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The Moral Problem in the Novels of George Meredith Its Intellectual Basis and Its Aesthetic Validity

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THE MORAL PROBLEM IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE MEREDITH
ITS INTELLECTUAL BASIS AND ITS AESTHETIC VALIDITY

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is; (1) to make a study of the evolutionary principles of George Meredith's naturalistic idealism; and: (2) to determine, through an analysis of the representative characters and critical situations in his books, how far these serve as a sustaining moral force in his work as a novelist.

The works of Meredith offer teeming mines for the delvings of aesthetic criticism; one is tempted to tap them for veins of German philosophy, French brilliance of style, and affinity with Greek comedy, to say nothing of individual influences: social, scientific, metaphysical, and literary. But this work will be limited to a study of the moral problem in his novels: to its intellectual basis and its aesthetic validity. One of his critics, M. Photiades, has observed:

From his first utterances to his philosophical codicils, through an immense gallery of romantic creations, Meredith has always employed his genius, with its innumerable resources, for the advancing of the same ideas, the metaphysical and moral convictions which constitute his very being.¹

¹ Constantin Photiades, George Meredith, His Life, Genius, and Teaching (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1913), p.198.
A study of the philosophy out of which he evolved his moral code becomes imperative when we realize that it was the basis of the structure of all his novels, and that it was owing to the falsity of that philosophy upon which he built that Meredith, in spite of great genius, will never rank among the greatest names in literature.

To Meredith's credit, it may be said that he sought the highest and most unselfish goals of human endeavor, intellectual, moral, and spiritual; his most poetic rhapsodies were the ebulitions of his own desire for the highest good; he urged each individual to strive unceasingly for perfection in himself so that perfection of the race might ultimately be arrived at.

From poetic heights his rarely intuitive genius envisioned a Promised Land inhabited by a race of men and women living in perfect harmony with Nature's laws and possessing a degree of strength, beauty, and wisdom beyond any yet dreamed of by men in their speculations on the possibilities of their own ultimate natural perfection. Once having contemplated this heaven, he dedicated himself to its attainment. The powers of his intellect he would use to find the way; his gift of song would lighten the march and encourage mankind to laugh light-heartedly while climbing over obstacles.

The requisite means for advance, nay, for the first firm footing for an upward swing, was to find the secret of man's relation to Nature; to establish man and Nature in harmony so that both, mutually contributing to the other's progress, might
proceed toward their common goal. The ascent, for man, would necessarily be difficult and steep. On it no one would be free to think of himself to the exclusion of others; each, employing reason and common sense, must continue to advance in order to further the progress of all.

It was a noble and selfless ideal. To his chagrin he was unable to arouse an answering enthusiasm in the hearts of his listeners. He could not make himself understood because he spoke with the voice of an individual spirit voicing its own idealistic hopes. His was not the voice of the universal spirit that breathes in all men and speaks a common language.

Being unable to accept revelation in regard to spiritual ideas, he evolved a creed of his own out of the scientific evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century; since he did not arrive at truth, his novels lack the universality, simplicity, and power which characterize the greatest art. If the Iliad, the Divine Comedy, Shakespeare's tragedies, and Goethe's Faust have been called the greatest books in the world, is it not because they have completeness, depicting, not simply man and his activity in this world, but also, to use Dostoieski's phraseology, "man in his relations with God and Satan"?

By repudiating a personal God, Meredith tends to lessen the importance of the personality of the human soul. He deprives his characters of souls imbued with supernatural faith, hope, and love, thereby causing his works to suffer a great loss of dramatic power. Gower Woodseer, Rose Jocelyn, Aminta, and Clara,
with their splendid intellects, are able to discern clearly their obligations to other people in a moral way, but they think not at all of their direct responsibility to God. The result is that the description of their triumphs or failures arouses only ephemeral and fugitive emotions in the soul of the reader. He finds it impossible to give his sympathies very deeply or for long to creatures who do not bear the weight of spiritual responsibility that he does. If Dahlia and Aminta are eventually to become nothing more than chemical elements in earth or vegetation, or, at best, to live in the idea, how can he identify himself with them?

Dostoevski in Crime and Punishment endowed Sonya with an unusual and beautiful soul. Having found light and truth in the Scriptures, she is able to help the murderer regain his sense of moral values. Her simple acceptance of Divine realities make the critical scenes in the novel in which she takes part something too powerful, too tremendous to leave our sympathies unmoved. Years after, we shudder and mourn and love. René Bazin gave Pascal a soul; the ever hovering former superior represents conscience and a benignly watchful Diety to her. By this device the author enhances her value in the mind of the reader, and anyone having read The Nun knows how hard it is to dismiss Pascal from his mind -- she will never go. If Meredith had been as generous with Sir Willoughby, we might have seen him sometimes when he was not an egoist; in other words, he would have become a personality instead of a type.
It would seem then that if, as Meredith claimed, a personal
God does not exist, for dramatic purposes an artist would do
well to create the illusion of one, for the existence of some
eternal force alone is able to give a crisis in the life of a
character eternal significance. In giving his people a temporal
existence only, Meredith committed an error which will leave
them always this side of greatness. He was the stern moralist
who built on contradictions and poetic hopes instead of revealed
truths. "Soar," he seems to say to them, "by binding yourself
to Earth." He bids them rise to heaven while assuring them there
is nothing there.

If Meredith could have lived to see what excesses in lit-
erary realism his materialistic theories have helped to produce,
his optimistic belief in the natural tendency of nature, es-
pecially human nature, toward good would have failed considerably.
He himself had nothing but loathing and contempt for the novelist
who represented man as essentially a depraved animal. Yet
the ethical pantheism by means of which he hoped to attain to
purity of race had no force in itself to sustain an individual
in the struggle with the lower nature, nor any spiritual
strength to keep him from sinking into animality.
CHAPTER I
EARLY INFLUENCES IN THE FORMATION OF MEREDITH'S
CONCEPTIONS OF NATURE, SOCIETY, AND MAN

The earliest and formative years of Meredith's life were deeply influenced by close connection with the three centers out of which the most revolutionary and liberal ideas of his epoch were to flow. England, it is true, in his early youth was resisting the encroachment of the new realism in art and was to continue the struggle throughout the century, but in science and philosophy her leaders were inoculated with radical German and French thought. George Eliot translated German inquiries into the authenticity of Christianity, and Darwin's *Origin of species* appeared the same year as *Richard Feverel*. Meredith was not at all dismayed by doubts induced by the new ideas; to him their trend was forward.

He was born in Portsmouth, February 12, 1828, the son of a tailor who lived with his family above the ancestral shop at No. 73 High Street. The father was really a naval outfitter, a distinction he had inherited from the "incomparable Melchisedec,"\(^1\) Meredith's grandfather, who presides as atmosphere over

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\(^1\) George Meredith, *Evan Harrington* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1922), p. 43.
his second novel, Evan Harrington. This unique figure by reason of a pleasing exterior and unusually magnetic social qualities had enjoyed the personal friendship of his patrons. Many of these, like Nelson, who is said to have spent his last night in England there, and Admiral Hardy, were among the great names in England's naval history. Besides a son, the "Great Mel" had three beautiful daughters who, to preserve the tradition of greatness set up by their father, held themselves aloof from society in the village. They incited this attitude in George Meredith, their brother's only son; the child spent most of his time alone or in the company of his elders.

Encouraged to think himself superior to his companions, and having no equals with whom he might form normal associations, he longed to be superior -- to identify himself with an ideal, with some ennobling force that would make concrete for him the precocious dreams of his poetic fancy.

The aunts married, one a banker who became Mayor of Portsmouth in 1833 when Meredith was five years old, another a naval officer who in 1832 was Consul-General in the Azores, and whose daughter, having married into the noble Portuguese family of Cabral, was known as the Marchioness de Thomar; a third married an officer in the marines who later became a general, Sir Samuel Burdon Ellis.2

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Meredith's mother died when he was five, and the boy was left alone with his father for whom he seems to have cared little. Augustus Urmston Meredith, the original of the hero's father in Harry Richmond, does not seem to have been a business success. Finally reduced to bankruptcy, he left Portsmouth for London and later migrated to Cape Town. Meredith, referring to his parentage, tells us:

My mother was of Irish origin, handsome, refined, and witty. I think that there must have been some Saxon strain in the ancestry to account for a virility of temperament which corrected the Celtic in me, although the feminine rules in so far as my portraiture of womanhood is faithful. My father, who lived to be seventy-five, was a muddler and a fool. He married again, and emigrated to Cape Town.\(^3\)

G.K. Zipf has an interesting conjecture that throws further light on the poet's youth. He says:

Six months after his bankruptcy, July 3, 1839, Augustus Meredith married Matilda Buckett of Portsmouth in the Precinct Chapel of Bridewell, London, giving George Meredith a woman of inferior birth and station for a stepmother, and one who is said to have been previously the housekeeper in his father's house in Portsmouth. Since the affidavits imply and occasionally state that Augustus had no income other than that derived from his tailoring, it is safe to say that Matilda Buckett brought no money into the family. It seems also reasonable to say that they were married in London instead of Portsmouth because Augustus was already living in London in July, 1839. I think it reasonable to assume that intimacies between Augustus and Matilda commenced before July 3, 1839, indeed before Augustus left for London.

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\(^3\) Constantin Photiades, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
Though I have no proof of this statement above, the facts seem to be that Augustus, a bankrupt supporting himself by his trade in London, either took Matilda with him to London and then married her, or else had her follow him to London for the marriage. Since this period was probably one of turmoil in Augustus's life, the courtship may well have antedated the bankruptcy by some time. Since a considerable portion of 73 High Street had been by Synge after Jane Meredith's death, the housekeeping could not have been a serious task, especially since George was attending school at this time. One is inclined to scrutinize carefully this father-housekeeper relationship because George Meredith, in later years, developed an abnormal loathing of all sexual looseness.

During this impressionable period, George Meredith, a sensitive lad coming into adolescence, in the midst of an unhealthy, father-son-stepmother situation, probably developed his traits of aloofness, secretiveness about his past, and above all his compensatory feeling of superiority, not to mention his pathologically puritanical attitude toward any disregard of the moral law.

For the serious biographer of Meredith, who sets himself a harder task than the mere rehearsal of the salient facts in his life, the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual nature of the author of The Egoist may appear to have had its first growth amid the inevitable anxieties, the disappointments, and conflicts of the decaying family of Portsmouth. Indeed, it is the poet's reaction to these early grievances and mortifications

which gives them their chief significance for literary history and aesthetic criticism.\(^5\)

George was placed in St. Paul's School in Southsea where his position as one of the gentry was more firmly established. Here as a boy of eight or nine he formed his first close acquaintance with nature as it revealed itself to him in all the loveliness of an English country-side. He loved to leave his books and even his companions to roam the woods and follow gentle streams where they flowed through flowery meadows. Could he have been the strange child, Harry Richmond, who is able to be comforted, after a rude separation from mother and home, by some lovely view in nature?

The soft mild night had a moon behind it somewhere; and here and there a light-blue space of sky showed small rayless stars; the breeze smelt fresh of roots and heath. It was more a May-night than one in February. So strange an aspect had all these quiet hill-lines and larch and fir-tree tops in the half dark stillness, that the boy's terrors were overlaid and almost subdued by his wonderment; he had never before been out in the night, and he must have feared to cry in it, for his sobs were not loud.\(^6\)

This astounding attention to natural detail in a child being separated from his mother hardly seems true to human nature; and when we come across it again and again in the same book, our sympathy for Harry is considerably lessened. When little Philip Cary, in Somerset Maugham's great novel, is

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\(^6\) *Harry Richmond*. pp.11,12.
awakened out of a sound sleep in the chill dawn to be taken to his dying mother's bedside. Maugham does not try to assuage his grief by diverting it to inferior objects. Too often, in Meredith's story, Nature intrudes herself, not as a sympathetic or contrasting background for the characters, but as one of them. If Meredith had read more in man's heart than in his intellect, he might have been able to speak with his readers "heart to heart" and thereby have won a wider circle of friends and at the same time hit nearer the essential truth of things.

When he was thirteen he was sent to another private school near Petersfield, where he seems to have associated more closely with boys of his own age. He takes as his hero a boy who is a leader in sports, an independent and self-reliant youth. Loving freedom and an untrammeled existence, young Meredith chafes at the discipline and restraint of a boarding school; the whippings he learns to take as a matter of course, but he rebels at conventional forms of religion which force him to long hours in the chapel, and he cannot bear being prayed for in public by the master after a misdemeanor.

I was prayed at to move my spirit, and flogged to exercise my flesh. The prayers I soon learnt to laugh to scorn. The floggings, after they were over, crowned me with delicious sensations of martyrdom.

7 This youth later became the Matey Weyburn of Lord Ormont and His Aminta.

8 Harry Richmond. p.59.
He loved heroes, not only the heroes of his early childhood, Hardy, Nelson, Pitt, William the Conqueror, Harold, Alfred; not only the great characters of Shakespeare, Falstaff, Lear, Hamlet, Shylock, but boys of flesh and blood at issue with inadequate ideals or weak authority. The boy who loved his headmaster's beautiful daughter, whom Meredith's readers know as Heriot and again as Weyburn, fascinated him as Steerforth fascinated David Copperfield, and united him with his Temple in the fervours of boyish eagerness. In such ardours emerges the spirit of the hero, eager not only for the life of action, but also for the imaginative creation of deeds of the heroic temperament, the spirit which is ready to act and to endure.9

Thus, the early years of the poet philosopher have been shaped in England; in his tenderest age he has imbibed into his soul the beauty manifest in her prodigal country-side; the yearning of his deepest thoughts he has associated with Nature's calm, unhurried selection, growth, striving, and blossoming; from the dawn of his reasoning powers he has watched the comedy resultant when social aspirations have a starting point in a tailor's shop; he has sought solace in Nature and found in her retreats a dignity and grandeur that human society had denied him. She will be repaid later in his books in which he will

9 J.A.Hammerton, George Meredith. His Life and Art in Anecdote and Criticism (John Grant, Edinburgh, 1911), p.382.
often show her more respect and deference than he does to his human characters.

He has learned under the discipline of a boarding school the importance of each individual's responsibility to duty, and already he has felt, if he has not yet expressed, the need of puritanical personal morality if purity of race is to be achieved.

If Nature had thwarted Meredith's search for the reality of the concept of beauty in his soul, he might have gone further and been forced to find the satisfaction of that desire in a personal God. Nature is not universally beautiful; everyone does not, like Meredith, make her acquaintance in the most scenic spots of England, Germany, and Italy, acknowledged scenic spots of the world. She is not God, the reward exceeding great, to many, but often Satan, the arch-enemy, who allures only to destroy. In his treatment of Nature, Meredith is always a romanticist; he offers no solution to those who would face it realistically as did Hardy in The Return of the Native or Jack London in his powerful short story To Build a Fire.

In 1842 the trustee of his mother's small estate, of which he was the heir, determined to send him to the Moravian School at Neuwied, and it was in August of that year that the fourteen-year-old boy entered the school and began his real education. This school deserves a word to itself. Neuwied, a little town in the most romantic part of the Rhine Country, was one of those little German principalities that became centers of
social progress and culture. Its Moravian school was founded during the reign of a liberal-minded eighteenth-century prince who believed in religious tolerance and allowed every religious sect the fullest liberty of thought and worship, and so excellent was the course of education offered by the Moravian Brethren in Neuwied, so inspiring their influence, that their school soon became famous and attracted pupils from all parts of western Europe. 10 "It was here that Meredith spent two years, without a break, during the most formative period of a man's life; and it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of these two years." 11

Mr. Petter lays proper stress on Meredith's school days in Germany, a crucial period that has not hitherto been thoroughly explored by English biographers and critics. It was the time when Germans were imbued with the humanism of Goethe, Schiller, and Jean Paul Richter, from whom Meredith in due course acquired the basis of his social philosophy on which he was to build higher and wider as his mind matured and other thinkers came within his ken. 12


J.B. Priestley also stresses the influence of Germany upon the young poet's thought; he says:

The Germany he saw was the Germany of the year immediately preceding '48, when an enthusiastic and romantic liberalism and nationalism were fermenting the educated classes, when social service was becoming the ideal of romantic young men, when liberalism had penetrated into theology, and free thought was in the air. The very fact of going abroad at all to be educated meant that Meredith had an opportunity to escape that provincialism which Arnold was later to denounce as one of the most glaring faults of the age; and the fact that he went to Germany, and to a center of liberalism, nationalism, and religious tolerance, partly explains the bent of his mind and the curious way in which he seems to escape his age. Meredith owed Germany a great deal more than the inspiration for Farina or the German scenes in Harry Richmond; it shaped his mind and determined the course of his thought and gave him a certain romanticism that coloured all his work, no matter how purely intellectual, how much in the spirit of pure comedy the underlying conception of that work might be.¹³

Here in the Rhine Valley Nature spread itself before him in a grandeur of hills and valleys, of mountains covered with majestic forests, and plains where fruit trees filled the spring air with blossoming loveliness. Whether she spake to him with the awful voice of a mountain storm; from sparkling falls or swift streams, or from deep meadows bright with the flowers of spring, he was like a keen and sensitive instrument to catch her meaning, to interpret her song and give forth in purest tones her perfect harmonies.

Germany's ancient literature was an inspiration to his lively imagination. All natural objects suggested it to him:

¹³ J.B. Priestley, op. cit., p.10.
Suddenly one of us exclaimed, "We're in a German forest;" and we remembered grim tales of these forests, their awful castles, barons, knights, ladies, long-bearded dwarfs, gnomes, and thin people. I commenced a legend off-hand.  

Goethe, in his youth, had urged his countrymen to great aims and high moral standards through which alone happiness was to be achieved. He taught the unity and brotherhood of man and found divinity in the visible forms of the material world; to seek noble ideals, to achieve goodness, these were necessary for a full and splendid life.  

Sencourt speaks of other philosophers from whom Meredith derived much:  

Goethe had given these ideas as leaders to Germany, and Meredith breathed them from the air of Neuwied. French and German literatures were the chief study there. The heritage of Goethe had inspired not only the philosophers, but also Fichte, Jean Paul Richter, Novalis, Eichendorff, Mörike, and Freiligrath. If Meredith found his first great teacher in Goethe, and through Goethe in Spinoza, it is true that his philosophy was also stated by Novalis and Jean Paul.  

"The boy who went down the Rhine in 1844 had grown almost out of recognition in two years." His was a nature keenly alive to the summoning challenge of new thoughts and the awakening perception of the subtle gifts of his own mind. "His experiences and impressions gathered there had raised him from the sense of the comedy of Portsmouth, and the conventions of Anglicanism, and the battles of his English school days, to a  

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14 Harry Richmond. p.146.  
15 R.E. Sencourt, op. cit., p.15.  
16 Ibid., p.20.
sense of a union made eternal with the river of life, as his spirit united with that of inhabited nature. He was joined to Coleridge and Carlyle in that fellowship of transcendental idealism which was Germany's gift to their ages." 17

Sencourt would stress the likeness of Meredith to Carlyle and their joint fellowship with Jean Paul:

But the high pulse of human life, and an interest rushing from one detail to another in an endless change of fun and fervour, made Meredith akin not to Coleridge but Carlyle. The best essay on the basis of the Meredithian philosophy is Sartor Resartus. Carlyle has himself referred to a source from which Meredith drank with the thirst of athletic youth. It was the first uproarious comic nature like their own, who had found a prophet in Goethe. It was Jean Paul Richter. 18

Back in England, Meredith came under still another influence which was to be an abiding one. It was that of Thomas Love Peacock, whose daughter, Mary Ellen Nicholls, Meredith married in 1849. Peacock was an ironist and trained the eyes of his son-in-law to see the rich comedy open to the novel of manners.

We have yet to speak of Meredith's debt to France. A brief survey of this aspect of Meredith's work may shed a new light on the man himself, and lead to a fuller appreciation of his mental outlook and philosophy. "It was not till his thirty-fifth year that Meredith visited France. In 1863 he accompanied Sir William Hardman on a journey to Rouen and Paris and Sir

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17 Sencourt, op. cit., p. 20.
18 Ibid.
William has left us a pleasant account of their wanderings."

"For Meredith's most direct eulogy of France as a literary nation we must turn to his Essay on Comedy which contains references to several great French men of letters, and especially to Moliere." W.G. Hartog is of the opinion that "Too much has been made of Germanic influence on his writings," and John Lees declares:

In 1864 he mentions Goethe along with Shakespeare, Moliere, and Cervantes as writers to whom he bows his head. He seems to have regarded Goethe as the most abiding literary influence in his life, but readers of the Essay on Comedy cannot fail to be struck with the author's remarks on Moliere. Meredith's own "Comic Spirit," his irony, his peculiarly whimsical half-detached presentation of the humours of life mark him as, on the whole, more akin to Moliere than Goethe.

Sencourt calls attention to Meredith's life long study of the French masters; he says:

Without attempting to minimize the German influence which Meredith himself stoutly insisted upon, we must yet admit that France claimed his devotion and by this ardent admiration his art profited much. A follower and an admirer of Goethe to the end, a lover of the woods of Germany and her open spaces, he began to feel the power of French humanism. Flaubert, the one man who insisted at that time that genius must not constrain its travail to the public taste, had published his first great work in the same year as The Ordeal. But Meredith had been reading more deeply: for humanist philosophy, Montaigne; for

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20 Ibid., p. 603.

21 Ibid., p. 611.

the comic appreciation of social life, Moliere; then La Bruyere, concise and searching in his knowledge of men and women; and then, for an irony so delicate that it was almost tenderness, Renan; and for a high note of passionate feeling, Racine. Besides Renan, he read Stendhal, Victor Hugo, Dumas, George Sand, Musset, Baudelaire, and Flaubert. He loved the vivacity of the French, the lively expression of their faces and, above all, of their eyes, their quickness to catch an idea or appreciate a feeling. 23

M. Photiades, on a visit to Box Hill, found Meredith reading the Revue des Deux Mondes, and elicited from him that he greatly admired the later works of Anatole France. "Excellent books," he remarked, "that I read over and over again." 24

"It is suggestive of the French influence under which Mr. Meredith has worked that of all his characters he prefers Renée de Croisnel, one of the heroines of Beauchamp's Career. "If a Frenchman were to propose to her; tell me that he loved her," he said laughing, "I should immediately challenge him." 25

Thus to understand the genius of Meredith it is necessary to know his indebtedness to the three countries from whose wells of learning he had drunk deep until he had thoroughly imbibed the spirit of all three.

24 W.G. Hartog, op. cit., p. 600.
His youth felt at once the influence of a prophet, Carlyle, and that of an ironist, Peacock; he owed something to his contact with the Germany of metaphysics and mysticism, and much to his elective taste for French balance and penetration. 26

To England he owed the strong moral bias which, in spite of his cosmopolitan education, he intended should keep him on the safe middle road where the unerring guide is common sense. The resulting philosophy which his brilliant, original, and intuitive genius deduced from all these schools of thought was a sort of naturalistic idealism which had its basis in the principles of evolution.

CHAPTER II

PRINCIPLES OF EVOLUTION AS THE BASIS OF MEREDITH'S MORAL AND ETHICAL IDEAS

To Meredith the ideal presented to the imagination by the possibilities for mankind inherent in the scientific theory of evolution was the very poetry of existence. This doctrine, which was given its most popular form by Darwin, co-incided with his own conception of Earth and its most inscrutable inhabitant, Man. It took hold of his imagination, firing it with hope and lighting up ways that had been dark and tangled, showing clearer and surer paths to ever higher achievement. To him we were not a fallen race but a climbing one. Eden, Meredith would say, is ahead of and not behind us. The briefest perusal of his writings will show that this doctrine is a fundamental principle with him. "Its influence is apparent in his confident asseveration of man's identity with Nature and harmony with it and in his romantic naturalistic ethics." ¹

His poetry elucidates his interpretation of the doctrine; his novels show it in practice as the test of individual worth

and a mysteriously provident force operative within the social body. Sometimes directly, sometimes by means of critical situations in the lives of characters, he points out, or infers, the ceaseless working out of this principle in the individual life. In all activity he perceives Nature striving for the perfection of man's intellectual, physical, and ethical powers. He can be ruthless in his treatment of anyone who would frustrate the attainment of this monumental ideal. To Julia Bonner he is merciless because she is sickly; and Meredith's ideal was a strong and fit body as well as a gifted intellect. "That we should attain to a healthy humanity, is surely the most pleasing thing in God's sight," he wrote to the Reverend Augustus Jessop in 1864. The finest dower that Earth can bestow upon her chosen ones is health of mind and body and soul.

Each of each in sequent birth,
Blood and brain and spirit three
(Say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
Join for true felicity.  

...............  

Earth that Triad is: she hides
Joy from him who that divides;
Showers it when the three are one
Glassing her in union.  

It is with this dower that Meredith enriches his fascinating heroines. Clara Middleton, Diana, and Rose Jocelyn, to name only a few, are creatures of "blood and brain," as well as of

2 Poems, The Woods of Westermain. p.84.
3 Ibid., p.85.
spirit. They boast of a glowing healthiness. Clara can easily outrun Crossjay; the Countess de Salda is struck by Rose's frank acknowledgment of a hearty appetite. We see these two meeting for the first time at the ship's table on the return trip to England:

Rose, unconscious of praise or blame, rivalled her uncle in enjoyment of the fare, and talked of her delight in seeing England again, and anything that belonged to her native land. Mrs. Melville perceived that it pained the refugee Countess, and gave her the glance intelligible; but the Countess never missed glances, or failed to interpret them.

She said:
"Let her. I love to hear the sweet child's prattle."
"It was fortunate," (she addressed the diplomatist) "that we touched at Southampton and procured fresh provision!"4

Lord Fleetwood is won by the Valkyre in Carinthia; he has his first glimpse of her against a background of her native mountains:

She climbed to the rock-slabs above. This was too easily done. The poor bit of effort excited her frame to desire a spice of danger, her walk was towering in the physical contempt of a mountain girl for petty lowland obstructions. And it was just then, by the chance of things—by the direction of events, as Dame Gossip believes it to be—while colour, expression, and her proud stature marked her from her sex, that a gentleman, who was no other than Lord Fleetwood, passed Carinthia, coming out of the deeper pine forest.

Some distance on, round a bend of the path, she was tempted to adventure by a projected forked head of a sturdy, blunted, and twisted little rock-fostered forest tree pushing horizontally for growth about thirty feet above the lower ground. She looked on it, and took a step

4 Evan Harrington. p.29.
down to the stem soon after. Fleetwood had turned and followed, merely for the final curious peep at an unexpected vision; he had noticed the singular shoot of thick timber from the rock, and the form of the goose neck it rose to, the sprout of branches off the bill in the shape of a crest. And now a shameful spasm of terror seized him at sight of a girl doing what he would have dreaded to attempt. She footed coolly, well-balanced, upright. 5

Because of her failure to possess one of the three gifts, Meredith makes poor Julia the scapegoat for all the unlikable qualities he withholds from his characters who are fit. She is ugly; she is suspicious and unreliable and she nurses a morbid jealousy and sense of inferiority. Her creator tells us why she may never rank among his heroines:

Bear in your recollection that she was not a healthy person. Diseased little heroines may be made attractive, and are now popular; but strip off the cleverly woven robe which is fashioned to cover them, and you will find them in certain matters bearing a resemblance to menial maids. 6

Around the Countess de Saldar's imperfections is thrown a veil of high comedy; her ceaseless activity keeps the ball rolling, even if it doesn't always take the direction toward which she would spin it. But Meredith extends no such poetic veiling over Julia's faults; she is allowed to die unmourned.

To further his scientific observations without detriment to his art was a subtle problem for the poet-novelist. According

5 The Amazing Marriage. pp. 151, 152.
6 Evan Harrington. p. 430.
to Guy B. Petter:

The "poet of evolution" had to devise a new framework and new methods, in order to set forth in a purely artistic form his philosophy of man's life as a process of active development. As is here urged, he was no strict Darwinian, though he did turn down Butler's Erewhon, evidently not recognizing that it was a criticism of the doctrine of natural selection as the sole agency of growth and variety.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and The Origin of Species appeared the same year; but the former, like the novels that followed, was based on less mechanical and more spiritual concepts, in which the views of Carlyle and Spencer were co-ordinated with Darwin's theories. 7

A clear application of this doctrine of natural selection is made in one of the early pages of The Egoist:

A deeper student of science than his rivals, he appreciated Nature's compliment in the fair one's choice of you. We now scientifically know that in this department of the universal struggle, success is awarded to the bettermost. You spread a handsomer tail than your fellows, you dress a finer top-knot, you pipe a newer note, have a longer stride; she reviews you in competition, and selects you. The superlative is magnetic to her. She may be looking elsewhere, and you will see—the superlative will simply have to beckon, away she glides. She cannot help herself; it is her nature, and her nature is the guarantee for the noblest race of men to come of her. In complimenting you, she is a promise of superior offspring. Science thus—or it is better to say, an acquaintance with science—facilitates cultivation of aristocracy. Consequently, a wresting of her from a body of competition, tells you that you are the best man. What is more it tells the world so. 8

8 The Egoist. p. 36.
And when Willoughby has won her, Meredith comments:

"Thus did Miss Middleton acquiesce in the principle of selection. And then did the best man of a host blow his triumphant horn and loudly. He looked the fittest; he justified the dictum of science." 9

In this struggle Nature will aid with her laws which ordain the survival of the fit and the destruction of the unfit, but each individual must contribute to the betterment of the race by conscious, intellectual striving. His philosophy, by which we are always to understand the outlook which determines conduct, is governed by this thought, as its main support, which gives to the life of the individual, as well as of the community, a sense of ceaseless forward and upward development to ever higher moral standards.

Speaking of this, Diana says:

To such an end let us bend our aim to work, knowing that every form of labour, even this flimsiest, as you esteem it, should minister to growth. 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.10

Our interdependence is voiced more poetically in Vittoria's song:

9 The Egoist. p.38.

10 Diana of the Crossways. p.15.
Were death defeat, much weeping would be right;  
'Tis victory when it leaves surviving trust.  
You will not find me save when you forget  
Earth's feebleness, and come to faith, my friend,  
For all Humanity doth owe a debt  
To all Humanity, until the end. 11

But no one is promised the final attainment of the perfection sought nor a reward for the effort expended; joy comes from the struggle itself; nor must any generation expect to find the realization of man's hope in its own day.

It is not with achievement that Meredith would deal in his novels, but with the striving; as Trevelyan says:

The sufferings by which callow youth wins wisdom and strength, if the victim is not broken to pieces in the process of the ordeal, are the central theme of Mr. Meredith's novels. And personal history is the epitome of the history of the race. Man's growth is slow as the aeons, to be counted in geologic periods. 12

One of the most profound of the European critics of our literature, in attempting to make tangible Meredith's complex philosophy, has written:

The doctrine of Meredith is a spiritualism which, resting on the most material reality, on the facts of experience, springs up to noble hopes. Evolution, a cosmic law, is the very principle, not the negation, of the religion of the mind. A divinity dwells in the depths of the universe; and the earth, the mother of man, is the sacred fount of

health and wisdom in which he must again and again be re-
refreshed. Read by the eyes of imagination, Nature teaches
us an order, a beauty, a virtue; and in our submission to
her we shall find a joy. The pantheistic optimism of Mered-
ith is not unlike that of Wordsworth. It is more complex,
accompanied by a more vivid perception of the mysterious-
ness of things, and of the holy terror that thrills the
Woods of Westermain. It finds its nourishment in elements
that are not so simple, and establishes more subtle re-
lationships between the influences of the soil or the sky,
and our soul. It does not directly deal with scientific
and metaphysical problems; but one feels that it has
breathed the atmosphere of metaphysics and science. It takes
its rise in animality, and ends as a mystic vision.13

We must go to his poetry for the clearest explanation of
his evolitional ideas. In "Modern Love" he would answer those
who question our origin thus:

What are we first? First, animals; and next
Intelligences at a leap; on whom
Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
Into which state comes Love, the drowning sun:
Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
Intelligence and instinct now are one.14

To Meredith it is clearly evident that man's mind and
spirit were evolved out of the earth as well as his body: "from
flesh unto spirit man grows." 15

13 Legouise and Cazamian, op.cit., p.1278.
14 Modern Love. XXX.
15 Ibid.
Henderson further says of this deduction that:

He not unnaturally wishes to see fiction written in the light of deep and penetrating comprehension of the fundamental realities of human nature. Character must be shown in consistent development, men and women must be shown struggling upward toward the light through the transmutative ordeals of human experience. So, after all, the primary consideration is Meredith's conception of the nature of humanity and of the forces which must operate in achieving individual and spiritual emancipation. The epitome of his fiction is personal history, a soul on trial, characters fused in the hot crucible of life -- the vicissitudes, failures and struggles of the individual to arrive at self-realization and self-mastery.16

Meredith differs from revealed dogmatic religion in his firm belief that Earth is man's true mother. "Earth has her brightest life in the works of man, and from her man derives his spiritual qualities." 17

He tells us through the mouth of one of his characters:

We do not get to any Heaven by renouncing the Mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is best to believe that Earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations.18


17 Ibid.

18 *Lord Ormont* and *His Aminta*, p.218.
"His is an agnostic philosophy of Faith and Love, that accepts the renewal of life in fresh forms through the death of the old, but does not pretend to know the inmost secret of things." 19

Wordsworth, and the coterie who followed him in his love of nature, were not so audacious as to make the soul a part of the evolutionary process as well as the body. The spiritual in man, they felt, came down from above and was a remembrance of and a beckoning toward his heavenly abode. Not so Meredith: to him Earth was not only the source from which our bodies had sprung; it was also the mighty giver of mind and spirit. We were not dropped down from heaven but were evolved out of Earth. To Earth and its precepts we must be faithful. "From the point of vision of the angels," says Diana, "this ugly monster, the world only half out of slime, must appear our one constant hero."20

"Evolution, however, is regarded by Meredith not as a mechanical process dependent on the properties of matter, but as a scheme of progress conducted in accordance with inherent principles. Men are descended from the lower animals, and have evolved: first, morality, then reason. If they stray from the onward path, they are doomed to disappear." 21

19 Trevelyan, op. cit., p.141.
20 Diana, p.10.
He points out the advantages gained by "such a scheme of progress" as carried on by one great family:

Earls of Ronfrey spied few spots within their top tower's wide circle of the heavens not their own. It is therefore manifest that they had the root qualities, the prime active elements, of men in perfection, and notably that appetite to flourish at the cost of the weaker, which is the blessed exemplification of strength, and has been man's cheerulest encouragement to fight on since his comparative subjugation on the whole, it seems complete of the animal world. By-and-by the struggle is transferred to higher ground, and we begin to perceive how much we are indebted to the fighting spirit. Strength is the brute form of truth.22

Questions of first causes and final ends are to him useless as long as we put our best into the struggle:

Our questions are a mortal brood,
Our work is everlasting;
We children of Beneficence
Are in its being sharers;
And whither vainer sounds than whence,
For word with such wayfarers.23

Elsewhere in his poems he sings of the upward climb, but confesses at last that, in a modern comedy of manners, the actors betray a surprising similarity to their simian ancestry:

Historic be the survey of our kind
And how their brave Society took shape,
Lion, wolf, vulture, fox, jackal and ape.
The strong of limb, the keen of nose, we find,
Who, with some jars in harmony, combined,
Their primal instincts taming, to escape
The brawl indecent, and hot passions drape.

Convenience pricked conscience, that the mind. Thus entered they the field of milder beasts, which in some sort of civil order graze, And do half-homage to the God of Laws. But are they still for their old ravenous feasts, Earth gives the edifice they build no base: They spring another flood of fangs and claws.24

Advancement will be found in ceaseless activity, even in war; he contends that if some gain has been made it is because our ancestors "scorned the ventral dream of peace, unknown in nature."25 In this warfare nature will be forced to sacrifice many of her best for the furtherance of her schemes:

A slayer, yea, as when she pressed
Her savage to the slaughter heaps,
To sacrifice she prompts her best:
She reaps them as the sower reaps. 26

Joseph Warren Beach dwells at length on this insistence of Meredith's on the necessity of unceasing warfare, of our need for constant action. He quotes:

The war with evil in every form must be incessant; we cannot have peace, says Alvan in The Tragic Comedians, Chap.III. Let then our joy be in war; in uncompromising Action, which need not be the less a sagacious conduct of the war.27

24 Poems, Society. p.129.
26 Ibid., p.32.
In one story he terms war, "the purifier;" 28 in another, Diana, the most vital if not the noblest of his heroines, declares: "I thank heaven I'm at war with myself." Her utterance meets with Lady Dunstane's heartiest approval.

"You always manage to strike out a sentence worth remembering, Tony, ... At war with ourselves, means the best happiness we can have." 29

Beach approves this ceaseless activity, and commenting on its use in Meredith's novels, he adds:

Conformity to nature is the key to action, and its object is the good of the race. Meredith has always his eyes on the future. They rest on the snow-capped and rose-hued mountains forward. The song of Vittoria soars to nobler heights than mere national patriotism...

It is interesting to observe that Vittoria, as well as five other novels of Meredith, and numerous poems and essays, appeared first in The Fortnightly Review which might almost have been called the organ of the Positivists: men doubtless abhorrent to the spirit of Brunetiere; men earnest in the effort to construct a philosophy of nature, and devoted to the cause of humanity. 30

As the spirit of man has evolved out of the earth, he believes that it will not die, but will continue to live on in the earth:

Full lasting is the song, though he,
The singer, passes: 31

and further:


29 Diana. p.40.


31 Poems, A Thrush in February. p.28.
Verily now is our season of seed,  
Now in our Autumn; and Earth discerns  
Them that have served her in them that can read,  
Glassing, where under the surface she burns,  
Quick at her heel, while the fuel, decay,  
Brightens the fire of renewal; and we?  
Death is the word of a bovine day...32

Regarding this continued existence, he wrote to G.W. Foote in 1889:

If I speak of a life that is a lasting life, it is not meant to be the life of the senses -- which is a sensual dream of the Creeds -- whereon our good Mother looks her blackest. She has more forgiveness for libidinousness, than for the smoking of such priest's opium. Those who do it stop their growth.

And earlier, in 1884, he had stated the same opinion in a letter to his close friend, Admiral Maxse:

For me, I would not have my life again--under the conditions; and also I should think it a wiliness to crave for the happiest of renewed existences. The soul's one road is forward. Dreams of sensational desires drown it. But as to the soul, we get the conception of that, by contrast with the sensations. We go and are unmade. Could elective reason wish for the reconstruction? And yet it is quite certain that the best of us is in the state of survival. We live in what we have done -- in the idea: which seems to me the parent fountain of life, as opposed to that of perishable blood.

Meredith sees no cause for regret in such a survival:

He is essentially optimistic -- that is, he considers all things as an evolutionist, but also as one who believes

32 Poems, A Reading of Earth. p.4.
that the tendency of the laws which govern the universe is toward the highest possible good. He believes the world to be the best possible world which man could desire, and he thinks that all the unhappiness and folly of men is due only to ignorance and to weakness. He proclaims that the world can give every joy and every pleasure possible to those who are both wise and strong. 33

His is essentially a doctrine of hope:

By my faith, there is feasting to come, ...
Revelations, delights!

I can hear a faint crow
Of the cock of fresh mornings, far, far yet distinct. 34

Mary Sturje Gretten considers this optimistic tendency to be the very keynote of his philosophy. She observes:

His eyes on mankind's future, he had correlated and compared; and, at eighty years, to his mind, the sum of it all was Hope. His beliefs had been born of his brain, not of young blood; "Our faith is ours, and comes not on a tide," he had written to John Morley." 35

But we are not to expect to see the fulfillment of our hopes for "the idea of a definite term set to evolution, a golden age, a heaven on earth or above the clouds, a final victory, a consummation either in or out of time -- all these ideas are wholly alien to Mr. Meredith's philosophy." 36


34 Poems, The Empty Purse, p. 5.


36 Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 121.
Spirit raves not for a goal,
Desires not; neither desires
The Sleep or the Glory: it trusts;
Uses my gifts, yet aspires;
Dreams of a higher than it. 37

Our struggles will not culminate in any Kingdom of God
where the worthy will receive the reward of their labors;
instead "there is an irregular advance up the path of progress,
along whose banks the joys and goods are strewn, free to be
gathered by each wayfarer as he forces his way along, toiling,
suffering, living, rejoicing. Each is to help himself, and also
to clear a foot of pathway for his companions, and for those
who are to follow." 38 "God is identified, not with all Nature,
but with the good elements in her, which it is the task of man
to bring to full and conscious life in himself, by the hard
process of evolution; the education of blood and tears." 39

Meredith analyzes the reason for this necessity in a
speculation of Gower Woodseer's:

A small street-boy at his run along the pavement
nowhither, distanced him altogether in the race for the
great secret; precipitating the thought that the conscious
are too heavily handicapped. The unburdened unconscious
win the goal. Ay, but they leave no legacy. So we must
fret and stew, and look into ourselves, and seize the
brute and scourge him, just to make one serviceable step
forward: that is, utter a single sentence worth the
pondering for guidance. 40

37 Poems, A Faith on Trial. p.100.
38 Trevelyan, op.cit.,p.124.
39 Ibid., p.119.
40 The Amazing Marriage. p.511.
"Eternal striving is the password for effectual life," says Meredith. "Evolution has no end. A kingdom of perfection at a later time, on earth or in the clouds, as a consummation of the evolutionary process, does not exist. That would be the end of all life; everlasting rest, everlasting death." 41

Meredith made evolution the main source of his inspiration and the basis of his thought. To him it was the complete denial of all formal religious dogma, but he bowed to his predecessors in the acknowledgment of a divine spirit in Nature, which was not, however, to be considered apart from her. He would merge "the essence of religious feeling and the scientific idea of evolution into one to form his view of life." 42

To comprehend the reality of progress we must hear

History speak, of what men were,
And have become. 43

"And therefore, in spite of modern pessimism, he thinks that the knowledge of history and the ideas of evolution which distinguish our latter days, have on the whole cheered man more than disheartened; they have banished the "spectral enemy"

41 Letters.
42 Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 104.
43 Poems, Earth's Secret.
which loomed so large in devil-ridden minds terrorised by superstitions now generally repudiated." 44

The spectral enemy lost form
The traversed wilderness exposed its track.
He felt the far advance in looking back;
Thence trust in his foot forward through the storm. 45

An analysis of this philosophy will reveal the lack of a strong personal incentive to virtue. The reward of personal achievement is to be reaped by others. One is to feel content, while stepping into oblivion, that at some far distant time a relatively few are going to benefit by the toil and sorrows and frustrations of ourselves and the millions who have struggled since the earth was set in motion.

This thought was not without its difficulties for Meredith. While repudiating the idea of a personal God and of the "eternal verities" of heaven and hell and forming for himself a naturalistic creed, his admiration for a life of pure morals was so great and his knowledge of its necessity, if the race was to be perfected, was so present to him that he had not the heart to offer that creed for the indiscriminate adoption by all mankind. He would yet use the moral strength which revealed religion imparts as a prop to keep weak humanity, which had not as yet attained to his philosophical stature, from degenerating into a creature too offensive for the Meredithian taste. In

44 Trevelyan, op. cit., p.133.

45 Poems, A Reading of Life. p.33.
In 1865 he wrote to Captain Maxse:

I cannot think that men's minds are strong enough, or their sense of virtue secure, to escape from the tutelage of superstition in one form or another, just yet. From the Pagan divinity to the Christian, I see an advanced conception, and the nearer we get to a general belief in the abstract Deity -- i.e. the more and more abstract, the nearer are men to a comprehension of the principles (morality, virtue, etc.) than which we require nothing further to govern us. 46

Seeking truth himself, Meredith would offer what he considers to be superstition to the masses! If his belief in the falsity of Christianity were sincere how could he in honesty offer it as a solution for the problems of even one individual? His willingness to compromise between theory and practice could only be accepted on the supposition that he did not realize the falsity of the doctrine that "the end justifies the means."

He would have his son, Arthur, adhere to the practice of the Christian religion as an adequate support for an adolescent during that difficult period in his growth. Writing to him from Box Hill in 1872, he states: "The Christian teaching is sound and good: the ecclesiastical dogma is an instance of the poverty of humanity's mind hitherto, and has often in its hideous fangs and claws shown whence we draw our descent."

Meredith evidently considered himself justified in using one set of beliefs as a protection while propagating another entirely opposed to it. If it were true that the reliance on

46 Letters.
earth and his own native instincts were enough to regenerate a man, would not this system benefit the individual in the nineteenth century as absolutely as at a later date? Or was it that Meredith doubted the staying power of the thing relied on? Did he ask himself whether one could rely on something that was in a constant state of mutation? The aesthetic, whom Meredith ridiculed in the ugliest of terms, at least showed no timidity about casting himself whole heartedly into the practice of the doctrine he professed openly. One reads of no attempt on his part to retain pagan practices until he was sure the new doctrine would prove advantageous. Meredith who, according to his own account, could scarcely finish the reading of a thoroughly naturalistic French novel, was preaching his earthy principles from the safe vantage ground of Victorian England.

The above estimate might be considered too severe if he had not left a verification of it in his own words:

And out of the sensual hive,
Grown to the flower of brain;
The Legends that sweep her aside,
Crying loud for an opiate boon,
To comfort the human want,
From the bosom of magical skies,
She smiles on, marking their source:
They read her with infant eyes.
Good ships of morality they,
For our crude developing force.47

47 Poems, A Faith on Trial. p.98.
There was no more severe moralist among the Victorians than Meredith. His first wife was never able to obtain his forgiveness after her desertion; this attitude was unswervingly held to by him regarding all deviations from the traditional Victorian code. It was a rule from which he allowed no deviation that only by the observance of traditional morality could the intellect obtain the mastery over the lower nature; this self-mastery he considered the safe guard of society. Very forceful are the words he puts into the mouth of Dr. Shrapnell in Beauchamp's Career:

Society ... is our one tangible gain, our one roofing and flooring in a world of most uncertain structures built on morasses. Towards the laws that support it men hopeful of progress give their adhesion. If it is martyrdom, what then? Let Martyrdom be. Contumacy is animalism. The truer the love, the readier for sacrifice! Rebellion against society and advocacy of humanity run counter.48

He sees the spirit rising to greater light and intellectual power,

Through conquest of the inner beast, "which measure tames to measure sane,"49

"Even the function of comedy, in his eyes, is not the destruction, but the evolitional sublimation of established morals." 50

48 Beauchamp's Career. p.270.
49 Poems, Hard Weather. p.11.
50 Archibald Henderson, op.cit.,p.30.
Meredith's attitude toward public events and persons often amazed those who were familiar with the freedom he allowed the characters in his novels. As an instance of this we have the following:

When Wilde's disaster came, there were, in spite of Punch, not a few intellectuals who looked upon his sentence as brutal. Enquiries were made, and it was found that the government of the time was disposed to take into account the judgment of the intellectuals of England. Mr. Frank Harris took up Wilde's case. He found that if Meredith (now Tennyson's successor as head of the Society of Authors) and a few others would address the Government in the prisoner's favour, his sentence might be remitted. Meredith, however, peremptorily refused. The issue seemed to him a central one in life. "Abnormal sensuality in a leader of men," he said, "should be punished with severity: all greatness is based on morality."

He insisted upon the stern discipline of the passions by an enlightened reason; to him the spiritual and material appeared as complements to each other: "Man thinks he has seen the spiritual and material forces of the world at war with each other; sentimental romance and so-called realism have been the fruits of this vision. Meredith sees spirit and matter unified, and, in consequence, it is his avowed aim as a novelist to eschew the "rose-pink" of sentiment and the "alternative dirty-drab" of the realist."

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51 Sencourt, *op.cit.*, pp.286,287.

52 Mary Sturge Henderson, *op.cit.*, p.3.
For that realism which would depict only the sordid aspects of life, Meredith had little respect. Regarding this, Stuart Pratt Sherman observes:

The philosopher must explore all life. But those who love to dawdle over filth, who advance with the watch word of "Art for Art's sake" on their lips what time they assault our nostrils with odours of the dung-heap, get from Meredith nothing but disgustful censure.

My conscience will not let me so waste my time. My love is for epical subjects -- not for cobwebs in a putrid corner though I know the fascination of unravelling them. He spoke with horror of the French realists: "Who reads must smell putrid for a month ... A Cocturient, cacturient crew... sheer Realism is at best the breeder of the dung fly."

But for the one who went to the other extreme, the "pinched ascetic," Meredith had as little use. As a moralist he was anti-Puritan. "He has no patience with an ascetic mortification of the flesh. Like Browning's David, he rejoices in "manhood's prime vigour;" he accepts with a relish the legitimate physical gratifications of life." To him there was a kinship between the ascetic and the sensualist, and he had an abhorrence for either extreme.

"The middle road was to him the only safe one and the solution of the problem of conduct lay in the control of the two

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
contending forces of sensuous pleasure and asceticism." 56 As he himself stated: "Hitherto human nature has marched through a conflict of extremes. With the general growth of reason it will be possible to choose a path midway." 57 Sensuous pleasure, he declared, was typified by Aphrodite, the Persuader, and asceticism by Artemis, the Huntress: "if man shuns or too devoutly follows either, he is doomed to destruction." 58

"Resting upon the revelation of the past by historical and scientific investigation as affording sufficient hope and guidance for the future, Meredith, like Huxley, George Eliot, and the other leaders of the new movement, found no need in his philosophy for a belief in personal immortality and saw no evidence to support such a belief." 59

Meredith's conception of Faith differed that of revealed religion.

He speaks of Faith as necessary to life, but his Faith is not belief in this or that fact as to the mechanism of the Universe, this or that view of the questions of God or Immortality in the narrower sense. His faith is an attitude of trust and joy in the good elements of a world which, whatever optimist or pessimist may say clearly contains both good and evil. 60

56 Cunliffe, op.cit.,p.25.
57 Letters.
58 Cunliffe, Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Trevelyan, op.cit.,p.106.
He would estimate the essential value of an individual's life by the contribution he renders toward race perfection, "but the problem cannot be worked out in isolation, not even by aspiration to a higher power; for the assumption of divine favour slays the soul of brotherhood." 61

It is in society that men and women must work out their salvation; the virtues acquired by a single being who preserves purity of behavior while serving his fellow men will eventually become the virtues of the human race. Meredith sees the face of Nature turned against those who walk alone, even when that person, as does the egoist, moves among his fellows; he is seeking an individual gain, his own, and not that of the group.

Meredith analyzes minutely the motives of his characters. "The souls of men and women are his quarry, and the test of a civilization the degree in which it has developed the mind for an enlightened control over the emotions and the bodily appetites." 62 However, he does not mean that the freedom of the individual to seek personal and present happiness is to be entirely curtailed. In fact, this is one of the problems, the struggle between the rights of the individual and the existing social laws, with which he deals in some of his greatest novels.


"Richard Feverel is an illustration of the author's general teaching that a human being must have reasonable liberty of action for self-development. The heart must be allowed fair-play, though its guidance by the intellect is desirable." 63

In this ability to reveal to us the motives and emotional reactions of his characters, he has a decided affinity to the Greek Menander.

Like Menander, he is neither a propagandist nor a mere entertainer, but an urbane yet pungent commentator on the quaintness, pathos, and generosity of life itself as lived by unheroic yet deeply attractive men and women. And like both Moliere and Menander he writes a Comedy of Manners which depicts more frequently types than individuals, and a situation that can without grave difficulty be supposed to occur every other week ... This type of comedy needs people who fully understand one another's notions of life, who share the same accomplishments, the same degree of culture, even the same kind of language. In brief, not only does the Comedy of Manners arise in a "World" that is small, sophisticated, equally sophisticated, and leisured; further, it is such a world and such a world only that it depicts. Meredith, an excellent Menandrian, dextrously carved for himself out of Victorian England a milieu containing only people of rank, fashion and culture therefore leisured and sophisticated -- who, with their dependents as always, gave him the ideal arena for his consummate wit and comedic genius.64

He desired the survival of the finest physical and intellectual types only among men and women, hoping that in the pruning process man might achieve a perfection of specie as far advanced beyond the nineteenth century man as that personage was from his simian ancestor.


concerning this, Knight observes:

He extends this interest, practically enough, to hint at the then little discussed subject of eugenics, as the "wild oats" passages in Richard Feverel show. It is true that one finds no criticism of painting or music or kindred arts, a thing that was soon to become popular.

One finds instead a leonine optimism and satire about the ordinary social relations; not superior like Thackeray's and not debilitating like Hardy's. In a period when thinking people were distressed by the conflicting ideas of sentimentalists and ascetics, religionists and scientists, Meredith kept his head, discovered a new brand of humor, rationalized thinking about women and love, revived romance in his Harry Richmond ... and offered to all readers a philosophy of sane individualism.65

In fact, he argues that it is only when the individual is allowed the fullest expression of his native powers and the most perfect opportunity for the development of his talents and resources that we may feel that the race as a type is advancing. According to Curle:

In such books as Vittoria and Beauchamp's Career, and in many characters and many scenes throughout all his books, there is a constant and passionate appeal for freedom and the claims of the individual. He admits that it is through society progress must be made, but he does not lose sight of the truth that society is comprised of individuals, and that there is in personal liberty a sense of something no less sacred than mysterious.66

Yet the individual is to be mindful that he is but one among many; that he is never free from his obligations to his fellows:


66 Curle, op. cit., p. 117.
To attach undue worth to oneself is only to invite the Comic Deity, lying in wait around the corner, to trip one up and make one ridiculous, for there is a very slight boundary between Meredith's comedy and his tragedy. It is comedy, as one sees, relying not upon whimsy or farce or play of words but upon profound wisdom in observing the phenomena of life. How funny the man who takes himself so seriously as to seek to play Providence to his son, to regulate a soul by the tickings of a scientifically adjusted meter -- this pair of passionate lovers who are only tragic comedians -- this wealthy young man who thinks himself a prize for any feminine taste--all these prejudices of sex, of politics, of nationality! What one needs, says Meredith, is the calm evasiveness which looks upon all, or practically all, these disturbances and revolutions with a playful doubtfulness. What one needs is a sense of individuality sitting in judgment and not hurried by mob opinions. 67

Meredith would never have us confuse freedom with license, but he "was an especially severe moralist when the person was a woman." 68 Lafcadio Hearn has made an interesting analysis of this aspect of the author's teaching drawn from a fine interpretation of his poetry.

In literature before Meredith, our sympathies are invoked on behalf of illegitimate love, -- even in Tennyson. We sympathize a good deal with Lancelot and with Guinivere. In Dante, most religious of the old poets, we have a striking example of this appeal to pity in the story of Francesca di Rimini. And I need scarcely speak of various modern schools of poetry who have imitated the poets of the Middle Ages in this respect. Meredith takes the opposite view -- represents the erring woman always as culpable, and praises the act of killing her. He gives evolutional reasons for this. For example, he takes an old Spanish love story, and tells it over again in a new way. There is a beautiful young wife alone at home. There is a terrible

67 Knight, op. cit., p. 222.

68 Lafcadio Hearn, op. cit., p. 144.
rascal of a husband, a fellow who spends all his time in drinking, gambling, and fighting, and making love to other women. His wife gets tired of his neglect and his brutality and his viciousness. If he does not love her, somebody else shall. So she gets a secret lover, while her husband is away. This young man visits her. Suddenly her husband returns, and now we leave Meredith to moralize the situation...

The point upon which the poet here insists is the evolutionary signification of female virtue and of all that relates to it. Evidently he does not believe that either men or women were very virtuous in the beginning--not at all; their knowledge of right and wrong had to be developed slowly through great sufferings in the course of thousands of years. In order that the modern woman may be virtuous as she is, millions of her ancestors must have suffered the experience that teaches the social worth of female honour. And a woman who today proves unfaithful to her marriage duty is sinning, not simply against modern society, but against the whole experience, the whole modern experience, of the human race. This would make the fault a great one, of course, but would not the fault of the man be as great? By what right, except the right of force, can he punish her, if he himself be guilty of unfaithfulness? I am not sure what answer religion would give to these questions, but Meredith answers immediately and clearly. The fault is greater in the woman for she is the custodian of the purity of the race.

All study of Meredith's conception of morality, then, leads inevitably to the focus of all his thinking: Nature. To him Earth and man were bound up inseparably as an evolutionary and integral part of the cosmic system.
CHAPTER III

THE NATURALISTIC BASIS OF MEREDITH'S BELIEF
IN NATURE AND MORALITY

Since the whole system of Meredith's philosophy of moral ethics had its basis in what he termed Earth or Nature, it would be well to pause for a while to clarify for ourselves the conception which that term had for him. That he had had a close and loving association with her is evident to any reader of his poems and novels. His detailed description of her various moods and colours; his digressions on the habits of plants and animals, are the result of a remarkably keen observation and are as accurate as if a naturalist had written them. "There is a background as of the wood's own shade to all his pictures." He was content to read Nature with "brain" alone and if he constantly refers to Spirit it is not a divine Spirit above and independent of the Earth to which he refers, but one residing within her. "It is not a mere accessory to human life and feeling, a background to be painted in, by way of contrast or harmony. Meredith's nature is, as in Aristotle, to quote Professor Butcher's definition --"not the outward world of created things;

it is the creative force, the productive principle of the universe."  

"He had a passion for Nature. "Nature is my God," he said, and his adoration shows as nobly in his prose as in his poetry."  

He has his philosopher, Gower Woodseer say: "Love Nature, she makes you a lord of her boundless, off any ten square feet of common earth. I go through my illusions and come always back on that good truth."  

By Nature he seems to mean the whole system of accessible facts and forces within and around the human consciousness. This system he found complete and saw no evidence of a Power not co-existent with it; what others called Gods were to him only the inexorable laws of Nature to which man must accommodate himself if he would survive. His denial, along with Huxley, George Eliot, and so many others of the nineteenth century humanists, of a future life marked the essential difference between his philosophy and any form of Christianity. He often asserted this lack of belief in his letters, but it is most evident in his poetry, especially in such poems as "The Question Whither," "The Thrush in February," and above all, "A Faith on Trial." He considered that men have no right to expect any con-

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2 James Moffatt, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

3 Grant C. Knight, *The Novel in English*, p. 221.

4 *The Amazing Marriage*, p. 354.
tinued existence after death; immortality is of the race and not of the individual. In this belief he was not to be moved, even refuting John Stuart Mill's statement concerning the persistence of the ego.

Nature to him something more than it has hitherto meant even for its most ardent votaries. As one writer expresses it:

Nature in his novels and poems is vital, radiant, and supreme, a living presence which reminds us of the pulsing, all-embracing Nature of Lucretius, and, in certain other aspects, of Nature as the expression and embodiment of that divine wisdom for man which Marcus Aurelius inculcated. The distinctive value of Meredith's teaching on this point, however, is that Nature is for him deeper and more complex than it could be for the ancient stoics. His Nature is the cosmos of evolutionary science...which seeks in Nature the ethical standards as well as the physical origin of man. The cardinal principle of his ethical idealism is the trust-worthiness of the moral instincts. Nature is a living organism, whose end for man is spiritual, not material, and human life is unintelligible apart from its relationship to natural facts and forces.5

That would seem to say, that, inarticulate herself, Nature brings forth an offspring fully equipped with faculties for speech; unoriginal herself and blindly forced to obey unswerving laws she has an offspring, man, who is original, and who may or may not obey the laws of his own being. But these are questions with which Meredith has no patience. Those who ask them are, according to him, probing further than we have a right to go. "Life according to Nature is man's destiny, which means, not the worship of the senses, but the spirit's control of the

5 Moffatt, op. cit., p.32.
senses. The end of Nature is man's ethical completeness.6 But this end is only to be obtained through the sacrifice of personal ambition to what will bring about the advancement and the good of all. "My friend," he warns, "the nursing of a single antipathy is a presumption that your motive force is personal—whether the thirst for vengeance or some internal union of a hundred indistinct little fits of egoism."7 Like Gower Woodseer, his noblest characters have a "passion for spiritual cleanliness without which was no comprehension, therefore no enjoyment, of nature possible to him."8 Lady Charlotte thinks that any reasoning that goes beyond Nature will tend toward a resulting dishonesty in action.

He's just the opposite to the hypocrite; so hypocrites hate him. I've heard them called high-priests of decency. Then we choose to be indecent and honest, if there's a God to worship. Fear, they're in the habit of saying—we are to fear God. ...Hypocrites may: honest sinners have no fear. And see the cause: they don't deceive themselves—that is why. Do you think we can love what we fear? They love God, or they disbelieve. And if they believe in Him, they know they can't conceal anything from Him. Honesty means piety: we can't be one without the other. And here are people—parsons—who talk of dying as going into the presence of our Maker, as if He had been all the while outside the world He created. ...I'm for a rational Deity.9

6 Moffatt, op.cit., p.32.
7 Vittoria, p.21.
8 The Amazing Marriage, p.271.
9 Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p.57.
To Wordsworth Nature bore intimations of immortality but to Meredith she bore no message but that written plain upon her face for all to read. Man had no right to weave into her own vain imaginings or unwarrantable yearnings. She was perfect in herself, a bride whose only dower was her all-sufficing beauty. No promise of personal immortality must be sought in her -- none indeed, but the psychically self-seeking would endeavour to find such a promise. Those who looked for a personal life beyond the grave were those who were incapable of the supreme altruism of merging their own life in that of the Race, and serving it, regardless of future reward.¹⁰

Yet Meredith, would not consciously class himself with the materialists: "On the contrary, he seeks Spirit everywhere: but Spirit must be sought in Nature, not beyond it, through the Real, not in the teeth of the Real; and if the Real be sought strenuously the Spiritual will come unasked. All things, both real and spiritual, are contained in Earth, and beyond Earth we cannot go."¹¹

He who the reckoning sums
Finds nought in his hand save Earth.
Of Earth are we stripped or crowned.¹²


¹¹ Ibid.

Strong errs in inferring that spiritual beings are not real.

¹² Poems, *A Faith on Trial*. 
And it is Earth, and Earth alone, which leads to Spirit.

Earth is

Spirit in her clods,
Footway to the God of Gods. 13

"And if we look Earth and Nature full in the face, and try to see in them the Real, we have in that very act made ourselves one with Reason -- Reason, man's germinant fruit, the eternal foe of self, the prompter to service and self-sacrifice. If man is one with Reason, the desire for supine comfort, for mere happiness, will cease within him, and he will know that:" 14

Wisdom is won of its fight,
The combat incessant. 15

"In his conception of the way in which the Universe is managed, he is largely agnostic," 16 but his convictions do not daunt his courage. On the contrary, he asserts that: "There is room for almost boundless hope, and Faith in the persistence of good is not contradictory to Reason. Since the Universe, whatever its veiled secret, is all we shall get, it is surely wise to make the best of it, rather than to think the worst." 17

13 Poems, A Faith on Trial.
14 Strong, op.cit., p.166.
15 Poems, A Faith on Trial.
17 Ibid., p.112.
"He uses Earth as the sanction for all his moral precepts, just as other poets and preachers have so used Heaven."18 In the last analysis, he would assert that, "Our only visible friend is our own Mother Earth. It is she who leads us to perceive what we call God."19 "To reach to what Mr. Meredith calls the "Spiritual God" we must study man, and hold communion with Nature; we must "read Earth." 20

The message our Mother has for each of her children must be interpreted by Reason, and he who brings "brain" to this task will read her aright and need not fear that following her laws will lead him astray, for: "He who has Reason will thus have transcended the senses and made himself their master; but he will not on this account have transcended Nature, nor will he dream of progress except along her path. But if he advance with Reason along that path, his progress will be steady and spiritual, undisturbed by vain cravings either for happiness or for the false ideal of a staying imagination?21

19 Trevelyan, op. cit., p.115.
19 Ibid., p.118.
20 Ibid., p.119.
21 Strong, op. cit., p.168.
Diana exclaims, "A thousand years! You may count full
many a thousand by this route before you are one with divine
philosophy. Whereas a single flight of brains will reach and
embrace her; give you the savour of Truth, the right use of
the senses, Reality's infinite sweetness; for these things are
in philosophy." 22

Laughter, a sense of the comic, was the great aid that
reason was to bring to man in his attempt to find his place
and maintain his balance in the cosmic scheme; she would show
him his failings in the plain light of common sense. Indeed,
"he believed the one thing needful, synthesis of all needs, was
to instruct men in the proper uses of the Comic Spirit, that
they might laugh and be laughed at unto their soul's salva-
tion." 23

Meredith's faithful student of Nature, Gower Woodseer,
found joy in close association with her. "A fellow" he thought,
"may brood upon Nature, but the real children of Nature -- or
she loves them best -- are those who have the careless chatter,
the ready laugh, bright welcome for a holiday." 24

23 Stuart P. Sherman, op. cit., p.266.
24 The Amazing Marriage. p.510.
Mankind was never to despair for:

ever ready in Reason's Service was Laughter, the symbol of the Comic Spirit, which spoke with Nature's very voice, and was the great purifying Spirit of the Universe. "A tear," said Blake, "is an intellectual thing." Meredith might have said the same of a laugh: for it was Laughter, based on a true knowledge of Nature's message, that must be used for the discomfiture of those who enter the Woods of Westermain with eyes shut to her beneficent purpose, interpreting all her processes in the light of their own sentimentalism and of the selfish personal sorrow which they have never learnt to lose in the joyous life of the Race; of these Meredith says,

This Earth of the beautiful breasts,
Shining up in all colours aflame,
To them had visage of hags:
A Mother of aches and jests;
Soulless, heading a hunt
Aimless except for a meal.25

While most other poets have sung of Nature in the abstract, have moralized, sentimentalized, transcendentalized her, Meredith has cared more to sing her as she is in the concrete. His predecessors have, in the main, sung the spirit of nature; he sings her body, which is the earth. 26

Nature is for him the great Reality; he sings of her, not because he worships her in some vague way afar off, as one might the abstract woman, but because he has loved and worshipped her as a man his wife, lying in her arms, eye to eye, breath to breath. He has lived with her day by day for many years, he knows all her moods, moods of summer and winter, of joy and travail, strange moods of contradiction hard to bear, and yet alike in one as in

25 Poems, A Faith on Trial.

26 Richard Le Gallienne, op. cit., p. 130.
another he has never lost his faith that her heart is love -- "love, the great volcano." 27

All forms of selfishness, of pettiness, of sensuality, any seeking the gratification of the ego to the detriment of Race improvement, were frowned upon by Meredith. He censures one who "did not reflect that the strong glow of poetic imagination is wanted to hallow a passionate devotion to the inanimate; for this evokes the spiritual; and passionateness of any kind in narrower brains should be a proclamation to us of sanguine freshets not coming from a spiritual source." 28

Moffatt discerns that:

his great aversion is for any form of sentimentality. Sentimentalism is a word that spells for him mental immaturity and moral opium. It is, to use his own fine aphorism, enjoyment without obligation, an attempt to taste existence without incurring responsibility. Upon the other hand, the better policy of trusting Nature frankly, which Meredith shares with the scientific movement of the age, makes an incessant demand upon courage and brains, especially brains. If people are to peruse Nature with virile and keen intelligence --an open eye and unflinching sincerity are required; hence the earliest symptom of philosophy in man is aversion to sentimentalism, in the guise either of self-pity or Byronic melancholy or contempt for the world. 29

28 Celt and Saxon, p.265.
29 James Moffatt, op.cit., p.32.
We are to approach Nature as a familiar intimate, knowing that an understanding of her laws is necessary if we would advance. "In "The Woods of Westermain" we learn Mr. Meredith's one great nature lesson: the attitude of utter trust, complete faith. Only by such an approach, he again and again impresses us, can we hope to know anything of her heart. In any other, she will be a riddle, yea! a horror." 30

Meredith's conception of Nature is unique, daring; he would endow her with nothing less than sublimity: "To Wordsworth Nature is some unknown, mysterious, far off power, which despite its distance consents to reveal herself to some few devout worshippers, binding them to her in some vague shadowy association. With Meredith we are Nature, we are quodcumque vides, quodcumque moveris, the Lucanian definition of God, we are the sons of Earth, true autochthons, derived aeons ago from Earth, deriving still all power and force from Earth and from Earth's contact." 31

He would tell us that this is our one bond of unity; our participation in the universal Spirit in Nature; each soul has

31 Crees, op.cit., p.103.
the sacred obligation to be true to the promptings of that
spirit, that he may be true to his Race.

We are one in an universal brotherhood with all
creatures that have life and breath, one even with the
inanimate, evolving slowly but surely from primal slime
to such glorious races as only the future shall reveal,
depending for our progress entirely upon our insight into
Earth, our Mother, basing, if we are wise, all our morals,
all our principles of conduct on such purpose as we can
desire in Earth, taking as our watchword the Stoic "life
in conformity with Nature," with a profounder understand-
ing of its meaning, thus shall we hold our onward course.
But what others call Nature, Meredith more often chooses
to call Earth. The difference is significant. It emphasises
his belief that we are sprung from the soil, of the
earth earthy.32

All our hopes of peaceful social relations and concord
between nations, Meredith would make dependent upon the uni-
versal understanding and acceptance of her precepts."Thus all
men, so far as they are swayed by the best in themselves, are
drawn by nature into one, into a solidarity of bestness. Where-
ever they are not responsive to her call, they fly apart into
social anarchy and hatred. For to Meredith there is no solidar-
ity except that of bestness. The analyst's task becomes, then, to
find out what is the will of Nature, and to pick his way through
whatever falsity in human affairs runs counter to it." 33

32 Crees, op.cit.,p.103.
33 Follett, op.cit.,p.103.
Acceptance is encumbant upon all, but it is the manner of acceptance that will determine the happiness and light each individual shall find in her:

Our acceptance of her must be not pessimistic, nor even patient, but joyous and exultant: for if a man once entered the Woods of Westermain, and looked upon Nature with the right eyes, self-pity would cease within him, and all things appurtenant to revelation would be done for him. He would see her indeed, still red in tooth and claw: but cruel though she were to the individual, she was ever kindly to the Race; and it was in the Race that the individual must learn from her to live the truer and the larger life. 34

"True poet though he is, George Meredith never loses touch with reality, and above all never attempts to deny it. His teaching creates no gulf between Nature and humanity." 35 Body and spirit have not different goals; there is not to be a parting of the way at last. "On the contrary, it reveals them to us working together upon the same task; it affirms that the most elevated means of money-making cannot be all-absorbing, and readily assimilates that thoughtful and severe saying of the Ramayana: "Duty is the essence of the world." 36

34 Strong, op.cit.,p.163.
35 Constantin Photiadès, op.cit.,p.200.
36 Ibid.
"Meredith's philosophy of nature, as far as it affects the conduct of man, may be summed up in the command -- Accept and serve." Throughout his writings we are impressed with this idea: that man will realize the purpose of his existence only in so far as he makes the purposes of Earth his own and labors whole-heartedly to further her ends.

The philosophy which represents Meredith's "criticism of life," is broadly speaking a belief in the rightness and wholesomeness of Nature, when Nature -- "Sacred Reality" -- is lovingly and faithfully and trustfully sought and known by the pure use of reason. Man must be "obedient to Nature, not her slave." Mystical as this philosophy occasionally becomes, it is yet an inspiring one, clean, austere and practical; and it is always dominated by the categorical imperative of self-knowledge and the striving after honesty of purpose and thought.

Meredith would hurl the term "egoist" at that individual who dared to express or nourish a desire for personal immortality apart from the imperishable Spirit of the Race. To him the only immortality was that of the race, not of the individual.

Doubtless it was the cold severity of his philosophy which kept many readers aloof from him; Meredith expressed scorn for their lack of thinking power, but there have been many from his own intellectual sphere who have since questioned his theories. Let us examine some of their findings.


38 Encyclopedia Britannica. Vol. 15.
Archibald T. Strong asserts that:

There would seem to be grave difficulties involved in Meredith's philosophy. One of its chief weaknesses, is surely his attempt to laugh out of court those who see fundamental evil in Nature, instead of fundamental good. Their case is far too strong for this to be done successfully; they speak with many voices, and are by no means necessarily pessimistic in their general outlook. One of them, Alfred de Vigny, contrasts the majesty shown my man in his weakness and sufferings with the utter cruelty and insensitivity which, as he believes, underlie all Nature's beauty.39

Science, too, has her word to say on the matter through the words of Thomas Huxley, who in his homanès Lecture on "Evolution and Ethics" remarks: "As I have already urged, the practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue— involves a course of conduct which in all respects is opposed to that which leads to success in the Cosmic struggle for existence."

Goodness, says the Professor, repudiates the gladiatorial theory of the struggle for existence, and after noticing again the theory "that the struggle for existence, which has done such admirable work in cosmic nature, must be equally beneficent in the ethical sphere," he continues: Yet if what I have insisted on is true, if the cosmic process has no sort of relation to moral ends, if the imitation of it by man is inconsistent with the first principles of ethics, what becomes of this surprising theory? Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of Society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less on running away from it, but on combating it. It may seem an audacious proposal thus to pit the microcosm against the macrocosm, and to set man to subdue Nature to his higher ends; but I venture to think that the

39 Strong, op. cit., p.169.
great intellectual difference between the ancient times
with which we have been occupied and our day lies in the
solid foundation we have acquired for the hope that such
an enterprise may meet with a certain measure of success. 40

So far Science: for philosophy's indictment of Nature
we may turn to certain chapters of Schopenhauer's World
as Will and Idea and Eduerd Von Hartmann's Philosophy of
the Unconscious.

The counts form a strong indictment, and they must be
met seriously; they cannot be brushed scornfully aside, as
Meredith endeavours to brush them in his poem, "The Whimper
of Sympathy", and in his second sonnet on Shakespeare. If
evil is not the positive pole of existence, as some have
contended, there is still profound meaning in Wordsworth's
lines:

Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.

Nor can one completely dispose of the problem by ordering
the individual to lose himself in the life of the Race. The
duty of service and self-sacrifice in the interest of one's
kind is indeed the first principle of practical conduct,
and one that is inculcated by all religion, as by all phil-
osophy worthy the name: and the new and strenuous deter-
mination which Meredith has given to this immemorial pre-
cept by attaching it to the theory of Evolution is the in-
spiring force of his philosophy and of some of his most
powerful poetry. But is such a noble ethical conception
sufficient to explain either certain processes of Nature or
certain convictions of the human consciousness? Further-
more, is the distinction a real one which Meredith draws in
such poems as "The Thrush in February" between the welfare
of the individual and the welfare of his kind? Is that
Spirit to which he so constantly appeals -- the spirit, that
is to say, of the Race -- true spirit at all apart from the
individual souls which compose the Race? The conception of
such a spirit, one and permanent, seems necessarily to im-
ply the idea of what is known as Race-Immortality, but is
such Race-Immortality, implying as it does a persistence of
the Race built upon the annihilation of the men and women
who are the Race, --immortality in anything but name? Can
such a word be applied to a mere continuity or succession
of separate and transitory personalities? 41


41 Ibid., p.173.
It was plainly Meredith's meaning that we live in the ideas of future races and in the good that we have contributed to their betterment. He would oppose Spirit to sense but declares that the spirit of each as a distinct personality is doomed to annihilation and "is, therefore, entirely dependent on the material conditions of his body. This at the outset is surely an unwarranted assumption, for no physical investigation has yet explained away Spirit, or proved it to be a mere appanage of matter."42

In such a philosophy the strong motive which the knowledge of a personal immortality together with its attendant responsibilities brings is utterly lacking. Lacking, too, as far as art is concerned, is the sense of the tremendous dignity and importance, the everlastingness, of the humblest of human souls over whom we may discern a divine Power unceasingly watching; that sense without which Macbeth becomes mere ranting; the mental anguish of Hamlet mere nonsense, and the conduct of Lear's daughters of slight consequence.

"The difficulty is not met by saying that the supreme good of those who are can only be attained in the existence of those who are to be; for this is to seek the individual's highest being in the mirage of an ever receding futurity in which no individual can ever have part. The very possibility of the in-

42 Strong, op. cit., p. 175.
individual's finding a positive supreme good in the existence of his successors implies a continuation of consciousness, whether personal or universal, and hence a continuation of existence.  

Too much is left without explanation in such a philosophy for "the existence of God alone gives meaning to evil and waste and suffering."  

There is sublime beauty in the cry of Meredith:

Into the breast that gives the rose
Shall I with shuddering fall?

But there is still greater sublimity, due just to the consciousness of this transcendental unity, in the answer of Faust, just before his descent to the lower world, to the cynical promptings of Mephistopheles: "In deinem "Nichts hoff" ich das all zu finden."

The bearing of all this on Nature is best expressed in the words of Hegel. "There is no prospect of returning from the uncultured earnestness and troubled sensibility of the modern views of Nature to the joyousness and purity of the Greek modes of regarding it, except in one way, and that is by restoring the lost identity through speculation, and once more merging the division in a higher potency."  

Meredith's teaching would limit the essential value of existence to the strong ones of this earth; those who possess the perfection of brain and blood and spirit; the less gifted receive but slight consideration from him. He declares that Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, a character for whom he had unbounded

43 Strong, op. cit., p.175.
44 Ibid., p.173.
45 Ibid., p.177.
admiration, "resembled our mother Nature in her reasonable antipathies to one or two things which none can defend, and her decided preference of persons that shone in the sun." 46

His philosophy denies human behavior the sublimity of a heaven directed intention:

According to Meredith, morality, like all other hygienic measures which society has adopted, must be much less an end than a means: the means of furthering more efficaciously the secret tendencies of Earth. Could an architect in the material world build elsewhere than upon Earth? He could not; and in the same way in the spiritual world, it is solely upon the conception of Earth that George Meredith finds his ultimate basis. He maintains that all morality; all science must be founded upon the conception of Earth. 47

By Earth we are not to mean the creation of a deity, but a complete cosmic force, the source of our souls as well as of our bodies and we must believe that "as we come from Earth so we are dissolved again into Earth. It is Pantheism once more, given a new meaning and an added force, and a strenuous purpose, made into the intellectual basis of man's outlook." 48 This is a fit ideal, perhaps, for a poet of genius, but "the inert majority do not require an intellectual basis for their morality, and Pantheism is too vague, too unsatisfying, too poetic for the ordinary man." 49

46 The Egoist. p.12.
47 Photiades, op.cit., p.205.
48 Crees, op.cit., p.103.
49 Ibid., p.104.
Alongside Meredith's faith in Nature comes his confidence in the efficiency and validity of the rationalistic process. Like Bernard Shaw, he believes that 'to life, the force behind the man, intellect is a necessity, for without it he blunders into death.' Faith in Nature, undirected by thought, may well lead us astray. Instinctive temperament, fortified by genuine passion but guided by clear-eyed intelligence will enable man to rise nobly to the heights of his possibilities. 50

Such a conception -- of the 'temperament of common sense fired by enthusiasm and controlled by humor' -- makes comprehensible to us at once his definition of passion as noble thought on fire. And in Meredith's fictive histories the hero totters and tumbles because he obeys one of the constituent forces to the neglect or exclusion of the others. The soul is co-existent with, and in a sense the interaction of, brain and blood. 51

"To Meredith, all things are one in the sense that Nature is quite literally the creator, the benign Mother, of man; man is her 'great venture,' and, regarding her, he regards the whole of which he is a part, and whose destiny is his." 52

It is impossible to interpret rightly either the novels or the poems without an understanding of his conception of the power in Nature; to him: "Even without our knowledge she is supreme judge in conflicts of sentiment or intellect. Though invisible, she displays her all-pervading power, as did fate in ancient dramas. We must call upon her each time that a novel

50 Henderson, op.cit.,p.18.
51 Ibid.
52 Follett, op.cit.,p.25.
or a poem by Meredith does not immediately yield up its inner meaning." 53

The essential and fundamental yearning in man for what is good was to Meredith something other than an inborn knowledge of the ten Commandments; to him "it was the still small voice of Nature speaking to man, and the unconscious response of the nature in man." 54 "It is the spirit of Earth," he would tell humanity, "which curbs our passions and supports our moral law. 55

He has little compassion; he is satisfied with the explanation cold reason offers for the sufferings of the individual because "in her sacrifice of the individual to the type, in her unhasting and perpetual laws, in her providence and far-sightedness, there are the wide signs of a self-sacrifice, a sanity, a wisdom, that are the salt of our ethical philosophy." 56

He regrets neither wars nor discord for "under it all," he sees that "Nature is pursuing her calm and unchequered course.

53 Photiades, op. cit., p. 203.
54 Follett, op. cit., p. 13.
55 Photiades, op. cit., p. 205.
For this sanity of hers is a fundamental lesson in her philosophy." 57

Many in his generation were distressed by the apparent conflict between the findings of scientific investigation and their old ideals; Meredith has this word for them: "The philosophy of Nature is the lesson of existence," and to those who feared that the following of his counsels would lead to a degeneration into materialism: "The beauty of Nature is the assurance of an ideal." 58

"What is morality? What is progress? What is truth? ... Meredith seems to say with no uncertain voice, 'Follow what Nature and Nature's human assistant, Society, dictate, but follow them only to the point where Individuality will naturally merge itself in their flow. Beware lest you lose your will, for it is only through a conjunction of will and Nature that any safe footing can be reached." 59

The first importance of Meredith, then, is that he was the first figure of great eminence in English fiction to have got through the jungle of scientific rationalism to a new faith that is exempt from the challenges of science. We need to inquire in some detail what this faith was, because it is what places Meredith nearest us, and also because there is absolute concord between his reading of

57 Curle, op. cit., p. 77.
58 Ibid., p. 104.
59 Ibid., p. 111.
the world and his reading of man's special destiny. Mr. Chesterton introduces us at a stroke to both when he says: "Meredith was perhaps the only man in the modern world who has almost had the high honor of rising out of the low estate of a Pantheist into the high estate of a Pagan. A Pagan is a person who can do what hardly any person for the last two thousand years could do: a person who can take Nature naturally."

Man's brain and spirit, says Meredith, no less than his body, are earthborn. Therefore man will find in earth his moral law, and the criteria of his morality will be the harmony between his conduct and the laws of Nature.

60 Follett, op. cit., p.24.
CHAPTER IV

HOW MEREDITH'S PRINCIPLES FAIL AS A SUSTAINING MORAL FORCE AS ILLUSTRATED BY REPRESENTATIVE CHARACTERS IN HIS NOVELS

If we do not find in the novels of George Meredith a great philosophical truth, we must admit that they are structures that contain rare and beautiful art treasures and in which we may catch brief glimpses of unforgettable portraits which are the essence of poetic art and by their very beauty above criticism. He does not give us absolute values; his characters are often groping in a confused maze of mixed ideals, but we have the meeting of a young lad with a fair princess in a German forest; a likeable scholar's view of a spring sky intercepted by the white fragrance of cherry blossoms while romance in the form of a dainty rogue is tripping across the lawn toward him; a girl singing to a night sky in a wood a song that will later soar to heaven as the embodiment of a million souls' yearning for freedom; an elderly dilettante absorbed in a discussion of the merits of old wine with the man from whom his daughter is longing to escape. In them we find a humour that is sometimes uproarious, sometimes subtle and sly, but which is always symbol of his optimistic and courageous outlook. His characters bravely face fundamental issues; his heroes are imbued with his own passionate desire for all that is noble and
good. They are works of genius, more like "caviar to the general" than Russian novels because of their icy intellectualism and the idealism of Meredith that prevents his characters from breathing and moving freely lest their human nature should obscure the ideas he would make them express for him.

This combination of merits and failure have placed the novels among the strangest enigmas in literature. Archibald Henderson has observed: "If Meredith, in a life of eighty years unswervingly dedicated to the highest ideals of his art and with the enlightened support of the most brilliant and most solid minds of his time and race, could never succeed in reaching the heart and brain of that hypothetical, yet none the less real, 'average man,' there must lurk hidden away in the flower of his art some deadly canker of secret and devitalizing force." ¹

His supreme interest is the analysis of human motives: "In his novels,... he portrays the epic encounter perpetually waged between Man in his instinctive temperament and the laws, institutions and traditions which the majority at any given epoch accept for their governance in mutual relationship." ²

But in his eagerness to impress his philosophy upon his readers, he frequently sacrifices the personality of his characters to the expression of his ideas, interpreting, not what

¹ In Interpreters of Life and the Modern Spirit. p.5.
² Ibid., p.19.
he sees, but rather the ideas he wishes to express.

Henderson has analyzed this characteristic of Meredith's minutely:

His characters seem uninformed with that interior logic which should solve the problems of their character and destiny: they are set in motion and must respond to the clock-work of Meredith's idée fixe. They often behave most unaccountably, not because they are human beings and so subject to vagary, idiosyncrasy and whim, but because they must follow, willy nilly, the strange and intricate functionings of the brain of George Meredith.

... His faith in the nourishing and sanctifying attributes of Nature certainly tends to no spiritual elevation of his characters. They are enmeshed in the coils of their own personal and immediate interests. They never escape from the immediate implications of self. They make strange gestures of fantastic and ensnaring charm; but it is always the recital of a secular legend at which we are asked to assist. With one or two unrepresentative exceptions, Meredith's memorable characters have no wide expanse of outlook, no extent of horizon, no real concern for others. Intent upon the problem of self, vividly introspective and self-analytic, they have no concern for humanity at large, or for the wider destiny of things. The decisive quality, the absolute differentia of the Meredithian novel is that the characters are shown acting and reacting in relation solely to a given series of events, never in any large human relation to the world.\(^3\)

Since it was his purpose as an analyst to cure the evils in society as well as in the individual, it became necessary for him to create a type character who would represent the incarnation of the fallacious tendency he sought to correct.

Such types the characters of Meredith have been mostly since 'Sandra Belloni.' Not life in its wearisome vast-

\(^3\) Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
ness nor a patch of it is his aim, but a summary of it. He works as a philosopher; he mingles with society, and believes that he detects certain maladies, and he aims at the artistic presentation of them. The malady of men is a primeval egoism in their attitude toward women. Consequently many of Meredith's men are egoists. His great feminine characters are also types, and in a measure homologues. They are women as they would be if emancipated, verging into women as they are, faultily educated and hemmed in by historic conventions. Meredith would be another Menander or Moliere: he would probe life with a clear perception, and by pointing out our absurdities, show us what we are.  

Gifted as he was, only a falsity in the philosophy by which he would read in their hearts and interpret their motives could be the cause of his failure to create characters with a third dimension instead of the types styled by Lafcadio Hearn as "flat characters." Further, as they have no great single aim toward which they may direct their actions, no absolute standard by which they may judge of their rightness, can they be blamed if they decide, as Aminta did, that the thing desired is both the present and the ultimate good? He sets before them a goal on lofty heights; but the nourishment we would offer them lacks sustaining force, and when they grow faint in the ascent he has no means by which to strengthen them for new endeavours; there is no glorious rising again as we find in Tolstoi's Resurrection. "And Meredith's people need some such solace, for almost all of his novels have heartbreaking endings."  

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5 Knight, op. cit., p. 258.
here "the position of the idealist may be challenged. He attempts to regulate humanity in particular, as it is regulated in general. He fails to grasp one of the greatest truths of life, that passion will make everyman an exception to his own actual view of humanity." 6

"The passion of his genius is, indeed, the tracing of the elemental in the complex; the registration of the infinitesimal vibrations of first causes, the tracking in human life of the shadowiest trail of primal instinct, the hairbreadth measurement of subtle psychological tangents: and the embodiment of these results in artistic form." 7

"A critical study of ... the novels would group them into 'those making war upon sentimentalism, those ridiculing egotism, and those proving the insufficiency of the conventional attitude towards the marriage question." 8

"Almost first with Meredith was the question of the relation of the sexes, involving as it does so many questions of morality, the Woman's Question, not so limited as aspect of it

6 Curle, op.cit.,p.2.
7 Le Gallienne, op.cit.,p.2.
as the suffrage, but the much wider, deeper problem of woman, her place in the world, her attitude towards man, man's attitude toward her, the mode and form of their association, the right conception of marriage." 9

He has drawn some of the most fascinating heroines in literature;

But thinking upon Meredith's heroines soon takes us into the less easily fathomed depths of sex questions. Many of his women are touched however slightly by these matters. Clara escapes the yoke of a tyrant sentimentalist, Lucy Desborough, Carinthia Kirby, and Diana Merion suffer from the faithlessness, the tyrannous humour, or the suspicion of a husband; Dahlia Fleming is ensnared into an irregular union, queenly Natalie Dreighton and Aminta Farrell (Brown) enter deliberately into such unions. Nesta, the child of Natalie and of Victor Radnor, brought face to face with man's brutality demands to penetrate beyond convention. In no case is a moral clumsily enforced nor morals clumsily inculcated, yet it is every moment plain that the author is grappling with hard facts, and urging us to do the same. 10

Here again in regard to marriage Meredith would uphold the strictest conventional attitude, but it is not within the scope of his naturalistic doctrine to define the code by which the individual shall be guided.

He realizes that the line of morality is not absolutely identical with that of legal and religious sanction. But this does not mean that he condones license. In two of his

9 Cree, op. cit., p.86.
10 Ibid., p.89.
later novels, he has introduced marriage relations extra-legal. In these books he does not attempt to solve all the problems involved. One may be sure there is nothing sacred to him in the mere religious or legal countenance of conjugal union. The obligation is a moral one. As to its binding force, each case must be decided on its own merits. There is no condemnation of his Aminta for her violation of the marriage vow. In that case, (according to Meredith) the husband had long since forfeited his claims by repudiation of the wife's. 

Meredith realized, too, that if Society were to be upheld, marriage would necessarily have to be safeguarded. But in a conflict between the individual and society, he found himself forced to submit to the claims of the former. Christianity has somehow taken care of both, seeing that each contributes to the advancement of the other, but Meredith's philosophy seemed not to be able to affect such a compromise.

Thus we may trace throughout the novels the inconsistencies arising between acknowledged ideals and actual conduct when characters are given no other spiritual sustenance than a vague system of Pantheism to motivate and sustain them in a moral crisis. Let us examine critically four of his great representative works with this purpose in mind.

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11 Joseph Warren Beach, op.cit., p.188.
Richard Feverel is the story of a failure -- the failure of a system. In tracing the efforts of a scientific humanist to produce earth's finest product, a perfect man who should embody in himself all the virtues desired of the race, while bequeathing to posterity an inheritance of princely qualities that would flow like a silver stream down humanity's muddy river; Meredith is really laying bare to what a degree his own system of naturalistic evolutionary principles would fail if accepted by mankind as its sole moral creed. For Sir Austin is the living mouthpiece of much of what Meredith preached. His system follows the natural laws very closely, even to labeling the different periods of Richard's development until he becomes a sort of guinea pig struggling through the blossoming season, the magnetic age, etc. The very novel itself is almost a beautiful nature poem with all the critical situations set in descriptions so lovely that they become pictures that make more lasting impressions than the characters themselves. When Richard meets with his first opposition that proves that the world is not quite his oyster, and sets his mind upon a plotted revenge, the scene is colorful, vivid:

"Speed-the-Plough was nothing loath, and in a short time they were following the two lads on the road to Bursley, while a horizontal blaze shot across the autumn land from the Western edge of the rain-cloud." 12

12 The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. p.20.
The meeting of Lucy and Richard occurs in a beautifully poetic setting:

"Above the green-flashing plunges of a weir, and shaken by the thunder below, lilies, golden and white, were swaying at anchor among the reed. Meadow-sweet hung from the banks thick with weed and trailing bramble, and there also hung a daughter of earth." 13

There is nothing of the spiritual, hardly of the human, in the attraction aroused by Lucy's beauty; Meredith paints it, with exquisite art, as a part of the natural setting with Lucy herself scarcely more than a fair flower of earth. He stresses nothing that would differentiate between her beauty and the natural objects about her. She has nothing even of the French "spirituelle;" she is purely nature.

The wide summer-hat, nodding over her forehead to her brows, seemed to flow with the flowing heavy curls, and those fire-threaded mellow curls, only half-curls, waves of hair call them, rippling at the ends, went like a sunny red-veined torrent down her back almost to her waist: a glorious vision to the youth, who embraced it as a flower of beauty, and read not a feature. There were curious features of colour in her face for him to have read. Her brows, thick and brownish against a soft skin showing the action of the blood, met in the bend of a bow, extending to the temples long and level: you saw that she was fashioned to peruse the sights of earth, and by the pliability of her brows that the wonderful creature used her faculty, and was not going to be a statue to the gazer.

....When nature turns artist, and produces contrasts of colour on a fair face, where is the Sage, or what the Oracle, shall match the depth of its lightest look? 14

13 *The Ordeal.* p. 96.
14 Ibid., pp. 98, 99.
The scene depicting the storm on the Rhine which drenches Richard into a recognition of his folly, is a climax befitting the work of a nature poet. Here Meredith shows Nature using some of the faculties in man's regard which he has claimed for her. She heals; she admonishes; she sternly safeguards her laws.

Nature is taking him to her bosom. She will speak presently ... Telling Austin he would be back in a few minutes, he sallied into the air, and walked on and on. "A father!" he kept repeating to himself: "a child!" And though he knew it not, he was striking the key-notes of Nature. But he did know of a singular harmony that suddenly burst over his whole being.

... Up started the whole forest in violet fire. He saw the country at the foot of the hills to the bounding Rhine gleam, quiver, extinguished. Then there were pauses; and the lightning seemed as the eye of heaven, and the thunder as the tongue of heaven, each alternately addressing him; filling him with awful rapture.

... The rain was now steady; from every tree a fountain poured. So cool and easy had his mind become that he was speculating on what kind of shelter the birds could find, and how the butterflies and moths saved their coloured wings from washing. Folded close they might hang under a leaf, he thought. Lovingly he looked into the dripping darkness of the coverts on each side, as one of their children. ... Vivid as lightning the Spirit of Life illumined him.15

Actually one doubts if, in reality, a thunder storm, which had no serious consequences for the youth and which was of such brief duration, would have so affected his actions. Human influence would be thus powerful, even if very subtle, as the reactions of our fellows to our words and deeds is sure to

15 The Ordeal. pp.140,141,142.
affect us however strong minded we may claim to be. But to a healthy youth no matter how poetically he may be gifted, and Richard, we are distinctly told, was without this gift, a thunder storm would be but an incident on his way.

Richard is a child of nature. Meredith puts many a sign post along the way to direct our admiration to him and to signify his own approbation. "So far certainly the experiment had succeeded. A comelier, braver, better boy was nowhere to be met. His promise was undeniable." 16 Later on he is "an arrow drawn to the head, capable of flying fast and far with her." 17

Sir Austin makes him the center of a system which is really a system of natural selection with the pruning away of all that would deter the selected one from his upward climb. Is it any wonder that Richard comes to think of himself as the center of a universe? Ripton follows him, and lies for him when he thinks a lie will save him. Mrs. Doria frets away a good many years of her otherwise pleasant existence over him; Clare dies as at his command; and Lucy, the pale star in his heaven, fades from the scene in the burning heat of his neglect. That he is saved from complete self-obsession and is able to feel

16 The Ordeal. p.81.
17 Ibid., p.99.
sympathy for those he has hurt, is the wonder of it all. For
nature does not feel sorry for those it ruthlessly destroys in
its struggle to insure the survival of the fittest. Richard is
to be the natural man with a veneer of culture, for "culture,"
Sir Austin declares, voicing Meredith, "is half-way to heaven."

Sir Austin's religion, or philosophy of life, was of his
own making as Meredith's was, and in the story of his rule over
his son we see the terrible consequences that result when a
short-sighted individual, incapable without the grace of God of
reasoning long without error, attempts to circumvent and rule
the soul of another along the lines of his own peculiar theory.
A thwarting and a frustrating of all noble, spiritual aspirations
toward an integrated beauty of character alone can result.
Frustration and defeat, physical and spiritual, will be the
harvest of such a sowing. How different the thin piping of an in-
dividual philosophy from the power and the wisdom that thunders
forth in marvelous simplicity ten great commandments. Man wonders
at the universality of the species when the Oxford graduate finds
them graven on the mind of the most benighted savage as well as
on his own complex intellect. Sir Austin might have profited by
Newman's pronouncement: "True religion is slow in growth, and,
when once planted, is difficult of dislodgement: but its intell-

18 The Ordeal. p.75.
lectual counterpart has not root in itself; it springs up suddenly, it suddenly withers. It appeals to what is in nature, and it falls under the dominion of the old Adam." 19

"Morally superstitious as the baronet was, the character of his mind was opposed to anything like spiritual agency in the affairs of men." 20 To Richard, God is but a remote idea. Sir Austin has put before him no direct Christian principles with which to govern his conduct; therefore we are not surprised to see him acting in a purely natural way after his quarrel with Farmer Blaize. Revenge, not the blind, thoughtless, passionate striking out that would have been less guilty, but one plotted in cold blood, is his way of saving his pride, and this in a youth who will not stoop to allow Ripton to "notch him." "A sweeping and consummate vengeance for the indignity alone should satisfy him." 21

When Meredith wrote this novel, the romantic movement was beginning to give way before the scientific; fresh ideas about evolution, heredity, and environment were in the air; and Herbert Spencer had just published in the British Quarterly Review, April, 1858, his famous essay upon the place of natural reactions in education, contend-

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20 The Ordeal. p. 72.

21 Ibid., p. 15.
ing that parents ought to let their children feel the true consequences of their conduct, and pleading, among other things, that 'in its injurious effects on both parent and child a bad system is twice cursed.

But the very ordeal of Richard arises from his father's well-meant, unwise endeavour to confine natural tendencies within the artificial restraints of a preconceived theory.

Richard apparently has no conscience except to do what appears to him most desirable at the moment. This lack makes him deplorably dependent upon his father for important decisions. When circumstances and people will not fall in with his plans, in spite of the author's encomiums on his manly nature, is at the mercy of the will of others. Witness Bella Donna.

It may not be out of place here to note that Meredith, in making Richard forgetful of Lucy after so short a space as one month, introduces an aesthetic flaw in his pattern. For how are we to be convinced of the depth of a passion, to which the author has devoted paragraphs of poetically heightened prose, when its inspiration can be forgotten after so short a space -- and this without any gradual falling off of the emotion! By the very gradation of Vronsky's growing indifference are we made to understand the depths of his former love for Anna. But Lucy, strangely enough, is forgotten even by the reader. She intrudes herself into none of the scenes into which her creator does not implicitly place her.

22 James Moffatt, op.cit., p.96.
Sir Austin "took care that good seed should be planted in Richard, and that the most fruitful seed for a youth, namely, Example, should be of a kind to germinate in him the love of every form of nobleness." Which was logical reasoning though it were a pity that Sir Austin had no higher an ideal than himself to present before the boy, nor did he remember that in moments of temptation something more present than example is necessary.

Richard has not been trained from infancy in a devout if simple idea of God to whom he owes responsibility for his actions. It is not until adolescence that Sir Austin notes that "conscience was beginning to inhabit him, and he carried some of the freightage known to men; though in so crude a form that it overweighed him, now on this side, now on that." This is consistent with Meredith's evolutionary theories, as he would have us believe that the life history of the race is repeated in the individual. His tragedy proves conclusively that all the theories in the world will not save an individual from himself in a moral crisis.

In The Egoist Meredith gives us, in the person of Sir

23 The Ordeal. p.75.
24 Ibid., p.76.
Willoughby Patterne another admirable example of the tendency of any education with a solely materialistic basis to produce an egoist, one incapable of achieving happiness himself and certainly incapable of imparting it to others. For Sir Willoughby is a prize product of the theory of natural selection. He regards himself as one of the lustrous stepping stones on which the race will mount to high perfection. Clara's acceptance of his suit does not surprise him: "A deeper student of Science than his rivals, he appreciated Nature's compliment in the fair one's choice of you." 25

Meredith claims that the egoist is a monster and not a natural product of his earthy ideal, but his premises are not adequately proved. Who gives more generous support to nature in her efforts to effect a perfect race of noble men than Sir Willoughby? Like other materialistic people he is inclined to take his happiness at the expense of others, Laetitia Dale being the outstanding sacrifice offered at that altar. To him "Possession without obligation to the object possessed approaches felicity." 26

25 The Egoist. p.36.
26 Ibid., p.132.
The rounded and fine characters in his novel who win our affection, those of Clara and Vernon, are the products of a Christian civilization; that civilization which Meredith concedes must hold until the world is sufficiently cultivated to accept his. There is evidence that much of the German philosophy of which Meredith had drunk deeply had its basis in egoism. How else does Nature attain its universal survival but by the tenacious grasping of each individual plant or animal life for the good that will best maintain its life and growth, without thought of how these are to be obtained? Where Christianity says, "Give," Nature says, "Take."

We at least feel some sympathy for Sir Willoughby, for from the outset we know he has not a chance. Although he is depicted as an intelligent man brains were the "prize" of nature upon which Meredith pinned his hopes for its ultimate survival. he seems to be incapable of profiting by experience; his character does not develop -- it sets and hardens. His scientific philosophy has no moral force capable of sustaining his spirit in a conflict with egoism, and, in truth, if relied upon would favor that tendency. In this novel we see clearly that Meredith would limit the possession of the highest felicity to the strong ones of earth. The minor characters in The Egoist have scarcely an existence of their own except insofar as they contribute to the ease and growth and happiness of that hope of the race, Sir Willoughby. His two aunts are hardly identities; and Clara, because she will not relegate her own personality and character to
oblivion for his sake, is a rogue. But would not this be a natural result of the theory of selection? Sir Willoughby is the one selected by Nature to be the custodian of its best gifts to posterity, and all inferior growths are to be sacrificed to the perfection of his happiness.

Meredith’s philosophy was no more successful as a sustaining moral force in Lord Ormont and His Aminta. This is the story of a marriage wrecked by the incompatability of a young wife and an elderly husband. Aminta marries the hero of her youthful days who, embittered by the attitude of his country toward him and having but slight regard for women in general, finds an outlet for his pique in a tantalizing refusal to acknowledge his marriage publicly. Aminta makes every effort to force this acknowledgment; but when Weyburn, the friend of her school days, comes back into her life as Lord Ormont’s secretary and they are thrown into daily contact, she decides that her position as Countess of Ormont is no longer the desirable prize it had seemed to be. Meredith’s solution to this problem is inevitably in favour of the individual’s seeking personal freedom and happiness, even though the price of that freedom is an offence against the moral law and society.

Pantheism being the basis of Meredith’s religious views, what effect has it on the problems of conduct such as confront the ordinary man? Pantheism is a religion without a revelation and therefore its votaries must work out their conclusions in accordance with the vague principles from which they start. Though Meredith’s views on ordinary questions of morality are not seldom as definite and as clear cut as the plainest burgess’s ... his definiteness
hardly seems the product of his creed. 27

It is rather the result of his own personal idealism; his poetic and intellectual intuition of what is finest and most desirable in human conduct. He is uncompromising in his defense of the virtues which will benefit society and hasten the perfection of the race in the evolutionary process, but these are vague ideals and too general to be of assistance to an individual confronting a problem of personal conduct. In the midst of these inconsistencies we may ask: to what length are we to follow natural inclinations when Society plainly dictates a contrary course? Meredith's reply that we must follow nature but preserve our individual will at any cost is somewhat indefinite. The injunction to follow Nature has resulted in the degeneration of realism in art into naturalism and the complete surrender of the spiritual in man to his materialistic desires.

Lady Charlotte voices Meredith's opinions on religion: she would separate fear from the love of God; like Meredith she prefers her individual opinion upon such matters and praises even free-thinkers; she sends a cheque to a blasphemer because he has the courage of his convictions.

In Weyburn, Meredith has conceived a character of high ideals, one loving truth and beauty and eager to seize the

27 Crees, op. cit., p. 104.
finest in all that is ennobling. We find him a seasoned but still a young man when he appears at the house of Lord Ormont:

Weyburn still read the world as it came to him, by bits, marvelling at this and that, after the fashion of most of us. He had not deserted his adolescent's hero, or fallen upon analysis of a past season. But he was now a young man, stoutly and cognisantly on the climb, with a good aim overhead, and green youth's enthusiasms a step below his heels: one of the lovers of life, beautiful to behold, when we spy into them; generally their aspect is an enlivenment, whatever may be the carving of their features. For the sake of holy unity, this lover of life, whose gaze was to the front in hungry animation, held fast to his young dreams, perceiving a soul of meaning in them, though the fire might have gone out; and he confessed to a past pursuit of delusions. Young men of his kind will have, for the like reason, a similar rational sentiment on behalf of our world's historic forward march, while admitting that history has to be taken from far backward if we would gain assurance of man's advance. It nerves an admonished ambition. 28

Still Meredith would arm such a one with so vague an armor as dreams from which admittedly the fire has already gone out, and his personal reward is to be that, if regarded far off enough, he will have history saying that he helped man's advance. Thus armed Weyburn meets the love of his youth at a lonely time in her life when anybody nearly her own age and not noticeably deformed would have delighted her. They are brought into daily proximity and soon ... "he was drawing swiftly to the vortex of the fools, and round and round he went, lucky to float." 29

28 Lord Ormont and His Aminta. p.73.
29 Ibid., p.92.
According to Weyburn "sharp exercise of lungs and limbs is a man's moral aid against temptation." 30 and Meredith adds: "He knew it as the one trusty antidote for him, who was otherwise the vessel of a temperament pushing to mutiny. Certainly it is the best philosophy youth can pretend to practice; and Lord Ormont kept him from it." 31

Therefore we may deduce that, failing in this one expedient, he has no longer any reserve strength to keep him in the line of moral duty. Certainly the expedient of physical activity is to be heartily recommended, but Meredith's device has not the guarantee St. Paul received when it was told him: "My grace is sufficient for thee." 32

Aminta was also created by her author a lovely character, pure and unselfish. She "was born to prize rectitude, to walk on the traced line uprightly;" 33 therefore we may blame the philosophy she sincerely follows if we find her solving the problems of her existence by a complete break with the moral law. To Meredith this was not a cause for surprise:

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30 Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p.95.
31 Ibid.
32 2 Cor. 12,1,10.
33 Lord Ormont, p.118.
"Women, educated to embrace principles through their timidity and their pudency, discover, amazed, that these are not lasting qualities under love's influence. The blushes and the fears take flight. The principles depend much on the beloved." 34

This unstable moral support is hardly one that will prove a sustaining force to keep a character "walking on the traced line uprightly." The defection of these two naturally noble characters is strong proof that without grace knowledge of the law and high principles are of little avail. Meredith's philosophy is evidently not the food of heroes and heroines who will lead humanity toward its goal of highest achievement. To the end neither Weyburn nor Aminta regret having offended Divine Law; they only admit that they "offend good citizenship." 35

Neither has any thought beyond a vague apprehension of what the world will think of their action. If their world will not condemn it, they will consider themselves justified:

The man who builds his house below the sea's level has a sleepless enemy, always threatening. His house must be firm, and he must look to the dykes. We commit this indiscretion. With a world against us, our love and labour are constantly on trial: we must have great hearts; and if the world is hostile, we are not to blame it. In the nature of things, it could not be otherwise. ... we have

34 Lord Ormont, p.352.
to see that we -- though not publicly, not insolently --
offend good citizenship. But we believe -- I with my
whole faith, and I may say it of you -- that we are not
offending Divine Law. ... So, then, our union gives us
powers to make amends to the world -- if the world
should grant us a term of peace for the effort.

Another of the novels in which Meredith makes a direct
application of his naturalistic philosophy to the social pro-
blem is the story of Rhoda Fleming. This is one of the most
powerful of his works; it is simply told without the brilliant
swiftness of style that so often obscures his thought and with-
out a multiplicity of minor characters. It is "the novel in
which the deceived woman is most prominent ..., the most
gloomy and the most didactic of Meredith's novels, one in
which he often meditates upon 'the human act once set in motion
which flows forever to the great account.'" 37

It is the story of two sisters, daughters of a poor far-
mer, who have nevertheless received a rich heritage of beauty
and manner which places them above their class. They are named
for flowers and carefully cultivated by their mother for the
attainment of worldly honors.

She would squander her care on poppies, and she had
been heard to say that, while she lived, her children
should be fully fed. The encouragement of flaunting weeds
in a decent garden was indicative of a moral twist that

36 Lord Ormont. pp. 415,416.

37 Creef, op.cit., p.91.
the expressed resolution to supply her table with plentiful nourishment, no matter whence it came or how provided, sufficiently confirmed. The reason with which she was stated to have fortified her stern resolve was of the irritating order, right in the abstract, and utterly unprincipled in the application. She said, "Good bread, and good beef, and enough of both, make good blood; and my children shall be stout." 38

Meredith endows them both bountifully with brain, blood, and spirit; he flaunts their perfections as children of nature:

They carried erect shoulders, like creatures not ashamed of showing a merely animal pride, which is never quite apart from the pride of developed beauty. They were as upright as Oriental girls, whose heads are nobly poised from carrying the pitcher to the well. 39

The farmer is a patient, virtuous man. He bears his grievances in silence where there is not a major issue involved.

His wife had once wounded his vanity. The massed vanity of a silent man, when it does take a wound, desires a giant's vengeance; but as one can scarcely seek to enjoy that monstrous gratification when one's wife is the offender, the farmer escaped from his dilemma by going apart into a turnip-field, and swearing, with his fist out-stretched, never to forget it. His wife had asked him, seeing that the garden flourished and the farm decayed, to yield the labour of the farm to the garden; in fact, to turn nurseryman under his wife's direction. The woman could not see that her garden drained the farm already, distracted the farm, and most evidently impoverished him. She could not understand that in permitting her, while he sweated fruitlessly, to give herself up to the occupation of a lady, he had followed the promptings of his native kindness, and certainly not of his native wisdom. That she should deem herself "best man" of the two, and suggest his stamping his name to such an opinion before the world, was an outrage. 40

38 Rhoda Fleming. p.3.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p.6.
But when there is a question of his good name, of respectability, he can be decidedly self-assertive. A hint of the tragedy that is to come that will break his spirit is given in the early pages of the book:

Like many days of gaiety, the Gods consenting, this one had its human shadow. There appeared on the borders of the festivity a young woman, the daughter of a Wrexby cottager, who had left her home and but lately returned to it, with a spotted name. No one addressed her, and she stood humbly apart. Dahlia, seeing that every one moved away from her, whispering with satisfied noddings, wished to draw her in among the groups. She mentioned the name of Mary Burt to her father, supposing that so kind a man would not fail to sanction her going up to the neglected young woman. To her surprise, her father became violently enraged, and uttered a stern prohibition, ... Rhoda was by her side, and she wilfully, without asking leave, went straight over to Mary, and stood with her under the shadow of the Adam and Eve, until the farmer sent a messenger to say that he was about to enter the house. Her punishment for the act was a week of severe silence; and the farmer would have kept her to it longer, but for her mother's ominously growing weakness.41

Rhoda is the stronger of the two characters; she shares her father's puritanical opinion that respectability before one's neighbors is almost the reason for and the reward of virtue. Dahlia's thoughts are from her youth turned toward London and the excitement and pleasure it offers. She is not a highly individualized character; Edward is more clearly delineated, but she illustrates again Meredith's lack of regard for the Divine law and his opinion of morality as a means for the preservation of society. The father's one concern is not for the sin committed nor for its atonement, but simply that Dahlia's name be cleared

41 Rhoda Fleming. p.8.
before the world. Rhoda, too, for all her reading of the Bible, has evidently no other thought than this. But her love for and devotion to Dahlia never fail. "This faith, indeed, ... is the only quality which keeps Rhoda from being too absolutely cold and passionless to be either truthfully drawn or interesting." 42

Dahlia's misfortunes end in an attempt at suicide, the inevitable solution sought by those who have only nature for God. What consolation would it have been to her that several centuries later because of her repentance mankind might arrive at an appreciation of nobler modes of conduct. Dahlia had had her sad experience of man's nobleness when he acts without the saving grace of God.

The novel ends sadly, poetic justice demanding that her sin be expiated by her early death. Her existence after her return home had been "more like a prolonged farewell than a gladsome restoration." 43 Meredith has offered his character no sustaining force in a moral crisis and when that character, left to its own strength, has failed, he has no personal and saving message of comfort or spiritual resuscitation.


There is a certain affinity between Aminta Farrell and that other heroine of Meredith's, Diana Warwick.

Aminta has the disrespect of immaturity for all human laws, the adolescent view of their constraint upon her personal freedom. With Diana Merion she gives the impression of feeling herself greater than law, outside of law, and justifiably unwilling to sacrifice to law. But in the case of Diana her rebellion against her husband is made clear—or perhaps obscured! -- by his exasperating treatment of her, while in the case of Aminta a certain dulness and selfishness is argued in the misunderstanding of a nature so intrinsically generous as that of Lord Ormont.44

The representation of the character of Diana betrays another aesthetic flaw for which we can hardly forgive Meredith. There are certain weaknesses which are the result of an over-generous disposition, but we do not enjoy discovering that we have taken into our sympathy and given our admiration to a person who is capable of deliberately betraying a serious confidence and a friend. We should have had some warning that the ability to do this was inherent in her character, but instead Meredith has stressed her fair play -- her almost masculine sense of sportsmanship. So we may conclude with Elizabeth Cary that hers:

is the type of the constitutionally perverse, and those to whom her beauty, vividly realized, and her impetuous emotions make her lovable are bound to ascribe to her in-calculable instincts of perversity the stupid baseness of her act toward Dacier, and the failure of her lauded brain.

to act at a moment of importance ... The weak point in her character, its tendency toward eccentric movements in the moral field, counter balances and finally overrules the power of her clever brain. 45

In dealing with the relations of the sexes, Meredith does not always demand that convention by way of legal and religious sanction be satisfied. His written views on marriage were liberal; his expressed opinion and his life were manifestly against license. Especially severe was he when it was the wife who offended for "women," he argued, "were the guardians of the purity of the race." 46

"Whenever he is dealing with problems connected with marriage, Meredith assumes the existence of the strongest prejudice against unconventional action in the minds of his public." 47 But nowhere does he solve the problem by sacrificing individual desires to the moral law. Three great novels, One of our Conquerors, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, and The Amazing Marriage, are the result of his deep study of this problem.

In the first, he argues that nature is more sacred than an unnatural union forced by convention and profit; in the second, that a wife is justified in running away from a husband who will not do her justice before the world, and in the third also, that she is dispensed from loyalty to a man who puts his egoism in the place of conjugal rights. 48

45 Elizabeth Luther Cary, op. cit., p.340.
46 Lafcadio Hearn, op. cit., p.145.
47 May Sturge Henderson, op. cit., p.270.
48 Sencourt, op. cit., p.251.
However, in One of our Conquerors, Meredith's personal views were scarcely concealed: "The lovable Nesta ... fights in vain against the irregularity of her position and has to own herself vanquished. Indeed the latter novel might be interpreted as a warning to those who are inclined to run counter to social traditions that they would do well to count the cost before they venture on the experiment." 49

Archibald Henderson would sum it up thus:

It is quite clear that Meredith, with all his passion for improving social conditions, his desire to place women on an equality with men, to establish a more rational basis for the institution of marriage, wishes to build upon the foundations of our present social structure. His plea is for alterations and modifications of social conditions on the basis of hardly won reforms, and not for construction of a new social fabric after destruction of the old. 50

His one great weapon against both personal and social evils seems to be the comic spirit, the sword of common sense. Unlike many masters of the comedy of manners he does not use satire to break down convention, but to show us our weaknesses that we may improve and build on firmer foundations. "The function of Comedy, in his eyes, is not the destruction, but the evolutional

49 Cunliffe, op.cit., p.33.

50 Archibald Henderson, op.cit., p.30.
sublimation of established morals." However, in offering this solution Meredith is presupposing the possession of a keen and well-developed wit and intellect which the vast majority of mankind does not have.

51 Henderson, op.cit., p.30.
CONCLUSION

In concluding our study of the intellectual basis and the aesthetic validity of the moral problem in the novels of George Meredith, it may be well to pause for a cursory glance at the works in general of that strangely contradictory personality who was poet, philosopher, and idealist. If so many of his brilliant stories are the histories of failures -- of the failures, not of characters in whom the seeds of evil are ripe for a harvesting, but of naturally good, noble, and upright characters, may it not be traced to the false doctrine upon which they are bred? They are not fed morally with spiritual truth and certainly "to know truth precedes all sound morality." 1

Meredith's philosophy was not so much a clearly defined doctrine as an instinctive, intuitive gleaning from the evolutionary theories and the poetic naturalistic idealism of his age. He came out of a precocious childhood an avowed free-thinker, though the principles of Christianity held his respect mainly because he thought adherence to them would preserve mankind from many evils until it should be strong enough to walk unsupported.

1 Crees, op. cit., p. 150.
He strongly condemned, however, those who hoped to see their virtue rewarded by a tangible and heavenly kingdom, claiming that it was beneath man's essential nobility to seek a reward for his good works. Yet few people have the courage to labor unceasingly without hope of reward. Communism is but one example one might bring forward to show that the general good advances slowly when private gains are not to be obtained.

Evolution, with its goal of the increasing perfection of the human race, became the basis of his teaching; but the characters he sets in motion toward this goal fail lamentably in the majority of cases because his scientific theories have no sustaining force to enable a character to overcome his inclination to evil; an inclination to seek personal happiness at the expense of the good of humanity. It is one thing to command and to set a standard of conduct; it is another to give the sustaining grace to attain that ideal. It is with us as with St. Paul: "The good I would, I do not." Meredith's teaching then, will not provide a solution for the evils that attack the individual and society.

Let us review briefly some of the major principles of this teaching. He claims that by conscious, intellectual striving each must contribute to the good of the race; but he does not consider that in a moment of passion a person does not even consider his own good or that of family or friends, let alone so vague a concept as race. By the observance of traditional morality the intellect obtains the mastery over the lower nature, but
is not this mastery morality itself? Then how are we to obtain it in the first place? The solution of the problem, he would have us believe, lies in the control of the two contending forces of sensuous pleasure and asceticism; but where one leaves off and the other begins is a subtle distinction even for enlightened intellects. Moreover, to hope for the continued maintenance of this balance would be to expect a normality of conduct that would be quite out of reach of all except the most philosophical of beings. Turning to Nature would not give us the power of control for she would urge toward the complete gratification of sensuous pleasure.

For all our answers, Meredith would have us go to our Mother Earth, though she has no speech and has never articulated one satisfactory answer to that most troublesome and questioning part of us -- the spiritual. We may learn of her how to solve the problems of the body in many cases though not in all. But this is the least difficult part of our problem. Given a strong healthy body and a beautiful, clean environment; men are still yearners, seekers after happiness; and all of Nature is empty of what he seeks. If his doctrine of a return to earth were taken seriously, it would mean nothing more nor less than animality for mankind. Mind and spirit can never be fused with Earth for they are not matter and have no elements in common with her.

All too frequent are the characters in his novels that illustrate clearly the inability of an individual to obtain moral support in a critical situation from his philosophic code.
Frequently, too, there is in his work a flatness of tone, a lack of hope which is not merely the result of his brilliant powers of analysis which enabled him to see man's failings clearly. Indeed, as an analyst he might have equaled Turgenev if, as did the great Russian, he had been content to interpret what he found in man's heart and mind instead of reading into them by the light of a false philosophy what he wished should be there.

The nearest thing to hope is his doctrine of resignation—accept—but there is no reward promised for accepting unless one can feel satisfaction in knowing that in so doing he is not an enemy of the race. There is no sense of inner exultation which faith alone gives; there is no answer to the ubiquitous presence of suffering; no acknowledgment that this moment of suffering is as precious and as much to be desired, for its ultimate effects, as hours of pleasure.

And to his lack of spiritual sense of the dependence of man upon God and his submission to Him may be traced his lack of universality; a lack of union with the common spirit of man. It detracts from his greatness as a writer and from his power as an artist and, in spite of undoubted genius, it has detracted from his fame.
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