chum Ripton, or young Crossjay (1) or Harry Richmond and his school chums? But whereas Crossjay Patterne is almost a symbol of the Joy of Earth, skillfully introduced to obviate the necessity of drawing Vernon Whitford in more than the lightest outline, Harry Richmond is enveloped in the twilight of Meredith's predominantly Celtic temperament.

W.C. Brownell marks the general absence of temperament in Meredith's work as a deficiency. (2) By the same token he shows his misunderstanding of the nature of high Comedy, and the implications of Meredith's Earth Philosophy. Had Meredith suppressed his intellectual perception to the same degree that he restrained his Celtic temperament, we should not have had "The Egoist" or such exquisite women as Chloe (3), Renee (4), Rose (5) Jocelyn, or Diana Warwick (6). Nor would we have had his Earth Philosophy. But we might well have had a number of gorgeous "Shagpat's", and "Harry Richmonds", and even another "Amazing Marriage", "all in the vein of pure romance, touching life with strangeness and turning it either into sheer beauty or grotesque phantasy." (7)

Priestly, like all writers who have mentioned Meredith's powerful Romantic imagination, has carelessly confuses "touching life with strangeness" and "turning it into sheer beauty". He refers to both qualities as "pure romance", and sets the scenes I have quoted from "The Amazing Marriage"

- (1) "The Egoist".
- (2) Brownell. op. cit. p...238.
- (3) "The Tale of Chloe".
- (4) "Beauchamp's Career".
- (5) "Evan Harrington".
- (6) "Diana".
- (7) Priestly. op. cit. p...157.

and "Harry Richmond" in the same category as, for instance, the scene under the cherry tree in "The Egdist", or the matchless duel in "Vittoria".

Stevenson was directly indebted to Meredith for his understanding of many things. Among these things he understood the distinction between Romance on the one hand, and the lyrical drama and philosophical comedy on the other. In 1882 he wrote: "Drama is the poetry of conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance. The pleasure that we take in life is of two sorts--the active and the passive. Now we are conscious of a great command over our destiny; anon we are lifted up by circumstance, as by a breaking wave, and dashed we know not how into the future.....The last interview between Lucy and Richard Feverel is pure drama; more than that it is the strongest scene since Shakespeare, in the English tongue. Their first meeting by the river, on the other hand is pure romance; it has nothing to do with character; it might happen to any other boy and maiden, and be none the less delightful for the change. And yet I think he would be a bold man who would choose between these passages.....

"True romantic art, again, makes a romance of all things. It reaches into the highest abstraction of the ideal; it does not refuse the most pedestrian realism. "Robinson Crusoe" is as realistic as it is romantic; both qualities are pushed to an extreme, and neither suffers". (1)

Romance equally with the Comic, then, has its basis in an idea, and it is simply ignorant and careless to confuse the great emotions stirred by the ride of the twenty-four

(1) "A Gossip on Romance".

Welsh cavaliers (2) and the lyrical wonder of the "cherry-tree" scene. (3) The first is entirely abstract and evanescent. We somehow feel that we are present at the birth of a great national legend. But the last is simply an idealization of a purely finite situation and is proper to the Comic which is also finite in essence. Again "the ride" is definitely linked with Meredith's deep Celtic impulses, whereas "the wild cherry-tree" is inseparable and impossible apart from his Earth philosophy: "She had curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath these boughs, and grasping Crossjay's hand fast she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately, and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim color and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth." (1) Consider carefully the last two sentences and it will be seen that Meredith would not have admitted this passage as Romance in any valid sense, but would have placed it among the poems which he entitle "Lyrics of the Joy of Earth."

"It is one thing to remark and to dissect, with the most cutting logic, the complications of life, and of the human spirit; it is quite another to give them body and blood in the story of Ajax or of Hamlet. The first is litera-

(1) "The Egoist". Chap. XI.

ture, but the second is something besides, for it is likewise art." (1) No one has ever managed the first of these tasks better than Meredith and few have given us more credible portrayals of women--women who are more quintessentially alive than those that most of us can mention from among our friends. "All that matters is the life and light that leap from his pages. It is an affair of genius only, where animadversion of mere manner or style fails. We judge him by his galleries, the great dramaturgist of our times. And never was there so vast and varied an assemblage since Shakespeare. Do you remember the Miss Poles? And do you remember Lucy? And do you remember Rhoda? A great range of diverging womanhood lies between these extremes. And in the last resort one must judge a novelist by his women. Their creation is his greatest task." (2) So wrote a fellow-novelist. And J.B. Priestly selects a figure previously unmentioned by critics: "Nataly, the mother of the heroine in "One of our Conquerors" and says that she "combines the poetical enchantment of some legendary queen with more than the reality of the woman who lives next door to us". (3) Meredith is decidedly what Meredith calls him, "the novelist's novelist". (4)

He clearly worked outside the scope of the purely Comic in the creation of Clara Middleton (5). Moliere does not give his women opportunities for the display of the rich qualities that Meredith gives to his women. Dorine (6) and

- (1) R. L. Stevenson. "A Gossip on Romance".
- (2) Hammerton. op. cit. p.338.
- (3) Priestly. op. cit. p...172.
- (4) Hammerton. op. cit. p...339.
- (5) "The Egoist".....
- (6) "Le Tartuffe".....

Celimene (1) are incarnations of common sense. It has been shown that Meredith's women are mistresses of the same attribute. And Meredith was aware that Comedy as such asks nothing more, for he said: "Concede that it is natural for human creatures to live in society, and Alceste is an imperishable mark of one, though he is drawn in light outline without any forcible human colouring." (2) And for most of Meredith's men this would serve as a description. It is because he did much more for his women that mention of them belongs to this chapter.

Something of this matter can be explained by a remark from his letters: "I have not studied women more closely than I have men, but with more affection, a deeper interest in their enfranchisement and development, being assured that women of the independent mind are needed for any sensible degree of progress". (3) But here again we are dealing with the conscious Meredith who is a mere dwarf beside the towering unconscious one. The fact that he had some very definite ideas about social reform is not enough to account for the exquisitely tender and tragic figure of Chloe whom he could never have conceived "had he not dug down to the very roots of human nature". (4) And Miss Harriet Preston says of this question what every reader of Meredith feels: "the emancipation which he invokes for the suffering fair is in no sense an intellectual one. It is anything and everything rather than an affair of sciences, languages, courses, and careers. And still less is it what is quaintly called by a

(1) "Le Misanthrope".

(2) "An Essay on Comedy". op. cit. p...86.

(3) Letters. p...562.

(4) J. M. Barrie. Scots Observer. Nov. 24, 1888.

certain class of agitators, "economic". It is purely moral and can be achieved only through the moral regeneration of woman's natural master. A champion of Woman's Rights--even with capitals--Mr. Meredith stands confessed; yet with the clearly defined proviso that a woman has no rights under the present dispensation save such as may accrue to her through the righteousness of man. No author ever gauged so accurately all that a high-spirited woman feels, as none, surely ever exposed so relentlessly the dastard quality that may shelter itself within the clanging armour of your imposing masculine bravo. Nevertheless, Mr. Meredith takes his text quite frankly from "Paradise Lost", "He for God only, and she for God in him". (1)

But this, like most Meredithian comment, is merely observation and is utterly lacking in any principle of criticism. W. C. Brownell comes rather closer to "the heart of the ulcer" when he says "it is as a sex that, currently, women particularly appreciate being treated as individuals. The more marked such treatment is the more justice they feel is done to the sex. Mr. Meredith's treatment of them is in this respect very marked....he obliterates<sup>very</sup>/often the broad distinction usually made between the young girl and the married woman. Diana, for example, leaves a maidenly, and some of his maidens a matronly impression.....Women are to be discriminated as individuals; like men, but the fact that they possess in common and as women a certain distinctive quality is, above all, not to be lost sight of. This is the permanent, the ewig, fact about them. Only it is

(1) Hammerton. op. cit. p...237.



to be taken as a crown, not as a mere label". (1)

These passages corroborate in Meredith's women what Coleridge has profoundly noted of Shakespeare: "In Shakespeare, all the elements of womanhood are holy, and there is the sweet yet dignified feeling of all that continues society as sense of ancestry and sex with a purity unassailable by sophistry, because it nests not in the analytic processes.....Shakespeare saw that the want of prominence which Pope notes for sarcasm, was the blessed beauty of the woman's character, and knew that it arose not from any deficiency, but from the more exquisite harmony of all the parts of the moral being constituting one living otal of head and heart.....In all the Shakespearian women there is essentially the same foundation and principle; the distinct individuality and variety are merely the result of the modification of circumstances, whether in Miranda the maiden, in Imogen the wife, or in Katharine the queen." (2)

And so it might be written of Meredith, that all of his splendid women who, individually and collectively haunt our minds, and imaginations, are a continuous revelation of the mystery and beauty of womanhood. What Miss Hannah Lynch says of Diana may be said of them all; "He paints her very faults upon worshipping knees," (3) or what Mr. Arthur Symons says of Sandra: "she is a living reputation of the doctrine of original sin". (4)

It is possible to give only an indirect idea of the prodigality of Meredith's great feminine creations. Rosamund

- (1) Brownell. op. cit. p...268.
- (2) Lectures on Shakespeare. op. cit. p...67.
- (3) Hammerton. op. cit. p...241.
- (4) Ibid.

Culling is only a minor figure in "Beauchamp's Career" and is overshadowed by Renee, Cecilia, and Jenny Denham; yet Lathrop truly writes of her that "one must search a long time in the masterpieces of fiction for a woman so complete, so natural, so wonderfully portrayed, as Rosmund Culling, who loves Nevil Beauchamp with a mingling of mother's and sister's love, and watches over him constantly." (1)

Meredith is not the sort of man who tempts one "to sum him up". He is so broad and various that apodictic judgments about him are quite impossible. He has assumed all the external features of a great classic. That is to say, he is an undethronable <sup>King</sup> being who has few subjects. But there will always be some who in a memorable hour discover the world of Meredith's men and women, where wit, brain, beauty and nature clash, sparkle and mingle. There he will discover a finer life within life and have always the vision of "certain nobler races now very dimly imagined". (2)

(1) G. P. Lathrop. Atlantic Monthly. Feb., 1888.  
(2) "Diana". Chap. XXXVII.

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