The "Oblique Light" of George Meredith's Social Philosophy

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THE "OBLIQUE LIGHT"

OF

GEORGE MEREDITH'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

BY

HELEN LEITENSTORFER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Loyola University February 1938
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. &quot;PROGRESS&quot; IN MEREDITH'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE SCENE OF COMEDY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Position of Supremacy</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Masking of Defeat</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Masking of Inferiority</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE &quot;OBLIQUE LIGHT&quot; OF THE COMIC SPIRIT</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Comic Spirit in Meredith's Works</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith in the Role of the Comic Spirit</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE PRESENT CRITICAL VALUE OF MEREDITH'S CONCEPTION OF THE COMIC</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith's Psychology</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reception of his Comic Philosophy</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Corrective Value of his Doctrine</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. AN ESTIMATE OF THE VALUE OF MEREDITH'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTION</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Influence of his Life and Personality on his Works</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traces of Meredithian Influence in Literature</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

There stands at the threshold of our modern literary world a figure whose voice is seldom heard and more rarely interpreted. George Meredith, who lived from 1828 to 1909, saw the growth and decay of the Victorian age and the emergence of a new era. Some earnestly believe his prophecy to be of the utmost importance; others are puzzled; but none dares to repudiate him. The majority manifestly do not understand his language. The whole question of his value in the world of letters is a perpetual challenge.

In this thesis the problem is attempted by means of a route suggested by Meredith himself. The following extract is from "An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit:"

...and whenever they (men) wax out of proportion...violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another...individually, or in the bulk - the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.*

From this the title was suggested: The "Oblique Light" of George Meredith's Social Philosophy. The purpose of the thesis is:

1. To explain Meredith's philosophy of the individual's position in a civilized society.

2. To demonstrate his view of comedy and the function of the Comic Spirit.

3. To evaluate his present and permanent contribution to literature.

The explanation and the demonstration will be introduced in the first chapter and will be expanded in the second, third, and part of the fourth chapters. The remainder of the thesis will be given over to the evaluation.

H.L.

Sept. 20, 1937.
From that time, men's minds have been continually expanding from the restricted areas of their own immediate interests into the wider circles of companionship. But is not this supposed harmony being frequently interrupted like breakers on the shore, by the raw clashes of semi-barbaric wills? Yes, for civilization is far from perfect. On the other hand, it is a more advanced step than individual isolation. At times the difficulty of subordinating individual supremacy for the good of the group as a whole proves too hard a task, and conflict begins anew. Yet, due to a certain refining influence of the civilizing process through the ages, we see, in place of the original rude combat, a subtle and sophisticated masking of the sharpened claw - "Society is the best thing we have, but it is a crazy vessel worked by a crew that formerly practised piracy, and now, in expiation, professes piety."¹ This kind of warfare, though it has changed its form, is as deadly as the former. The real hope for civilization is that the battle has moved from the body to the brain. The mental contest has the power of firing courage for renewed and continued progress. Spent strength is supplied with new energy, which once more smooths the jarring elements into new harmony.

The world of civilized man forms Meredith's chief interest. Man, sprung from the womb of earth, homely and common, is possessed of nature's most wonderful mechanism - an intellect. This magic instrument serves as a balance wheel between body and spirit; it is delicately wrought and intricately complex. The play of intellect through human language, facial expression, and action, is permanently interesting. Still more fascinating

is the operation of intellects on each other - retreat and advance, parry and thrust, to failure or success. Meredith sees with unusual clarity the power of the mind to fuse heart and soul, and he wishes to share this find with others. He says, "I have something of a great power and I must use it. I can put a glass to men's chests and see what is working inside." The elements in Meredith's thought are now new. Augustus H. Able truthfully makes the following statement: "That Meredith, however, no matter how little confessing, felt the impress of others, cannot be doubted." Our author does not create a completely new theory of the universe, but his mind searches out the finest thought of man from early times to his own. He discards the worthless, and he reconstructs certain choice fragments into a whole spiritual guide for himself and others. He wastes little time on what he considers the futility of speculating on the nature of the Supreme Spirit governing the world. On this point, it is noteworthy to observe the mid-course Meredith takes between Charles Darwin and Cardinal

Newman. Darwin, who supposes he may be considered an agnostic, confesses to a complete ignorance of the Creator, and devotes his attention to scientific research in biologic evolution. 1 Cardinal Newman, who also admits man has not been able to fathom the secret of the universe, concludes that, in spite of it, man generally acknowledges the necessity for some form of religion. He accepts the Roman Catholic religion to be the best. 2 Meredith is interested in both viewpoints.

In science, Meredith is engrossed with regeneration of matter in relation to the theory of evolution, especially the evolution of man’s mind. He shows real genius in his scientific analysis of the power of the brain. On other scientific questions he is reticent or noncommittal; he is even narrow and prejudiced when he says, "there are some who are worse than people who deliberately commit crimes ... They kill little animals for the sake of Science." 4 He praises the medical profession, and is, no doubt, grateful for its service in connection with his three gall-stone operations, but he fails to give credit to the importance of animal experimentation in the progress of surgery. Although we feel that he does not sufficiently oppose war as a trace of society’s original barbarism, he does

3. Darwin’s Origin of the Species and Meredith’s The Ordeal of Richard Feverel were published in 1859. It is much more probable that Meredith appropriated Darwin’s evolutionary theory than that he had an independent intuition of the truth.
look askance at the enormous power of modern military machinery by saying, "Science, I presume, will at last put it to our option whether we will improve one another from off the face of the globe, and we must decide by our common sense."¹ Since he concedes no knowledge of the Creator, he believes that chance and circumstance are forces over which man has little control. He does not seem to fully realize that many of the forces of nature can often be modified, controlled, or checked by the acquisition of new scientific truth and that many advances in civilization are due to science alone. He lives in a materialistic machine age and seldom marvels. He dimly guesses at the truth in a rare statement: "Now surely there will come an age when the presentation of science at war with Fortune and the Fates, will be deemed the true epic of modern life."² In one sense, his own psychological analysis of character is one type of scientific war on fate. He feels that the thing most easily averted is the unhappiness man makes for himself by a perversion of the gifts of the intellect. He believes that "men, and ideas of men ... are actually the motives of men in a greater degree than their appetites."³

Although he is an agnostic, Meredith has deep religious feeling. With him, it is a necessity. He is contemptuous of many things in established

religions, but he finds it necessary to find for himself a spiritual guide for human action and endeavor. In a letter to John Morley he says, "It seems to me that Spirit is - how, where, and by what means involving us, none can say. But in this life there is no life save in spirit. The rest of life, and we may know it in love, - is an aching and a rotting."¹

Since Earth is the only reality perceptible to man, the most sensible thing to do is to make the most of it. To Meredith, the one reflection of the Supreme Spirit in humanity is love. It is a universal love that forgets self and embraces the rest of mankind. Real charity for others is the "open sesame" to a corresponding response in the hearts of one's fellowmen. Perhaps Meredith experienced to a very small degree the fact that gratitude is not always the reward for service. Regardless of that, the fact that one has contributed to Earth's progress should be reward in itself. To many this is probably very cold comfort. He accepts the basic faith upon which all religion is built:

```
Religion should be universal love,
And not a coop for blind enthusiasts
Who cannot sympathize with natural life,

To do thy duty is to act a prayer²
```

He does offer us his belief in the continued life of the spirit emanating from a good life well spent. Here he bows to intuition. In a letter to

G.P. Baker in America, Meredith says, "all right use of life, and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us." In his opinion the observances, ceremonies, and even some of the beliefs of orthodox religion are illusions of man's mind, forgetful that man is of earth-born origin, in tune with nature. Meredith says in a letter to Captain Maxse, "Our great error has been (the error of all religion, as I fancy) to raise a spiritual system in antagonism to Nature."  

The Philosopher who believes so fervently in civilization as the finest product of the human mind cannot but be dismayed, appalled, and even bitter at the fashion in which man's mind sometimes inflicts harm on himself. As Meredith expresses it, he becomes the "Laocoon of his own serpents."  

There are three courses open to such a philosopher; he may sink gloomily into pessimism; he may grasp at any illusory escapes from bitter reality; he may accept the world as it is, but with a belief in the world's march of progress and his part in the plan. This latter is the one acceptable to Meredith. Pessimism of any sort is abhorrent; his own common sense and hopeful temperament lead him to strike out from under its oppression. He admires the poetic art of Lord Byron and he appreciates the beauty of the Rubaiyat through Fitzgerald's translation, but he cannot subscribe to the dark philosophy of the writers. He is not blind to tragic reality. He

2. Letters, I, p.33  
sees it and does not flinch, but he thinks that too much concentration on the shadows obscures the joy of something brighter. He likes Thomas Hardy but is "afflicted by his twilight view of life."\footnote{Letters, II, p.567.}

The forced attempt to ignore tragic reality by escaping into mental illusion is self-deception. To still the ache, Tennyson melts into the mystic world of chivalry. In Meredith's novel, The Egoist, Horace says of Flitch, the drunken coachman, "He drinks to rock his heart, because he has one."\footnote{p.172.} To have a heart is surely better than to possess only the starved and withered remnants of emotion, but he who runs away is a coward. To remain enmeshed in profound despair is weakness, and nature has no patience with weakness, but an escape from tragedy is a temporary delusion which only makes the reaction more bitter. Inebriation is followed, not only by sobriety, but by headache.

Social imperfections of any sort sometimes result in tragedy. To Meredith this fact is a source of grief, then of irritation, and finally of swift, devious attempts at solution. These faults are especially glaring in those persons or institutions which professedly aim at the improvement of society. Here, human suspicion often slumbers; evil wears so bright an aspect because we expect brightness. The outward appearance being so deceptive, a considerable degree of psychological acumen is required to probe the difficulty. This important and specialized task falls to a particular kind of philosopher, the Comic poet, the incarnation of the Comic Spirit.
The Comic poet, in common with other men, perceives the direct blaze of brilliant white light, but the prism-like keenness of his intellect deflects it obliquely into its primitive, original elements of color, among which are both light and dark shades. The surprise at the difference between the apparent outward appearance of the whole and the actual view of the several parts composing the whole results in a certain mental exhilaration of the mind, a mental laughter. It is the best tonic for the eradication of the diseases of society. In Sandra Belloni, Meredith gives the core of his philosophy - "Man is the laughing animal, and at the end of an infinite search, the philosopher finds himself clinging to laughter as the best of human fruit, purely human, and sane, and comforting."

To reveal the Universal Fool hidden in the soul of man is not a pleasant dose to give a reading public. Like the Little Old Woman in the Mother Goose Rhyme, who gasped in amazement at her cut petticoats, "Lauk a mercy on me, this is none of I!" the reader would like to shut his eyes to the truth, which is provocative of nothing else than a deep shame. And Meredith mercilessly drives home the truth, from an allegorical interpretation in The Shaving of Shagpat and a critical appraisal in his "Essay on Comedy" to numerous expansions in his many novels, short stories, and many of his poems. Robert L. Stevenson says of The Egoist, "here is a book to send the blood into men's faces." Very often in literature the comic figures are so eccentric, so far removed from us in their ridiculous capers, that we can laugh wholeheartedly at them. But Meredith reveals the egoist

in our own natures so thoroughly that it levels pride, chastises the spirit, and provokes only the wry smile of mental accusation. This view of the comic acts as a corrective agent. Cornelius Weygandt, too, in commenting on the same novel, decides that "No candid man reading this book but feels his face slapped smartly in chapter after chapter." Ever watchful, the Comic Spirit, the Sword of Common Sense is ready to cut through illusions of the mind. In the portrait galleries it has "the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half-tension." It is ready to administer the rebuke, but the rebuke is lightened by a jollity, or a sympathetic laughter. Man feels his kinship with the rest of the world - "to feel its presence and to see it is your assurance that many sane and solid minds are with you in what you are experiencing; and this of itself spares you the pain of satirical heat, and the bitter craving to strike heavy blows."

On this point, Augustus Able very aptly states that Thomas Love Peacock's unfinished story, "Lord of the Hills," contains the exact prototype of Meredith's Comic Spirit in the invisible sprite, Numbernip. In so far as both are detached observers of the follies of human life, this is true. But when Numbernip laughs, it is derisive, satiric.

I do most firmly believe I shall marry the handsomest, wittest, most amiable and most constant husband in all the world. Bless me, surely I heard a titter at least.

2. "Essay on Comedy," p.46
3. p.47.
Monsieur then observes for the benefit of Numbernip:

I think the progress of reason and liberty are certain though slow and that there is much more of both now in the world than there was in the twelfth century.

Thereupon "A loud laugh ran echoing and re-echoing along the rocks."

Now Meredith would not have laughed at Monsieur's statement, because it is exactly what he so fervently believes. His is really a sympathetic spirit. In the preface to Thackeray's The Four Georges, Meredith writes, "Not a page of his books reveal malevolence or a sneer at humanity."

Meredith wants to share with his fellow-men the experience of a rare laughter, especially with those who have tasted, or who are likely to taste, the sorrow of their own folly. The Comic poet shows how the unsocial man forfeits the chief benefits of society; human sympathy, and the pleasures of social intercourse. Nobility is best achieved through the triumph of despair; the errors of men offer opportunities for such achievement. After many setbacks, the heroine of Diana of the Crossways secures "the three rarest good things in life: a faithful friend, a faithful lover, a faithful servant."

In the Shaving of Shagpat, Meredith expresses the same idea allegorically. Goorlka is the Enchantress who casts spells of illusion over men so that they lose their human forms and are transformed into birds. The means of disenchantment rests with Shibli Bagarag (the Comic poet) who is

"to keep the birds laughing uninterruptedly an hour; then are they men again, and take the forms of men that are laughers." But Shibli himself has first to fall under the spell of illusion before he sees his true self mirrored. He is crowned with "bejewelled asses' ears, stiffened upright, and skulls of monkeys grinning with gems!" This unique view convulses him with laughter. One of Meredith's critics, John B. Priestley, advances the theory that Meredith (like Shibli) was first the principal object of his own Comic perception. This, which would explain a keener sensibility in detecting the Comic in others, Meredith himself would agree to. There appears on the margin of one of his music books, "It is not surprising for a man to be that which he preaches against, for he is naturally inveterate with what he feels in himself contemptible." 

This mental laughter of which Meredith speaks has an element of tragedy in it. When the laughter of Goorelka's birds had ceased, "their visages were become long and solemn as that of them that have seen a dark experience." The realization of their own self-duplicity is cause for serious reflection, and the full understanding of the perversion of their manhood is a tragedy.

An example of this is clearly shown in the novel Rhoda Fleming. Edward Blancove writes to his cousin Algernon:

1. The Shaving of Shagpat, p.168.

Alice Meynell in her essay on Laughter says "Laughter never was so honoured as now; were it not for the paradox one might say, it never was so grave."

Jean Paul, in the "Vorschule der Aesthetik" in Vol.IV of his Works, says Hamlet is a melancholy fool behind an insane mask.
I wonder whether you will ever perceive the comedy of life. I doubt whether a man is happier when he does perceive it. Perhaps, the fact is, that he has by that time lost his power of laughter...I believe that we comic creatures suffer more than your tragic personages. We...are always looking to be happy and comfortable; but in a tragedy, the doomed wretches are liver-complexioned from the opening act. All the menacing horrors of an eclipse are ours...No; the comedy is painfulest...

And now, farewell, my worthy ass!

Sometime later, through the clever manipulations of a Jewish pawnbroker, Algernon himself "sobbed desperately; seeing himself very distinctly reflected in one of the many facets of folly." The Comic poet does not allow, however, emotion that sears. Meredith explains his method in *The Egoist*: "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 briny drops. There is the innovation."

That is the innovation. Pathos is achieved without sentimentality, for sentimentality is foolish and weak. The mind cannot afford to loll in the luxury of its own tears when courage is needed for success. In Shibli Bagarag's struggle to shave the inordinate crop of hair on Shagpat's neck and face, Meredith indicates the difficulty of man in conquering his errors. Moreover, he reminds us that the mastery of an event lasts only a score of years:

1. Rhoda Fleming, p.245
2. Ibid., p.287.
3. p.4,
So ever fresh Illusions will arise
And lord creation, until men are wise.

At first glance this would seem to present a hopeless case - do we really fall back as often as we progress? No, for each "fresh illusion" is merely a defect of an advanced step of progress already won. Meredith writes in a humorous vein to his friend William Hardman - "May thine and mine live in the Age of the final Eradication of Humbug. But then wilt thou and I be flying particles on the birth of the South-West."

Always above, detached and free, breathes the supramundane Spirit of Comedy, born of the earth, yet supreme over earthly folly. Watching, focusing its many-faceted surfaces, it shows perpetually shifting changes of light and dark - now a blaze of brilliancy, now obscure shadow. To the very careful observer, it now and then reveals a penetrating glance of the oblique - a ray of transparent depth. This ray is centered on the intellects of men in the hope of firing responsive sparks.

Meredith, as the representative of the Comic Spirit, is especially interesting because of the peculiar quality of his oblique beam. We find it in the recorded idiosyncrasies and tragedies of his comic characters; we find it in his analysis of their minds; we find it in his style and outlook. He has called on all the faculties of his own mind and has bent them to the end of infusing the laughter of the Comic Spirit into the minds and hearts of men.

O Laughter! beauty plumped and love had birth.
Laughter. O thou reviver of such Earth!
Good for the spirit, good
For body, thou! to both art wine and bread!

1. Shagpat, p. 245
If he has over-estimated the value of some of his gifts and has erred, we can only admit his likeness to the rest of us. Perhaps, too, like the pearl in the oyster, his very faults have produced unusual beauty in the realm of the Comic.

3. (from p. 14)
CHAPTER II

"PROGRESS" IN GEORGE MEREDITH'S
SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

The highest ideal is Earth's progress, and the finest progress is through men - men in a mutually beneficial society of brotherly love. In such a society the utmost powers of body and mind are bent toward a realization of this spiritual ideal. The individual or group which is motivated most strongly by it is characterized by a well-rounded personality - physically, mentally, and spiritually.

   Blood and brain and spirit there  
   Say the deepest gnomes of Earth  
   Join for true felicity.  
   Are they parted, then expect  
   Some one sailing will be wrecked  
   ......................1..................  
   Earth that Triad is.

Since Meredith does not visualize a state of perfectability - and who does, for what would be so boring? - the best of what we have is only relatively perfect. But, as a Comic Spirit, he must give us an adequate conception of this best, this genuine, to serve as a measure of comparison with the eccentricities of the comic characters.

The laughter of men results from a sudden and unexpected shock. Purely physical laughter produces the hysteria of characteristic facial convulsions - purely mental laughter may have none at all. Sometimes the two

are closely interwoven. The Comic Spirit is concerned only with mental
laughter of a specific kind - the mental surprise of a contrast between
the apparent and essential character of man. Man himself can often readily
distinguish between the false and the genuine. The Comic Spirit sees the
false masquerading as the genuine. Furthermore, in the interests of
humanity, he assists at the disrobing - takes off the false hair and wooden
leg, takes out the false teeth and glass eye. The contrast between this
curiously denuded creature and its former magnificence is grotesque - the
shock produces the laughter.

The deception is so often almost perfect. A counterfeit is more
easily recognized if we compare it with the real; a paste jewel has not
the depth of brilliance of the actual gem. An imperfect knowledge of the
real thing obscures the ability to pierce disguise.

What is Meredith's conception of the real or genuine? First of all,
the normal, progressive individual must understand the natural laws govern-
ing his own physical person, for life is the basis of the mind and spirit.
One of the aims of civilization, then, is the maintenance of physical fit-
ness. How Meredith glorifies health! The lusty infants, Richard Feverel
II in The Ordeal of Richard Feveral and John Edward Russett in The Amazing
Marriage are nursed and tended carefully by their own mothers. In Rhoda
Fleming, Mrs. Fleming is equally successful in raising flowers and
daughters. Of the latter she says, "Good bread, and good beef, and enough
of both, make good blood; and my children shall be stout!" The Meredithian
heroes, almost without exception, take long walks, swim, box, and partici-

1 p.3
pate in all kinds of sports. More wonderful still, the heroines also break loose from the limitations of social artificiality: Clara Middleton in The Egoist walks in free and easy strides; Carinthia Jane, the girl of the woods in The Amazing Marriage, climbs easily from crag to crag in contempt of danger; her mother, Countess Fanny, and Aminta in Lord Ormont are excellent swimmers. Sir Willoughby Patterne, the Egoist, complacently believes that his projected union with the healthy Clara is merely the result of a natural selection of the fittest of the species, for he has never been "shaken by a doctor of medicine." Of health in old age, Meredith gives us the splendid example of Captain Kirby, a "three-decker entering harbour after a victory." This tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested warrior attracts the love of the Countess Fanny and produces two children at the age of sixty-seven, "when most men are reaping and stacking their sins with groans and weak knees."

Opposed to these fine specimens, ill-health of even a lesser degree is considerably magnified. In The Egoist alone we have two good comparisons. In contrast to the youthful beauty of a Constantia Durham or a Clara Middleton, there stands Laetitia Dale, faded, spiritless, and anaemic. The healthy animal Adrian Harley is much more attractive than the sallow, dyspeptic Hippias.

The second aim of civilization, moral fitness or virtue, leads directly from the moderation of physical excesses. For example, Meredith

continually reminds us that asceticism and sensualism impede physical and moral development. Like the extremes of starvation and greed, they are contrary to the best development in nature.

Master the blood, nor read by chills, Earth admonishes.¹

The goal is a golden mean. In The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, young Richard does grow up strong and healthy under his father's closely-systematized supervision. It is a soil of artificial cultivation; the boy is carefully nurtured and protected from despoilment by unselected society; any side-shoots, good or bad, are clipped to fit the father's pattern; the hot-house plant is then ready for full and splendid flowering. But a weakness is there, a weakness of over-charged strength. As his cousin Adrian Harley says, "combustibles are only the more dangerous for compression."² A crisis is reached when pure instinct leads him to love and marriage with the lovely Lucy Desborough. Sir Austin's planned life for his son does not include such a secret and precipitate marriage; he refuses to see the fortunate circumstance of the choice. With deceptive smoothness and guile, Richard is torn from his bride and thrown into the thick of fashionable society. His unusual rearing is the worst possible preparation for this sudden transplant into foreign soil. His total lack of experience with this element causes an over-intoxication in the delights of social intercourse, and he succumbs to both blandishment and treachery.

Meredith is as stern as nature itself in penalizing the breaker of her laws. When Oscar Wilde was convicted and it was suggested that a word

¹ "Seed-Time," Poems, p.316.
² pl24. On page 242 of the same book, Meredith says of Clare Forey, "Now excess of obedience is... as bad as insurrection."
from Meredith might save him from prison, Meredith refused with the words, "Abnormal sensuality in a leader of men...should be punished with severity; all greatness is based on morality." Any kind of excess is downright vice and not to be tolerated. Meredith does not dwell much on deliberate immorality, for he feels that nature exacts its own penalty. In The Amazing Marriage, he shows how Lord Fleetwood, a decadent nobleman, becomes the victim of his own gambling mania. Under the heady influence of wine he proposes marriage to the innocent mountain girl, Carinthia, who has really fallen in love with him. Confidently she holds him to his word; Fleetwood's only pride, the pride of a gambler and a sportsman, forces him to keep his word. On his side, it is a loveless match; he marries her in contempt and coolly abandons her. Carinthia has been a fool, but she does not remain one. When Fleetwood comes to a realization of her fine character, she has discovered his weaknesses, has ceased to love him, and just as coolly abandons him.

Physical and moral health steers for a mid-course. The rocks on one side may shatter, and the shallows on the other may stagnate. Only the swiftly-running, unobstructed current steadily propels. In regard to Fleetwood Meredith observes: "But, for the keeping of a steady course, men made of blood in the walks of the world must be steadied. Say it plainly 2\textsuperscript{2} - mated."

Meredith's whole desire is to be thoroughly safe, moderate, and controlled - yet progressive. He shuns extremes for fear of irremedial damage. But if a complete knowledge of normal progress leads to a better understanding of the world, Meredith's work is not in vain. 1. Robert E. Sencourt, "Some Later Friends of Meredith," Scribner's, LXXXV (1929), p.647. 2. The Amazing Marriage, p.560.
understanding of error, is it not also true that a thorough acquaintance with error leads to a better understanding of the normal? He does admit that excesses correct each other. If that is the case, can not the excesses of asceticism and sensualism correct each other? But a thorough investigation of vice of either extreme Meredith never wished to try nor did he advocate it, because there might be no retrieving of the good. He does not forget that sacrifice is often necessary for progress, but he does not seem to agree that extensive experimentation with vice should be the sacrifice.

It is Meredith's belief that the physically healthy person is better able to cope with the demands of life. Good blood produces a stronger, keener mental power and a better fortitude in combating obstacles. In Meredith's allegory, The Shaving of Shagpat, the water from the well of Paravid gives insight; the three hairs from the horse Garaveen give strength. These, with the Lily of Light, or Love, are the magic talismen for progress.

Here Meredith's own preoccupation with a formula closes his mind to a more inclusive view. In general, this idea may be true; but there are exceptions. For instance, physical health does not necessarily include an excellent mental equipment. The brain, like any other organ in the body, may be congenitally defective or weak. The exact opposite may be true; ill health, especially in regard to the nervous system, may cause increased mental sensitivity, even genius.

Moreover, physical courage is very frequently separate from moral courage. In very few cases does he show the supreme moral strength of the physically weak - the crippled girl in "Martin's Puzzle," Dahlia Fleming, and Emma Dunstane. Through Emma, Meredith says, "There is nothing the body suffers that the soul may not profit by." Too often, however, Meredith places an over-emphasis on physical strength and well-being.

And since he devotes so much attention to correct health habits and proper exercise, why does he not encourage hard physical labor of a productive kind as an incentive to a good appetite, proper digestion, the moderation of sensualism, and the clearing of mental fancies? Edward Blencove in Rhoda Fleming admits that "work is medicine." Yet we do not have the impression that he places it anywhere near another type of medicine which is usually prescribed - laughter.

On the whole, though, his teaching has many worthwhile points. His ideal is simple, logical, and practical. He does not altogether abandon the idea of a God, but because his God is different from the one clothed in vaporous mists by civilized society he seldom uses the word. Meredith's God is the Author of the Universe, whom we know only through His creation, the earth. Earth's lesson is universal helpfulness, the combination of all virtues, which Meredith calls Good.

And ever we espy the greater God, 3
For simple pointing at a good adored.

Then let our trust be firm in Good. 4

1. Diana of the Crossways, p.413.
His spiritual ideal is that of social service, that which binds men "in consideration one to another," that which consists of sound reason, fair justice, and a certain humility in regard to the individual's place in a cosmic whole. It is the foundation of virtue, the real faith and real hope of struggling humanity.

As has already been indicated in the first chapter, we seem to see two of nature's laws in disagreement - an egoism of the individual which disrupts the union of society and an egoism of society which tends to smother the individual. Both are of the utmost importance in the progress of Earth. They must be reconciled if we are to continue our belief in the wisdom of nature.

For us the double conscience and its war,  
The serving of two masters, false to both,  
Until those twain who spring the root and are  
The knowledge in division, plight a troth  
Of equal hands! 1

The sense of sight and hearing in conjunction form a more vivid concept in the brain than each separately, for each emphasizes and clarifies the other by mutual correction. So do the egos of the individual and of society correct the excesses of each. There are some losses, but the gains are much greater. The dragon of Self must be partially tamed so as to accord with other similar dragons:

Squats the scaly Dragon-fowl,  
Who was lord ere light you drank,  
.................................  
Wait, and we shall forge him curbs,  
Put his fangs to uses, tame,  
Teach him, quick as cunning herbs,  
How to cure him sick and lame.  

The taming of the dragon is not easy, and often he merely shams tameness. Shibli Bagarag discovers this in his efforts to shave Shagpat, for many are the "thwackings" he receives. To the strong, the thwackings merely add zest to the combat. It is the ordeal, the opposition, the obstruction which tempers character and gives added strength. Shibli's friend, the Old Woman, says, "What! thou hast been thwacked, and refusest the fruit of it - which is resoluteness, strength of mind, sternness in pursuit of the object!" Modern thwackings are mental or spiritual rebuffs caused by one's own folly, for the most part; although they may be the repulses of unexplainable Fate. In spite of the fact that he admits that physical thwacking or suffering may bring profit to the human soul, the greatest service is in the revelation of error to the fools who have been responsible for such condition. His applications of the uses of adversity are not broad enough, but it is usually true that

'Tis the thwacking in this den
Maketh lions of true men! 2

He seems to feel that the added strength given by opposition is the working out of another natural law. The individual ego is but an instrument to be pitted against other egos for the eventual progress of Earth. Fear and despair have no place - the weak fall, and the "survival of the fittest" carry on the world's work.

Since Pain and Pleasure on each hand
Led our wild steps from slimy rock
To yonder sweeps of gardenland,
We breathe but to be sword or block! 3

1. The Shaving of Shagpat, p.11.
2. Ibid., p.246.
Here is an instance which leads us to believe that Meredith is too severe with the unfortunate. Forgiveness is a virtue which he does not feel bound to admire. In *Diana of the Crossways*, Diana refuses to return to an erring husband; in *The Amazing Marriage*, Carinthia chooses service for a noble brother in preference to living with a weakling husband; Meredith himself refused to visit his dying wife, Ellen. To him, the unforgivable fault of such characters is their passivity in error; any effort on their part to redeem themselves would have obtained immediate recognition. He thinks that mere forgiveness confirms them in inaction, and this is undoubtedly one angle of the situation. But he believes so firmly in charity; his noblest characters assist the poor and unfortunate. Is not forgiveness one of the greatest acts of charity, and is it not sometimes a necessary help to the spiritually unfortunate and to the eventual progress of the earth?

To Meredith, those who fail to live harmoniously with nature's plans for humanity weaken, sicken, and may even dissolve prematurely into death. Nature frowns on the passive performer of life's drama and secures swift retribution. Meredith says, "If in any branch of us we fail in growth, there is, you are aware, an unfailing aboriginal democratic old monster that waits to pull us down; certainly the branch, possibly the tree; and for the welfare of Life we fall." Through death the disintegration of decay produces new life and new hope of progress. Death, the only real democracy, forces real and active service.

1. *Diana*, p.15.
The varied colours are a fitful heap:
They pass in constant service though they sleep;
The self gone out of them, therewith the pain;
Read that, who still to spell our earth remain.

Death itself should hold no terror. It is merely one feature of change or progress. The natural law of the non-annihilation of matter proves consoling in itself, especially when there is no belief in a future life. Scientifically, there is eternal existence through continual regeneration. It is the really awe-inspiring wonder of the universe.

Struck by this thought, Meredith says,

Death, shall I shrink from loving thee?
Into the breast that gives the rose
    Shall I with shuddering fall?

The only real sadness in death comes of a life which has given no service. Although Meredith has no belief in the permanence of the individual body, he does believe in the continuance of soul or spirit that has performed some useful thing. "The good life gone lives on in the mind; the bad has but a life in the body, and that not lasting." The shorter life has, on the average, less opportunity to develop to its fullest extent, but a short life well spent is better than the attainment of a selfish old age. A premature death, like Beauchamp's, has only the sorry aspect of brevity, for his work lives on.

And what if our body be dashed from the steeps
    Our spoken in protest remains,
    A young generation reaps.

The long life well spent; hale, hearty, and kindly old age; here there is readiness to greet death, for there has been a full life and full service. Nature gives to these calm resignation and quiet acceptance. In the role of the dying Camille, Vittoria sings:

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
To serve God's aim; else die we with the Sun.

How have the characters in Meredith's books fit in with the plan of the universe as he has conceived it? Does he show us these ideal persons who are doing some progressive good for Earth? Yes; but in general they do not stand out so clearly as do the comic characters. Pink is not so vivid as red or white. Sometimes Meredith gives us a picture of the hero and villain in one, as Edward Blancove in Rhoda Fleming. Through most of the story he has been an egoistic coward; near the end, when he sees his folly, he tries to make amends for the mischief done. The ruin of Dahlia's life, which is beyond repair, remains as a corroding punishment; yet he manages to rise to a regeneration of character.

The ideal characters, which are present in every novel, are not perfect, for they are human. They have been tried by ordeal and have emerged with brave hearts.

Matey Weyburn in Lord Ormont is a thoroughly well-rounded person. A keen sportsman, he unites a life of physical action with that of teaching. The latter assumes importance because his theories of education and society embody reform. Both he and Aminta have been life-long admirers of a national hero, Lord Ormont, whom Aminta finally married. Ormont, however,

has married her only to revenge himself on a society that has shown him rank ingratitude. Aminta and Matey, who have fallen in love with each other, commiserate the weakness of their idol; but they feel no hesitancy in defying convention by going away to seek their own legitimate happiness. On the continent they found a school in which Weyburn, among other innovations, experiments with co-education. Their actions, stupefying to the ordinary world, could only be undertaken so courageously by two such leaders, whose ideals of progress include the purging of such existing evils of society as unnatural marriage laws and artificial educational institutions. The deserted Lord Ormont weeps over his folly, but instead of being their strong antagonist, he recognizes and applauds their daring ventures.

Austin Wentworth, in Richard Feverel, under cloud of an unfortunate marriage, is the steadying influence in the system-ridden Feverel household. His quiet but effective influence is never fully appreciated there, until his absence in South America results in disaster and tragedy at home. It is during this period that Sir Austin Feverel does his most foolish manipulating of his son's life, and Richard commits the folly of deserting his wife Lucy for his father, society, and the bewitching Lady Mount. Wentworth's return brings a fair amount of stabilization, but some of the force of disaster continues on to the end.

In The Egoist, Vernon Whitford is also the victim of an unwise early marriage through his sympathy with an unfortunate woman. He has finally learned not to let his emotions turn to his undoing, and he maintains an attitude of impersonal wisdom towards Clara Middleton, squirming in the net of the egoist, Sir Willoughby. It is his detached, though sympathetic
attitude which helps her to help herself.

Carinthia, the heroine of the Amazing Marriage, has had one of the most trying ordeals of any of Meredith's characters. We have already seen how her marriage with the dissipated Lord Fleetwood and his desertion of her on their very wedding day almost breaks her spirit. In addition, her brother's financial difficulties and his withdrawal from the army prey on her mind. Yet she does not whine or droop. With the money Fleetwood contributes to her support she helps the miserable and unfortunate. She also makes many new friends, among them Owain Wythan, whose trouble is similar to hers. Although married, he has never known what marriage is, for his wife has been a continual invalid. He has accepted the burden; he has kept faith with humanity by faithfully serving his sick wife Rebecca, by assisting the unhappy Carinthia, and by helping less fortunate neighbors. The coincidence is most amazing, but Rebecca and Fleetwood both die, to leave the field clear for a union of these tried souls, Owain and Carinthia.

A noticeable feature of Meredith's ideal characters is their patience in trouble. One of the most noteworthy of these is Thomas Redworth. His belief in the real value of Diana Warwick's character sustains him through her loss of reputation and through her numerous follies. With Diana's friend, Lady Dunstane, he is always at hand to help and to guide her to eventual happiness.

Robert Eccles is a sturdy yeoman farmer possessed of intelligence - a fact which seems to surprise even Meredith. Although secretly his perception of the comic in the Fleming family causes wells of silent laughter, his inherent concern over their misfortunes leads him to assist in overcoming
them. His main reason is, of course, his love for Rhoda, who, though foolish at times, is essentially good in intention.

More in the public eye by reason of participation in public events are the hero and heroine respectively of Beauchamp and Vittoria.

Beauchamp, the political radical, is not so successful in his persistent attempts in behalf of the middle-class, but he does dent the smug security of the aristocratic circle from which he has sprung. Even a dent in this solid masonry is a distinct achievement. When Beauchamp is drowned, his aristocratic uncle, Everard Romfrey, unites in grief with his nephew's sponsor of radical politics, Dr. Shrapnel. Even before this Beauchamp has effected a partial understanding between these two former bitter enemies.

Vittoria throws herself wholeheartedly in the struggle for the national liberty of the Italians against Austrian rule. She arouses suspicion in regard to the honesty of her purpose: first, because she is a woman; second, because she has recognized some old English friends who are in sympathy with or fighting in the ranks of the Austrians. These disheartening drawbacks do not daunt her steady purpose; actually, her sincerity results in a better feeling of friendliness on both sides, although politically the Italians fail and Vittoria's husband is killed.

In that the lives of such characters present a picture of hard-won victory, they are truly inspiring. The quiet service of a Redworth or a Wentworth, the more spectacular achievement of a Vittoria or a Beauchamp, are the really strong moral forces in our civilization. They help to forward progress. As comic characters, we are grateful for their example.

Meredith applies his ideas also to men in groups, but here his lack of
a broader experience tells. He admires the spirit of progress in both the French and the Italians, and the profound depth of the Germans. He believes that the English, when the balance of vivacious Celt and solid Saxon is found, have the best racial constituent, but he shows a preference for the Irish and the Welsh. Similar to his views on individual health, he considers the building of strong races an important element in progress. In Diana of the Crossways he says, "the senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction...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." Very dim, also, is his view of the world outside of England and a portion of the Continent.

He does see the necessity and value of government and religion as means of social control. In spite of their faults civilization would collapse without them. Of Christianity he gives the following tribute: "You must bear in mind that Christianity will always be one of the great chapters in the History of Humanity: that it fought down brutishness: that it has been the mother of our civilization: that it is tender to the poor, maternal to the suffering, and has supplied for most, still supplies for many, nourishment that in a certain state of intelligence is instinctively demanded." In Meredith's mind, therefore, Christianity is the Santa Claus of the backward and unintellectual. Maturity's reason and logic lends another version to love and duty. He feels that eventually men in general will come to recognize it, just as they recognized that the Christian ideal

1. p.353-54.
was superior to the Pagan. There have been many reforms in religion, and many of the human race have been doing without it at all. It remains to be seen whether Meredith's scientific religion will be the accepted thing of the future.

The narrowness of his world-view is always apparent. His prayer is liberty and democracy - in several poems he praises the French Revolution, and in Vittoria he admires the attempt of the Italians to gain civic freedom. Of negro slavery in America, a struggle of paramount importance in the cause of liberty, he gives only cursory attention. He writes to A. Morton Fullerton, "Since their most noble closing of the Civil War, I have looked to them as the hope of our civilization." But what of the conquered natives in the English colonial possessions? Perhaps he feels that the oppression of strong nations in turning weak nations into colonies is merely an application of the Darwinian natural law, and that the subjugation of the natives is offset by the acquisition of a more advanced civilization. Still, brotherly love can be shown and civilization advanced in more peaceful ways. Would his view of war been so meagerly stated if England had not been the victorious colonizer? He lived in the thick of industrialism - did he not realize the evils of the machine age? He is correct in saying that the progress of the mind and spirit lives on in succeeding generations. What he forgets is that this immortal spark is sometimes revived only after a long period of dormancy. Among others, the ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations almost collapsed with their downfall. Only with the growth of prosperity and a certain amount of leisure in new civili-

zations in other parts of the world have the old nuggets of value been sought for and retrieved.

Meredith is best in the interpretation of the nature of individual man in his universal egoistic characteristics. His doctrine of progress, while limited, is good and is necessary in the proper understanding of the comic characters. His best proposition is that consideration for others has a tendency, though it is not a guarantee, to generate the same feeling in others, and that this mutual love and charity is one of nature's finest gifts. The Comic Spirit has cause for laughter in man's deliberate refusal of the choicest of Earth's happiness.
CHAPTER III

THE SCENE OF COMEDY

The Comic Spirit, in its rather complete knowledge of the possibility of spiritual progress in human society, has a peculiar ability to pick out those flaws in character that deviate from the normal. It plays unceasing war on the comic characters. Meredith says of a former generation, "In those old days female modesty was protected by a fan ... That fan is the flag and symbol of the society giving us our so-called Comedy of Manners, or Comedy of the manners of the South-Sea Islanders under city veneer."

Egoism is a curious disease prevalent in all society. The ego is a necessary life force, but an over-developed ego is certain to lead to moral weakness or destruction. Egoism is as general as the common cold, for it attacks all of us at one time or another. The following anecdote of Stevenson's shows Meredith's opinion of the universality of the disease. After the publication of The Egoist, a young friend ran shouting to the author, "It is disgraceful! It is abominable!...Willoughby is myself!" Meredith replied, "My dear fellow, calm yourself!...Willoughby is every one of us."

The emergence of man from primitive barbarism to civilization brought about a discarding of tooth-and-claw tactics and an assumption of a moral ideal of reciprocal service. Even if apparent necessity requires a return

to the tooth and claw, civilized man attempts to hide it under his newly acquired cloak of moral pride. This is what Meredith means when he says, "The first effort of man's reason should be to approve of himself. Here stop most of us." The ease with which man can approve of himself! For if the world approves, he can approve, regardless of the mask he is wearing. This deception is productive of a spurious kind of happiness which lasts as long as he is not discovered. When Richard Le Gallienne suggested that Meredith write an autobiography he was answered with, "No, I leave that to men still in love with their own egos, that wondrous love affair which is apt to outlive all others." Here Meredith himself was covering the fact that a really honest autobiography would not reflect altogether favorably on himself, but he cleverly gives us the impression that autobiographers are egoists.

Egoism is a disease that covers all the seven deadly sins, but it has three main varieties. These may appear singly or in conjunction; the worst cases combine all three.

A. The Position of Supremacy  
B. The Masking of Defeat  
C. The Masking of Inferiority

Shibli Bagarag has the right view of the case, when, after many and serious attempts to convince his fellow-men of the need of reform, "it was revealed ...that he who ruleth over men hath a labour and duties of hearing and judging and dispensing judgment similar to those of him who ruleth over apes and asses." In other words, he might have said - fools and the imitators

Henri Bergson gives us the main symptom of this variety of the disease. He calls it "a growing callousness to social life. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with the rest of his fellow-beings." It is a satisfying contentment with one's physical well-being, one's mental lucidity, or one's moral goodness. The mistake lies in the fact that this complacency sees no prospect of further growth. Inactivity, or a halt in progress, brings only atrophy. Meredith observes of great doctors, lawyers, professors, and officials that "policy seems to petrify their minds when they're on an eminence." It is a petrifaction of pride - it is Narcissus gazing at the beauty of his own reflected image and listening to no one but his own dear Echo.

In Sandra Belloni, Purcell Barrett discovers an ideal woman in Cornelia, one who is entirely devoted to himself. But this ideal is shattered, only because Cornelia determines to take care of her sick father before marrying him. He is pierced to the heart - he cannot live - he commits suicide! Joseph Beach says of him, "Rather than compromise an ideal, he will turn his face away from life."

3 (from p.35) Shagpat, p.175.
2. Lord Ormont, p.262.
Of equally tragic import is the case of the two sisters in Rhode Fleming. Dahlia and Rhoda have been reared in a manner superior to most of their class; but while Rhoda manages to keep a level head, Dahlia feels that the villagers who have been her life-long companions are distinctly inferior to her. As a consequence, "the idea of love upon the lips of ordinary men provoked Dahlia's irony; and the youths of Wrexby and Fenhurst had no chance against her secret Prince Florizels."\(^1\) It is the great error of her life, for though she does attract a man of superior station, Edward Blancoove, he refuses to marry her or to acknowledge her publicly in any way because of such vestiges of her lowly origin as village ways and bad grammar. Meredith warns:

\[\text{-----------------------------shun}\]
\[\text{That sly temptation of the illumined brain,}\]
\[\text{Deliveries oracular, self-spun.} \(^2\)\]

Of none of Meredith's characters is this so true as in the case of Sir Austin Feverel, whose belief in the superiority of his plan for the education of his son Richard is so intense that he can not nor will not see the faults that bring eventual disaster. There is a humorous chapter in the book entitled "The Unmasking of Mr. Ripton Thompson." Sir Austin and Lawyer Thompson have been boasting to each other of the remarkable progress of their respective sons. Thompson proudly leads Sir Austin to his son Ripton, who is presumably deep in the study of law. Ripton, caught unaware, seems to be sickeningly empty of all legal knowledge; his father finds his desk filled with numerous legal forms, but they are bills and I.O.U.'s for debts

1. p.4
incurred in the interests of Love and Beauty. Apparently, the disgrace and humiliation is Lawyer Thompson's. Actually, the really comic figure is Sir Austin, the "Scientific Humanist," whose own son at that very moment is breaking through the rigid confines of his educational system.

Again and again Meredith shows how the wealthy, well-born noblemen, such as Lord Fleetwood, the Honourable Everard Romfrey, and Sir Willoughby Patterne, are especially susceptible to this kind of vanity. Fleetwood would never dream of "breaking his word" whatever the cost to himself or others; Romfrey is frozen in Tory conservatism, and Patterne remains incased in his scientific manipulation of lives. In Celt and Saxon, Patrick O'Donnell sees "the narrow pedestal whereon the stiff man of iron pride must accommodate itself to stand in despite of tempest without and within; and how the statue rocks there, how much more pitiably than the common sons of earth who have the broad, common field to fall down on."¹

Of not such fatal consequence are other manifestations of this variety of egoism. Beach says, "The sentimentalist is a spiritual snob. He supposes himself to be possessed of insights and emotions more rare than the ordinary."² This delusion of ultra-refinement, when expressed, is so patently open to the ordinary observer that the blindness of folly on the part of the comic character is doubly amusing. Here we may indulge in what Meredith calls "the Broad Grin." In Sandra Belloni, the Pole sisters are convinced that they possess the "Nice Feelings" and "Fine Shades" of social

1. p.73.
decorum above the average. They try to freeze the common, cheery good-nature of Mrs. Chump; what exquisite torture their nice feelings exact when they are forced to consent to Mrs. Chump's marriage to their own father in order to save the family fortunes! In Vittoria, their brother Wilfred Pole becomes aware of the comic in his nature, although he "had at one time of his life imagined that he was marked by a peculiar distinction from the common herd."

The most colossal example of inflation is, of course, the brilliant Sir Willoughby Patterne. He is the sun in his own universe of adoring satellites, the magnet of baser metals. He receives homage as his due; a lack of it only shows the lack of ability to evaluate real artistic value. His vast sums to charity obtain the submissive respect of society; his support of such relatives as his maiden aunts and his cousins Vernon Whitford and Crossjay Patterne is assured as long as they conform to his wishes. As if enraptured by an inward vision, he says, "I see farther than most men, and feel more deeply." The delicacy of such a treasure must not be marred by repellent persons or disturbing events, for his whole nature is likely to become blighted - "I surround myself with healthy people specially to guard myself from having my feelings wrung." His choice of bride is not inspired by love, for essentially he is incapable of any but self-love. She is a rare art piece snatched from wolvish competitors, selected for the purpose of gracing his own perfection and that of his posterity. When another lady is suggested as his bride, he cries, "'A widow!' and straightens

1. p.314.
2. The Egoist, p.51.
3. Ibid., p.84.
"his whole figure to the erectness of the letter I." Nothing second-hand will do; and his virgin bride, loyal to him throughout life, must remain undefiled by a second marriage after his death - he begs his Clara to be true to his "dust." No sacrifice of his own perfection is he willing to concede to others - they are "extinct" if they refuse to conform to the proper positions of subjugation to which he has assigned them in his mind. Laetitia Dale takes an X-Ray of his very heart when she says, "Perhaps you are too proud for ambition, Sir Willoughby." Diana Warwick is probably thinking of such as he when she remarks, "I am not sentimental about garden flowers: they are cultivated for decoration, grown for clipping."

Sentimentalism also extends to social groups. Meredith particularly censures patriotic sanctimoniousness. The Irish Captain Con says of the English flag, "And when you gaze on it fondly you're playing the part of a certain Mr. Narcissus." Sir Willoughby gazes on it fondly during his three-year excursion around the world, for he sees nothing but the superiority of the British. Of Augustus Warwick Meredith remarks, "Perhaps his worst fault was an affected superciliousness before the foreigner." Meredith sees the British lion waving its majestic tail in a kind of solemn joy as it gazes benignly upon its lesser fellows. But he also discerns the rapacious gleam behind the calm eye and the points of the claws beneath the soft fur. "Our England holds possession of a considerable portion of the

1. The Egoist, p.16.
2. The Egoist, p.49.
3. Ibid., p.35.
globe, and it keeps the world in awe to see her bestowing so considerable a portion of her intelligence upon her recreations. To prosecute them with her whole heart is an ingenious exhibition of her power... the highest mountain in Britain, the mountain of Accumulated Humbug."

A third type of sentimentalism may be seen in the literary field. As always, Meredith leans toward fusion and moderation. Diana Warwick says, "Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab." Tennyson's "rose-mist" irritates Meredith, for he writes to Captain Maxse, "Do you care to find the holy Grail, Fred?... isn't there a scent of damned hypocrisy in all this lisping and vowelled purity of the Idylls?" In Richard Feverel, he characterizes the poet Diaper Sandoe by saying, "he was of course a sentimentalist and a satirist, entitled to lash the Age and complain of human nature." Charles Dewey Tenney, using the above quotation of Diana's as the basis of Meredith's views of the comic in literature, says, "The decadent realist, under cover of a pretended frankness... attempts to titillate the lower emotions... His realism amounts to a sadistic sentimentality... sentimentalists would convert literature into a rose-mist concealing facts or into a drab and insistent exhibition of the lowest realities." But writers who make proper

5. Richard Feverel, p.2
7. Ibid., p.418.
use of their talent do that which they can do best. Meredith himself, unless under the inspiration of his witty verve, can be very dull. The forcible restraint of his comic genius in much of his criticism and his evidently unwilling descent into yeoman soil in Rhoda Fleming produces a kind of tonelessness. The devious routes by which he explored the convolutions of the human soul had a marked effect on his style, resulting in an artificial eccentricity which has always been open to attack. Many writers are conscious of their faults, but they also feel, and Meredith may be included in this category, that they in some way are contributing something to letters that has never been given before. Shibli Bagarag shows this intoxication with one's own work when "his mind strutted through the future of his days and down the ladder of time, exacting homage from men, his brethren."¹

A Masking of Defeat

In the days of our primitive ancestors, sharp competition for physical self-preservation made physical combat the order of the day. The struggle brought out all the innate strength of the body so as to ensure success. But the ordeals of the present time are tests of mental sharpness and moral courage, the triumph of which is spiritual satisfaction. Meredith writes to G.P. Baker, "My method has been to prepare my readers for a crucial exhibition of the personae, and then to give the scene in the fullest of their blood and brain under stress of a fiery situation."²

1. Shagpat, p.91.
For a considerable period of life most people are sheltered and guided by others, as are the young Harry Richmond, Evan Harrington, and Richard Feverel. Their characters are negatively good - formless. They must be proved by combat.

Behold the life at ease; it drifts, 1
The sharpened life commands its course.

Progress, naturally, does not tolerate idling; things must be set in motion. The very security of inaction often leads to the abnormal growth of egoism. But there is always the possibility of defeat; the true test of character is the common sense of meeting overwhelming opposition. There may be a succumbing to the permanency of inferiority, an admission of failure with a determination to build up strength for future struggles, or an absolute refusal to admit defeat by striking back blindly, by fair means or foul. The first is weakness, the second is common sense, and the third is folly.

This type of folly is plainly seen in such a character as Percy Dacier in Diana of the Crossways. He is wounded by a flaw in Diana; he refuses to forgive a desperate, apparently deceptive act which has really been prompted by love for him. Diana's friend, Lady Dunstane, "became enlightened enough to distinguish in the man a known, if not a common type of the externally soft and polished, internally hard and relentless, who are equal to the trials of love only as long as favouring circumstances and seemings nurse the fair object of their courtship." 2 He covers his defeat by a speedy marriage to a frosty heiress with whom he is not in love.

2. Diana, p.358.
Diana's innumerable errors are themselves due to a previous defeat in pride. Her hasty marriage to Augustus Warwick has proved a loss chiefly to her intellectual liberty. She leaves him, only to recuperate her grievance by plunging into a series of follies. Her innocent friendship with Lord Dannisburgh reestablishes her intellectual pride, but it brings the out of a moral society's disapproval. Through the uncertain financial returns of novel-writing she attempts to maintain an expensive establishment and to entertain hosts of witty friends, but "her error was the step into Society without the wherewithal to support her position there."¹ To pay her debts she commits the worst mistake of all - the selling of an important State secret.

Disapproval by one's fellow men is one of the most biting of defeats. Farmer Fleming and Rhoda, not willing to suffer social ostracism when Dahlia's ruin through Edward Blancove threatens to become known in their village, offer her on the altar of "honorable" marriage to an unknown suitor, a black scoundrel who is well paid for this tender service and who, at the same time, is already in possession of a wife and family whom he has deserted. To Dahlia, already severely buffeted by her own mistakes and by the meddling of others, this last sacrifice for love of her family and its subsequent horror is a signal for attempted suicide.

In One of Our Conquerors, Victor Radnor defies society in his alliance with young Nataly after having left his lawful wife who is many years older than himself. While he despises the tyranny of the marriage law which forbids a legal union with Nataly, he cannot accept the social odium against Nataly and their daughter Nesta. He plans to reinstate the family at any cost.  

¹ Diana, p.301.
cost. But his continual lavish entertainments hasten the death of Nataly; and his arrangement for the loveless marriage of Nesta to a well-born and honorable nobleman to lend the proper dignity to his own union would have been disastrous if carried out. Ironically enough, Nataly dies exactly five and one half hours before Radnor's wife. He himself goes insane. Nesta is the only salvage of the wreck.

This forcible attempt to wrest victory from absolute loss sometimes takes the form of a sophisticated and subtle revenge. Underneath it is bull-blind wrath overriding everything in its way. Lord Ormont's injury is his dismissal from the army, an army which he has faithfully served the major part of his life and which has raised him to the glory of a military hero. He feels that his error in judgment, though costly, has been too severely condemned. In his rage and contempt of a society that can be so ungrateful, he secures a certain satisfaction in a marriage beneath his social station. Aminta has always admired Ormont as a great leader of men, but her idol falls to the dust after their marriage when she discovers that he is extracting balm from anything to show the world how he despises it and that she is being used for this petty gratification.

The most cruel despot of this type is Sir Austin Feverel. As we have seen, his original error was his aloof withdrawal into the palace of his superior mind, his failure to recognize the place of instinct and emotion in humanity. An older Sir Willoughby in many ways, he is more coldly silent. His wife's soul shrivels, and she runs into the warmth of the love of the poet Diaper Sandoe. This is the shattering blow to Sir Austin's self-esteem. His system for the education of Richard now serves two ends. It 

not only maintains his position of mental superiority, but it is also a weapon to show the world that an erring mother's natural affection can be superseded by a wounded father's scientific training. This dual motive runs through all his action. He allows the sacrifice of three human hearts, Clare, Lucy, and Richard, for the proving of his own infallibility. In a letter to Mr. Lucas, Meredith says, "the main design and purpose I hold to. I have certainly made it too subtle, for none have perceived it... The 'System', you see, had its origin not so much in love for his son, as in wrath for his wife, and so carries its own Nemesis ... The moral is that no System of the sort succeeds with human nature, unless the originator has conceived it purely independent of personal passion. That was Sir Austin's way of wrecking his revenge.\(^1\)

Richard himself is blinded by insane revenge when he discovers the base deception of the Mounts. Immediately after a reconciliation with his wife, Lucy, he dashes away to fight a duel with Mount. He is seriously wounded; and Lucy, in anguish over his possible death, contracts brain fever and dies.

These foolish attempts to snatch triumph from defeat are so often fatally tragic. The error of these comic characters is as gigantic as that of those who permanently retreat, for their strength is diverted into false channels. Yet these ordeals, which can cause so much havoc, can also be used to cure folly. The really wise man makes use of experience, whatever it may be, for his own and others' good.

A Masking of Inferiority

In masking a defeat in self-esteem there is an attempt to regain lost superiority. Now we are to consider those who have never known superiority but who have an inordinate adoration of it.

Most of intelligent mankind acts to secure the world's good opinion. Civilization, which has set up certain moral standards for its guidance, has favored the followers of these standards with respect and approval. The actual attainment of the goals, however, is often much too difficult or troublesome. If the world's good opinion can be secured by deception, so much the better. Adrian Harley in Richard Feverel is an extreme sensualist; to society at large he is an exemplary young man.

In this connection, the individual is not entirely to blame, for civilization has set up many standards which in themselves masquerade as moral excellencies or which have not accepted new truths. Political, religious, and social institutions often lag behind in the march of progress; they have not sloughed off old errors. As a consequence, many persons are led astray in their attempts to follow the true goals.

Meredith complains of the Tories who uphold Toryism in place of genuine 1 patriotism. He regrets that as yet no better method than governing by parties has been devised, but that in government, "it's the curse of our country to have politics as well as other diseases."

He despises religious hypocrisy for personal and selfish gain. Religion itself has become a business, an effective tool in deception. In "The 1. Beauchamp, p.126. 2. Ibid., p.24
Baggar's Soliloquy" the pious shopkeeper is singled out:

On week-days he's playing at Spider and Fly,
And on Sundays he sings about Cherubim.1

Even those with the noblest intentions have failed to supply essential needs in religion; in a measure Christianity itself has failed - "What you say about Christianity arresting sensualism is very well; but the Essenian parentage of Christianity was simply ascetism ... Paganism no doubt deserved the ascetic reproof; but Christianity failed to supply much that it destroyed."2

Social customs are so often ridiculous modes that pass away. Meredith commiserates Lord Fleetwood's sad folly in keeping to the pledge of his word when by so doing he is committing infinitely greater wrong. Like many of the comic characters, he cannot choose the lesser of two evils.

Meredith believes thoroughly in physical exercise as a means of releasing stored-up primitive energy, but he detests one outlet of this kind - duelling. It is both silly and wasteful. In Farina, a tale of German chivalry in the middle ages, he tells of the White Rose Club, organized to defend the honor of the white rose, Margarita. In another place Meredith cries out, "Colney on Clubs! he's right; they're the medieval in modern times, our Baron's castles, minus the Barons; dead against public life and social duties ... Sectionally social means anything but social."3

The White Rose Club spends its whole energy in practise duels of slight origin and no sense. "Not to possess a beauty-scar, as the wounds received in these endless combats were called, became the sign of inferiority."4

The action of the club becomes signally comic when a real crisis arises. Margarita is snatched by bandits and carried away to their lair. The club, with a tremendous display of energy, rushes to her rescue, only to discover that she has already been rescued by the more wide-awake and sensible Farina and his friends. With the Monk, who has attempted to exorcise the Devil in lonely meditation on a mountain-top, each one can say, "I am the victim of self-incense."

The folly of duelling becomes even more evident when there are tragic consequences. Major Waring says, "I detest duelling...I don't like a system that permits knaves and fools to exercise a claim to imperil the lives of useful men." One wonders again why Meredith does not apply this opinion to aggressive warfare, for there the evils of duelling are increased a thousand-fold. Beach observes that Alvan, in *The Tragic Comedians*, killed by the bullet of Prince Marko in a duel, has no fault to find with chance, for he who commits himself to such a senseless ordeal must not complain.

The inferior in wealth or in social position becomes comic when he apes the real thing. Meredith says of Lady Camper's rouge, "we loathe the substitute, omitting to think how much less it is an imposition than a form of practical adoration of the genuine." Since even the apparent genuine may be false, the situation is doubly comic; the Comic Spirit may show two dimples instead of one. For instance, great wealth brings its own dangers,

2. Rhoda Fleming, p.199.
especially if it is unearned. The aristocrat who inherits a title and social position is merely invested with what the economists call "unearned increment." His situation also bears its attendant evils. And these are what look so promising to the persons who do not have them.

The comic character forges a new set of shining circumstances for himself. Meredith remarks, "poverty is never ridiculous to comic perception until it attempts to make its rags conceal its bareness in a forlorn attempt at decency, or foolishly to rival ostentation." In "The House on the Beach," Mart Timman has acquired some money and some official position in a small town. His success suggests that he aspire to presentation at Court and to the position of knighthood. After a severe storm, whose rioting waters almost engulf him and his home, he is brought to shore where the townsfolk are gathered. Suddenly the wind whips the ends of his dressing gown apart - underneath glitters his most treasured possession, his magnificent Court suit! And - "Perfect gravity greeted him from the crowd."

A nice care of the figure one presents in social circles is of supreme importance. Mrs. Mountstuart wisely observes, "appearances make up a remarkably large part of life." In General Ople's case, idleness fosters a super-sensitiveness toward public regard which, had he continued his business of soldiering, would probably never have engaged his attention. He has "the sentiment of humble respectfulness towards aristocracy" and gardening is "a business he delighted in, as long as he could perform it in a gentlemanly manner, that is to say, so long as he was not overlooked."
This process of being overlooked can be so degrading! The Harrington daughters, who have risen to higher strata of society through judicious marriages, "were dutiful and loving children, and wrote frequently; but of course they had to consider their new position."¹ This new position, strangely enough, forbids acknowledging one's parents to acquaintances and bans appearing at the funeral of a tailor-father.

This is nothing but hypocrisy and sham glory. Meredith uncovers the real battle-ground of social life in his account of the Generalship of Sir Willoughby, Richmond Roy, and the Countess de Saldar (née Harrington). He praises the artistic maneuvers of the Countess with the following commendation: "'Touching a nerve' is one of those unforgivable small offences which, in our civilized state, produce the social vendettas and dramas that, with savage nations, spring from the spilling of blood. Instead of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, we demand a nerve for a nerve."² Horace de Craye is moved to remark upon Willoughby's skill in that connection, "The art of cutting is one of the branches of a polite education in this country."³ Here, unknown to the comic characters, the distended ego is more easily seen and the disease more readily diagnosed than in other cases. The ridiculous reaches its height in the Pole sisters who have practised the art of lofty hauteur to a fine point. They call themselves Pole, Polar, and North Pole, to indicate "the three shades of distance which they could convey in a bow."⁴ Of the three, North Pole (Cornelia) is most adept, for unhappy strangers "bowed to an iceberg, which replied to them with the freezing indifference of the floating colossus."⁵

1. Evan Harrington, p.16.  
2. Ibid., p.208-09.  
4. Sandra Belloni, p.2  
5. Ibid., p.3
To those who are deeply concerned with the improvement of society, these derangements in the natural good of the human race are matters of real concern. Matsey Weyburn in Lord Ormont is fervent in "his loathing of artifice to raise emotion, loathing of the affected, the stilted, the trumpet of speech," and Meredith describes Beauchampism as "anything which is the obverse of Byronism and rarely woos your sympathy, shuns the statuesque pathetique, or any kind of posturing." Yet there is so much artificiality, affectation, and posturing in the world that it becomes one of our most serious problems. Meredith himself uses an affected style to attract attention to the "intellectuals," the high caste of the literary world. But it is this very thing which tends to infuriate him with others. The only thing that allows him to tolerate them at all is to study them.

What is the remedy? To Meredith, Laughter. Who applies it? The Comic Spirit, here in the person of Meredith. The application is not always effective, but it is one of our best tonics.

1. Sandra Belloni, p.94.
2. Beauchamp, p.32.
CHAPTER IV

The "OBLIQUE LIGHT" OF THE COMIC SPIRIT

The Comic Spirit, the shooting star of quickly transient luster, has perspicacious qualities which can only be ferreted out by the alert and watchful eye. Along its way it has incorporated other philosophical views which fire its headlong course into a passionate zeal for transmitting its oblique rays deep into the darkness of Earth. If it seems to have momentarily disappeared, know that it hovers, like a will-o-the-wisp, over the marshlands of humanity.

The Comic Spirit in Meredith's Works

We must remember that the comedy and the Comic Spirit are two separate entities. The first is the fault; the second is the moving spirit of reform in correction of the fault. If the comedy is well presented by the writer there is no doubt but that the Comic Spirit is generated in many of the minds of the spectators; that is what some of Meredith's critics mean when they say the story should speak for itself. But, as a Victorian novelist, Meredith will not permit any of his meaning to be lost if he can help it. As a Comic Spirit he must move through the comedy, kindling the actors and spectators at once.

The Comic Spirit operates on the intellect. In the "Essay" Meredith writes, "The Comic poet is in the narrow field or the enclosed square of the society he depicts; and he addresses the still narrower enclosure of
men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters . . . nor can he whose business it is to address the mind be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity."

The Comic Spirit not only infuses common sense in those who can understand, but in those intelligent men and women whose social position, wealth, or artistic genius give them the opportunity of being of greatest service to men. Most of mankind looks to its leaders for guidance and support - Shibli Bagarag is told that "We of the city of Colb take our fashions from them of the city of Shagpat." Right aims in the leaders will lessen the chance of error in the masses. Sometimes, of course, sacrifices are demanded of others for the illumination of these leaders, but such sacrifices are for greater good. George C. Trevelyan says, "Out misdeeds punish others beside ourselves. If we could each of us see the sum of evil for which he or she is really responsible, we should all turn with horror from our faults...we need a great novelist to illumine our conscience."

The only consolation of the injured is that misfortune may purge one's own folly or that of others, as Meredith shows in "Martin's Puzzle."

Lose a leg, save a soul - a convenient text:

If the Lord permits that she be made a victim of fools
It's a roundabout way, with respect let me add,
If Molly goes crippled that we may be taught.

2. Ibid., p.3
As has been indicated, this can hardly be a healing salve to the majority of innocent victims. The Christian hope of reward for suffering in a future life will always prove more attractive to the ordinary man. Too, the amount of sacrifice necessary to teach some fools is more than they are worth. Dahlia Fleming suffers mental torture and physical debilitation before her father, sister, and Edward Blancove are convinced of their selfishness. Clare Doria and Lucy Feveral are offered up for the instruction of Richard and his father. Chloe "dies to save" the Duchess of Dewlap from a fate similar to her own, the misfortune of loving a reckless ingrate. Certainly the characters who are thus instructed hardly deserve such attention.

To see the light of the Comic Spirit the comic character must be, momentarily at least, free from the grip of passion. Mrs. Mel wisely observes, "A madman gets madder when you talk reason to him." An egoist is a madman; he is delirious from the fever of his disease. The dominance of selfish passion bars the light of reason, but when the crisis subsides calm judgment may enter. Meredith writes to the Countess of Lytton, "There is no consolation for a weeping heart. Only the mind can help it, when the showers have passed." Sentimental sympathy may be more welcome, but it has a tendency to produce a self-righteous apathy, which is useless. The right use of philosophy gives the best aid, for it invigorates.

Philosophy, thoughtless to soothe,
Lifts, if thou wilt, or there leaves thee supine.

In *The Egoist*, Vernon Whitford shows this kind of productive guidance. Clara Middleton's sad predicament is her promise to marry a man whom she later discovers to be a confirmed egoist. In her distress, she looks hungrily about for encouragement to break the bond. Vernon does not urge her to action, but he does advise her when desperation leads to error. He knows that there is no victory like self-conquest, and Clara finally severs her obligation of her own accord. Meredith says of Vernon, who watches the consternation and the desperate wriggling of the repulsed Willoughby to regain his former superior position, "Yet, as he was perfectly sedate, none could have suspected his blood to be chasing wild with laughter."

The interesting question now arises - to what extent does Meredith conceive the illumination of common sense to be effective in restoring the comic character to normal? If there is success, what is the extent?

To any observer, a survey of the field shows relatively few complete triumphs. Like Beauchamp, Meredith seems to feel the comic world a difficult one to conquer, and he is satisfied with even slight success. In his "Essay on Comedy" we read, "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 ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes."  

Lady Camper detects the faults of General Ople but marries him; he accepts her ridicule of himself and corrects his follies. (From a realistic point of view, however, male egoism would have to reach the zero mark before it accepted Lady Camper's high-handed abuse.) Thomas Redworth justly

2. *Essay on Comedy*, p.41
appraises the real value of Diana's character beneath all its errors; her grateful recognition of his patient endurance moves her to a change. Evan Harrington accepts social censure for the foolish but fond schemes of his sisters; two of the sisters respond by discarding their false masks, and only the Countess proves incorrigible. Harry Richmond's love overlooks his father's extravagances; the father finally achieves a victory just before his death. Beauchamp loves his uncle Everard Romfrey in spite of the latter's narrow Toryism; the uncle is brought to a partial conversion. This perception of the comic in others while still retaining love for them implies a deep regard for intrinsic value. The very knowledge urges a search for their regeneration. In turn, the comic characters, recognizing the falsity of their positions, are frequently moved to reform. "Sensitivity to the comic laugh is a step in civilization."¹

One type of failure, however, can be attributed to over-sensitiveness to the comic laugh. Some blushes may burn too deeply. The Countess in Evan Harrington cannot endure the social exposure she is forced to accept. She retreats to Rome and Catholicism, a religion in which every man is a gentleman and error is forgiven through the priests. Meredith condemns such as she when he says, "She was now in the luxury of passivity, when we throw our burden on the Powers above, and do not love them."² Lord Fleetwood is finally led to an enlightenment of his folly, but "Courage to grappe with his pride and open his heart was wanting in him."³ He cannot accept Carinthia's deliberate repudiation of him, but retires into a monastery where he dies, in six months, of his austerities. These characters simply

1. "Essay on Comedy," p.49  
2. The Egoist, p.200  
do not have the moral stamina to effect an about-face.

In Rhoda Fleming Meredith says, "Saying 'I was a fool' they believe they have put an end to the foolishness. What father teaches them that a human act once set in motion flows on forever to the great account?" He warns that conscience is a sorry guest without courage, and that "If courage should falter, it is wholesome to kneel." This is the only use Meredith has for prayer; it is the only favor he asks of the Unknown Creator. In a letter to his daughter-in-law Daisy he says, "Fortitude is the one thing for which we may pray, because without it we are unable to bear the Truth." With him, prayer seems to be a sort of self-induced hypnotism by which the mind forces the body to do that which the egoism of nature rebels. However, he defines it in much more poetic language - "Prayer is our power within us to communicate with the desired beyond our thirsts."

Still others of Meredith's comic characters are blind through the intensity of self-love. J. H. E. Crees says Sir Austin needed only laughter to relieve him of his extravagances. Sir Austin certainly "was cognizant of the total absence of the humorous in himself (the want that most shut him out from his fellows)," but the System obscures anything outside it. This really human tragedy is revealed through a nephew, Austin Wentworth: "By degrees Austin learnt the baronet's proceedings, and smiled sadly."

Richmond Roy never fully realizes the bitterness and sorrow his rhapsodical exploits cause to those he loves. His son Harry is finally brought to a complete understanding of his father's character - "He had ceased to entertain me. Instead of a comic I found him a tragic spectacle....He clearly could not learn from misfortune...I chafed at his unteachable spirit; surely one of the most tragical things in life."  

Sir Willoughby's is, of course, the most hardened case. Neither shame, ridicule, or exposure unseats his unquenchable pride - he is blushless. He fails to see that "Candour is the best concealment, when one has to carry a saddle of absurdity."  

Of all such persons Meredith speaks the truth when he says, "There is ever in the mind's eye a certain wilfulness: we see and understand; we see and won't understand."  

But the Comic Spirit continues its unceasing efforts. For the successes it has as many or more failures. Its courage does not flag against what amounts at times to tremendous odds. Meredith writes that Beauchamp's Career is "an attempt to show the forces around a young man of present day in England, who would move them and finds them unutterably solid, though it is seen in the end that he does not altogether fail, and has not lived in vain." He expresses his faith in the earth's spiritual evolution in a poem called "The World's Advance."

Judge mildly the tasked world; and disdaine
To brand it, for it bears a heavy pack.
You have perchance observed the inebriate's track,
At night when he has quitted the inn-sign;

1. Harry Richmond, p.449.
2. Diana, p.298.
He plays diversions on the homeward line,
Still that way bent albeit his legs are slack:
A hedge may take him but he turns not back,
Nor turns this burdened world, of curving spine.
"Spiral," the memorable Lady terms
Our mind's ascent: our world's advance presents
That figure on a flat; the way of worms:
Cherish the promise of its good intents,
And warn it, not one instinct to efface
Ere Reason ripens for the vacant place.¹

Meredith in the Role of the Comic Spirit

The oblique light thrown by the Comic Spirit is never more elusive
than when sought for in Meredith himself. We are interested, first, in the
origin of his views.

He had a really natural joy in laughter, both as a physical and a
spiritual good. His critics are fond of referring to him as an optimist,
in contrast to Thomas Hardy as a pessimist. With Meredith it is an inborn
optimism, a natal gift of temperament. Like the champagne which flows so
freely through the pages of his novels, his spirit is clear, radiant, and
all the better for its effervescent sparkle. His friends have borne wit-
ness to the fact that he was a bracing and intoxicating influence. He
was "Robin" to William Hardman's "Tuko";² their notes and letters to each
other are filled with sheer lively nonsense. Meredith constantly referred
to Hardman's wife as Demitricia because she had been wooed five years, half
the period of the siege of Troy. Richard Le Gallienne and G.K. Chesterton
tell us that his talk was exactly like his books; Lady Butcher says that
"in later life Mr. Meredith became more serious in his conversation, and

2. See S.M. Ellis, A Mid-Victorian Pepys, (London: Cecil Palmer, 1923) and The
in his attitude toward life, and even in those days, we were seldom long
1 in his company without laughter." In his writing, Meredith's Celtic
nimbleness runs the full gamut of heterogenous and quickly-changing metaphor,
for his liveliness finds too many angles from which to shoot its lightning
flashes. Yet, to catch a glimpse of this Comic Spirit is a release and a
rejuvenation. Meredith says, "Laughter, let it be but genuine, is of a
common nationality, indeed a common fireside; and profound disagreement is
not easy after it." 2

It is no wonder that a poet-philosopher who finds laughter so valuable
should try to use it in the alleviation of the tragic. In this capacity
the laughter becomes purely mental. Meredith's vivacity carries with it
the corresponding irritability of ill temper when it encounters the un-
pleasant; in this case mere physical laughter can be satiric bitterness or
hilarious insanity. The gay charmer, Colonel de Craye, reveals this secret -
"You have heard of melancholy clowns. You would find the fact not so
laughable behind my paint." 3 Adrian Harley is Meredith's spokesman when he
remarks, "Well! all wisdom is mournful. 'Tis therefore, coz, that the wise
do love the Comic Muse. Their own high food would kill them. You shall
find great poets, rare philosophers, night after night in the broad grin
before a row of yellow lights and mouthing masks. Why? Because all's dark
4 at home." Meredith tries to modify the bubbling mirth of spontaneous joy
into the quiet laughter or wary smile of a discernment of tragedy.

1. Lady Butcher, Memories of George Meredith (New York: Charles Scribner's
Sons,1919), pp.60-61.
See also Janet Ross, The Fourth Generation: Reminiscence (London:Constable
He does not evade tragedy. He attempts to accept the inevitable and to lighten its burden. He tries to prevent the unnecessary evil caused by abnormal excesses of the ego. But he tolerates with no good grace the drooping despondency of the hurt soul - "Our closest instructors, the true philosophers - the story tellers, in short - will learn in time that Nature is not of necessity always roaring, and as soon as they do, the world may be said to be enlightened." ¹ The human race should take its full inheritance of the beauty of this world. Clara Middleton, in the midst of her pain, can say, "The world has faults; glaciers have crevasses, mountains have chasms; but is not the effect of the whole sublime?"² It is Meredith's admiration of the earth that gives him his faith, that urges him to apply what he has found to be good to a correction of that which is evil. This faith helps to adapt the individual into the social and cosmic scheme. In a letter he writes, "My religion of life is always to be cheerful."

The Comic Spirit is an aloof spirit; Curle calls it the "look of eternity on time." ⁴ As Meredith conceives it, this Spirit is detached and impersonal, yet sympathetic; it is sympathetic but not sentimental. The sympathy is of a useful kind, for in its detachment from human passion it has its origin in mental keenness. Yet even this kind of sympathy is an emotion; the Comic Spirit is guided by a zeal for progress, using mind as the pilot. It must be remembered again that this is Meredith's Comic Spirit - Peacock's Numbernimp is satiric, Shakespeare's Puck is a tease and assists at the antics of fools. Frederick Mayer likens the Spirit in Meredith to

². The Egoist, p.65.
⁴. Richard H.P. Curle, Aspects of George Meredith (London: George Routledge
the pastoral attitude, while W.T. Young compares it to the Greek chorus of Aristophanes, Goldsmith's Chinaman, and the Spectator. These surely have the same concern for humanity's progress, they are impersonal and alert observers, and they are zealous reformers; they do not, however, have the same bubbling agility in running down error. Meredith's unique stylistic methods have also aided in the process.

It is his literary style, though, which confuses readers and critics alike; and they refer to it as his obscurer and eccentricity. This seeming paradox must be explained. For one thing, he had several talents at his disposal - he was poet, novelist, dramatist, and critic. Dixon Scott says his life was one of essential frustration, because he wrote novels to pay for the publication of his poems and critical articles for the reviews to supplement the income from his novels. He never wrote a play for publication, but among his possessions at his death was an unfinished comedy, The Sentimentalists. Although he preferred writing poetry, he concentrated his attention on the novel. It not only helped him earn a living, which poetry did not do, but it served a wider public for the dissemination of his doctrine. He says, "Philosophy is required to make our human nature creditable and acceptable. Fiction implores you to have a bigger breast and take her in with this heavenly preservative helpmate, her inspiration and her essence." Still, he did not forsake his other gifts, for he...

2 (continued from p.62) and Sons, Ltd.,1908), pp.14-15.
brought his poetic, dramatic, and critical abilities into the novel."

Meredith's almost lyric exuberance and his multiplicity of metaphors proclaim him a poet; his penetrating sharpness in translating the thoughts of the brain through facial expression, movement, and language concede him to be a dramatist; his interpretation of life and society prove him to be a critic. His views as a philosopher have already been given—we now turn our attention to his use of the poetic and the dramatic in his novels.

In the hands of a poet the metaphor is an effective instrument of clarity, and so Meredith intends it to be. But his fly so swiftly they pass us by, and they crowd in such numbers they obscure a free view. Both in his poems and in his novels, the number and variety of his metaphors have dazed, rather than instructed the reader; only when the tangled skeins are unraveled and examined do they perform their primary function of clarity. Meredith says of Diana Warwick, the only novelist in his books, "Metaphors were her refuge...the banished of Eden had to put on metaphors, and the common use of them has helped largely to civilize us. The sluggish of intellect despise them, but our civilization is not much indebted to that major faction." His fault is that, in spite of his evident purpose to instruct and appeal to the intelligent, he is not above performing monkey-tricks for his own delight. He writes to Alice Meynell, "my opinions, unless I dress them expressly to amuse myself by making the modern reader gape, are blunt hammerstrokes." The following passage from One of Our Conquerors.

5. (continued from page 63) Diana, p.16

1. Diana, p.231

James McKechnie, in Meredith's Allegory, Op. cit., says, p.20, "Meredith's symbolism, on the other hand, is such as only the world's greatest master of metaphor could produce."

while it is not really one of his obscure pieces, is illustrative of his method in metaphor. Victor Radnor, having slipped on a wet pavement, is helped to his feet by a man who, in the act of assistance, has dirtied Radnor's white waistcoat. Radnor involuntarily exclaims, "Oh, confound the fellow!" and the gathered mob takes offence at the ungrateful remark. After a short altercation in which Radnor attempts to brush away his remark with light condescension, his helper retorts, "And none of your dam punctilio." Now the word punctilio is a stab to the heart; Meredith devotes several paragraphs to the whizzing, searing darts of pain it causes in Radnor's good opinion of himself.

...and very soon he was worrying at punctilio anew, attempting to read the riddle of the application of it to himself, angry that he had allowed it to be the final word, and admitting it a famous word for the closing of a controversy - it banged the door and rolled drum-notes; it deafened reason. And was it a London cockney crow-word of the day, or a word that had stuck in the fellow's head from the perusal of his pothouse newspaper columns?

Furthermore, the plea of a fall, and the plea of a shock from a fall, required to account for the triviality of the mind, were humiliating to him who had never hitherto missed a step, or owned to the shortest of collapses. This confession of deficiency in explosive repartee was an old and rueful one with Victor Radnor. His godmother Fortune denied him that. She bestowed it on his friend Fenellan, and little else. Simeon Fenellan could clap the halter on the coltish mob; he had positively caught the roar of cries and stilled it, by capping the cries in turn until the people cheered him; and the effect of the scene upon Victor Radnor deposed him to rank the gift of repartee higher than a certain rosily oratorical that he was permitted to tell himself he possessed, in bottle if not on draught. Let it only be explosive repartee; the well-fused bomb, the
bubble to the stone, echo round the horn.
Fenellawould have discharged an extinguisher
on punctilio in emission.¹

The dramatist has little else to work with but his characters; they
create the atmosphere, reveal themselves, tell the story, and present the
ideas the dramatist wishes to give. The scope of the dramatist is limited,
and the events of the story are compressed into what the author feels are
the strikingly important scenes. It almost seems as if Meredith the novelist
is subject to the same limitations of the stage in regard to the number of
scenes and the use of conversation as a means of information. As a conse-
quence, his narration is very often indirect - oblique.

It is this which, at first glance, proves most annoying. What can be
more irritating to the curious reader than banishment from many of the
important and interesting events of the narrative? For example, we would
like to have actually met the Great Mel in Evan Harrington, for his effect
on his whole family makes up the story of the book. Yet the novel opens
with the resplendent figure of the artful tailor lying quietly in his coffin.
We learn to know Sir Austin Feverel's ruthless experimentation with his son;
it would have been just as interesting to us to see how this fault in
character drove his wife away into the arms of another lover. There can be
no denying, however, that the material in the books themselves perhaps
gives a more thorough and complete picture of the seemingly buried person and
events than if they had actually formed the major portion of the stories.

Meredith's only interest is in the relationship of persons in society.
The thoughts of persons, outside of writing, are read through conversation,

¹ One of Our Conquerors, pp.1-4.
facial expression, action. These form the body of the drama and much of Meredith's novels. He often uses the indirect method of narration to secure the maximum interpretation of certain characters. Not the smallest clue is allowed to slip by. He forces it out of obscurity into the open, as in Victor Radnor's obsession with the word punctilio. A trifling incident serves us to read his whole character.

In the same way rapid-fire of unadorned conversation, as in the drama, may tell us just as much. In the following scene Sir Willoughby courts Clara by contemplating the brevity of life. The conversation alone indicates his ardent love of himself and Clara's scarcely-controlled repulsion of that love.

"If you lose me, Clara!"
"But you are strong, Willoughby."
"I may be cut off tomorrow."
"Do not talk in such a manner."
"It is as well that it should be faced."
"I cannot see what purpose it serves."
"Should you lose me, my love!"
"Willoughby!" 

The conversations of minor characters are important, for the spectators have a more disinterested viewpoint than the actors of the drama, especially when the latter are standing, unknowing, in the light of the oblique beam of the comic. Beauchamp, as a frenzied English patriot issuing a challenge of war to the whole French nation, is "too much on fire to know the taste of absurdity." Each chapter of Meredith's unfinished story, "The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen" gives an individual, first-person version of the main problem by a different character of the story.

1. Edward Clodd in "George Meredith: Some Recollections," Fortnightly Review, XCII, (1909), p. 24, quotes Meredith as saying, "I never outline my novels before starting them; I love day and night with my
Meredith sacrifices balanced organization of narrative to analysis of the comic character. He replies to the Rev. George Barnton, "What the American critic says of the plot is correct. But I do not make a plot. If my characters, as I have them at heart, before I begin on them, were boxed in a plot, they would soon lose the lines of their features."¹ When W.J. Dawson says, "he has never learned the art of simplicity,"² it is a just criticism of Meredith's use of multiple metaphor, or of the construction of sentence, paragraph, or plot. But Meredith has some excuse for a lack of simplicity in interpreting the comic character, for the latter plays a dual and sometimes a triple role. In his diagnosis of the ills of personality Meredith excels. Like Dr. Corney in The Egoist, he has "a Celtic intelligence for a meaning behind an illogical tongue."³

Meredith's probings into the labyrinths of mind, and often his insertion of certain Meredithian idiosyncrasies into mind, produces a certain artificiality to the language of his characters and further complicates his style. He excuses this complexity by saying "thought is tough."⁴ The thing which he really seems to have found very tough is a comprehensible written expression of many things he wished to illuminate.

By these poetic and dramatic devices, then, Meredith plays his oblique beam upon the comic characters, to reveal them in their nakedness to our startled gaze. Beach calls Meredith's novels "studies in civilization unperfected,"⁵ and the word "studies" is probably the best designation for them. At least the novel is of an unusual kind.

1. (continued from p.67) characters."
2. ( " " " ) The Egoist, p.48.
3. ( " " " ) Beaufchamp's Career, p.9.
Still a further word may be said of Meredith's method of illuminating us, his readers, who are other comic characters. In "The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper," Lady Camper fills the office of the Comic Spirit in much the same way as Meredith does in his novels. The subject for her instruction is the General, of whom Meredith says, "He was one of us; no worse, and not strikingly or perilously better."

General Ople has become so engrossed in his suit for the hand of Lady Camper that he fails to notice his own daughter's love affair with Lady Camper's nephew; even when it is brought to his attention he does not recognize the fact that he is in a position to smooth away some of the difficulties. On the other hand, Lady Camper is fully alive to the whole situation. She likes the General but sternly refuses to countenance his foibles. Rather than permit the decay in character she applies the axe to his egoism.

When he finally proposes marriage she accepts him with calculating coolness. Immediately after her acceptance of the fifty-five-year-old General she reveals her age to be seventh—her rouge, she says, cleverly concealed her wrinkles. The stunned lover would like to retreat, but his "honor" is at stake. Shortly after this, Lady Camper takes an extended tour.

A skill in drawing prompts her to send sketches from various points of her

3 (continued from p.168) The Egoist, p.268.
4 (""") In a letter to G.P. Baker (Letters, II, p.399), Meredith writes, "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."
6 (""") In the same letter to Baker mentioned above, Meredith says, "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."
journey - but what sketches! They strike terror to her lover's soul, for they are all caricatures of himself in various postures of egoism. One of the most typical is a picture of his daughter kneeling on the ground, weeping, near a sentry-box. Her lover, torn from her, is galloping toward the gulf. The sentry-box, a symbol of Ople's position in society as a retired army officer, contains one inhabitant - the General - who "contemplates his largely substantial full-fleshed face and figure in a glass." The sketches come thick and fast to perpetually harass our poor hero. Meredith observes that "Niobe under the shafts of Diana was hardly less violently and mortally assailed." The fatal wound is a drawing of the back view of himself, bent over in the act of gardening, an occupation he indulged in only when he is not being observed. The writing man moans, "she must have sat in an attic to the right view of me."

Since misery loves company, he looks about for others unhappily situated; in so doing, he steps out of his egoism. His daughter Elizabeth finds herself once more an object of consideration. Lady Camper then returns and recapitulates his follies and her part in their correction, and concludes with "Well, General, you were fond of thinking of yourself, and I thought I would assist you. I gave you plenty of subject-matter." She relieves his mind by revealing her real age to be forty-one, and later actually marries him, for "she had not been blissful in her first marriage; she had abandoned the chase of an ideal man, and she had found one who was tuneable so as not to offend her ears."

1. (continued from p.69) In Short Stories, p.267.
2. p.300
3. p.300
4. p.312
5. p.315.
Meredith, like Lady Camper, gives the reader "plenty of subject-matter"—increasing numbers of word-pictures showing various degrees of egoism, from the simply amusing to the stark tragic. He is not really satirical, for true satire has its origin in contempt, but he leans in that direction more than once. If he hurts, he is merely employing the knife of a surgeon—painful perhaps, but with the primary intention of healing. Comic laughter is the first sign of recovery. Meredith advises that if "they are in a comic situation, as affectionate couples must be when they quarrel, they would not wait ... to bring back the flood-tide of tender feelings, that they should join hands and lips."¹

For a wound to heal, there must be good blood; for a correction of folly there must be intelligence. Matey Weyburn in Lord Ormont distinguishes two methods of correction—"If they had heads to understand, I would try them at their heads. Otherwise they are the better...for a little hostile exercise of their fists."² In regard to the latter method he cites what is undoubtedly a reference to the French Revolution:

You see, human nature comes round again, try as we may to upset it, and the French only differ from us in wading through blood to discover that they are at their old tricks once more; "I am your equal, sir your born equal. Oh! you are a man of letters! Allow me to be in a bubble about you!"³

It is evident that he feels England as a nation to have a head. It can usually settle its problems through deliberation and compromise (the better and more enduring way). Yet, regardless of the method, crises are emerging movements towards progress. Satisfaction with existing conditions

2. p.167.
3. The Egoist, p.95
slows the circulation and dulls initiative - "all these parsons and judges and mobcaps insist upon conformity... Yet we know from history, in England, France, Germany, that the time of nonconformity brought out the manhood of the nation."¹ He admits, though he neglects to emphasize, that there must be a fair degree of stabilization in society before these energizing movements can have telling effect.

Meredith's purpose in writing is to jolt the complacent as well as to calm the extravagant. His Comic Spirit "proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us."²

The question whether Meredith has accomplished this aim has been considered in part in this chapter in regard to his method and style. Further considerations respecting the validity of his psychology, the critical reception of his philosophy of the comic and the corrective value of the Comic Spirit, must be left, in the next chapter, to his readers and critics.
CHAPTER V

THE PRESENT CRITICAL VALUE OF GEORGE MEREDITH'S CONCEPTION OF THE COMIC

Of all problems in present-day literary criticism which seems bewilderingly unsettled, that of Meredith's admission into the realm of the great remains paramount. Joseph Warren Beach, who has retained an interest in Meredith over a period of several years and who has veered from several of his former opinions, tells us that there is plenty of occasion for Meredith studies, for he is still one of the most questionable shapes among all the major figures of nineteenth century England. There is no doubt that Meredith is extremely mercurial; the substance appears bright, but an attempt to examine it sends the volatile stuff slipping and sliding into invisibility. Some critics, like Virginia Woolf, prefer to sidetrack the issue by concluding that we are neither near enough to be under his spell nor far enough to see him in proportion.

At all events, Meredith must be considered solely as a comic artist. Was he fitted for the task? To what degree has he succeeded? To what extent has he failed, for it is a fact that he is read very little.

We have already seen that he was well-endowed with a natural gift for laughter which he applied to easing the tragedy of human life. Critics are inclined to believe that his perception of his own faults in character caused him to be especially sensitive in detecting the same human weaknesses
in others. One of his biographers, Robert E. Sencourt, lists the following as his outstanding faults: his snobbishness in childhood, a love of "showing-off," a quarrel with his feckless father, his refusal to visit his first wife on her deathbed, his neglect of his son Arthur after his second marriage, and his working for a Tory newspaper when he held Liberal views.  

From these and other facts, John B. Priestley concludes that Meredith was not a great man. Yet William, Meredith's son, has stated publicly that the biographical facts which Priestley cites are not all correct. In addition, R.E. G. George also charges that Priestley has refused to accept some of William Meredith's biographical corrections and that he has even misinterpreted some of the facts so as to fit his theory that Meredith himself can be illuminated by his own "oblique light." Other ameliorating circumstances have been given by such friends of Meredith as William Hardman and Lady Butcher, who knew many of the hidden facts of his life. As far as the biographical facts are concerned, then, we are led to believe that the whole story has not been told.

1 In The Life of George Meredith, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).
2 In a letter to the editor of T.L.S., July 1, 1926, p.448.
4 R.E.G. George, in his "Vindication," says that Alice, Ellen Meredith's daughter by her first marriage, is still living. S.M. Ellis, in The Letters and Memoirs of Sir William Hardman, p.196, says that after Ellen ran away with the artist Wallis, there was an illegitimate son Harold, later Felix. Both he and Alice, with their descendants, would be hurt by any publicity in regard to Ellen.
Yet Priestley's premise, even if arrived at by dubious means, has the support of others, including Yeats and Maurois. They believe that Meredith's recognition of his own egoistic nature accounts for his genius in portraying the egoism of his fellows. Maurois says, "...it might be true to say: Meredith pilloried the egoist because he was himself an egoist, and Meredith ceased to be an egoist because he had written The Egoist...Meredith tried to re-fashion his character by his works and very nearly succeeded."

Meredith's Psychology

Another piece of equipment necessary for an artist who occupies himself with the dissection of human nature is his keenness of psychological interpretation. In this he is said to have antedated many of the eminent psychologists of the present day, both in the professional and in the literary fields.

Sex egoism is the link between Meredith and Sigmund Freud. In The Tragic Comedians, Alvan the Jew is determined that before he marries the Gentile, Clotilde, he will override all the social contempt shown his race by Clotilde's parents and friends. Instead of accepting her freely offered love, he humiliates her by his delay and cools the ardor of her pledge by the fantastic "proving" of his genius. His vagaries finally lead to the fatal termination of a duel. In The Egoist, Meredith rightly says, "The love season is the carnival of egoism." We have already seen how Diana's love for Percy Dacier shows itself in a false pride, which seeks to hide the existence of debt incurred in his behalf. When the debt becomes too

2. Ibid., p. 111
3. Ibid., p. 110
oppressive and she desperately sells Percy's political secret, she suffers Dacier's repudiation of her love.

The link between Alfred Adler and Meredith is the belief that egoism is an unconscious effort to camouflage an inferiority complex. Meredith's studies in this connection have been cited in Chapter III under A Masking of Defeat and A Masking of Inferiority. Here, sex egoism is enlarged to include much of the general social scene. Adler goes beyond Meredith in showing that egoism frequently masks physical as well as social inferiority, a fact which is unnoticed by Meredith, who is usually preoccupied with his blooming specimens of health.

It is only occasionally that Meredith's stories exhibit psychological flaws. Lord Fleetwood's dying in a monastery in six months as the result of his austerities shows a bigoted obsession with the idea that starved emotion tends toward physical decay. General Ople's acceptance of Lady Camper's merciless flaying of his faults is worthy of a saint's crown of martyrdom. It is not clear, though, that Richard's desertion of Lucy is a psychological flaw. Richard's unusual rearing has caused a physical and mental abnormality; it is a case of the dam breaking to release turbulent flood waters.

Mrs. Gretton says that Meredith does not see the necessity of insisting that a capacity for emotion is the very basis of human equipment. There is no reason for his insistence on what he considers a natural possession. He does not shun the importance of controlling emotion or of the hypocritical forcing of false emotion - sentimentality; for, as a Comic Spirit, he sees how excesses drown reason and result in comedy.
C.E.M. Joad has said that modern psychologists like Freud, Jung, and Adler, and modern writers like Huxley and Lawrence have combined to sow distrust of reason and to present it as a tool of the unconscious. But it is not reason that is the tool of the unconscious - it is a reason warped by emotion. Modern psychoanalysis attempts to bring the error of the unconscious to the conscious, which only means a dispassionate purging of error by the pure prowess of the intellect. Meredith's Comic Spirit attempts to bring the fault of reason blinded by the passion of egoism to the common sense of the mind. The processes are the same; only the language is different.

The Reception of his Comic Philosophy

The next question is whether Meredith's conception of the comic is logically acceptable. As has been often indicated, the totality of his philosophy is incorporated under the banner of the Comic Spirit. Let us say, rather, that he combined the jarring elements of seemingly opposed philosophies to form a single harmonious one of his own, a feat of admirable ingenuity. If a Victorian compromise is anywhere to be found it is in Meredith's philosophy. Nora Solum points out that, even now, there has been no reconciliation between a philosophy of reason, represented by Mill, and a philosophy of intuition, represented by Carlyle; the controversy is still being waged by the Pragmatists, modernists, and fundamentalists.2

But Meredith effected such a reconciliation. Scientists must approve his acceptance of the theory of the non-annihilation of matter and its

2. Nora Olava Solum, Conscious Intelligence as an Element in the Works of Meredith and Hardy, University of Chicago Master's Thesis, p. 4
continual change in form for the evolution of the earth; religionists can have no quarrel with his fundamental doctrine of brotherly love and service for mankind. He has combined these two apparently irreconcilable doctrines into one. To Meredith, Nature is the Universe, a Universe composed of progressive elements. The power behind spiritual evolution is man, whose privilege it is to set the natural forces in motion towards progress. Human service, the source of all virtue and morality, is basic force. The supreme confidence he shows in his philosophy proves puzzling even to his opponents - Leonard Woolf says in a kind of wonder, "To me the philosophy underlying the poems and preached by or implicit in the novels, particularly all the stuff about Nature, with a large N, is bunkum...but I accept it partly because...it seems to be a reasonable kind of bunkum." Until our knowledge of the ultimate source and end of destiny becomes more explicit, though, Meredith's view is bound to have vitality.

Charles Tenney says that among English men of letters Meredith is rated, almost alone, as a profound original thinker by professional philosophers; his philosophy is classical in its moderation and catholicism and modern in its positivistic adherence to earth. But his real originality lies in his theory of comedy and the uses of his Comic Spirit. This has been his greatest attraction to modern philosophy.

For a long time comedy was chiefly the prerogative of literature; and in literature, of the drama. Meredith enlarged its scope by assisting

1. In "George Meredith" in Nation and Athenaeum, XXXIX, (1926), p.323.
in its recognition by philosophy proper, and by introducing it to a largely non-dramatic literary medium, the novel. James Sully commands his work by saying, "The combination of a fine feeling for the baffling behavior of this spirit with a keen scientific analysis, such as is found in Mr. George Meredith's "Essay on Comedy" seems to be a rarity in literature." In Chapter IV some account of the evidence of Meredith's native inclination toward comedy and laughter has been given. The style of his writing, if nothing else, would confirm that. But how has his scientific analysis been received by critics?

Jean Paul Richter's theory is that comedy contains a double contrast. The first is the objective comic circumstances; the second, the subjective perception of these objective comic circumstances. But Meredith knows that the objective contrast is comedy whether the mind perceives it or not. Very often the objective contrast never lodges in the mind - it is the aim of the Comic Spirit to direct it there. A pistol may be fired; the sound exists; but unless the sound is transmitted through a normal ear-drum to the normal brain of a person, or indirectly by wireless, the sound is not heard. Meredith appreciates the difficulties under which the Comic Spirit struggles in order to be heard.

It was only two years after Meredith's death that Bergson brought out his _Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic_. Its close resemblance to Meredith's essay is startling. Better still, it is simpler, clearer, and devoid of poetic exuberance. Louise Mathewson, in comparing the two,

shows that they agree on two fundamental points: the appeal of comedy to
the intellect, and the correction of folly as the primary aim. She goes
on to say that Meredith's novels, more satisfactorily than any English
comedy, illustrate Bergson's theory of the comic. Some of them do,
certainly, but only because Meredith's novels illustrate his own theory
of the comic and because Bergson has used part of Meredith's theory.

Bergson falls short of Meredith in at least two propositions. First,
he says the comic person is comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself.
This ignorance may make a person more amusing or more pathetic to the
spectator, but the essential comedy does not increase thereby. Meredith
desires to show the comic character that he is in a comic position; this
knowledge may lead either to a cessation or a continuance of comedy, as
the case may be. Second, he says:

What life and society require of each
of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns
the outlines of the present situation, together
with a certain elasticity of mind and body to
enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence ...
The rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its
corrective ... Here I would point out, as a symptom
equally worthy of notice, the absence of feelings
which usually accompanies laughter.2

Bergson's use of the terms "rigidity" and "elasticity" is pertinent in
connection with one type of comic character, but it excludes others. If
fits the type mentioned in Chapter III under The Position of Supremacy.
Sir Willoughby Patterne's very name indicates the rigidity of the pattern of
his etoistic mind, and Sir Austin Feverel's system is as rigid as a triangle.

1. Louise Mathewson, "Bergson's Theory of the Comic in the Light of English
Comedy," University of Nebraska Studies in Language, Literature, and
Criticism, No. 5, Lincoln, 1920, p. 21.
These, though, are the mortally-diseased egoists, practically past the cure of the Comic Spirit. To Meredith, the degree of rigidity must not be so acute if social regeneration is to occur, for elasticity is hard to produce in inelastic material. Moreover, some of Meredith's comic characters are too elastic, such as Richmond Roy and the Countess de Saldar. In these, the Comic Spirit attempts, somewhat futilely, to starch the extreme pliability of their natures. Even if we consider "rigidity" to mean a state of egoism, much of the energy of the comic characters is focused upon elastic schemes of maintaining the comedy. Last, Bergson's term, "the absence of feeling," is not strictly in accord with Meredith, whose ideal is "the richer laugh of heart and mind in one."  

In 1902, James Sully brought out An Essay on Laughter, which Willard Smith rates as "the most thorough and inclusive book on the subject in our language."  

In it are summarized all the previous theories of comedy and laughter, whether of physical or mental origin, or both. Here we get the true perspective of Meredith's view, to which Sully gives praise. Here he merely repeats Meredith when he says comic laughter is difficult of conception because it is a laughter of the mind or intelligence - a laughter that is slightly or not at all visible on the face, a laughter that is excluded from the popular category. This latter admission is the clue to one important reason why Meredith is not popular. In general, readers have not understood his unusual extension of his term comedy to include even the direst tragedy, his Comic Spirit to include mental discovery of comedy, and

1. "Essay on Comedy," p.50
his laughter to embrace mental exhilaration resultant upon that discovery. We seem to like our mental concepts served as separate dishes; for comedy to become congruent with much of the territory of tragedy seems to obscure the boundaries of each. Meredith's choice of the term "laughter" must be considered as figurative. The shock which brings on physical laughter has its counterpart in the brain. Since the sudden thrilling intelligence of the mind is similar to the shock of physical laughter, he gives it the name of mental laughter. On no one point has Meredith been more misunderstood. The idea is not easily assimilated, although in many of his poems and novels, chiefly in his "Essay" and in The Shaving of Shagpat, he has reiterated the fact over and over again.

For example, Paul Weiss in "A Theory of the Comic", either does not recognize or will not admit Meredith's theory that laughter may exist behind an impassive countenance. He says our difficulty is the failure to separate the comic from laughter situations; laughter arises sometimes in non-comic situations, and the comic is not always laughed at. Henry Myers in "The Analysis of Laughter" is annoyed by the gravity of laughter. He remarks that in regard to "these super-refined theories of comic laughter, ... there is always the even greater danger of accepting the intellectual postmortem in place of the living spirit of laughter, the danger involved in taking laughter so seriously that at the end there is nothing laughable left."

Literary critics have experienced the same difficulty, Bernard Shaw and Louise Mathewson in regard to Meredith's phrase, "silvery laughter."

As we have seen, Meredith means here the piercing brightness of the mental perception of comedy. Shaw asks, "Is it clear that the Comic Spirit would break into silvery laughter if we saw all the nineteenth century has to show it beneath the veneer? There is Ibsen ... he is not lacking ... in the Comic Spirit; yet his laughter does not sound very silvery, does it?" 

Miss Mathewson loses sight of the essential purpose of Meredith's Comic Spirit when she says the silvery laughter is not given to all - "We may withdraw to a cosmic watch tower and laugh critically at mortal fumblings; or we may feel our kinship with foolish man and laugh sympathetically at our common blunders." But Meredith indicates in his "Essay" that the sympathetic laugh at our common blunders may be just as silvery as the detached and critical laugh at mortal folly.

The latest extensive study of the comic seems to be Willard Smith's The Nature of Comedy, published in 1930. After commenting chiefly on Meredith, Bergson, and Sully, he gives his own interpretation. It is significant that while he discards much of Bergson - for instance, in saying "intellectual rigidity is not in itself laughable" - he considers Meredith's essay to hold "a high and distinctive place in the theory of comedy ... Most of the recent philosophers and psychologists refer to it as a brilliant but superficial treatment of the subject."

4. Smith, The Nature of Comedy, (Boston: Richard Badger, 1930) p. 60
5. Ibid., p. 11
Smith's choice of the word "superficial" is unfortunate, for Meredith's theory of comedy is deeply profound. It is limited, it is true, to mental laughter; but mental laughter has never had such a thorough, intensive, and widespread application. What Smith offers as his own contribution is nothing more or less than Meredith's own finding translated into modern psychological terms:

I look upon comic laughter as a physiological phenomenon with a psychic antecedent. The psychic antecedent is the contrast between a perception and an image. Frequently, this contrast takes the form of a disproportion between an end and the means by which the attainment is sought.¹

When we read this, and Bergson's account of "rigidity" and "elasticity" we seem to hear the coldly scientific pronouncements of Sir Austin Feverel. If we compare these with Meredith's humanely malign Spirit, casting its oblique light and bursting into volleys of silvery laughter, we feel that the Spirit of Comedy has lost much of its vivacious, poetic essence by being strait-jacketed into the confines of pure psychology. Still, these studies, and many others, have simplified for many the complexity of Meredith's interpretation.

The Corrective Value of his Doctrine

Some of Meredith's critics take exception to the corrective value of his doctrine, a fact which he strongly emphasizes in his essay. J.B. Priestley thinks that Meredith places too much insistence on purely corrective tendencies - "The trouble is that subtle Comedy, throwing egoism and its antics into high relief, will provide us with a healthy and mirthful

spectacle, but it will leave its victims exactly as it found them, with not a shadow flitting across their self-esteem.  

Since we have such contrary evidence as that of Stevenson and Weygandt, and such evidence as Meredith's indirect confession of his own folly in his novels and in his poem "Modern Love," we cannot entirely accept Priestley's statement. In the novels, there is little shadow flitting across the self-esteem of Sir Willoughby, Sir Austin Fevorel, Richmond Roy, or Countess de Saldar, but even they are not wholly graceless. If individual egoism is the original sin of humanity, the failure of redemption of our comic natures would mean an overthrow of civilization.

Miss Mathewson modifies Priestley's extreme view by saying, "The task laid upon comedy is too heavy...The great mass of foolish people must go uncorrected." Both Miss Mathewson and Priestley forget that Meredith places no task on comedy itself, but on the Comic Spirit in detecting comedy. Meredith would agree that the gains of the Comic Spirit are relatively small, but that the results of such gains have a far-reaching influence for good. He says, "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." It has been shown in Chapter IV how his novels bear out this opinion. Smith seems to miss Meredith's main intention in several of his statements:

2. See p. 10 of this thesis.
3. In Poems, p. 3
Comedy concerns itself principally with the issues of conduct in their social significance. Comedy at best can achieve no social regeneration. It can only restrain from vice indirectly by generating the fear of being ridiculous. I grant the corrective tendency of comic laughter, although I regard it as an acquired and not an innate attribute of the Comic spirit.

Inspiring the fear of ridicule is not the work of Meredith's Comic Spirit. His purpose is to convince the comic character that his actions are opposed to his own ideals in regard to concord in civilized society. He sees, too, that the fear of ridicule is largely responsible for much of the comedy in the world. Willoughby's fear that it will become known he has been twice jilted moves him to swift and unceasing battle to gain the consent of the second-rate Laetitia Dale to marriage. Furthermore, the Comic Spirit in itself acquires no attributes; it is inherent in the nature of man. The comic character may acquire the attributes of the Comic Spirit and its gift of laughter, which lie within him. Children, savages, idiots, and other mentally immature persons possess very little social consciousness. Increasing mental power would increase the power of the Comic Spirit, and the Comic Spirit will operate successfully when there is no intrusion of personal passion.

In conclusion, from a consideration of the facts presented in this chapter and the latter part of the preceding chapter, we can say that critical opinion of the present day, in spite of its unwillingness to turn

3. Ibid., p.82.
4. Ibid., p.55
its attention to Meredith, especially in regard to an analysis of his
genius, has a tendency to regard him favorably on almost all counts that
relate to his mental equipment.

This equipment includes a turning of his natal love of laughter to
acute psychological interpretation of human character, and the validity of
his conception of the comic and its somewhat complex uses.

Meredith's great fault, as almost universally interpreted, is the
imposing of his own personal self everywhere in his works, especially in
his literary style. This includes a lack of organization and an artificial,
twisted, and at times obscure atmosphere of persons, language, and scene.
But in a peculiar way, these very faults give rise to his real genius -
a high quality of comic lyricism infused in the serious ideals of a civilized
world.
CHAPTER VI

AN ESTIMATE OF THE VALUE OF MEREDITH'S LITERARY REPUTATION

The Influence of his Life and Personality on His Work

In his works we find the clues to the cause and the limitation of Meredith's genius. He appears first as an only child; solitary, high-spirited, intelligent, under the care of a widower-father. As Harry Richmond, he is deluded by the charm and fantastic schemes of an over-indulgent parent; as Richard Feverel, he is deceived in the wisdom of a father's love and protection. The whole story of Evan Harrington is a confession of the desperate efforts of his own tailor-family to bury its lowly origin and of the vacillations for and against this common aim in the mind of the young Evan. The same theme is played in a minor key in Sandra Belloni.

Much of his trouble is the lack of normal companionship of his own age during his boyhood. His aloofness is due to a pride in superior intellect and to constant association with interfering elders. At the age of fourteen

1. Steward M. Ellis, a second cousin of the author, says in George Meredith: his Life and Friends in Relation to his Work (London: Grant Richards, Ltd., 1920), p.16 that Meredith was in a quarrelsome relationship in the family circle, which felt no understanding for the child's peculiarity.

2. Edward Clodd in "George Meredith: Some Recollections," Op.cit., p.20, quotes Meredith as saying, "My father lived to be seventy-five. He was a muddler and a fool."

3. In the Altschul Collection, Op.cit., pp.80-81, Augustus Meredith, the father, is quoted as saying upon the appearance of Evan: "I am very sore
he breaks away from their domination by going to school at Neuwied, Germany, where he remains two years. From that time on, an independence of spirit governs his life. He starts the study of law but soon abandons it for literature. Like Richard Feverel, his sudden immersion into the flood-waters of society prove both delightful and disastrous. His gift of laughter and his intellectual wit gain for him a quick popularity. But his woeful lack of preparation for the reciprocal obligations of social intercourse leave him maladjusted, oblivious to the secret of mutual compromise. His difficulties with wife, father, son, and friends probably have their foundation here.

Similar to Diana and Carinthia, his first marriage is a serious mistake. Like Carinthia, the real canker of the union is the discovery of degeneracy in his wedded partner. At any rate, the combination of two indomitable wills wreaks havoc; the sad story is recorded in his sonnet-sequence, "Modern Love." Meredith is one with Diana in his refusal to visit a dying mate in an eventual happiness in a second marriage.

Although he early assumes a democratic and world-inclusive philosophy, he cannot quite throw off an acquired fastidiousness. Chesterton accurately calls him "a sort of daintily dressed Walt Whitman." Both Whitman and Stevenson (who is the prototype of Gower Woodseer, the nature philosopher in The Amazing Marriage) are real democrats in the sense that they have a

3(continued from p.88) about it, I am pained beyond expression, as I consider it aimed at myself and am sorry to say the writer is my own son."

1. Clodd quotes Meredith in his "George Meredith: Some Recollections," Op. cit., p.21: "Peacock's wife became mad, and so there was a family taint." Meredith's first wife Ellen was Peacock's daughter.

2. William Hardman says in Ellis's The Letters and Memories of Sir William Hardman, Op.cit., p.197, "I am sure he will make her (Meredith's second
genuinely personal interest in each one of the totality of humanity; good
or bad, rich or poor, crude or refined. From many of the distasteful
features of life Meredith's nature, although not his mind, recoils. This
dual character is often puzzling. Moreover, it makes the universality of
his philosophy less convincing.

He praises the sweat of honest labor, but he would rather engage in
the more genteel exercise of long walks or morning "dips." In Rhoda Fleming
he advocates plenty of good beef and bread for the building of stout bodies;
a nicety in choice of delicate foods and wines is recorded by his friends
Wilfred Meynell, William Hardman, and Lady Butcher. He claims that good
character is the greatest element of human progress; why does he so swiftly
pronounce judgment in his statement to Arthur Clodd: "I never met Borrow;
his lack of manners would have repelled me." 2

Emma Wingfield-Stratford says Meredith invented an upper-class society
3 to reflect his own brilliancy. As a Victorian of the English middle-class
he does show an undue desire to attract the cream of society. He is not
happy unless he is moving in the chosen company of his creations, the
company of an intellectual aristocracy. He makes clear, however, that the

2. (continued from p.89) wife, Marie) a good husband. He was married before,
    he is going to marry now."
3. (continued from p.89) Gilbert K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Litera-
4. (continued from p.89) On page 99, Woodseer declares that no strangers
   exist on earth.
1. In The Amazing Marriage, p.117, Lord Fleetwood observes, "the dirty
   sweaters are nearer the angels for cleanliness, than my Lord and Lady
   Sybarite out of a bath, in chemical scents."
3. In The Victorian Sunset, (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd.,1932)
   p.216.
worthy representative of that circle keeps level with Earth and its laws; he does not often find the aristocrat worthy of his position, as in the case of Lord Fleetwood and his friends. In this sort of expose he assumes a middle-class superiority. Usually he searches elsewhere for the child of nature, like Carinthia, Sandra, or Crossjay Pattern, whose beauty of character invest them with natural grace and whose ignorance of the social amenities needs only polishing. He wishes to combine the cultural heritage of an aristocracy in society with the free sturdiness of an aristocracy of nature.

Everything must be of the best. He shows us his preference for the healthy, the strong, the intellectual, the cultured. Yet he believes most earnestly in social progress as the greatest good. Here some pieces do not dovetail. The world's leaders are certainly the most vital, but the vitality is not necessarily general. World leaders are not always physically strong and are not always courteous, beautiful, or young. Some may even secure progress through selfishness and egoism; some of inferior intellect may succeed through habits of industry and perseverance where others fail.

Meredith assumes England to be the leader of nations. He realizes that an over-confidence may lead to defeat, and he issues proper warning, but he evidently feels that England's errors are more easily excused because she is blazing new trails in higher civilization. In several of his books, especially in *Celt and Saxon*, he cannot conceal his admiration for the Irish.

1. In his essay, Meredith claims that the middle-class make the most acute and balanced observers. On page 12 he says, "A simply bourgeois circle will not furnish it, for the middle class must have the brilliant, flippant, independent upper for a spur and a pattern."
and Welsh (from which he has sprung) or their felicitous blending with the
more deliberate Saxon. Occasionally he does admit that "The Englishman
has an island mind, and when he's out of it he's at sea." Meredith is not
even fond of putting out to sea, for when his son Arthur is offered a post
in China the father does not press the matter, but writes, "I felt it would
be repugnant to you to spend your life in China, where the climate is hard,
society horrid, life scarcely (to my thoughts) endurable."

If we are true disciples of the comic we see here a fit subject for
laughter - a professed philosopher of the universe shuddering at coarse
food, bad manners, and Chinese society. This very kind of snobbery he
scores in his books - Edward Blancove's shame at Dahlia Fleming's bad
grammar, the Pole girls' rudeness to the vulgar Mrs. Chump, and Wilfred
Pole's disgust of the great "unwashed" of the Austro-Italian campaign - and
he cannot always hide his own inherent disgust for the vulgar and the dirty.
Meredith often is, in spite of his wish to embrace the whole of humanity,
narrow. He is still further limited in his concentration on mind; his own
mind as reflected in those of others in a civilized world. In one respect
we cannot protest his fastidiousness and his compression. By a subtle
process he refines the noisy guffaws of broad humor to the dignity of the
comic smile. In transition, the heartlessness and cruelty of the primitive
roar has been chastened to a sympathetic intelligence of error. It is in
the isolation of mind that Meredith has suffered real torture; it is here
he looks for comfort and help.

1. Celt and Saxon, p.105
In his writing Meredith refuses to waver in purpose or method because of unfavorable criticism. Yet he is extremely sensitive to this kind of attack. Wardis Fisher, who has made a study of Meredithian criticism up to the author's death in 1909, finds the great majority to be favorable. In addition, many of the favorable reports come from some of the best writers of his time—Kingsley, Stevenson, George Eliot, Rossetti, and Swinburne. Fisher calls Meredith's complaints of adverse criticism "a strain of childish petulance in his nature" which arises chiefly from his failure to make money from a popular sale of his books, and he dismisses as unfounded the statement that George Meredith was a sadly neglected and much depreciated genius. Certainly Meredith chose to think of himself as a heroic humanitarian, staunchly beating his way through the opposition of those less intelligent than himself, who do not know what is really good for them; it is George Meredith he impersonates in Beauchamp in the crusade against Tory conservatism or Vittoria in her fight for Italian liberty. Heeding adverse criticism might have informed him that he was failing in one of the fundamental aims of writing, comprehension. His deafness in this respect may be considered foolish. But insofar as a change in method or style might reasonably have dampened the fine verve of his Comic Spirit, we may consider him justified in giving free rein to its progress.

It is also true that in addition to his desire to attract upper-class society to himself he hoped to engage the admiring praise of the best writers of the world to his work. He did succeed in a measure, but he also came to

2. Clodd, Op. cit., quotes Meredith, p.24: "Sometimes Harry Richmond is my favorite but I am inclined to give the palm to Beauchamp's Career."
discover that it took more than the interest of a cultured few to supply him with food and clothing. Critics nowadays object to his cheerful affectation and his moralizing. If he lacks simplicity and modesty, he tries to be as honest as the modern objective realists. Their posing may be unconscious or concealed, but it is there. And it is legitimate.

Proust says, "each time we see the face or hear the voice it is our own ideas of him which we recognize and to which we listen." In speaking of Meredith's fall in reputation at the present time, Virginia Woolf reveals the grip of literary fashion on the judgment of literary critics - "Yet we have to remind ourselves that the fault may be ours. Our prolonged diet upon Russian fiction rendered neutral and negative in translation, or absorbed in the convolutions of psychological Frenchmen, may have led us to forget that the English language is naturally exuberant." Exuberance; happy, witty ardor; silvery laughter; all are produced by Meredith's Comic Spirit. In this Meredith does not moderate his enthusiasm. If the reader has the patience to really understand him, he will be buoyed by the rioting capers of the Comic Spirit, with very few moments of flagging interest in spite of the "moralizing."

Certain aspects of contrast may throw additional light on this Comic Spirit. Some words not at all applicable to it are melody, color, sweetness, serenity, reverence, or majesty. The Shaving of Shagpat probably has more color and music than most of his work, including the poems, but that is largely due to the Oriental influence of The Arabian Nights. Much of his

2. Ibid., p.23
poetry is merely a beating of different rhythms as a thin accompaniment to his philosophic ideas. A rather wonderful orchestration in words of the music of the opera "Camille" in Vittoria really conveys the mobility of the ideal of human liberty, but this is an isolated case. Meredith's emotion is chiefly the emotion of the exalted idea. Only in a few poems, among which Love in the Valley seems to be the peer, does complete abandonment to love unite with the loveliness of a sylvan setting to give a picture of purely sensual beauty. Sweetness, in Meredith's mind, too often leads to the saccharine melting hypnotism of illusion, although at times his Comie Spirit shows the sweetness of sympathy. Meredith appreciates the reverence due an awe-inspiring universe, but he does not permit a trance-like worship of the Imme - true reverence is the proper use of nature! Now the triumph of sin and error can be truly majestic, but it holds only a transitory interest in Meredith's mind, for he continually seeks new fields to conquer. Man is not even allowed to die in the usual manner - his epitaph is not "Rest in Peace," but "Decay Rapidly for the Evolution of New Beauty."

In his preoccupation with the movement of the Comie Spirit Meredith clears the stage of all other extraneous matter. Most sensual appeal is discarded for the reason that it obstructs the clarity of the mind. Dress, conveyances, homes, and general atmosphere are shadowily sketched; in these his works do not date. This bald simplicity of background throws into relief the movement of the mind; the intellect gallops, careens and soars in the fullest liberty. We are given the situation - the mind is set free to work upon it. There is freshness, lightness of spirit, energizing action under thoughtful control. According to John Livingston Lowes Meredith's
Comic Spirit is a windswept mountain-top, a refreshing shower. Nimble and swift, sometimes gayly mischievous, it is the only extravagance or luxury Meredith allows himself. His greatest gift is this irresistible animation which enlivens the dullness of duty, the sordidness of tragedy, and that which gives commonplace living a finer spiritual impetus. There is nothing more flat and stale than the work which is not much inspired by the Comic Spirit, as in some of his poems and critical articles, and especially in one novel, Rhoda Fleming. Like Cervantes and Molière, his genius is concentrated in the comic.

Traces of Meredithian Influence in Literature

A few illustrations of distinct Meredithian influence in his successors will uncover still other views of his distinctive ability. It is important to state at this point that the illustrations do not attempt in any way to cover the whole field of Meredith's literary influence and do not aim at an exhaustive study of a selected number of isolated cases. Rather, the purpose is to show, in a somewhat sketchy fashion, the variegated points of contrast between Meredith and some of the later writers who have shown kinship with him. Even some of these, among whom may be mentioned Gilbert Cannon, and E.M. Forster, have been omitted.

Much has been said of his fine creations of noble womanhood—such as Clara Middleton, Clare Doria, Aminta, Diana, Lady Dunstane, Carinthia, and Vittoria. Why are we not allowed to see as great creations of noble manhood, of which he gives so few examples? Egoism is the lack of emotional balance which works at odds with the individual's and society's best interests. In Vol. II of the Letters, p.156-7, Meredith says he bows his head to
ests - it is the source of greed, envy, jealousy, and fear. But why are his women so curiously exempt and his men so infected with the comic germ? Human nature is much the same, regardless of sex. Doubtless Meredith's own emotions in this respect biased his view and he was led astray by a male partiality to women; he evidently was bidding for their admiration as readers of his books. This accounts for his joining in the chorus for the emancipation of women.

A short story by Booth Tarkington, "Stella Crozier," seems almost a perfect copy of Sir Willoughby Patterne in the feminine. Stella, rich, spoiled, and selfish, donates large sums to charity only on condition that the money be used for a specific purpose for which she alone shall name; or that the gift be entitled the "Stella Crozier Fund." It is reminiscent of Willoughby's dictum that all who do not comply with his wishes are "extinct." Stella keeps a girl cousin as her close companion, both as a foil for her own glittering gowns and gems and as an assistant in clerical work. Vernon Whitford performs the same office for Cousin Willoughby. Stella, after deliberate calculation, engages herself to a wealthy scion of a Refrigerator Dynasty; Willoughby, after scientific consideration, attempts to yoke himself to the young, beautiful, and wealthy Clara Middleton. As soon as Stella discovers that a certain gentleman is interested in her secretary-cousin, she immediately drops her wealthy fiancé to go in pursuit of the new prize; Willoughby snatches Clara from several competitors. The dénouement

1. (continued from p. 96) Shakespeare and Goethe - in their way, Molière and Cervantes - for they are realists with the broad aim of idealism at their command.
2. Percy Lubbock, in "George Meredith to Alice Meynell," Nation and Athenaeum XXXVI. (1923), p. 356, says "He can never hit the appropriate tome in which to address a woman."
in Stella's case is her forced acceptance of her father's sudden marriage to the same cousin. She fumes at her own loveless marriage and the slice in her own fortune; she bangs impotent fists against a closed door. The demouement in Willoughby's case is his forced proposal to the twice-rejected Laetitia Dale upon the heels of his second jilt. This short story shows what Meredith neglects in his world of women; Clotilde von Rutiger in The Tragic Comedians and the Countess de Saldar in Evan Harrington are the nearest approaches to it, but even they are not the truly heartless type of egoist Stella is. It must be remembered, though, that Meredith's egoist is the original creation, and that it is much more minutely, carefully, and thoroughly analyzed.

In Stella Crozier Tarkington uses as his interpretation a method so often employed, but not consistently so, by Meredith. Tarkington keeps the surface scene unilluminating, realistic. The revelation of character is made by a minor person of importance, a guest at the dinner. Meredith is more faithfully true to the inner recesses of thought, but he is less realistic in his projection of these thoughts in conversation. This is particularly strong in the Countess de Saldar and in Sir Willoughby.

In only one instance, Rhoda Fleming, does he actually suppress the unspoken thought to the background of conversation. Robert Eccles is setting out to work on another farm; his love for Rhoda keeps back an accusation of her folly.

He begins:

"I've always thought you were born to be a lady." (You had that ambition, young madam.) "You will soon take to your new duties." (You have small objection to them even now.) "Yes, or my life won't be worth much." (Know that you are driving me to it.) "And I wish you happiness, Rhoda." (You are madly imperilling the prospect thereof.)

To each of them the second meaning stood shadowily behind the utterances.  

Of course this same device is used by the early dramatists in the "Aside." It is used throughout Eugene O'Neill's play, The Strange Interlude.

Two other authors show very obvious symptoms of Meredithian influence. May Sinclair's novel, Mr. Waddington of Wyck, is a story of the same harmless type of egoism we find in "The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper;" the series of sketches drawn by Lady Camper find a counterpart in the sketches drawn by Barbara, Waddington's secretary. Mr. Waddington is a combination of General Ople and of Sir Willoughby. Miss Sinclair's words, phrases, postures of egoism, and the events are strongly Meredithian. She has not, however, the same serious purpose behind the presentation; the story is intended to be merely amusing; Waddington's wife, son, and friends let him go his way with smiling tolerance. James Branch Cabell adapts Meredith's conception of comedy for his own, although he is not moved by the same high spirits. The title and subtitles of some of his books are indicative enough: "Cords of Vanity," "A Comedy of Shirking," Figures of Earth, "A Comedy of Appearances;" "Jurgan, "A Comedy of Justice;" and Cream of the Jest, "A Comedy of Evasions." In the latter book, Chapter VI of Book I contains characteristic Meredithian phraseology: "Journey's End; with the Customary Unmasking."  

1. p.379.
Cabell, too, creates an artificial world for the interpretation of mind, the dream-world of ideals.

Much more purposeful and much nearer to Meredith in their concentration on the errors of the upper classes and the psychological interpretation of its problems are the works of Henry James and his disciple, Edith Wharton. In his novel, The Portrait of a Lady, James gives us one of the most subtlest examples of cruel and heartless egoism in Gilbert Osmond. We can often forgive the errors of Meredith's comic characters, for they usually have real social feeling underneath the comic exterior. But James' Osmond is absolutely unlikable. Osmond "never forgot to be grateful and tender, to wear the appearance ... of stirred senses and deep intentions...His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife." Like Clara Middleton, his wife Isabel sees that "The real offense...was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his, attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park." James usually weighs us with an oppressive burden; he neither enlivens the tragedy by spirited language nor by a doctrine of courage. Isabel, unlike Clara, Diana, or Aminta, does not leave her egoistic husband, but accepts the result of her own deliberate choice. In James, too, the analysis of the egoistic character is less thorough.

Mrs. Wharton's House of Mirth is touched by the smiling sadness of the Comic Spirit. Lily's life is colored by illusions of the life of the idle rich and the socially prominent. She reaches out for them in spite of severe handicaps of poverty and sound morals. When the acquisition of these

2. Ibid., p.200
baubles runs counter to her ideals, she renounces the illusions, but it is
too late to prevent tragedy and death. Again, the prevailing tone is that
of unrelieved tragedy.

In the social novel, too, Sinclair Lewis shows points of contact with
Meredith. He uncovers the masks of conventionality and hypocrisy, tells of
man's frequent error in balking his spiritual ideals, and he does both in
an energetic style of a certain sly amusement, although it is quieter than
Meredith's. He shows us the stiff pride of a "moral" community in Main
Street, the blustering egotism of the successful business man in Babbitt, and
the false religious fervor of a revivalist in Elmer Gantry.

Galsworthy, especially in his Forsyte Saga, lays a finger on the sore
spot of society in his recognition of the combined material and spiritual
nature of man, and in his own fervent desire for real virtue among men. As
in Meredith's many marriage problems, it is the selfish preoccupation of
Soames Forsyte in gloating over his possessions that estranges his wife,
Irene. She is attracted by the spiritual beauty of character; first, of the
architect; then, by that of Jolyon Forsyte, whom she marries. Like Meredith,
Galsworthy shows the later regeneration of Soames' character through the love
for his daughter, Fleur. This more hopeful solution to egoism is perhaps a
later development of Galsworthy's, for in such plays as Justice and Strife,
and in the novel Fraternity, he indicates the hopelessness of any attempt
to merge the rigid outlines of class distinctions.

Most of the later social plays and novels have acquired the lowering
seriousness of a pessimistic age. But even in his own time Meredith was

1. What the pessimists have done is to show that the whole world is an
illusion after which they glare aggrievedly at the gross deception.
never so somberly serious as George Eliot nor so satirical as Thackeray. He is not moved by the sentimentality of Dickens, but he maintains the same high level of convivial laughter. At the present time there are at least two writers similar to him in their interest in modern civilized society and in the energizing wit of their presentation - Gilbert K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw.

Chesterton the essayist has preached a doctrine of cheerful acceptance of the universe by means of a brilliant paradoxical style that sometimes is twisted in meaning like Meredith's metaphors; but the accompanying logical explanation both simplifies the matter and fluctuates the height of his inspiration. Meredith's liveliness never wanes - even though it penetrate to the core of tragedy, the original energy is diverted in the form of courage to meet disaster.

Like Meredith, George Bernard Shaw is dauntless, electrical, humorous. He is not, however, moved by an inner kindly laughter; his is a defiantly satiric glee. A thorough-going radical, he attacks social conventionality, hypocrisy, and smug security with such force that he jerks the recumbent to a sitting posture by shock. In an epistle to Walkley he says, "it annoys me to see people comfortable when they ought to be uncomfortable." But his method is far from diplomatic, for his flippant pertness in undermining even the most sacred of social ideals without offering much in return irritates and enrages, rather than guides. His only solution is socialism, but the impotence of his doctrine maddens him and he shouts, "Yes, Mr. Meredith; but suppose the patients have 'common sense' enough not to want to be cured!"

1. In Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy, (New York: Brentanos, 1931) p.vii
He reminds us of Meredith in his desire of getting down to the truth of a thing and then expressing it with "the utmost levity." But if Meredith's hopeful enthusiasm ever seems forced, Shaw's beleaguering and prodding jollity always seems strained.

An equally worthy contribution to the literary world has been Meredith's demonstration of the possibilities lying in the overlapping and interweaving of literary types. Artists have for a long time combined art and language or music and words. Writers have enlarged the scope of a single gem of letters. Shakespeare's plays contain both poetry and prose; Lamb's essays often embody narration; the chapters in Fielding's novels begin with philosophic dissertations. As we have seen, Meredith has gone even farther in combining in the novel the poetic device of the metaphor, the dramatic device of indirect narration, and a psychological and philosophical view of social problems.

These efforts have continued from his time. Shaw precedes his plays by lengthy prefaces or essays in which he thoroughly explains the problem, his characters in relation to the problem, and his opinion of both. In this way he has assumed some of the privileges of the novelist. Just the reverse of this, Meredith has placed the comedy of the drama into the novel. Hudson, in his novel *Green Mansions*, writes a kind of poetic ode to an elusive spiritual beauty. In the free verse of some modern poetry there is an attempt to capture some of the freedom of prose without abandoning the inspiration, the cadence, and the figures of poetry.  


1.Lady Butcher, *Op. cit.*, pp.96-7, says, "He admired Walt Whitman but feared that the language and style too uncouth and undisciplined to carry his thought through the ages."
Conclusion

This very limited survey of Meredithian similarities and influences in our day shows a continually growing, intense concern over social problems, problems which will not subside as long as civilized man allows his present advances to hinder future progress. Egoism is a word that has been universally accepted as a general term which covers a multitude of social evils; it is continually being examined microscopically through psychology. But nowhere has the problem of civilization been united to such a distinctively fine Comic Spirit as Meredith's.

A solitary genius, through the collision of painful mental experiences of a social nature with an inborn wit, has evolved for himself and others a social philosophy shot through with the irradiating beams of a penetrating oblique insight. He has chosen to reproduce his discovery in written language. If this mode of expression becomes slightly distorted through some of its angles, it acquires an unusual clarity through others. It is not, as Joad suggests, that our modern age is immature and shallow because it will not read Meredith nor listen to Beethoven; it is too busy and impatient. Meredith's technique, his language, an occasional narrowness of philosophic vision, or even his idea of comedy and the Comic Spirit, offer barriers to the general reader. However, patience is its own reward; clarity, if found, is of a particularly illuminating kind. If Meredith cannot find favor with the general reader, the literary artist has much to learn from him.
Cornelius Weygandt, in referring to the doubts usually expressed by even the most sympathetic of Meredith's critics, says:

Dr. Chislett need not worry. And Mr. Priestley need not doubt. As long as man cares for lyric rapture, for revelation of human nature, for great portraits of women and men, for an optimistic philosophy of life that blinks no ugly facts, George Meredith will be read and written of and talked about by thinking men young and old.¹

Best of all, over the whole controversy there darts, or mentorily pauses to cast his oblique beam on a civilized world, an impish sprite who is ready to lend us his own irresistible high temper - the Comic Spirit.

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