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THE NOVELIST AS COMEDIAN: GEORGE MEREDITH
AND THE ART OF FICTION.

The City University of New York, Ph.D.,
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JOSEPH MOSES

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THE NOVELIST AS COMEDIAN:
George Meredith and the Art of Fiction

by

JOSEPH MOSES

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Foreward

This study attempts to work in two related areas. It creates its own critical framework because most criticism of the novel seems to go astray in one of two directions. Either it becomes grand, spiritual, and moral or it becomes rigidly technical and constructs rules out of a particular artistic technique. Following Auerbach's suggestion, I have tried to derive from the notion of Testament an analogical human construct for the novel. Once that framework is provided, then it is possible to locate within it various aspects and elements of fiction without distorting their significance. A novel needs a morality, for example, because within this human testament morality has a structuring function which ordains "the world" and which measures character and action against it. I have tried to indicate that the morality need not be familiar or appealing. It need only be possible.

The most important consequence of this theory, however, is finally to rid the air of apologies for rhetoric and attacks on authorial presence. If a novel is a mortal analogue to Testament and derives its coherence from the author rather than from an imposed organization, clearly there is no need to apologize. When James talks about his craft, he is speaking of an artist with certain aims and certain constraints. This is the way he is playing the game -- his game. But while an artist is entitled to

speak about his technique and craft, the critic has no sanction for prescribing. The novel has needed a liberating criticism. I believe the concept suggested in this study provides it, and I believe the concept to be true.

Secondly, this work attempts to deal with George Meredith. With no theory of the novel as a form (other than that of the silent author), Meredith has been the victim of either neglect or content-analysis. Admittedly he is a rich field. However, he has emerged from that analytic experience as part samaritan, part missionary, and even part hypocrite. It should be evident that Meredith turned to the novel, not for autobiographical confession, but because something happened in those novels that transmuted the biographical into a different kind of content through an artistic purification. Most biographical studies tend to forget that catharsis is what happens to the audience, not the playwright. A work of art must have an eternality that is more than its confessional meaning.

This work then, is divided into two parts, which correspond roughly to these two concerns. The first two chapters attempt to articulate the theory of the novel as play testament. The next two chapters examine two elements of Meredith's novels -- morality and character -- and attempt to reveal that they have artistic autonomy. The fifth chapter is really a bridge into a particularly

Meredithian quality -- self-consciousness. In a sense, it reveals Meredith as afflicted with a modern consciousness, seeing how long he can play a conventional game of fiction. The last five chapters are studies of particular questions which this new view of the novel makes possible and which seem to me demanded by Meredith. These are: the problems of self-conscious meaning in The Shaving of Shagpat, self-conscious plot in Harry Richmond, self-conscious characterization in The Egoist, self-conscious narration Candra Felloni and One Of Our Conquerors. The last chapter deals with the problem of incorporating comedy and tragedy into a single novel, and uses primarily The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. I have no more than scratched the surface in each case. And I have, of course, omitted many questions which need still to be asked.

Anyone reading this study must, of course, see its tremendous obligation to the writings of Erich Auerbach. Less explicit, though no less present in this study is the influence of Northrop Frye particularly in The Anatomy of Criticism. I should also express my obligation to many critics of the novel, particularly those with whom I have presumed to disagree -- and especially Percy Lubbock, whose Craft of Fiction was a catalyst in my own musings on the subject.

One of the beautiful rewards of intellectual endeavor is, paradoxically, the indebtedness that one incurs. On this personal level, my indebtedness extends back to the University of Chicago and two people in particular, Wilma Ebbitt and Theodore Silverstein. From my recent years at City University I owe a special debt of thanks to Melaine Newstead whose kindness, concern, and occasional prodding as Executive Officer of the Program evoke my sincerest appreciation. -- as does the memory of these past four years, which were more than I expected from a doctoral program, stimulating and gratifying.

There are two people in particular responsible for this. Thomas McFarland has been more than a teacher for me. But what I thank him for most is the knowledge of how amazingly potent, how beautifully revealing, and how humane intellectual honesty can be. My admiration for his learning and my respect for his understanding are second only to that.

My obligations to Allen Mandelbaum are various and deep. However, it was the influence of his Meredith-like mind that created much intellectual excitement during these past four years. For pointing out some of the new

and additional possibilities in the old, for showing me his delight in the leap itself, for this and much more, I owe him a debt beyond gratitude.

In turning to my family, I first thank Lea and Henry Krochmal for translating their faith into the substance that helped make beginning doctoral work possible.

My sons, Marc and Elan, helped in many ways -- by worrying about my book, by listening to "tales from Meredith," but mainly by just being themselves.

To Anita Moses -- who read much Meredith and argued with me some of my most nebulous points -- my acknowledgement must be somewhat unconventional: For sometimes disturbing my placidity and reminding me that there are criticisms of life other than poetry, for being occasionally the frustration of my work but always its justification.

Finally, there is my indebtedness to my parents. Aunty March makes the wry statement about his mother that "what I learned from her was not what she taught." I have been more fortunate, in learning what was taught and in retaining the spirit of those teachings. Particularly to my father do I owe much in this regard -- including the notion that one should exult in all the richness of life and in a particular truth which I later found in Wallace Stevens, and which serves as the epigraph to this study.

Wallace Stevens,
"The Wolf Dressed Man With A Beard"

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

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The object cannot be regarded as a naked thing in itself, independent of the essential categories of natural science: for only within these categories which are required to constitute its form can it be described at all.

Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

CHAPTER I

THE INEVITABILITY OF THE NOVEL

Among the commonplace despondencies of modern literary criticism has been a persistent failure in dealing with the novel. Thus we have the well-known confession of Austin Warren in 1949, "Literary theory and criticism concerned with the novel are inferior in both quantity and quality to theory and criticism of poetry."¹ Nor did the critical developments of the next few years provide any basis for increased optimism. Writing in 1956 on "Fiction and the Criticism of Fiction," Philip Rahv seems ready to concede the impossibility of fiction ever becoming as susceptible to literary analysis as poetry. He examines a few approaches to criticism of the novel and concludes: "This effort to deduce a prosaics from a poetics is au fond doomed to fail...."² Unfortunately, the view has proved itself distressingly prophetic.

There has been, it is true, interesting accomplishment in certain areas of fiction criticism. But this has come from the application of what Robert Penn Warren calls "extrinsic perspectives."³ It is rather ironic, actually, that the novel has been textually hospitable and accommodating to the political scientist and the sociologist and the historian of ideas. It has been docile to almost everyone

but the literary critic -- or more accurately, to the literary critic only insofar as that critic could apply the strategies of essentially non-literary disciplines. The study of existentialism in Dostoyevsky may be a worthwhile endeavor, but it certainly has little to do with Crime and Punishment's being a novel -- a fact which even superficially seems more important and relevant than the imposition of couplet demands in the Essay on Man.

There is good reason to suspect that criticism of the novel has consistently gone awry because it has failed to understand or has not even attempted to understand the nature of its subject. The novel may be the problem child of literary criticism; but it is the offspring of a bad family situation in general -- a situation in which the legality of the family unit and the legitimacy of the offspring have been tenuously assumed on what can be called the common-law grounds of their "wordness." This is not said with the presumption of throwing into question the many notable achievements of criticism. Nevertheless, it is only the merest exaggeration to describe our critical legacy as a syncretistic canon whose value inheres in its multiplicity, not in its unity.

Years ago John Crowe Ransom placed his classified advertisement for an "Ontological Critic"⁴ and the position remains still to be filled. Perhaps it should be pointed out explicitly that this deficiency in the organization and direction of the critical enterprise is directly related

and founded upon a still more basic deficiency to which Northrop Frye alluded. He pointed ominously to the absence in our lexicon of any word for a literary work of art or any single term which would include drama and fiction and poetry, short of something as complex and awkward as "a hypothetical verbal construct."⁵ The absence of an accepted term and the strain put upon language in creating even a makeshift points conspicuously to the area in which literary speculation has been weakest. Our "ontological critic" may still be walking around somewhere, for all we know; there was unfortunately, however, no address for him to report to.

It is not my purpose here to rehearse once again the platitudes of critical frustration. Most of these observations have been made elsewhere, at greater length and with sharper clarity. Except that the well-known critic's lament has a special and direct bearing on the difficulties which have confronted any erstwhile critic of the novel. Certainly literary criticism in general has proceeded as if the basic questions had already been answered, when indeed they have rarely been asked.

However, in the case of the drama or in the case of poetry the lapse, serious as it may have been, was not catastrophic. For the critic in those areas was dealing with forms which are in large degree self-defining and whose discreteness is more easily apprehendable. Thus the critic of drama could suspend his discussion from so slender a chain of reasoning as the one which posited that all art is

imitation, literature imitates in words, and drama is a species of verbal imitation characterized by certain features. There are two things working in his favor: one, that the drama is about as mimetic and imitative as art can get (i.e., real people walking around acting and reacting to one another and to various situations), and two, that the form was so bound up with the conventions of its genre (i.e., the conventions of the stage, blocking of characters, masks, prescribed gestures, inhibiting decorum, etc.) that it needed no theoretical definition in order to isolate and distinguish it from the reality which it presumably duplicated.

Our ancient abstract critic, then, had the best of both possible worlds. His theoretical formulation seemed quite precise and accurate as far as that precision and accuracy had to be tested. On the other hand, there was a blatancy about the conventions of imitation that precluded any need for defining the mimetic relationship. A similar case can be made for poetry, which if it is weaker than drama in imitativeness, is certainly stronger than drama in the complexity and artificiality of its conventions. In any case, the practical business of criticism and classification could proceed on the basis of this minimal interim theorizing, and the fact that the interim has lasted for one and one-half millenia testifies to a kind of pragmatic adequacy.

It may be necessary to insist upon that second point

just a bit longer -- namely, that the more recognizable and individuated a form is, the less the critic feels any compulsion whatsoever to enter into the philosophy of that form. He is relieved from wasting his analytic energies on such obviously airy and empty speculations as "What is the nature of Art?" and "What is the relationship of this particular form to other endeavors?" Such questions he can then regard from the safety of his contempt as being the proper field for the "aesthethician."

Poetry, then, becomes for our purposes an even better example than drama. For obviously even the most perfunctory attention to the matter must reveal that the literal notion of artistic mimesis cannot adequately account for or comprehend the fact of a poem. Nor does one have to go so far as to deny any truth in the "somatic" interpretation of rhythm as the imitation of our body's pulsating in first consciousness, the primal fact of life which even precedes memory. Similarly, one might even concede that there is some justice in a psycho-analytic apology for rhyme as a means of answering our hunger for security by returning us to complete closure. And so on. But with all this constant reference and referral to the order of nature, still the most modest of enquirers after truth might justifiably ask: How does a poem imitate nature? Surely we would not ask him to believe that a poem is mimetic in that one of its conventions imitates one aspect of reality and another convention imitates another aspect. So that the poem be-

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comes a nature or reality stew, with a real carrot here and a natural potato there. Or, to usurp a more appropriate and dignified metaphor, if a poem is an imaginary garden, we can do justice to its beauty only if we recognize the entire landscape and not merely an occasional toad here and there.⁶

Despite the ambiguousness characteristic of poetical theorizing, despite the absence of any approach coterminous with the fact of a poem, and despite the consequent partiality and fragmentary quality of poetical criticism, that criticism has been operationally successful a good deal of the time. Such success as it has had, it owes not to its greater insight, but to the distinctness and identifiability of the poetic utterance. A poem is a clear and distinct construct. No matter what we say about it, the poem remains recognizable to us in its bare outlines as distinct from any other kind of statement. It has an apprehendable and describable form, which differs and is unique from any other utterance. Further, the sureness of our apprehension is supported and augmented by the tradition which is its corroboration and source. Finally, and perhaps most important, we recognize that poetic art is dependent totally upon its exploitation of words, that it strains the limits of verbalness, that it tests the utility of every aspect of the word. That is, we recognize that poetry earns and achieves its form from the way in which it twists and nudges language. We have, then, immense knowledge about poetry without any

theoretical speculation -- we know its form, and we know what gives it that form.

The nature of our knowledge concerning poetry, impoverished though it may be in certain respects, is very important -- for it reveals to us precisely what we do not know about the novel, and how large and perhaps critically paralyzing that ignorance is.

The questions which we must ask at the outset, therefore, are so basic and fundamental as to be embarrassing. For if our endeavor is to be honest and enlightening, we must acknowledge much by the question which is at the same time a confession: What is a Novel: How do we recognize its form? Is Gulliver's Travels a novel or is it not? And if we answer that in the negative or in the affirmative, how does that help us in determining whether Pilgrim's Progress is a novel? And how about Moll Flanders? Can that book be described in any kind of structural way?

Or shall we simply say that a novel is a work which tells us a story? But in that case so does Herodotus tell us stories and for that matter Plutarch too.

But -- we shall be told -- those are true stories.

So again we must ask why this should make any difference whatsoever except that by his freedom from literalness the novel writer is able to accomplish another goal. And if this is so, then what is that goal?

Furthermore, we must ask whether a novel is the same as the story that it tells. For if this is indeed the case,

why should one reread Emma or Martin Chuzzlewit for the fourth or fifth time, since presumably one would remember a plot quite well enough after three readings.

Any preliminary discussion of the novel must persuade us of the indispensability of some kind of definition -- and the attempt at definition is no more and no less than a search for form. And where are we even to begin looking? Is there any quality of the novel which is so essential that it can serve to locate us and to organize our expedition? Is there some "idea of order" which can create out of the random lights of the novel the design of its organization and make Form emerge from what was previously only mass? Or is it not true that when we speak of the novel we immediately concede that there is no perspective we have in mind capable of handling an event by being superior to it, a consciousness which comprehends event and subjugates it and thus diminishes it. We have such a concept in mind when we speak of the poetic consciousness and when we speak of the dramatic consciousness. But when we allude to a novelistic consciousness we do not, on the contrary, really mean anything more than a mind which does not transcend event, but which is completely filled by it. The "poetic" implies a stance whose artificiality must ultimately render form. The "dramatic" implies an intensification which ultimately renders arrangement. But the "novelistic" -- what does it imply other than things in themselves and as they really are, the noumenon of our lives over which the

human mind cannot exult.

Determined as we are to propose at least some interim compromise, it is necessary to rephrase our problem and to examine it from every facet -- for in some of these facets may reside the pieces of an answer.

Historically rephrased, then, it would seem that the novel arose as a genre precisely in function of the liberation from form and the conventions of artificiality, from the refusal to negotiate with art via the traditional mediations. Looking for its antecedents, the Ur-Novel so to speak, we can only conclude it to be a degenerate form of the epic in which the conventionalized, hypostatized character has shrunk, in which speech is merely informational, and the gesture of language a mere motion, a shrug. It is a fall from the poetic into the prosaic, from form into mere content. And as pure content, Romance decays into self-indulgent day-dream activity and the tragic becomes no more than melodrama.

Yet here too, even the melodrama of the stage is a viable form because it still interposes a distance between observer and action. Staged melodrama still has the difficulties of the mode of its presentation to contend with; and in that contention, in that disputed space, the form of the art realises itself. But the melodramatic novel offers no space between itself and the reader. The theatre in which the fictional melodrama is enacted is the overly plastic one of the mind's daydream. Everything is possible

within that theatre which has no rules. The tears must not be earned, and gratification is imminently available on all hands.

Geoffrey Hartman speaks of an "unmediated vision"⁷ as one mode or stance of lyric poetry. But it does not jeopardize the form of the lyric. The single-mindedness and unity of that "unmediated" apprehension, its character as fragmentary analogy to a vast totality, these would alone suffice to impose upon the lyric a discipline and constraint. The novel is too multifarious. It is too long, in other words, and it says too much. It is not circumscribed by its intensity and its emotion dissolves and runs too freely.

Even more to the point, however, is that in actuality there is no such thing as an unmediated poem. We may speak very accurately about unmediated vision as a lyric quality, but that lyric itself is so enfranchised to form and convention that the expression of the "vision" is clearly always mediated. We have only to look at one of Hartman's examples of unmediated vision, Hopkins's "The Windhover," to realize just how tight the constraints of discipline bear upon the freedom of the vision.

All arbitrary constraints are clearly absent in the novel. There is absolutely nothing we have to offer that can compete with the magnificent alogicality of rhyme, alliteration, or caesura. The novel on the contrary has always proclaimed and reveled in its triumphant "meaningfulness" -- from Cervantes's demolition job on the non-

sensical in Romance, to Fielding's ridicule of the knightly quest in Tom Jones, to Thackeray's joyful destruction of the hero in Vanity Fair. What has been celebrated in the novel since it first emerged as a genre has been a celebration of content, pure content, sheer content, a content which inflicted no distorting bruises on the order of reality.

But now in trying to treat the novel as an art form, we are thus latterly forced to confront the defect of this virtue and to consider indeed whether the novel can present us with a form and whether it is artistic at all. This remains the big question, the question which so many critics of the novel have been unwilling to consider. One cannot blindly plunge ahead and study the language of the novel according to rules and doctrine which have emerged from the study of poetry as Lodge does,⁸ for clearly words do not function in a novel the way they do in a poem. Words are not "where the action is" in a novel nor are they unfettered sufficiently for the bursting of those fetters to be explosively significant. Even the Campbell soup can or the Sunoco sign must be framed before the line and color can speak with authority to the enclosed space. Fiction does not provide that frame nor is the novel that kind of verbal loom.

We are guilty of the same fallacy, too, though perhaps less obviously, when we accept a criticism like Lubbock's⁹ which makes out of the novel an exercise in prose drama construction. As highly important as The Craft of Fiction

is, it nevertheless moves from a misleading hypothesis, the conviction that those novels are best which transfer to the written page the virtues of theatre. And in fact that this is the purpose of a novel and the standard against which fiction must succeed or fail. Admittedly, one should restrain one's irreverent impulses in discussing The Craft of Fiction. Yet a little irreverence is possibly in order and long overdue toward a work which dismisses so easily and offhandedly large sections of War and Peace as an artistic aberration, a clumsy interference with the proper work of a novel.¹⁰

Here again, the confused groping toward a criticism of the novel reveals the peculiar, problematic nature of that genre. For the novel seems to comprehend, seems to have absorbed into itself amoeba-like, the features of all kinds of writing and all genre. It can be as poetic as the description of the fog in Bleak House, or as dramatic as the meeting between Mishkin and Nastasya Phillipovna in The Idiot. Its prose can be biographical or essayistic, historical or philosophic. Its very looseness, in other words, encourages the critic to seize on this or that aspect in order to create an organization in his criticism which he is lacking in his subject. For the opposite alternative seems to be to proclaim the novel no more than a bastard form with no defining integrity, and to treat the various instances in isolation from one another, or in any case without any reference to a supporting order, which amounts

to the same thing. Thus, once more, the temptation is not to treat the novel as form itself, but just as meaning -- a novel is "what" it is about and not "how" it is about. There are no heresies or paraphrase in such an analysis, for the novel becomes to such an approach essentially its paraphraseable content. We are back, in a sense, to psychology and sociology.

Even such a notable statement as Leavis's The Great Tradition¹¹ can be seen according to the lights of our inquiry as a begging of the question, an attempt to blink the problem of form in the novel. For Leavis too escapes immediately into the question of content, though the content that interests him is that of the humanist and not of the social scientist. But the "ethical" criticism, a curious throwback to the eighteenth century, is obviously forced, obviously cramps him, and just as obviously is asked to take too much upon itself. For it leads Leavis into a peculiar preference, D. H. Lawrence over James Joyce.¹² It all follows logically from the premises of his argument, yet should he not at this point question the premises, or at least look around and see if he is not missing one or two premises?

To recapitulate, then, there seem to be two major obstacles blocking an ordered and reasoned criticism of the novel and depriving it of a claim to artistic standing.

One is the closeness of the novel to the undisguised human voice -- the absence of any perceivable devices to amplify it, diminish it, or modulate it in any way. No conventions seem to intrude upon its rawness, shape the form of its utterance, constrain its naturalness, or restrain its loquacity. The second and related problem is the easy recognizability of its content. It tells a story -- and the story, unfortunately, for the sake of art, is the event of human experience as it occurs and as we know it. All content is sentimental, all meaning; all semantic substance has a somatic quality which disqualifies it from the sphere of art, were it not for the abstractness of form, its necessary ameaning, alogicality, and consequent eternality. In art, too, we believe because it is impossible. We are compelled by a force that lies beyond persuasion, beyond any boundaries of the personal. The quintessential abstractness of art is the same as the impersonality and non-meaningness of the $\sqrt[3]{81}$ (the cube root of 81), or better yet the $\sqrt[3]{82}$ (the cube root of 82) which is called, interestingly enough, an irrational number. What are we to do then with a genre of writing that is so heavily indentured to event and to the sentimentality which attaches to event? If a novel is all content, all meaning, then indeed criticism is rightfully stymied. Then we practice on fiction those modes of analysis which we perpetrate upon the content of reality -- i.e., psychology, sociology, etc. And in this sense we can see how the practices of the past are a cor-

roboration of a view of the novel which must deny it an aesthetic.

Most essential it is to point out, however, that the question of "meaning" and the attendant problems of managing its presence in a work of art is not the dilemma of the novel only. Essentially, the question haunts all of literature -- as opposed to the other arts. For according to a most convenient and most obvious simplification, the musical arts are a celebration of time just as the graphic visual arts are a celebration of space. We have then temporal and extensional celebration. And exactly what is it that the literary arts celebrate if not the word, and what is the word (divorcing it from its purely temporal quality) if not meaning? It may in fact be that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."¹³ But certainly that beginning was the beginning of meaning, as both the Word and God are equivalences of meaning. Literature is, as we have always suspected and said, the most impure and the most humanistic of the arts, for it reflects in its paradoxical and ambivalent nature the self-conscious impurity of the human condition. Magnificent though they be, the achievements of a Bach or a Michaelangelo are "merely" artifactual and phenomenal reconcilements. Only because of its very impurity can literature, uniquely and peculiarly, seek the self-conscious balance of fact and meaning, event and significance, need and spirit,

harmony and impurity.

The dualism of the mind-body dichotomy is resolved and resolvable in music and painting to the degree that they are conscious and "unnatural" arts, that they intrude upon the mindless harmony of chaos and by such mastery as they command, produce a triumphal and more deliberate arrangement. They are, thus, conscious -- but not self-conscious. For what they do not seek to do, indeed cannot do, is render the processes of mind as the subject of their art rather than only the predicating element.¹⁴ Painting and music present answers, certainly, but they are answers to the disruptions which the painter or composer has himself introduced into the once virgin equilibrium of the posited universe. Thus only indirectly do these arts address themselves to the persistent, perennial, eternal disruption of mind in the midst of body, of self-conscious man in the midst of the indifferent universe.

Due to the very nature of the word, however, which is the symbolic representation of meaning, the case of literature is fundamentally, radically different. It has the onus and the virtue of a tremendous self-consciousness -- and a burden which must be literally Atlantean, or crushing.

The question of how literature redeems itself from the abyss of meaning -- pure meaning, raw, sentimental and untranslated into the conventional formal containers -- is I think the interesting and the crucial question to be asked

for all the literary genres. The answers may not be difficult to find, may in fact appear obvious, once the question is so put.

The first clear fact we encounter is the corporeality of the word which we mentioned before. By this we mean that the word reflects, mirrors, is microcosmically mimetic of the human condition in that it has body as well as spirit. On this side, the Occidental side of pure contemplation, meaning inhabits expression and expression partakes of the physical world. This fact even the most abstruse essayist must confront, a Kant, a Plato, a Hegel.¹⁵

But we are for the present not concerning ourselves with the essay, but with the "more artful" forms of literature. Looking at Poetry in this light, then, we can begin to see the point and purpose of those conventions we mentioned earlier, and how they function. Samuel Levin is certainly right when he points to the arbitrariness and alogicality of these conventions, their lack of any "semantic" content.¹⁶ For what poetry does is to celebrate and sing the body of language as well as its spirit. So strongly does poetry emphasize the physicality of language and of words, that it appears frequently to be what it is not, or as an attempt to be what it is not -- a verbal artifact. "A poem should not mean, but be," says MacLeish,¹⁷ possibly recognizing that the statement is doomed, that its univocal inaccuracy makes it the weakest line in that poem. For while poetry may hunger toward the female otherness of un-

reflecting body,¹⁸ it cannot deny or forego the intellectual demands of its own material without dissolving into a Poevian wordish puddle. Poetry certainly does engage in a constant testing of its own physical endurance and limits. And by the arbitration and mediation of meter, assonance, enjambment, and rhyme it creates an analogy to the alogical, non-semantic laws which govern the physical terms of our existence. It comes as close to pure phenomenon as words can come. It "artifactualizes" meaning to the degree that meaning can be so rendered and still be. But the ultimate triumph of poetry is not its conquest over meaning, but its compact with meaning.¹⁹

If poetry is the confinement of content within a verbal sculpture, and the "fixing" of meaning within a spatial cage, then drama is the orchestration of meaning, of content, within time. Drama, dealing not so much with the word as with event and act -- elements which occur in time -- is the symphonic rendering of experience. It places, counterpoints and arranges. The relation of drama to experience and to the content of reality -- to meaning, in other words -- is in some ways unique and peculiar to itself. For in order to deal artistically and artificially with event, in order to achieve the hypostasis of the passing moment, and to freeze the time which is its total subject, the drama turns event into ritual. Its appeal to time is so absolute for the imposition of that "non-literary" and non-semantic element which redeems and rescues meaning from the quicksands of its own narcissism, that it turns

character into archetype, event into myth, and experience into ritual. Plot is "the soul of tragedy," says Aristotle, but plot escapes the trivial subjectivity of story in drama by turning the content of experience less into meaning than into rhythm. The masks of Greek theatre are the emblems of dramatic convention -- purified and simplified and frozen.

It is for this reason that drama has always seemed of all the literary genres the least capable of bearing or sustaining a complex intellectual import. The conventions of poetry are such that they still permit a complexity of thought as long as that complexity respects and consults a non-semantic series of confinements. Poetry will as a matter of fact frequently use the complexity of a meaning or meanings as the stones with which it plays its exquisite game. Drama, however, in dealing with larger meanings, displays event as processional. Its themes are the historical samenesses of human life and the recurrent patterns of history and prehistory.²⁰

Individuation certainly does occur in Drama. Othello and Macbeth are two totally different men. And Willy Loman is no Prometheus "nor was meant to be." But perhaps Aristotle did understand this terribly well, that the uniqueness of the hero must take place within the spectrum of his similarness, and that -- at least in classical terms -- the human heroic itself must be subordinate to the temporal. Drama, in other words, is a rendition of time and of what happens to man when he is caught or as he is caught in the

rhythms of its turning. When character or thought begin to threaten the ascendancy or the priority of time in drama, when in other words Hamlet becomes more important to us than what is happening to Hamlet, when we permit the center of our attention to shift from action to soliloquy, we are destroying drama and get a character too big for his role, one who is upstaging the playwright himself. We get the situation of which Eliot complained,²¹ a Hamlet who within the context of the play in which he functions, is over-reacting to the forces which should totally define him. Thus, the greatness of Lear is precisely this: that we should have very little interest in the hero as a character, except for what the action of the play propels him into becoming. Lear's character then is totally dramatic; it is a function of plot and not of ideas.

Thought is not the converse of time. It is more accurate to say that the two exist in, create, and measure dimensions of their own. But they are not reciprocal or mutually translatable. And because it is possible to have a Theatre of the Absurd, it is not possible to have a Theatre of the Analytic.

This dramatic phenomenon of action entrapped in time, of event which cannot break through time to reasoned meaning (which incidentally fits drama most especially to a religious purpose) is vividly displayed in Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author, a play where the problem of entrapment occupies quite literally the center

of the stage. Pirandello poses the question of the ritual of experience. Each of the six characters -- from the father to the demented little boy -- he reveals to us doomed in time, condemned to the rhythm of a smaller history. Each of them frantic to be released from what is in that play the purgatory of time. They are in search of an author, a redeemer, a literary savior or god.

But that is as far as even Pirandello can go in the play. For a release from time is an escape into complexities and qualifications, hesitations and intrusions which destroy drama. Quite rightly Pirandello portrays the bewilderment of the actors whose rehearsal has been interrupted, for they cannot even begin to understand either the desperation or the nature of such a quest. The six characters are in search of an author, but they have in a sense perpetuated their folly by coming to a theatre, for the author they seek is not a playwright, but a novelist.

The arrogance of such a claim, however, obviously makes the novel liable to terrible humiliation and to the large freedom which is the root of this humiliation. For while rendering our obeisance to the order and coherence imposed by Form, we are at the same time implying that the forms of poetry and drama are also an Evasion. Any form and any language engage in a process of exclusion which distorts by denial. Yet is not that denial itself the only salvation from chaos?

The first of the clarifications is that precisely this dilemma has been the cross which fiction has had to bear. It has been, and in some limited way continues to be, an art in search of its form. And we can therefore read the history of the novel as a series of promiscuous dalliances with respectable, acceptable modes -- temporary liaisons which permitted assimilation towards (but not with) recognized literary languages. The picaresque novel edges ingenuously toward epic and forms its loosest alliance there. The epistolary novel makes apology for its form as correspondence. The historical novel throws itself upon the legitimacy of event. The Gothic novel experiments with legend and myth. Dickens moves frequently in the direction of biography and Dostoevsky in the direction of tragedy.

But it is the second clarification which is here most important. For it can provide an entree into the oneness of the novel as well. We suggested above that an essential aspect of the novel, if not indeed the essential aspect of the novel, was its rejection of the traditional mediations, the traditional codes of coherence as artistic expressions of reality. One need not have read much of the literature in order to recognize and understand how peculiarly Romantic such a rejection is, and how it typifies in its stance that welcome of disorder and the embrace of all experience including the sordid and chaotic that makes Romanticism in some of its manifestations so easily confused with Realism. Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel,²² while he utilizes what

has become the standard criterion in analyses of the novel -- Realism -- pays homage as the analyst of Realism to such admittedly Romantic sanctities as Originality, Individuation, Particularity, and even, by implication, Organicism. Furthermore, while Watt is essentially concerned with an historical and sociological study of the early English novel, that is, primarily with content, he does state what should be the priorities of Critical concern. "The use of 'realism' however, has the grave defect of obscuring what is probably the most original feature of the novel form. If the novel were realistic merely because it saw life from the seamy side, it would only be an inverted romance; but in fact it surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it."²³ Then again, a little farther down, he says, "...it is very significant that, in the first sustained effort of the new genre to become critically aware of its aims and methods, the French Realists should have drawn attention to an issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form -- the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates."²⁴

This very question of "the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates" in its largest sense is the one which must now occupy us also. But

in all fairness to the greater generality (or complexity) of our investigation we must stretch the term somewhat. What we really wish to discover is whether such a relationship can actually and honestly exist, or has ever existed, whether the dislocations of literary art are not necessarily extreme, uncandid, and expedient. It is at this point then that we must enter upon such a speculation if we are to break through that circularity which has so severely limited all attempts at criticism of the novel.

We remarked just above that Form is an evasion, that it does discriminate and exclude -- and furthermore, that this is a truth which a non-decorous or even an anti-decorous Romanticism apprehended with rebellious satisfaction. Now, on the order, the nature of what we may designate as "classical exclusion," much has been said already. We can easily identify the complex of classicism and its pattern of apprehension by reference to such touchstones as its selection of the universal and typical, rather than the individual and aberrational, its emphasis on the behavioral and historic, rather than the impulsive and biographical; its preference for the rational and explicable over the mysterious and arcane; its social openness whose articulation corroborates the continuum of life, rather than the private concealment whose end is in the silent encounter with death. Classicism is essential and not existential. It is explicit and individuated, horatory and

not bemused.

Classicism is, in other words, ultimately articulate, since it proceeds from the view that truth is communicable and that the surfaces of experience are at least analogically accurate. It is this ingenuous historicism which Schiller refers to in his essay on Naive and Sentimental Poetry.²⁵

We may therefore, in creating a formula of Classicism, quite legitimately utilize Nietzsche's label of Apollonian, even though it characterizes only half of a phenomenon in whose duality he is most concerned.²⁶ The Apollonian is, for Nietzsche, a composite of traits related to those we have already enumerated. He calls it the "plastic art," a beauty fully realized as Grecian statuary -- sculptured and apparent and explicit -- an art that lives in sunlight.

To be sure, Nietzsche recognizes that the Apollonian is not a simple-minded naivete, but a victorious assertion of a life-art over the drunken-nightmare-passion of the Dionysian death-art.

The Homeric 'naivete' can be comprehended only as the complete triumph of the Apollonian illusion....With this mirroring of beauty the Hellenic will combatted its talent -- correlative to the artistic -- for suffering and for the wisdom of suffering and, as a monument of its victory, Homer, the naive artist, stands before us.²⁷

Nevertheless, the artistic fact remains, and it remains as Apollonian. The classical aesthetic is, even by Nietzsche's admission, exclusive, discriminatory, and aristocratically

selective. As a matter of fact, when describing the ecstasy and terror of the Dionysian orgy, he says, "Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of all nature here reveals itself in the tremors of drunkenness to the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity."²⁸

It becomes abundantly clear then that the Dionysian state is artistic only in the most magnificent and meaningless terms. Its revels are too abandoned and too dissolute to permit art. What Nietzsche describes is a state of sustained epiphany so brilliant and so overpowering that it admits, by a gracious sufferance, human existence but destroys with the same graciousness human endeavor. To deny to a painter the memory of line, or to a poet his language is to substitute Art with supra-human necessity. Within conceivable terms, and those which are humanly negotiable, classical art is represented by the Appolonian. And even in classical tragedy where the press of Dionysian reality becomes most urgent, it is the function of art to redeem us from its terrors, to sober us from its drunkenness, and to translate Dionysian ecstasy into Appolonian joy, and the grief and terror into pity and fear.²⁹

The relevance and/or convenience of Nietzsche for our own discussion here is that he dramatizes so vividly the polarities which have consistently disturbed us and which constitute our dilemma. That is, the pole on the one hand of the conventionally utterable, whose mode is through the

circumscribed conventions, and that, on the other hand, which is unutterable and unspeakable either because it is too terrifying or because it is too chaotic -- assuming those reasons to be separable.

Secondly, there are ramifications of the Nietzschean analysis which go beyond its mere convenience. It helps clarify, for one thing, the tendency of the "serious" novel -- whether by "serious" we mean Anna Karenina or David Copperfield or even Emma - to veer toward the tragic. It explains why even in Tom Jones, the novel threatens to outwit the comicality of its author and why in a novel like The Ordeal of Richard Feverel that defeat does actually take place. For beneath the surfaces of the Apollonian, the Dionysian forever prowls, and in its refusal to seek a classical refuge, the art of the novel may slip down and into the forbidden domain of Dionysian knowledge.

Furthermore, the dynamics of this Nietzschean aesthetic, and the epistemological dualism on which it is based must inevitably reveal to us how irreconcilable are the traditional modes of criticism with an artistic construct whose premises are in effect antagonistic to the art forms from which an earlier criticism evolved. In other words, if the novel is to any extent a disdain of evasion, and some kind of artistic concession to chaos, how can we possibly measure it, or determine its dimensions by the standards of the epic, merely because the two exhibit a number of roughly similar characteristics. And does not such a false analogy, or

others like it, actually confound any real analysis by confusing our expectations, and by reversing the priorities of what is essential and what is contingent?

And ultimately, The Birth of Tragedy leads us back to that largest question of all which has embarrassed our discussion from the very beginning. Once we stray from the Apollonian have we not in fact parted ways with criticism and the criticizable? In other words, if epic narrative provides a false and delusive analogy to the novel, what, if anything, is its accurate analogy and wherein can the "mode" of the novel exist?

We have arrived, thus, at the final permutation of our question and a stage at which, logically, the aesthetic and the epistemological have become melded into one. Is there a middle ground, we ask, between surface form and chaos? Is it possible to probe beyond the surface of an Apollonian mimesis without destroying the adequacy of the container, or the illusion of its adequacy, in an encounter with Dionysus?

Fortunately for our sakes, we can turn to Erich Auerbach's Mimesis³⁰ and see our groundwork already accomplished. Auerbach begins his work by discussing and analysing that quality of Homeric epic which Schiller termed "naive," Nietzsche labelled "Apollonian," and which in Auerbach's discussion is termed an "externalisation" a "foregrounding" or "frontality." "...the need of the Homeric style," Auerbach says "[is] to leave nothing which

it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized." ³¹

The case in point is Odysseus's return to Ithaca and the discovery of his identity by his old nurse who recognizes him by an old scar which he had borne on his thigh since early youth. Auerbach's analysis reveals that not only does the story about the origin of the scar receive quantitatively the same narrative space as is given to events of the narrative present, but that that narrative space is contiguous to the space of the main plot. Everything, in other words, history, antecedent history, and present, all occur in narrative foreground. "...Homer," he says, "...knows no background. What he narrates is for the time being the only present, and fills both the stage and the reader's mind completely."³² Auerbach's examination goes on to show how the syntax of the antecedent narration "quietly disentangles" itself from its subordinate relationship to the main story and annexes by the fullness of such articulation, complete attention and complete clarity. Further buttressing his argument that both externalization and frontality are germane and indigenous to the Homeric "style," Auerbach remarks that "...even the Homeric epithets seem to me in the final analysis to be traceable to the need for an externalization of phenomena in terms perceptible to the senses."³³

Nevertheless, as astute and satisfying as the discussion is, it represents mainly only a modification and amplification of epic features which Schiller had already introduced

into critical discussion. What makes this first chapter of Mimesis particularly relevant and exciting for us, is the complex of terms which Auerbach introduces as a counter to the Homeric "style." That is, the narrative technique of the Old Testament, the story-telling of the "Elohists" which is so contrary to the Homeric that Auerbach greets it as "from a different world of forms."³⁴

In brief, what Auerbach demonstrates in the Old Testament is a "style" so internalized that it appears almost with intent to be diametrically opposed to the Homeric. In place of the explicitly articulated, there is only the implicit, at best, and frequently no more than the suggestiveness of silence. In place of the lavishly described, the adjectival, there is no more than the barren naming, the terse identification of objects and persons. In place of the fully located within a foreground, there is an allusiveness to depths and backgrounds which recede eventually into the humanly unknowable, and which constantly threaten to reduce even the knowable to insignificance. The Homeric is hypostatized, and realized. Its dimensions are perfectly congruent to human rationality. And it will not permit the introduction of a dangerous and destructive perspective which leads finally to mystery. The Old Testament alternately recedes and looms, is admittedly supra-rational, and confesses mystery to be the context of human experience. This leads to another contrast which Auerbach merely implies -- that the Homeric is the arena of pride and the Old Testament the arena of humility.

The primary text for this analysis of the Old Testament "style" is the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac. Nowhere in Mimesis is the beauty of Auerbach's perception or the inevitability of his conclusions more evident. For example, on the passage which relates that Abraham, on the third day "lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar...." Auerbach comments, "That gesture is the only gesture, is indeed the only occurrence during the whole journey, of which we are told....Thus the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead, and which yet is measured: three days! Three such days positively demand the symbolic interpretation which they later received."³⁵

What Auerbach demonstrates in the first chapter of Mimesis, and indeed the argument prosecuted throughout the book, is basically the following. That which we call the Greek tradition or the Classical tradition in literature is a hypostasis of extremely formal elements which permit of no tampering or adulteration. Its character may be suggested in an emblematic manner by the classic requirement, the unrealistic imposition of such a literary demand as the "separation of styles." The compartmentalization, the artistic segregation of the "low" from the "high," of the "tragic" from the "comic," and of the "rhetorical" from the "conversational," was an accepted literary

artifice or convenience whose brittleness did not become apparent until the social underpinnings were weakened, denied, and finally denounced by the triumph of Christianity and the new view of man which it imposed. Auerbach is, as a matter of fact, very careful to illustrate by analysis of texts from Petronius and Tacitus and Ammianus³⁶ the necessary and essential limits to that realism possible within a pre-Christian or classical "style." Even the language itself, as the product of a differing culture, cannot handle such realism.

What is most significant for our purposes, however, is not the actual tracing of this development through various texts leading to Schiller's domestic tragedy and further. The identification of literary Romanticism with Christianity is of course highly significant and has already been the subject of many studies. But the highest priority of importance is not the subsequent evolution, but the origin -- and the fact that Auerbach discovers the origins of this development in the Old Testament, a development which is later translated in an even more ample manner into the New Testament.

We have throughout this discourse been much concerned with origins, with beginnings, with fundamental questions of form and derivation of form, with the idea of form as analogy. We have been concerned to search out, further, whether relinquishing the classical conception of form -- a conception which has yielded and transmitted to us the epic, the lyric, tragedy and comedy, etc. -- we could

be left with anything defineable and discrete.

We may accurately say, that Auerbach's concern with evolution is a teleology of content, and he moves with rightful and inevitable ease from Don Quixote to Luisa Millerin -- as indeed he might very well have moved to The Ring and the Book or "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." For us, however, the ramifications of the analysis he presents in Mimesis are at least equally dramatic and more than illuminating. For we have been insisting from the very beginning that the question of the novel was essentially the question of the availability of form. Or to repeat what we called the "final permutation" of this question: Is there a middle ground between surface form and chaos? Is it possible to probe the tension of Appolonian mimesis without destroying the idea of the container, or the illusion of its adequacy?

What Auerbach does is provide an affirmative answer to that question. Yes, there is a middle ground, he tells us, and the form of that middle ground is Testament.

For the unspoken corollary (although at one early point, the denied corollary) of everything that Auerbach tells is that the difference in literary or mimetic traditions emerges inevitably from the differences in cultural cosmologies or cultural mythologies. The primacy of surface in the Homeric tradition, therefore, is the inevitable consequence of a mythology where divine responsibility was attached to the surface character and qualities of existence,

and where there was, furthermore, a fragmentation of that responsibility among the incoherent apprehensions possible to human rationality.

What we are suggesting is hardly an extension of what Auerbach has already given us, both implicitly and explicitly. A monotheistic mythology is in terms at least of its theological and cultural maturity, at a more advanced stage of sophistication and development because it purports to comprehend astronomical and microscopic immensities. In this we must agree with Frazer, that certainly according to our own cultural bias, the movement from magic to religion is a movement in the direction of progress.³⁷ Further, it is precisely in these terms and because of these premises that we permit ourselves to designate the Homeric as "naive."

The Old Testament looms and recedes, moves from the articulated to the merely suggested, but it alludes and can allude to the unspoken because the very name of its God is unutterable. It admits of depths and recesses, of perspectives and proportions because within the framework of its mythology all distances are divinely measurable. In order to unclutch one's grasp on the surfaces of existence, in order to allow for perspective, and mystery, and death, for multi-layeredness, and unconsciousness, and even silence, in order to permit all these and still deny chaos and futility -- one must recognize a consciousness that can contain them. Here we must qualify Auerbach's comment,³⁸ and insist that in this sense the Jewish God is the cause

of the Jewish view. The Old Testament tolerates ambiguity because its God comprehends even chaos. It is "fraught with background" because His presence announces coherence with no need for further localization or definition. That coherence we may call Testament. Neither Zeus nor Jupiter, the Titans nor the pre-Titanic has voice for such pronouncement. And the consequent concern with the present and with surface is Epic.

Undoubtedly, we hunger for the naive. We are nostalgic. And we long for the heroic. Too late we may say we recognize that this Judaic consciousness not only comprehends but also intimidates. But if -- to turn to Wordsworth for a moment -- we have made a "sordid boon," it was the inevitable product of consciousness -- the last human arrogance. It is idle to prefer being "suckled in a creed outworn." It is idle theologically and, by analogy, it is idle literarily. We cannot have classic tragedy without inevitably reducing the Prometheus of Aeschylus to the Samson Agonistes of Milton. And we cannot have even "secondary epic" without some confusion about who the real hero is.

The novel was inevitable in the sense that literary narrative required a form that did not demand heroism, that could as a matter of fact accommodate "anti-heroism," the undecorous, the angular, and the conversational. It required a form that could comprehend perspective and could locate within that perspective the facts and ambiguities whose existential importance Christian mythology tolerated

and countenanced.

But that very inevitability of the novel is what deceived criticism into the basic misconception that the changes which the novel presented were merely accommodations of art, concessions to "realism." The failure of criticism has been its blindness to the essentialness and radicalness of these "concessions" -- differences so basic that they derive from "a different world of forms." I have called that montheistic world the world of Testament -- and it is to Testament that the novel is an analogy.

Footnotes

CHAPTER I

1. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York, 1949), p. 219.

2. From The Myth and the Powerhouse (New York, 1956). Reprinted in Critical Approaches to Fiction, ed. Kumer and McKean (New York, 1968), p. 288.

3. See Penn Warren's essay on The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, in Selected Essays (New York, 1958).

4. "Wanted: An Ontological Critic," The World's Body (New York, 1938).

5. Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 71.

6. The allusion is to Marianne Moore's "Poetry," in Collected Poems (New York, 1951).

7. The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valery (New Haven, 1954).

8. David Lodge, Language of Fiction (London and New York, 1966).

9. Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (New York, 1957).

10. "...suppose he had left the epic of his country and 'the historians' to be dealt with in another book, suppose the interpolated scenes ... were to disappear and to leave the subject entirely to the young heroes and heroines -- what shall we find to be the form of the book which is thus disencumbered? ... It gains, I could feel, by this process of liberation...." Lubbock, p. 43. Also see all of Chapters III and IV.

11. New York, 1967.

12. Leavis, pp. 25-26.

13. John 1:1.

14. An interesting illustration of this point can be seen in some of the collage paintings of the early cubists, where the page of newspaper print achieves a totally non-verbal utility. The container of meaning is admitted into this world of art, but the meaning itself is completely excluded.

15. It would be an interesting study to examine the strategies they employ or fail to employ, as an exercise in comparative rhetoric. Kenneth Burke has done some investigation along these lines in A Grammar of Motives (New York, 1952).

16. "The Conventions of Poetry," a paper delivered at the Conference on Style in Bellagio, Italy, August 1969.

17. From "Ars Poetica," reprinted in Modern American and Modern British Poetry, ed. Louis Untermeyer et al. (New York, 1955), pp. 272-273. W. K. Wimsatt also comments on this particular line somewhat to the same effect as I have: "But a poem cannot be in the simple sense that a statue or a piece of Venetian glass is, for each thing insofar as it is, must be, have being, according to its nature. The nature of words is to mean, and a poem is through its meaning." The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson (New Haven, 1948).

18. The term is used in the sense of harmony and sufficiency as well as passivity.

19. "Wordsworth's poems are 'impure' because they have about them the smell of soil and soiled flesh, the reek of humanity. Their syntax is not 'pure' syntax because it refers to, it mimes, something outside itself and outside the world of its poem, something that smells of the human, of generation..... For poetry to be great, it must reek of the human This is not a novel contention; but perhaps it is one of those things that cannot be said too often." Donald Davie, Articulate Energy (New York, 1958), p. 165.

20. One of the reasons, for example, that Frye's criticism is particularly useful in regard to drama is the essential archetypal and ritualistic quality of drama.

21. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," Selected Essays: 1917 - 1932 (New York, 1932), pp. 121 - 126.

22. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967.

23. Watt, p. 11.

24. Loc. cit.

25. Trans. Julius A. Elias (New York, 1966).

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Wm. A. Haussmann (London, 1909).

27. Nietzsche, p. 37.

28. Nietzsche, p. 27.

29. "...The Apollonian influence uplifts man from his orgiastic self-annihilation, and beguiles him concerning the universality of the Dionysian process into the belief that he is seeing a detached picture of the world What can the healing magic of Apollo not accomplish when it can even excite in us the illusion that the Dionysian is actually in the service of the Apollonian..." (Nietzsche, pp. 163-164).

30. Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Princeton, 1953).

31. Auerbach, p. 5.

32. Auerbach, pp. 4-5.

33. Auerbach, p. 6.

34. Auerbach, p. 7.

35. Auerbach, p. 10.

36. Auerbach, pp. 24-60.

37. James George Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion (New York, 1951). See in particular Chapter IV, pp. 56-69.

38. "The concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things " (Auerbach, p. 8).

Literature exists first of all as a way of developing our powers of invention and self-stimulation in the utmost freedom, since its matter and tool is the word, freed from the burden of immediate use and suborned to every conceivable fiction and delight.

Paul Valery, "Memoirs of a Poem"
in The Art of Poetry

CHAPTER II

DIVINE TESTAMENT And HUMAN PLAY

The novel then is like Testament.¹ Its mode of apprehension is the same, its unity of perspective, the style of its narrative and the role of its narrator, its view of man and its view of history. All these defining attributes are part of a complex which identify the novel with the "style" of Testament.

Yet -- clearly -- it is at the same time not Testament. Written from mortal limitation and finiteness of mind, it is only an analogy to Testament, a quasi or mock-Testament. The novelist is, we would say, playing at Testament, and what he does in fiction is to create the corresponding analogical structure for his chronicle, his parables, his commandment. It is to the question of "play" or "mock" testament that we must now turn.

For in order to understand the achievement of Meredith, we must attempt an understanding of the mode of the novel in a way that will not be distortive, that will not force real accomplishment into an unreal and cramped pattern. Believing, further, that Meredith's work is the first realization in England of the modern novel, we must consider the nature of the novel and determine if and how Meredith is significant in the novel's progress toward self-actualization.

The recognition that the activities of art and play are similar is certainly not new. One of the first expressions of it in any organized or applied sense, however, occurs in Kant's Critique of Judgement. In a well-noted passage in Book II, Kant distinguishes between Art with its essential freedom, on the one hand, and what he calls "handicraft" or "industrial art ":

We look on the former as something which could only prove final (be a success) as play, i.e. an occupation which is agreeable on its own account; but on the second as labour, i.e. a business which on its own account is disagreeable (drudgery), and is only attractive by means of what it results in (e.g. the pay) and which is consequently capable of being a compulsory imposition.²

Art and play are alike says Kant, because in both the fundamental antinomies of constraint, on the one hand, and contingency, on the other, lose their hold. Art in particular, becomes significant and important as an arena in which the conflicting human dualism can attain to some serenity of resolution.³

It is worth observing at this point, since it will bear on our own specialized interest, that the free ambience of art for Kant was somewhat problematical, and he therefore wished to distinguish it from the random, anarchic quality of "mere" play.

It is not amiss, however, to remind the reader of this: that in all free arts something of a compulsory character is still required, or, as it is called a mechanism, without which the soul, which in art must be free, and which

alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless and evanescent (e.g. in the poetic art there must be correctness and wealth of language, likewise prosody and metre). For not a few leaders of a newer school believe that the best way to promote a free art is to sweep away all restraint, and convert it from labour into mere play.⁴

What Kant fails to explicitly acknowledge here is that the various levels of play also have their "compulsory character," that there are rules which always define play and define games, and that these, furthermore, surely correspond to poetic prosody and meter. As a matter of fact, in referring to them as we did in the last chapter, as being arbitrary and non-semantic, we were in effect asserting their "compulsory character" but in a way unburdened by constraint and contingency.⁵

It is this same practical confusion which sees art and play as liberated activities, but sees play as liberated to the point of aimlessness which prevents Huizinga's Homo Ludens⁶ from becoming more than merely an interesting collection of social and anthropological data, describing parallels and similarities that remain curious rather than illuminating. With a psychologically revealing emphasis on the competitive aspects of play, and with a superficiality that is no less distressing than surprising, Huizinga attempts to reject the art-as-play theory, but ends by merely contradicting himself. Specifically, Huizinga wishes to refute Schiller's concept of Spieltrieb or play-instinct. His argument against the play instinct seems

emotional rather than logical:

As an explanation of the origin of decorative motifs in art, let alone of plastic creation as a whole, a psychic function of this kind must strike us as somewhat inadequate. It is impossible to assume that the aimless meanderings of the hand could ever produce such a thing as style. Apart from this the plastic urge is by no means content with mere ornamentation of a surface. It operates in three directions: towards decoration, towards construction, and towards imitation.... It seems preposterous to ascribe the cave paintings of Altamira, for instance, to mere doodling -- which is what it amounts to if they are ascribed to the "play-instinct."... The grotesque wildness of the dancing-masks among savage peoples, the monstrous intertwining of figures on totem-poles, the magical mazes of ornamental motifs, the caricature-like distortions of human and animal forms -- all these are bound to suggest play as the growing point of art. But they should do no more than suggest it.⁷

It is much against his will that Huizinga admits to a play-element in the distortions and dislocations of art.⁸

In addition, one of the most conspicuous aspects of the passage from Homo Ludens is the perverse and intentional misreading of Schiller and his concept of Spieltrieb.⁹

Certainly Schiller finds the source of art in the play, the disinterested use and exercise of one's powers and faculties without a defined aim. It even confers a benefit on man who without it, "Eternally chained to only one single fragment of the whole...himself grew to be only a fragment...."¹⁰ Play instinct, therefore, functions as self-realization and as a testing of the conditions which surround us. Such play we know to be universal, and not only for man, as

indicated by the frequently used illustration of the lion roaring even when he is not hungry or enraged. Similarly, Schiller says, "Man's imagination has, like his bodily organs, its free movement and its material play, in which, without any reference to shape, it simply delights in its absolute and unfettered power."¹¹ However, imagination alone does not create art without a "legislative faculty" creating definition by providing resistance.

From this play of the free sequence of images, which is still of a quite material kind and declares itself by simple natural laws, the imagination finally makes, in its attempt at a free form, the leap to aesthetic play. A leap we must call it, since a wholly new force comes into play; for here for the first time, the legislative faculty interferes with the operations of a blind instinct, subjects the arbitrary process of the imagination to its immutable and eternal unity, imposes its own self-dependence upon the variable and its infiniteness upon the sensual.¹²

Schiller's most sweeping proposition is: "...Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing."¹³

The Letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man present a fully developed, Kantian description of all art as play. The ideas were in some ways altered by Konrad Lange. Lange accepted the fundamental theory of the play-impulse, but he widened it and strengthened the idea of its applicability. The need to experiment, to test, and to transcend the confining and unsatisfying limits of actual experience becomes for Lange the motive force of art. Consequently, he finds no need for Schiller's second law of aesthetic play, the

"aesthetic leap." All play, including the primitive play of children, has the nature of art -- as long as one additional stipulation is made. The play must have the element of "conscious self-illusion"; the players must be aware of the "as if..." quality of their game.¹⁴ Lange, in one sense, brings us to a mimetic, imitative view of art which has a valid basis in play theory. "There is not a single characteristic of art which does not apply to the illusion games and no single characteristic of the illusion games which cannot also be found in art."¹⁵

Many of the concepts already derived from this "outline" of play theory have a clear applicability to the novel as a "play" testament in general, and even to Meredith specifically. For instance, Meredith's attack on fictional and dramatic satire, in the Essay on Comedy, coincides with the Kantian view that the play of art should not be purposive or pragmatic. Huizinga's grudging admission of a relationship between play and grotesquerie covers Dickens and Meredith and all but the most determinedly realistic novelists. Schiller's elucidation of art as a playful resolution, as a release from the remorseless dual forces of reason and sense, seems to have a particular applicability to the novel as testament; for the problems of that dualism occupy the center of our lives and consequently are the subjects of works which in order to treat them must rise above their sway. Again, when Lange talks about the necessity of testing limits which are

constricting, and about "conscious self-illusion," he has divined the forces which in the first instance gave the novel its liberty and in the second give the novelist his license.

Finally, we will cite a play theorist who followed Lange and whose applicability to Meredith as an ironic comedian of novelistic form is extremely apt. Karl Groos¹⁶ does not reject previous analysis. He rather keeps referring back to Kant and Schiller and Lange. But what he does is rearrange the priorities. So that the important play-motive for Groos is less in transcendence, discovery, or definition than in the fundamental satisfaction of power, "...our familiar pleasure in power, delight in being able to extend the sphere of our ability, a motive which should never be underestimated."¹⁷ His emphasis on power differs somewhat from Schiller and seems to imply a preoccupation with new achievement and extension at the price of risk and of strain. So it does. "If pleasure in the possession of power appears as the most important psychological foundation of play," says Groos, "its highest intellectual expression, its idealization, as it were, proves to be the assuming of a role or mock activity in any form. Objectively, all play is of this character...."¹⁸ The "mock activity" which interests us is the novel as testament. We see the novel, not as its content, but as a form which mocks or burlesques content, which plays at being testament.¹⁹

It becomes disconcertingly evident, though, as we begin our search after the "shape" of Testament that we cannot hope to meet with the neat configurations the word Form usually calls to mind. Although we may tentatively accept a description of Testament as beginning with Genesis and ending in Apocalypse, as soon as we try to grasp the formula analytically, it begins to crumble.²⁰ The shape of Testament is not beginning-middle-end, it is not conflict-crisis-resolution which are the formulations of another age and of a different approach to narrative. Nor is it the voyage, the journey, the container of picaresque narration with its clear point of origin and destination.

The shape of Testament can be conceived of and apprehended only as we relinquish our usual distinction between content and form. For Testament must essentially and necessarily be a continuous narration whose beginning and end -- and how inappropriate such terms are -- exist in the mind of God. Its form -- as it appears to man, as far as he is able to recognize it -- begins with speech, its middle is the entire duration of speech, and its end occurs when the divine authorial voice expresses itself no longer in that which we recognize and call language. It should be further clear that narrative as conceived of in divine terms is not and cannot be dependent on the mechanical devices which render our forms. It is rather a continuous moral imperative and therefore terminally significant at any point as at any other. Its shape is

conditioned by and contingent upon the Ethic in the act of expressing itself. There is actually no possible Idea of Order in the classical sense, antecedent to the voice of Testament, for "...the Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep."²¹

What we see in Testament, therefore, is Form in the act of unfolding itself, and performing such definition by reference to an ethic which is the content of its expression. Such an inseparability is the quintessential nature of organicism, its hallmark, and its ultimate artistic mode. Classicism attempted to assimilate its myths into art, since art was conceived of as an "imitation" of nature. Romanticism, of which the novel is perhaps the most explicit and pure example, was a granting to myth of its primacy and transcendence. But -- and for our purposes this may be the most important fact -- it is in the contradictions, paradoxes and impossibilities generated by the conflict of divine artistic omnipotence and human artistic limitations that the novel develops, takes shape, becomes recognizable.

The novel has evolved, then, not only in analogy to Testament, but its contours must frequently be analyzed as the compensations for its mortality -- not mechanical conventions imposed upon it, but developments which attempt to bridge that discrepancy between divine Testament and the human testament which is its imitation. Thus we are not opening a Pandora's box of shapelessness in which "anything goes" since fiction proceeds from at least a

novelistic omnipotence and omniscience. Nor must we say that the only discipline and corrective for authorial self-indulgence is Realism. Rather, we find in Testament a possible and available language of narration -- or narrational mode, of narrational stance, of narrational preoccupation -- a way of comprehending and domesticating existence. In appropriating that language, the novelist is necessarily faced with the problems of commanding its syntax, its grammar, its mode of inflecting, and perhaps to a more limited degree, its lexicon.

We have allowed, for example, that the distinction between form and content is not as discrete in the novel as in other forms. At the same time, an aspect of the novel's shape does become clearer when we observe that fiction is obsessively preoccupied with moral choice and ethical decision. We must surely recognize a Testamental significance to the phenomenon of the American novel where the concern with ultimate meanings is the thematic location of every significant writer from James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner. To take an instance closer to the central concerns of this study, we may begin to discover Meredith's ethical ideas in his fiction to be less a display of didacticism than as an orientation defining the ethical framework of his play-testament.

The relationship of "theme" to "form" can be demonstrated as follows: The writer of epic -- whether Homer, Virgil, or Milton -- speaks from the safety of a universe

organized, stratified, fully created, and of which he is merely the third-hand spokesman. For whether his subject is Achilles' wrath, Aeneas in battle, or even "Man's first disobedience," he is agent of a superintendent Muse -- itself subservient. His purpose is descriptive, his subject "historic," and his mode is Song. The invocation of "Sing, Heavenly Muse!" is both stately and deliberate, but the response of the beneficent Muse is to render precisely what was asked: Song. If that Song is necessary, (and who would contravene this) its necessity is that of aesthetic luxuriance and luxury; it is operatically, spectacularly necessary. But what it is at the same time not, is essential, crucial, prescriptive, and -- as Dr. Johnson recognized²² -- suspenseful. Little in Epic is being tested, little hangs in the moral and ethical balance, which could upset that very balance and tear it from its moorings, the point of universal order from which it is suspended. For that order stands and is an accepted fact antecedent to Epic. The machinery of Epic -- its Muse, its similes, its hero, etc. -- mirrors and is mimetically reflective of a totally created, mechanistic and therefore, closed world.

It is not so with Testament whose narrative -- as we said -- shapes the moral order of the universe, and therefore, conversely, hazards its moral condition. "So much depends" upon Adamic sin in creating not only the human condition but the ethical climate within whose emergent bounds the choices acquire significance. Nor should

we restrict our illustrations to an event whose magnitude inspired its rendering in Epic.²³ Adam exists as the first example in our literature of the anti-hero. But by the same token, the range of possible human moralities or morality is qualified by the story of Noah -- whose righteousness we are admonished can be evaluated properly only within the context of "his generations."²⁴ Very much in the same way, but with a different effect, does Abraham's plea for the cities of Sodom and Gomorra create the possibility of human behavior in such a way as to incriminate silence and elevate human audacity above submission.

The characters of a novel, too, whether Tom Jones or Tom Gmdgrind, Emma Woodhouse or Emma Bovary, live in existential jeopardy: individuals by whose risk the terms of existence become clear and through whose survival or destruction the limits of a universe become established. That the novelist sets out his universe by means of a plot is surely a significant fact, but to regard plot as the determining, form-giving element is just as surely a distortion.²⁵

Plot in the novel is less a narrative order than a narrative sequence, the accumulations of event rather than a superimposed order, and a progress upon an existential level rather than an essential level. Great novels are, in other words, not predictable and the ultimate novel is not neat. When the attempt at neatness is made the results appear to the reader as conspicuously artificial. Can we

actually discover the pattern of Moby Dick or of War and Peace? Are not the plots of those novels, in any real sense, really coterminous with the works themselves?

However, while openness and contingency are very fine things -- to reverse the argument of Dostoevsky's narrator in Notes from Underground -- so are closure and constraint. The latter seem all the more preferable, as a matter of fact, to anyone interested in the apprehending of form. The contingent, the provisional, the vulnerable to momentary pressures actually negate the idea of form which is usually an abstract, inhuman, and, therefore, a final concept. Is it possible to work toward a definition of form from the idea of contingency? That is to say, we might incorporate or try to accommodate the contingent presence in our vision of novelistic form, but only as a contrary pull against a more reliable order, a stable arrangement. The idea of the provisional is useless to us as a formal idea until we can first recognize the antecedent arrangement which it qualifies.

It is useful to state the dilemma in these drastic and despondent terms; however, there is an answer possible. And for this we must first understand more clearly the relationship between the idea of analogy and the idea of play.

It is almost tautological to point out that all human activity is an attempt to domesticate existence, to subordinate it, to redefine it within a formula which employs man as

its major genus. It has long been recognized that what separates the arts from other human activity is, as Kant says, their essential uselessness. One subordinates the earth by planting it and by deriving from it nourishment and sustenance. It is thus possessed and "subdued" in accordance with Biblical injunction. The creatures of earth are subdued and tamed by various degrees of love or of killing. These activities all have practical, useful results, just as the discoveries of the sciences domesticate existence by making it utilizable or capable of utility. In any case, we understand biology and physics, and through our understanding they become literally comprehended; the forces and the principles which determine their working become susceptible to human government and no longer control men at what had previously seemed the whim of nature. By "knowing" science, we become materially free.

There are, however, certain subjects which are not amenable to such domestication. Certain towering, irreducible, and incomprehensible subjects that will not diminish into subjection or dwindle into formula. And it is these subjects of incomprehensible dimension which in their very hugeness and abstraction and infinitude are both incapable of destroying man but constantly threaten him with mortification; it is these humiliating subjects which become the province of art or of religion: Time and Death, Fear and Lust.

In the working out of religious compromise, these

"irreducibles" are not properly speaking domesticated or tamed at all. Man can form a relation to them only through subservience, only by delivering himself unconditionally to external forces beyond his own. Religiously speaking, we enter the house of fear or of death and pay homage to its domination, ubiquity, and terror. In return for servitude, we can receive such modicum of security as is given to the undaring meek, symbolized at its fullest as the inheritance of earth, pallid but purged of terror.

Art, on the other hand, approaches these subjects more insolently.²⁶ And quite justifiably does the Decalogue then thunder a prohibition against graven images, against depiction of what exists in the heavens above and in the earth below. For being incapable of comprehending the immensities which are its subject, art domesticates existence by recasting it in forms which are humanly controllable because they are human duplications. The play of art is -- literally -- a re-creation, a re-making of the world. The domain of art as it moves away from religion, is not -- at least eventually is not -- the domain of reality. Art establishes, stakes out a territory of its own within which it can identify terrors, and by naming subdue them. But its conquest of "reality" as opposed to the scientific and practical activities, is accomplished only by analogical forays. The "logic of the Humanities," to borrow Cassirer's phrase, is not logical; nor is it phenomenological; it is analogical. It replaces the "leap of faith" with the play of art.

The key term here is of course, analogy. For it reminds us that the novelist is not and cannot be a writer of Testament just as it is impossible for him to create time. He is rather writing a human analogy to Testament and re-creating out of the human elements and possibilities at his disposal a so-to-speak artificial Testament. In the play of art, in that novel which is his game, he attempts to duplicate and to mimic the features of omnipotent and omniscient statement. But he does not attempt, as he cannot attempt, to follow a blueprint for the creation of his testament.

Nevertheless, there are certain features of the novel as testament that assert themselves. In the first place, the matter of rhetoric and authorial presence can fall into place. We learn to look upon rhetoric without superciliousness, without squirming and grudging. Even the "necessity of rhetoric" seems a terribly inadequate description. Rhetoric is rather the insignium of the novel, the expression of an authorial consciousness which is the medium of the novel, within which the novel -- like Testament -- is suspended and comprehended.

Secondly, we have mentioned and shall examine in the next chapter the essentially moral nature of the novel, which is to say that the novel asks moral questions or works its way toward moral definition. But we should quickly emphasize again that the emphasis is on morality as creating Form rather than content.

Third is the matter of fictional character, whose contingent behavior is the subject of Chapter IV. Novelistic character requires, in the first place, the hazardous investment of the characters themselves who must be faced with loss and occasionally accept loss. They cannot live charmed sequential lives in which the possibilities have been carefully measured and anticipated and, consequently, neatly prefigured. For this is the world of contingent actuality which the mode of testament has opened to expression. Theoretically, it may be said that no novelist can guarantee the safety of a character until the last sentence in his work has been written.²⁷

Even the morality of a fictional work is partially hazarded through the characters and their reaction to events. For the crucial unpredictability of fictional history is not only what illustrates, but what defines the morality; the complexity of the variables thus increases geometrically the hazards which it will be forced to stand. A novel, unless it wishes to diminish into allegory, must rely on the ambiguity of event and cannot mandate a consistency of moral behavior or moral retribution.

The preceding clearly implies that the very writing of a novel in itself is a risk. And this too is true, since the mode of the novel even above and beyond the risking of character and moralities -- or more accurately, as a correlate of it -- required the casting away of the traditional form-creating mediations of literary art.

If, as a matter of fact, we take these essential features of Testament -- the mandated rhetoric, the emergent morality, the risked characters, the rejection of genre -- we can distinguish the last as definitive, and the others as subsumed by it. For the novel is a process which does not compromise itself through traditional forms forcing a work toward foregone conclusion. A risked morality, in other words, cast into a prefigured mold is a contradiction in terms. For a form must force, must demand, must ordain, its verdict. And the history of form analysis and criticism -- perhaps particularly the work of Frye -- demonstrates to what large degree a form builds itself around, and legitimates itself in, conclusion. Genre not only mediates, it arbitrates; it passes judgement and it exacts its judgement.

The rhetorical character of the novel too can be similarly derived, and from either of two directions. One may say, in the first place, that having dismissed the narrative enablement or sanction of genre, the novel had to go back to the assumptions anterior to genre, pre-existent to those of a congealed form. Or one may argue what is essentially the same thing, that traditional form having been disqualified as an overly restrictive organization for narrative, it could not be merely abolished without finding replacement in some other kind of ordering principle which would assure a narrative continuity.

We now need the patience for one final theoretical transposition. Nature itself, and the order of Nature, is ruthlessly aristocratic. It dismisses the weak and consumes them as merely the fuel of history. So long then as narrative itself was classical and aristocratic, it owed apology to no critical audience, for it had committed no offense or violence. Its arrangements did not contradict the naive, the aristocratic evidence of Nature with its processes of selection and rejection. But the novel is -- it has been frequently pointed out -- a bourgeois form, just as the Judeo-Christian tradition is a bourgeois view of existence. In other words, it elevates what nature does not elevate. It celebrates the weak rather than the strong. It understands rather than sings. It appreciates intention rather than commemorating action. The muse is thus proud and descriptive; the novelist is humble and introspective. The completed form need only see and identify. The novel must explain and explain -- for it attempts to replace with another completeness, the completeness of Nature.

Going back, for example, to the wicked Cities of the Plain in Genesis 18 and 19, what we discover in that destruction or in the intent of destruction is that the awfulness of Divine power is not sufficient sanction. The fact of power, of capability is not in itself a sufficient condition for Testamental order. There is rather another organization announced which supplants and impeaches the order of power when Abraham says: "That be far from thee to do after

this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous shall be judged as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"²⁸

The verse illustrates for us the precedence of morality over history in the concern for the possibility of virtue even in the foulness of Sodom and Gomorrah. And how clearly absent is such "niceness" of concern in the sacking and fiery destruction of Illium. We may go even further and say how irrelevant a concern with justice is to the sacking of Troy when, through its distribution of divine powers to the many gods, that narrative indicates its primary allegiance to the order of nature and to the description of history. It contains the ambiguities; its responsibility is to present a rational description. But by no means can such narrative recognize any incumbency to resolve what the polytheistic structure of narrative fails to shape into a monistic moral universe.²⁹

The aristocracy of history, then, can attain sufficiency with the apparent and the foregrounded. And we make no claim for any superiority of ours over the naive. But when the apparencies must be resolved, and when they must be brought into a subservience to a unified moral order outside and beyond history, an order not always and not necessarily apparent in Nature, the narrative of mere description will no longer suffice.³⁰

Schiller, in his essay on Naive and Sentimental Poetry puts it similarly:

Anyone who observes the impression that naive poetry makes on him and is able to separate from it that part which is due to the content will find this impression always joyous, always pure, always serene, even in the case of very pathetic objects; with sentimental poetry it will always be somewhat solemn and intense. This is because with naive accounts, regardless of their subject matter, we always rejoice in our imagination in the truth, in the living presence of the object, and seek nothing further beyond these; whereas with the sentimental we have to reconcile the representation of imagination with an idea of reason and hence always fluctuate between two different conditions.³¹

Thus by its analytic irony the need and nature of novelistic testament to explain and explain forces us into collision with another feature of testament -- what we shall call the paradox of distance. We accept as axiomatic that distance is necessary for narrative as for any other art. And surely it is axiomatic for Meredith. For without the interposition of distance between oneself and the story one is telling, one will end with that worst of all narrative foulness, sentimentality. One needs something beyond the self, beyond the ego, to arbitrate.

The problem of the paradox of distance emerges only with the novel and resides in the mortal and human nature of fictional testament. The problem of maintaining distance in divine Testament can hardly constitute a difficulty since no greater distance can safeguard the disinterestedness of narrative than the one between a divine Narrator and His human subject. But there is clearly no such insurance to protect

the integrity of mortal testament where the "taint of the human" infects both teller and tale. And that being the case, Schiller appears to have correctly assessed the alternatives as either naive or sentimental.

One of the most common of nineteenth-century solutions was the attempt to preserve that proportion between narrator and testament, between teller and tale, which characterizes actual Testament. This could be done most conveniently by reducing the characters of the novel in such a fashion as to make conspicuous to the reader the difference between their limited existence and the fuller nature of the narrator. This is obviously an accurate way of rendering what Thackeray does in his insistence upon the narrator's prerogatives throughout, and in calling his characters puppets at the close. He creates a ratio in which the Testamental proportion of narrator to actor is maintained. It is also, in a more subtle way, what Dickens implies by reducing his characters to caricatures entrapped within a limited human ambience -- Dicken's genius being an amazing ability to keep the reduction in a balance that is synecdochic, the part representing the whole in a satisfying proportion.

But the novelist unwilling to make such reduction the sanctioning principle of his fictional world was forced to assert his own primacy in some other way. He could escape the dangers of diminished self-gratification, of an art-destroying narcissism -- dangers which beset the very premise of human testament -- by borrowing the anonymity of some

formal narrative pattern, and thus being pushed into an attitude of formal distance toward the tale he had to tell. By usurping the structures of romance, of allegory, of epic, of drama, etc., the novelist could impose upon his work conditions of control to prevent his testament from becoming merely testimony. And in the security of this impossible, irrational and inhuman order, he could attempt to play with the intentional disorder, the human disarray of his testament.

But these structural borrowings were artificial and the very device of borrowing itself an artificial one. In that consciousness which the novel presumed to celebrate, therefore, the artificialities could not indefinitely go unnoticed. The rational consciousness of the novel inevitably gave way to a more omnivorous consciousness -- self-consciousness. And in that process of turning back upon itself, the formal organization of the novel itself had to succumb to the ironic scrutiny in which it had presumed to hold all other phenomena. The tension which the novelist created between his own unmediated awareness and the arbitrariness of form -- that mode itself -- had to become finally the victim of its own awareness; it could not continue indefinitely to enjoy its privileged and sanctioned status.

Such ironic self-examination, then, is the ultimate instance of human play because it seeks to test the very rules of its "game." The Novelist as Comedian, in the act of performing, calls his performance into playful question.

The one notable example of it prior to Meredith is Sterne. But Sterne exhausted himself of his preoccupation in only one work. Meredith is the first major English novelist in whom ironic self-consciousness does not become attenuated, but persists in one form or another from work to work. And Meredith thus becomes highly -- if not singularly -- significant in the history of the novel.

But we have now outdistanced ourselves with these questions. We must first look at Meredith and see to what degree the thematic values of his work are preserved by aesthetic play, and to what degree they become tainted with didacticism.

Footnotes

CHAPTER II

1. We should point out that the view of Testament being forwarded is extra-theological, being independent of "faith" or Fundamentalist belief. It is enough that such a conception can exist and has historically existed. In his discussion of "imagination as metaphysics," Wallace Stevens quotes C. E. M. Joad in order to make a similar point: "If ... God is a metaphysical term, if that is to say, He belongs to a reality which transcends the world of sense experience ... to say that He exists is neither true nor false. This position ... is neither atheist nor agnostic; it cuts deeper than either, by asserting that all talk about God, whether pro or anti, is twaddle." "Imagination as Value" in The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1951), p. 138.

2. Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1952), p. 164.

3. This is one aspect of the conception of art as play which Schiller later capitalizes on and develops in his aesthetic theory.

4. Kant, p. 164.

5. It is interesting to note that since literature cannot remain purely "unsemantic," it must always feel some pull from constraint. In a special sense, Wimsatt's essay on "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason," is an attempt to pull rhyme back into the realm of constraint. See The Verbal Icon (New York, 1966).

6. Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston, 1955).

7. Huizinga, p. 168-169.

8. So reluctant is Huizinga to approach the aesthetic that in his chapter on "Play and Poetry" he wishes to "discard the idea that poetry has only an aesthetic function or can only be explained in terms of aesthetics." (p. 120). It is therefore not as aesthetic play that he examines poetry, but as social play.

9. Literally a "play-drive" or a "play-instinct," it is also related to a theory of surplus energy.

10. Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man: in a Series of Letters, trans. Reginald Snell (New York, 1965), p. 40.

11. Ibid., p. 134.

12. Loc. cit.

13. Ibid., p. 80.

14. Lange seems to be stressing the imitateness of the game rather than its rules. The selection by Lange entitled "Art as Play" is in A Modern Book of Esthetics, ed. Melvin M. Rader (New York, 1935).

15. Ibid., p. 35.

16. Karl Groos, "Art and Play," Esthetics, ed. Rader.

17. Ibid., p. 39.

18. Ibid., p. 40.

19. The one remaining ambiguity concerns the question of "conscious self-illusion" which Lange said was necessary, but which Groos denies. However, the difficulty can be resolved quite easily by pointing to the peculiar nature of fiction. In most forms of art, the artist is using contingency or sense as the subject of his aesthetic play. But the novelist has as his subject, as we said in the last chapter, constraint or reason. In transmuting that into aesthetic play, the incidence of self consciousness -- even for Groos -- would be much greater. And it should be pointed out that they must be so transmuted. The moralities of the novel should have the form of Testament, without its heavily didactic content. For this among others, is the liberating premise of art and its redemption from necessity.

20. Frank Kermode seems to argue that Testament itself may contain this design, but that such an interpretation was weakened by the time that the novel appeared. See The Sense of An Ending: Studies in The Theory of Fiction (London, 1966), pp. 67-89.

21. Genesis 1:2.

22. "...original deficiency cannot be supplied. The want of human interest is always felt. Paradise Lost is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure." Samuel Johnson, "Life of Milton," Lives of the English Poets, ed. Warren Fleischauser (Chicago, 1964), p. 38.

23. Not much attention has been directed to the different quality of dislocation between the epic treatment of Biblical narrative (i.e., Paradise Lost) and the novelistic treatment.

24. Genesis 6:9. If from the drunkenness of Noah to the drunkenness of Marmeladov is an immense leap, the immensity would be seen as not merely historical distance, but as the movement from divine narrative to human narrative.

25. That R. S. Crane discovers in Tom Jones a guide to novel "plotting," the Ur-plot of all novels, the very concept of plot, may be interesting from the viewpoint of Aristotelian calisthenics; but it has little to do with the novel. See R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones," Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1952), p. 616.

26. "...a Catholic critic ... has written: 'Art, whatever its aim, is always in sinful competition with God.' Actually, it is more correct to talk about competition with God, in connection with the novel, than of competition with man's civil status." Albert Camus, The Rebel, trans. Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), p. 259.

27. We may say that in practice this is actually never true, that characters do lead charmed lives, that the endings of characters are usually anticipated by their authors, etc.. We should have to argue, however, that to the extent that this is discernible, a novel becomes mawkish, sentimental and trite -- and the character stilted and lifeless. We should argue further that for an author to present the illusion of openness, it must to a large degree exist as a reality for him. And we should argue this, finally, even in the writing and rewriting of Anna Karenina, as we would be able to argue a much easier case with Pierre or Natasha in War and Peace. Finally we should point out that although novels differ from Testament in that they close while Testament remains open -- this being one of the limitations of mortal testament -- the point in the novel where this closure begins to take place is clearly the most artificial and even sentimental and crude.

28. Genesis 18:25.

29. The contrast may appear with even greater sharpness if, in addition to the destruction of Sodom, we cite the closer parallel of the destruction of the city of Shechem by Simeon and Levi (Genesis 34) for the rape of their sister, Dinah, since Simeon and Levi also accomplish the act by means of a ruse. But the

power of nature and the heroism of act is far from being the tribute which they are accorded by Testament. For in the coherent moral organization of Testament that vengeance becomes morally inappropriate. "Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in their habitation. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in there selfwill they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel"(Genesis 49:5-7).

30. "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/
What will suffice. It has not always had/ To find:
the scene was set; it repeated what/ Was in the
script." Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," Collected Poems (New York, 1954), p. 239.

31. Trans. Julius A. Elias (New York, 1966), p. 116.

If a man's work is to be of value, the best of him must be in it. I have written always with the perception that there is no life but of the spirit; that the concrete is really the shadowy; yet that the way to spiritual life lies in the complete unfolding of the creature, not in the nipping of his passions. An outrage to Nature helps to extinguish his light. To the flourishing of the spirit, then, through the healthy exercise of the senses. These are simple truisms. But of such are the borderways of the path of wisdom.

George Meredith, Letter to
Mrs. J. B. Gilman, March 16, 1888

CHAPTER III

THE MORALITIES OF MEREDITH: Metaphoric Truths and Literal
Reviewers

In the relatively sparse criticism which the novels of Meredith have attracted, there is one aspect that has received almost all of the attention -- Meredith's philosophy. In fact it is not difficult for us to understand. Meredith is always intruding upon us with analyses of his characters' behavior or with explanations of the course of action. He begins his career as novelist with an allegory, The Shaving of Shagpat; and his last completed novel, The Amazing Marriage, seems also thematically burdened with moralizing tendencies, a need to underline the rights and wrongs of human action. Or so it would seem.

It is symptomatic of the accepted critical approach to Meredith, that Forster's blindly unfair attack on him lists among its foremost reasons that "his philosophy has not worn well. His heavy attacks on sentimentality -- they bore the present generation...."¹ Even a more sympathetic critic, Joseph Warren Beach, after doing an early work devoted to Meredith's thematic concerns, later recants his youthful devotion: "...there was a time when I came to him looking for wisdom, and was completely satisfied. He gave me wisdom, and he gave it in a form that stimulated me by its originality and its gnomic subtlety." But some twenty years later, Beach is rather put off by the "didactic

intention."² He finds that "the main objection is that the intrusion of the philosopher in Meredith so constantly destroys the illusion created by the dramatizing of consciousness."³ Beach seems even willing to accept the action and characters as a "dramatization" of Meredith's philosophical doctrines; what he cannot tolerate is the voice of the author constantly interrupting and destroying illusion. But Virginia Woolf, in her uniquely perceptive pages on Meredith, cuts much deeper than Beach: "Above all, his teaching is too insistent.... And there is nothing that characters in fiction resent more. If, they seem to argue, we have been called into existence merely to express Mr. Meredith's views upon the universe, we would rather not exist at all. Thereupon they die; and a novel that is full of dead characters, even though it is also full of profound wisdom and exalted in teaching, is not achieving its aim as a novel." Or just above that: "His teaching seems now too strident...It obtrudes; and when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the system or with the novel or with both."⁴

It is curious and ironic how wholeheartedly this view has been accepted as an accurate description of Meredith, not only by his detractors, but equally by his admirers and defenders.⁵ The critical conviction may possibly stem from Meredith's having written the Essay on Comedy and having

made himself especially vulnerable by including in the title the phrase "Uses of the Comic Spirit."⁶ Having set down there a rather abstract and programmatic view of the Comic Spirit, Meredith has had to suffer the search for program in his novels. And what is even worse, to suffer the discovery of program in his novels.

It is an unfortunate critical tack to take. For it forces a reduction of the novels into a narrow rigid scheme. Norman Kelvin, for example, in his chapter entitled "The Rational Compromise" asserts unequivocally that Meredith "did not, like George Eliot, write novels to share with readers a tragic vision of life. He wrote, before all other reasons, in order to show that ethical behavior is rational behavior."⁷ The equation is too pat, too constricting. It forgets that the "comic spirit" -- whatever its pragmatic, civilizing function may be -- is after all comic and makes men laugh.

Jack Lindsay does not fare much better by declaring: "His work, as we have seen, from first to last is concerned with concretely grasping the ways in which the society of the cash-nexus distorts the human essence."⁸ It is again a reduction by overstatement. Even were we to admit that Lindsay has hit the central thematic preoccupation of One of Our Conquerors (which is itself an exaggerated concession) how many modifications and interpolations would be necessary before the formula could accommodate The Amazing Marriage, Beauchamp's Career, or The Egoist? It seems incredibly

perverse to insist on such programmatic didacticism when Meredith has given us in the "Shaddock Dogma" of Austin Feverel to name just one instance, sufficient parable to warn us from it.⁹

Of all the more recent works on Meredith, certainly one of the most useful is Walter Wright's Art and Substance in George Meredith. Yet Wright also talks too heavily about a "discipline by the comic spirit."¹⁰ To him, too, the comic whose usefulness Meredith took as his topic in the Essay, must be shown as an ethical principle within the novels. It is a view which assumes that Meredith is teleological, that he has a defined end and purpose in mind and that fiction serves as an instrument to effect that end by instructing men in the principles of proper behavior.

Wright actually uses The Shaving of Shagpat as major locus of the Meredith ethic. But it should be obvious that the thematic weakness of that novel is Meredith's impatience with the simply allegorical. Shagpat is actually rent thematically by the opposing pulls of what should be allegory on the one hand, and an undercutting irony which refuses to take the allegorical prescription seriously. The satire of Shagpat is treacherous; and it turns against its ethic as much as against the foibles which its characters exemplify. The comic spirit -- except in an abstract and indirect way -- is not prescriptive.

The themes of Meredith are important. And the author frequently offers them to us with a distressing blatancy. But they are an ethic which resides above the fray. They

are the abstract laws for the particular testament and not even a description of what is possible within the comic scene of human activity.

Sir Osbert Sitwell has, I believe, hit off the idea accurately when he talks about "...the novelist's ideal world ...which he upholds in his heart as a secret standard, and against which, as he weighs it, all others are found wanting...."¹¹ The ideals, the abstract and impossible perfections, do exist, but they can hardly form demands to be exacted from living characters. Measured against such impossible standards, everyone must fall short; it is implausible to assume that Meredith was inspired with so determined a didacticism as to indict any character for the failures which illustrate his humanity. Meredith himself, when declaring his attitude toward the sentimental blindness of his "wrong" characters, is quite far from taking the condemnatory tone of the writer with a moral purpose.

I for my part prefer to see boys and girls led into the ways of life by nature; but I admit that ...in most cases, our good mother has not...made them perfectly presentable; by which fact I am warned to have tolerance for the finer beings ~~Sentimentalists~~ who labour under these excessive sensual subtleties. I perceive their uses. And they are right good comedy; for which I may say that I almost love them. Man is the laughing animal; and at the end of an infinite search, the philosopher finds himself clinging to laughter as the best of human fruit, perfectly human, and sane, and comforting. So let us be cordially thankful to those who furnish matter for sound embracing laughter." Or yet again, "For if sentiment which spurns gold is the child of gold, so the fantastic philosopher who anatomizes Sentiment could not exist without Sentiment, wherefore let him be kindly-cruel."¹²

It is, I think, this same reasoning which causes Sitwell

a few pages later in the monograph when he compares Meredith with Samuel Butler, to state point blank that "He Meredith did not deal in ideals; he scarcely questioned accepted beliefs...."¹³ Now we know that Meredith did embrace wholeheartedly the cause of the Feminist movement, that he had progressive ideas in regard to education, that he condemned the complacency of bourgeois Victorianism and what Lindsay calls the "society of the cash-nexus." What makes Sitwell's statement acceptable in the face of Meredith's avowed endorsement of many "ideas" and causes, is precisely an absence of moral didacticism. Meredith tells us that this is what happened -- let us say -- to Dahlia Fleming or to Victor Radnor. He also explains in novelistic-fictional terms why it has happened. But what he does not do is tell us that it should not have happened. Thus the ideally moral or ethical may be indirectly implied by the dramatization of the less than ideal, but the ideal itself is "consumed" by the real.¹⁴

Much confusion and distortion of the Meredith position may be traced to inconsistency in Meredith himself. At times, our author does insist on the benefits and consequences of the comic spirit -- so that it appears to be both pragmatic and programmatic in its agency. It happens at many points in the Essay on Comedy, for example, when we see him equating the comic spirit with its beneficial results: "There has been fun in Bagdad. But there never will be civilisation where comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality between the sexes... cultivated women to recognize that the comic Muse is one of

their best friends. They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists."¹⁵ At another point Meredith assigns to the comic a subservience to common sense, "...the first-born of common sense, the vigilant comic."¹⁶

To take just one more example of the hobbling of the comic spirit to a grossly utilitarian purpose: "Lands where the Comic Spirit is obscure overhead are rank with raw crops of matter...I am mindful that it [the incident he relates] was in Germany, when I observe that the Germans have gone through no comic training to warn them of the sly, wise emanation eyeing them from aloft, nor much of satirical."¹⁷

The quotation is particularly perverse in conceding a relationship between the comic and the satiric, which Meredith has been at pains to deny throughout. He himself said, for example, "...the English...excel in satire, and they are noble humorists. The national disposition is for hard-hitting, with a moral purpose to sanction it....But the comic is a different spirit."¹⁸ We can see that Meredith is himself responsible for confounding the issue. For this last passage clearly separates the comic from the satiric, from that which has a "moral purpose." The comic, for Meredith, is more "ethereal," the word that he uses in praising the comicality of Moliere. It has a loyalty to no position and to no ethic. It can turn against "common sense" too when the necessity arises, as it does in, say, Rhoda Fleming. It is, on the other hand, never so determined or single-minded in its pursuit of the ridiculous as to falsify and

distort the nature of the object it views. It eschews, that is, even a programmatic loyalty to justifiable laughter, as in the case of Cervantes and "the compassion he plucks out of derision" by "fusing the tragic sentiment with the comic narrative."¹⁹

The comic is, as Meredith himself has named it, a "spirit." It infuses those who have it with the ability for rational, ethical, and noble perceptions although it binds itself by no allegiance to any of these. Its laughter is thus both disinterested and humane. But in itself the comic spirit is neither laughter nor philosophy nor morality. It is a way of looking which is closer to the ironic than to any other single term.

The comic, which is the perceptive, is the governing spirit, awakening and giving aim to these powers of laughter, but it is not to be confounded with them; it enfolds a thinner form of them, differing from satire in not sharply driving into the quivering sensibilities, and from humor in not comforting them and tucking them up, or indicating a broader ²⁰ than the range of this bustling world to them.

One of the very few writers sympathetic to Meredith who has dared treat the Essay with less than complete reverence and who has keenly pointed out its discrepancies and misleading generalizations, is J. B. Priestley.²¹ In an intelligent and original chapter Priestley criticizes Meredith for ignoring basic distinctions which undermine the effectiveness and clarity of the Essay's thesis, i.e., "the theory of Comedy as a social weapon." These confusions include a failure to maintain a consistent distinction between "pure

comedy" (as in stage comedy) and the comic spirit; a further confusion between pure comedy and his own work; a confusion which treats irony "as if it were something more than a mode of expression"; a confusion of "the more subtle forms of comedy" with its grosser forms; and a confusion of what is essentially the distinction between the moral and the aesthetic effects of the comic spirit.²²

In the course of his exposition, Priestley also suggests an absence of didacticism in Meredith:

The Essay on the Idea of Comedy is an astonishingly brilliant performance, the best of its kind we have, but its pronouncements no more invite a close scrutiny than did Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's epigrams.... Incidentally, it is too often assumed that Meredith, in this essay, is describing the spirit in which his own work is conceived and not discussing a literary form. In places he is, but actually his own work far transcends the limits imposed by him upon the creator of pure Comedy.... The Comic Spirit... unlike Humour, preserves its detachment, content to throw a beam of clear light on some incongruity.

...his larger claims...are too sweeping, particularly those he would make for the Comic Spirit informing his own work. He throws too much emphasis upon its purely corrective tendencies, more especially its power of purging fools of their folly.... The trouble is that subtle Comedy, throwing egoism and its antics into high relief, will provide us with a healthy and mirthful spectacle, but it will leave the victims exactly as it found them, with not a shadow flitting across their self-esteem...

The mistake, in treating of the more subtle forms of Comedy, is to stress the effect upon the victim instead of upon the spectator....²³

Priestley then goes on to discuss another matter we have alluded to above, the inevitability of human folly even in the author himself, and the greater vividness of Meredith's victims over the characters who are "right." It is one of the essential facts of any novel, and one which militates

against didacticism. "It is obviously difficult," Priestley says, "to draw an arresting figure on these lines."²⁴ He means the virtuous lines of Whitford and Redworth.

Having cleared away, at least in part, the mistaken conception of Meredith's novels as pure "teaching," and having opened the door to the possibility of not equating his fiction with "moral purpose," we can now more freely examine the moral concerns of the author. For the moral does constitute one crucial dimension of fiction.

The main thrust of the Meredith ethic in the novels is to illustrate how the mistakes and the foolishness of its characters can be traced to sentimental vanity, the modern variant of the sin of Pride. For our purposes the specimen novel that provides the best subject for examination is Sandra Belloni. There we find the most varied range of Sentimentalities and Sentimentalists; there Meredith engages in his most systematic anatomy of the sentimentalist as he may appear in a Mephistophelean variety of forms and shapes. And indeed the variations are immense, far exceeding the scope of any one novel. Imperfection is, as we know, what produces the "many" rather than the "one." We have -- and Meredith would say, thankfully -- a vast comic richness.

...whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever...self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws

binding them in consideration one to another;
whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice;
are false in humility or mined with conceit,
individually, or in the bulk....²⁵

This is Meredith's subject, and although the inventory even here is sufficient for ten novels, Sandra Belloni will give us a good sampling of human self-ignorance and will serve as a base for some forays into other works.²⁶

We must begin by saying that Sandra Belloni is the most awkwardly constructed of Meredith's novels, primarily because it divides itself into two overly discrete fields of interest. The first concerns the titular heroine of the work, Emilia Alessandro Belloni. Poor, unsophisticated, beautiful, and the daughter of an eccentric, irresponsible Italian musician, she does have a splendidly thrilling voice which Meredith uses in part to suggest the beauty of her natural innocent spirit. She is the good. The other part of the novel, and by far the more interesting and complex, has as its focus the Pole family -- the sisters: Arabella, Cornelia, Adella; the brother: Wildrid; the father: Samuel Pole, merchant -- and those who come into their orbit. These last include in their number a marvelously vulgar Irish widow, Mrs. Martha Chump, who has her eye on Father Pole; the ill-fated, young Purcell Barrett; Mr. Pericles, a temperamental Greek tycoon and partner with Mr. Pole in some business speculations, "who held millions of money as dust compared to a human voice"; and, of course, Emilia herself.

The weakness in the novel's structure is the result of a disunity between these two narrative fields. Theoretic-

ally, they should be bound together through the agency of Emilia who, while forming the nexus of a major plot line, also cuts across the rest of the novel's action. It does not work and for very good reason. Although Emilia's amorous entanglement with Wilfrid Pole should bridge the two worlds, the worlds are so basically antagonistic to one another that Emilia is always a foreigner in the sentimental artificiality of Brookfield. Wilfrid Pole's conflict in his infatuation for Emilia, is as a matter of fact predicated precisely on this irreconcilability. As one of Meredith's prime sentimentalists, he conceives himself in the throes of a passion for Emilia. But as a sentimentalist also, he must pay homage and sustain allegiance to the demands of Brookfield's artificiality. Thus, while the schism in the novel intensifies Wilfrid's conflict, the two story lines remain as indifferent to one another narratively as Emilia and the Pole sisters do temperamentally.

When we come to the sisters Pole, however, we reach a very different kettle of character and one which Meredith enjoyed, and enjoyed working with. In the preceding book, Evan Harrington, Meredith had already provided a dissection of one family of Sentimentalists -- the Harrington siblings, Caroline, Harriet and Louisa.²⁷ Both sets of ladies are guilty of the same sentimental fallacy, i.e., wishing to be what they are not, putting on airs, aspiring to a social condition and social behavior which will elevate them from the sphere of trade to the sphere of the gentry. They are

in other words, snobs and social climbers. Their contemptuous disdain of the real and the natural and their reference to an artificial, tinsel, romantically fabricated system of values is decadent and dangerous as a house of cards.

Sentimental distortion is perilous because it violates reality; and reality is Meredith's great restorative principle. As long as we keep our eyes on the facts of nature and of human nature, we cannot be far misled. When we turn from these trustworthy signposts and guides, when we foolishly install in their place a code predicated on our own wishes, even on a vision of justice unschooled in the principles governing our existence, inevitably we err. Fact, experience, event, reality -- call it what we will -- can alone instruct us in the proper balance of our conflicting natures and hold us to the sane and necessary synthesis of our varied impulses. Photiades in his chapter exalting Meredith's teachings, defines the Sentimentalist as follows:

At the outset, what is the outstanding crime of the sentimentalist? ...to disunite unscrupulously that which Earth had united; to scoff at that which our flesh, our intelligence, our soul form into a triple and inviolable whole: to detach one of these three elements, then, half idly, half calculatingly, to use it to the detriment of the others; to profess at the same time, in order to find excuse for its caprice, that our body and our soul are separated by an abyss -- such follies as these are but sport for the modern sentimentalist. By these methods he runs into two contrary heresies: asceticism and sensualism.

....In vain does the Comic Spirit extol temperance as via media between two excesses equally absurd.²⁸

True enough, and Sandra Belloni documents well the two excesses. It gives us, as we shall see, the Sentimentalist

as Ascetic in Purcell Barrett, and the Sentimentalist as Sensualist in Wilfrid Pole. Purcell Barrett is so infatuated with his own nobility of character, is so weighted down with the consciousness that such a frail flower cannot easily exist, let alone be victorious in winning his woman, that he shoots himself. On the other hand, Wildrid Pole is so blind to any claim outside the drive of his passion and hunger for gratifications, that he nearly destroys Emilia while she is presumably under his love and his protection.

But these are gross, conspicuous forms of Sentimentality, even in the case of Purcell Barrett which we shall return to later. In the case of the two groups of sisters we find a more subtle and more complicated kind of Sentimentality which does not lend itself so easily to the kind of Aristotelian cleanliness of analysis which Photiades performs. How are we to categorize the recurrent Meredithian phenomenon of the snob, the affected social climber? "Mounting," Meredith says, "is the title given to this proceeding." But is it a defect of the flesh, the intelligence, the soul? Which of this triad?

Actually, the "true Sentimentalist" suffers from a distortion of all three. Having relinquished or wilfully rejected the schooling by reality and fact, he is left, literally, to his own devices. But human nature, constituted as it is, will re-create reality to suit its own convenience, occasionally in the image of its own sickness or to satisfy the needs of its own deficiencies. J. M. E. Cress in his book on Meredith agrees with this less conscious and at the

same time more insidious view of Sentimentality.

Deep feeling and 'sentiment,' things so alike to those who deal only in the superficial, are deadliest enemies. The former feels, feels to its utmost fibres, but it is slow to indulge in the luxury of melancholy or in sensuous reverie, it is shy of demonstrations, and will not wear its heart upon its sleeve. It is a real thing, based upon realities, with a clear vision of the real. Sentimentalism is a sham...wilfully blind to unpleasant reality.... Sentimentalism...is a timorous apprehension of realities, sometimes of realities in the world at large, sometimes in reference to a person's immediate environment.²⁹

A major difference, then, between the Harrington sisters and the Pole sisters of Brookfield, is that the former are would-be Sentimentalists, perhaps -- may have even been more foolishly sentimental in their youth -- but we see them after the fact. They have made their choices and are now faced with the very real problems of living with their choices. They are, in other words, in some kind of intimacy with reality which precludes Sentimentalizing. This is not so with the younger Pole sisters or with their brother. Meredith is after different game in each book and the groups, while analogous, are essentially different. Here for example is Louisa Harrington musing about her brother:

A gentlemen she had discovered must have one of two things -- a title or money. He might have all the breeding in the world; he might be as good as an angel; but without a title or money he was under eclipse almost total. On a gentleman the sun must shine. Now Evan had no title, no money. The clouds were thick above the youth.³⁰

We may not like this calculating turn of mind. We may be offended by the scheming of Evan's sister. But we certainly cannot deny that it displays a mind ready, even

over-anxious, to grapple with the realities as they are perceived and discovered to obtain in the world. This is clearly not the place for preachment against Sentimentality, except perhaps the Sentimentality of a total capitulation to grossness -- a variant of what Photiades called the Sentimentality of Sensualism.

We can very conveniently juxtapose with the above passage the musings of Cornelia Pole about her lover in regard to a very similar matter:

"You are rich and he is poor...And it is gold gives you the right in the world's eye to despise him:" she apostrophized the vanished Laura, clothing gold with all the basenesses of that person. Now, when one really hates gold, one is at war with one's fellows. The tide sets that way. There is no compromise: to hate it is to try to stem the flood. It happens that this is one of the temptations of the sentimentalist, who should reflect, but does not, that the fine feelers by which the iniquities of gold are so keenly discerned, are a growth due to it, nevertheless.³¹

This aspect of Sentimentality as a pampered disrespect for reality and a contempt for its unavoidable, unpleasant and ugly facts, is part of the portrait that Meredith insists upon from the beginning of the novel. The Misses Pole are spoiled, undisciplined and uneducated by any encounter with the oppositions of a recalcitrant reality. Having no mother, they ruled their father's house and him.

It may be seen that they were sentimentalists. That is to say, they supposed that they enjoyed exclusive possession of the Nice Feelings, and exclusively comprehended the Fine Shades.... and possibly the philosopher will now have his eye on the source of that extraordinary sense of superiority to mankind which was the crown of their complacent brows. Eclipsed as they may be in the gross appreciation of the world by other people,

who excel in this and that accomplishment,
persons that nourish Nice Feelings and are
intimate with the Fine Shades carry their own
test of intrinsic value.

....my vulgar meaning might almost be
 twisted to convey that our sentimentalists are
 a variety owing their existence to a certain
 prolonged term of comfortable feeding.³²

Sentamentality is, in other words, a sign of human decadence; and like every other decadence it grows out of an excess of luxury and comfort. It is a hothouse growth which can survive only when nurtured and protected against the cold and bracing wind of a coarser, sometimes unlovely reality.

The "specific," the remedy, or better yet, the immunization against the ever-present contagion of sentimentality comes by sustaining the influence of the natural, of the fact, of the real. That Nature itself functions this way in Meredith's novels is quite clear, both as a symbol for the real and as the largest, most available instance of it.

What with frequent intrusion of "the Philosopher" and the numerous discourses on the nature of story-telling, morality, and self delusion, Sandra Belloni can hardly be called one of Meredith's most subtle novels; yet its treatment of nature is not as obvious as in, for example, Lord Ormont and His Aminta. In the Pole-oriented chapters, the stress on Sentimentality prevents anything but a negative implication: the absence of the natural, the false, the artificial; and even in the treatment of Emilia the association never threatens to become an equation. Nevertheless, there are definite associations. The action of Sandra Belloni begins with the discovery of Emilia singing in the woods, and

although she incongruously had her harp with her, Meredith offers a rational explanation. Nature does provide the backdrop for our first look at Emilia and it recurs. Typically for Meredith the setting is not purely idyllic.

Lank dry weeds and nettles, and great lumps of green and gray moss now stood...and the moon slanting through the fir-clumps, was scattered on the blossoms of twisted orchard-trees, gone wild again. Amid this desolation, a dwarfed pine, whose roots were partially bared as they grasped the broken bank that was its perch, threw far out a cedar-like hand. In the shadow of it sat the fair singer.³³

Concerning her activities on being taken to Brookfield, we are told that "...she sat at harp or piano, and then ran out to gather wild flowers and learn the names of trees and birds."³⁴ Like other of Meredith's heroines, Emilia is artless, impulsive, ardent; her animal nature is in harmony with Nature at large. Wilfrid's interest in her is thus surprising: it is strange that he should be "...running after a little unformed girl, who had no care to conceal the fact that she was an animal, nor any notion of the necessity for doing so."³⁵

The difference between Emilia's natural impulsiveness and the artificiality of the Pole sisters is also rendered in terms of their attitude toward nature; but it is concealed in minor incident, and within a narrative frame the author's thematic intent is subordinated to his ironic one.

A gardner was shaving the lawn.
 "Please spare those daisies," cried Emilia.
 "Why do you cut away daisies?"
 The gardner objected that he really must make the lawn smooth. Emilia called to Adela, who came, and hearing the case, said: "Now this is nice of you. I like you to love daisies and wish to pro-

fect them. They disfigure a lawn, you know." And Adela stooped, and picked one, and called it a pet name and dropped it.

She returned to her sisters in the conservatory, and meeting Mr. Barrett at the door, made the incident a topic. "You know how greatly our Emilia rejoices us when she shows sentiment, and our thirst is to direct her to appreciate Nature in its humility as well as its grandeur."³⁶

These examples are useful ones for us in coming closer to an understanding of Meredith's philosophical intent and mode in the novels. For although Sandra Belloni is repeatedly interrupted for the introduction of comments "extraneous" outside the pale of simple or even complicated narrative, even Sandra Belloni vindicates Creech's pronouncement that, "In no case is a moral clumsily enforced nor morals clumsily inculcated...."³⁷ Meredith "interrupts," "intrudes," forces upon us a persistent awareness of the authorial intelligence. But he does so always to explain, to qualify, to set in perspective what has already happened -- never to say what should have happened. The distinction may appear overly simpleminded; yet it is nonetheless highly significant that it exists, and, furthermore, that Meredith never violates it. For it reveals to us the presence of a discipline, a willed observance of and compliance to the outlines of the story as it is being told. The moral imperatives of "Do" and "Do Not" must not be more obtrusive than they are in the telling of the tale. The novel is the embodiment of a moral idea; it "ticks" a world around that idea; but in so doing it has touched the limits of fiction. In displaying for us the conflict between naturalness and sentimentality, Meredith's commentary never infringes on narrative beyond the

clarification of negative action.

At times he seems even to play with this limitation and draw attention to it. The most pointed example occurs most of the way through the novel. Wilfrid hurrying through the streets to one of his last interviews with Emilia is doused with beer by a potboy. Embarrassed to appear before her smelling of the alehouse, Wilfrid gets a bottle of scent from his father's clerk, Braintop, and "with a reckless desperation, saturated his handkerchief, and worked at his breast as if he were driving a lusty dagger into it." Naturally, it does not work. Wilfrid now smelling twice as bad can only make a lame apology to Emilia and escape. The sequence of events is presented with comic success. And then the author interrupts to give what is probably the most explicit statement in the novel of the hostility between Nature and Sentimentality.

The Philosopher, up to this point rigidly excluded, rushes forward to the footlights to explain in a note, that Wilfrid thus setting a perfume to contend with a stench, instead of waiting for time, change of raiment, and the broad lusty airs of heaven to blow him fresh again, symbolizes the vice of Sentimentalism, and what it is always doing. Enough.³⁸

Although the cryptic and aphoristic "Philosopher" is content here with underlining the typical artificiality of Wilfrid's remedy, we must be a bit more pedestrian in suggesting that Wilfrid's expedient is not merely typical, but paradigmatic. (This explains the unrestrained "philosophical" outburst.) There are in Nature -- Meredith seems to be saying -- things unpleasant, things contrary,

things offensive to our various senses and apprehensions. These abrasions and conflicts notwithstanding, the only salvation for a sane and rational life is a recognition of the primacy and supremacy of Nature. Within its larger pattern and order, Nature contains the compensation for these disturbances, since balance and equilibrium are the essence of the natural cycle. A "change of raiment" and the "broad lusty airs of heaven" are the proper ways of "contending with a stench," because they harmonize and conform with the methods of Nature. But man has, unfortunately, been able to manufacture unnatural, ersatz formulae with which he attempts to de-odorize Nature. These are, in other words, the "perfumes" by means of which the individual man -- as Sentimentalist -- attempts to "correct" and "improve" Nature to a pattern or orbit whose center is the Sentimentalist himself: his individual needs, his peculiar desires, his cultivated and refined sensibilities.

It is for this reason that Meredith in his role of the "social comedian" (as opposed to the other role of the "artistic comedian") has selected the name "Sentimentality" as the generic term to include the various forms of human folly. Living in some divorce from the governance of Nature and the beneficent inexorability of its laws, man inevitably falls to a deluded governance by his own Sentiments, which it pleases him to regard as commutable and equally viable principles. The range of Sentimentalities in common practice, which Meredith anatomizes -- and which Beach partially catalogues, as: the Wiseacre (or aphorist), the Snob,

the Optimist, the Romantic Epicure³⁹ -- are variant syndromes of Sentimentality, which in its most aggravated state becomes Egoism.

As remote as it is from our present purpose to elevate Meredith to the position of social prophet, the embarrassingly ample fund of contemporary illustrations makes it difficult to resist another clarifying word. When living in a "state of nature" or in some intimacy with it, we must come to recognize a fact like death, not only in its inevitability or even its necessity, but also its propriety and harmony. Meredith asserts this explicitly in his poetry and implicitly in his fiction. Yet living in an age fraught with death and suicide, bomb, or highway, we are nevertheless embarrassed by death and attempt to deny it. Without analyzing the differences between The Loved One⁴⁰ and the measured balance of Meredith's fiction, or the ways in which Waugh exemplifies Meredith's denigration of satire in the Essay, Forest Lawn Memorial Park would unquestionably be for Meredith the great and unnatural emblem of our Sentimentality. The necessary balance provided by a recognition of death and of Nature is as foreign to our contemporary sensibility as perspiration is distasteful to it. Our ludicrous proliferation of deodorants is merely modern technology's version of Wilfrid Pole's perfume. And Meredith would once again assert that we purchase a questionable convenience and complacency with the substance of our lives.

It would certainly be a mistake abstractly to convert

Meredith into a Taoist.⁴¹ Yet when we look at a definition of the Tao -- "Reason-Path-Word-Nature-God and Virtue" -- we see its remarkable resemblance to the agency of Nature in Meredith. Thematically considered, Meredith's novels are a nineteenth-century argument for a humanism which in the twentieth century -- under pressure of a greater terror -- is given by C. S. Lewis in The Abolition of Man.⁴²

Of necessity, Sentimentalism is a decadent growth. Encountering no substantial opposition to its desires and wishes, it becomes soft and flabby. Ministering constantly to itself, it is pampered. Gratifying itself always upon its own body, it is incestuous and masturbatory. Confined to the radius of its own desires, it becomes fetid and stale.

In The Comic Spirit in George Meredith: An Interpretation, Joseph Warren Beach tries to maintain a distinction between the Sentimentalist and the Egoist as different in kind, rather than in degree, as we have suggested. He goes on to argue that the Egoist is less decadent actually since "Self-seeking is a natural instinct, the motive power of every organism."⁴⁸ Now whether he is pushed to this declaration by the new discoveries of psychological science or by the wish to construct a separate chapter for the Egoist, as he has for the Snob, the Sentimentalist, etc., the discreteness of the categories cannot be maintained. The decadent, claustrophobic quality of Sir Willoughby Patterné's world is too pronounced and is too clearly what Meredith is after.

You are mine, my Clara -- utterly mine; every thought, every feeling. We are one; the world may do its worst. I have been longing for you, looking forward. You save me from a thousand vexations. One is perpetually crossed. That is all outside us. We two! With you I am secure! Soon! I could not tell you whether the world's alive or dead. My dearest!⁴⁴

But Clara is, as we know, not the right audience for these sentimental effusions. Willoughby has remarked quite rightly that "...we are in an atmosphere where the world cannot breathe." But the understandable effect on Clara is a feeling of suffocation. The world is not without its faults, she admits, "...but is not the effect of the whole sublime? not to admire the mountain and the glacier because they can be cruel, seems to me..."⁴⁵ Clara is as yet unsure how to end the indictment. But to Meredith it was the rejection by natural woman of a sick, decadent Sentimentalism.⁴⁶

The most explicit fictional statement of Meredith's Nature philosophy is found in the last two novels. Nor must we look very hard. The name Gower Woodseer starts out at us from the early pages of The Amazing Marriage and indeed we remark on its unfortunate blatancy. Woodseer is indeed one who "sees" Nature and who has learned about life in a direct and immediate way. When asked at which University he was educated, Woodseer answers, "I put on my hat one day and walked into the country. My college fellows were hawkers, tinkers, tramps and ploughmen, choughs and crows. I had scarce any money, so I learnt how to idle inexpensively.... We're at the bottom of the world when we take to the road;

we see men as they were in the beginning -- not so eager for harness till they get acquainted with hunger, as I did, and studied in myself the old animal having his head pushed into the collar to earn a feed of corn."⁴⁷ Woodseer's education in Nature has thus been manifold. Not only has he seen and absorbed the great order, pattern, and harmony of the physical universe, but he has also learned the filial obedience which is owing to it, the kinship which must follow with all men, with uncivilized natural man, with all living creatures from whom man evolved.

The morally inferior and misguided alternative to Woodseer is Lord Fleetwood, to whom the short autobiography is addressed. And the name-playing is again present. Both are spending the day in the country. But whereas Gower Woodseer actually sees the woods and sees Nature, the aristocratic earl's relationship to Nature is, as his name implies, too "fleet" and the impression of Nature upon him too fleeting. He remains despite, or because of, a superficial familiarity with Nature, egocentric, sentimental. His view of life, therefore, cannot be infused with fresh and natural virility; it bespeaks the artificial and the soiled.

When Woodseer describes the novel's heroine, Carinthia, as a "beautiful Gorgon," Fleetwood can understand the paradox only as a lovely woman hardened by life:

Who but the woman could look the Gorgon! He tried to explain it to be impossible for a girl to wear the look: and his notion evidently was, that it had come upon a beautiful face in some staring horror of a world that had bitten the tender woman. She touched him sympathetically through the pathos.⁴⁸

While Woodseer's metaphor has contrary referants:

Who but a girl could look the beautiful Gorgon!
 What other could seem an emanation of the mountain solitude? A woman would instantly breathe the world on it to destroy it....But a girl's face has no story of poisonous intrusion. She indeed may be cast in the terrors of Nature, and yet be sweet with Nature, beautiful because she is purely of Nature.⁴⁹

Similarly, when Fleetwood acts with cruelty to one of his obsequious hangers-on, Woodseer feels a natural repulsion: "...so intense a peremptoriness in the look of an eye made him uncomfortable in his own sense of independence."⁵⁰ It is a foreshadowing of the haughty cruelty Fleetwood is to inflict on Carinthia after their marriage.

One of the functions of Woodseer in the novel is as a measure of Lord Fleetwood's deep-rooted and, finally, ineradicable egoism and sentimentalism. He represents the dramatization of the rationally, naturally possible, just as Fleetwood is the embodiment of possible deludedness. Time after time Meredith introduces Woodseer into the earl's thoughts and company, as if to show the difference between them and the impossibility of reconciling such an essential difference.

He [Fleetwood] did not phrase it, that a talk with the fellow Woodseer of his mountains and his forests, and nature, philosophy, poetry, would have been particularly healthy for him, almost as good as the good counsel he needed and solicited none to give him. It swept among his ruminations while he pricked Potts and Mallard to supply his craving for satanical fare.⁵¹

The essence of Nature -- and of any view accurately reflecting it -- is a remorseless justice, an undeviating adherence to its order and laws. The deed done is irrevocable:

the act committed cannot be rescinded. This notion embodies Meredith's evolutionist ideas, his muted rejection of all organized religious practice and his contempt for the weak sentimentality that would create for man a separate, privileged code, outside of the universal, the "unalterable law."⁵² Admittedly, Roman Catholicism was for Meredith a safe target -- and he used it as whipping boy for all sentimental religious dogma. In Evan Harrington the application is much more light-heartedly ironic. In The Amazing Marriage, Meredith's grimmer strategy is to have Fleetwood turn from a dalliance with Woodseer's view toward a dalliance with Roman Catholicism, which because of its appeal to sentimentality eventually enmeshes the earl who cannot relinquish the habits of his imperfection. He has "an increasing antagonism to Woodseer's philosophy---which the fellow carried through with perpetual scorings of satisfaction...." Or in a more explicit musing of the sentimentally vulnerable earl:

Honest though he might be, sometimes deep and sometimes picturesque, the philosopher's day had come to an end. How can philosophy minister to raw wounds, when we are in a raging gale of the vexations, battered to right and left: Religion has a nourishing breast: Philosophy is breastless. Religion condones offences: Philosophy has no forgiveness, is an untenanted confessional: -- "wide air to a cry in anguish...."⁵³

To summarize Gower Woodseer's symbolic virtue in The Amazing Marriage we can come back to the term that Meredith applies to him when he first appears. He is the "natural philosopher." And in that combination of fact and thought resides the Meredithian formula for successful life. Nor is Nature idealized or romanticized or in any way sentimentalized.

Influenced though he was by Wordsworth, Meredith does not tell us that "Nature never did deceive the heart that loved it." For the statement would be arrogant and sentimental. Nature is not to be contained in man or by man. One of its beneficent influences is, precisely, that it reduces us to a proper view of ourselves and the world around us through its magnificently virile indifference. Although Joseph Warren Beach is speaking specifically in reference to Meredith's poetry, his remarks apply to the fictional themes as well:

...Meredith teaches that Nature is concerned not for the individual but for the race (or even for life) as a whole, and in order to have significance in nature's order a man must tame and subject that old worm, Self or Egoism.⁵⁴

In abstracting from Meredith's novels the moral code which obtains in his fictional universe, we can also investigate the relationship between Nature and one or two other Meredithian preoccupations, for example, Meredith's views regarding education and the relation between the sexes. For this we can turn to Lord Ormont and His Aminta.⁵⁵ It is probably the most humorless of the novels and most restricted in its philosophical ambience. The essential action of the novel resembles that of The Amazing Marriage in that it deals with a young wife who suffers neglect through the callous self-obsession of her husband, in this case a much older husband.

The theme briefly stated is this: the unnatural separation of the sexes in youth is responsible for most sexual mischief in later years, and that artificial, un-

natural, authoritarian methods of education divorced from reality are responsible for an aversion to learning and knowledge -- an educational crippling which can be permanent. Meredith is again positing that the True, the Good, and the Beautiful can only be found in the Natural; but the larger theme is advanced here within the particularized context of the sexual and educational institutions of society. Indeed the former is part of the latter. It is more than coincidence that Meredith names one of his hero's young French friends, Emile.

For example, we noticed earlier that Meredith will take the opportunity within a novel to deplore the sentimental encouragement to "young ladies" to deny their physicality and animal nature. It is one form of accepted social sentimentality in regard to sex. But in Lord Ormont for the first time we get a dramatization and illustration of this unnatural practice. It comes early in the novel when Matey Weyburn and his schoolmates have been enjoying a rollicking snowball fight to which the young ladies of Miss Vincent's establishment have been mere spectators:

Her young ladies looked shrinking and envious to see the fellows wet to the skin, laughing, wrestling, linking arms; and some, who were clown-faced with a wipe of scarlet, getting friends to rub their cheeks with snow, all of them happy as larks in air, a big tea steaming for them at the school. Those girls had a leap and a fall of the heart, glad to hug themselves in their dry clothes, and not so warm as the dripping boys were, nor so madly fond of their dress-circle seats to look on at a play they were not allowed even to desire to share. They looked on at blows given and taken in good temper, hardship sharpening jollity. The

thought of the difference between themselves and the boys must have been something like the tight band -- call it corset -- over the chest, trying to lift and stretch for draughts of air.⁵⁶

Later in the novel we discover that Weyburn has a scheme for remedying and redressing the inequality. He envisions and has proposed the education of boys and girls together. "...never separated, declaring it the only way for them to learn to know and to respect one another. They were to learn together, play together, have matches together, as a scheme for stopping the mischief between them"

And mischief there is aplenty, as the novel shows us, from outright infidelity to dangerous flirtation, to unwarranted jealousy, to a vying for supremacy, to what is presented ironically as the least of intersexual evils -- two strangers living under one roof, indifferent where they do not indeed hate. "The chief object in life, if happiness be the aim, and the growing better than we are, is to teach men and women how to be one; for if they're not, then each is a morsel for the other to prey on."⁵⁷

The chief example in the novel of a misguided upbringing and its harmful results is Aminta herself. Matey Weyburn has escaped harm, not through the effects of the prescribed education, but rather in his freedom as a male to deviate from prescription. His love of the outdoors, of nature, and of competitive sport have imbued him with the capacity to choose wisely, to avoid the unnatural. But Aminta, completely at the mercy of unnatural prescription and social orthodoxy is beauty in moral peril. What was in Weyburn a

natural, ambition-fostered hero-worship becomes for the female of the species a claustrophobic, self-indulgent, and romantic daydream leading her to marry Lord Ormont, the old-man hero whom Weyburn had already outgrown. Placed in the impossible position where she has not love, not recognition, not any satisfaction -- because all worthwhile accomplishment is denied to her -- she sinks into moral atrophy which almost endangers her honor. So steeped is she in the artificialities of a decadent society, that time must pass before her sight is cleared enough for a recognition of Weyburn's heroism and largeness of spirit in his refusal to play society's false game. She comes finally to see his chosen vocation of schoolmaster as exalted, despite its being commonly derided. She comes to realize that Weyburn, free from the taint of unnatural falsity, can truly love a woman. "How is it he is the brother of women? They are sisters for him because he is neither sentimentalist nor devourer. He will not flatter to feed on them. The one he chooses, she will know love."⁵⁸

Although Meredith provides near the end of Lord Ormont the kiss which seals the compact between Aminta and Weyburn, that kiss is not the climax of the novel. The climax is rather a culmination of Aminta's metamorphosis when she leaps toward Weyburn into the great natural bath of ocean: "...out of bondage into buoyant waters...." It is literally a baptism back into nature.

"The pleasure she still knew was a recollection of the outward swim, when she had been privileged to cast away sex with the push from earth, as few men will believe that women, beautiful women, ever wish to do; and often and ardently during the run ahead they yearn for Nature to grant them their one short holiday truce."⁵⁹

Guy B. Petter in his summation of Karl Tesche's work on the concept and agency of Nature in Meredith's writings,⁶⁰ indicates -- by giving a quotation from "The Woods of Westermain" -- the dualism of which Nature is at once the emblem and through which she becomes our mentor: "She being Spirit in her clods, / Footway to the God of Gods." and again, "Or, where old-eyed oxen chew/ Speculation with the cud/ Read their pool of vision through,/ Back to hours when mind was mud."⁶¹ Neither Tesche nor Petter exploits sufficiently what seem to be the most noteworthy and remarkable significance of these lines: the paradoxical coupling of "Spirit" and "clod," and then again of "mind" and "mud." Tesche, at least, seems content not to underline the harshly emphasized antagonism, but to conceive of "mud" or "clod" as ultimately reconcileable to "spirit" -- perhaps even becoming its material.⁶² Thus, in his analysis, Nature too becomes reasonable, understood, comprehended, domesticated to human thought.

...when we look at Nature with an understanding mind, she lifts the veil of her secret workings. And this relationship gives to the man who has penetrated into the recesses of nature, a surety which expresses itself wonderfully in guidance and direction of his life....The subjective-objective outlook of the poet signifies that

nature works upon us. It is in this spirit that an important action of Meredith's stories is generally introduced with some beautiful picture of nature as though born of it. In the golden meadows, where the Sun comes down to earth and the plumes of the woodland are alight, Richard makes love to Lucy; the Rhineland storm brings him back to consciousness of his duty to the wife and child so long neglected.⁶³

The oversimplification of the statement is in its implying a rational equation, i.e., Nature equals understanding, equals Beauty, equals Ethical action. Whereas the relationship is, for Meredith, a more complex one. Nature reduces our arrogance, humiliates our impulse to Egoism, by revealing a pattern and order irreducible to our paltry wishes and dwarfing our artificial pretensions. It is possible indeed to have "a reading of earth," but the inscribed lesson can be a rather stiff dose. "Our mortal sublimities drop..." when we reside in the reality of Nature. "Not she gives the tear for the tear./ Weep, bleed, rave, writhe, be distraught,/ She is moveless."⁶⁴ The artificiality of pampered man, his vanity and fear, all must topple before we can hope to assimilate the wisdom of Nature. "...And when from my soul I said,/ May the worm be trampled: smite,/ Sacred Reality: power/ Filled me to front it aright,/ I had come of my faith's ordeal."⁶⁵

Although Meredith is never as explicit or as didactic in the novels as in the poetry, "A Faith On Trial" (or "Woods of Westerman") does explain the repulsion between the pole of Egoism-Sentimentality and the pole of Nature-Reality. The sentimentality of the Pole sisters, or of Purcell Barrett, or of Mr. Pericles, or of any one of the gallery

of sentimentalists in Sandra Belloni, is then a double travesty. In the first place it defies and defiles the order of social reality -- both the actual and the ideal order. It has no roots in the real world at all. Secondly, and just as important philosophically, it is a miniature parody of the misguided human ego which places man at the center of the universe and whose vanity assigns to man a supremacy, in defiance of Nature and at the cost of the wisdom of Nature. We can see here the aptness of Richard Le Gallienne's metaphor in discussing the "comic muse" in relation to the novels:

Mr. Meredith is a Copernican in a world yet peopled for the most part by Ptolemaists, men without Jupiter in their lives. And from this living without Jupiter come all those forms of tradesmanlike seriousness with regard to life, as opposed to the great seriousness; all forms of taking existence for more and, therefore, for less than it is; all that disproportion which it is the function of the comic muse to adjust.⁶⁶

We can now return to Sandra Belloni and examine more closely those prime offenders against reality, reason, the comic muse and Nature itself -- the Pole sisters. We begin by offering our disagreement with Mrs. M. Sturge Henderson who maligns those poor girls in still another way:

The sisters Pole, in spite of the complexity with which they are analyzed, belong to... the large class of Meredith's unvitalized characters; they are not individuals, they form collectively the middle distance between the real persons and the background. Viewed thus, as representing the "fine shades," the "nice feelings," they are excellent; but...we weary of their manoeuvres as well as of their author's efforts to make us think of them separately.⁶⁷

The criticism is both severe and undeserved. Perhaps it is revelatory of the shift in sensibilities that Mrs. Henderson questions the believability of the deluded Pole sisters, while including the woodenly virtuous Merthyr among the characters "lit with...fire." The three ladies of Brookfield are quite believably rendered, all the more so because Meredith ironically refuses to ride his theme so hard as to make them unsympathetic. If their affectation and snobbery are hard to swallow, they pay a mighty penance for it in having to write to their sick father in the style of the woman they detest, Mrs. Chump, and in later having to wheedle and flatter Mrs. Chump whose money their father has lost in speculation. They sit through some of the grimmest dinners in fiction helplessly silent, while Mrs. Chump, innocently and even affectionately stupid, forces glass after glass of port on the seriously ill Mr. Pole.

But it is not only their suffering that softens the reader toward them; in a curious way it is their earlier triumphs. To be snobbish, and to do it badly, is laughable and self-defeating. It would betray the novice whose manner cannot keep pace with her affectation. This is the precise use of the easy mark. Meredith is rarely interested in easy targets, however. The Pole sisters are such consummate snobs, so masterfully haughty, so superbly pretentious, that they almost manage to carry it off completely -- and do manage to wring from the reader a grudging admiration. If their efforts fail to meet with final success, and they do

fall short of establishing the world as they wish it, the failure is, on the one hand, not ascribable to them. On the other hand, it indicates the retributive force of the circumstantial reality which the sentimentalist determinedly ignored. One of the dangers of Sentiment, Meredith shows us, is that reality will ultimately assert itself. This is one of the great universal principles for Meredith and the inescapable premise of his moral world. It is true in Sandra Belloni and in every one of the novels.

As for Mrs. Henderson's other complaint, the undifferentiated nature of the Brookfield ladies, it is again a gross misjudgment. It is true that the characterization of the Harrington sisters is a superb accomplishment in differentiated snobbishness -- if one can call Caroline Harrington a snob at all. But the reader must remember -- and does in fact remember -- that in the Pole sisters Meredith has consciously created a special artistic and thematic problem, the creation of three characters who are defined by precisely the same sentimental humor. The variations upon this limited theme must of necessity be more subtle. It might be considered even as an artistic parallel to the thematic concern with *Fine Shades* and *Nice Distinctions*. Nevertheless, Meredith emerges, I believe, triumphantly. And without any visible strain.

Meredith lingers most over Cornelia -- of all the sisters -- but his lingering is not a sign of fondness. If Sentimentalism is the moral equivalent of the Christian sin

of Pride, Cornelia's sentimental languors are the combination of Pride with Sloth. Her style of the *Fine Shades* is marked by such hauteur and distance that she -- nicknamed by her own sisters as North Pole -- is completely impervious to the incursions of reality in any form. She is on her pedestal always, not only to her lover, but to herself. Hyper-sensitive to the degrading effect of practical behavior and the real world, she withdraws completely to herself and her own Nice Feelings. Marriage is of course vulgar to her except as the giving of her hand in condescension and favor "even to a prince." When Mrs. Chump has to be wheedled and placated, the burden falls mainly on Arabella, and on Adela to whom it is really not so great a burden.⁶⁸ Earlier when Mrs. Chump accuses the servants at Brookfield of theft, both Adela and Arabella enter the fray; Cornelia can only "murmur" something about "the Celtic nature."

The posture is typical of Cornelia. She murmurs, she smiles but faintly, she languishes. The most beautiful of the Pole sisters, she has, paradoxically, the least body. And more than either of her two sisters, she exemplifies Sir Austin Feverel's definition that, "Sentimentalists are they who seek to enjoy without incurring the Immense Debtorship for a thing done."⁶⁹ Her brother Wilfrid whose Sentimentalism is of a different sort says to her at one point "...we want money.... Our position depends on it!" Cornelia's refined answer is, "Yes, if we can be tempted to think so."⁷⁰ In response to Wilfrid's information

that their father intends to marry Mrs. Chump, she says "Do you conspire -- Wilfrid, is it possible? -- are you an accomplice in the degradation of our house?" And to Wilfrid's apology for telling her the truth, "Yes, dear Wilfrid; even brutality, rather than your exultation over the wreck of what was noble in you. With which phrase Cornelia swept from the room."⁷¹

Withdrawn out of sight of Nature and the real, and cast, consequently, upon the guidance of emotions that have no correlatives in reality, Cornelia is drawn more and more into romantic self-indulgence where the satisfaction of sensation can be produced only in transcendent or bathetic intensities. The innocence of this romantic pastime is belied by its disregard and contempt for the natural order. Cornelia's sentimentalism not only permits but invites chaos. The essential gravity of her offense mixes tragedy in with the comedy, for she does, in effect, conspire in the suicide of her lover.

The most admirable specimen among the three sisters is Arabella, the eldest. She gives herself airs; she does in fact set the tone of superiority and haughtiness toward the rest of the world. But this too reveals a position of active responsibility, at least as opposed to Cornelia's disdainful passivity. Arabella has a grace and a style which is manifest even in her sentimental bullying of her father, the snobbish suppression of her social inferiors, and her ambitious dexterity with her social superiors. She moves within a reality, albeit a distorted, diminished, and

tainted version. Furthermore, Arabella's Fine Shades are supported by the real superiority of her mind to those around her. Her sentimentality consists in making that superiority the most central fact of her existence. Nevertheless, she is redeemable, as her behavior later in the novel indicates.

Adela is the fledgling of the Fine Shades. And apparently there is still some confusion in her mind regarding the egoism necessary for the nurture of this sensitivity and just plain egoism. She has her eye on the main chance -- whether by appropriating the stupid briberies of Mrs. Chump or by appropriating the aristocratic and wealthy suitor for Cornelia, the middle-aged Sir Twickenham Pryme. Against the background of her sister's behavior, there is something refreshing in Adela's healthy instinct. At the same time, it is clear that her lapses into natural behavior are the fault of her youth. Adela has still to find the style of her Sentimentality, and as a representative of the Fine Shades she is the least interesting, though quite distinct.

Both the male and the female reveal, as Sentimentalists, the defects of their education and the dangers of their roles. In her most classic form, then, the female coyly withdraws into refinement which excludes harsh and vulgar reality. The male animal, on the other hand, cultivates his Sentimentality by a myopic misapprehension of the part for the whole. The lady tends to err in the direction of precious delicacy; the gentleman in the direction of blind assertiveness.

The distinctions here are rough, approximate, and like all formulae difficult to maintain consistently or as consistent with fact. Nevertheless, it will serve to distinguish between Meredith's separate indictments of sisters Pole on the one hand and brother Pole on the other.⁷²

Wilfrid is basically a good fellow. He feels an indisputable attraction for Emilia, even to the point of admiration, passion, perhaps love. We follow Wilfrid into the scene following the riot in Ipley Common when he takes from Emilia, or is given, the first kiss. And we understand him very well. As a matter of fact, were Meredith not so persistently pulling us back for the objective view we would be all understanding and very little analyzing.

Yet unquestionably Meredith does insist on his pound of analysis. We are hardly allowed to see Wilfrid in action at all except as he is filtered through the perspective of an overactive critical intelligence. Every turn and every advance of Wilfrid's affections are pinned and dissected until we feel a positive cruelty of rationalism in the analysis. Here we have vanity; and here we have a feminine passivity; and yet here again we see a thoughtless submission to emotion. More than any other character, more than even his sister Cornelia, Wilfrid is offered up as the apostle of Sentimentalism, a sacrifice and a victim of it. If the analysis at the beginning of Sandra Belloni concentrates on the inconsistencies of Wilfrid's behavior and its self-deception, the later examination displays his ludicrousness

and ineffectuality.

The reason for this determined attention on Meredith's part is that he has in Wilfrid Pole a case not of the exceptional but of the average. In the case of his sisters and their *Pine Shades*, Meredith must bring us to the verge of an extreme -- albeit believable and real -- in order to make the dramatization move. Wilfrid, on the other hand, has a marvelous and unusual typicality -- not only in contrast to his sisters, but in contrast also to most of the other male sentimentalists whom Meredith pulls toward center stage. Wilfrid is certainly brighter than Algernon Blancove in *Rhoda Fleming*, and less aristocratically immoral than Algernon's cousin, Edward. He does not have the pampered obstinacy of a Lord Fleetwood or the crabbedness of a Lord Ormont. He lacks the grandiose delusion of Richmond Roy and, similarly, the sullen pettiness of Ferdinand Laxley. Both age and innocence separate Wilfrid from the enforced optimism of Victor Radnor or the enforced pessimism of Austin Feverel. And he certainly has not been conditioned by the insulated egoism of Sir Willoughby Patterne. On the whole, Wilfrid is a good-natured, well-intentioned, rather average young man, who, like the rest of his family, would like to make his way up in the world. He is, in other words, ripe for Meredith's probing as a specimen of Sentimentalism in its most common, garden variety.

There are two major counts on which he is indicted. For one thing, he shares with most of the world that weakness for the *Pine Shades* and *Nice Feelings* which in

aggravated form partially disfigure his sisters. He prizes Emilia, when he does, not because of her freshness, simplicity and innocence, not as an embodiment of Nature at its most beautiful and charming, but rather in spite of it. And only with considerable determination does he fitfully overcome his aversion to Emilia's fundamental unity with Nature and the natural. "Reconciled for the hour," Meredith tells us, "were the contesting instincts in the nature of this youth: the adoration of feminine refinement and the susceptibility to sensuous impressions."⁷³ To put the matter in a more balanced way, Wilfred's attachment and infatuation for Emilia is stirred when her innocence and naturalness cater to his vanity, just as her beautiful voice -- by making her obviously, publicly desirable -- also services Wilfrid's vanity. The moral offense is again in turning from Nature and admitting into existence only that portion of it which pleases us, comforts us, flatters us. The futile attempt to reduce Nature to the size of our own egos may theoretically seem wildly unreal, but dramatized in Wilfrid, the attempt has a very common, universal expression -- as Meredith is quick to point out.

...Here was something absolutely his own. His own from the roots; from the first growth of sensation. Something with the bloom on it: to which no other finger could point and say: "There is my mark."

(And, ladies, if you will consent to be likened to a fruit, you must bear with these observations, and really deserve the stigma. If you will smile on men, because they adore you as vegetable products, take what ensues.)⁷⁴

It is to purchase flattery of such gratifying richness that Wilfrid looks away or forgives much of the "coarseness" of Emilia's behavior, particularly at the beginning of the novel.

It is worth giving an instance of Meredith's skill in rendering one such scene. Emilia has been telling Wilfrid the story of her life at home concentrating mainly on an incident when her father, unjustly suspicious, followed her to the park and pelted her with potatoes. "He snatched out potatoes and began throwing them.... He threw nine large potatoes" I begged him to think of our dinner...." The gentleman Emilia came to meet chivalrously "...put some potatoes he had been picking up into my hand. They were muddy but he wiped them first... and I slipped the potatoes into my pocket immediately, thankful that they were not wasted... I knew the potatoes would only be bruised. Even three potatoes will prevent you from starving. They were very fine ones, for I always took care to buy them good." Meredith; clearly, has not missed one chance to repeat the word "potatoes." Nevertheless, Wilfrid's reaction to this simple natural story, not without an element of pathos even in this rendition, is to stifle a yawn. Later Meredith summarizes his emotions:

It speaks something for the strength of the sentiment with which he had first conceived her, that it was not pelted to death, and turned to infinite disgust, by her potatoes. For sentiment is a dainty, delicate thing, incapable of bearing much....Bruised and disfigured, it stood up still, and fought against them. They were very fine ones, as Emilia said, and they hit him hard.⁷⁵

But as we observed before, Meredith's main concern in Sandra Belloni, as in most of the other novels, is less with man's necessary relationship to Nature. The violation of that bond, the falsification of that fundamental compact, is properly speaking the realm of high tragedy. In any case, the poetry provides a more adequate strategy for dealing with it. And it is probably because of this that Wilfrid's treachery and betrayal of the "symbolic" Emilia, as the embodiment and exemplification of Nature, receives only occasional, secondary consideration.

The thematic concern and preoccupation of Sandra Belloni focuses on a subject at one removed from Nature itself: the Society that permits itself to operate on principles which are, decadently, at variance with Nature. It is on this second count that the indictment against Wilfrid tightens -- his betrayal of the realities around him and within himself, his dishonoring of the obligations he has himself contracted, and consequently his dishonoring of himself by the contradictions of his behavior, almost to the point of irredemption. For it is in society that sentimentalities are allowed to spawn and breed in a contagion that must become ultimately self-destructive. There are for Meredith, national sentimentalities, group sentimentalities, individual sentimentalities. But it is from the analogy of the larger group that the smaller receives its encouragement and sanction.

Unavoidably, therefore, Wilfrid indulges himself. He

becomes momentarily infatuated with Emilia and gives himself to this easy gratifying pleasure "...at the same time that the sober reality murmured at his elbow." But reality speaks a language to which the Sentimentalist always chooses to be deaf. Carried on the crest of an emotion which he has neither the strength nor the judgment to resist, Wilfrid eventually binds himself to Emilia. "Whatever you are, you are my dear girl; my own love; mine;" Then, in a passage subtly sensitive to the ambivalences of Wilfrid's feelings, Meredith proceeds to anatomize the Sentimentalist.

Having said it, he was screwed up to feel it as nearly as possible, such virtue is there in uttered words.

Then he set about resolutely studying to appreciate her in the new character she had assumed to him.⁷⁶

He sees her beauty, her charm, her talent; but:

Still, it was not quite enough to make him scorn contempt, should it whisper: not even quite enough to combat successfully the image of elegant dames in their chosen attitudes -- the queenly moments when perhaps they enter an assembly, or pour out tea with an exquisite exhibition of arm, or recline upon a couch, commanding homage of the world of little men.⁷⁷

The inner dialogue moves, like Wilfrid, through an indecisive pattern of advance and retreat, until:

It mattered nothing. He kissed her, and the vision of the critical world faded to a blank. Whatever she was, he was her prime luminary....

Of marriage there was no further word. Her heart was evidently quite at ease; and that it should be so without chaining him to a date, was Wilfrid's peculiar desire. He could pledge himself to eternity, but shrank from being bound to eleven o'clock on the morrow morning.⁷⁸

The greatest precision and the greatest cruelty are in that last sentence.

What Wilfrid exults in is the reality of his own emotion at any given moment, and the exclusion or wilful denial of any other reality is an attendant necessity. Wilfrid allows himself to be swept into a heady infatuation with Emilia although she irritates his notions of genteel femininity and impoverishes his hopes for a lucrative marriage. His sentimental crime is in refusing to relinquish either side of the contradiction. His inability to act with rational consistency is dramatized by his still entertaining vague marital designs on Lady Charlotte Chillingsworth. To stigmatize Wilfrid permanently with the brand of sentimental treachery, Meredith places Emilia in the adjoining room as Wilfrid denies his love for her to Lady Charlotte. Only much afterward does Emilia emerge from the painful education with a just appraisal of Wilfrid's emotions.

As we said earlier in somewhat different form, what the sentimentalist lacks in strength of emotion he will compensate for by an increased intensity of emotion. This frenzied, unrational intensity -- different from passion -- finally gets the typical Meredithian tag some three-quarters of the way through the novel. He calls it "riding the Hippogriff."

"The sentimentalist...goes on accumulating images and hiving sensations, till such time as (if the stuff be in him) they assume a form of vitality and hurry him headlong. This is not passion, though it amazes men, and does the madder thing."

In fine, it is Hippogriff.⁷⁹

Passion, on the other hand, "is noble strength on fire."

We can observe its action by looking at Emilia.

...thus, believing in, she never violates, nature, and offends no law, wild as she may seem. Passion does not turn on her and rend her when it is thwarted. She was never carried out of the limit of her own intelligent force, seeing that it directed her always, with the simple mandate to seek that which belonged to her. She was perfectly sane, and constantly just to herself....Constantly just to herself, mind! This is the quality of true passion. Those who make a noise, and are not thus distinguishable, are on Hippogriff.⁸⁰

The next chapter offers the parallel contrasting passage for Wilfrid:

...he had sold out of the English service, and was to receive the money in a couple of days. How long would the money support him? It would not pay half his debts! What, then, did this pursuit of Emilia mean? To blink this question, he had to give the spur to Hippogriff. It meant (upon Hippogriff at a brisk gallop), that he meant to live for her, die for her, if need be, and carve out of the world all that she would require. Everything appears possible, on Hippogriff, when he is going; but it is a bad business to put the spur on so willing a beast. When he does not go of his own will; -- when he sees that there are obstructions, it is best to jump off his back. And we should abandon him then, save that having once tasted what he can do for us, we become enamoured of the habit of going keenly, and defying obstacles.⁸¹

Thus Wilfrid Pole.

The one other obvious sentimentalist whom Meredith takes pains to castigate is Purcell Barrett, Cornelia's gloomy and Byronic lover, who near the end of the book gives in to despondency and stumbles into, rather than commits, suicide. We need not at this point devote a long analysis to his character except to point out that he exists in a gloom of

morbid self-pity that intensifies as the story progresses and as his attachment to Cornelia becomes stronger. His oppressive moodiness and dejection create a detachment from the world which coincides curiously with Cornelia's disdain. The one is dark and the other is cold. They nourish one another's sentimentalities until the tragic conclusion of their affair. The masochistic is frequently an element in the composition of the sentimentalist; and they torture themselves with more exquisite Fine Shades and ever bleaker prospects of hopelessness. "So it is," Meredith says about them, "when you play at Life!"⁸²

It is possible to view Barrett from the perspective of our most recent definition of Sentimentalism. For if Wilfrid takes emotional infatuation as his portion of reality, then Barrett takes despondency to be his whole reality. In each case there is the insistent delusion that a small part comprises the whole. Thus while Wilfrid rides Hippogriff to his own humiliation, Barrett rides the strange beast to a less comic destination.

Both Mr. Pole and Mr. Pericles, while not confirmed sentimentalists like those already mentioned, do live in a diminished reality. It is hardly necessary to point out that to Mr. Pericles almost nothing exists but music. It has been suggested that such devotion to art carries with it Meredith's approval. However, this can hardly be the case when Pericles is partially responsible for Mr. Pole's financial fiasco and larcenous dealings. Furthermore, his brutality to Emilia

after she loses her voice can hardly be sanctioned in the name of even artistic fanaticism. Pericles is gratuitously cruel in inflicting as much pain as he can, whenever he is crossed. Although he substitutes an obsession with art for the more naked egoism of the usual sentimentalist, the ensuing moral imbalance and ethical distortion are the same. Meredith displays him primarily as a comic character whose mannerisms of speech and thought are funny. But our amusement at him should not obscure the fact of a deficient sensibility.

In Mr. Samuel Pole, who has somehow fathered a line of Sentimentalists, we also encounter Meredith's criticism of a deficient sensibility. But Pole's moral inadequacy is rather a case of reverse sentimentalism. Instead of asserting his ego and wishful dreams in opposition to the dictates of nature-reality, Pole seems to withdraw progressively further away from any assertion of himself whatsoever. Consequent upon this abrogation of his ego rights, the abdication from any self-assertion, there is also a sentimental blinking of reality which becomes a mere wishfulness that everything turn out for the best. But the sequence of the unnatural pattern Meredith describes in Mr. Pole is first a withdrawal from self and then a withdrawal from reality, culminating in a sickness which physically prevents his active participation.

That Meredith condemns ego-lessness along with ego-centricity as two sterile sides of an identical decadence can be seen in the case of Mr. Pole. A page or so above we

quoted the author's praise of Emilia's healthy naturalness, in that she followed "the simple mandate to seek that which belonged to her." This is right and good; it is the law of nature. How different do we find the description of Pole and what Meredith calls "his perishing individuality."

"His daughters had completely cut him off from his cronies...." He had a vague sense "...of restriction, and compression, and that his own house was fast becoming alien territory for him...." Or even more explicitly, "...the worthy merchant's consciousness of his identity was vanishing under the iron social rule of the ladies."⁸³

Pole's behavior is all the more culpable in that it renders him passive and ineffectual in deflating sentimentalities whose falsity he recognizes. When Adela tells him with supreme disdain that she and her sisters object "...to being submerged in matrimony until we know who and what we were," Pole objects, "You're like a youngster playing truant that he may gain knowledge."⁸⁴ Still, although the verbal hit is accurate, the father's ability to resist is vitiated by the statement. In practice he submits to his daughters, to Wilfrid, to Pericles's violation of his better judgment and business integrity. Finally, because he has little self to direct and sustain him in rational choice or action, and to oppose the foolish sentimentalities of his progeny, Pole and his family must submit to the humiliation that is called Mrs. Sarah Chump.

Mrs. Chump like Mr. Pole is a significant thematic complication of Sandra Belloni. Both of them serve to

qualify and balance the thematic, moral weight of the novel. As characters, they dramatize the modulations of Meredith's moral vision by opposing and complementing an ethical thrust. They provide a friction which reduces the purity and therefore the distortion of the didactic. Ethical perspective is, we have said, the context of the fictional world of Meredith. The novels offer us an analogy to our own lives rather than a sharp instrument with which to perform moral surgery. We have attempted to point out how Mr. Pole in his pallid irresponsibility reveals the opposite and equally unacceptable alternative to his children's sentimentalism. Mrs. Chump functions thematically with even greater subtlety of effect.

Almost everyone who has written on Sandra Belloni has pointed out that Martha Chump is a character in the style of Dickens: rich, colorful and exaggerated. A few have gone on to suggest that her presence in the novel provides at least one instance of vivid reality, vitality, the life force, and thus constitutes a thematic opposition to the Misses Pole. It seems clear, however, that this is the opposite of Meredith's thematic intent. For were Mrs. Chump to exemplify a good, why should Meredith wish to drown that goodness in the overpowering flood of her marvelous vulgarity? She appears at Brookfield, Meredith tells us, as "a shock of blue satin to the eye" and on seeing Wilfrid. "A great thick kiss was planted on his cheek, with the motto: 'Harm to him that thinks ut.'"

Having exhibited to the reader an initial view of Mrs.

Chump's sophistication, the author renders the following monologue addressed to Wilfrid:

"I was just off. I'm packed and bonnuttet, and ready for a start; becas my dear, where there's none but women, I don't think it natural to stop. You're splended! How a little fella like Pole could go and be a father to such a mighty big son, with your bit of moustache and your blue eyes! Are they blue or a bit of grey in'em?" Mrs. Chump peered closely. "They're kill'n', let their colour be anyhow. And I that knew ye when we were no bigger than my garter! Oh, sir! don't talk of ut; I'll be thinking' of my coffin. Ye're glad to see me? Say, yes. Do!"⁸⁵

It is certainly Dickens, and more specifically, Mrs. Gamp of Martin Chuzzlewit whom she resembles both in name and in speech. Yet somehow Meredith has managed to change her by making the past to which both ladies are constantly referring, a real and believable background for Mrs. Chump. Moreover, he has managed to raise her socially while at the same time increasing her vulgarity. Mrs. Gamp's indulgence in "spirits" was purely for the sake of its warmth and medical properties, but Mrs. Chump does not hide her weakness for alcohol. She rather proclaims it. "...my weak time's after my porrt, my dears," she tells the sisters, hoping thus to overcome their objection to her marriage with Mr. Pole.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, although Mrs. Chump is vivid and while even her vulgarity displays honesty and vitality, she never rises above the ridiculous or, at best, the pathetic. Soiled, sodden with tears and with drink, pleading for charity or crying for vengeance, her coarseness an open and running embarrassment, Mrs. Chump can hardly be considered as preferred by Meredith over the Pine Shades of the sisters

Pole. What Meredith has actually done is give the theme of sentimentalism another twist and portray in the novel not only the sentimentalism of over refinement, but also the sentimentalism of vulgarity. We may find Mrs. Chump highly entertaining but we would hardly delight in having her as a member of our household. As a matter of fact, though it is heresy to her champions, we would most of us prefer even Cornelia Pole as a member of our menage to the Coarse Shades and Vulgar Feelings of Mrs. Chump.

It is precisely for this reason that Mrs. Chump is important to the novel. Meredith refuses to give clear cut moral choices to his reader. Simple it would be to condemn the Fine Shades for their rejection of a sympathetic Mrs. Chump, imbued with moral virtue and triumphantly riding the theme of Nature to its neat and logical conclusion. The simplicity and neatness of such a format have indeed persuaded many readers that this was in fact Meredith's design. But it is clearly too easy and not Meredith's style at all. Mrs. Chump's thematic ambiguity is, on the contrary, symbolic of Meredith's ideal thematic mode. And the rejection by the Pole sisters of Mrs. Chump is not in itself to be condemned, except for the cruelty of their manner and the egoism of their motive.

There are few thematic values that Meredith advocates as unqualified positives or negatives. In the contrast, for example, between over-refinement and vulgarity, this is what

Meredith says at the beginning of Sandra Belloni, ironic though its tone may be.

Nor let the philosopher venture to despise them as pipers to dillettante life. Such persons come to us in the order of civilization. In their way they help to civilize us.... If with attentive minds we mark the origin of classes, we shall discern that the Nice Feelings and the Fine Shades play a principal part in our human development and social history.⁸⁷

The danger is in construing the ironic as a disclaimer. Meredith's irony is not a rejection of these pronouncements but rather a refocusing so as to see the way in which they are true. Thus, if Cornelia Pole is a testimony to the dangers of aggravated delicacy, Martha Chump must stand as an equal warning of the horrors of vulgarity. Later on in the novel Meredith restates this thematic ambivalence in a more open, less ironic tone:

The sentimentalists are represented by them among the civilized species. It is they that sensitively touch and reject, touch and select; whereby the laws of the polite world are ultimately regulated, and civilization continually advanced, sometimes ridiculously. The sentimentalists are ahead of us, not by weight of brain, but through delicacy of nerve, and, like all creatures in the front, they are open to be victims. I pray you to observe again the shrinking life that afflicts the adventurous horns of the snail, for example. Such are the sentimentalists to us -- the fat body of mankind. We owe them much, and though they scorn us, let us pity them.⁸⁸

To maintain, therefore, that Martha Chump is introduced into the novel to suggest a superiority of any kind is to deny Meredith's stated ideology, and blindly -- even sentimentally -- to reconstruct the novel into didactic preachment.

Civilization may advance toward refinement "somewhat ridiculously," but its retreat into coarseness is at least as ridiculous. After Mrs. Chump's bawling and pathetic outbursts of self-pity or recrimination, we discern not just grudging respect but sincere regret in Meredith's criticism of the gentlemanly, civilized, and morose Purcell Barrett:

He was invariably erect before men, and he did not console himself with a murmur in secret. He had lived much alone; eating alone; thinking alone. To complain of a father is, to a delicate mind, a delicate matter, and Sir Purcell was a gentleman to all about him. His chief affliction in his youth, therefore, kept him dumb. A gentleman to all about him, he unhappily forgot what was due to his own nature. Must we not speak under pressure of a grief?⁸⁹

This assertion applies both to the specific instance of Mrs. Chump and also to the novels generally: i.e., Meredith is less concerned with a small consistency of design in the scheme of his novels than with achieving an accurate -- if ambivalent -- approximation to truth. Such a premise reverses, of course, the reading of the novels as moral pronouncements and the reduction of characters to the status of authorial spokesmen and puppets. For a novel which is probably the most severe indictment of sentimentalism, to tolerate ambivalence and grant some justice to sentiment, must exonerate it from the charge of didacticism -- unless we would insist on calling Don Quixote a didactic novel too. Ambiguity and irony do not mix with moral symbolism. For Cornelia Pole and Mrs. Chump to exist together in the same novel undercuts the moral symbolism of both and mutes the stridency of the sermonic.

Examining the themes of Sandra Belloni from this ironic point of view we discover that Meredith, time after time, modifies and qualifies his negative judgments. For example, when Meredith ridicules Wilfrid Pole for giving himself to mindless, irrational emotion -- mounting the Hippogriff -- in pursuit of Emilia, he ends the paragraph of most severe indictment by saying: "Thus do we begin to corrupt the uses of the gallant beast (for he is a gallant beast, though not of the first order): we spoil his instincts and train him to hurry us to perdition."⁹⁰

Even the Hippogriff, even wild, irrational intensity, has in other words, its uses and its appropriate time. Not among the first rank of noble emotions, Meredith acknowledges that it may still be "gallant," and by introducing this new variable Meredith cuts the superiority of our laughter at Wilfrid with compassion for him.

Wilfrid certainly comes off worst of all the characters in Sandra Belloni. He cheats, misleads, exploits, overreaches, and fails. Eventually he is humiliated. If any character in the novel serves as an outright exemplification of the author's theory of Sentimentalism, it is unquestionably Wilfrid. Still, again, about one-quarter of the way into the book we find Meredith qualifying and undercutting his own "moral" as follows:

Wilfrid was a gallant fellow, with good stuff in him. But, he was young. Ponder on that pregnant word, for you are about to see him grow. He was less a coxcomb than shamefaced and sentimental, and one may have these qualities, and be a coxcomb

to boot, and still be a gallant fellow. One may also be a gallant fellow, and harsh, exacting, double-dealing, and I know not what besides, in youth. The question asked by nature is, "Has he the heart to take and keep an impression?" For, if he has, circumstances will force him on and carve the figure of a brave man out of that mass of contradictions. In return for such benefits, he pays forfeit commonly of the dearest of the things prized by him in this terrestrial life.⁹¹

On the other hand, in the case of a character who embodies much of the Meredith ethic, Gower Woodseer of The Amazing Marriage, we have the irony cutting the other way in such statements as, "...a young man studying abstract and adoring surface nature too exclusively to be aware of the manifestation of her spirit in the flesh...."⁹² Or still again when Harry Richmond's watery idealism is severely flayed for its insubstantiality.⁹³

To return one final time to Wilfrid Pole, there is another thematic principle which we can derive from Meredith's portrayal. Wilfrid is reproached, among other things, for his inconstancy. He makes love to Emilia without being serious, then he becomes serious, then he commits himself to Lady Charlotte, then he swings back to Emilia. Such light-heartedness we feel is blameworthy. It is therefore significant to realize that the frailty and fickleness of male attachment is not unique to Wilfrid, nor -- furthermore -- is it necessarily condemned in every context. Nevil Beauchamp makes love to at least three women in his short career. Harry Richmond transfers his affection from the Princess Ottlia to Janet Ilchester with an easily given authorial blessing, and has cast his eyes in other directions as well.

Richard Feverel is hardly held personally accountable after a much more serious lapse. In the first place, Meredith apparently accepted the polygamous nature of young men as a fact of life. Even more important, though, is the indication or the corroboration that Meredith does not divide human action into categories of good and bad, moral and immoral. Rather, he paints a continuum and suggests that the individual action must be judged in the continuum and further in the context of circumstances that produced the individual act. Once again, the wedge of ambiguity is driven in.

The wedge of the ambiguous is driven in through the force of question. If we cannot create discrete moral categories, if we must content our judgmental proclivities not with neat moral boundaries, but with contradiction or approximation, how can we ever condemn or exonerate with certainty? When does sensitivity become precious, and refinement turn to decadent over-refinement? When does the natural human need to cry out in pain become a sloppy and sodden embarrassment to ourselves and others? At what point does youthful exuberance turn to shallow irresponsibility, or responsible behavior to the plodding and dull? Certainly these are important, inescapable, and ultimately unanswerable questions, and they make our only possible apprehension of truth ironic, ambivalent, ambiguous, shifting.

Meredith offers Nature as a model for reason, sanity, truth, goodness, and beauty. But that prescription, in its very largeness, can be only theoretically satisfying. The difference between the poetry of Meredith and the fiction is that in the nature poetry Meredith can talk in terms of idealities and generalities; but in the novels he confronts the actuality of behavior; the ideals fall into frustrated tatters in the face of defiant existence. Thematically, then, the novelist as Comedian must attempt to juggle the incoherencies and paradoxes into the necessarily ironic design that will accommodate, without bruising, their truth.

Of all Meredith's heroines, for example, Emilia comes closest to being an image of Nature, the breathing ideal. But she too is caught in the contradictions of her nature, in paradoxes, and finally into the violation of her infatuation with consistency. Matey Weyburn of Lord Ormont is cast even more in the mold of the ideal, and suffers from the cramp of consistency, until Meredith recasts him into the more ironic and human form of Gower Woodseer in The Amazing Marriage. We are forced to declare that the neat schemes and diagrammatically sterile outlines of Meredith's themes and philosophy display the organizational reflexes of the critic rather than the intent of the author. There are for Meredith as for Wallace Stevens many ways of looking at a blackbird.

We can see the unformulated and unformulatable character of Meredith's thematic mode by looking not only at the major themes of Nature and Sentimentalism, not only by

examining the thematic dramatization in character, but by looking briefly at two of the recurrent sub-themes in the novels. Kelvin in A Troubled Eden has already pointed to the question of Meredith's problematical attitude toward dueling.⁹⁴ It comes up in novel after novel -- in Kelvin's count at least seven -- and is the object of a rather shifting judgment on Meredith's part. At times he approves, at times he disapproves; and at times he seems to both approve and disapprove at once. About Meredith's handling of the duel in The Adventures of Harry Richmond, Kelvin says, "Meredith wants us to know that Harry's manliness consists not only in his ability to dismiss dueling as childish but in his ability to practice what he belittles." We detect almost a sneer in Kelvin's restatement of the paradox, and he goes on to resolve the ambivalence by imposing on Meredith's mind a tidy pattern:

When Meredith was still in his boyhood, English society had decided that the duel was unequivocally bad. Hence we have the odd spectacle of Meredith slowly advancing toward a private position which is essentially the one the public and the institutions of England had reached a generation before.... It was not until Meredith wrote Diana of the Crossways (1885) that he finally, and without reservation, adopted the long prevalent middle-class attitude toward dueling.⁹⁵

We have an odd spectacle indeed. But the question is whether it is Meredith or whether it is the critic trying to squeeze Meredith into a pattern that the critic's study demands. Reference to the novels will quickly disabuse us of any notion of Meredith "slowly advancing" toward an

antipathy against dueling. He is certainly no more disposed to favor it in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel than in The Adventures of Harry Richmond. If we may judge by its fictional context and by its consequences, it is surely more darkly condemned.

Undeniably Meredith's attitude toward dueling was ambivalent. But why should he be critically forced toward making a choice? Is not ambivalence an accurate, necessary condition for the perception of an ambiguity, and is not dueling an ambiguous quantity for Meredith as for most of us? Discretion, Falstaff tells us, is the better part of valor. That sentiment has its force, even as we recognize that discretion meets cowardice at a point on the continuum roughly corresponding to the one where valor meets stupidity.

Furthermore, dueling in Meredith -- as Kelvin himself sees -- is part of a more intricate complex which includes various forms of conflict, from war to boxing. But his attitude toward war and conquest seems to be equally ambivalent. At the beginning of Lord Ormont and His Aminta we have a debate regarding Ormont's forceful suppression of a native insurgency in one of the Indian provinces:

"We are a civilian people; we pride ourselves on having civilian methods."

"How can that be if we have won India with guns and swords?"

"But that splendid jewel for England's tiara won," said he (and he might as well have said crown), "we are bound to sheathe the sword and govern by the Book of Law."

"But if they don't have the Book of Law?"

"They know the power behind it."
 "Not if we knock nothing harder than the Book
 of Law upon their skulls."

The subject provoked everywhere in Great Britian a division...one party for our modern English magisterial methods with Indians, the other for the decisive Oriental at the early time, to suit their native tastes; and the Book of Law is to be conciliatingly addressed to their sentiments by a benign civilizing Power, or the sword is out smartly at the hint of a warning to protect the sword's conquests. Under one aspect we appear potteringly European; under another, drunk of the East.⁹⁶

Implicit in the passage is a denigration of the national behavior, a disapproving awareness of its blatant and brutal contradictions. Is this his fixed position or is it the glorification of battle and war given in Sandra Belloni through the eyes of Emilia and Merthyr? Or is it again the view of war as a necessary tonic for a nation becoming flabby, which we find in One Of Our Conquerors? Can we not say that Meredith holds all these attitudes in suspension, just as he treats boxing seriously as a necessary corrective, the position advanced by Weyburn in Lord Ormont and His Aminta, and then treats it ludicrously with the figure of Skepsey in One of Our Conquerors. Going back to the model of Nature will unfortunately not solve the dilemma for us. For we find in nature herself the ambiguous, ironic co-existence of the principles both of conflict and of tranquility.

Our last examination of a sub-theme to illustrate Meredith's essential irony is his attitude toward aphorism. There are two ways in which Meredith's aphoristic style and epigrammatic compression appear in the novels. One is in

the normal course of his description and narrative or soliloquy. For example, this is Meredith's rendering of Sir Willoughby's meeting with Laetitia Dale after a long absence:

"Laetitia Dale!" he said. He panted. "Your name is sweet English music! And you are well?" The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go....⁹⁷

Frequently Meredith puts a descriptive mot in the mouth of one of his characters, as when Mrs. Mountstuart calls Clara Middleton "a rogue in porcelain," or when Gower Woodseer calls Carinthia "a haggard Venus."

But Meredith has also an aphoristic bent which is more closely related to thematic concerns, and that is his use of aphorism literally as adage and as epigram. Mrs. Mountstuart prides herself on being a wit and the creator of epigram. Sir Austin Feverel is the author of that compilation of wisdom and wit known as The Pilgrim Scrip. Captain Peter "the Old Buccaneer" Kirby, the father of Carinthia in The Amazing Marriage, "was a standing example of the lesson on his own Maxims For Men, a very curious book, that fetches a rare price now wherever a copy is put up for auction."⁹⁸ There is also Colney Durance in One Of Our Conquerors. "...the sayer of bitter things, manufacturer of prickly balls, in the form of Discord's apples...."⁹⁹ Meredith's own delight in aphorism is clear to any reader of the novels, the compression, the balance, the economy that flashes an entire meaning in a phrase, the necessary precision of word

and image. And he enlarges the occasions for maxim and aphorism by creating characters such as those mentioned just above. And out the adages and aphorisms pour with a sometimes bewildering plenty:

The compensation for Injustice, is, that in that dark Ordeal we gather the worthiest around us.¹⁰⁰

In action, Wisdom goes by majorities.¹⁰¹

When we appear most incongruous, we are often exposing the key to our characters....¹⁰²

Who rises from Prayer a better man, his prayer is answered....¹⁰³

...we say to the madman, Your strait-waistcoat is my easy-chair....¹⁰⁴

Aphorism, Richard Curle says in Aspects of George Meredith:

is one of the most self-conscious of literary productions, and Meredith is perhaps the most self-conscious of aphorists. I do not mean that it is a small self-consciousness, for indeed it might well be called the reverse. Self-consciousness, is, in this aspect, a sort of crucible into which the rough ore of thoughts and words are poured, and from which comes forth the refined essence of both, harmoniously and beautifully blended. For the aphorism is the polished alloy of the intellect and the imagination.¹⁰⁵

At the same time to offer the polish of a neatly stated epigram as actual truth, may be no more than a sly intellectual arrogance, having less to do with truth and more with self-infatuation. It has been remarked that Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's "mot" on the Young Sir Willoughby Patterne, gets to be something of a bore rather quickly in the novel. But it is Meredith's intention in the novel to hold up Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's vaunted wit as in reality a hoax. "Mrs. Mountstuart was a lady certain to say the remembered,

if not the right thing." In that antithesis Meredith gives the reverse view, the eventual irony which undercuts the pithy aphorism. "...there is more in the world," he says in The Tragic Comedians, "than the epigrams aimed at it contain."¹⁰⁶ And with that epigram, the circle of irony closes and becomes complete.

Meredith's attitude toward aphorism, then, is again a complicated and frustrating ambivalence. He admires and delights in it and is suspicious and chary. It is the best way of saying something...perhaps; or it may be a way of saying nothing. Aiming to pick up a whole truth, it may miss and its manicured hands remain essentially empty. Curle is right in calling Meredith "the most self-conscious of aphorists." But he neglects to pursue the necessary consequences of supreme self-consciousness, which is to say that Meredith is self-conscious about his self-consciousness. Meredith's artistry has an ironic self-consciousness.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel provides a relevant instance of the complicated positive-negative attitude toward the supremacy of intellectual consciousness and of self-conscious formulations. It involves Sir Austin Feverel, the most famous of Meredith's aphorists, and it occurs in the final pages of that novel in the chapter entitled "The Last Scene." Lady Blandish keeping Sir Austin company at Raynham Abbey comes across the original of the Old Notebook in which he wrote the famous maxims and she turns by chance to read some of his "later jottings."

She read: "A maker of Proverbs -- what is he but a narrow mind with the mouthpiece of narrower?"

"I do not agree with that," she observed. He was in no humour for argument.

"Was your humility feigned when you wrote it?"

He merely said: "Consider the sort of minds influenced by set sayings. A proverb is the half-way-house to an Idea, I conceive, and the majority rest there content: can the keeper of such a house be flattered by his company?"

She felt her feminine intelligence swaying under him again. There must be greatness in a man who could thus speak of his own special and admirable aptitude.

Further she read, "Which is the coward among us? -- He who sneers at the failings of Humanity!"

"Oh! that is true! How much I admire that!" cried the dark-eyed dame as she beamed intellectual raptures.

Another Aphorism seemed closely to apply to him: "There is no more grievous sight, as there is no greater perversion, than a wise man at the mercy of his feelings."

"He must have written it," she thought, "when he had himself for an example -- strange man that he is?"¹⁰⁷

We shall not now attempt to assert the "greatness," but there must certainly be an irony in the writer "who could thus speak of his own special and admirable aptitude." Nor would we go so far as to suggest that Meredith considers his own statements and themes as half-way-houses to the Ideas. For they are not half-way-houses; they avoid half-truth or complete falsification by being set in a living ambience, by the contingent and ironic context which permits the necessary rearrangement and prevents "setting" and stagnancy. The ironic complicates things immeasurably and requires a much increased mental and moral agility. The example of Sir Austin illustrates this for us perfectly --

for here we have the skilled aphorist speaking against aphorism and couching his indictment in the language of aphorism. The multiplication of contextual conditions, Meredith seems to be saying, is the only way of catching at a truth in its native processional character. It cannot be simply grasped; it must be encircled and lifted together with its context. What is Meredith's attitude toward aphorism? It may be Austin's bitter humility; it may on the other hand be Lady Blandish's "intellectual rapture." But most likely it is the ironic distance which locates both attitudes within the experiences of the speakers, and which permits the reader to view their ambiguity without being hurried into judgment and into the neat categories fabricated from such judgments.

Having said this, we should turn to one more important aspect of Meredith's themes, and one that has been largely disregarded: the function of theme, not only as part of the author's moral universe, but its novelistic function, its agency in the fiction itself.

We have foregone the compelling temptation to include in this chapter a section entitled: George Meredith and His Relation to the Jewish Problem. And even now we shall content ourselves to point out that that problem emerges explicitly for Meredith as a variant Sentimentality and a violation of Nature which claims the brotherhood of all men, the discarding of the prejudices of religion as well as those of class or sex. Anti-Semitism gets its most explicit treatment in The Tragic Comedians since the hero

of the story, Dr. Sigismund Alvan, is a Jew.

At the beginning of the novel, Meredith gives the common attitude toward "the dirty Jew" even in the mind of Clotilde, the weak heroine: "The Jew was to Clotilde as flesh of swine to the Jew. Her parents had the same abhorrence of Jewry. One of the favorite similes of the family for whatever grunted its grossness, wriggled with meanness, was Jew...."¹⁰³ Later on in the novel we get the sympathetically accurate counter-view as ennobled by the mind of Alvan:

We Jews have a lusty blood. We are the strong of the Earth....Heroical too! Soldiers, poets, musicians; the Gentile's masters in mental arithmetic -- keenest of weapons; surpassing him in common sense and capacity for brotherhood. Ay, and in charity; or what stores of vengeance should we not have nourished: Already we have the money-bags. Soon we shall hold the chief offices. And when the popular election is as unimpeded as the coursing of the blood in a healthy body, the Jew will be foremost and topmost, for he is pre-eminently by comparison the brain of these latter-day communities. But that is only my answer to the brutish contempt of the Jew. I am no champion of a race. I am for the world, for man!¹⁰⁹

It is actually in the last few sentences that Meredith enunciates what is for him the ideal reconciliation. Clearly enough -- even in Alvan's speech -- that ideal remains an abstract goal, the unattained -- even if theoretically attainable -- human destination. In the actual and imperfect world where "brutish contempt for the Jew" predominates, the human response can only take the form of a super-chauvinistic pride and a determined ambition.¹¹⁰

This is characteristic throughout the novels of the difference between the abstract thematic ideal and the practical behavior of the human characters. Consequently, our fictional interest in the themes is not an interest in their realization, or in the perfect adaptability and conformation of the characters to them. Rather, Meredith's interest in thematic factors is in the pressure exerted by the thematic upon behavior and action and choices. Our interest in Alvan's Jewishness is less a concern for the political and social restructuring of society. What is important about his Jewishness in The Tragic Comedians is that it forces him to act the "gentleman" at a crucial moment, when -- were he not a Jew -- he would evaluate rationally and act more decisively for his own good and advantage as a man. Despite his profession earlier, the Jew and the man have not been reconciled in him, as they cannot be in reality, given the imperfection of the worldly circumstances.¹¹⁰

The major point being made, however, is that Meredith's thematic preoccupations are not fictionally admissible by themselves, but rather as pressure points put at the service of the psychological themes. And it is here that Meredith clearly joins hands with James and Conrad. The predicament of Dr. Alvan in the moment of his philanthropical misjudgment of a Gentile world cannot be read otherwise than as a parallel to Conrad's Lord Jim. And Clotilde is, just as surely, the weaker sister of Isabel Archer in Portrait of A Lady and Fleda Vetch in the Spoils of Poynton.

Thus, in logically extending our argument, we must say that the problem with Meredith's least successful characters -- and the stick figures are almost exclusively men -- is not too great an infusion of theme. The trouble with Merthyr Powys, Dartrey Fenellan, and Matey Weyburn also, is that thematic input exerts no pressure on character behavior and choice. The themes, in other words, remain inert regarding these characters, as between two self-sufficient and complacent worlds. Matey Weyburn, for example, can comment to a Jewish acquaintance with theoretical accuracy as follows:

"You have beaten the Christians on the field they challenged you to enter for a try. They feel the pinch in their interests and their vanity. That will pass. I'm for the two sides, under the name of Justice; and I give the palm to whichever of the two first gets hold of the idea of Justice."¹¹¹

But the trouble with the statement is that it can be too theoretical, too disinterested. It pushed Weyburn in no **direction** at all, neither of confirmation nor contradiction. Though just as thematically insistent, how much more interesting and potentially dramatic are the words of his companion:

"To harmonize the nationalities, my dear boy! -- teach Christians to look fraternally on Jews! David was a harper, but the setting him down to roll off a fugue on one of your cathedral organs would not impose a heavier task than you are undertaking....we're nearer to King John's time than to your ideal, as far as the Jews go."¹¹²

There is one great fact in Lord Ormont which helps redeem Weyburn from his greatest danger -- that of becoming the wooden sentinel to abstract ideals. After saving

Aminta from the rapacious Mr. Morsfield, and from herself, after preserving her honor and the sanctity of her marriage vows, Weyburn himself runs off with her though she is still a married woman. The contradiction is noted and handled; but the irony is unfortunately not one which Meredith wishes there to exploit.

Footnotes

CHAPTER III

1. E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York, 1954), p. 89.

2. Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique (New York and London, 1932), p. 39.

3. Ibid., p. 46.

4. Virginia Woolf, "The Novels of George Meredith," The Second Common Reader (New York, 1960), p. 211.

5. G. M. Trevelyan, for example, was one of Meredith's greatest admirers and devoted advocates. Although Trevelyan's study focuses mainly on Meredith's poetry, he does make occasional remarks on the fiction. "...his novels contain the application of his ideas to life and conduct: it pervades every part of their structure, even in chapters where the reader seems for the time carried away on a wave of mere sensation. Every person and every incident that is put on the board, is introduced partly for its own sake, but partly in order to help the reader in the complicated and difficult task of seeing the whole truth of the ethical problems of the book. And these are his main interest." The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith (London, 1913), pp. 171-172 (my italics).

6. The Essay was originally a paper on "The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit," delivered at the London Institution in February 1877. It was published with that title in The New Quarterly Magazine for April 1877.

7. Norman Kelvin, A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith (Edinburgh and London, 1961), p. 100. In the same passage Kelvin admits that "it was difficult for him to translate this idea into narrative without becoming a superficial moralizer...."

8. George Meredith: His Life and Work (London, 1956), p. 362.

9. The Great Shaddock Dogma was the title conferred by Adrian Harley on Sir Austin Feverel's Pilgrim Scrip. It is a pejorative allusion to Sir Austin's didactic insistence on the weakness and imperfection of human nature. A species of grapefruit, the shaddock grows in the East Indies where it is considered a "forbidden fruit." For an interesting discussion of the term and its relation to The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, see "The Great Shaddock Dogma" in Guy S. Pether, George Meredith and His German Critics (London, 1939), pp. 78-81.

10. Nebraska, 1953, pp. 33-59.

11. The Novels of George Meredith and Some Notes on the English Novel (Oxford, 1947), p. 3.

12. SB, I, p. 215.

13. Sitwell, p. 9.

14. The absence of the didactic, which is an "unconsumed ideal," in Meredith is highlighted for Sitwell in the contrast between his fiction and that of Butler. It is interesting that both writers also had their flings with allegory, but the difference between them can be seen in the dissimilarity of tone between Shagpat and Butler's Erewhon, which was incidentally rejected by Meredith in his role as reader for Chapman and Hall.

15. Essay, p. 32.

16. Essay, p. 33. In the next paragraph Meredith goes on to explain the higher spirituality, the more independent and unfettered wisdom of the comic, but the damage has already been done.

17. Essay, p. 52.

18. Essay, p. 41.

19. Essay, p. 51.

20. Essay, p. 43 (My italics).

21. George Meredith (New York, 1926).

22. Priestley's Chapter V, "His Attitude: The Comic Spirit," is the best treatment of this whole problem.

23. Priestley, pp. 117-119.

24. It pays to remember that there is one narrative form in which there exists an equality of interest in both right and wrong characters, with the possibility of an "edge" for the former. That is in allegory, where the lowest narrative denominator is employed. It becomes additionally significant then to recognize that Shagpat constituted Meredith's rejection of allegory.

25. Essay, p. 48.

26. "Sandra Belloni ... possesses an intensity of theme which fuses the leading characteristics of Meredith's thought, and shows us the springs of his feeling at their source." M. Sturge Henderson, George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer (New York, 1907), p. 75.

27. They are marvelous creations, even Harriet whose hard-bitten, tight-lipped jealousy is felt in the absence of much speech, and especially Louisa, Countess de Saldar, whom we shall look at more closely in the next chapter. But Meredith hardly ever repeats himself. Although the "young ladies of Brookfield" remind us of Evan Harrington, there is a difference in the purposes to which Meredith pits his material.

28. Constantin Photiades, George Meredith: His Life, Genius and Teaching, trans. Arthur Price (London, 1913), pp. 231-232.

29. J. H. E. Crees, George Meredith: A Study of His Works and Personality (Oxford, 1918), pp. 25-27.

30. EH, p. 23.

31. SB, I, p. 214.

32. SB, I, pp. 5-6.

33. SB, I, p. 11.

34. SB, I, p. 35.

35. SB, I, p. 36. The notion of acknowledging and accepting the animal side of our nature and our body was exceedingly important to Meredith and part of his evolutionary concept of Nature. Joseph Warren Beach in The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry (New York, 1936) and especially Lionel Stevenson's Darwin Among the Poets (Chicago, 1932). Like all of Meredith's "ideas" it is put forth with much greater

vehemence in the poetry. In a poem entitled significantly "Garden of Epicurus" for example, Meredith talks about the "Garden of sedate Philosophy" where, he says, "...mind and body, in fair conjunction free, / Luted their joyful concord..." (Poems, I, 199). An indication of the fervor and vehemence with which this notion was generally advanced can be gained from looking at some of the early writers on Meredith. We have already noted Photiades's summary of it. An even more ardent spokesman is J. H. E. Crees: "We have, thank Heaven! left far in our rear the age of Dora Spenslow, and even Jane Austen, consummate artist as she was, is behind the fashion; she would have shuddered at Clara Middleton's wet feet and clothes, and even swooned at Carinthia jumping out of windows twelve feet high and walking o'er the Tyrol heights. But now our maidens have bodies as well as souls, they are daughters of the gods divinely tall, and passably strong. Would that a novelist could make such paragons walk the earth, not merely tread within the enchanted walls of his won world. There might be fewer bachelors" (Crees, p. 89).

36. SB, I, p. 61.

37. Crees, p. 90.

38. SB, II, p. 249.

39. Joseph Warren Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith: An Interpretation (New York and London, 1911).

40. Waugh's novel is a very funny but very grotesque satire.

41. There is, nevertheless, a specific reference to Buddhism in The Amazing Marriage. "He talked of Buddha. He said: 'Here the brook's the brook, the mountain's the mountain: they are as they always were'" (p. 60). Interestingly enough, that articulated morality is also subordinated to an ironic tone.

42. London, 1947.

43. Beach, Comic Spirit, p. 124.

44. Egoist, p. 49.

45. Egoist, p. 53.

46. The Egoist, however, like Sandra Belloni, concentrates its interest on the "negative capability" of human behavior, its huge potential for huge folly. Essentially Clara Middleton and Vernon Whitford are more successful realizations of their counterparts in Sandra Belloni, Emilia and Merthyr. But Meredith's artistry and skill have here risen to a new plateau. Clara and Vernon hold us, in the first place, as complex and interesting human beings, and in the second place, because their action has been more organically interwoven into the whole plot. One can even say that the increased force of their presence indicates a pattern in Meredith's novels to dramatize more effectively positive value and the characters who live under its aegis and sway. In Richard Feverel, for example, Richard and Lucy are enmeshed in the folly of Sir Austin and as a result end tragically. The problem is rather avoided than dealt with in Evan Harrington. In Sandra Belloni and in Rhoda Fleming the spheres of sentimental delusion and rational, natural behavior are permitted to coexist in the same novel but are kept at a distance from one another as if to avoid mutual contamination. The Adventures of Harry Richmond and Beauchamp's Career begin to exemplify the more intimate relationship of what Walter Wright has called the "conspiracy of the comic and tragic muses." The Egoist in this scheme, (and perhaps necessarily in any scheme) represents Meredith's supreme achievement because the sustained preoccupation with folly gives the Meredithian irony a swifter flight to a clearer target. After the Egoist, and with the novel entitled, significantly, The Tragic Comedians, Meredith begins working toward a greater balance of positive and negative values, and evaluation. It is curious that as the moral equilibrium increases, the quality of the narrative irony changes. It becomes, in one sense, more blunted, while in another sense, it becomes more enlarged and inclusive. The irony becomes, in other words, less of a weapon, and more of a container. This accounts partially for the greater difficulty and lesser popularity of the later novels.

47. AM, p. 76-77.

48. AM, p. 81.

49. AM, p. 81. The recognition of Nature as Terror also, the recognition of her supremacy, may be what ultimately separates Woodseer from Fleetwood.

50. AM, p. 85.

51. AM, p. 185.

52. My allusion is to Meredith's well-known poem, "Lucifer in Starlight" (Poems, I, p. 185), in which one of the implications is that Lucifer's "hot fit of pride" was the futility of opposing Nature's law.

53. AM, p. 429.

54. Beach, Concept of Nature. See note #35 above.

55. All of Part II in Petter's Meredith and His German Critics is devoted to a analysis of the study done by Greta Grimsehl on "The Relation of the Sexes in the Novels of George Meredith."

56. LO, p. 15.

57. LO, p. 287.

58. LO, p. 285.

59. LO, p. 325.

60. Petter, p. 120.

61. Poems, I, p. 75.

62. In fact, the relationship for Meredith was reversed -- mind being evolved from body, and then spirit from mind by means of another evolution. (See Beach, Concept, pp. 470-485.)

63. Petter, p. 123. Again the implication given is of a mellow relationship.

64. From "A Faith on Trial" in Poems, II, p. 154.

65. Ibid., p. 156.

66. Richard Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics (London and New York, 1905), p. 57

67. Henderson, p. 75.

68. "She looked at Cornelia with envy. The latter lady was leaning meditatively, her arm on a side of her chair, like a pensive queen, with a ready, mild, embracing look for the company. 'Posture' seemed always to triumph over action." SB, II, p. 254.

69. ORF, p. 178.
70. SB, I, p. 150.
71. SB, I, p. 150.
72. "The sentimentalist lives in unrealities. He looks at Nature with his eyes half-closed, or else he considers some select portions of her." James Moffatt, George Meredith: A Primer to the Novels (London, 1909), p. 30.
73. SB, I, pp. 107-108.
74. SB, I, p. 181.
75. SB, I, p. 51.
76. SB, I, p. 200.
77. SB, I, p. 201.
78. SB, I, p. 202.
79. SB, II, p. 185.
80. SB, II, p. 185.
81. SB, II, p. 189.
82. SB, II, p. 266.
83. SB, I, p. 55.
84. SB, I, p. 121.
85. SB, I, pp. 137-138.
86. SB, II, p. 43.
87. SB, I, p. 6.
88. SB, I, p. 214.
89. SB, II, pp. 258-259.
90. SB, II, p. 189. (My italics)
91. SB, I, p. 112.

92. AM, p. 254.
93. See most of Chapter XXIX in HR.
94. "This institution troubled and fascinated Meredith, and for years exercised a strong grip upon his imagination " (Kelvin, p. 55).
95. Kelvin, p. 58.
96. LO, pp. 20-22.
97. Egoist, p. 24.
98. AM, p. 6.
99. OOOC, p. 75.
100. ORF, p. 6.
101. ORF, p. 6.
102. RF, p. 128.
103. ORF, p. 75.
104. AM, p. 7.
105. London, 1908, pp. 263-264.
106. TC, p. 75.
107. ORF, p. 438.
108. TC, p. 9.
109. TC, p. 62.
110. Thus he is, in Meredith's terms, "at variance with his profession" (Essay, 48) and this makes him a comic figure.
111. LO, p. 315.
112. LO, p. 314.

My purpose here was merely to oppose an art of figures to an art of adventures. For I have a notion that in our time the novel of high style must turn from the latter to the former. Instead of constructing interesting plots -- which is practically impossible -- it must invent interesting characters.

Jose Ortega y Gasset, "Notes on the Novel" in The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER: Constraint and Contingency

In turning now to the examination of character in Meredith's fiction, and to his creation and development of character, we must necessarily expect complexity. For although the important "actions" in his novels are public, Meredith understood that character is not. "The reason," he wrote, "why men and women are mysterious to us, and prove disappointing, is that we will read them from our own book; just as we are perplexed by reading ourselves from theirs."¹

This awareness creates a principle of characterization in Meredith which is dualistic. He sees character both subjectively and objectively, both from within and from without, in terms of an individual consciousness and in terms of more abstract social and moral categories. In the development of English fiction it constitutes a new approach to character which Richard Curle, writing back in 1908,² fears may lead to "a sense of bewilderment" in the reader. Curle attempts to deal with it in the following passage:

Meredith has seen that true understanding of character is to be read in niceties. In the questions and problems that ceaselessly ebb and flow within ourselves, in the strange, internal conflicts, in the unheard cries of individuality, he notes the emergence of a soul. Though he sees us dyed in the common dyes of sex, race, station, he sees that we are isolated and alone.... He has the amazing power of understanding people from their own positions. He feels instinctively the battle that is the eternal justification of each individuality. He has grasped what may seem a truism, but what has not apparently been grasped

by many, that people seem real because they are real and have a real personality and point of view. Consequently there are few writers who have given such a splendid air of truth to their creations. And yet, as I have said, there is always about them an idealized atmosphere, a philosophic perception of their universality.³

We might here even insist a bit on our advantage and linger over this "aspect" of Meredith's superiority as a maker of fictions. Surely there are few creations in literature like the character of Richmond Roy, for example.⁴ Meredith's unique strength in rendering him mercilessly and at the same time not unsympathetically is matched but few times in the history of fiction. A character morally repugnant and yet not to be merely contained or dismissed with the label of villain is an extremely difficult creation for an author. Few even among the masters of the nineteenth-century novel were able to reach the complexity and ambiguity of such characterizations. Dickens was never able to compromise with his impulse of grotesquerie, and while he frequently does transmit to us the feeling of the entrapment of character within a tragically or pathetically limited ambience, the portraiture inevitably petrifies into caricature. Let us look through all of Dickens for an analogue to Richmond Roy and we find at best only Mr. Micawber, and Skimpole of Bleak House. Their brilliance is of a special sort and we delight in them; but at no time do they threaten to turn on us or into us. If George Eliot does risk the hazards of ambiguity and complexity with a character like

Casaubon, she is giving us, on the other hand, a diminished character.

Richmond Roy looms large in The Adventures of Harry Richmond and it is the peculiar virtue of Meredith's artistry that the largeness of his characterization is not bought by compromising his ambiguous and paradoxical nature. Meredith holds us always in a balance of varied attitudes toward his characters -- for to indulge oneself excessively in any direction is the sin of the Sentimentalist. The blindness to the realities, in other words, which can curse the behavior of a character is precisely to be avoided by the knowledgeable novelist as by his most ideal character. It is the avoidance of Sentimentalism, the movement toward balance, which creates constantly in Meredith the ironic self-awareness of the modern consciousness.

If the need for reasoned and objective balance creates out of the old archetypal villains pathetic or even sympathetic characters, it does by the same token also qualify heroism -- and there is consequently a flattening out of the heroic in Meredith. In order to do justice to the order and arrangement of the real and necessary one must heave up and cause to tumble many artificial walls, including also the one separating tragedy from comedy. And this too becomes one of the peculiar Meredithian crochets.

But our point here in any case is to recognize the creation and rendering of Richmond Roy as a landmark in the

history of fiction with many sources but certainly no previous analogues. And it is only after such an accomplishment as Meredith's that we have the experimentation with ambiguity in Henry James, in Ford Madox Ford, and in Conrad himself. To say that the preoccupation in modern literature with ambiguity and irony does not enter the modern consciousness necessarily through the work of Meredith is by no means to minimize his achievement.⁵

The description of characters in a Meredith novel is in a sense never completed for it continues with every development of the plot. It might be called in the first glance a mode of characterization by accretion. But that is not quite accurate either, for it is not simple accretion but rather a fictional dialectic where every synthesis of a character becomes subject then to an antithetical qualification. We do not, in other words, "have" the character until the novel is completed. One of the reasons that Meredith can become -- even when he is quite good -- most annoying and even tedious, is that he is never finished with "worrying" a character -- compounding, complicating, qualifying. Further, this can become even more distressing and frustrating when the novel has not merely one or two variables, but when every single character insofar as he is a matter of novelistic concern and attention can be rendered only in terms of polarities and contradictions -- in terms of a dialectic of behavior and personality.

We must have in Meredith a high tolerance for ambiguity, for our threshold is constantly being threatened. We begin to hunger for a definite assertive evaluation. Cecil Baskell in Beauchamp's Career, for instance, comes as close to being a thoroughgoing rascal, malicious and snide, as one finds in Meredith. Yet who has not read that novel without harboring a kind of affection for the character for being precisely that -- a reliably offensive character without qualification.

It is particularly so in Beauchamp's Career since our annoyance level there is harshly put to the test. The hero of that novel becomes enamoured of a young French girl, already betrothed by her family to an elderly nobleman. She is seventeen; her intended is close to fifty. Their first encounter comes when an impetuous Nevil is pitted against not only the charming girlish Renee but against her familial loyalty, her Frenchness, her convent-obedience, her timidity, inexperience, and ardor. These are made to collide with Nevil whom she has nursed back to health after glorious naval exploits, and with his gratitude, passion, feeling for her brother, idealism, loyalty, and also inexperience. It should be apparent from this intentionally awkward description that the counters with which Meredith is working are many and capable of generating various complications. They do. The situation of the two lovers, the possibility of their union as opposed to its improbability is turned

over for the reader from various angles. Nor do the analytics of pairing Renee and Nevil end when all the variations have been exhausted; the two are, on the contrary, precipitated into decision by the appearance in Venice of Renee's betrothed. Furthermore, it is a decision to which they are not equal. It is not made; it happens. And the contingent and accidental quality of the outcome is underlined here as elsewhere by Meredith.

Good, we say. Such is the nature of reality. However, consider further that this is but the first of four appearances that Renee makes in the novel. At each juncture the circumstances surrounding both her and Nevil have altered. They change, mature, become variously narrowed and broadened, participate in different worlds, make different acceptances and rejections within those worlds. Their second meeting for example, is occasioned by Renee's summoning Nevil to her husband's estate in order to strengthen her from falling into an affair with a young French suitor. Nevil, on the other hand, obeys her cryptic summons, though in the midst of a hot political campaign in which his weakness for French women has already been bruited about in the opposition press. So once again we submit to the novelist's gamesmanship the arrangements and rearrangements, the conjecture as to motivation and outcome, the contrast between not only the new Nevil and the new Renee but between their present and former selves both in relation to themselves and to each

other. All these are part of Meredith's narrative material or lurk just beneath the narrative surface. Then, too, contributing to the reader's need for increased dexterity is the augmentation of alternatives, created by introduction of the third lover, the neglect of Renee by her husband, the treachery of her sister-in-law, the relocation and readjustment of Nevil's priorities, etc., etc.

The third appearance of Renee in the novel is really the climactic one. She appears in England to claim the unchanged love and devotion which Nevil has presumably been cherishing all this time in his heart. The thematic counters in this meeting surround the questions of loyalty, courage, self-determination, and conventionality. In terms of pure plot, it constitutes Nevil's rejection of Renee and the recognition of his rejection in what is a new but obliquely seen self-knowledge. Nevil has actually committed the major sin of the Meredith code. He has been guilty of Sentimentalism in assuming that man is unchangeable and love does not fade and wither. Although Meredith, perhaps out of particular affection for this hero of his,⁶ does not name Nevil's sin, much less launch into his frequent tirade against it, Nevil's folly has unquestionably been that of the Sentimentalist.

Nor does Meredith at this point indulge himself in crudely analyzing Nevil's behavior in rejecting his first love. With a much more effective and artistic subtlety he permits the ambiguous, ambivalent motives to arrange them-

selves around Beauchamp's concerns during the time. Is it the fact that he has been for a long time involved in a semi-romantic though amorphous relation with Cecilia Halkett? Is it his involvement with the Radical cause? His loyalty to England? His concern for Dr. Shrapnel? His feud with his uncle? Or is it really the shift in the center of his concerns away from Renee which happens as a consequence of all these forces at work?

Out of the complex of possible causes, the epitaph of his attachment to Renee is inevitably pronounced, although Nevil chafes a bit at the suspicion of political motives on his part.

The approval of him by the prudent was a disgust, and by the pious tasteless. He had not any consolation in reverting to Dr. Shrapnel's heavy puritanism. On the contrary such a general proposition as that of the sage of Bevisham could not for a moment stand against the pathetic special case of Renee; and as far as Beauchamp's active mind went, he was for demanding that Society should take a new position in morality, considerably broader, and adapted to very special cases.

Nevertheless, he was hardly grieved in missing Renee at Rosamund's breakfast-table....⁷

There is no question about Meredith's skill in rendering and evoking ardor and infatuation. His severest critics grant him that ability and will grudgingly acquiesce regarding certain passages in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel⁸ -- though there are equally effective passages in other works. He exhibits a precision and at the same time a subtlety that seems to prefigure certain moments in Henry James as the one between Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey in The Ambassadors.⁹

Both writers share the same ability, and perhaps Meredith even excels at it, in rendering the passing away of ardor and passion, the turning of love into something a little less and far different. For such a theme is again and again incorporated in the plots of the novels, as it is in Beauchamp's Career.

However, the point we were concentrating on was Meredith's mode of characterization -- his view of character, his philosophy of character, if you will -- particularly as it affects the structure and organization of the novels. What we can call an "inductive" mode of characterization since it is not a syllogistic movement from a major premise toward inevitability, but is a constant process of discovery and revelation, of widening and deepening -- would appear to be the ideal mode of the novelist. Nevertheless, we must be prepared to recognize also the defect of this virtue -- and its excesses. What happens in Beauchamp's Career and what causes the intermittent tedium of the story is precisely such an excess. For what we are asked to contemplate in Beauchamp's Career is not by any means the relation of Nevil and Renee as the main business of the novel. It is a useful and important minor plot which intersects at points with the major thrust of the work. Renee is, though important, only one of three women who figure as possible sexual partners for Nevil. During the Venetian interlude Renee has the love interest all to herself, but obviously and importantly never afterward.

Thus while we are see-sawing through much of the constantly redefined relationship of Nevil-Renee, we are at the same time involved in a very similar holding-action between Nevil-Cecilia. Furthermore, both are women whom Nevil "loses." There are consequently numerous parallels of the tortured, torturous, and finally torturing introspections, analyses, if-only-then's.... that qualify the relationships and retard consumation or even clarification. And at a certain midway point the reader is tempted to cry out, "Enough! Enough!"

In addition to this, as we said before, Meredith clearly believes that in matters of characterization "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Thus it is not only the previously mentioned characters whose evolution and development must be charted, but every character of the second rank and even the third. Cecilia's father, Colonel Halkett, changes drastically if quite understandably from an ardent admirer of Nevil to an adamant opponent of Nevil's suit for Cecilia as a result of his slowly increasing contempt for Nevil.

A more interesting example as well as a more interesting character is Nevil's uncle, Everard Romfrey, affectionately called the "baron" because of his nobility of conduct both in imperiousness and in forbearance, who eventually inherits the Earldom of Romfrey. As a character he is also a coup de plume for Meredith. Obstinate in his common sense and loyal

in his affection, jealous of his aristocratic prerogatives, principles, and privileged way of life, he is as solid as the Gibraltar which his Tory-ness would guard to the last breath. It is therefore interesting to watch the stresses to which Meredith subjects him. In terms of measurable change, it might appear that Romfrey goes the greatest distance by finally apologizing to Dr. Shrapnel for unjustly horsewhipping that frail radical. But the reader recognizes that the greater and more important truth is the essential humanity of Romfrey, a humanity which is frequently blind but which also makes him capable of a terse magnanimity. The fictional accomplishment is in creating a character whose secure predictability is always open to question. The paradox of character is within Romfrey and the answer as to whether continuity or reversal of behavior will predominate can only come from seeing how he has in fact acted.

A final example will bring out yet another aspect of Meredith's view of character. For in analyzing a character like Dr. Shrapnel we see most emphatically that there is little or no change in him. And yet, at various points in the novel he seems wise, silly or at least irrelevant at others. He is gentle or wild, idealistic or obsessed, courteous or fantastic. It is not so much that he changes, as that differing situations will call forth varied and occasionally contradictory responses even from the most placid and unchanging human beings. Furthermore, human traits can never be

finally defined for our evaluation, but must depend on the context in which they emerge. What is the difference between obstinacy, tenacity, persistence, doggedness, and fortitude if not the situation in which the trait is exhibited, and its relevance to the situation. It is finally the idea of proportion. Dr. Shrapnel's dedication to the cause of the people is admirable and laudatory. The real beneficence of such dedication, however, depends on a non-idealized view of the "unwashed multitudes" in the first place, for anything less is the old Sentimentalism. In the second place, the dedication to radical ideals has no business interfering between a man and his bride as Shrapnel thoughtlessly would have it come between Nevil and Jenny. It is, in Meredith's terms, as misguided to allow political ideals to interfere with a man's honeymoon as it is misguided to refuse to let them interfere with a man's grouse hunting. The impression one gets from Beauchamp's Career is that, forced into a choice, Meredith would opt for grouse hunting over ideals and principles -- for there is at least more reality in it and consequently less harm. The harm in Romfrey's behavior, interestingly enough, comes not from his hunting but from his principles regarding poaching and chivalry.

We can abstract, then, from the foregoing certain basic Meredithian principles regarding the open-ended nature of character and especially fictional character. Character is

not a completed totality; it is a process -- and a never-ending process. To Meredith, one might say, a man's character is not his fate, for this would impute an a priori condition to personality, an arbitrary radius which describes the limits of possibility. It is certainly more accurate to reverse the aphorism and say that a man's fate is his character, that life and events determine character and shape it. That since character is process, the dynamics of its movement are generated by the clash of the completed synthesis with the constant novelty of as yet unassimilated experience. In personal history, too, the operative principle is dialectical. To be alive, for Meredith, is to be subject to stresses which perpetually test the tolerances of what we are and would like to be. If there seems to be, as we have said, much repetition of this testing in Beauchamp's Career, it is for the author a necessary repetition since no experience can be said to have already prefigured another or to have established its undeviating pattern. There is, obviously, no such thing as the repetition of experience, for who can say when a certain strand or element in our complicated selves may become the ascendant and determining one. Meredith states as much in the following brief paragraph.

"...the Countess looked superb in the pride with which she said she was what she would have given her hand not to be. But few feelings are single on this globe, and junction of sentiments need not imply unity in our yeasty compositions."¹⁰

There is no such thing as the "unity" of personality but rather an incongruous combination of sympathies and antagonisms which are held and suspended within a magnetic field of the "self" -- and which may at any moment be liable to change and to a new configuration. For the mixture is, as Meredith says "yeasty " and in a state of continuing ferment.

What creates character, and what continues molding, shaping, "sculpting" is the experience of an individual's life, the various events or "circumstances" that create inconsistent traits and continue the process of adding to them and rearranging them. Meredith is speaking right now of Evan Harrington.

He has little character for the moment. Most youths are like Pope's women; they have no character at all. And indeed a character that does not wait for circumstance to shape it, is of small worth in the race that must be run. To be set too early, is to take the work out of the hands of the Sculptor who fashions men. Happily a youth is always at school, and if he was shut up and without an ark two or three hours ago, he will have something to show you now; as I have seen blooming sea flowers and other graduated organisms, when left undisturbed to their own action.¹¹

But if Meredith refers here to a youth of barely twenty years, as Evan Harrington is at this point in the novel, he clearly enough does not restrict the agency of "circumstance" and experience to such a case. Youth may offer a softer and more malleable material for the shaping agency of event; but even after the outlines and features of the "sculpture" are discernible, it is event and experience that modify, that

will correct or blemish the partially finished likeness.

Certainly Meredith does acknowledge the petrification or the vitrification of character -- and all the more readily, since it constitutes one of the major themes of his work.¹² But it is for Meredith a fact not of the life of personality, but of its death. We mentioned earlier that Dr. Shrapnel in Beauchamp's Career displays precisely such inflexibility and intransigence in advancing the cause of radical idealism. But he is, to that extent, a ludicrous figure. There can be little question, furthermore, that the more Nevil himself becomes involved in the rhetoric and bombast of Shrapnel, the closer he moves to the ridiculous -- and it is at times very close indeed.

One of the functions of Cecilia Halkett and her perpetual examination of Nevil's "incomprehensible" behavior is to reveal that Nevil has not become a brittle replica of Shrapnel, that he is still responding on an emotionally human level, that he sees his cause in relation to actual, individual human beings and not abstractedly as the "Cause." Not that there is anything wrong with Shrapnel's ideas. They are on the whole worthy ones, and for that we have the testimony of Seymour Austin. The wrong enters in the divorce of the ideas from the reality. "He is honest," Austin says of Shrapnel, "and takes his honesty for a virtue."¹³ Shrapnel, he says, practices "the politics of impatience." It is a species of politics divorced from reality. The Cause becomes self-

justifying and, consequently, fanatic and self-defeating.

There are, however, various degrees of intellectual and emotional petrification, of closing one's mind and one's heart to the tutelage of experience, circumstance, and reality. Of all these, the form rendered in Beauchamp's Career is not to Meredith's mind the worst -- and he treats almost all the characters in that book with unusual charity.

The worst form of character disease, Sentimentalism, can have a great variety of manifestations, but all are characterized by self-delusion and self-indulgence. It can be the self-flattery of males that they are the superiors and masters of women, which looms large in Diana of the Crossways. It can be the smug superiority of the aspiring aristocrat over the tradesman and the uncultivated as exhibited by the Pole sisters in Sandra Belloni. It can be the self-deception and irresponsibility which permits Edward Blencove to gratify himself but destroy Dahlia Fleming in Rhoda Fleming.

In its most virulent form self-indulgent sentimentalism wishes not merely to contravene and subvert reality for its own purposes or to ignore the realistic principle; it conspires, like Satan, to effect a total overthrow -- that is to substitute that self-indulgent self and its needs as the first principle of reality. In a groping and confused fashion, this is what Sir Austin Feverel attempts in the The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. And it so describes Sir

Willoughby Patterne in all his actions that Meredith entitled that one novel The Egoist.

Freud had yet to refine the distinction into the triad of super-ego, ego, and id. But Meredith was already creating a series of chronicles in which a conflict erupts out of the disparity between the reality principle and ego gratification. And at least for Meredith there was a balance possible. Kelvin calls it the "rational compromise."¹⁴ To Meredith himself it was the "comic spirit." The complex and intertwined relationship between Meredith's view of behavior, his method of characterization, and the constant mediation of what we have called his "comicality," can be glimpsed when he says in The Essay, "They build a temple of arrogance; they speak much in the voice of oracles.... Insufficiency of sight in the eye looking outward has deprived them of the eye that should look inward. They have never weighed themselves in the delicate balance of the comic idea, so as to obtain a suspicion of the rights and dues of the world...."¹⁵

Meredith's method of characterization, then, is to project event and allow a character to locate himself in relation to the event, and in relation to other characters who may be considered complex, sometimes volatile, events and experiences. Always for Meredith, one measure, and perhaps the supreme dimension, of character is the openness and plausibility that guide a character's reactions and decisions, his freedom from the peculiar and idiosyncratic,

his tolerance for objective acceptance of event and his capacity to absorb it. The comic spirit is clearly a social and socially induced attribute. It is the product of the world's true wisdom as manifested in history, and as manifested in experience which is always -- to the clear-sighted -- a smaller re-creation of history.¹⁶

Were we to chart the history of narrative as a movement from the primacy of plot toward the primacy of character, we could see the real nature of that symbiotic relationship. As long as character is a "given," the movement of narrative depends on the contrivances of plot and plot making. And here Dickens bears us out as well as Homer, Fielding as much as Virgil. It is the recognition of the contingency of character as a narrative principle that makes for the subordination of plot, that reduces and diminishes it. The function of plot in Meredith is to display and exhibit character, to provide the medium for its unfolding and development.

If it seems that we are merely describing the workings of the "psychological novel," we must point out here that Meredith differs from most psychological novelists of modern fiction in that he employs not introspection as the instrument of change, but rather action. The life of the individual mind is not for Meredith the "plot" it is for Henry James. The old saw that James wrote more and more about less and less may be necessarily so. But it is not the case

with Meredith. He does enter the mind of a character, but the attitude of a courteous outsider or the restraint of a privileged acquaintance marks the limits of his intimacy. For that is not where the drama is to be played out. The fictional stage is, for Meredith, the social and not the psychological one. As a matter of fact Meredith's psychology frequently seems to us rudimentary and obvious. But it does not have to be any more than that. For it will not be the internal agonizings which ultimately define the character; it will be his actions.¹⁷ Meredith himself said at least as much when, in The Amazing Marriage, he wrote: "Character must ever be a mystery, only to be explained in some degree by conduct...." ^{17a}

This brings us directly to the final corollary we will draw regarding the relation, or inter-relation, of plot and character in Meredith, and which derives from and extends what has already been said. In addition to revealing and testing character, action also creates character. For given the complexity of its "yeasty" composition, the variety of its impulses, and the contingency of its selections, character can emerge from obscurity, succumb to temptation, or follow clear duty's call only through the determinant of action -- since action alone is not reversible. The possible correlatives which define the locus of any decision can become definitive only after the weight of action has made an ineradicable impress. To think, to contemplate, to review

one's options, is dalliance; to experience, to make a choice, and to commit oneself by acting -- is revelation of character and formation of character.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel begins as comedy, but its definition changes because, among other things, Richard himself does not conform to the image of the faithful young lover. Similarly, the regeneration of Laetitia Dale in The Egoist, of Cecilia Halkett in Beauchamp's Career, of Carinthia in The Amazing Marriage, all are testimony to the mobility of human behavior as realized in its actions. On the other hand, commitment by action can be regarded as the elimination and cancellation of other options. When Cecilia Halkett finally declares her betrothal to Blackburn Tuckman it is a step that forces her into another relation to Nevil, to herself, and to society. She has, in effect, made herself into a different person. Rosamund's pleas are in vain, not because Cecilia has engaged herself to another man, but because the engagement has turned her into someone capable of such an engagement. She has become subject to a new condition of life.

The significance of "act" in creating and modifying character is recognized in Beauchamp's Career by Nevil's uncle Everard, and hardens his refusal to apologize for horse-whipping Shrapnel even after he realizes that he acted stupidly and unjustly. The Earl of Romfrey is neither a stupid nor an unjust man, but neither is he a man with any humility, Christian meekness, or submission whatsoever.

Only through a heavy, double-barreled moral blackmail is he finally forced to apologize.¹⁸ But it is a violation of his beliefs, a treachery to his class, and a shattering of his Olympian superiority. It has in a sense reduced him to being a man who has apologized to Shrapnel. The apology was not only something he did, but something he became. The irony of Meredith's title, Beauchamp's Career, is what Rosamund painfully feels when she says to her husband, "No, but what I feel is that he -- our Nevill! -- has accomplished hardly anything, if anything." The earl feels somewhat differently, however:

"He hasn't marched on London with a couple of hundred thousand men: no, he hasn't done that," the earl said, glancing back in his mind through Beauchamp's career. "And he escapes what Stukely calls his nation's scourge, in the shape of a statue turned out by an English chisel. No: we haven't had much public excitement out him. But one thing he did do: he got me down on my knees!"

Lord Romfrey pronounced these words with a sober emphasis that struck humour of it sharply into Rosemund's heart, through some contrast it presented between Nevill's aim at the world and hit of a man: the immense deal thought of it by the earl, and the very little that Nevill would think of it -- the great domestic achievement to be boasted of by an enthusiastic devotee of politics!"¹⁹

For Meredith's own comments on the significance of action in relation to character, the following passages from Evan Harrington is "comically" illuminating, regarding both the inconsistency and the determination by action.

...I must here state that the scene related, innocent as it was, and, as one would naturally imagine, of puny consequence, if any, did no less a thing then, subsequently, to precipitate the

Protestant Countess de Saldar into the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church. A little bit of play!

It seems barely just. But if, as I have heard, a lady has trod on a pebble and broken her nose, tremendous results like these warn us to be careful how we walk. As for play, it was never intended that we should play with flesh and blood.

And oh, be charitable matrons of Britain. See here, Andrew Cogglesby, who loved his wife as his very soul, and who almost disliked her sister; -- in ten minutes the latter had set his head spinning! The whole of the day he went about the house meditating frantically on the possibility of his Harriet demanding a divorce.²⁰

Discussion of Meredith's view of character and his mode of characterization has inevitably led us, even at this point, into the question of freedom and necessity in describing the motives and behavior of fictional characters. It is a question which obviously has its analogue in the old philosophical dilemma of freedom of the will as opposed to determinism. And although we may spare ourselves a digression into that mooted problem, its close parallel to our present concern should vindicate our preoccupation with this aspect of character portrayal. Perhaps for too long we have accepted with an innocent ~~blitheness~~ or blindness the opaque bromide about flat characters and rounded characters and about authors adept in either of the two fashions, without troubling ourselves to speculate on the philosophical premises which would accommodate extreme dislocations.

Even such a useful book as Spilka's Dickens and Kafka²¹ seems almost intentionally to blink the question of necessity

determinism, or, in its psychological aspect, the entrapment of character within itself. So that in Spilka's chapter on the "Imprisoning Worlds" there is a conspicuous absence of any attention at all to character as itself "imprisoning" and consequently no further analysis of the outward condition of imprisonment as a reification of the inward condition of entrapment. In the preceding chapter, as a matter of fact, Spilka is arguing for just the opposite point of view. "...the grotesque affirms the assertive spirit, or the active play of conscious feeling, in the very process of reduction. Its comic figures are supremely aware of their fixations: they accept the mechanical, they embrace their fears and obsessions, and by doing so they actually seem to transcend them."²²

It is a forced argument, recommended more by its unexpectedness than by its specious logic and questionable accuracy. Spilka's own illustrations from Dickens's "comic villains" can be here invoked against him. Are Fagin and Gradgrind and Grandfather Smallweed "supremely aware of their own fixations?" Are they not rather totally defined by those fixations and consequently incapable of transcending anything? And is not Spilka mired in a rather basic confusion of character awareness and reader awareness? Surely Bleak House and Pemby and Son, for example, to which Spilka makes recurrent reference, must persuade any reader that Dickens gives us a vast gallery of characters harshly circumscribed.

And that, furthermore, even when moments of self-awareness glimmer through to them, as with Richard Carstone, or Skimpole, or Dombey himself, these moments are hardly "supreme" and scarcely capable of generating transcendence.

But Spilka is forced into a Procrustean logic precisely because he must make Dickens fit into a narrow view of fictional art that judges characterization by a geometric touchstone of flatness and roundness. In order to redeem Dickens from the taint of the former, he must attempt a reconstruction and a rehabilitation of the characters not supported by their appearance or performance in Dickens's novels. Secondly, the coupling of Dickens and Kafka, unless it takes cognizance of the movement and evolution in the art of fiction, must inevitably run aground in the understandable divergence of the cultural-philosophical-aesthetic contexts which conditioned those works. Spilka says: "In sum, the lines of continuity between our cheerful, readable Victorian forebears and our neurotic, difficult moderns are thick and strong...we may explore that fiction of both periods together for the severe disruptions it exposes, and for the variety of means by which creative artists mend them."²³ All granted. Nevertheless, the sum of our psychological insights and parallels will be themselves distorted and to some degree nullified unless we can knowledgeably distinguish between psychological and sociological "disruptions," on the one hand, and views of human destiny and narrative art which

occasion certain artistic dislocation, and do in fact prompt them, on the other hand. It is in other words dangerous to ignore in such an account Kafka's proximity -- in both content and form -- to existential contingency, and Dicken's relative distance from it. The movement Spilka traces may indeed be from Dickens to Dostoevsky to Kafka, but it is an evolution, with the possibilities of narrative art at each juncture undergoing readjustment and refocusing.

We have been advancing the argument that Meredith signals the assertion in fiction of a new sensibility in which ambiguity, paradox, unpredictability, and contingency predominate. We have also advanced the argument that only in the novel can these qualities emerge since only in the novel did that freedom from restrictive convention become manifest. Nevertheless, it has been true that the history of characterization in the novel was for a long time an escape from freedom. Characters were polarized around various ethical emblems or standards and did not travel any great distance sufficient to obscure their allegiance or identification.

Of novelists writing before the middle of the nineteenth century, it is of course Jane Austen and not Dickens, who threatens to tumble my neat classification. But even with Jane Austen the statement may be shown to hold true. For even though her characters exhibit a relatively great narrative independence -- or at any rate her main characters -- they

deviate from a known and secured moral point. Elizabeth Bennet may be self-righteous and Emma Woodhouse may be a bitch. But the ideal moral location of even these characters is not left for a moment in doubt nor is the fact that they can eventually discover their true and proper characters. The world is thus an absolutely arranged world, and while behavior may be aberrational, the aberrations are described to us rather than explained. For explanation is not possible except in equally moral, ordained terms. There is, to return to the key term, nothing contingent. Thus the remedies are inherent in the maladies themselves: for ignorance, knowledge; for pride, humility; etc. Once the necessary tonic has been prescribed and taken, the fictional world can realize its potential and impending symmetry.

The neatness and tidiness of the denouement in Miss Austen's novels is emblematic of the order and the "necessity" of order that marks the characterizations themselves. Although in Emma, Miss Austen set herself the challenge of creating a heroine out of a character the reader would not normally like, she does not qualify Emma by making her "ambiguous," "ambivalent," or "paradoxically conflicted" as a means of purchasing the reader's sympathy. There is nothing inconsistent in Emma's behavior. Within the confines of characterization as "necessity" Miss Austen does beautiful things and she is unquestionably a more finished novelist than Meredith. But in regard to the complexity of character,

Meredith offers us a greater insight and variety, and even dexterity.

Arnold Kettle in his Introduction to the English Novel -- and before him Lukacs²⁴ -- have pointed out that what separates the eighteenth from the nineteenth-century novel is the accepted order of society in the eighteenth-century novel. Kettle goes on to say that it is true even for Jane Austen in general and for Emma in particular.²⁵ Resolution can then be effected in a totally satisfying manner which we have just referred to as the realization of a potential and inherent symmetry. The pattern, then, of the eighteenth century novel from "deviation" to "conformity" in an ordered chain of being reveals not only the movement of the plot; it reveals and sets out the limits of characterization possible within this conceptual pattern.

But Miss Austen is still anchored in a classical conception of order and necessity which frees the notion of necessity from a barren and sterile mechanistic equation. Further, this classical view gives the tone of her irony a flexibility, an independence, and a freedom from self-consciousness. Miss Austen does not have to justify her basic tendencies; they are justified by the experience and wisdom of history. The ironic sensibility therefore is free to comment, to qualify, and to constantly mediate within that ordered world of hers. On the other hand, she can "get away with" expressing certain moral precepts which would completely

annihilate another novelist, and possibly defeat a whole novel's worth of artifice. Kettle's instance of Mr. Knightly talking to Emma after the Box Hill Episode is excellent. "My Emma," he says, "does not everything serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with one another?"²⁶ What saves the novel from just crumpling at this point is the fact that neither Mr. Knightly nor Miss Austen must trumpet the statement. It can be made with no self-consciousness whatsoever -- for it is no more than the explicit expression of what is accepted and acknowledged in Miss Austen's fictional world.

To continue, though, when we leave the safety and security of the ordered, classical world of Emma, both behavior and morality must necessarily become problematical with the sometimes excruciating seriousness either of a Richardson or a George Eliot as a consequence. The comments of Kettle at this point are I think extremely germane.

It is important, I think, to recognize the link between the weaknesses of Middlemarch and the limitations of George Eliot's philosophy. For there are two sorts of weakness in the novel which at first appear unrelated and even antithetical. In the first place there is a tendency toward a certain flatness or heaviness...associated with her somewhat static view of society and morality. In the second place there is the element of unresolved emotionalism involved in the Dorothea-Ladislaw relationship. The two weaknesses are not, in fact, contradictory; but rather two sides of the same coin. It is the very inadequacy of her mechanistic philosophy, its failure to incorporate a dialectical sense of contradiction and motion, that drives George Eliot to treat the aspirations of Dorothea idealistically.²⁷

The characterizations of Jane Austen are hardly dialectical. But the ordered repose of her world and the repose of its morality does permit a dialogue between her characters and her ironic sensibility. Eliot's world is not in repose; its morality is not ordered; and since the characters must themselves create that morality, it is not enough for them to be merely the expression and embodiment of an aspiring or crushed idealism, or on the other hand, the embodiment of an aspiring or crushed materialism. Without the abrasive of paradox and inconsistency, without accommodating recalcitrant fact and ambiguous contingency, the novelist becomes a self-indulgent sentimentalist whose characters are incapable of bearing the required moral burden. This, with some extension, is Kettle's judgment regarding the defects of Middlemarch, which he nonetheless regards as a great work.

But whether or not we accept Kettle's valuation as just or as tainted by Marxist prejudgment, we must surely recognize that his reference to the "dialectical sense of contradiction and motion" isolates the new view of behavior and the new sensibility in the creation of character. What may dramatize this difference most vividly is the juxtaposition of a character of Austen, of Eliot, and of Meredith. We can even use such a stock character as the female social climber as the point of departure. We have one in Mrs. Elton of Emma and we have another in Evan Harrington's sister, the Countess of Saladar. Perhaps the very difficulty in find-

ing a character to match these in the works of George Eliot bespeaks the precise inadequacy of characterization we have been discussing. But in lieu of a more vivid character we will put up Rosamund Vincy as a surrogate.

The portrait of Mrs. Elton is one of the brilliant high points in Emma. She is such a horror that she becomes a kind of delight -- like "high camp." If Miss Austen did the job on the minister in Mr. Collins of Pride and Prejudice she has completed the match with Mrs. Elton of Emma. Here we have the two ladies at the close of their first meeting. Mrs. Elton is offering her assessment of some of Emma's dearest friends:

"We have been calling at Randalls" said she, "and found them both at home; and very pleasant people they seem to be. I like them extremely. Mr. Weston seems an excellent creature -- quite a first-rate favourite with me already, I assure you. And she appears so truly good -- there is something so motherly and kind-hearted about her, that it wins upon one directly. She was your governess, I think?"

Emma was almost too much astonished to answer; but Mrs. Elton hardly waited for the affirmative before she went on.

"Having understood as much, I was rather astonished to find her so very lady-like! But she is really quite the gentlewoman."

"Mrs. Weston's manners," said Emma, "were always particularly good. Their propriety, simplicity, and elegance, would make them the safest model for any young woman."

"And who do you think came in while we were there?"

Emma was quite at a loss. The tone implied some old acquaintance -- and how could she possibly guess?

"Knightley!" continued Mrs. Elton; -- "Knightley himself! -- Was not it lucky? -- for, not being within when he called the other day, I had never seen him before; and of course, as so particular a

friend of Mr. E's, I had a great curiosity. 'My friend Knightley' had been so often mentioned, that I was really impatient to see him; and I must do my caro sposo the justice to say that he need not be ashamed of his friend. Knightley is quite the gentleman. I like him very much. Decidedly, I think, a very gentleman-like man."

Happily it was now time to be gone. They were off; and Emma could breathe.

"Insufferable woman!" was her immediate exclamation. "Worse than I had supposed. Absolutely insufferable! Knightley! -- I could not have believed it. Knightley! -- never seen him in her life before, and call him Knightley! -- and discover that he is a gentleman! A little upstart, vulgar being, with her Mr. E., and her caro sposo, and her resources, and all her airs of pert pretension and under-bred finery. Actually to discover that Mr. Knightley is a gentleman! I doubt whether he will return the compliment, and discover her to be a lady."28

It is a remarkable portrait and its precision is merciless. There we have Mrs. Elton all the more remarkably rendered because everything she is, her complete behavior is contained in that scene -- the affectation, the presumption, the vulgarity, the meanness of spirit. Emma may be astonished at "this person" during their first meeting, but clearly after seeing the worst, she will not again be surprised by her. She is actually quite right, in her summation of Mrs. Elton. It would seem as if Miss Austen has her anatomize the character, just in case the reader has missed any detail of it. For the comicality of Mrs. Elton after our first exposure to her will depend not on any surprises, but on her complete predictability.

The case of Rosamund Vincy in Middlemarch is quite, quite different. She is vain, selfish, ignorant, cold, beautiful, opportunistic. But she is each of these in so singleminded and "thin" a way as to be finally not worth

attention. Perhaps a more accurate assessment would be that her character is neither large enough to bear any external comicality, nor complex enough to reveal any play from within. Her position in the novel is so reduced that she becomes a unit, a single, unequivocal object of moral condemnation. Her "action" in the novel is to accomplish the degradation and humiliation of a potentially fine and noble man who becomes through her fatally crippled by weakness. That being the case one might wonder whether it is indeed possible for Eliot to do anything else with Rosamund.

But the argument from plot is, as I hope I have shown, a spurious one. For I have isolated these individual characters in order to show not only a force of characterization based on freedom, necessity, or contingency, but to show that the predominant mode of approach has an organic relationship to all the characters and to plot. Broaden or complicate Rosamund and you broaden and complicate that whole segment of Middlemarch, which in the case of the Rosamund-lydgate relationship would hardly be amiss. We must therefore say, though with little originality, that the greatness of Middlemarch rests in the last analysis on the panoramic sweep of its "study of provincial life" and less on the adequacy of any particular view within the panorama. One has only to compare Rosamund with Helene in War and Peace, of whom she is a diminished resemblance, to see not only the possibilities of even limited characters but an organic

relationship to the depth and richness of plot.

Furthermore, if we look at the novelistic handling of say the Dodson sisters in The Mill on the Floss, where the opportunity surely exists for either a broadness or a complication of character, i.e., for either an external or an internal comicality, we see that George Eliot consistently turns away from the human intensification whose largeness or complexity might endanger the thematic foundations of her work.²⁹ If there is a narrative uniformity to the novels of George Eliot, an absence of the dramatic, a moderated philosophical sureness, it is Miss Eliot's ignoring or inability to accept the axiomatic nature of fiction.

There are three positions or locations of informing narrative in the novel: scene, summary, and statement. The last, statement, designates the conceptual unity, the rational and intellectual meaning of the action, the theme which is always a reduction of experience and event, the attempt at "comprehension," in both meanings of that word. Summary is a mid-way point between event and mind. It describes action and in the process of description qualifies, cultivates and domesticates it to mind. Scene is the attempt at rendering the act itself, as close to the event as it can come, and is the least susceptible to the tame comprehension of mind, the least tidy, predictable, or conceptual. One of the dynamics of fiction is the movement or the stasis created by the "pull" of these three narrative "fields." But not in George Eliot. Event is never recalcitrant or larger than

theme and consequently, or as a parallel phenomenon, character is not excessive or unmanageable.

An interesting though unintentional corroboration of this "singleness of vision" in George Eliot comes from Barbara Hardy's study of her novels.³⁰ Interestingly enough, Miss Hardy points out Eliot's view of "personal destiny as something fixed and determined"³¹ and also relates this tendency to the statement "from Novalis -- 'Character is destiny' --" much as we discussed in reference to Dickens earlier. She then makes a passing reference to Eliot's letters which reveal "a stage...in which her imagination played with possibility...."³² After asserting that these alternate possibilities are felt in the novels, Miss Hardy tries to argue that they modify the irrevocable quality of the destinies and constitute formal structural forces which comment on the actual events and choices so as to widen the ambiguities and complicate the ironies, etc. As evidence that Eliot had this cast of mind and interest, Miss Hardy invokes a passage from the Mill on the Floss light enough, in that heavy-handed book, to be worth repeating here.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation for sanity notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms toward the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law.³³

To which Miss Hardy adds, "...George Eliot would have written

Hamlet with this alternative life in mind, having a ghostly presence within the actuality of event, and playing some part in the final impression."³⁴

Without belittling some of the interesting patterns that are yielded through this enlargement, one must nevertheless ask whether it is prompted by a rather basic confusion. The passage Miss Hardy quotes from The Mill on the Floss is witty and clever. But its wit and cleverness derive from a significant truth: that ordinarily we cannot conceive of Hamlet middle-aged, with an old father, and having mild in-law troubles. It is inconceivable because the richness and complexity of the given situation, the rendered drama, annihilates the possibility of its being reconstructed in any other terms. The divergence and range of contingent possibilities within the presented fiction or drama should be so compelling and intertwined that alternative possibilities -- as in the case of Hamlet -- do not even enter into the question. Once the reader can begin to speculate beyond the ordained possibilities of the author's given world, it would seem to threaten seriously the integrity of that world. I can think of only one play in which almost any reader indulges in this kind of "If...." phantasy -- and this is Othello, not Hamlet. But that is a play in which the cynical horror is so intense and so painful, that just for relief the reader escapes into a momentary sentimentality of "If...." while knowing quite well that an alternative possibility

would destroy the work. There can be in a work of art no other "if's" than those explored and the greater the work the less the possibility. What can we possibly say to Oedipus Rex, for example, except "If Oedipus had only not been born!" which is what Sophocles has already put into the mouth of the chorus.

At the same time, after saying all this, we must rather agree with Miss Hardy when she says, "There is something very like the appearance of alternative destiny within the 'Irrevocable' and finished book. There is a strong and deliberate suggestion of the possible lives her characters might have lived."³⁵ Yes, there does seem to be this suggestion of alternative possibility in Maggie and Lydgate and Hetty, but rather than revealing a narrative strength it would seem to betray exactly that narrative weakness we remarked upon above. Fiction, we have been attempting to stress, should usurp all the possibilities, and it should do so by a complexity that crowds out alternatives. The novel must be, ideally, the complete analogy. But when it falsifies its necessary allegiance to event and factual complexity, when it cuts the last corner on inconsistency and multifariousness, it becomes to that extent not fiction, but that sole member of the fictional triad which we called statement. Unfortunately, statement alone is not an analogy to reality, but a reduction of it. A character born under the dominant aegis of Statement is therefore not an event but the illustration of a thesis. And a thesis, we know, contains its own antithesis, for this is

the only way the abstraction can exist with some relation to life and to the living event. That hovering possibility of an alternative destiny over the characters of George Eliot, which Miss Hardy has accurately noted, is produced by the inevitable dialecticism which Eliot was not able to incorporate into their portrayals. She must consequently suffer and not rejoice in the antithetical possibilities commenting upon her characters from without. Casaubon and Mr. Brooke, for example, are not among those haunted by "the ghost" of alternative possibility. And what saves them is a different authorial comicality in each case.

The Countess de Saldar is one of Meredith's greatest comic creations -- so that I am most certainly loading the dice in favor of my novelist by selecting her as a contender against Mrs. Elton or Rosamund Vincy. However, it would be grossly inept not to take her as a representative of Meredith's comic mode of characterization. And as far as fairness is concerned, it may be quite significant that while comic characters abound in nineteenth-century fiction there are none -- putting aside Meredith's own Richmond Roy -- of quite her stature and certainly none that inhabit the center of a novel and dominate it. Evan Harrington in perhaps its most important sense, is the chronicle of her transcendence. Not since Tristram Shandy and not again till Bloom of Joyce's

Ulysses has the corrosive of irony been so at liberty upon a major character. The most amazing aspect of the performance is that Meredith has brought it off successfully within the framework of a conventional novel.³⁶

I can hardly do better than to introduce the "matter" of Evan Harrington by setting down the sentence with which Meredith opens the chronicle. "Long after the hours when tradesmen are in the habit of commencing business, the shutters of a certain shop in the town of Lympport-on-the Sea remained significantly closed, and it became known that death had taken Mr. Melchisedec Harrington, and struck one off the list of living tailors." There are a number of narrative oddities about this opening -- even aside from the authorial perversity which prompts Meredith to entitle the first chapter of a novel as if he were flinging a dare in the face of his readers: "Above Buttons." There is Shandean malice and irony in using death rather than birth as the narrative gambit, although in another sense it is perfectly justified since it is the ghost of Melchisedec Harrington, the hybrid gentleman-tailor, which is source and catalyst of the action. Thus, ambiguously, it may be the main character -- as a corpse -- that makes the first entrance. Secondly, while the name Melchisedec Meredith is hardly more believable as the appellation of a tailor, one would expect a novelist, normally, to be interested in the decorum of realism rather than its actuality, especially a writer who

had certain sensitivities regarding the trade of his father and grandfather. But clearly Meredith's delight in the unlikelihood of his grandfather's name is too great to permit a milder and more anonymous substitution.

Thirdly, there is the irony of tone and language. The shutters of a tailor shop, Mr. Meredith tells us, are "significantly closed." We might show a fine contempt at such "significance," were we not already discomfitted by the title of the chapter, and, further, somewhat amazed that the temporal locus and orientation which we must accept if we are to have any at all, is the demeaning timetable based on the commercial habits of tradesmen. Nor is our vanity saved when we are informed with biblical or epic grandness "that death had...struck one off the list of living tailors." For were the dynamic of the narrative that of the mock-heroic all might be well for the reader's security. But the success of the mock-epic requires a stability, a tacit understanding between author and reader that they share a set of values which exist unthreatened outside the arena of the satiric work. No such comforting assuming can be extorted from Meredith. On the contrary, the beginning of that deceptively innocent sentence throws us inexorably into the company of tradesmen, and if we are ever to emerge from that spiritually stifling condition it must be by dint of exertion and agonizing, like the very characters of the tale, and not by any easy, supercilious smugness. Furthermore, how comfortable can we be or are we asked to be in the presence of death?

How comfortable can even the mock-heroic be when the first object it encounters is a dead man? Is not our first and natural reaction that of hushed reverence at the death of anyone -- even a tradesman? What we have in the sentence, then, is a set of loosed ricocheting ironies. The connotation, the tone of the statement threaten and undercut the stability of any conventional perspective.

One of Meredith's favorite satiric devices is language itself, and he uses it at the beginning as if to underline for us the gap between the life of tradesmen and his dignified, serious terms. It is always so for Meredith. He is constantly aware of the grave, serious, monumental quality of language, and consequently of the ridiculousness and folly of applying such logical, monolithic statements to human beings. His use of words is always a withdrawal into the rigidity of language and the density of his sentences dramatizes the clumsiness of language in rendering not-language. But it is especially the case here. To speak of tradesmen as if one were speaking of nobility, to scrutinize their commercial habits, to speak of a deviation from the commercial pattern as significant -- all this is ironic rather than satiric, for it strikes at the writer more than anyone else. It is self-directed.

The high acidity of the opening irony is ameliorated or partially neutralized by a partial rationale for our attention in this case, an extenuating circumstance, so to speak -- the circumstance of death and the fact of its

equalizing force, "...death had taken Mr. Melchisedec Harrington." The attendant ironies even of that statement we have already remarked on. But it is nothing to the redoubled impact of "and struck one off the list of living tailors." For not only does this last clause careen off the preceeding one, it does so in such a harsh way as to turn and refocus the first.

Nor should we stop here if we are describing "the Progress" of this irony in Meredith's narrative mode. "The demise of a respectable member of this class," he tells us next, "does not ordinarily create a profound sensation." Exactly what, we must ask, is a "respectable tailor?" Or even more pointedly, what is an "un-respectable tailor?" Are not these terms actually inapplicable to that species? We seem to be at the mercy of a nervous irony -- never at rest, always shifting, and worst of all with a compulsion to undercut irresponsibly any and every statement.

And how well the rest of the paragraph bears out the legitimacy of our uneasiness. For in the last half of the paragraph Meredith seems to have settled down -- at least for him -- to describing the paradox of the late Melchisedec Harrington, the tailor who was called "the Great Mel." Our misgivings are lulled because the contradiction is rendered in terms of paradox and this, we feel, should satisfy that omnivorous, obsessive irony. "He was a tailor," Meredith begins the conclusion, "and he kept horses; he was a tailor, and he had gallant adventures; he was a tailor and he shook

hands with his customers. Finally, he was a tradesman, and he never was known to have sent a bill." And now come the last words of high praise. "Such a person comes but once in a generation, and, when he goes, men miss the man as well as their money."³⁷

The treachery of the satire here is really a double one. The peculiarity of the ironic pattern is not merely that Meredith could not resist this opportunity for undercutting, but the moral grounds from which he undercuts. In other words, the implied discrepancy throughout the whole paragraph, the one which Meredith has been working, has been between the name and the person, between the aristocrat and the tailor, between the significant world and the trade shop. Great Mel's greatest vulnerability is his presumption. And Meredith has hardly ignored this ironic possibility of ambiguity and enlargement. In the last statement, therefore, the ironic shift is all the more unexpected and bewildering. For Meredith's sardonic comment derives not from Mel's not being a real aristocrat, but on the contrary from the vaguely contradictory grounds of his not being a good tradesman. The values have been turned inside out; the moral ground to which the preceding ironies had accustomed us is pulled from under our feet. Meredith insists on working both sides of the street.

We can justify the ploy structurally by remarking that it returns us to the world of trade with which the paragraph opened, and whose ethical integrity is of fundamental

importance in the novel. We can justify the paragraph organically by observing that the sliding, criss-crossing ironies provide the sole rhetorical analogy to accommodate and organize complexity, incessant qualification, and contradiction. We can justify the mode novelistically by asserting once more that the novelist must have the freedom of Testament and liberty from our nostalgia for naive and simple formulations.

All the justifications notwithstanding, the demand on the reader to hold his judgments in suspension is a taxing one. At one extreme, the mode is Shandean. But Sterne has the unquestionable advantage of pushing that demand for suspension toward the center of his work. The juggling of contingencies and the attendant impatience and frustration become, in a sense, the thematic core of a narrative that is so contingent it can never be completed. Much to the right of Sterne, asserting a tentative completeness and pattern, is Henry James. But contingency still dominates the mode of Jamesian narrative. A distressing number of modifiers, qualifications, and parenthetical insertions still precede the substantive in his sentence, and one must read at least one hundred pages of the Wings of the Dove before the action is sufficiently qualified to begin revealing pattern. But James's devotion to the contingent receives its warrant from the psychological unity of its framework. James deals with the subtleties of the mind and its workings. Or to put the matter negatively, he takes a solipsistic "cop-out."

Meredith may be the first and the last major novelist who attempts to balance the factual and the contingent, who attempts to accommodate both external circumstance and the possibility of pattern, who believes -- like Hegel (and like Hegel the last) -- that the organization of history is possible. He may be the first and last to believe that history must be rendered with accuracy in its patterning and with faithfulness to its contingency. There is absolutely no question in Meredith -- as we remarked above -- regarding the importance of the objective, of the shared event.

The anatomizing of the first paragraph of Evan Harrington with its clashing ironies, is probably the most apt prelude to the anatomizing of a Meredith character. But having introduced the "great Mel" we should first outline the situation in which those who have survived him must move. Evan Harrington is a novel about the four children of Melchisedec Harrington, and primarily, or at least nominally, about his one son, the youngest of the four. The three daughters of Mel have followed the un-tailorlike model of their father and have risen above the shop by contracting marriages of social elevation. The first daughter, Caroline, married an army officer. She was the first and it was the best she could do. The second Harriet, working from the achievement of her sister, was able to ensnare a wealthy brewer -- an M.P. to boot. From this strategic eminence, it is inevitable that the third daughter ascend into another realm or condition. The potential of her position is

magnificently realized by her marriage to the Portuguese Count de Saldar. It is she who assumes responsibility for her younger brother's future, desiring that he should carry on the tradition of his sisters. And for this end she has arranged and planned his eventual marriage to Rose Joycelyn, heiress, and daughter of a lord.

The scheme is disturbed by the death of the Great Mel and the legacy of debt which he has left behind. In honor of the memory of his father and in obedience to the strong mindedness of his mother, Mrs. Mel, young Evan accepts the responsibility for repaying all the creditors. The path of honor, however -- especially for Mrs. Mel -- leads directly back into the tailor shop, and Evan among other humiliations must submit to his own name being painted on the sign over his father's shop. But his trials and ordeals, including his eventual apprenticeship to the petty Mr. Goren, are for Meredith a necessary part of Evan's education. The pettiness of Mr. Goren, sickening as he may be in both his smugness and subservience, finds many counterparts in the pettiness at Beckley Court, during the long interlude which takes up the bulk of the book.

What Evan must learn is to avoid the pettiness of any class. Having escaped the smallness of the tradesman (which is less to be condemned because it has less options) he must unlearn the smallness of the aristocrat. That is not to say that one must abolish distinctions and embrace a doctrine that "the mind is its own place." The mind is certainly not its own place. How infinitely preferable to walk the

lawns of Beckley Court with one's beloved Rose than to stand behind the counter of a shop in London. But the preference should be based on a recognition of the realities, not on the soft sentimentalities of prejudices. Once Evan has come to terms with his own situation, including its portion of tailor-hood, once his decisions can be based on seeing realistic priorities, Meredith allows him to rise. Despite Meredith's ironic tone, Evan has served an apprenticeship to more than tailoring.

Notwithstanding all my efforts, you see, the poor boy is thrust into the shop. There he is, without a doubt. He sleeps under Mr. Goren's roof; he (since one cannot be too positive in citing the punishment of such a Pagan) stands behind a counter; he (and, oh! choke, young loves, that have hovered around him! shrink from him in natural horror, gentle ladies!) handles the shears.

If you can think him human enough still to care to know how he feels it, I must tell you that he feels it hardly at all. After a big blow, a very little one scarcely counts. What are outward forms and social ignominies to him whose heart has been struck to the dust?³⁸

The position of the Countess de Saldar in this novel of "the tailor re-tailored"³⁹ is so central that she threatens at times to take over the book, and may in fact do so. She is responsible for almost all the action of the novel and represents in her thinking and behavior all the sentimentalities that Meredith condemns. Unbearably affected, pretentious, scheming, snobbish, malicious, lying, devious, and selfish, she could easily have degenerated into merely a thematic pawn of her author. And even so, the immense

energy with which she has been drawn and invested would have raised her to an eminence above Mrs. Elton of Emma.

But to condemn her sentimentality and to indulge his own is for Meredith the unpardonable sin of fiction. The same ironic movement we perceived in Meredith's narrative and action, is constantly at work on the Countess and is in this case employed in undercutting the purely thematic consistency of the Countess's nature. The outrageous affectation of this daughter of a tailor, the artificial and cultivated hauteur, are displayed for us in the very first scene as the Countess is discussing Evan's future with her own sisters. Even in the safety of this company, Meredith tells us, she speaks "in a languid alien accent."

He can walk, my dears, certainly, and talk -- a little. Tete-a-tete, I do not say. I should think there he would be -- a stick. All you English are. But what sort of a bow has he got, I ask you? How does he enter a room? And then his smile! his laugh! He laughs like a horse, absolutely! There's no music in his smile. Oh! you should see a Portuguese nobleman smile. O mio Deus! honeyed, my dears! But Evan has it not. None of you English have. You go so.⁴⁰

Incredibly pretentious and even preposterous for the daughter of a tailor. And Meredith has already taken pains to remind us that this person speaking is one of the three "daughters of the shears."⁴¹ The constant affected disdain of the oft-repeated "you English," the foreign phrases, the pointless and fabricated anecdotes that are an opportunity of name-dropping, the exaggerated pretence of shock at the smallest hint of vulgarity (which is in itself a vulgarity),

we know the Countess by all these. She is presented time after time by an irony that fixes these traits indelibly in our mind, so that we see her as part of the tradition in which Miss Austen's Mrs. Elton resides but so much more grandly that the force and determination of her personality verge on the heroic and begin to excite admiration. When Lady Jocelyn refers to the Great Mel as "that magnificent snob" and "that efflorescence of sublime imposture" we can recognize in the description Louisa Harrington, his daughter, the Countess de Saldar de Sancorvo.

But it is impossible to view that Countess as either a contemptible snob or a scheming adventuress. Meredith has given her qualities and burdened her with a self-consciousness and even a wit that defy the labels. The Countess is that peculiar Meredithian mixture of the "sentimental" and "non-sentimental" whose various combinations account in part for the great diversity of human nature. If the Countess has a hysterical abhorrence for tailorship or tailordom, it is at least paralleled in the novel by the heroine's (Rose's) contempt for the tradesman, and in the economy of the novel each qualifies and comments upon the other. One extends a limited pardon to Rose's prejudice, founded on ignorance, as it is, and the acceptance of a social prejudice. By the same token, then, the existence of that prejudice must mitigate our judgment of the Countess's dissimulation. The ideal character would have declared herself and fought the battle on those grounds -- and without Evan's vacillations.

But amused though the author and the reader may be by the vanities of human behavior and its consequences, there can hardly follow from this amusement a moral demand for consistent, ideal action.

As a matter of fact, that possibility is also anticipated and undercut by Meredith. He creates a Lady Jocelyn who has also risen in the social scale by virtue of her marriage. Yet she is gracious, charitable, accepting of her past and her origins, clever and rational. There is little if any of the sentimental in her character. Above all else, Lady Jocelyn is just. But in a contingent and paradoxical universe, justice and reason have also their ironic underside. And this "Philosophic Lady" with a "masculine" intellect, who "never relied on her feelings," is too detached and cold. "In fact, she was a veritable philosopher. She permitted her fellows to move the world on as they would, and had no other passions in the contemplation of the show than a cultured audience will usually exhibit."⁴²

Part of our admiration of the Countess, then, in this ironic and contingent world, arises from the resolution and determination with which she has embraced her found or self-created opportunities. She has, in other words, succeeded -- and with a magnificent completeness. This is no ordinary social climber; it is someone who has "arrived." There is nothing small or petty about her. She may have agreed to raise her children in the Catholic Church. She may refuse to attend her father, the tailor's funeral. But like a

general -- a title which Meredith constantly applies to her -- she has judged the situation and made her sacrifices. It is the Lymport gossips --Meredith tells us -- who call her first decision "paying the devil for her pride," as if to underline for us the source of such calumny and how far beneath the grandeur of the Countess it must remain:

The Countess was immensely admired, and though her sisters said that she was "foreignized" overmuch, they clung to her desperately. She seemed so entirely to have eclipsed tailordom, of "Demogorgon," as the Countess was pleased to call it. Who could suppose this grand-mannered lady, with her coroneted anecdotes and delicious breeding, the daughter of that thing? It was not possible to suppose it. It seemed to defy the fact itself.⁴³

But we admire and even sympathize with the Countess not only because of her success, but -- paradoxically -- because of her vulnerability, her living constantly in danger of discovery. Even she must unburden herself as she speaks to her sisters.

Safe from the whispers, my dears; the ceaseless dread? If you knew what I have to endure! I sometimes envy you.... I was at dinner at your English embassy a month ago, and there was Admiral Combleman...who was Admiral at Lymport formerly. I knew him at once, and thought, oh! what shall I do! My heart was like a lump of lead. I would have given worlds that we might one of us have smothered the other. I had to sit beside him -- it always happens! Thank Heavens! he did not identify me. And then he told an anecdote of Papa. It was the dreadful old 'Bath' story. I thought I should have died. I could not but fancy the Admiral suspected. Was it not natural? And what do you think I had the audacity to do? I asked him coolly, whether the Mr. Harrington he mentioned was not the son of Sir Abraham Harrington, of Torquay -- the gentleman who lost his yacht in the Lisbon waters last year? I brought it on myself. 'Gentlemen, ma'am --

Ma'am!" says the horrid old creature, laughing,
 -- 'gentleman! he's a " I cannot speak
 it! I choke! And then he began praising Papa.
 Diacho! What I suffered. But you know I can
 keep my countenance, if I perish.⁴⁴

The Countess can indeed keep her countenance, as she proves later in the novel under more trying circumstances.

What Meredith reveals to us in this speech also is another dimension to the Countess's character. "What do you think I had the audacity to do?" she asks. And the question reveals an intelligence, and an ability to estimate herself and to take her own measure. Life may be highly serious game as far as the Countess is concerned, and she may participate in all the distorted social values, but she is not so much at their mercy as to forget that it is a game, or to falsely estimate her ability as a player. She may appear ridiculous to us when on board ship returning from Portugal to England she remonstrates with Evan for not having seized the opportunity of declaring his passion for Rose. But that is because sincerity has become a luxury she can no longer afford. It is by no means stupidity or hysteria. In the next passage the Countess demonstrates how very finely she has calculated her effect upon Melville Jocelyn, how much he fears the clinging dependency of her entourage, and by recognizing Melville's increasing alienation, is able to exploit it for at least Evan's benefit.

Nor is the Countess often wrong in her analysis of others, at least in her negative evaluations. "As for your poor husband, Harriet!" she says speaking of Andrew Cogglesby,

"one really has to remember his excellent qualities to forgive him, poor man!" The comment may seem extremely and disdainfully unkind, particularly before we meet poor Andrew, but it is an admissible reaction to his kind, well-intentioned weak-mindedness. Furthermore, we can have no objection whatsoever to her description of Major Strike. "And that stiff bandbox of a man of yours, Caroline!...he looks as if he were all angles and sections, and were taken to pieces every night and put together in the morning. He may be a good soldier -- good anything you will -- but, Diabol! to be married to that! He is not civilized."⁴⁵ Again the Countess is right; the Major is indeed an uncivilized martinet.

Unquestionably, the Countess's skill in reading character is debased by the utilitarian ends to which she puts it -- in exploitation and manipulation. Through it she reduces Harry Jocelyn to the level of her vassal -- and to do her justice takes little pride in the accomplishment. Through it she influences Mrs. Bonner in bequeathing the legacy of Beckley Court to Juliana, and thus indirectly to Evan. Through it she controls and diverts the outrage of a betrayed husband, preventing the outbreak of scandal at Beckley Court and causing Lady Jocelyn to say of the Harringtons, "'Upon my honor...they are a remarkable family.'"⁴⁶ It is, in other words, a dangerous attribute for a novelist to bestow on a character whom he wishes to show as ridiculous, misguided, and finally excluded by her own vanities.

The Countess's insights are not just generally correct; they reveal a sensitivity and an acuity regarding human nature which are psychologically valid. When Juliana Bonner comes ailing and dying to London in the throes of her passion for Evan, it is the Countess again who reads her correctly, if not cynically. "...she is enamoured of his person. These little unhealthy persons are always attracted by the person. She thinks it to be Evan's qualities. I know better; it is his person."⁴⁷ And Meredith some fifteen pages later, as if taking the cue from the Countess's observation, comments, "The Countess was right in her judgment of Juliana's love. Juliana looked very little to his [Evan's] qualities...Guilt did not spoil his beauty to her; his gentleness and glowing manhood were unchanged; and when she knew him as he was, the revelation of his high nature simply confirmed her impression of his physical perfections."⁴⁸

This novel, we might almost say, maketh indeed strange bedfellows. It were as if Thackeray were to second an opinion of Becky Sharpe's, Fielding side with Lady Bellaston or Dickens find alliance with Lady Toppins. Except that these are false analogies. For in the contingent, ironic, commingled world of Meredith's presentation, we can rarely if ever find a clean separation between good and evil as in Thackeray or Fielding or Dickens. Look at the Countess in one way and you see an immoralist, a scheming adventuress. Readjust your sights to some degree and you must, as Meredith points out, "accept in the Countess the heroine who is

combatting class-prejudices, and surely she is pre-eminently noteworthy."⁴⁹

Repeatedly Meredith seems to delight or feels compelled to qualify and reverse the view in which the Countess is held. If the distance has been maintained so as to make visible her peculiarities, he shortens it and brings us closer to sympathy. Conversely, when the perspective has been too close and there may be danger of our taking the Countess too seriously, Meredith shifts to a telescopic view. Even such an obvious affectation as the Countess's pretentious speech is not allowed to remain at rest in a ridiculous light. We find Rose and one of the other characters taking advantage of the parodic possibilities of the Countess's speech.

...Drummond mimicking the lady: "In verity, she is most melifluous!" while Rose sugared her lips and leaned gracefully forward with "De Saldar, let me petition you -- since we must endure our title -- since it is not to be your Louisa?"⁵⁰

But Meredith has Lady Jocelyn interrupt and qualify the Countess's affected mannerism:

"You're too hard upon the Countess. The female euphuist is not to be met with every day. It's a different kind from the Precieuse. She is not a Precieuse. She has made a capital selection of her vocabulary from Johnson, and does not work it badly, if we may judge from Harry and Melville. Euphuism in 'woman' is the popular ideal of a Duchess. She has it by nature, or she has studied it; and if so, you must respect her abilities."⁵¹

Possibly the best example to illustrate in limited compass the various stations of acceptance in our view of the

Countess and in Meredith's rendering can be seen in the letter which the author has her write to her sister Harriet. It moves within a few lines from the Countess as the fun-maker, to the Countess as the object of the fun-making.

Mr. Parsley spoke very beautifully...last Sunday in the morning service. A little too much through his nose, perhaps; but the poor young man's nose is a great organ, and we will not cast it in his teeth more than nature has done. I said so to my diplomatist, who was amused. If you are sparkingly vulgar with the English, you are aristocratic. Oh! what principle we women require in the thorny walk of life. I can show you a letter when we meet that will astonish humdrum. Not so diplomatic as the writer thought! Mrs. Melville (sweet woman!) must continue to practise civility; for a woman who is a wife, my dear, in verity, she lives in a glass house, and let her fling no stones. 'Let him who is without sin.' How beautiful that Christian sentiment! I hope I shall be pardoned, but it always seems to me that what we have to endure is infinitely worse than any other suffering, for you find no comfort for the children of T-----s in Scripture, nor any defence of their dreadful position. Robbers, thieves, Magdalens! but no! the unfortunate offspring of that class are not even mentioned: at least, in my most diligent perusal of the Scriptures, I never lighted upon any remote allusion; and we know the Jews did wear clothing. Out-casts, verily!

This letter must surely stand out as a minor masterpiece, a cameo presentation of the typical, essential Meredith. It is irony in action. We start out laughing with the Countess, admiring her wittiness, approving of the jesting hit she has made. But the ironic claims of truth and accuracy cannot tolerate the partiality of the picture, and it is as if the dialectical comicality we have spoken about must assert itself. The Countess does not have enough distance or objectivity for a sustained perception of the ridiculous, and within a few lines she becomes herself ridiculous. The

remarkable achievement of Meredith in this instance, and what may be exasperating in many other instances, is the skill with which he effects the alteration, a movement which frequently shifts literally from the sublime to the ridiculous.

We referred earlier to The Essay on Comedy where Meredith explains the comic spirit as a rational perception of incongruities and the absence of it as an atrophy: "Insufficiency of sight in the eye looking outward has deprived them of the eye that should look inward."⁵³ The Countess presents a variant syndrome. Here is a case rather of arrested development. There is nothing wrong with her "outward" vision, as we see many times over. Yet she has no inward vision at all. The heroism which her author ascribes to her is not without its truth. But it is the Countess's inner blindness which intensifies the acerbic irony normally attendant upon that term. Her cleverness becomes cunning; her kindness becomes calculated; her sense of justice turns to envy and her sense of retribution to malice. So far into moral jeopardy is the Countess carried by her determined lusting after a false and empty aristocracy, that when her mother, Mrs. Mel, materializes at Beckley Court, Meredith must tell us, "'Mama!' she softly exclaimed, and thanked heaven that she had not denied her parent."⁵⁴ Within the comic and ironic terms of the Countess's heroism, her self-blindness may be considered her "tragic flaw." At the same time and, again ironically, it is the Countess's tenuous and slippery position, the eradicable "blot" on her birth, that

binds her to the realities and prevents escape into a total sentimentality.

Because the contours of Evan Harrington are so clearly those of a Romance, and since a sentimentality of characterization is most admissible, and is often mandatory in that genre, we note all the more forcefully how foreign such a mode is to Meredith. The Countess avoids the extremes of virtue and condemnation because within the organic working out of the novel all character is qualified and contingent. If on the side of virtue, Lady Jocelyn approximates the ideal of rational woman, gracious lady, and understanding mother, we have already pointed out that she is scored for her passionless detachment and neutrality. Nor does morality fare any better than reason, if we are to look at Mrs. Mel whose humorless views make honor seem a grim and arthritic alternative.

It would seem that Meredith is echoing the sentiment of the old Chinese proverb that nothing should be done to excess -- including moderation. The ethic is a tautological one; it completes itself; it is self-sufficient and needs no human model. Which is the same as saying that it can have no human model. And consequently from its viewpoint all behavior is equally susceptible to either incrimination or exoneration. Thus Ferdinand Laxley may be an aristocratic, shallow cad, yet his caddishness consists primarily of a snobbery in which the heroine Rose participates and to which the Countess aspires. Furthermore, his disdainfulness is not rendered only pejoratively.

When Lady Jocelyn accuses him of writing the malicious letter actually penned by the Countess, he denies it once, leaving Beckley Court rather than insisting on the denial. In another instance, when Major Strike goads Evan to the point of Evan assaulting him and then leaves, Meredith feels compelled to inform us that physical cowardliness is not part of the Major's ugly personality, ugly though it is in other respects.

Finally, when Juliana Bonner dies, knowing Evan to be innocent of the disgrace he bears in Rose's thoughts, Meredith carefully avoids what would seem an inevitable sentimentality. Juliana must inform Rose of Evan's innocence; but Meredith accomplishes this without Juliana becoming any more noble or generous in her death than she was in her life. Her last decision is to tell Rose the truth, but she reaches the decision only because she has assumed that it is also too late for Rose to get Evan. Having never been beautiful, rich, or aristocratic enough in her life to afford self-deception, Juliana does not indulge herself now either. Meredith treats even this death scene with a drily ironic restraint. "Diseased little heroines," he says, "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."⁵⁵ Thus she writes Rose the truth, but quite honestly she recognizes that it is "neither sublime nor generous; not even good; merely her peculiar duty."⁵⁶

We can hardly imagine such treatment of a death scene, especially the death of a young woman, in the hands of any other novelist and we need not even stipulate for Dickens.

Meredith's characterization, then, and the interrelation of character and plot in his novels, reveal a tolerance for ambiguity, a recognition of the undeniably contingent, and a comprehension of the ambivalent and "yeasty" in describing behavior. This whole question of Contingency, was able to emerge only within the given freedom of the novel. In the ironic pursuit of the limitations of that freedom, while still retaining -- unlike Sterne -- the loyalty of history, Meredith's novels become a crucial stage in the evolution of fiction and a most important step in the novel's realization of itself and of its own form.⁵⁷

For the sake of convenient simplification we may borrow Sidney's terms and equate plot with history and theme with philosophy;⁵⁸ we must, then, also conclude that in the poesis of the novel the misplaced emphasis on either of these two can only produce an imperfect poesy. Nor are we merely playing a game of analogical terms. For the reconciliation of philosophy and history, of the abstract and the concrete, of the symmetrical pattern and the incongruous, awkward fact, is, as we have said, the peculiar problem of literature. We owe to Auerbach the insight that these reconciliations have yet another parallel in the necessary reconciliation of law and parable. Jacob stole a blessing; Simon and Levi murdered a city; Aaron himself fashioned

a golden calf, and unlike the heroes of epic, they and their actions lack the sanction of narrative primacy and supremacy.

Yet because of that very fact, because Moses's wrath is not the story and the basis of Testament, because it must be subservient to another superimposed pattern to which it does not conform, its incongruent contingency makes the characters of Testament the subjects of its narrative as Achilles and Hector can never be. The conflict between philosophy and history must issue in character -- which has neither the abstract indifference of the first, nor the concrete indifference of the second. The characters of fiction, like the characters of Testament, are necessarily contingent.

The release of ambiguity, contingency and qualification is a risk which engenders and creates certain artistic problems and questions which we will attempt to confront in other chapters. At the moment we shall venture to touch on just one, since it has been so much at the source of this present analysis. Theoretically it has to do with the problem of endings. But much more practically and pointedly it is: What shall we do with the Countess de Saldar? How is the ironic, ambivalent nature of her character to fit into the pattern which resolution in a novel needs? We can satisfy this fictional requirement as far as the other characters are concerned with a minimum of squirming. Even matures,

gains assurance, and is accepted fully by Lady Jocelyn and the entire family. Rose unsnobs a little, which is more than sufficient, and realizes that neither trade nor tailordom can destroy true nobility. Ferdinand goes to the heavily populated land of all rejected suitors. Harry, it would appear, marries Polly's sister. (We do squirm just a bit at that.) But what are we to do with the Countess?

We remarked earlier that Meredith manages his novel so that we are spared the conversions that frequently must occur in the less-contingent, plot-centered novel. Harry does convert, true, but he is stupid, in the first place, minor in the second place, and his conversion is merely hinted at, and by messenger -- so to speak. But what kind of conversion is even possible for the Countess? Her problem is not one of past crimes, of prejudice against others, or of injustice to them. Her problem is her birth. Her father was a tailor. And what redemption can there be for her?

Meredith's solution to the problem of the Countess is so brilliant that it seems indeed inevitable. It is the clear solution, the only solution. The novelist is here comedian, in every sense of the word.

The Countess de Saldar de Sancorvo writes her last letter. It is to her sister Caroline, and it is postmarked Rome.

Yes, dearest! I am here, body and spirit! I have at last found a haven, a refuge, and let those who condemn me compare the peace of their spirits with mine. You think that you have quite conquered the dreadfulness of our origin. My love, I smile at you! I know it to be impossible for

the Protestant heresy to offer a shade of consolation. Earthly-born, it rather encourages earthly distinctions. It is the sweet sovereign Pontiff alone who gathers all in his arms, not excepting tailors. Here, if they could know it, is their blessed comfort.⁵⁹

Footnotes

CHAPTER IV

1. ORF, p. 242.
2. Curle, Aspects of George Meredith.
3. Curle, pp. 122-123.
4. He is the father of Harry Richmond. For a more detailed examination of his character, see Chapter VII.
5. Modern criticism has made much of the notion of ambiguity because critical concern has paralleled the artistically liberating notion of human paradoxicality. The irony of Oedipus Rex is, for instance, qualitatively different from the irony of Othello. In Sophocles the ironic is produced from extending Oedipus's purity -- the consistency of his nobility -- so far that it turns back upon itself. Shakespeare's Othello and Macbeth, on the other hand, comprehend the ironic contradictions which destroy them. The creation of human types, of consistent characters, was a practice of the novel too. Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, even the "immortal Jane" proceed from the assumption in their various ways -- Dickens extending it to the point of another reality, Thackeray being forced to rely on his own intellect and voice, and making the characters subordinate to it, Austen by her sensibility and incisiveness.
6. "By taking his beloved Maxse [Captain Frederick Augus Maxse] as the model for Beauchamp .. the author indicated his approval of the troublemaking Radicals." Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith, p. 203.
7. BC, II, p. 152.
8. The passages usually invoked are from Chapter XV, "Ferdinand and Miranda."
9. One of James's remarkable accomplishments in the relationship between these two characters at the beginning of the novel is the way it reveals Strether's capacity for intensity and ardor. The particular scene I have in mind is at the beginning of Book II in which Strether keeps noticing and re-noticing the "red velvet band" Miss Gostrey is wearing around her neck.

10. EH, p. 23 (my italics).
11. EH, p. 50.
12. See the discussion of The Egoist in Chapter VIII.
13. BC, II, p. 99. Perhaps what redeems the characters of Beauchamp's Career is that unrealistic as they may be, they seek at least an adherence to first principles. They are nevertheless out of balance -- which must be the condemnation of all radical politics -- and out of touch with the world of real men.
14. "Enthusiasm for rationalism remained a current in Meredith's thought and a prompter of his imaginative powers till the end of his career..." Kelvin, A Troubled Eden, p. 112.
15. Essay, p. 52 (my italics).
16. "I see the revelation of God to man in the history of the world, and in the individual experience of all of us...." A conversation with Meredith published in the Review of Reviews, March, 1904. Cited by J. A. Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism (London, 1909), p. 325.
17. In contrast to Meredith's relatively public fictions, James was intent on keeping the drama within the individual consciousness. Leon Edel comments on the Prefaces to Roderick Hudson and Portrait of a Lady by remarking that "the general plan in James was to make the reflections of an individual as exciting as an adventure story." The Modern Psychological Novel (New York, 1964), p. 37.
- 17a. AM, p. 511. This is, incidentally, almost the last sentence in Meredith's last completed novel.
18. The pressing of Rosamund, his recent bride, is unavailing, even when she discloses that Shrapnel did not insult her at all. Only when, in addition, Nevil becomes seriously ill, does Romfrey capitulate.
19. BC, II, p. 300.
20. EH, p. 450.
21. London, 1963.
22. Spilka, p. 71.

23. Spilka, p. 265.
24. Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel (New York, 1960); and George Lukacs, The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston, 1963).
25. Kettle, I, pp. 93-95.
26. Jane Austen, Emma (Boston, 1957) p. 350.
27. Kettle, I, p. 189 (my italics).
28. Emma, pp. 214-215.
29. Cf. remarks on Sandra Belloni in preceding chapter.
30. The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form (London, 1959).
31. Hardy, p. 135.
32. Hardy, p. 135.
33. The Mill on the Floss (London, 1908), II, p. 162.
34. Hardy, p. 135.
35. Hardy, p. 136.
36. Sassoon contends that a novel like Evan Harrington is irrefutable evidence that "...when he chose to submit himself to the standards of conventional novel-writing, Meredith could do it every bit as well as his competitors of the Victorian age." Meredith (London, 1948), p. 36-37.
37. EH, p. 2 (my italics).
38. EH, p. 398.
39. Although Meredith was clearly using autobiographical material in this novel cauterizing the painfulness of his own experience through irony (as he did in ORF), there may be an additional irony in the "slant" allusion to Carlyle. There are numerous references to Carlyle's influences as when Nevil Beauchamp claims him as his favorite writer. Also see Sassoon, pp. 25-29.
40. EH, p. 20.

41. Again there is at least a double irony here, since Evan's sisters are in this chapter taking upon themselves the role of Fates.

42. EH, p.

43. EH, p. 22.

44. EH, pp. 22-23.

45. EH, p. 20.

46. EH, p. 339.

47. EH, p. 417.

48. EH, p. 429.

49. EH, p. 324.

50. EH, p. 175.

51. EH, p. 176.

52. EH, p. 289.

53. Essay, p. 52.

54. EH, p. 336.

55. EH, p. 430.

56. EH, p. 431

57. Virginia Woolf's comments are extremely relevant here: "...the novel had reached a stage where it could only exist by moving onward. ...if fiction had remained what it was to Jane Austen and Trollope, fiction would by this time be dead. Thus Meredith deserves our gratitude and excites our interest as a great innovator." The Second Common Reader, pp. 211-212.

58. "The philosopher, therefore, and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example; but both, not having both, do both halt. For the philosopher, setting down with thorny arguments the bare rule, is so hard of utterance, and so misty to be conceived, that one that hath no other guide but him shall wade in him until he be old, before he shall find sufficient cause to be honest. For his knowledge standeth so upon the abstract On the other side the historian, wanting the precept,

is so tied, not to what should be, but to what is; to the particular truth of things, and not to the general reason of things; that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine. "Now doth the peerless poet perform both...." Sir Philip Sidney, The Defence of Poesie (1582), in Prose of the English Renaissance, ed. J. William Hebel et al. (New York, 1952), p. 276.

59. EH, p.

Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find
Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare
His cloudy drift and planned a colony.
Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex,
Rex and principium, exist the whole
Shebang. Exeunt omens. Here was prose
More exquisite than any tumbling verse:
A still new continent in which to dwell.
What was the purpose of his pilgrimage,
Whatever shape it took in Crispin's mind,
If not, when all is said, to drive away
The shadow of his fellows from the skies,
And, from their stale intelligence released,
To make a new intelligence prevail?
Hence the reverberations in the words
Of his first central hymns, the celebrants
Of rankest trivia, tests of the strength
Of his aesthetic, his philosophy,
The more invidious, the more desired:
The florist asking aid from cabbages,
The rich man going bare, the paladin
Afraid, the blind man as astronomer.
The appointed power unwielded from disdain.
His western voyage ended and began.

Wallace Stevens, from The Idea of A Colony,
"The Comedian As the Letter C"

CHAPTER V

TOWARD THE "ILL-MADE" NOVEL: The Release From Plot Into
Consciousness

In the last two chapters we attempted to focus attention on the novels of Meredith themselves in order to isolate a few essential characteristics. We arranged those discussions around the elements of theme and character, but we have hardly mentioned plot. A moment's reflection will remind us, however, that Aristotle's most emphatic discrimination, his supreme emphasis, is on plot over any other element:

...Plot is the imitation of the action: for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents....

...Most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality....Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character....

The Plot, then is the chief principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: Character holds the second place.¹

Whether Aristotle is right about the hierarchy of elements in regard to tragedy is not pertinent to our discussion. What is important, and what may already be evident from our preceding discussions, is that the novel demands a reversal of the order. We have neglected analysis

of plot, in other words, because plot -- the arrangement of incidents in a prescribed sequence, the formulaic requirements whether of Reversal and Recognition or of epic combats and journeys to the underworld -- does not and cannot have the sway in a novel which Aristotle claims for it in the Poetics. Much earlier we offered the suggestion that the basic nature of drama was rhythmic. That being the case, we can profitably study the pattern and timing of its movement. The basic nature of the novel, however, is not rhythmic. It is partly ethical and partly psychological. Primarily we said it is the nature of Testament, and we should now turn to examine how this affects plot.

What we shall contend is that the movement of narrative from Epic to Testament is a movement from plot toward the cancellation of plot, a movement away from Time and the arrangements of Time toward the moment and the arrangement of the moment, a drive not toward impending completeness but toward process. In its formal aspect the novel has the comic ambiguity of accepting plot as its eventual outermost limit at the same time as it retards and seeks to undo the dominance of plot. Similarly, the novelist as Comedian will be most conspicuous as he employs devices which function to retard plot and attempts to defeat it in the novel.

Actually we find essentially the same notion voiced by so unesoteric though skillful a writer as Sean O'Faolain.

In his book on the short story, O'Faolain says, "...the least essential element of all is the actual story of anecdote on which the tale hangs."² He then gives the outline of O'Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" and concludes, "It is nevertheless, by the highest tests, an inferior story..."³ With no conscious or intentional reference to what we know as "the naive" O'Faolain says, "There is a primitive appeal in narrative, or anecdote." But, he goes on to repeat, "...an anecdote is not a story if that is all a story contains."⁴ Again we must interpolate that O'Faolain is talking about content rather than form. Further, we can see all too clearly how he derives from E. M. Forster.⁵ Nevertheless, we can also see how the kind of content O'Faolain demands from the story depends on a reconstructed view of fictional form.

Plot, the organization of event into a pattern of conflict-to-crisis-to-resolution, is a paradigm of the anecdotal. It is complete, final, or -- to use O'Faolain's term -- "finished." That is the same as to say that it is neither literary nor literature. It can become literature only through complication, only through moving away from the closed circle of abstract pattern and harmonized event.⁶ Fiction must both accept and reject such limitation. It may even be that narrative art has always rejected the anecdotal nature of plot and has always engaged in the practice of retardation. And thus what we see in Homer is

also narrative retardation.⁷ But since the Homeric perspective focuses on surface event, since it is plot-oriented, the retardation and complication is effected through event. Plot interrupts plot, narrative lines cross and criss-cross, and the formal interest is in the complexity, intricacy, and inter-relation of plot patterns. Character still completely fills and fulfills its plotted role. Character is, in other words, congruent with its function and does not distract attention from the arrangement and juxtaposition of history. Upon such an open surface, theme also rides smoothly without penetrating through the veneer of narrative. All elements are within the grip and the grasp of a symmetry which will neither accommodate nor tolerate disturbance and disproportion.

That the perspective of Testament disturbs this symmetry is of course the critical trauma, the disruption which demands a new understanding. However, it has not been sufficiently recognized that the emergence in literature of the anti-hero does have an organic relationship to the emergence in fiction of an "antiplot" -- a narrative thrust that works toward continuity and complication, rather than toward completion and resolution, an impulse toward risk that is willing to jeopardize a pattern by interruption and retardation, and that emphasizes the importance of interruption as well as the importance of pattern.

The locus classicus of such a narrative mode is

naturally Tristram Shandy and plot is certainly "undone" in that work. But operating at the extreme and outermost limits, Sterne illuminates for us the fact of possibility within a disintegrating plot. Once we observe and accept the hovering, ambivalent nature of human testament, the comic reconciliation in the novel of theoretical plot and the deferral of plot, we can begin to turn our attention to the less extreme strategies of deferral that the novelist as comedian employs.

The "strategies of deferral" is of course a critic's phrase, not a novelist's. But in so self-conscious an artist as Meredith, we can hardly be surprised by the novelist's very acute recognition of retardation, a pressure within fictional narrative to deny plot. After the first ten pages of One of Our Conquerors from which we can hardly know what the novel is going to become, Meredith feels impelled to interpolate the following:

The fair dealing with readers demands of us, that a narrative shall not proceed at slower pace than the legs of a man in motion; and we are still but little more than midway across London Bridge. But if a man's mind is to be taken as a part of him, the likening of it, at an introduction, to an army on the opening march of a great campaign, should plead excuses for tardy forward movements, in consideration of the large amount of matter you have to review before you can at all imagine yourselves to have made his acquaintance. This is not necessary to do when you are set astride the enchanted horse of the Tale, which leaves the man's mind at home while he performs the deeds befitting him; he can indeed be rapid. Whether more active, is a question asking for your notions of the governing element in the composition of man, and of his present business here.

The Tale inspires one's earlier ardours, when we sped without baggage, when the Impossible was wings to imagination, and heroic sculpture the simplest act of the chisel. It does not advance, 'tis true; it drives the whirligig circle round and round the single existing point; but it is enriched with the applause of the boys and girls of both ages in this land; and all the English critics heap their honours on its brave old Simplicity; -- our national literary flag, which signalizes us while we float, subsequently to flap above the shallows. One may sigh for it. An ill-fortuned minstrel who has by fateful direction been brought to see with distinctness, that man is not as much comprised in external features as the monkey, will be devoted to the task of the fuller portraiture.⁸

Hardly any writer, hardly any critic for more than a century can have blinked the fact that the art of fiction had moved away from prescriptions of plot and was now interested in answering the demands of character. Flaubert, Turgenev, Meredith, Conrad, James, all have consciously avowed the new allegiance. Curiously, however, it has been noted as the new subject matter, the new content of fiction, with little attention paid to the impact of such a drastic shift on the form of fiction. Again James, the most explicit and critically searching of our literary craftsmen, in the same preface where he states the nature of Turgenev's character-oriented fictions, discusses the problem of ending his own novel.⁹ But the two features of Portrait of A Lady are coincidentally juxtaposed with no stated relationship between them. The formal problems, evoked by the subordination of plot to character are not considered, nor is the exploration of character looked

upon as a deferral of plot, which it inevitably is. In all the discussions of the problematic and frustrating conclusion to Huck Finn, for example, no one has specifically suggested that the novel founders on the conflict between the rich development of Huck's character and his relationship with Jim on the one hand, and the purely conventional demands of a traditional picaresque form in which Twain cast his novel. It should be clear enough that the center of gravity in that novel has less to do with reaching Cairo than with a continuing growth of character in the direction shown when Huck says, "All right, then I'll go to hell."¹⁰

Nevertheless, although imperfectly understood, the shift in narrative preoccupation and sensibility has at least been remarked and noticed. On the other hand, there has been no attempt to remark or understand the nature of the authorial voice in fiction, the need and justification for its presence. Quite the contrary, it seems always to have been some kind of critical embarrassment, a peculiarity of awkward and unaccommodating novelists who insisted on drawing attention to themselves, like spoiled children in the company of adults. And one can almost sense the sigh of critical relief when Lubbock enunciated the critical dogma which permitted, which absolutely demanded that the critic, like the much put-upon adult, ignore the intrusions of an ill-mannered child or reprimand him for his breach of etiquette.¹¹ An author may be

"pictorial" or he may be "dramatic"; but he must be silent. "...we like," says Joseph Warren Beach more than a decade after Lubbock, "the sense of taking part in an actual, a present experience, without the interference of an authorial guide."¹² As a matter of fact, later on in his work in a chapter entitled appropriately "Dramatic Present" Beach gives the explicit rationale for such preference. "The essential differences," he says, "between the novel and the play grow out of the fact that the novel is to be read and the play is to be presented on the stage."¹³

Such critical perspicuity can scarcely be gainsaid. And we willingly concede the point that the novel and the drama are tied to different modes of presentation. But is this indeed the "essential" difference? Is it the prescriptive difference responsible for the novel? Must we accept the dominance of this obvious fact as the determining, form-giving element of fictional narrative? And must we accept then alongside it the attendant corollary, the hidden premise in this reasoning, that the function of literature is to entertain by telling a story? And how are we to accept this construction while concurrently recognizing and being part of the emergent awareness that literature is at the same time a more serious and more playful pursuit of truth? And, finally, how are we to defend this doctrine -- that the novel is a non-dramatized drama -- in the face of constant violation by practicing novelists,

without artistically invalidating our greatest works of fiction?

Let us for the moment forsake our defense of the clumsy Tolstoy, the egocentric Thackeray, and the perverse Meredith. What are we indeed to do with the darling of the dramatistic critics, Henry James? And this is not in an early and excusable novitiate like The American, but in the very crowning work of his career, The Golden Bowl. What possessed James in the beginning of the second part of the novel to violate arbitrarily the dictum of his explicators? The paragraph begins with a description of the solitude to which Maggie's father, Adam Verver, has betaken himself. Then, for no apparent reason, we notice the intrusion of an authorial presence:

We share this world, none the less, for the hour, with Mr. Verver; the very fact of his striking, as he would have said, for solitude, the fact of his quiet flight, almost on tip-toe, through tortuous corridors, investing him with an interest that makes our attention -- tender almost to compassion -- qualify his achieved isolation. For it may immediately be mentioned....¹⁴

It is an authorial voice which not only intrudes, but perversely calls attention to its intrusion. Nor is that interruption, that rude novel-crashing, confined to that one sentence. It affects and creates the background for the entire discussion of Adam Verver, which becomes -- though admittedly muted -- a talk much in the old style between author and reader. For some twenty pages later

James refers to the scene as "the Sunday morning, on the occasion round which we have perhaps drawn too wide a circle."¹⁵ He adds to the self-consciousness of authorial presence the further self-consciousness of authorial craft.

Yet to what purpose, we should ask, and to what end does James destroy the validity and integrity of his novel, if indeed we must accept that such it is. The apology most frequently made for James is that his lapses are minor and relatively rare. But, on the other hand, is this not the more grievous fault? One might make some brief for the crudity of a Thackeray, and to a lesser degree of a Trollope, whose narratives are suspended so blatantly within authorial omniscience and delivered in the voice of an ubiquitous presence. They may be accused by the insistent of not having written novels at all. But whatever lesser name one assigns to their primitive and artless narrative, its form is not betrayed or violated by inconsistency. If there is, however, any such thing as a novel in English, its meticulous artifice must certainly be exemplified by Henry James. And is his infrequent lapse -- because of its very infrequency -- not therefore all the more destructive?

But clearly this is not the case. By turning away from speculative theorizing and examining the actual and the particular -- as in the case of The Golden Bowl -- we see that the dramatistic conception of fiction is its own,

discrete construct and we see how minor is its relevance or decisiveness.

When James himself discusses those questions of point of view, center of consciousness, the intrusiveness of a possible narrator versus the scenic method, his avoidance of exposition through creation of a ficelle, all these are the preoccupation of an artist with a particular set of constraints that will confine and therefore define a particular area of labor. "One's work should have composition," he formulates, "because composition alone is positive beauty."¹⁶ At the same time, a look at that very preface to The Ambassadors will reveal quickly that this particular set of self-imposed obligations constitutes only one variant among the possibilities of "composition." That James would have vehemently protested the petrification of his particular game into the dogma for all sport can be seen over and over in the Preface, even in the sigh of his release from his labor: "But oh the cares begotten, none the less, of that same 'judicious' sacrifice to a particular form of interest!"¹⁷ Or a little later on when he discusses his decision not to cast the novel in the first person narrative of Lambert Strether: "Suffice it, to be brief, that the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness, and that looseness, nevermuch my affair, had never been so little so as on this particular occasion."¹⁸

Contrary to much that has been written, James's aversion to explanatory passages and traditional expository narration is based less on rigid principle as on what he himself saw as the modern taste. "...I had thus inevitably ...to wave away with energy the custom of the seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative, which flourishes so, to the shame of modern impatience, on the serried page of Balzac, but which seems simply to appeal our actual, our general weaker, digestion."¹⁹ And finally, the last and usually most ignored statement in that whole preface, "...not that the particular production before us exhausts the interesting questions it raises, but that the novels remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms."²⁰

We can only conclude that the doctrinaire purposes to which fictional criticism has put James can be summed up in the complaint which Isabel Archer justifiably indicts Madame Merle in Portrait of a Lady, when the younger woman says of the older, "She made a convenience of me."²¹

But the conversion of James from the possibilities of craft to the perfection of craft was, we may say, an act of critical desperation. For, after all, what was one to do with the novel, and in particular what was one to do with that discomforting feature of the novel, the authorial presence? John Crowe Ransom in his essay, "Humanism

at Chicago," criticizes the Neo-Aristotelians as follows:
 "It is to be presumed that the humanists at the University of Chicago, in the 1930's, had their painful indecisions as to how to direct the literary studies when their own speculations were not exactly coming through on schedule."²²
 The same, even more extended, dilemma faced those who would speculate on the craft of fiction. Pascal himself complaining about the vague evasiveness of the literary analysis of his time expresses the trouble with even more acuity and accuracy as a failure to discover the proper model or analogy. "...we do not know in what grace consists, which is the object of poetry. We do not know the actual model which we ought to imitate; and through lack of this knowledge, we have coined fantastic terms, 'The golden age,' 'The wonder of our times,' 'Fatal,' etc., and call this jargon poetical beauty."²³

The jargon describing fictional beauty, then, had long advocated if not demanded the abolition of the author from his work, in that he constituted an embarrassment and an encumbrance, in that he could not be assimilated into an available critical formula. Richard Stang in The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870,²⁴ has amply documented for us the wide currency of this critical demand, in its century-old persistence. Even when Sir Leslie Stephen writing in The Cornhill on George Eliot voices his loud advocacy of the author's prerogatives, his very insistence

serve as an index to the unpopularity of the position.

We are told dogmatically that a novelist should never indulge in little asides to the reader. Why not? One main advantage of a novel, as it seems to me, is precisely that it leaves room for a freedom in such matters which is incompatible with the requirements, for example, of dramatic writing. I can enjoy Scott's downright story-telling, which never reminds you obtrusively of the presence of the author; but with all respects for Scott, I do not see why his manner should be the sole type and model for all his successors. I like to read about Tom Jones or Colonel Newcome; but I am also very glad when Fielding or Thackeray puts his puppets aside for the moment and talks to me in his own person.... But till the critic gives me some better reason for obedience than his ipse dixit, I shall refuse to respect what would destroy many charming passages and obliterate touches which clearly contribute to the general effect of George Eliot's work.²⁵

Stang, too, cites the Leslie Stephen essay as the "strongest defense" of authorial intrusiveness, in particular, because it states as its grounds the essential freedom of the novelist from imposed constraints. But in most cases, although "occasionally...an author's comments were defended...the critic's tone makes us aware that he is upholding an unpopular belief or making an exception for a single writer to the widespread demand for objectivity and impersonality."²⁶ Stang's section on "The Disappearing Author" also reveals the degree to which the requirement for "disappearance" was predicated on an analogy with drama. Characters in novels are referred to as dramatic personae; the novelist who breaks in on his reader with discussions of events or characters is compared

to "the actor who indulges in extempore and extra-professional hints and winks to the audience";²⁷ and even a defense of George Eliot's intrusions is excused by saying "She acts herself the part of the chorus...."²⁸ The dramatic model hovers constantly in either the background or foreground of the discussions. Thus it is quite significant that Stephen's declaration of novelistic freedom contains an explicit denial of the analogy with drama. But it is amply clear even in that pre-Jamesian era that Stephen is fighting a losing battle to the fiction critics of a dramatic persuasion.

The advent of James, then, becomes for this particular school the supremely significant event. In James they could discover the one element previously missing from their theorizing: the practical illustration which could justify critical intuition. More than that, the example of James obviates for criticism the need of returning directly to the analogy of drama which may possibly have retained some residual embarrassments without some actual novelistic support reifying the position.

In the haste to recognize in James the model for fiction and the prescriptive ideal, one fact was very largely ignored -- namely, that point of view or center of consciousness becomes in James not merely the narrative design but the subject of narrative as well. The restriction of point of view, in other words, whether to Lambert Strether,

Isabel Archer, Fleda Vetch, or Mrs. Brook becomes a restriction also of narrative ambience, of the scope of "story." Unquestionably, to James, the subtle change is the crucial one -- the distinguishing of tones, the "niceties" of perception. Everything may indeed depend in his fiction on whether a character "hangs fire" or answers hastily, on the degree of premeditatedness in deception or manipulation. And therefore in James the word is suited to the act, the angle of perception (i.e., the point of view) to the object of perception (i.e., the plot). But surely everyone must acknowledge that in James both are diminutive, that different and larger fictions are both possible and necessary. War and Peace could not be so written and designed; but just as clearly neither could the action of Nostromo or even of Absalom, Absalom. As habits become morality, so too does technique become subject. And the narrative technique of James, consequently, limits not only what can be seen but also what can become significant action in a novel

Practially speaking however, in the development of criticism it makes little difference. James's novels afforded a vindication of the dramatistic reading of fiction. That the actions of his works are subtle and take place within a diminished arena was recognized as peculiarly Jamesian; but no inferential relationship was perceived to exist between technique on the one hand and action on the

ether. Still another way of putting it is to say that authorial presence and intervention was looked upon as merely a matter of technique -- i.e., how to communicate a piece of information to the reader without betraying the existence of a narrator when the character himself is either ignorant or indifferent. What was not considered is that the very necessity of communicating such a piece of information means -- by definition -- that the character is not the true center of consciousness at all. But no matter what way we incriminate the shortsightedness of the dramatistic criticism, its gains become consolidated with the work of Lubbock. It became the tradition of fiction criticism.

It was not until comparatively recent years that the criticism of fiction could begin to examine some of these dramatistic assumptions, and to question their validity. Probably the most significant of these recent critics has been Wayne Booth, and The Rhetoric of Fiction²⁹ constitutes the most noteworthy plea to read the novel on its own terms rather than on the terms of drama. Indeed the first half of his book constitutes an encyclopedic overview of the various critical strategies that have been used to expel, expunge and exile authorial presence from the novel. And what Booth goes on to show -- and he shows it very well -- is that all these perspectives are myopic ones. Booth takes up one third of his work -- all of Part

One and frequent passages in Parts Two and Three -- to regroup and organize all the proponents of authorial silence into three fundamental categories. All these critics, Booth says in essence, have one common feature -- they require objectivity in fiction. Employing another Aristotelian triad, he assigns and classifies these approaches as either demands that the work itself be objective, i.e., that the novel be realistic; or that the writer himself be objective, i.e., that he not intrude himself; or that the reader be permitted to be objective, i.e., that there be no appeals made to the reader outside the rational ones inherent in the facts of the novel.

Booth's work is an important one, both in the convenient catalogue and history of the opposing viewpoint, and as an attempt to argue for the novel. Nevertheless, his presentation of the question is circumscribed in such a way that he need argue only a very pragmatic case, and frequently a very pedestrian one. What, he need only ask, is Realism? How, he need only ask, are we to define objectivity? Where, he need only ask, does the reader become engaged? Thus he can quickly come to his self-evident conclusion -- namely, that all novels are slanted views and therefore must, do, and inevitably are exercises in rhetoric. Here we have Booth near the end of his chapter on Realism:

It is thus in the failure to think clearly about ends and means that the prophets of realism have most often tarnished their

remarkable achievements. To have made naturalness of technique an end in itself was, perhaps, an impossible goal in the first place. Whatever verisimilitude a work may have always operates within a larger artifice; each work that succeeds is natural -- and artificial -- in its own way. It is easy for us now to see what was not so clear at the beginning of the century: whether an impersonal novelist hides behind a single narrator or observer, the multiple points of view of Ulysses or As I Lay Dying, or the objective surfaces of The Awkward Age or Compton-Burnett's Parents and Children, the author's voice is never really silenced.³⁰

While Booth easily wins his argument, however, it remains no more than an inductive triumph. In other words, his conclusion can encompass no more than his questions offered. Do novelists use rhetoric? Yes, novelists use rhetoric. The novel is a rhetorical genre. But concealed within that immaculate, impeccable conclusion lies the more important and troublesome query as to the novelist's sanction. If practice can never be more valid or effective than its theoretical justification, has Booth in fact brought us any closer to an understanding of how the novel means and works? Even when Booth goes on, in the passage cited above, to say that the rhetoric "...is, in fact, one of the things we read fiction for...."³¹ he is hazarding beyond the perimeter of his own safely circumscribed questioning, and we must take that statement not as a critical formula, since it has no basis in Booth's method. For he would be critically entitled to the statement only after conducting a survey of readers and basing the conclusion on the inductive proof of an extensive sample, just as he has

done with his conclusion regarding the rhetoric in the novel.

Booth does not traffic much in theory or speculation. He is a classifier. And in truth his classifications and distinctions in the second part of the book, "The Author's Voice in Fiction," are valuable in making an orderly inventory of the possibilities of narrative stance. Indeed, although his work is in part an attempt at emancipation from Lubbockian monism, how well does Lubbock's charming preface to the 1954 edition to the Craft of Fiction apply to Booth.

I claim for this book, written more than thirty years ago, a happy title and since the title is now all I have that I can now read of the book I incline to dwell upon its happiness. The craft of fiction, not the art: they may be one and the same, the art and the craft, with no true working distinction to be drawn between them...but how differently they sound: Art is a winged word, neither to hold her to bind, ever ready to fly away.... The homely note of craft allows no such distractions; it holds you fast to the matter in hand, to the thing that has been made and the manner of its making....³²

Charm notwithstanding, or even partial truth, the absence in Booth of any theoretical base more sophisticated than the children's game of Show and Tell,³³ must be accounted his major and serious flaw. For it must eventually lead us to question whether Booth's reading of previous criticism as a demand for objectivity and realism is not in actuality a reduction of those demands in order to fit them into his particular answer. Is Sartre, for example, so naively misguided a writer and critic of fiction as to

imagine that there is no subjective angle of vision in the novel? Are we further to conclude that critical insistence on subjectivity has never recognized an authorial bias in statements like Ibsen's Ghosts or political slant even in Shakespeare's Coriolanus? If Booth is suggesting that these critics have required from fiction a greater objectivity than they demand from drama, certainly they deserve to be attacked on the grounds of the inconsistency of their demands, since drama has provided the major resource for disdain toward authorial meddling.

Contemptuous of speculation as we might like to be, we are nevertheless forced to recognize that The Rhetoric of Fiction runs aground on the shoals of its simplistic formulations. Booth readily admits that in the novel "the author's voice is never really silenced." And the "really" while not grudging, marks the limits of Booth's theoretical push. What he is unable to do is continue and assign to the novel what is in this regard the most significant attribute of Testament -- that rhetoric is the medium in which the novel is suspended. Not that the author's voice is never really silenced, but that without the author's voice there is only silence; there is in such an absence no novel at all. Authorial voice is the condition of fiction.

Once Booth has asserted the requirements for rhetoric in a novel, he can without too much difficulty then

classify and categorize different rhetorical strategies which novelists employ in the exposition of their stories. There is, however, one authorial stance -- at least -- which must logically confound him. Since authorial rhetoric is for Booth an instrument through which the writer spins his tale, what is he to do with authorial intrusion not subordinated to the purpose of informing? It is in trying to deal with this nettlesome, annoying phenomenon that the clarity and discreteness of Booth's categorizing begins to disappear, and we have one of the least satisfying sections of the book. Fiction begins to merge with essay as well as with drama; author begins to merge with character; rhetoric begins to merge with plot, or at least with subplot, and Tristram Shandy moves toward myth and archetype and cosmic meaning.³⁴ The last is, one supposes, inevitable if we accept the premise that rhetoric is the handmaiden, rather than mistress of the novel. Since rhetoric is always means and never end, Tristan Shandy must have some other deeper and more arcane meaning, rather than being a boisterous exultation in the assertion of its own nature and a playful testing of that nature.

Yet one is nonetheless disturbed by the ease with which Booth collapses and destroys fundamental distinctions in order to allow the unobstructed flow of his particular reading. For example, in confronting such a fact as Fielding's address to the reader, or more specifically, of the writer's farewell to his pen at the

end of Don Quixote, Booth analyzes in the following manner: "The effect here is made up of many elements....But quite obviously the most important quality here is...[that] the narrator has made of himself a dramatized character to whom we react as we react to other characters."³⁵ In the first place, it is questionable whether -- in Booth's own terms -- the narrator has actually "dramatized" himself by a specific and explicit statement any more than the preceding rhetoric has dramatized and created him, or whether that statement is any more than an additional manifestation of an already existent authorial presence.

Second, and more pointedly, why do we react to him "as we react to other characters" and not as the rhetorician and author of the novel? Is it not rather true that we do react toward him as the rhetorician of the novel? Booth himself indicates this in the next paragraph by the well-known effusion of Holden Caulfield in Catcher in the Rye,³⁶ which illustrates that we react to a writer as rhetorician, as author, and not as character. It is ironic that Booth's encyclopedia footnoting causes him to document two statements -- that of Paul Goodman and that of H. W. Leggett -- whose burden is to insist on the distinction that Booth thoughtlessly erases.³⁷

Or is it carelessness? Perhaps we should say that Booth himself is still working the tail end of a tradition which requires that all of a novel must be subsumed in its action. Even the discovery in the novel of rhetoric can be entertained and tolerated merely as a "lubricant" for

that action. And whatever enters conspicuously onto the stage of the novel must find its justification in action. The only way to deal with a visible author is to reduce him to the status of character and to call our relationship with him a sub-plot. Booth is, in other words, still caught in the throes of a dramatistic view of the novel, a view in which all significance must have the peculiar foregrounding of dramatic action, and must be explicable within the dynamics of plot.

The inadequacy of Booth's conceptual framework becomes quite obvious in the critical squirming necessary to accommodate the contortions of Tristram Shandy. In order to explain Sterne's ostentation, Booth is forced to see in it the hybrid of three separate traditions, assuming for the first time in his exposition an ad hoc historical perspective. At the same time, however, the evidence of the text compels Booth to admit that the similarities he has pointed out may be incidental resemblances rather than disciplined analogies or parallels.

...since Tristram, unlike Montaigne, is really trying to tell a story, his struggle as a writer has itself a kind of plot form impossible in Montaigne. Though this action disputes the comic action that he pretends to be relating, the two are really interdependent, like Swift's story of the three brothers and the grub-street narrator who tells that story. And yet, unlike what we find in A Tale of A Tub, the action of writing a book does not seem here to be shown simply for the sake of making fun of other writers or their opinions; despite the great amount of incidental

satire, the action of Tristram in writing this book seems, like the comic actions in Tom Jones or Don Quixote, to rise above any satirical intent, to exist ultimately as something to be enjoyed in its own right: the satire is for the sake of the comic enjoyment, and not the other way around.³⁸

Consequently, although Booth does a great deal of "arranging" for us, and while he very methodically and impressively organizes the case for the operation of rhetoric in literature, he does not tell us anything essentially, radically new. The novel is, for him, a drama with rhetoric instead of being a drama without rhetoric. But this position merely formalizes what has always been an implicit fact of fiction, as Booth himself would be the first to admit. It is for this reason that one reads The Rhetoric of Fiction, led on by the geniality, cordiality, and wide coverage of its author, until rather more than half of the way through, one asks oneself what it is indeed that he has learned. The constant implicit focus on plot, while evincing loyalty to its Neo-Aristotelian genesis, must nevertheless constitute an insuperable obstacle to the examination of a form whose source lies beyond plot, whose nature is the very attempt to transcend the constrictions of plot and of event, to penetrate beyond the surface of event.

We can again rightfully insist that such approaches -- including Booth's -- founder on their dogmatic denial to the author of his rightful position as spokesman,

active creator, and arbiter within the narrated world of his novel. Were the analogy to Testament even more specious, it would still be valuable in creating at least the possibility of another view, and one which coincided more truly with fact. For to tolerate rhetoric as merely unavoidable is very different from granting it an equality in the novel, if not indeed a priority.³⁹

Drama has after all a form. And it is a form based on act, event, time. But narrative has nothing which gives it form except the narrator's voice. The authorial voice and the authorial presence are thus the medium in which narrative is suspended; they are the material of its composition.⁴⁰

Finally, we must offer another argument appropriate at this point. Rhetoric as embodied in the authorial presence also involves the control of plot. We mentioned earlier what we called the deferral of plot. And by that we meant to indicate that the novel seeks to go beyond event and beyond act in a manner impossible to drama and to epic. But that very impulse to break through, to penetrate beyond surface is equivalent to positing the existence of a consciousness that will not only hold but also retain control after the sureties of surface are relinquished. It is not merely rhetoric, but the dominating authorial consciousness manifested in rhetoric

which is indispensable to the novel.

In other words, when narrative decided to forego external artificialities, the conventions -- which is to say the restraints -- of its form necessarily ceased to operate. However, in the absence of such impositions, narrative can easily plunge in either of two directions: one is the direction of anarchy and chaos; the other is the direction of sentimentality and self-indulgence. Incoherence looms on the one side, easy gratification on the other, opposing poles marked by gibberish and Superman. In this complete and potentially decadent freedom only authorial presence can mediate, refine, and fashion. Only authorial presence becomes, like the traditional conception of God, both the center of coherence and the circumference, the limit of sentimental indulgence. It is the authorial presence which provides at the same time both the locus of the action and the distance from which it is viewed. This is, in other words, the human analogy to Testament and the human analogy to its Author. The novel exhibits an author whose center can be located and whose limits are discernible. But within such mortal limitations the novelist does comprehend the paradox of center and circumference.

If the metaphor has become possibly too fanciful,⁴¹ we can defend its validity by indicating that authorial consciousness does indeed function in precisely this way.

We are accustomed, for example, to repudiate the crude intrusions of Thackeray in Vanity Fair. At best we excuse his flaunting of authorial prerogatives and his abuse of a narrator's privilege. Yet it is true that the plot of Vanity Fair is a shamelessly sentimental one, just as the plot of Pendennis is hardly a subtle one. In neither of these novels is the narrative appeal to the fineness of our perceptions or the subtlety of our feelings. It is rather much like an exercise in sentimentality. We would like to say -- and occasionally do -- that Becky Sharpe and not Amelia is the heroine of Vanity Fair. But it is an open-faced distortion of the novel. Clearly what makes acceptable to us the presentation of the Dobbins and the Amelias in their sentimental goodness, and what makes the presentation of sentimental villainy palatable, is a conspicuous authorial consciousness which creates or makes possible the creation of irony through distance. We may suggest then that the crudeness of Thackeray's presence in Vanity Fair is in equal measure to the crudeness of sentimentality within that novel. And that the much berated authorial intrusiveness is what saves the novel from shrinking under the weight of its sentiment.

On the other hand, we can take a novel which verges not toward the sentimentality of story and of content, but toward an incoherence of reflection, toward an anarchy of disconnected thought. It is this, rather than sentimental-

ity, that characterizes the narrative danger of As I Lay Dying, for we are not permitted intimacy with any viewpoint in that novel of sufficient duration to build a sentimental attachment. On the contrary, the stress is on fragmented and refracted objectivity, with no less than some fifteen or sixteen points of view dispersed in more than fifty chapters. So well is this distance established that even the tragedy of Addie Burden's death and the horrors of her journey to burial in Jefferson become lost in grotesque parody. The very stench of her body is dispersed in the reader's mind by a neutrality of perspective against which we measure not only Darl's outrage, but Jewel's obsessiveness, Cash's acceptance, Anse's indifference, and Vardaman's misunderstanding. Yet at the same time, the novel does not disintegrate in a multiplicity of consciousnesses. Quite otherwise, it is held in a remarkable unity by force of a consciousness which comprehends all points of view and which selects and discriminates among them. The tragedy of As I Lay Dying is not Darl's as it is not Addie's as it is not that of the nine day funeral journey to Jefferson. It is rather a testament of human tragedy and burlesque unified, dominated, and articulated by the sufficiently omniscient author of As I Lay Dying.

Certainly Faulkner's novel is a conveniently exaggerated and excessive example. Nevertheless, what is true of As I Lay Dying is just as true of Ulysses or of

Mrs. Dalloway. What will differ in these novels is just the measure or degree of force necessary to set in motion a countervailing energy to the basic centripetal or centrifugal direction of the narrative. Even in as "centripetal" a work as Notes from Underground, where the fictional narrator has presumably covered all the bets himself, where he has presumably usurped all the options of viewpoint and perspective, the fact that finally determines the fictional status of that work is the external authorial consciousness which moves us to view the very frenzy of the fictional narrator's usurpations with grim humor.

Our argument then regarding plot and its relation to novelistic form can now begin to emerge more sharply. Although an essential ingredient or even condition for the novel, Plot in the absence of the usual conventional restraints cannot have the responsibility of form delegated to it by other narrative genres. For in the novel it lacks those determinants which would prevent it from going off in the path of least narrative resistance. Secondly, it is rather the narrative stance, the authorial presence which determines plot and to which plot itself must be subservient. The demands of order in poetry and drama, while negotiable, are fairly rigid. In the novel plot is contingent -- and contingent upon an authorial viewpoint, which is why indeed there is the problem of ending or resolution in fiction. Thirdly and finally,

therefore, it is that authorial consciousness -- what Booth saw as only the rhetoric of fiction -- that constitutes the "form" of a novel.

Nevertheless, if we can claim as established that the nature of the novel, its essential character, consists in authorial consciousness or rhetoric, we can proceed to the next stage -- which is to posit that an attendant feature of human consciousness is self-consciousness. That is to say, that by releasing an author from the constraints of convention, from the tyranny of a prescribing muse, we deliver him not to the practice of a peaceful, leisurely narrative, but into the bewilderment of his new freedom. His task has become much more complicated. He must consider now, in addition to the narrative to be disclosed, his own relation to that narrative. He must consider himself as well as his "story."

There are two basic strategies by means of which the novelist may forestall the invasion of this interference of self-consciousness. He may pretend that there is nothing wrong, proceeding with his business of storytelling, and enjoying the freedom of the novel form as it increases his narrative ambience and technical convenience. Nor is there justification in snubbing the procedure which produced not only Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells, but George Eliot and Charles Dickens. These are not tidy novelists.

But the usual standards of tidiness do not apply to the novel. Nor is it necessarily the business of the writer to deliberate and consider what sanctions his practice. He must consider finally only the work he has produced.

But after a period of the enlargement of activity, of exuberant exploration and conquest, the complement of the historical pattern and of the aesthetic dialectic asserts itself in a demand for consolidation. The very Hellenism of artistic expansion eventually summons the Hebraism of artistic contraction and consolidation.⁴² Practically speaking, this Hebraizing impulse declared itself in the fiction of Flaubert, Stendahl, Turgenev, Henry James. The search for a fictional principle to limit and inhibit the practice of fiction therefore led either to an art-centered centered dogma -- that is, the dramatic, the well-made novel -- or it led to content-centered dogma -- that is, the true-to-life, the realistic.⁴³

While seeing the novel mainly in terms of such evolution and development, we must add that in the absence of convention, narration itself can become the subject of artistic examination and inquiry -- and unlike the mock-epic, in a manner which is ironic without necessarily becoming satiric or parodic. As a stratagem against the temptations of sentimentalism, such a stance is extremely useful and potent. For it prevents the author from taking himself too seriously, since he is in fact one of the

elements in question. The ironic distance which all great novels display toward characters, is in this case displayed by the author toward his own function as narrator. He views not only the subject of his work with a comic distance, but views also the elements, the medium, the components of his craft and its form with the same or similar comic distance.

In the sense that all art is comic and redemptive, in the sense that it constitutes deliverance from silence and inarticulate despondency, the novelist becomes comedian in articulating the elements of his own artistic medium. The novelist as comedian risks the very craft of fiction in ironic distance and tests to what degree that craft can be treated as an end in itself and to what degree his role as narrator can be defined in the process of the novel. We might go even further and declare that the Novelist as Comedian hold in suspension and in ironic question the very form of his narration, the form of the novel itself. He questions it, and will test to see how far the question can be pushed without destroying the integrity of the work as a whole. In this special sense, his practice recognizes the temptation toward a caricature of form.

It is this aspect of the ironic Meredith that concerns us now. The novelist as self-conscious comedian related to a mode of the novel practiced by Sterne and by Gide explicitly, and by other implicitly. What distinguishes

Meredith in this regard is how essential is his preoccupation with the comedy of form and how organic his irony is not only to the perception of action and character, but to his perception of himself as an authorial consciousness. That awareness characterizes to some degree all of the novels, and in some it threatens to preempt the more traditional novelistic concerns.

Footnotes

CHAPTER V

1. Aristotle, The Poetics, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York, 1961), pp. 61-63.

2. Sean O'Faolain, The Short Story (New York, 1951), p. 37.

3. O'Faolain, p. 39.

4. O'Faolain, p. 39.

5. "Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causability. 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it." Aspects of the Novel (New York, 1954) p. 86.

6. Interestingly enough, Meredith uses the same geometric figure of the closed circle in his description of plot-dominated fiction: "...it drives the whirligig circle round and round the single existing central point..." OOOC, p. 11.

7. "One main characteristic of an epic poem is that it is ever going forwards and backwards; hence all retarding motives are epic. Yet they must not be actual obstacles; these, in reality, belong to the drama.

"Should this demand for retarding -- which is fulfilled to excess in both of Homer's poems, and which also lay in the plot of mine -- be actually essential, and not to be dispensed with, then all such plots as proceed towards the end ought to be utterly rejected, or regarded as a subordinate historical species."

Goethe in a letter to Schiller, April 19, 1797. See Correspondence Between Schiller and Goethe from 1794 to 1805, trans. L. Dora Schmitz (London, 1914), I, p. 313.

8. OOOC, pp. 10-11.

9. See Henry James, The Art of the Novel (New York 1934), pp. 40-58.

10. This is the point when Huck decides not to write Miss Watson the whereabouts of Jim. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New York, 1961), p. 168.

11. Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction.

12. Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel (New York, 1932), p. 16.

13. Beach, Twentieth Century Novel, p. 146.

14. Henry James, The Golden Bowl (New York, 1962) p. 87.

15. Golden Bowl, p. 105.

16. James, The Ambassadors (New York, 1964), p. 10.

17. Ambassadors, p. 10

18. Ambassadors, p. 10

19. Ambassadors, p. 11.

20. Ambassadors, p. 15.

21. James, The Portrait of A Lady (New York, 1951), p. 410.

22. Poems and Essays (New York, 1955), p. 89.

23. Blaise Pascal, Pensees (New York, 1958), p. 9.

24. New York, 1959.

25. Published in The Cornhill Magazine, February, 1881. Reprinted in A Century of George Eliot Criticism, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston, 1965), p. 138.

26. Stang, p. 97.

27. Stang, p. 96.

28. Stang, p. 97.

29. Chicago, 1963.

30. Booth, pp. 59-60.

31. Booth, p. 60.

32. Lubbock, Preface.

33. See titles in Booth of Chapters I and X.

34. For example: "But Sterne faces, like the reader, the world of chaos in fleeting time as it threatens the artist's effort to be true to that world without lapsing into chaos itself" (p. 233). Or, "He is up against insurmountable obstacles that we all face -- the nature of time, the nature of our unpredictable minds, and the nature of human animality as it undercuts all our efforts to attain to the ideal" (p. 230).

35. Booth, p. 212.

36. "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish that the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it." J. D. Salinger, Catcher in the Rye (New York, 1951), p. 20.

37. Both Goodman (Structure of Literature) and Leggett (Idea in Fiction) assert that there is an identification of the reader with the author as author.

38. Booth, p. 230.

39. Also see above Chapter II.

40. Granting this, and accepting the presence of rhetoric in the novel, it would seem impossible to avoid except by blind determination the analogy to Testament. For the long-standing, traditional distinction between Law and Parable, between Commandment and Legend would seem here to find an indisputable analogy in the distinction between Rhetoric and Story. Rather than dismissing large sections of War and Peace or of Moby Dick as irrelevant and misplaced or confused, they appear well placed, relevant, artistically valid.

41. "Man," Schiller says, "should not strive for form at the expense of his reality, nor for reality at the expense of form.... But if there were cases when he had this twofold experience at the same time, when he was at once conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence, when he at once felt himself as matter and came to know himself as spirit, he would ... have a complete intuition of his humanity." Schiller, Aesthetic Education, pp. 73-74. The situation Schiller describes as the condition of "play," seems to be a direct analogue to the condition we have described as the situation of the novelist.

42. "So long as we do not forget that both Hellenism and Hebraism are profound and admirable manifestations of man's life, tendencies, and powers, and that both of them aim at a like final result, we can hardly insist too strongly on the divergence of line and of operation with which they proceed." Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, Chapter IV.

43. The two are closely connected and each one can be interpreted as a function of the other.

The subtle Arab who conceived Shagpat, meant either very much more, or he meant less; and my belief is, that, designing in his wisdom simply to amuse, he attempted to give a larger embrace to time than is possible to the profound dispenser of Allegories, which are mortal.....

George Meredith, from the Preface
to the Second Edition

CHAPTER VI:

THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT And the Comedy of Meaning

We turn first in our examination to The Shaving of Shagpat not primarily because it is the first of Meredith's novels; chronology matters little in this study. Rather the novel reveals the slant of Meredith's fictional intelligence in a specialized context which highlights its ironic features.

Since its publication,¹ the paradoxical quality of The Shaving of Shagpat has been such as to throw the very nature of the work into an unresolved ambiguity. What is The Shaving of Shagpat? Is it merely the "Arabian entertainment" which Meredith called it in the sub-title? Or is it an allegory of tremendous profundity, sensitivity and insight? "If there are any who require to be convinced either of the greatness of the Allegory, or of Meredith's understanding of human life, they cannot do better than turn to these three chapters..."² Or further, "An allegory whose kernel is an ism always permits of easy interpretation. One has but to know the ism to possess the key. But the key required for The Shaving of Shagpat is nothing less than the knowledge of life itself."³

On the other hand, we find just as much critical vehemence in the statement by Elmer James Bailey: "The lot which has befallen Meredith of always being taken too seriously or not seriously enough is evidenced in the two or three attempts that have been made to interpret The Shaving of Shagpat allegorically.

To the most recent, it is said, Meredith courteously replied that the elaborate exposition recalled some of the thoughts which he had when writing the fantasy, but that as a matter of fact, the book was no more an allegory than Crummies was a Prussian." ⁴ So vehement is Bailey, that he has permitted himself to become somewhat distortive. The letter he refers to as written "to the most recent" of the explicators is the one appearing at the front of The Shaving of Shagpat: Meredith's Allegory which Meredith wrote to James McKechnie regarding McKechnie's earlier, briefer explication of Shagpat. Actually the letter reads as follows:

You have done as much as could be done with the adventurous barber. An Allegory is hateful to the English & I gave it clothing to conceal its frame. But neither that nor the signification availed. Very few even of my friends have cared to read the book, and of those I can count but two who have said a word in favor of it. I regret to think that although you may be indemnified for ⁵ the cost of publication your labor will go unrewarded.

In view of this letter, however, lest we be overly harsh on Bailey and those who share his opinion -- including, incident-⁶ally, George Eliot and Siegfried Sassoon -- we must also present the remarks that Meredith had prefaced to the second edition of Shagpat when it was issued in 1865. It would just as clearly tend to discredit any allegorical reading which even as moderate a critic as James Moffatt calls a misconception, declaring that "it is as vain to allegorise this story as 'Don Quixote'." Both Bailey and Moffatt quote Meredith's disclaimer in full:

It has been suggested to me by one who has no fear of allegories on the banks of the Nile, that the hairy Shagpat must stand to mean umbrageous Humbug conquering the sons of men; and that Noorna bin Noorka represents the seasons, which help us, if there is health in us, to dispel the affliction of his shadow; while my heroic Shibli Bagarag is actually to be taken for Circumstance, which works under their changeful guidance towards our ultimate release from bondage, but with a disappointing apparent waywardness. The excuse for such behavior as this youth exhibits, is so good I would willingly let him wear the grand mask hereby offered to him. But though his backslidings call loudly for some sheltering plea, or garb of dignity, and though a story-teller should be flattered to have it supposed that anything very distinct was intended by him, the Allegory must be rejected altogether. The subtle Arab who conceived Shagpat, meant either very much more, or he meant less; and my belief is, that, designing in his wisdom simply to amuse, he attempted to give a larger embrace to time than is possible to the profound dispenser of Allegories, which are mortal; which, to be of any value, must be perfectly clear, and, when perfectly clear, are as little attractive as Mrs. Malaprop's reptile. ?

We are not principally concerned, however, with clarifying or resolving the apparent contradictions of Meredith's own statements regarding Shagpat; Joseph Warren Beach, as a matter of fact, has already given what seems the plausible and likely explanation.⁸ What we are more concerned about understanding is the nature of a work which seems with equal hospitality to accommodate both statements and both points of view, whether expressed by Meredith himself or whether dispersed between two groups of readers and explicators. Further, and more openly, we wish to pursue the argument that the opposed readings of Shagpat are a direct consequence of the dichotomous, contradictory character of the book itself.

That dichotomous and contradictory character is a major frustration in trying to give a summary of the work; for whether we lean toward the direction of story or toward the direction of serious meaning we are always conscious of a persistent discomfort that somehow the real quality of the book is being compromised, if not actually distorted. But, nevertheless, in its broadest outlines The Shaving of Shagpat gives the following account. Essentially it is the tale of one, Shibli Bagarag. This young hero is of all things a barber, not the son of a barber -- for we never hear a word of Shibli's parentage -- but the nephew of a barber, "the renowned Baba Mustapha, chief barber to the court of Persia." This Baba Mustapha, whom we meet in the last sections of the novel, is presented as a typical babbling practitioner of his craft, a bit of a fool, ludicrous, craven. But not so his nephew, whose faults are those of youth rather than of barberdom. He is vain, ambitious, impetuous, daring, and adventure-seeking. In the tradition of the heroes of legend and lore -- from Oedipus to Owen Glendower to John Marcher⁹ -- Shibli has been marked by destiny. At his birth it was "proclaimed that I was one day destined for great things, if I stood by my tackle, I, a barber." But, Shibli says:

I stood by my tackle as a warrior standeth by his arms, flourishing them. Now, when I found great things came not to me, and 'twas the continuance of sameness and satiety with Baba Mustapha, my uncle, in Shiraz -- the tongue-wagger, the endless tattler -- surely I was advised by the words of the poet to go forth in search of what was wanting, and he says:

Thou that drestest an Event,
When Circumstance is but a waste of sand,
Arise, take up thy fortunes in thy hand,
And daily forward pitch thy tent.

Now I passed from city to city, proclaiming my science, holding aloft my tackle. Wullahy! many adventures were mine....¹⁰

Thus has "our hero" come to the city of Shagpat and thus he encounters his destiny in the horrendous form of Noorna bin Noorka, ugly as a frog "with but room for the drawing of a thread between her nose and her chin," and whose "joints were sharp as the hind-legs of a grasshopper." Yet in true legendary fashion she extorts from our hero the promise of marriage in exchange for her aid and the support of her supernatural powers in bringing Shibli to the fulfillment of his destiny, in making him immortal in song and in history by becoming "Master of the Event." The "Event" which Shibli is to "Master" is the shaving of the merchant Shagpat, in the first attempt at which Shibli is severely beaten and "thwacked" within an inch of his life. Although a necessary prelude and precondition for what is to follow, the first try at the shaving of Shagpat is both reckless and foolhardy on Shibli's part, since he does not yet understand the difficulties which beset the task or the amazingly profound significances of those difficulties.

At the close of the first chapter or section, entitled "The Thwackings," the stage has been set for the ensuing action and we are ready to move into the major action of the novel. But we do not. Instead Meredith stops the action and in a manner rather reminiscent of the Princess Sheherazade, but for no such clear reason as hers, tells us the tale of "Bhanavar the Beautiful."¹¹

Let it be noted that this tale takes up about one-fourth of the novel's length. Looking back at the novel as a whole, we can see many points of similarity between the inserted tale of Bhanavar and the main story line. Also in fairness, let it be said that the tale is introduced a propos of certain transformations that have already taken place in the appearance of Noorna bin Noorka. Nevertheless, the interruption of narrative in a story barely established does take place. After seventeen pages concerned mainly with introductory exposition, the reader has thrust at him seventy pages of tangential, secondary narrative.

One does wonder whether indeed The Shaving of Shagpat is not a frame narrative like the Arabian Nights designed for the stories embedded in it. However this proves not to be the case. For although Meredith offers another two interrupting narratives, they are both quite minor, neither exceeding six or seven pages, and neither in length or in placement threaten the primacy of the main story.

At long last, then, we return to our main concern, a tale whose importance has now been further undermined, and whose sublimity even from the first was not a little mixed with the ridiculous -- our barber hero faced with the Herculean task of the shaving of Shagpat. Soon we learn of the superhuman dimensions of Shibli's task when:

Quoth Shibli Bagarag, "A clothier, O Noorna, control the Visier! and demand of him his daughter in marriage! and a clothier influence the King against his Visier! -- 't is, wullahy! a riddle."

She replied, "'T is even so, eyes of mine, my betrothed! but thou know'st not Shagpat, and that he is. Lo! the King, and all of this city save we

three, are held in enchantment by him, and made foolish by one hair that's in his head."

Shibli Bagarag started in his seat like one that shineth with a discovery, and cried, "The Identical!"

Then she, sighing, "T is that indeed! But the Identical of Identicals, the chief and head of them, and I, woe's me! the planter of it."¹²

Truly we may say that the plot has begun to thicken and boil. If barbers are to be heroes clearly whiskers must challenge heroism and demand great risk. Exactly why The Identical has such power we never quite discover. But we learn that it is a Hair which can charm men and hold them in subservience to whoever is the wearer and possessor of such a hair. As a matter of fact, the might and majesty of the greatest of all Identicals, The Identical of Identicals, is dramatized for the reader in the final section of the book when it causes Baba Mustapha to be thrice hurled across the royal hall for merely approaching it with the tonsorial tackle; then growing in its aroused wrath from the head of Shagpat it mounts higher and higher, piercing the roof of the Royal Palace into the sky, where it burns in majesty¹³ for three days and three nights. Certainly Noorna bin Noorka is right in the wisdom of her beneficent sorcery when she foretells the thrice compounded difficulties in the shaving of Shagpat:

...first, how the barber must come upon Shagpat and fix him for the operation (despite the illusions and multiplication of Shagpats which his protectress Rabesquarat, Queen of Illusion, will throw around him as deceptions); second, how the barber must be possessed of more than mortal strength to master him in so many strokes; third, how the barber must have a blade like no blade in this world in sharpness, in temper, in velocity of sweep, that he may reap this crop which flourisheth on Shagpat, and with it the magic hair which defiesth edge of mortal blades.¹⁴

Yet dark as the future looks for Shibli and Noorna, all

is -- thankfully -- not lost. There is one instrument capable of shearing Shagpat and cutting through even the Identical of Identicals. It is the sword of Aklis "before the keen edge of which all illusions and Identicals are as summer grass to the scythe."¹⁵ Now the great thing is to get the sword. No easy matter, since more than half the plot of the story deals with Shibli's adventures in getting the sword: the dangers he must face, the help Noorna offers him, and perhaps the wisdom that he gains. Here in one paragraph we have most of the forthcoming adventures named as Noorna speaks to her father, Peshnavat, Visier to the King:

"Thou knoweth, O my father, I am proficient in the arts of magic, and I am what I am, and what I shall be, by its uses. 'Tis known to thee also that I hold a genie in bondage, and can utter ten spells and one spell in a breath. Surely my services to the youth in his attainment of the Sword will be beyond price! Now to reach Aklis and the Sword there are three things needed -- charms: and one is a phial of the waters of Paravid from the wells in the mountain yonside the desert; and one certain hairs that grow in the tail of the horse Garraveen, he that roameth wild in the meadows of Melistan; and one, that the youth gather and bear to Aklis for the white antelope Gulrevaz, the Lily of the lovely Light, that groweth in the hollow of the crags over the Enchanted Seat with these spells he will command the Sword of Aklis, and nothing can bar his passage. Moreover I will expend in his aid all my subtleties, my transformations, the stores of my wisdom. Many seek this Sword, and people the realms of Rabes-qurat, or are beasts in Aklis, or crowned Apes, or go to feed the Roc, Kroojis, in the abyss beneath the Roc's-egg bridge; but there's virtue in Shibli Bagarag: wullahy! I am wistful in him of the hand of Destiny, and he will succeed in the undertaking if he dareth it."¹⁶

In a word, it is indeed as Noorna bin Noorka speaks. One by one the items enumerated in her account are met and mastered,

though not without frequent error and pain. It is a changed Shibli Bagarag who finally secures the Sword and enters upon the mighty combat, engaging not only the benumbed Shagpat, but the evil genie Karaz, and the corrupt and decadent Rabesqurat, Queen of Illusions. It is an older Shibli, matured and reasoned who has recognized the folly and vanities of the world, and who at great peril to himself has looked even beyond the "last illusion." He finally becomes Master of the Event and can thus in moderation and wisdom, together with the now beautiful Noorna bin Noorka, live happily ever after.

Even such an impossibly brief and truncated exposition of the plot as has been here sketched serves to reveal how rich in romance, how marvelous in incident, how authentic in color and in mood and in atmosphere The Shaving of Shagpat is. And those who wish to take it at only face value have an intricately, beautifully worked surface which fully answers the demand of the exotic, marvelous, Oriental tale.

Yet they have, disturbingly, even more than that. For at the same time that Meredith gives us the tale, he gives us also a frustrating lampoon of the tale. Is it really necessary for instance to name his hero, Bagarag? And why must he seem not only youthfully naive, but also vain and foolish with crude ambition? Furthermore, there is the matter of his barbering. Granted that there is many an Oriental tale about the poor beggar who rises to riches and fame. But is not even beggary something to be preferred to barbering? And if he must be a barber, what

perverse inclination causes the teller of the tale to insist so frequently, with such outrageous persistence, on the unromantic aspects of the craft and on the common image, the demeaning cliché of the ludicrous, babbling, and self-inflated barber?

Is there not something further ridiculous in again insisting that the fact of barbering itself be worked into the design of grand resolution? Must Destiny select as its historical instrument something as trivial, if not downright humiliating, as a shave or as the shaver himself. The stories of tailors, for instance, who have risen to romantic greatness are found in literature, but it is hardly through practice of that lowly skill that the result has been effected. Rather it happens through the transcendence of the menial station in life and not by attempting the paradoxical task of lifting tailoring with the tailor.¹⁷ The very idea of converting the needle to a spear and the thimble to a shield is one to inspire ridicule and parody, not romantic gratification. We can see and can predict that romance and irony will be uneasy bedfellows, and will seek each to crowd out the other.

But if we have this difficulty on the level of the romantic plot, it is compounded when we move to the level of meaning. Meredith has followed too well Emily Dickinson's injunction to "tell the truth, but tell it slant." For it must be, I believe, that ironic slant which has persuaded so many readers that the work has no allegorical level, when it is clear in so many ways and blatantly exposed in so many instances that an allegorical intent is present. The greater difficulty is of course to

reconcile the allegorical with the ironic. It is bad enough to tell a story, particularly a romance, and to force constantly into the foreground elements which undermine the premises of the story by reminding us how ridiculous it is. But what is even more ridiculous is to equate those ridiculous fictional elements with certain important meanings, and expect the reader to accept them as necessary, or at least instructive, even while the fiction and the meanings are satirized.

Exactly these cross purposes are at work in The Shaving of Shagpat and have disoriented most critical appreciations of the work. George Eliot called it "a new Arabian Night" and Sassoon called it "a burlesque of The Arabian Nights." But neither consults a level of consistent symbolic meanings embodied in the tale. On the other hand, although one must reverence McKechnie's attempt at an explication of the allegorical meaning, there is something blindly grim in his equation of The Shaving of Shagpat to Pilgrim's Progress and the humorless high-seriousness with which he says it epitomizes all the best that is contained in the Christian (Protestant Christian, that is) life. Both McKechnie and Sassoon are partial, and in their partiality refer to a book that does not exist. Priestley is again closer to the mark, though not very elucidating, when he¹⁸ calls it "half-allegorical."

Joseph Warren Beach is one of the few critics who treats both the serious and comic aspects of the work -- but never in relation to the same incident, and not in the ironic sense of

one putting pressure on the other. He sees the humor as augmenting the serious meaning, and not as dislocating it. Indeed, this is the major flaw in Beach's reading. For although Beach is sensitive to all the fictional properties in Shagpat -- the romantic action, the serious meaning, the mock-heroical aspects, the allegorical, and the comic -- they exist for him as separate facets of the work which are dominated by a consistent and ordered plan always in control. Thus he can say about The Shaving of Shagpat, "...I find it most interesting as a poetic statement of Meredith's programme. Whether so intended or not, is of little consequence. Shibli Bagarag is for me a type of the comic¹⁹ artist puncturing illusions with the Sword of Common Sense." The summarizing remarks of Beach quite ignore the ironic dimension of the work. Or perhaps more accurately, although he is frequently very close Beach is reluctant to raise the dynamics of irony in the work -- which is equally a reflection of the Meredithian "programme" as of the Meredithian mentality.²⁰

The difference is substantial enough to be paused over for a moment and commented upon; it demonstrates the peculiarity of Meredith's fiction and the tradition of the novel in which we are most interested. According to Beach and most readings of the novel, the novelist too "holds a mirror to Nature." The consciousness of the writer is that mirror. But the metaphor holds true with a startling and illuminating consistency. For what self-consciousness does in fiction is held up still another mirror opposite to it in which the first mirror and the holder

are reflected also. The ironic self-consciousness which is that second mirror -- in other words -- creates a situation as in physical optics, of endless reflections flashed and transmitted between mirrors, of internalized awareness, of mode becoming matter, of the examiner himself succumbing to scrutiny and examination. Any meaning reflected in the first mirror must survive the test of the ironic mirror.

This is the dynamic of the ironic novel and the context of Meredith's fiction. Within this altered understanding we may wrench a truth, a truth from Beach's analysis and say that The Shaving of Shagpat may indeed be paradigmatic -- the paradigm and the allegory of the ironic: barbering is pushed to heroism and the barber shoved into heroics; the snipping of a hair symbolizes the most difficult of labors rather than symbolizing triviality; the plucking of three hairs from the tail of a horse is the fitting prelude to greater accomplishment; the performer of this deed -- like Shibli on the back of the magical steed Garaveen -- becomes complacent with the minor "triumph," satisfied with only moderate greatness, and reluctant to confront magnificent destiny in the form of a shave.

Thus locked into a squirming, writhing intimacy, we have at once a marvelous oriental romance, and the parody of oriental romance, celebrating its gratifications and ridiculing its impossibilities. We have on the one hand the justifications of serious allegory, and on the other hand a satire of serious meanings and allegory.

There are at least these four levels of meaning in The Shaving of Shagpat which in crowding one another inside the locked frame of the story create an active and volatile chemistry. The Identical of Identicals, for example, represents on the level of romance the "Event," the heroical feat which the hero of the tale must "Master." It is at the same time parodic in its triviality and insignificance. As allegory, the Identical is a symbol for the arbitrariness and strength of human illusions or delusions. But then this meaning is undercut and derided by its patent absurdity.

The effect of the irony -- whether it ridicules tale or ridicules allegory -- is partially to discredit that particular reading and to throw the reader back onto an amply supported contrary level of reading. We have then not merely four discrete levels, but rather a pattern or rhythm which carries the reader from marveling, to laughter, to understanding, to a rejection of understanding -- though not necessarily in that order. Meredith plays with the pattern or with alternations of it in such a way as always to keep the reader nervously on the move. And it would seem as though the only way to break the cycle is to opt for a particular reading, decisively rejecting all others. This accounts for the remarkably divergent, opposed views regarding Shagpat. The pattern of opposed but interlocking ironies in the tale creates an ongoing ambiguity regarding its purpose which becomes progressively more difficult to tolerate.

This would imply, however, that Meredith embraces an ironic nihilism. And this is not true. Although Meredith exerts ironic force on all aspects of Shagpat, irony is for him not a rejection but a necessary qualification; it is not a method of discrediting, but a mode of apprehending and accommodating. It is by virtue of his ironic self-consciousness that a writer establishes his claim to authority and acceptance. And consequently, even in romance, the tale must stand the test of irony and even allegory must allow itself to be so purified. For it is in the twist of the ironic and in its pressure that both tale and allegory establish a valid connection with the worlds of truth and reality.

Thus Shibli begins to rise in the world by being severely "thwacked" and beaten, by betrothing himself to the ugliest creature ever beheld by normal eye. Even when the machinery of the oriental romance is in high gear, Shibli's rise is not direct and unimpeded. Pulled, pushed, occasionally literally carried along by the aid of Noorna bin Noorka's magic and supernatural goodness, he manifests time after time the perverse inclination to falter and to stumble. It is through Shibli's foolish intoxication with Garaveen's ride that Noorna is forced to release the evil genie Karaz in order to save Shibli. It is through Shibli's almost incurable vanity that Karaz nearly drowns him at sea. It is through Shibli's weakness of will that he succumbs to curiosity and, despite Noorna's warning, looks upon the face of the malign sorceress Goorelka of Olb and is petrified by its false but dazzling beauty. Time after time

Shibli must be bailed out and saved from the dangers into which he is betrayed by unheroic weakness. And when halfway through the novel Noorna regains the splendid beauty which was rightfully hers, we almost feel she is throwing herself away on the stammering and pathetic Shibli who appears only confused and ridiculous.

Still, despite the necessity for Meredith -- psychological as well as artistic -- to fashion his work upon an ironic slant, The Shaving of Shagpat could easily founder on the discrepancy between matter and method. That is, there are sections of the work that are clearly carried by richly romantic action, the conventional plot of oriental tale or fairy tale. At the same time, the leaven of an ironic intent obtrudes upon the rich tapestry too strongly and too often to be dismissed. The two elements in themselves might be insoluble and not mix. The genius of Meredith in The Shaving of Shagpat is that he uses allegory as a solvent. But it is not any simple allegory to illustrate a simple truth. It is an allegory of Meredith's own creation: the Allegory of Irony. Shagpat is an allegory which illustrates and dramatizes ironic truth.

There are two incidents in Shagpat which clearly exemplify Meredith's view of the importance of the ironic consciousness. The first occurs in relation to the wicked Goorelka of Olb, who we are told has enticed men into her service and adoration by means of the Identical over which she has had control. Once under her complete sway, Goorelka had the power to charm and transform them into birds who could only sing and whistle at her

bidding. There was, however, one way of breaking the spell. If someone could relate to these birds a story of men which would cause them to laugh for the duration of a single hour they would return to their former states. But this could be done only in Goorelka's absence, for if any one of the birds began his ironic laugh in her presence, she would cut it short by command and punishment.²¹ Here Noorna ponders their sad condition:

And as I mused, my breast melted with pity at their desire to laugh, and the little restraint they had upon themselves notwithstanding her harshness; for could they think of their changed condition and folly without laughter? And the folly that sent them fresh mates in misery was indeed matter for laughter...²²

The second instance involves Shibli himself, after he has fallen still once again into the trap of easy temptation. Having passed with the aid of Noorna and Abarak through the perilous domain of Rabesqurat where he had to leave Noorna stranded on a pillar above raging waters, Shibli arrives at the Palace of Aklis. No sooner does he enter, than he is greeted by seven and twenty beauteous maidens who offer themselves to him and call him King. It is just too much, once again, for Shibli to fight off.

...imagination fired him with the splendours due to one that was a king, and the thought of wearing a crown again took possession of his soul, and he cried, "Crown me, O my handmaidens, and delay not to crown me; for as the poet says:

'The king without his crown
Hath a forehead like a clown;'

and the circle of my head itcheth for the symbols of majesty.

And with those ominous words, Shibli allows the maiden to crown him and enthrone him before he discovers that he has been duped, like ninety-eight other adventurers that had preceded him in the quest. All are crowned with irremovable crowns and seated on thrones from which they cannot move. But as Shibli looks around,

...his gaze fell on a mirror, and he beheld the crown on his forehead what it was, bejewelled asses' ears stiffened upright, and skulls of monkeys grinning with gems! The sight of that crowning his head convulsed Shibli Bagarag with laughter, and, as he laughed his seat upon the throne was loosened, and he pitched from it....²³

Thus does the power of even a belated self-consciousness, a tardy ironic self-recognition have redemptive and healing power.

But the ironic assertions in Shagpat go beyond those that are attained by the characters. These are but a reflection of an ironic premise and an ironic condition that contain the characters, the novel, and history as it exists in the novel. Indeed the justification for the ironic contradictions in Shagpat -- the anti-heroical hero, the mock-heroic saga, the ridiculous task charged with sublimity, the impurity and imperfection which infect almost every incident of the narrative as when Shibli finally enters the inner sanctum of the adored Aklis still with the unspeakable crown of stiffened, gem-encrusted asses' ears -- all these paradoxes, mockeries, and mock-paradoxes, receive justification and sanction from an ironic vision so sweeping and so biting that the artistic conception must either bow it a welcome or be destroyed and completely invalidated. The ironic view is primal. In the beginning was indeed the word -- but the human word is self-conscious and ironic.

This does not mean to say that The Shaving of Shagrat is a deductive, premeditated ironic statement. On the contrary. What impresses one in reading the novel is how Meredith starts out in a relatively carefree, unprogrammatic manner to give his own sardonic recreation of the conventional oriental tale of the marvelous. Nor does there appear to be during the first half of the work, any systematic attempt to equate elements of the tale with a thematic meaning, ironic or otherwise. It is true that, at a relatively early point, Noorna indicated that the power of the Identical is the power of Illusion, but the interpretation seems there almost to intrude on a narrative whose main business is action, with the occasional lampoon of that action. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly, but a qualitative change seems to occur somewhere around the chapter entitled "Goorelka of Olb."²⁴ Here we have the start of ironic morals and meanings being clearly pointed, as in the incident of the enchanted birds who are not allowed the liberation of laughter, or when the King of Olb, Goorelka's father, in a moment of weakness allows himself to be shaved and then commands his court to be similarly denuded so that they will not be able to ridicule him. So far we have parody and disconnected ironic comment.

The third level of irony to which Meredith rises establishes itself firmly in the chapter "The Wiles of Rabesqurat."²⁵ It is here that the ironies of plot and the sporadic thematic ironies begin to mesh and to form a coherent whole, where before they were discordant and frequently contradictory. For Rabesqurat is the Queen of Illusion, and we come to recognize that Illusion,

false appearance, superficial pleasure and pleasingness, these are the vices of the thematic ethic and these constitute the obstacles which threaten successful accomplishment, the "Mastery of the Event," on the level of plot. The illusions men cherish, the idols they worship, the attractions to which they are drawn, are all essentially as frail and worthless as a single hair on a forehead. They are, furthermore, as meaningless and insignificant, except for the power they derive from the weakness, fatuousness, and vanity of their mortal idolators. It is this abdication from intelligence and self-awareness that can make out of a mere hair a burning pillar of fire that will dominate the very heavens.

Thus the symbol of "man as barber" by the inverse paradox of truth is an accurate representation of the human condition in both meniality and magnificence. But the ascent to true and meaningful Barberdom is beset with temptations and dangers, which will attack man at his most vulnerable weaknesses and offer him the glitter of empty satisfaction to belie and compromise his possible human greatness. These dangers and false satisfactions change as they seek to seduce through their flattery of man's various vanities of mind, of body, or even of soul. But they are all illusory, partial, and finally empty. They are all variations on the theme of vanity, and it is this that connects the birds of Goorelka with the bag of eyes held by Rabesqurat,²⁶ and connects both of these to the lifeless kingship offered by the beautiful maidens in the first ante-chamber of the Palace of

Aklis, or to the dominion over a kingdom of asses and apes which lies even on the other side of the precarious Bridge of Shells.

Our purpose here is not to work out the details of allegory. McKechnie has already demonstrated that this is possible -- even in his misguided, humorless equation of the lavish richness of Shagpat with the bleak landscape of Pilgrim's Progress. What we wish to indicate is that there is this third ironic level within which the seemingly disparate elements of Shagpat are made to cohere. It is as if the ironies of the first two levels had of themselves -- as it were -- begun to form the outlines of a pattern. And as if Meredith, working from the materials of these levels and their indications of a pattern, made bold to intensify the design of his irony.

But having arrived at consistency of ironic design, we are still lacking its internal rationale. We are still wanting, in other words, something to persuade us of the necessity of an ironic design in the first place. Why are the illusions men worship no more than the delusions of their grandeur? And why are they consequently, comparable to a worthless hair, that symbol of worthlessness? Why should the hero of this tale, then, be of necessity a barber? Why indeed all the ironies that we remarked at some pages ago, ironies, which -- forced from the premise of human inconsequentiality -- generate conditions of allegory which must inevitably be ironic? Let us, on the contrary, reverse the allegorical conditions and depict man as

heroic, though mortal, as wise, though capable of being deceived, as strong, though vulnerable. What, in other words, forces the writer to ironic allegory? Let him give us heroic allegory. Why should the reader have to contend with the mental discomfort of a barber as hero? Let us indeed have a king, or a knight.

There are actually two questions implied in seeking to determine the appropriateness and relevance of irony in The Shaving of Shagpat. The first is the question of aesthetic congruence which we raised some pages back: Is it not self-defeating to write an oriental romance which mocks oriental romance, or an allegory which appears to ridicule its own significance? We have attempted to answer this question by pointing out that Meredith's irony is not intended as a disabling satire or as a rejection. It is rather a medium of acceptance, the manner in which he "comes to terms with Mercutio,"²⁷ the Mercutio that exists without and the Mercutio that exists within. Furthermore we have attempted to indicate that both on the level of tale and on the level of allegory, irony exerts a pressure that does not disqualify, but merely qualifies. The tale of romantic and marvelous adventures holds us on its own substantive levels -- the wryness never turning awry -- and that Meredith words adroitly from the ironies of narrative to a consistent pattern of meanings which we call an allegory.

We shall not attempt to suggest that the relationship of the ironic to romance and allegory has been completely clarified. But granted its necessity, the necessity of the ironic, we can

see how Meredith has created an arrangement which is in a large degree successful. The second time we question the ironic, as we did above, we are querying not merely the limited aesthetic question of technique and accommodation, but the much larger question of the ironic compulsion. It is a question not only of appropriateness, but of relevance. It is possible to retell romance and allegory in an ironic manner, but why should one wish to do it? It is clear that in a way the integrity of The Shaving of Shagpat depends on Meredith's ability to provide an answer to that last question in the work, for only then will The Shaving of Shagpat have its own artistic autonomy.

This then is what Meredith does in the fourth level of irony in the novel, in the chapter entitled, "The Veiled Figure."²⁸ Throughout the work, as we observed earlier, Meredith has designated Illusion as the greatest evil. It is allegorized in many ways in the work; the most prominent symbol is the Identical of Identicals torn from the head of the evil Karaz and transplanted by force of circumstance rather than design in the head of dull-witted, somnolent Shagpat who becomes, ironically, an object of reverence and adoration. But now the finally triumphant Shibli has secured the Sword of Aklis with the power to dispel illusion, to see beyond mere appearance. Not only will the edge of the Sword cut through the Identical but the brilliance of its flashing blade will illuminate the essence that lies hidden beneath the appearance of things. Surely Shibli has come into his glory with such irresistible power; he is now invincible. He can see into the heart of all things.

It is indeed so; and this forms the substance of Meredith's most comprehensive and most "existential" irony. For retracing the path that took him to Aklis, Shibli comes once again to the stream across which he must be ferried by the boat of the Veiled Figure:

As they were crossing, desire to know that veiled figure counselled Shibli Bagarag evilly to draw the Sword again, and flash it, so that the veil became transparent. Then, when Abarak turned to him for the reason of the flashing of the Sword, he beheld the eyes of the youth fixed in horror, glaring as at sights beyond the tomb.²⁹

The experience which seems totally to have paralyzed Shibli, his mind and his will, is on the most apparent level just one more illustration of Shibli's crude bumbling. As Noorna says in the following chapter, "...yet his weakness clingeth to him, even in Aklis and with the wondrous Sword in his grasp."³⁰

But on a more complex, though equally clear level, Meredith has staged the most ironic reversal of all. Illusion is indeed an evil and betrays us into folly and stupidity. It deludes us and diminishes us. But such is the nature of the human condition, such its frailty and weakness, that without any illusions we become paralyzed. To know everything, to see through all surfaces, to apprehend the essence of all our efforts and activities, and to see the truth of where it all shall lead, is a wisdom which cripples. Humankind can, truly, not bear that much reality. For what we may see when we penetrate beyond the surface of an illusion is that at its heart there lives but another illusion. Certainly this would be the most terrifying insight, the most paralyzing knowledge.

Abarak heeded him not, crying still, "What sight?" and Shibli Bagarag lowered his tone, and jerked his body, pronouncing the name "Rabesqurat!" Then Abarak exclaimed, "'Tis as I weened. Oh, fool! to flash the Sword and peer through the veil! Truly, there be few wits will bear that sight!"³¹

Illusion is at the same time evil and necessary, just as man's noblest aspiration is to see through that which is false and illusory while still retaining enough faith to sustain himself and the worth of his goal. Vanities lie all about us crying to be dispelled. Yet the effort requires that we disregard the essential vanity of our own lives and the precariousness of our own moralities.

What Meredith does in that last reversal is to close his ironic circle in The Shaving of Shagpat. All the contradictions and paradoxes -- of which there are so many -- are legitimated by the huge ironic premise from which they depend. And all the ironies of action, of meaning, of character are remorselessly justified. For The Shaving of Shagpat is not merely an ironic allegory; it is an allegory of what is for Meredith the ironic and tenuous nature of truth.

...for the mastery of an Event lasteth among men the space of one cycle of years, and after that a fresh Illusion springeth to befool mankind, and the Seven must expend the concluding half-cycle in preparing the edge of the Sword for a new mastery.³²

The ironic ramifications of such a final statement can easily be extended to include all meanings, the content of all value systems, the temptation to rely on the permanence of any truth. If human intelligence makes available to us anything at all in which we may safely repose our trust, it is certainly not

the doomed content of our doctrines, but rather the form through which we apprehend and tentatively frame that doctrine. That limited affirmation possible to our intelligence is -- Meredith says -- necessarily ironic.

As far as The Shaving of Shagpat itself is concerned, its last statements function to enclose its meaning and internally justify its mode. It is, even for Meredith, an instance of supreme irony, like the snake swallowing its own tail.

However, although we are justified in saying that Meredith is parodying not only Oriental Romance, then, but his own parodistic treatment of Oriental Romance, we must also point out that the ironic consciousness is a definition and a boundary to keep us from falling into a limbo of meaninglessness. It is a redemption from absurdity. And such a vindication may be the true morality of The Shaving of Shagpat.

Footnotes

CHAPTER VI

1. "When the book was ready for the press, in December 1855, Meredith wrote a prefatory note for it, to explain that he was 'imitating the style and manner of the Oriental story-tellers. But such an attempt, whether successful or not, may read like a translation.' He therefore avowed that 'it springs from no Eastern source, and is in every respect an original work.'" Stevenson, Ordeal of George Meredith, p. 17.

2. Henderson, George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer, p. 28.

3. James McKechnie, Meredith's Allegory: The Shaving of Shagpat (London, 1910), p. 17.

4. Elmer James Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith: A Study (New York, 1907), p. 36.

5. Not in Letters, but published in facsimile at the front of McKechnie's book. See note #3 above.

6. "Primarily an outburst of youthful vitality ... it revealed its author as already a master of imaginative narration, sumptuously descriptive prose, and richly triumphant humor. Yet it was begun and carried through as a burlesque of the Arabian Nights...." Sassoon, Meredith, p. 12. George Eliot in her laudatory review of January 5, 1856 in The Leader, praised the book as follows: "...in exuberance of imagery, in picturesque wildness of incident, in significant humour, in aphoristic wisdom, 'The Shaving of Shagpat' is a new Arabian Night. Two two-thirds of the reading world this is sufficient recommendation." Reprinted in George Meredith: Some Early Appreciations, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London, 1909), p. 27.

7. Quoted in James Moffatt, George Meredith: A Primer to the Novels (London, 1909), pp. 81-82.

8. See Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 25, n. 2. "We know the author was irritated with some bungling attempt to interpret the story, and that in the preface to the second edition he seems to repudiate the allegory. ...But we know also that later

he permitted the dedication to himself of an essay by a Scottish clergyman in which the allegory is explained in considerable detail. This is James McKechnie's...."

9. The allusions to Glendower and John Marcher are particularly appropriate since Meredith applies a similar strain of irony to Shibli Bagarag.

10. SOS, p. 3.

11. SOS, pp. 19-84. It is curious to note that the tale of Bhanavar is not characterized at all by the lighthearted tone of the main story and, as a matter of fact, has a rather "dark" ending. The final chapter of this study will take up the phenomenon of Meredith's mixture of tones.

12. SOS, p. 88.

13. SOS, p. 234.

14. SOS, p. 100.

15. SOS, p. 100.

16. SOS, p. 101.

17. Biographically and psychologically, the irony of SOS derives from the embarrassing paradox of Meredith's own life. A psychoanalytic approach would certainly note the author's ambivalent attempt to deal with the fact that his father and grandfather were tailors. The same, as we noted above, is true of EH.

18. Priestley, George Meredith, p. 174.

19. In his "Ode to the Comic Spirit," Meredith makes the following invocation: "Head on,/ Sword of the many, light of the few! untwist/ Or cut our tangles till fair space is won/ Beyond a briared wood of austere brow,/ Relieved of discord by thy timely word/ At intervals refreshing life: for thou/ Art verily Keeper of the Muse's Key..." (Poems, II, 228). Beach makes an equation between this "Sword of Common Sense," which is the first line of the poem (p. 216) and the Sword of Aklis, in SOS (Comic Spirit in G.M., p. 33).

20. In other words, the comic exists not only in the contents, but it functions as process, as perception, as a mode of creation.

21. If we wished to pursue the endless ironic possibilities, we might suggest that the description of those poor captives of Goorelka symoblizes the uneasiness of the reader and seems emblematic of the very pattern of SOS.

22. SOS, p. 139.

23. SOS, pp. 166-168.

24. Chapter IX, p. 120.

25. Chapter XII, p. 146.

26. "...in one hand he bore a sack, in the other a tray; so he emptied the contents of the sack on the surface of the tray; surely they were human eyes! and the Queen flung aside her tresses, and stood over them. The youth saw her smile at them, and assume tender and taunting manners before them, and imperious manners, killing glances, till in each of the eyes there was a sparkle. Then she flung back her head as one that feedeth on a mighty triumph, exclaiming, 'Yet am I Rabesqurati: wide is my sovereignty'" (SOS, p. 156).

27. Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Selected Essays, p. 8.

28. Chapter XVII, p. 189.

29. SOS, pp. 189-190.

30. SOS, p. 194.

31. SOS, p. 190.

32. SOS, p. 244.

The forms achieved by prose fiction are neither shapes nor logical systems; for although literary works contain propositions, literary form is not the systematic unity of a complex literal statement. The artistic form is a perceptual unity of something seen, heard, or imagined -- that is, the configuration, or Gestalt, of an experience.

Susanne K. Langer, Problems of Art

CHAPTER VII

HARRY RICHMOND And The Comedy of History

In The Adventures of Harry Richmond, the problem of latent meaning almost vanishes. While there is a range of opinion regarding the success of the work, few critics or reviewers have found in Harry Richmond sufficient thematic complication to support such an approach. Only Lindsay, insisting on his economic reading of Meredith's fiction, will continue in a manner that is almost self-parodic: "The Squire then represents the successful merging of feudal survivals with the dominant bourgeoisie. Roy stands for the failure of feudal privilege to assert itself as an alternative way of life, of State power; and his last outburst expresses his recognition of that failure."¹ It is of course no such thing. The equations are false and misleading, and have almost nothing to do with the reality of the characters in the book.

The one portion in which Meredith's reforming impulse does appear, is in the German section of the book where in particular he uses the voice of Doctor Julius von Karsteg to announce his view of life, morality, truth and beauty. But Lindsay himself recognizes that "the whole German section miscarries...."² including the discussions with the learned doctor, and including also Ottilia's remon-

strances to Harry that the "unexamined life" is not worth living, that he should abandon the frivolities of his life for serious matters. Ottilia's presence in the novel may have its complexities, but even these are all of a romantic or romanticized character. Her chiding therefore is no more than a faint echo of Germanic "seriousness" and seems hardly more than "sweet."³

However, in order to illustrate how Harry Richmond resists the attempt to organize it by meanings -- and it does so more than any other of Meredith's novels -- Lindsay is too extreme an example. The approach of Norman Kelvin to the novel is a more useful instance. Although more moderate, and less distortive, Kelvin also makes equations that in the last analysis betray the unique quality of Harry Richmond, the richness of its plot and its exultation in the amplitude of history. The following is a good example:

...for Harry the Princess is the second ideal: his father had been the first. Before Harry's conversion can be completed, that earlier guiding image must be exorcised. Actually the exorcism has already taken place.... Having become sane, sober, and rational, Harry prepares at this point to be a better follower of the Princess than he ever could have been as her lover or husband.⁴

The point is not of course that Kelvin is wrong in the way that Lindsay is wrong. Kelvin is right. The falsification comes in making Richmond Roy into a symbol of irrational, self-indulgent living which first attracts

Harry. The analysis ignores Roy's great charm and love. These are more important to Harry, as is the fact that Roy is his father, than Kelvin's ideological equations. Similarly, the Princess Ottilia is a girl Harry falls in love with. That relationship would seem to have more weight in the novel than Ottilia's allegedly emblematic significance.⁵

We are much safer in turning to a more popular view.

Harry Richmond pretends to be nothing more than a fine story. This is evident at the beginning. Contrary to the other novels, it does not begin with a torturous preface, but with a prologue which has the boldness and the precision of a tale, the brightness of a fairy story, and the pathos of a little one-act drama. This prologue gives the novel an unforgettable frontispiece. It testifies to the superior essence of an imagination which is ever displaying greater strength in later chapters. And forthwith the writer leads us into strange paths, and fairy lands, where a commonplace novelist would never venture.⁶

We can also invoke the testimony of as competent a judge as Virginia Woolf, who says that in Harry Richmond "All traces of immaturity are gone.... The story bowls smoothly along the road which Dickens has already trodden of autobiographical narrative."⁷ While in all honesty we must say that she does not find the smoothness sustained throughout, nevertheless, her final judgment is that the "shallow bath of illusion closes over our heads and we sink with Richmond Roy and the Princess Ottilia into the world of fantasy and romance, where all holds together and we are able to put our imagination at the writer's service without reserve."⁸ This overall, essentially positive reac-

tion was reflected popularly also, since two months after its publication in 1871, a second edition was immediately printed.

Virginia Woolf's comments go even further:

....the author has curbed his redundance and pruned his speech. The style is the most rapid possible. It runs smooth, without a kink in it. Stevenson, one feels, must have learnt much from this supple narrative, with its precise adroit phrases, its exact quick glance at visible things ...we are able to put our imagination at the writer's service without reserve. That such surrender is above all things delightful; that it adds spring-heels to our boots; that it fires the cold scepticism out of us and makes the world glow in lucid transparency before our eyes, needs no showing, as it certainly submits to no analysis. That Meredith can induce such moments proves him possessed of an extraordinary power.⁹

The very citing of Stevenson as even a theoretically possible protege -- and the praise of Meredith being "without kinks" when the essence of Meredith is his "kinkiness" -- dramatically illustrates the distance of Harry Richmond from Meredith's other novels. So uncharacteristic, as a matter of fact, was the work that upon its appearance in the Cornhill, the work was not popularly attributed to Meredith by a public which had become accustomed to a rather different fare from his pen. Meredith complains about the mistake in a letter of 1870.¹⁰

Harry Richmond then is a work dominated by plot, and not only crowded with event, but to a large degree pushed and jostled by it. We are accustomed to think of Meredith's novels as being impelled by a certain kind of

authorial energy which is constantly and conspicuously reflexive. In Harry Richmond it is as if all this energy and all this consciousness were infused and injected into event and the making of plot. As E. J. Bailey has pointed out:

For the benefit of the curious in such matters, it may be said that this novel is Meredith's longest story....The numbers of characters, too, is remarkably large, there being one hundred and sixty-nine -- that is more than appear in "The Ordeal of Richard Ferevel" and "Sandra Belloni" taken together, and as many more than are found in "Vittoria" as there are personages in "Rhoda Fleming." Unimportant as these details are in themselves, we are forced to regard them as giving some foundation to the frequently repeated charge that the story is a rambling one. Certainly, it is far less compact than any which preceded it....The scene of the acting moreover, touches all the continents of the Eastern Hemisphere; and characters appear from every important European district except Russia and the Scandinavian peninsula.¹¹

Here certainly, in this exuberant plot-making is a testing of the limits of plot; and in the rapturous indulgence of event, the comedy of history.

Furthermore, Meredith has so circumscribed himself in autobiography as to legislate purely authorial intervention out of existence. While Harry Richmond serves in some part inevitably as a conveyance for "ideas," Meredith has no alternative but to risk the preachments on the inadequacies of the English, the role of women, the state of education, the admirability of the Germans, by hazarding them in dramatized form. Occasionally, though with far less frequency than might be imagined, the habit of reflection, of

reflexiveness does assert itself. But even then its presence has already been subsumed; it has been retroactively sanctioned as autobiographically acceptable soliloquy. For example, in describing the events immediately leading to his duel with Prince Otto, Harry indulges in this reflection:

I see that I might have acted wisely and did not; but that is a speculation taken apart from my capabilities. If a man's fate were as a forbidden fruit, detached from him, and in front of him, he might hesitate fortunately before plucking it; but as most of us are aware, the vital half of it lies in the seed paths he has traversed. We are sons of yesterday, not of morning. The past is our mortal mother no dead thing. Our future constantly reflects her to the soul. Nor is it ever the new man of to-day which grasps his fortune, good or ill. We are pushed to it by the hundreds of days we have buried, eager ghosts. And if you have not the habit of taking counsel with them, you are but an instrument in their hands.¹²

It is of course the typical Meredith down to the compressed and tortured metaphor of the forbidden fruit which he is at more pains to locate geographically than logically. The big difference is that this too, even such an outrageous strained analysis, falls under the blanket of the hero's narration. We wince but do not stop. It is even more significant that Meredith himself while unwilling to blot the passage, recognizes an incongruity. "My English tongue," Harry continues in the next sentence, "admonishes me that I have fallen upon a tone resembling one who uplifts the finger of piety in a salon of conversation." And here the metaphor is surely apt. For this novel is Mere-

dith's "salon of conversation," an exercise in storytelling which should not be compromised by blatant intrusions of piety or pedagogy. James Moffat comments ironically on how well Meredith preserves the spirit of this novel. "...as a rule incident and action abound: in fact, as has been already hinted, they abound to the detriment of the story's construction..."¹³

The same mixed note of approval at the novel's being a story, and distress at its being too much story, is sounded by Richard Holt Hutton at the beginning of his review in The Spectator of 1872. "This book shows originality, wealth of conception, and not a little detailed knowledge of the world; the outline of the tale is bold and flowing, and the individual figures are painted with considerable though unequal skill; some other scenes are full of force of a very unusual kind...and yet it would be far truer to say that it has the stuff for half-a-dozen first-rate novels in it, than that it is a first-rate novel itself."¹⁴

While frankly adulatory, Photiades's comments are nonetheless useful in isolating the unusually conventional cast of the narrative:

Although this book Harry Richmond does not surpass the others in depth of thought, it is the one which many eminent men prefer, because nowhere has Meredith's fancy found such freedom. Uncurbed by philosophical reservations, George Meredith has been able to allow his imagination free scope; and happy in feeling free, it has

displayed for the first time the extent of its power. It is therefore Harry Richmond that we shall choose if the reader desires a specimen of Meredith. We shall do so with all the more assurance, as it is the only book which we can summarize without in any way doing an injustice. The loss of ornament does not deprive it of all beauty. Certainly George Meredith has never written a line without being in some degree esoteric; but here, at least, the literal sense is quite sufficient in itself, and one can read Harry Richmond without worrying oneself as to what lies beneath it.¹⁵

Without question, however, the atypicality and uniqueness of Harry Richmond in the Meredith canon, its plot primacy, is testified to most strongly by the determined and mistaken haranguing of Percy Lubbock. For according to Lubbock's dogmatic view, the question of novelistic form is no question at all. It is as a matter of fact all answer; good novels are dramatic and the best novels are those in which everything has been dramatized. The responsibility of the novelist, consequently, in selecting the authorial point of view is to choose the one which affords the greatest potential for dramatizing all the central action of a novel.

The novelist, therefore, returns to the third person again, but he returns with a marked difference. He by no means resumes his original part, that of Thackeray in Vanity Fair; for his hero's personal narration he does not substitute his own once more. It is still the man in the book who sees and judges and reflects; all the picture of life is still rendered in the hero's terms. But the difference is that instead of receiving his report we now see him in the act of judging and reflecting; his consciousness, no longer a matter of hearsay, a matter for which we must take his word, is now before us....

Meredith would have sacrificed nothing, so far

as I can see, by proceeding to the further stage
in Harry Richmond....¹⁶

Lubbock embarks on a precarious design in posing a Jamesian solution for a Meredithian concern. And obviously the prescription is Jamesian, for Lubbock uses Harry Richmond as the bridge, as the transition from Henry Esmond to The Ambassadors.

The evidence of all Meredith's fiction as well as the internal evidence of Harry Richmond all bear heavily the same conclusion. That Meredith's central mode in Harry Richmond is not toward the definition of the "well-made novel" as postulated by Lubbock-Beach, any more so than in the other novels. But that in Harry Richmond Meredith is testing the plot dimension of fiction, and is doing so by accepting that traditional method of narrative which must diminish and confine the arrant self-consciousness of a less plot-dominated novel. Are event and plot the characteristic material of fiction, Meredith would be saying. Is history the essential component of a novel? Let us then attempt a novel in which the supremacy of history and event is axiomatic and in which we test whether that supremacy, once granted, can become definitive. Harry Richmond is for us an exercise in the self-consciousness of plot. For the novelist as comedian, Harry Richmond is the comedy of history.

For a more balanced and accurate perception of Harry Richmond, J. B. Priestley once more comes closest to

the truth in his appraisal.

...though no one else could have written Harry Richmond, its good qualities being all native to the writer, it is in some respects one of his least characteristic productions. It is really an experiment. *(Italics mine.)* The fact that unlike any of the other novels, it is written in the first person, in the sprawling autobiographical form that plays such a notable part in English fiction, is significant. It means that the writer is about to part company with a number of his most familiar devices. The detachment demanded by intellectual Comedy is clearly impossible when one of the chief actors is himself the narrator and we are to see everything through his eyes. Something can be done indirectly, by means of irony; while Harry Richmond is romanticising it may be possible to let in Comedy, as it were, by the back door; but the difficulties are almost insuperable. Meredith undoubtedly planned it as a fresh departure, an experiment in the picaresque, in which the purely romantic strain, never long absent from many of the novels, not even from The Egoist, that was as much a part of him as the Comic, should have full play. But he could not resist the temptation to make this romantic autobiography a Comedy as well.

The result is a curious mingling of atmospheres.¹⁷

The description is almost dead center. What Priestley calls the "intellectual Comedy," "detachment," and "Irony" are all coordinates of authorial self-consciousness just as "romance" and "the picaresque" are distilled forms of plot. It is significant how well Virginia Woolf's more general statement supports and extends that of Priestley.

He did not steep the world in one mood. His mind was too self-conscious and too sophisticated to remain lyrical for long. He does not sing only: he dissects. Even in his most lyrical scenes a sneer curls its lash round the phrases and laughs at their extravagance. As we read on we shall find that the comic spirit, when it is allowed to dominate the scene, licked the world to a very different shape.¹⁸

The question of "shape" is of course at the very center of our discussion. And we must point out that in addition to the crowding of Harry Richmond by character and incident, there is also the crowding of motifs. Romance, autobiography, picaresque, bildungsroman, all these are found in Harry Richmond. All the traditional novelistic attitudes which inform and bind fictional plot are synthesized by Meredith here. And the work which issues from the synthesis is therefore one of a phenomenal fullness. The novel is "packed" in the way that we speak of a line of poetry being "packed" in terms of conflicting rhythms. It is the romance of a young man, the son of an illegitimate father, who variously becomes heir to one of the largest landed estates in England, runs away from school to cast his lot temporarily with gypsies, aspires to the hand of a German princess, accepts the freedom of poverty, and finally unites with the true love of his heart. It is also the picaresque adventure of a long and varied road whose incidents are scattered over the rural and urban landscapes of England and Europe. It is at the same time a bildungsroman of a young man's discovery of life with its sadness, disappointments, and missed opportunities, an education to reality and to pain, and disillusionment, a learning to reject the proffered and opposing alternatives and to construct a more rational, personal alternative to the "yea's" and "nay's" surrounding him. Finally, it is

an autobiography of Harry Richmond from childhood in the home of Squire Beltham to the time when the problems, adventures, and questions of his life have been resolved and can be of no further interest to us. He dies or he lives happily ever after, the two are actually equal and biography ends.

To talk about Harry Richmond and its shape as a novel is, in a most important sense, to talk about Richmond Roy. Harry's father, who styles himself Augustus Fitzgeorge Frederick William Richmond Guelph Roy, represents emblematically Meredith's narrative energy in this novel. Every discussion of Harry Richmond must take up the matter of Richmond Roy, for he towers over the novel very much as Falstaff threatens to dominate the action of Henry IV, Part I. Called Meredith's greatest creation and one of the great comic characters of literature, Richmond Roy is essentially a charlatan. But he is of such magnificent proportions, so irresistibly described and so perfectly understood by Meredith, that the designation is almost unfair. Richmond Roy has little to do with caricature. He is perhaps the triumphant example of Meredith's great ability to comprehend and to dramatize the paradoxical, the ironic, the ambiguous.

If on the one hand Richmond Roy, this illegitimate son of an actress, is a schemer, a deceiver, an exploiter,

a blackmailer, a liar, and an irresponsible sponge, he is on the other hand self-deceived, vulnerable, noble, loving, generous, and -- strictly in his own sight of course -- honorable. The comparison with Falstaff is valid. Richmond Roy has that quality of all great comic characters of comprehending within himself not only the mask with which he meets reality, but like Falstaff or Don Quixote the fact of its tragic or pathetic inadequacy. It is this eventually doomed quality about Richmond Roy, which Meredith is able to convey even at the time of his relative success, and which defeats him finally in the scene when Squire Beltham bludgeons him almost to the very death. He frequently outrages us as he has outraged Harry's grandfather, the Squire, but it is a charlantanry coupled with commensurate vulnerability. This accounts for the charm and fascination Richmond Roy holds for us as for the characters within the novel -- from Harry to Mrs. Waddy to Dorothy Beltham to Princess Ottilia.

The attractions of Richmond Roy, the glitter of his "grand style," his flair for the impressively dramatic and eloquent are all established in Chapter One of Harry Richmond, that marvelous opening chapter where Harry's father appears suddenly out of the night to demand first his wife and then his son. But it is in the second chapter where Harry describes his first memories of life with his father, the marvelous Sundays that they spent together --

"...this was a day with a delight of its own for me. He was never away on the Sunday " -- it is here that the portrait deepens, humanizes, and becomes warm with Roy's reality. "My father could soon make me forget that I was transplanted," Harry says. "When he was at home I rode him all around the room and upstairs to bed, I lashed him with a whip till he frightened me, so real was his barking; if I said 'Menagerie' he became a caravan of wild beasts; I undid a button on his waistcoat, and it was a lion that made a spring, roaring at me; I pulled his coat-tails and off I went tugging at an old bear.... Our room was richer to me than all the Grange while these performances were going forward."¹⁹

One of the most revealing passages in the chapter and perhaps in the novel is Harry's account of his father's reconstruction of Shakespeare.

'Great Will,' my father called Shakespeare, and 'Slender Billy,' Pitt. The scene where Great Will killed the deer, dragging Falstaff all over the park after it by the light of Bardolph's nose, upon which they put an extinguisher if they heard any of the keepers, and so left everybody groping about and catching the wrong person, was the most wonderful mixture of fun and tears. Great Will was extremely youthful, but everybody in the park called him, 'Father William'; and when he wanted to know which way the deer had gone, King Lear (or else my memory deceives me) punned, and Lady Macbeth waved a handkerchief for it to be steeped in the blood of the deer; Shylock ordered one pound of the carcase; Hamlet (the fact was impressed on me) offered him a three-legged stool; and a number of kings and knights and ladies lit their torches from Bardolph; and away they flew, distracting the keepers and leaving Will and his troop to the deer. That poor thing died from a different weapon at each recital....

My father related all this with such a veritable matter-of-fact air, and such liveliness -- he sounded the chase and its cries, and showed King Lear tottering, and Hamlet standing dark, and the vast substance of Falstaff -- that I followed the incidents excitedly, and really saw them, which was better than understanding them....²⁰

These paragraphs are among Meredith's best. But in addition to dramatizing Roy's charm and humor not merely for his son but for us too, the passage is an anatomy of Richmond Roy's weakness. For just as Roy reconstructs Shakespeare, in very much the same way he attempts to reconstruct reality, using only those parts which have utility for him at the moment, discarding whatever is inconvenient. Harry remarks about his father's introducing him to Shakespeare that vividly imagining incidents and characters in the narration "was better than understanding them." Nevertheless, there comes a time when understanding the actual fact becomes of much greater importance and a greater necessity than enjoying this or that particular aspect, when self-indulgence must be replaced by responsible action. It is that discovery that marks Harry's coming of age.

But it is far from being an easy process. Harry learns early that loyalty to his father cannot be a half-way measure, for in order to exist at all it demands participation in the extravagant and inflated vision which Richmond Roy is able to conjure out of even the most ordinary and common circumstances. When in the second half of the novel, Roy takes it upon himself to announce the engagement of Princess Ottilia to Harry, his extrava-

gant fabrications echo with the same rearrangement of fact and reality that he has practiced all his life. Except that it is understanding and truth that Harry has come to value as highly now as the vividness and color of his father's vision.

I read a paragraph in which Ottilia's name and titles were set down; then following mine and my wealthy heirship, and -- woe was me in the perusing of it! -- a roundabout vindication of me as one not likely to be ranked as the first of English commoners who had gained the hand of a hereditary foreign princess, though it was undoubtedly in the light of a commoner that I was most open to the congratulations of my countrymen upon my unparalleled felicity. A display of historical erudition cited the noble inferiors by birth who had caught princesses to their arms -- Charles, Humphrey, William, John. Under this list, a later Harry!

I looked at my father to try a struggle with him. The whole man was efflorescent.²¹

It should be finally emphasized that Richmond Roy, flawed, deluded, romantic, never becomes merely ridiculous; and the measure of his charm and persuasiveness is the success to which he very nearly brings his schemes.

But our critical interest in Richmond Roy now should be directed mainly to his effect on the plot. And his effect from that point of view appears to be a distracting and competing element. We tend to suspect of Meredith that his ironic sensibility has gotten the better of him and that he has written an autobiography of Harry Richmond, the son, when in fact it is the story of Richmond Roy, the father. Similarly we call it romance, but the most romantic interludes in the novel are the ones that have been

produced, staged, and practically directed by Roy, while Harry dutifully, and perhaps even a bit too docilely, plays the part in which his father cast him opposite the Princess Ottilia.

There is no denying the force of the argument. As a matter of fact, in his chapter on Harry Richmond, Moffatt takes precisely this position if not a more extreme one:

The fascination of the man, with his incorrigibly dramatic vein and florid temper, throws Harry into the shade, and the titular hero's character never develops much independent interest. The wealth of the minor characters, of whom the country folk are specially good, and episodical nature of the school-scenes, the German scenes, and the gypsy adventures, also tend to divert the reader's attention, not from the father's superb faith in his own genius and the contagion of his personality, but from the character of the son, who becomes little more than a pawn upon the chess-board.²²

Nevertheless, there is another way of looking at the novel which is important, if only to provide some understandable basis for the practical success of the work. At the risk of being merely ingenious, we might suggest that Richmond Roy is a unifying as well as a dispersive structural factor. In other words, Meredith obviously wished in this novel to create a fictional matrix which could comprehend a broadness of event he had not hitherto attempted. If Sassoon is right that Harry Richmond was originally planned as "a picaresque story of the 18th-century type,"²³ we can claim a critical right to theorize on the change in design. The main problem with the

picaresque novel is a fragmentary and episodic quality. But Harry's odysseys are not episodic and fragmented; they have a coherence because their destination is a point of reference already embedded in the novel: his father, Richmond Roy. In the same way, we can argue that the motif of romance is given an organic relation to the novel, also through the agency of Richmond Roy. The point emerges just as clearly if we look upon the novel as a form of Bildungsroman. Almost everything in the novel, in other words, is identified and given historical value in terms of Richmond Roy.

There are two structural points here that are closely related. The first is that Richmond Roy and his diminishing influence on Harry serves as a means of organizing the whole novel as a plot structure. And it should be evident that such an organization and structure must exist if we are to have any testing of plot. History must be given the semblance of design, of coherent unity in order for us to see the results of subjecting the structure to internal and external pressure. This plan can be contrasted with episodic novels as open-ended not only as Moll Flanders and Martin Chuzzlewit, but as Melville's Redburn and Bellow's Augie March. The latter two especially are, like Harry Richmond, autobiographical novels in which the main characters grow to maturity; but while Melville gives his novel the mechanical organization of a voyage to

Liverpool and back, neither it nor Augie March creates a design which limits the validity of incident. Richmond Roy helps create these limits, at the same time that he is constantly bringing more "plot" or event into the novel. He is therefore a means of testing plot and not testing only the memory or the patience of the reader.

The second point is similar though not the same. It has to do with the function of Richmond Roy himself as an organizing and defining agent. That is, Roy's character itself aside from its function in creating a plot structure, is useful in preventing the profusion of Harry Richmond from turning into a mere confusion. His very grandness is an orienting force amid the superabundance of plot. We alluded above to the argument that this should have been Harry's role; however, the question arises of whether that is possible in such a novel. Dickens is certainly more successful, but the many comparisons between Harry Richmond and David Copperfield are essentially superficial. And one might candidly ask whether David is as clear to us as Uriah Heep or even Miss Murdstone, and whether Pip of Great Expectations is nearly as memorable as Miss Havisham. In any case, however, since Meredith believed young men to have very little personality,²⁴ he could hardly have done much more with Harry than he did. Lionel Stevenson emphasizes the same point in The Ordeal of George Meredith:

...this was consistent with Meredith's theory that the average young person is malleable, with capabilities of becoming either good or evil, depending on the blows he receives from the hammer of experience. Harry is the same sort of well-intentioned but underdeveloped youth as Wilfrid Pole; he annoys the reader more, simply because he is central in the story and because he frankly records his own vacillations and apprehensions.²⁵

In a chapter dealing so much with story and plot, it is unforgivable not to set forth the Plot of Harry Richmond. It is impossible to do so however, since any capsule version of the story must of necessity omit the flood of incident and detail, the richness in diversity of character, which gives the novel its unique quality. One can only cite here statistics like those of Bailey, quoted earlier. Or one can like Photiades, in his chapter on the "Genius" of Meredith, give a ninety-page summary. The compromise which follows will, hopefully, reveal some patterns.

After taking Harry from Riversley Grange and Squire Beltham, after the extended sojourn in London where Roy is constantly plagued by the "descendants of Shylock," and after the long interlude of Dipwell Farm, all of which is crammed into three chapters -- Roy bethinks himself of the necessity of Harry's education. Momentarily in funds, he seizes the opportunity to place Harry at Surrey House, a school where an almost brutal Mr. Rippenger presides over the education of the boys and his young, lovely daughter Julia rules over their hearts. The three chapters describ-

ing Harry's "adventures" in British Public Schools education have the distinct, conventional quality of their setting, but are again heightened by Meredith. It is accomplished mainly by a dramatization of first-love between Harry's noble friend Heriot and his beautiful protectress, Julia Rippenger. The younger boy acts as a go-between for the pair and his participation in their idealized love touches and transmutes the traditional elements of school-days fiction, the harsh schoolmaster, the bullying and comraderie, etc. The Heriot-Julia relationship also serves to foreshadow the later relationship between Harry and Princess Ottilia.

But Harry, who arrived in the grand flush of his father's latest windfall, has not heard from Roy since that time. Nor has Mr. Rippenger whose manner toward Harry coarsens over the years as Harry's financial state continues to deteriorate. Eventually Harry runs away from school by joining a gipsy band through a chance meeting with one of its members, a young and haunting girl, Kiomi, who reappears at several points in the novel until her tragic ending with the then dissolute Heriot. The strange gipsy interlude (revived later in the novel) ends when Harry's plan to find his father is subverted. His strange companions hoping for a reward practically deliver him to Squire Beltham. Thus Harry returns to Riversley Grange after years of absence. He remains there for a number of years, during which time

two things are established: one, that he will be the heir of Squire Beltham only if he renounces his father; and two, that the Squire wishes him to marry the rather aggressive Janet Tichester.

Harry is so far from accepting either condition that he once more leaves, this time with his good school-friend Temple, to find his father in London. The two arrive late and plunge into a chapter in which both fire and fog are symbolically invoked. After a few hours and encounters more incredible than important, they fall asleep on board a ship and awake to find themselves being shanghaied to Germany. Harry is particularly disturbed, and quite understandably, by such an unexpected frustration of his plans to find his father. However, he is soon to be consoled quite as unexpectedly. For whom should he meet soon after the ship docks but the same father and daughter who befriended him some ten or twelve years before when, as a child, he got lost in the streets of London. They helped to find his father then and are about to perform the same services again. For the wondrous truth of the situation is that Richmond Roy is not in London at all, but by a strange and Providential coincidence happens to be in Germany at the court of the Prince of Eppenwelzen-Sarkeld.

The two pilgrims press on and after meeting "a beautiful little lady" who turns out later to be the young Princess Ottilia, Harry is finally united with his father

who has been busy furthering Harry's career by proposing a match between him and Ottilia. The grounds he offers are his own allegedly royal blood and Squire Beltham's large fortune. In the meantime, however, he consents to return to England with Harry.

Back in England, Roy's spendthrift habits lead him again to Debtor's Prison from which he is rescued by Harry. There is a long section of the novel set in Bath where Roy gets entangled with a nineteen-year-old heiress and while he emerges with some dignity from the entire affair, Harry's insight and disenchantment date from this episode.

However, Roy's major preoccupation and obsession is his design for the marriage of Harry and Ottilia, and when Harry comes of age this scheme moves into an almost full occupation of the novel's plot. Roy's complex and involved machinations in bringing the two potential lovers together finally issue in a mutual declaration of love between them. But when the Princess informs her father, he refuses to recognize the engagement despite Roy's previous subtle bribery. The plan thus founders on the family's distaste for the match, although many repercussions follow, including Harry's being forced into a duel with Ottilia's rejected suitor, Prince Otto.

For almost half the novel following this, Meredith continues to explore and to probe the relationship between

Harry and Richmond Roy, showing as he did in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel that love is indeed not enough, particularly in the case of a deluded and misguided father. In addition, he juxtaposes the scenes of Roy's fluctuating fortunes in London, his dalliance in politics, his increasingly frenzied attempts to assert the fact of his illegitimate, but royal lineage. The scenes at Riversley Grange reveal Harry's increasing alienation from the life, the comfort, and the wealth it represents.

The various strands of the plot are brought together near the end. Richmond Roy makes one last attempt to unite Harry with the Princess Ottilia. He fools Ottilia into coming to the Isle of Wight by writing her that Harry is dying. Ignoring discretion in the face of such a summons, she comes and her arrival empowers Roy to blackmail the family with the threat of scandal. In a perverse way, the episode starts out as if to show the amoral magnificence of Roy. In his moment of great wrong, delusion and power, he stands all alone -- and determined. Numerous characters representing the worlds of Riversley, London and Sarkeld are all there, and they all oppose him. Harry, himself, is sickened by the thought that his father has lost him, irretrievably, the love of Ottilia. But Roy, believing himself to hold all the cards, is determined to exact this triumph from a world that has denied him his rightful position.

The last scheme of Roy's fails, since Ottilia takes refuge from scandal by marrying an older suitor of her family's choice. But what follows in the scene between Squire Beltham and Roy must surely be one of the most intensely brutal confrontations in any novel. This scene alone would justify Meredith's contention that his method was to lead up to a big scene and render it.²⁶ It contains an almost uninterrupted monologue of verbal extermination:

"You married the boy's mother to craze and kill her, and guttle her property. You waited for the boy to come of age to swallow what was settled on him. You wait for me to lie in my coffin to pounce on the strongbox...For nine-and-twenty years you've sucked the value of my family and struck through my house like a rotting disease....You breed vermin in the brain to think of you! Your wife, your son, your dupes, every soul that touches you, mildews from a blight! You were born of ropery, and you go at it straight, like a web-foot to water. What's your boast? -- your mother's disgrace! You shame your mother. Your whole life's a ballad o' bastardy. You cry up the woman's infamy to hook at a father. You swell and strut on her pickings. You're a cock forced from the smoke of the dung-hill!"²⁷

The two men finally cancel themselves out. Richmond Roy never recovers from combined blows of his failed scheme and the verbal veating. He becomes silent, a man with no plans. As for Squire Beltham, in the following chapter Harry says: "My grandfather lived eight months after a scene that had afforded him high gratification at the heaviest cost a plain man can pay for his pleasures; it killed him."²⁸ The last few chapters constitute really

no more than epilogue. Janet and Harry are brought together eventually through the leniency of Providence and the kindness of a concerned Princess Ottilia. They return to Riversley Grange to discover it in flames and Richmond Roy dead in the fire.

Not even the first part of our summary can convey the fullness of event and the variousness of character in this novel, and in general it can give no more than a hint of the story or of how Roy functions in plot structure. But the summary does remind us, too, that the novel contains ample proof of Meredith's tendency to strain the limits of plot not only by quantity and horizontal crowding, but by vertical distortion of incident as well.

For example, we cited the instance of Harry and Temple being shanghai-ed as an indication of Meredith's unabashed use of the incredible. But we omitted the reason for the two young men being kidnapped or the nature of their kidnapper, which strains even more the credulity of the reader. It seems that they are held on board ship for the sake of their soul's salvation by an energetically evangelistic Captain Welsh. "'I came on board, he explains. "I found you both asleep, with those marks of dissipation round your eyes, and I swore -- in the Lord's name, mind you -- I'd pluck you out of the pit while you had none but one leg in.'" He even gives them assignments: "'...I'll

trouble you to commit to memory the whole story of the Prodigal Son 'twixt now and morrow's sunrise. We'll have our commentary on it after labour done."²⁹ Interestingly and typically for Meredith, the captain of the *Pricilla* is not just a case of exaggeration for comic effect. For later in the novel he becomes the instrument of tragedy. Meredith is not merely straining after a comic scene.

The peculiarity of such stress on the level of sheer story occurs in Harry Richmond not only in regard to character and not only in regard to the common device of coincidence. Meredith appears to apply the force in parody of such a fictional convention as the "recognition scene." For example, when Harry arrives at Sarkeld to be reunited with his father, he finds that gentleman in the rather unique situation of impersonating a statue:

The head of the statue turned from Temple to me. I found the people falling back with amazed exclamations. I -- so prepossessed was I -- simply stared at the sudden flashing-white of the statue's eyes. The eyes, from being an instant ago dull carved balls, were animated. They were fixed on me. I was unable to give out a breath. Its chest heaved; both bronze hands struck against the bosom.

"Richmond! my son! Richie! Harry Richmond! Richmond Roy!"

That was what the statue gave forth.³⁰

Such instances taken both individually or in the broader view of the entire crowded plot do, I think, vindicate our contention that in Harry Richmond Meredith turns his ironic self-awareness full face toward the matter of

fictional history. The claim that we find narrative improbability in all the novels need not disturb us. It would, as a matter of fact, support the theory of the continuities in Meredith's ironic consciousness. All the more probable, we might say, that when he turns to a novel where other elements are formally restrained, where the essential vehicle becomes event, the comicalities of history multiply and are conspicuous.

The suspicion thus persists that even at the end of Harry Richmond, where Richmond Roy is tragically consumed in the fire that destroys Riversley, Meredith may be pitting against this tragic conclusion the comedy of conventional plot.

Footnotes

CHAPTER VII

1. Lindsay, George Meredith, pp. 184-185.
2. Lindsay, p. 185.
3. Strangely enough, Lindsay is very good on these points since they do not bear directly on his determined Marxism: "Meredith needed some episode... to bring out the type of debt he wants Harry to owe to Germany; but what he does is simply to put him into a sort of exteriorization of Roy's fantasy." And a bit later he again says quite accurately: "By linking Ottilia and the professor Meredith commits...a falsehood; and the idea that their influence fuses to push Harry into a socially-valuable and responsible life carries no conviction" (Lindsay, p. 185).
4. Kelvin, A Troubled Eden, pp. 72-80.
5. If we were to start making abstract patterns in a novel of this narrative richness, the possibilities seem endless. We might recall, for instance, that it is Roy, Kelvin's symbol of irrational excess, who brings Harry together with Ottilia, Kelvin's symbol of sanity, sobriety, and reason. Does this mean that Meredith's thesis in Harry Richmond is that "The Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom?" Well, perhaps it does -- but in so general a large way that it becomes distortive or pedantic to say.
6. Photaides, George Meredith, p. 74.
7. Woolf, Second Common Reader, p. 208.
8. Woolf, p. 208.
9. Woolf, p. 209.
10. The letter is addressed to William Hardman and is actually not dated. But it obviously was written late in 1870 while HR was being serialized in the Cornhill Magazine. Meredith writes: "So you do both care for 'H. Richmond.' I hoped it. I wish someone like Shirley Brooks would let it be known it's mine. Lethbridge tells me he has seen it attributed to Lever! A word from you, Tuck, in the august ear of Punch, anon, anon..." (Letters, I, p. 215).

11. Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 106.
12. HR, I, p. 339.
13. Moffatt, A Primer to the Novels, p. 202.
14. Some Early Appreciations, p. 157.
15. Photiades, 73-74.
16. Lubbock, Craft of Fiction, pp. 142-143.
17. Priestley, Meredith, p. 155.
18. Woolf, p. 210.
19. HR, I, p. 15.
20. HR, I, pp. 17-18.
21. HR, II, p. 107.
22. Moffatt, p. 194.
23. Sassoon, Meredith, p. 108.
24. The comments in Chapter IV are pertinent, especially Meredith's statement about Evan Harrington at the beginning of the novel as having little character.
25. Stevenson, p. 194.
26. "My method has been to prepare my readers for a crucial exhibition of the personae, and then to give the scene in the fullest of their blood and brain under stress of a fiery situation " (Letters, II, p. 398).
27. HR, II, p. 283.
28. HR, II, p. 290.
29. HR, I, p. 152.
30. HR, I, p. 197.

Nothing could be more unique than the character of Hamlet. Though he may resemble other men in some respects, it is clearly not on that account that he interests us most. But he is universally accepted and regarded as a living character. In this sense only is he universally true. The same holds good of all the other products of art. Each of them is unique, and yet, if it bear the stamp of genius, it will come to be accepted by everybody. Why will it be accepted? And if it is unique of its kind, by what sign do we know it to be genuine? Evidently, by the very effort it forces us to make against our predispositions in order to see sincerely.

Henri Bergson, from "The Comic in Character," in Laughter

CHAPTER VIII

THE ECOIST and the Comedy of Limited Character

Marvelously characteristic of Meredith is the way he can frustrate our efforts to wrap and package him neatly. It is easy for a critic, looking for a pattern, to equate the more elusive nature of artistic endeavor and accomplishment with a previously "established" design or theme. Even when such a pattern or thematic design has itself been meticulously derived from another work, it is the indispensable caveat of the critic to remember that the writer -- and especially the "comic" writer -- is less interested in the consistency of design and pattern than his critical analyst. Meaning and even substance can interest him only as secondary and tertiary elements of his craft and must concede the first place to craft itself and to the organic possibilities of each work as a problem in itself. Obvious and self-evident propositions, perhaps, yet difficult to live by. Particularly difficult, when the apprehended design of a previously discussed work offers the security of an analytic orientation, the path of least intellectual resistance, and is thus easily mistaken for the accuracy of perception and insight.

The warning is applicable; it has a place as we turn from The Shaving of Shagrat and The Adventures of Harry Richmond to The Egoist. The first, we said, was a testing of the relationship between Event and Meaning, the ordeal of allegory so to speak, as well as a critique of those two components of allegory within themselves. Thus in the retarding function of tales like Shashpesh the Persian, Bhanavar the Beautiful, and the Case of Rundrum we have the trial of tale in itself since, whatever their meanings, these tales do not affect the outcome of the primary and crucial narrative. Even more significant, however, was the probing exploration of meaning in itself, its nature, and how much weight it could be asked to bear. In this essay the experimentum crucis, the severest test, was -- as we pointed out -- when Shibli Bagarag looks through the veil of illusion masking the Veiled Figure and is almost irrecoverably stricken, an experience of knowledge from which the gratifications possible to him in the bosom of Noorna have the power to reclaim him for mortal activity. This self-conscious examination not only of the base quantity of narrated tale, but even more so and primarily in the probing of the limits of the exponential quantity of meaning, results in a work whose essential character is ironic. It is, as a matter of fact, the more ironic in that Meredith succeeds in covering, in containing, in comprehending the irony within the gorgeous

fabric of the "oriental," and by moving within an ostensible narrative primacy, the ironies in Rilke's words, "disdain to destroy us."¹ The Shaving of Shagpat is a test of "meaning" and in the test of that "meaning" the ironies open up and discover themselves.

The Adventures of Harry Richmond too, we have pointed out, is an ironic test of narrative. But instead of trying the character and limits of the marvelous, it presents in its "comedy of biography" a trying of the artistic limits of history. What we attempted to show in the preceding section is how that work explored both the scope and the depth of the biographical medium, the microcosmic container of history. Here too, consequently, we discovered instances of retardation and acceleration, of the heaping up of character and event. And if we discovered instances in The Shaving of Shagpat where a realistic perspective exerted a force of the marvelous, with which it had to create a new peace, even more pronounced in Harry Richmond is the presence of the bizarre and the grotesque which attempts to force history into an accommodation with romance. We can conclude then that in Harry Richmond Meredith offers us some of the experimental variations inherent in the possibilities of plot which other craftsmen more interested in the consistency of their design have chosen not to investigate. Many critics -- including Harry Richmond buffs -- to the contrary therefore,

this novel is conventional only in the subservience of all other elements to plot and action. But upon that given stratum Harry Richmond is restless and nervous. The comedy of biography therefore does become an assay into the irony of design. We can, finally, call into testimony the numerous thematic ironies which reflect, augment and support the ironic design of the action.

After describing the irony of meaning in The Shaving of Shagpat and the irony of historical design in The Adventures of Harry Richmond, then, we come to The Egoist prepared and primed to trace there a pattern in regard to character which will neatly complete our dossier -- the irony of character.²

We are somewhat dismayed, consequently, coming to The Egoist with these expectations of the ironic novelist and his ironic subject to find that the novel which is the minutest, most detailed dissection of character seems one of the least ironic. It can be instructive for us in understanding Meredith's fictional intelligence to see the way in which the ironies of character are limited and contained.

The Egoist is generally held to be the most successful of Meredith's works -- successful in at least two senses of the word. It is one of the three or four novels still read today. And similarly, Lionel Stevenson tells us, "...the reviewers were more favorable than they had

been toward any of his earlier novels."³ Among the early appraisers of Meredith, Hannah Lynch says, "As a work of art, it is, indeed, the most complete and perfect thing that Meredith has done -- a flawless masterpiece...."⁴ and Cress calls it "the tour de force of a virtuoso."⁵ Mrs. Sturge Henderson calls it the "most characteristic"⁶ of Meredith's works and Priestley says: "Of all Meredith's novels, The Egoist is generally and rightly considered the strongest."⁷

Running parallel to and supporting the concurrence of opinion regarding the artistic merit of The Egoist, there is another strand of critical opinion which sees the success as a singular instance of Meredithian discipline. Meredith has here, in other words, accepted the external constraints of unity and coherence with which he generally refuses to be bothered. The Egoist appears in the light of such appreciation as an isolated phenomenon, a lone example of usually ignored or disregarded possibilities which a perverse Meredith displayed in his other novels. "In this one novel, Meredith, working at last with his eyes open, no longer seeking an uneasy compromise between what he really wanted to do, and what he thought a novelist ought to do, really made the form his own. The new turn he gave to fiction was completed."⁸ Possibly taking their cue from Meredith's own declaration that The Egoist "is a Comedy, with only half me in it...."⁹ and further from

Meredith's avowed kinship and admiration for Moliere, the majority of critics and writers on the work concluded it to be precisely and literally what Meredith called it in the subtitle, "A Comedy in Narrative." Sassoon's comments are illustrative, and because tempered, the most useful.

...it seems worth pointing out that Meredith's preparation for his masterpiece was the writing of An Essay on Comedy. It can only be through the thought he gave to the idea of Comedy that he approached Sir Willoughby and resolved to make him the theme of a grand comic drama. Moliere had been much in his mind, with his deeply conceived displaying of imposture, and it was on Moliere that he was modelling his treatment of The Egoist, with Menander and Terence as a subsidiary influence. Had he been a dramatist, The Egoist would have come to us as a play -- probably one of the most brilliant in the English language. In any case it has more of the unity of play-writing in it than any of his novels. All the ingredients of a highly perfected comedy are there.¹⁰

We need not be so perverse as to attempt rejecting or discrediting Sassoon's reasoned and balanced description. If we are discomfited by the suggestion that The Egoist is a singular and abrupt achievement for Meredith and that its presence among his novels can be "explained away" by pointing out the similarity to drama in general and to Moliere in particular, we need hardly be so disturbed. It may well be that the recent preoccupation with Moliere was a catalyst in Meredith's undertaking the form in which The Egoist is written. But rather than viewing it in terms of discontinuity with his other works, both before and following, it is more realistic and reasonable to view it as

evidence of Meredith's ongoing experimentation in the limits of fiction. Having tested the dimensions of history, of meaning, of tale, Meredith can hardly be accused of inconsistency when in The Egoist he examines the form-giving nature of character.

That this, in fact, gives The Egoist a resemblance to drama we can hardly deny. Goethe, distinguishing between the novel and drama in Wilhelm Meister, points out that the novel focuses on opinions and events while drama presents characters and deeds. The latter is certainly true of The Egoist. But are there not differences of at least equal importance? Is the conflict not too cumbersome and heavy to be dramatic? Does not the action move too slowly and repetitively for the stage? Is not the resolution too melodramatic without having built up the compensating merits of the suspense and excitement? And are the destinies of the characters which lie in the balance really crucial enough for the stage without the qualification and augmentation of the novelist's art? ¹¹

Finally, we must judge what the critical game of "musical genres" actually reveals to us beyond the perception of certain similarities. They may be incidentally interesting or curious, but do they add to our understanding of the work? We have remarked before that a characteristic of a work of art is frequently its attempt to become that which it is not. But before that "attempt" can be understood in any significant or functional way,

we must first recognize the basic nature of the work and then attempt to evaluate the effect of the dislocations. As an instance of analysis which becomes only metaphoric description we can here cite E. J. Bailey's defense of The Egoist against the attack of a rather savage critic:

...The Egoist is something entirely different from what the critic supposed it to be. It is not a story in the ordinary sense, it is a study in character; its author used the methods not of the novelist, but of the dramatist; he treated language as if it were in a plastic rather than in a fixed state, that is, he discarded the rules of the prose writer and availed himself of the privileges of the poet; and finally he did not aim so much to amuse as to instruct, for the purpose of the book is to make the reader turn his criticizing eye inward upon himself rather than outward upon his fellowman.¹²

The passage is almost a parody of itself. We are tempted to conclude that if Bailey's defense is accurate and The Egoist is a poetic drama not meant to entertain, an attack is more appropriate than a defense. The nature of impressionistic "similarity criticism" is perhaps best reflected in Oscar Wilde's epigram: "Meredith is a prose Browning -- and so is Browning."¹³

The Egoist, then, is a novel dominated by a single character, Sir Willoughby Patterne, and by a single theme, Egoism. The two -- Meredith demonstrates to us -- are synonymous; Sir Willoughby is Egoism. In order to treat his subject -- or rather his victim -- with intense scrutiny, Meredith has in this novel reduced all the variables. The theme is, we have noted, equated with the central character -- so that Sir Willoughby's behavior seems to extend the meaning of egoism beyond what was

previously conceivable. The plot has been carefully reduced and tailored so that it does not acquire its own perverse and wilfull life and lead us into intricacies and developments which distract. So tight is the construction of the work, that it does almost observe the three dramatic unities of action, of time and of place. The other characters are reduced far below the number usually populating Meredith's novels and they function mainly in the work in regard to their relation with Sir Willoughby. More important and more clear than any other fact of their existence, we know their attitude toward Sir Willoughby as the most precise means of definition.

Given this peculiarly "compressed" novel -- if that word can be applied to a work which runs in most editions to between 500 and 600 pages -- Meredith does not waste time before unfolding to his readers the nature of Sir Willoughby's character. After the gnomic Meredithese of a tortured Prologue we are given the first incident which is at once emblematic and at the same time an approach from an oblique angle. Sir Willoughby, we are told, is a snob. The instance of his snobbishness concerns a cousin a few times removed, a Marine whose heroism has been reported in the press. Gratified mainly by the glory reflected on the name of Patterne, Willoughby decides to take him up. He asserts loudly the familial connection, basks in his kin-

ship with heroism, and ends by sending a check and an invitation to the cousin whom he assumes to be young and dashing. "Young Sir Willoughby was fond of talking of his 'military namesake and distant cousin, young Patterne -- the Marine.'"¹⁴ Unfortunately, the Marine lieutenant turns out to be middle-aged, threadbare, "a thick-set stumpy man," and Willoughby has no choice but to be "not at home" to him when the Marine "claiming to be his relative in this unseasonable fashion" presents himself at Patterne Hall. Meredith explains the behavior with: "Nothing can be done with a mature and stumpy Marine of that rank. Considerateness dismisses him on the spot, without parley. It was performed by a gentleman supremely advanced at a very early age in the art of cutting."¹⁵

This matter Meredith confesses to be no more than a "minor incident." But it is sufficient to reveal a nature that has no room for anything but its own gratification, which will use whatever ministers to its need for satisfaction, and will discard without the shiver of a quail whatever disturbs its comfort. We see with Meredith's aid, even in this minor incident, a personality so stunted that it has not the capacity to acknowledge any ethic competing with its own desires or wants. It is as if Willoughby's ego exists in a transcendental realm above common morality. It is its own higher morality. We get a hint of the complications entailed in such moral self-sufficiency when Meredith tells us that there is a Miss Durham who

witnesses the incident. "Young Sir Willoughby spoke a word of the rejected visitor to Miss Durham, in response to her startled look: 'I shall drop him a cheque,' he said, for she seemed personally wounded, and had a face of crimson. The young lady did not reply."¹⁶

If we are claiming much from what is admitted to be a casual, almost incidental act on the part of Sir Willoughby, we are only spelling out perhaps too crudely what the force of implications in this chapter renders unmistakable. It is Meredith's method in The Egoist to create a habit of scrutiny in the reader, and in the first chapter he posits and illustrates the intensity of focus, the unremitting harshness of examination, which will reveal completely. Certainly the phrase "minor incident" is used ironically, since it is hardly minor to the middle-aged Marine lieutenant whose hopes, efforts and expenditures in coming to Patterne Hall have been rewarded with insult and humiliation. But it is actually "minor" also in regard to the revelations which are the real subject of the book. We are introduced to these by means of mere snobbery. And it sets us up for what is to follow.

Of the precisely fifty chapters in The Egoist, only the first already described and the second have a primarily expository function. In the second "The Young Sir Willoughby" Meredith sketches as much as he ever will in the novel,

the unique psychological and "environmental" factors that have created Sir Willoughby. The only pampered child of a widowed mother, he has been raised on the adulation of overly sentimental women, including two maiden aunts whose abdication from self and personal claim in deference to the demands of Willoughby's precocious brilliance, has become the mode of life within the family. In a later chapter we find the two ladies, Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel, reminiscing in their faceless devotion about the time when Willoughby, little more than an infant, stood on a chair and proclaimed with a winning charm, "I am the sun of this house."¹⁷

The narrative slant of the chapter, though, belongs primarily to Mrs. Mountstuart, "a phraser," a coiner of nots and epigrams, whose kind acquiescence in the adoration of the sole heir of the Patterne estate, establishes the fashion for Willoughby-worship throughout the county as well. It has been remarked that we weary soon of Mrs. Mountstuart's marvelously understated summation of Willoughby's praises, "...he has a leg."¹⁸ But the endless analyses, interpretations, and explications of that priceless encomium are actually the author's apt and valid metaphor for the lavishness or slavishness of attention of which he has been the subject from birth.

Nevertheless, one must immediately add that while Meredith establishes a reasonableness concerning the

development or evolution of a Willoughby, he stops safely short of explaining him completely, or explaining him away. Willoughby is not merely the sum total of his experiences, the hapless and innocent victim of a rearing over which he could hardly have control. Meredith offers a basis of psychological validity for the egoist, but he refrains from making it an apology. In the first place, such "psychologizing" would crowd out of the novel the force of the implied moral attitude. In the second place, Meredith seems also to suggest that the omnivorous egotism of Sir Willoughby and the actually grotesque proportions to which it grows can only flourish by a willful denial of others and recognition only of self. When we see Willoughby in action, we laugh, we gasp, we may even pity; but we also hold him responsible. Meredith presents us with a martinet -- but not with a puppet.

Meredith's preoccupation with the relationship between the sexes, his conviction that the absurdities and falsifications of this relationship were symptomatic of other sociopolitical ills, these are among the reasons that he chooses the courtships of Sir Willoughby as the arena of action. But there is a more direct reason for displaying Sir Willoughby primarily as lover. "The love season is the carnival of egoism," he wrote, "and it brings the touchstone to our natures."¹⁹ Sir Willoughby proved or probed most deeply will be a Sir Willoughby in love. Thus chapters three, four and five present in

succession the three women who figure in Willoughby's love season.²⁰

The first of these, the beautiful Miss Constantia Durham, dubbed by Mrs. Mountstuart as "the racing cutter" and a witness of Willoughby's cruel rebuff of his Marine lieutenant cousin, is not an actual presence in the novel. It is rather the force of her absence that makes itself felt and acquires ominous and prophetic significance. She is gone. Inexplicably. Ten days before the wedding ceremony which was to bind her eternally to the handsome, the wealthy, the accomplished and charming master of Patterne Hall, this very Constantia Durham elopes with a young Captain Oxford, who -- whatever his charms -- can hardly match any of the attributes of Sir Willoughby. Meredith's point of view in this recounting is confined to Willoughby. We never enter into Miss Durham's psyche or learn her strange motivation. Or we might say alternately, that Meredith thus strongly implies that to know Willoughby is sufficient to understand Miss Durham's motivation. In any case he returns to his county where he resumes for a period, "the decent interval prescribed by the situation," a more intense courtship of Laetitia Dale, whose fantasied hopes he had rejected in favor of Miss Durham. She is somewhat confounded at the very first by these attentions, but can bring herself only to a single, indirect query, "One question she asked: 'Miss Durham is well, I trust,'

And he answered, 'Durham?' and said, 'There is no Miss Durham to my knowledge.'"21

Laetitia Dale is for Sir Willoughby "the girl back home." Miss Durham's name is as it has turned out, a misnomer. It is Laetitia Dale who is the true "Constantia." The daughter of a retired army surgeon, one of Willoughby's "cottagers," Laetitia Dale spends her youth in a faithful and worshipful adoration of Willoughby -- a devotion whose liturgy she herself pronounces in a poem written to celebrate Willoughby's twenty-first birthday. The song "was thought to be bold as only your timid creatures can be bold. She had let the cat out of her bag of verse before the multitude; she almost proposed to her hero in her rhymes."22 Although poor and portionless, Laetitia Dale "was pretty; her eyelashes were long and dark, her eyes dark blue, and her soul was ready to shoot like a rocket out of them at a look from Willoughby."23

It is to this haven of unquestioning ardor and fidelity that Willoughby turns to ease his soreness and mask his humiliation. But it is also in relation to Laetitia that the reader discovers the enormity of Willoughby's egoism and disregard of others. He lavishes attention on Laetitia for months following the elopement -- and then leaves England abruptly for three years without a word. Nor is it merely the cruelty of his departure which Meredith uses to characterize Willoughby, for this would be common

enough perhaps. It is the gargantuan egocentricity of seeing people only as adjuncts of the egotist's self, of denying, of being blind to any other dimension of their being. Here, for example, is Willoughby supremely ready to suck the substance of anyone offering nourishment to his egotism. He greets Laetitia after his three years absence:

He sprang to the ground and seized her hand.
 "Laetitia Dale!" he said. He panted. "Your name is sweet English music! And you are well?" The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go, saying, "I could not have prayed for a lovelier home-scene to welcome me than you and these children flower-gathering. I didn't believe in chance. It was decreed that we should meet."²⁴

That Willoughby is sincerely delighted to see Laetitia upon his return is undeniable. His enthusiastic expressions of satisfaction and joy may even be truly felt and are certainly without malice. "...what happiness this is, Laetitia! Adieu; for some hours -- not for many!"²⁵ What is blameworthy however is that Laetitia represents only a reflection of himself. Whereas Willoughby does not consciously seek to mislead her, neither is he capable on the other hand of perceiving in Laetitia -- or in anyone else for that matter -- an autonomous and discrete personality with its own desires and its own needs. There is no necessity, consequently, for placing a restraint on the extravagance and exuberance of his greetings. He is Willoughby -- and this is how he feels at the moment. It

suffices. If his next meeting with Laetitia reveals him as casual and offhand and dispassionate, there is no violation of consistency. For he is still Willoughby -- and the moment of his ardour has passed. If any blame is to be assigned, let it rather fall on Laetitia and her failure to sustain the passion within him. The supreme egotist, Meredith would say, is supremely irresponsible, recognizing only his claim upon others and no claims at all upon himself.²⁶

That these unspoken assumptions are the supports of Willoughby's behaviour and of his world becomes even clearer in the scene that follows rather hard upon the joyous homecoming -- after Laetitia has written in her diary, "This day I was a fool."²⁷ The violation of decency is explicit when Willoughby informs Laetitia of his interest in Clara Middleton, at the same time pleading that she, Laetitia, remain loyal and faithful to him:

"...and you must continue the same, or where shall I be?" Thus he was led to dwell upon friendship, and the charm of the friendship of men and women. "Platonism," as he called it. "I have laughed at in the world, but not in the depths of my heart. The world's platonic attachments are laughable enough. You have taught me that the idea of friendship is possible -- when we find two who are capable of a disinterested esteem. The rest of life is duty; duty to parents, duty to country. But friendship is the holiday of those who can be friends. Wives are plentiful, friends are rare. I know how rare!"²⁸

The scene is an outrage, as is the request it carries that Laetitia accept vows of chastity in order to offer Willoughby

an incidental gratification, to augment and fill out his sense of well-being. Such colossal and insatiable narcissism that would eagerly sacrifice her life to a symbol of maidenly constancy is beyond the comprehension of Laetitia, and she believes Willoughby to be flirting even now. Meredith tells us that she too, "would have marvelled in acknowledging how sincere he was."²⁹

In any case, neither the notorious Miss Durham nor the vulnerable Miss Dale have been capable of providing the trial of Sir Willoughby Patterne. The one escaped rather shamelessly from the test, the other -- disarmed by her position -- is forced to a patient acceptance. It thus becomes the task of the third of the young ladies, Clara Middleton, the youngest of the three and described by Mrs. Mountstuart much to Willoughby's displeasure as a "dainty rogue in porcelain," to engage in contest with Willoughby and to discover for us the anatomy of the Egoist. Acquiescing too easily and precipitatedly to Willoughby's pressing suit for her hand, Clara soon recognizes with horror the nature of the man to whom she has betrothed herself:

Egoist! She beheld him -- unfortunate, self-designated man that he was! -- in his good qualities as well as bad under the implacable lamp, and his good were drenched in his first person singular. His generosity roared of I louder than the rest....He was in his thirty-second year, therefore a young man, strong and healthy, yet his garrulous return to his principle theme, his emphasis on I and me, lent him the seeming of an old man spotted with decaying youth. "Beware of marrying an Egotist." [So Willoughby had jokingly warned her.]

Would he help her to escape? The idea of the scene ensuing upon her petition for release, and the being dragged round the walls of his egoism, and having her head knocked against the corners, alarmed her with sensations of sickness.³⁰

Yet this is as good a one-sentence description of the novel as we can find. For it is precisely what happens. More than one reader has made the comparison of The Egoist with Richardson's Pamela. Although Willoughby's intentions as opposed to Lord Booby are "honorable" yet the impending marriage has become for Clara just as horrible a violation as the fate which Pamela so narrowly and so frequently escapes.

Young, pretty and lively, Clara reacts with violent distaste against Willoughby's affected harangue and diatribes against the "world." In the first place, she recognizes early that there is something "illogical" and contradictory in his presumed disdain. "He had no contempt for the world's praises. Mr. Whitford wrote the letters to the county paper which gained his applause at various great houses, and he accepted it, and betrayed a tingling fright lest he should be the victim of a sneer of the world he contemned."³¹

But even more unsettling to Clara is the perception -- at first no more than instinctual -- that Willoughby's dismissal of society is a means of banishing any claims whatsoever which might challenge the sovereignty and pre-eminence of his "devouring" egoism. The decadence of an over-refined sensibility that has as its locus nothing but

self, is revealed throughout the novel as Willoughby "exposes himself" in varying degrees and varying situations. Well would he like to believe Laetitia Dale's early comment that he is "too proud for ambition." But the truth is that he is too soft and self indulgent, that he lacks the virility necessary for contest and for conquest, that he can exercise no restraint on his self-obsession. Even Laetitia Dale's remark about his pride is an evasion on her part. She wishes to submerge and to drown her earlier glimpse of Willoughby's unmanliness.

But Clara suffers under no such need or disability as Laetitia. She frankly wonders why Willoughby so determinedly exposes the worst and weakest that is in him. She goes as far as putting the question to Willoughby himself. "Is it fair to me," she asks, "that you should show me the worst of you?"³² But Willoughby, supremely oblivious to the implications of the question, can answer with unconscious irony that he shows, "All myself...." The question weighs heavily on Clara. "...how must a man despise women," she remarks to herself, "who can expose himself as he does to me!"³³ So the process of alienation is accomplished with Willoughby acting as the main agent. The dramatization of Meredith's verdict on Willoughby -- "Through very love of self himself he slew"³⁴ -- can be seen, typically, in any number of scenes between Willoughby and Clara.

The action of the novel becomes, then, the conflict between the fetid, stagnant, and suffocating quality of Willoughby's egotism -- for which Patterne Hall as an exclusive reduction of reality becomes a metaphor -- and the open freshness, the embrace of life and the natural embodied in the character of Clara Middleton -- for which the invigorating air of Swiss mountains becomes the metaphor. It is, of course, no contest. As we indicated earlier, plot in this novel is artificially trimmed and pruned; it is relegated to the status of the mechanical. If the resolution seems especially contrived, depending as it does upon the accident of Crossjay's presence at the midnight proposal of Willoughby to Laetitia Dale, we make some note of it, but hardly enough to interfere with our experiencing of the novel. The deus ex machina character of this denouement might distress us in many a novel, even in Dickens, but should not in a work whose purpose is so patently that of rendering a reflection of the "essential egoist." The worst we can say of the plot is that it is as artificially silvered and is as brittle as the mirror whose function it supplies.

A more serious objection, however, is the one to which we alluded at the opening of this chapter: the absence in this portrait of the usual ironic ambivalence so typical of Meredithian portraiture. In no other novel of Meredith do we find a major character (and rarely a minor character)

who exhibits such unobstructed consistency of behavior as does Willoughby. He is as close as Meredith comes to a "humour" and it is very close indeed. That is not to say that Willoughby's actions are necessarily predictable. They are not. We could not anticipate, for example, his sabotage of Clara's scheme to escape with her father from Patterne Hall, or the clever subversion and seduction of her father by means of a superb wine cellar. But the surprises of character are surprises of extreme and excess. We marvel at the size of Willoughby's egotism; we are surprised at the excesses of its demands; we are shocked by the obscene utility with which everything and everyone is made to service it.

It seems as if part of Meredith's plan is to illustrate the perversion of many contradictory human impulses and to show how they may all be put to the service of the ego. We have already seen some evidence of how love can be so subverted in Willoughby's relation to three women, especially Clara. The abuse of authority and power in the guise of wounded benevolence is illustrated in Willoughby's relation to his former coachman, Flitch, who made the mistake of wanting to go into his own business. Willoughby explains the situation to Clara:

Mr. Flitch had not a single grievance here; only one day the demon seized him with the notion of bettering himself, he wants his independence, and he presents himself to me with a story of a shop in our county town -- Flitch! remember if you go you go for good. -- Oh! he quite comprehended. -- Very

well; goodbye, Flitch....Of course the shop failed, and Flitch's independence consists in walking about with his hands in his empty pockets, and looking at the Hall....

Here he was happy. He decided to go elsewhere, to be free -- of course, of my yoke. He quitted my service against my warning. Flitch, we will say, emigrated with his wife and nine children, and the ship foundered. He returns, but...he is a ghost here and I object to ghosts.³⁵

Willoughby is at pains to point out that this firmness of principle on his part applies not only to his groom, but to his cousin Vernon Whitford who wishes to attempt a literary career in London. It is the abuse of friendship.

"It will be the same with old Vernon, my dear. If he goes, he goes for good. It is the vital principle of my authority to insist on that. A dead leaf might as reasonably demand to return to the tree. Once off, off for all eternity! I am sorry, but such was your decision, my friend. I have you see, Clara, elements in me....."³⁶

That Clara has an unobstructed view of the "elements" in Willoughby is clear, as she asks herself, "Has he no ideal of generosity and chivalry?" It is a question which would undoubtedly bewilder and fluster Willoughby by its very unexpectedness and inappropriateness as applied to him. Who could have greater generosity, and who in fact did have greater generosity? A classic instance of the egotistical benefactor is seen in Willoughby's attitude toward and treatment of Crossjay. The boy is the son of the spurned Marine, whom Vernon has brought to live under his tutelage after inquiring into the poor financial straits of the family. Vernon wishes to have the boy trained to receive

a naval commission, a plan -- however -- for which he lacks funds. Willoughby objects to these plans and will undertake support of Crossjay only "to make a gentleman" of him. He explains the logic of his position to Clara, who argues Vernon's case:

"...if I take him, I claim undisputed sway over him. I cannot make a gentleman of the fellow if I am to compete with this person and that. In fine, he must look up to me, he must have one model."
 "Would you, then provide for him subsequently?"
 "According to his behaviour."
 "Would not that be precarious for him?"
 "More so than the profession you appear inclined to choose for him?"
 "But there he would be under clear regulations."
 "With me he would have to respond to affection."
 "Would you secure to him a settled income? For an idle gentleman is bad enough; a penniless gentleman!..."
 "He has only to please me, my dear, and he will be launched and protected."
 "But if he does not succeed in pleasing you?"
 "Is that so difficult?"
 "Oh!" fretted Clara.
 "You see, my love, I answer you," said Sir Willoughby.³⁷

We see, as Clara does, the nature of egotistical generosity. It is a whimsical and moody kindness -- as Laetitia Dale says in the next to the final chapter of the book -- which will alternately pet and then discard. It is in that chapter that Willoughby, his back to the wall, is pushing furiously to retain some shreds of his proud appearance in the world by masking his second jilting by Clara Middleton with an engagement to a now brutally realistic Laetitia. He concedes to her stipulation for the reinstatement of Crossjay whom he had banished. She pushes further for

the rehiring of Flitch. Willoughby hesitates. He then sees the carriage of Mrs. Mountstuart coming up the drive. All must be effected before her arrival. He concedes again. "You can be generous," Laetitia admits, and her eyes have grown moist despite her presumed severity. But at this point the reader still recognizes Meredith's mockery.

As it is with Egotistical Love and with Egotistical Generosity, so is it with an egotistical show of devotion. When Willoughby believes himself to possess Clara's love he is ready not only to discard Laetitia -- which he regards as a personal sacrifice on his part -- but to marry her off to Vernon or to forbid her entry into Patterne Hall. In the same fashion is he ready to make a gesture later to Laetitia with the lives of his two poor maiden aunts. The sacrifices of the egotist are always the trusts that are placed in his hands for safekeeping. The emotion of the moment is for him the only matter worth preservation.

As it is with all the other virtues of the egotist, so it is with egotistical friendship. "Old Vernon" as he disparagingly calls his cousin, is valuable to him only insofar as he is useful in bringing distinction to Patterne Hall, in providing a duller contrast to Willoughby's brilliance, in being an object of Willoughby's humor or good natured ridicule, in illustrating Willoughby's benevo-

lence. But even friendship for the egoist is never disinterested, for as Laetitia finally recognizes, such a nature is forever scheming to discover the utility in any relationship. It is, in fact Willoughby's perversion of friendship that functions in the novel to exonerate the behavior of Horace De Craye, who might otherwise be condemned by the reader for betraying his friendship to Willoughby. Instead the reader appreciates De Craye's wit and his cynical wisdom in keeping at least two jumps in front of Willoughby.

We could go on now to take the cramped measure of egotistical honesty or to examine the egotistical wit, etc.. But such an endeavor would be a retelling of the novel in a fragmented manner. It is rather Meredith's disconcerting consistency in the design of Willoughby's character that should finally receive our attention. We are treated to ever more surprising excesses of selfishness, to blatancies and subtleties of self-serving connivance, to a pitiable abjectness of need for flattery. But nowhere in Willoughby's character -- to the very last page of the book -- do we find an opposing impulse of benevolence, the hesitation of a monetary disinterest, the shadow of a recognition that some other ethic has force. If The Egoist is indeed a portrait, a novel of character, then is not some confusion of motive, some ambivalence of thought an indispensable concomitant?

The usual answer is to explain the construction of the novel in terms of its theme, one of Meredith's favorites, and to suggest that the novel is theme-ridden to the detriment of its character portrayal. Willoughby is a monolithic, heavily drawn caricature because Meredith was more interested in preaching a moral lesson than in creating a work of fictional interest. Such an explanation, however, would have to resolve two insuperable obstacles to its plausibility. In the first place, we have already in one of the preceding chapters tried to deal with the misapprehension that Meredith is primarily a heavy-handed moralist whose conception of literature was what Horace called the utile.³⁸ But secondly, and much more persuasive, is our experience of the novel itself. For peculiarly enough, despite the single-minded presentation Sir Willoughby emerges as anything but a stereotype. We have the inescapable conviction after reading the novel that the single-mindedness of the character is less that of Meredith than of Sir Willoughby himself. We have just finished pointing out that the reader does not, cannot anticipate Sir Willoughby. The excesses of thought and behaviour, the grotesquerie, are beyond what we normally imagine and envision -- yet at the same time they have the indisputable ring of truth. We begin our reading of Sir Willoughby by saying, "How could anyone possibly behave in this way?" But we conclude our reading by saying,

"Yes, this is precisely the outrageous way he would behave. It is true." In other words, in this one novel Meredith establishes his proprietorship to the reader's interest not by employing the normal principle of human behaviour, but by challenging the realistic, by violating the rules of character and creating a character who is purely fictional, purely artificial -- and by forcing the acceptance of him. Not by duplicating real character, but by creating his own analogies to it.

That all of Meredith's novels are deeply embedded in artifice and artificiality is of course part of our contention. It is one sense of the phrase, the novelist as comedian. He is an artificer, and a conspicuous one -- a feature which at its worst can and does become an annoying archness. But in the other works, Meredith's final plea to the reader, the redemption from the Meredithian quirks, and the safety net over which his fictional acrobatics take place is the essential human acceptability of his characters. The exuberance with which Meredith prosecutes his experiments in the various aspects of fiction in most of the novels must finally derive their sanction from the psychological realism with which he endows character. It is not so in The Egoist. For the novel is as we said a novel of character. And in testing the limits of character Meredith logically had to pursue the depiction beyond his normal range of presentation and further, beyond the normal

range of character itself.

Typically enough, it is less in the adulatory and admiring "appreciations" of Meredith that the essential quality of The Egoist is brought out than in the unsympathetic criticism of Dorothy Van Ghent.³⁹ She is "at best able to feel only a passive appreciation which amounts practically to indifference." Echoing and quoting the negative voices of Virginia Woolf and Henry James, Miss Van Ghent accounts for her response to The Egoist in the following way:

The fact is that Willoughby is treated as a perfectly lonely aberration, a freak; nobody (neither we as readers nor anyone in the book) knows how he came about, how he happened, what he is for, what connection there might be between his psychological peculiarities and the human soul at large. We do not really supply the connection when we say, "There is a Willoughby in each of us," for though the statement seems valid enough, its validity lies outside the book and not structurally within it; within the book there are no Willoughbys except Willoughby. Meredith makes similar extraneous statements about Willoughby's human representativeness, but they remain dogmatic, without internal aesthetic corroboration.⁴⁰

Miss Van Ghent's argument derives its thrust from Meredith's own excessiveness; it is Meredith's exuberance and overstatement which makes her most unhappy, which interferes with her proper appreciation of the work. He makes Willoughby, she complains, "a freak." For otherwise we might carp a bit at Miss Van Ghent's own exaggerations. Certainly we do know -- as was pointed out earlier how Willoughby "came about"; we know "how he happened." And

as far as his connection with "the human soul at large," we know that too. Dr. Middleton surely evidences sympathetic vibrations to a certain level of male egotism. Horace De Crays is not without the arrogance of the conquering male. And as far as female complicity in allowing and fostering male egotism, we have practically the whole spectrum, from Willoughby's maiden aunts to Laetitia Dale to Mrs. Mountstuart. The "internal aesthetic corroboration" which Miss Van Ghent demands does exist in the novel; but -- and this is the vindication of Miss Van Ghent's criticism -- it does not exist in any degree commensurate with the obsessive egotism of Willoughby.

Yet disposed as we are to concede Miss Van Ghent her point, we are also constrained to say that she approaches that point from the wrong direction, that is, from a series of assumptions and hypotheses that can only inappropriately be applied to Meredith. Miss Van Ghent is a critic and reader to whom a novel must be its content and meaning. It is history, she says in the first chapter of her book, but it is history with a difference -- in that the material of novelistic history is so organized and arranged as to discover, reveal, and release a pattern of meaning.⁴¹ Although she states that "the nearest similitude for a novel is a 'world,'" it is clear before that statement can be called an accurate definition of her position, she must change the phrase "a world" to "the world." For it is

this world Miss Van Ghent talks about, the world we live in and recognize and will appreciate all the more when it has been made coherent and consistent. "The sound novel," she says, "like a sound world, has to hang together as one thing. It has to have integral structure."⁴²

This sounds very good. But a moment's scepticism may cause us to ask what exactly integral structure means. For if it means a principle of consistency operating within the work, then do not most novels have this -- from Little Women to Another Country? Miss Van Ghent seems to be making a brief for the novel as "Nature methodized." But is not that the greatest fault of the self-indulgent novel, that nature has been over-methodized with never a risk taking place on the part of the author of his characters? It is all too certain, then, that Miss Van Ghent's integral structure is not answered by a discreet consistency that terminates at the covers of the book; but rather she clearly imports those principles from the reality outside of fiction -- whether these be the principles of factual or psychological realism. The consequence is thus to diminish the ambience of the novelist himself and to confine him to the consistencies of history and realism. "Form and function" Miss Van Ghent tells us her book deals with. But admirable and insightful as her book is for many of the novels she discusses, her criticism takes the line that form follows function. And having thus limited the

function of the novel to the classification of historical meaning, it must disqualify her from the evaluation of a form that may legitimately seek to go beyond the limits she has set.

We must -- pardonably, I think -- press our point that Miss Van Ghent limits her definition of the novel to a basically historical form. Her first chapter is a modern rewriting of Sidney, who -- we should remember -- was concerned with defending the utility of literary creation.⁴³ We, on the other hand, have defined the novel as a variant of Testament. And there is all the difference in the world between the resulting conceptions of novelistic endeavor. For Miss Van Ghent the nature of character must have realistic justification. It must find its acceptability at that level which all other characters and elements in the novel contribute to establish, and these other factors are those of historical reality. The presence of the author is discernible only through his discretion: an attribute which governs both his process of selection and his well-mannered invisibility.

It is not so in Testament where the primacy of the authorial presence is axiomatic, where the novelist's existence precedes the novel's essence, so to speak, where author precedes history. Within such a form it is possible, of course, for the novelist to subdue his presence to history. He may be, in these terms, a "hidden god," as

in the tragic vision of Pascal or as in the comic vision of the Book of Esther. But very much on the other hand, the author of a testament may elect to exercise the first and most conspicuous of his prerogatives, i.e., to cast his narrative not in the acceptable neutral medium of history but in the axiomatic integrity of his own voice. It is then a tale which belongs to the teller, his creation, and an extension of him. The believability and acceptability of character or of any other single element in the narrative may derive an additional strength and coerciveness from the distinctiveness of the individual and personal voice. It is an interesting and curious fact that when narrative violates or begins to push against the confinement of historical norms, we usually find it supported by the appeal and persuasiveness of an individualized narrating voice. We may take such a coincidence as still another element which Lubbock overlooks in his discussion of the selection of point of view. At any rate it seems to be the case in much of Poe and Faulkner, in Wuthering Heights and in James's The Turn of the Screw. Whether totally true or not, it still illuminates a relationship of reciprocity between the "unhistorical" nature of elements in a novel and the blatancy of the authorial tone, the insistence of the authorial "I am what I am!"

What all this means in regard to Sir Willoughby, is this: Miss Van Ghent is perfectly justified in pointing out the excessiveness of Willoughby's portrayal. And she would be justified too in her dismissal of the novel were the form to be equated with history and the historically acceptable. But the novel is not only that; for it is capable, among other things, of a larger irony. If the novel is an art form, if it is in other words isolatable from its contents, then the contents and the elements of form which frame that content must be susceptible to examination and to stress.

This operation of applying stress to character is exactly what Meredith accomplishes in The Egoist. The elongations and broadenings are accurately described by Miss Van Ghent as out of proportion to other characters and elements in the work. Were the novel merely its story, then, this novel would unquestionably fail. And Miss Ghent says that it does, even though she admits that she would not do without it. However, we contend that the novel does not fail. The testamental form of fiction is precisely what enables Meredith to test the element of character and provides the ironic self-consciousness of Meredith that coaxes the attempt. Finally we suggest that as compensation for the risk of trial, the authorial voice answers in part. Beyond any reasons that Miss Van Ghent can muster to accept Willoughby, we have one more. It is the voice of Meredith telling us to.

Footnotes

CHAPTER VIII

1. "For beauty's nothing/
but beginning of terror we're still just able to bear/
and why we adore it so is because it serenely/
disdains to destroy us." Rainer Maria Rilke, "The First
Elegy," Duino Elegies, trans. J. B. Leishman and
Stephen Spender (New York, 1963), p. 21.

2. We are all the more prepared for this ironic
examination, since those perverse and frustrating dis-
cordancies are always most conspicuous in relation to
character. Even in the ordered cosmology of Pope's
Essay on Man, where both meaning and history dovetail
in perfect clarity and congruence, it is the condition
of "character" which, itself ambiguous, generates
problems by projecting from its own ironic and mixed
condition: "Created half to rise, and half to fall;/
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;/Sole
judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled;/ The glory,
jest, and riddle of the world!" The ironic heroism
or anti-heroism of character date not from Dostoevsky
or even from Fielding or even yet from Cervantes. But
even in the tragedies of Sophocles it constitutes the
major element which those tragedians attempted to
account for in the working of history. Irony in
Oedipus may be a function of history -- but it is a
history which could never have been written were the
nature of man unitary and unambiguous.

4. George Meredith: A Study (London, 1891), p. 127.

5. Crees, George Meredith, p. 28.

6. Henderson, George Meredith, p. 161.

7. Priestley, George Meredith, p. 152. Also see
LeGallienne, Chapter II.

8. Priestley, pp. 152-153.

9. The statement was made in a letter to Robert
Louis Stevenson, April 16, 1879. (Letters, I, p. 297).

10. Sassoon, Meredith, pp. 145-146.

11. Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, trans. Thomas Carlyle (New York, 1962), p. 288. Actually, the very next sentence Goethe writes, tends to corroborate the validity of our assertion that The Egoist is essentially novelistic rather than dramatic: "The novel must go slowly forward; and the sentiments of the hero, by some means or another, must restrain the tendency of the whole to unfold itself and to conclude."

12. Bailey, The Novels, p. 134.

13. Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in Intentions, quoted by J. A. Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 342.

14. Egoist, pp. 9-10.

15. Egoist, p. 11.

16. Egoist, p. 11.

17. Egoist, p. 371.

18. Egoist, p. 12. The remark is followed by three full pages of explication and interpretation.

19. Egoist, p. 21.

20. Albert Cook, in The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean (New York, 1966), sees the phenomenon from a somewhat altered perspective. "Sex is the most social and most probable of all activities. The success of normality and the failure of abnormality are nowhere so evident as in the attraction of women toward men" (p. 96).

21. Egoist, p. 20.

22. Egoist, p. 16.

23. Egoist, p. 16.

24. Egoist, p. 24.

25. Egoist, p. 24.

26. "Sentimentalists are they," Meredith has said, "who seek to enjoy without incurring the Immense Debtorship for a thing done" (ORE, p. 178). How much more true is this of the egoist.

27. Meredith implies that it is Willoughby's return that helps Laetitia in coming to her senses and seeing him, and herself, realistically.

28. Egoist, p. 30.
29. Egoist, p. 31.
30. Egoist, p. 81.
31. Egoist, p. 40.
32. Egoist, p. 90.
33. Egoist, p. 78.
34. Egoist, p. 8.
35. Egoist, p. 88.
36. Egoist, p. 89.
37. Egoist, pp. 69-70.
38. Ars Poetica.
39. The English Novel: Form and Function (New York, 1961).
40. Van Ghent, p. 189.
41. "Human experience is organized in patterns that are in movement Fiction tries to isolate the principle of coherence in events ... and the more extensive principle that makes one event slide into another in human lives" (pp. 5-6).
42. Van Ghent, p. 6.
43. In, The Defence of Poesie Sidney says that he feels impelled "to make a pitiful defence of poor poetry, which from almost the highest estimation of learning is fallen to be the laughing stock of children..."
See Prose of the English Renaissance ed Hebel et al., p. 268.

Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate. Someday in Shakespeare -- Touchstone, I think -- talks about a man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit, and it seems to me that this might serve as the basis for a criticism of Meredith's method. But whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal, and after all, even if the man's fine spirit did not revolt against the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at respectful distance. By its means he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses.

Oscar Wilde, from "The Decay of Lying"

CHAPTER IX:

Sandra Belloni, One Of Our Conquerors and the Comedy of Narration

Earlier in this work we suggested -- both by implication and direct statement -- that the liberation from the dogmatism of foregrounded conventionalities which the novel represents and embodies is at the same time a release into the problematic. As long as such major fictional components of tale, ethic, and personae are bound by Promethean chains to a supporting surface unified by its smoothness, these elements exist and function in a harmonious equivalence. Mythos, ethos, and dianda are then little more than different perspectives on, different aspects of a self-sustaining, a reciprocating, a symbiotic and narratively complacent whole. Deviation from that completeness, which includes also death, or a forced recognition of the insufficiency of that completeness, issues simply and inexorably in tragedy.

Among the anti-classical, romantic disproportions admitted into the recognitions of the novel is the discrepancy between event and meaning, between history and design. The novel seeks to erect its artistic line of defense somewhere between the incoherence of experience and the human need for order and relation. We pointed

out that this is the very question which lies at the center of such a work as Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of An Author and is explicitly articulated in much of that author's fiction. We also suggested in an earlier chapter that one means of accommodating the uncontrolled and uncontrollable divergence between fact and understanding was to catch and to hold it within the framework of character. The contingency and ambivalence of character, in other words, no matter how contingent and ambivalent, still provides a unity through which we can perceive an analogy to the disruption and the break between the disorder of history and the order of philosophy. It is, so to speak, disorder and timeless sorrow.¹ Thus the development of modern fiction is a continual progress in the direction of the novel of character and a progressively greater and greater immersion in the individual consciousness. Whatever its philosophical drawbacks, surely there is no coherence possible greater than solipsism. Its unity becomes as a matter of fact claustrophobic.²

But, as was implied even in the preceding chapter, there is a unity available not only by a descent into character, but also by an ascent into the narrator. In other words, the discontinuities between event and meaning can find their "connection" not only in the tenuous, ambivalent, and partial consciousness of the character but in

the dominating, superintending consciousness of the narrator himself. Testament provides us with a mode in which there is available omniscient as well as fragmentary coherence. The incompatibility of history and philosophy, commandment and parable, need somehow to be balanced in the novel. The incompatibility may issue in the paradox of character; or it may be resolved in the amplitude of the narrating consciousness.

We have gone so far as to posit that in a novel like The Egoist where Meredith denies in his main character the contingent and paradoxical nature of character, it becomes increasingly important for the resolution of the novel that the authorial presence manifest itself more and more conspicuously. It is the indispensability of that narrating presence as part of the structure of the work that disqualifies The Egoist from being placed -- as has been so often attempted -- in the category of drama. It is a novel, though of a particular kind.³

In any case, this dichotomy between a non-conventionalized rendering of action and coherent significance constitutes one of the theoretical dilemmas of novelistic narration. For the novelist as comedian -- like Meredith -- whose fictions are at once acts of narration and treatises on the art of fictional narration and the examination of its limits, the problems occupy a central position in various of the works. It is hardly wonderful therefore

to observe Meredith confronting the act-meaning dualism as he does throughout the course of Sandra Belloni. The very brashness and flamboyance of the confrontation is useful.

The moment in question comes comparatively early in the novel, the day after their mutual avowal of love when Wilfrid has declared to Emilia that she should never leave him. It turns out, however, than on the morning following this declaration Wilfrid has indeed gone. In the chapter which bears the significant heading, "Contains a Short Discourse on Puppets," Meredith launches into the following comments, which significantly parallel some of our remarks just above:

This curious retreat of my hero belongs to the order of things that are done 'None knows why'; a curtain which drops conveniently upon either the bewilderment of the showman or the infirmities of the puppet.

I must own (though I need not be told what odium frowns on such a pretension to excess of cleverness) that I do know why. I know why, and unfortunately for me, I have to tell what I know. If I do not tell, this narrative is so constituted that there will be no moral to it.

One who studies man in puppets (in which purpose lies the chief value of this amusing species), must think that we are degenerating rapidly. The puppet hero, for instance, is a changed being. We know what he was; but now he takes shelter in his wits. His organs affect his destiny. Careless of the fact that the hero's destiny is to conquer nature, he seems rather to boast of his subservience to her.

Still, up to this day, the fixture of a nose upon the puppet-hero's frontispiece has not been attempted. Some one does it at last. When the alternative came: 'No nose to the hero, no moral to the tale'; could there be hesitation?

And I would warn our sentimentalists to admit the nose among the features proper to heroes, otherwise the race will become extinct. There is already an amount of dropping of the curtain that is positively wearisome, even to extremely refined persons, in order to save him from apparent misconduct. He will have to go altogether, unless we boldly figure him as other men. Manifestly the moment his career as a fairy prince was at end, he was on the high road to a nose. The beneficent Power that discriminated for him having vanished utterly, he was, like a bankrupt gentleman, obliged to do all the work for himself. This is nothing more than the tendency of the generations downward from the ideal.

The springs that moved Wilfrid upon the present occasion were simple. We will strip him of his heroic trappings for one fleeting instant, and show them.⁴

After explaining Wilfrid's psychology, Meredith concludes the chapter with the following paragraph:

A showman once (a novice in his art, or ambitious beyond the mark) after a successful exhibition of his dolls, handed them to the company, with the observation, 'Satisfy yourselves, ladies and gentlemen.' The latter, having satisfied themselves that the capacity of the lower limbs was extraordinary, returned them, disenchanted. That showman did ill. But I am not imitating him. I do not wait till after the performance, when it is too late to revive illusion. To avoid having to drop the curtain, I choose to explain an act on which the story hinges, while it is advancing; which is, in truth, an impulse of character. Instead of being more of a puppet, this hero is less wooden than he was. Certainly I am much more in awe of him.⁵

There are a few allowances, of course, which must be made before proceeding -- allowances which any understanding of Meredith demands, though they are usually refused or most reluctantly conceded. They have to do with the crashing awkwardness of the intrusion that announces itself in such a loud voice, the extreme archness of the self-mockery and

irony (Meredith's archness is usually directed at himself), the weakness of his hold on the design of the book or his carelessness in calling Wilfrid the hero when he is certainly not the hero, and finally the gnomic and overly elliptical impatience of his prose which imposes a burden of strain on the reader. However, these allowances disposed of we can begin to appreciate that Meredith has here sketched his own little theory of the novel or at the very least has indicated an obvious concern regarding questions which a theory of the novel must reconcile.

For what Meredith does is tackle a whole complex of issues about the possibilities of narration in the novel. What is the role of the narrator in the novel? Is it merely to recount the external action? And if so how, indeed, can plot and action be reconciled with meaning when there is no prior agreement or convention that posits their congruence? Clearly no superficial rendering can adequately transmit a unity in the novel which will release a meaning to the reader. The novelist must be both a Narrator and a Philosopher -- to use the terms by which Meredith later designates the dual role of the novelistic author. The meaning that underlies event, that is frequently concealed by event must be explicated. He must "unfortunately" tell us what he knows, Meredith says, since otherwise his "narrative is so constituted that there will be no moral to it." And we can take the statement seriously.

Otherwise it will disintegrate in the disunity, the incoherence, and the ambiguity of mere act, of mere history. We will have "narrative"; but without "moral." We will have history without meaning. It is that impulse toward unity and coherence, toward order and design which forces the intrusion of the authorial consciousness into the novel.

Nor can there be any legitimate force behind the question of why the narrative should be "so constituted." For Meredith anticipates us here, too. It is because narrative no longer concerns itself with epic and romance, in both of which cases morality and character are the reciprocals of plot. As narrative has moved from the totally formed and the supernatural to the historic, so character has moved from the ideal and the superhuman to the real and the natural. In Meredith's words, "...the moment his career as a fairy prince was at end, he was on the high road to a nose." In terms that prefigure Frye's distinction in the Anatomy between idealized visions of man and more realistic appraisals, Meredith had already said, "Careless of the fact that the hero's achievement is to conquer nature, he seems rather to boast of his subservience to her." Thus as character becomes less heroical and more internalized, as he begins more and more to "take shelter in his wits," as he can no longer rely on the supports of a charmed life or of charmed conventionali-

ties and must begin "to do all the work for himself," it also becomes the obligation of the narrator to make that internal action as accessible as were the conventions which preceded it.

But further and beyond such a fundamental obligation is the task of the author to reveal the unity and coherence, the conformity to significance and to his grand design. If there remains some residual similarity of such characters to puppets, Meredith is quite right in saying that the similarity is a greatly diminished one. And quite right is he also in saying of such a character, "I am much more in awe of him." For at least theoretically such a narrator has increased the resistance to conformity and multiplied the dangers of his own betrayal.

Finally, we should point out that this little discourse on the relation or disrelation of puppetry to narration illuminates still another facet of Meredith's theory of narration, and one which may be quite important in appreciating his practice. We devoted an earlier chapter to a definition and discussion of sentimentality as constituting for Meredith the central flaw, the worst of the deadly human sins. But we confined the discussion to sentimentality as a moral failing. What we see in this passage is that there is for Meredith an aesthetic sentimentality as well which is just as insidious and destructive. It is the sentimentality of the falsely romantic,

of a too easy narrative gratification, the sentimentality of the total hero and the conventionalized heroic. The presentation of the smooth and foregrounded surface is a dangerous aesthetic atavism. It eschews the distasteful, it ignores the complex, it avoids the discordant. But just as it is potentially disastrous to deny the discomfiting realities of existence, so it is no longer possible to gloss over them in art. For in fact, the form of novel is so constituted that it must accept his alternative, "No nose to the hero, no moral to the tale." A novel that sacrifices meaning and significance in order to avoid risk and ignore the contingencies of character contradicts and dooms itself. "And I would warn our sentimentalists," Meredith says, "to admit the nose among the features proper to heroes, otherwise the race will become extinct." Or later in the paragraph, "He will have to go altogether, unless we boldly figure him as other men."

It is of course typical that Meredith's ironic self-consciousness should turn his speculation and examination of the novel form into the subject matter for the novel itself. We therefore find in Sandra Belloni not only a writer with the ominous name of Tracy Runningbrook, not only a representation of Meredith himself with all the peculiarities and idiosyncracies of his tortured style, but we are given, too, on the thin pretext of a literary discussion between Cornelia Pole and Purcell Barrett a defense of that style. "The point to be considered,"

Barrett says, "is whether fiction demands a perfectly smooth surface. Undoubtedly a scientific work does, and a philosophical treatise should. When we ask for fact simply, we feel the intrusion of a style. Of fiction it is part. In the one case the classical robe, in the other any mediaeval phantasy of clothing."⁶ The phrase, "a mediaeval phantasy of clothing," in its mocking self-deprecation may be a more accurate description than any of his critics produced. But what is more noteworthy is the fact that Meredith defends the style, however sardonically, as appropriate to literature unconfined to the transmission of merely external fact. It is an open rejection of surface ease and smoothness.

But aside from such an infrequent reference to literary endeavor and aside from the somewhat less infrequent knotty verbal tangle, Meredith calls attention to narration by continually reminding us of the fundamental dichotomy of the novel -- the opposing forces of event and meaning -- and by parading before us his partial resolution to their alternate claims. The narrative organization of Sandra Belloni might well be called "a comedy of competing authors." On the one hand we have the story-teller whose main business is the furthering of the tale; on the other, we have what Meredith calls the Philosopher who over and again insists on interrupting to explain the meaning of an event, the significance of an attitude, or

the wider context which informs a particular act. "The philosopher (I would keep him back if I could) bids us mark...." Or again, "The same philosopher who fathers his dullness on me asserts that...." Nearly every appearance of the Philosopher elicits the affected displeasure of the Story-Teller.

It will be helpful to exhibit this alter-ego in two of his major intrusions into the novel where Meredith prolongs the intrusion by discussing the Philosopher's relation to the narrative. The reaction to the Philosopher "peremptorily demanding the pulpit" is what should command our attention, rather than the occasion or even the substance of the intrusion itself.

... right loath am I to continue my partnership with a fellow who will not see things on the surface, and is, as a necessary consequence, blind to the fact that the public detest him. I mean, this garrulous, super-subtle, so-called Philosopher, who first set me upon the building of THE THREE VOLUMES, it is true, but whose stipulation that he should occupy such a large portion of them has made them rock top-heavy, to the forfeit of their stability. He maintains that a story should not always flow, or, at least, not to a given measure. When we are knapsack on back, he says, we come to eminences where a survey of our journey past and in advance is desirable, as is a distinct pause in any business, here and there. He points proudly to the fact that our people in this comedy move themselves, -- are moved from their own impulsion, -- and that no arbitrary hand has posted them to bring about any event and heap the catastrophe. In vain I tell him that he is meantime making tatters of the puppets' golden robe -- illusion: that he is sucking the blood of their warm humanity out of them.'

Finally we shall cite here one complete instance of the Philosopher's forcing his way into the narration to

clarify further what he means in calling Wilfrid's irresponsible infatuation: "riding the Hippogriff."

(Presuming that he has not previously explained it, the Philosopher here observes that Hippogriff, the foal of Fiery Circumstance out of Sentiment, must be subject to strong sentimental friction before he is capable of a flight: his appetites must fast long in the very eye of provocation ere he shall be eloquent. Let him, the Philosopher, repeat at the same time that souls harmonious to Nature, of whom there are few, do not mount this animal. Those who have true passion are not at the mercy of Hippogriff -- otherwise Sur-excited Sentiment. You will mark in them constantly a reverence for the laws of their being, and a natural obedience to common sense. They are subject to storm, as in everything earthly, and they need no lesson of devotion; but they never move to an object in a madness.)

-----Now this is good teachings: it is indeed my Philosopher's object -- his purpose -- to work out this distinction; and all I wish is that it were good for my market. What the Philosopher means, is to plant in the reader's path a staring contrast between my pet Emilia and his puppet Wilfrid. It would be very commendable and serviceable if a novel were what he thinks it: but all attestation favours the critical dictum, that a novel is to give us copious sugar and no cane. I, myself, as a reader, consider concomitant cane an adulteration of the qualities of sugar. My Philosopher's error is to deem the sugar, born of the cane, inseparable from it. The which is naturally resented, and away flies my book back at the heads of the librarians, hitting me behind them a far more grievous blow.

Such is the construction of my story, however, that to entirely deny the Philosopher the privilege he stipulated for when with his assistance I conceived it, would render our performance unintelligible to that acute and honourable minority which consents to be thracked with aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities. While my Play goes on, I must permit him to come forward occasionally. We are indeed in a sort of partnership, and it is useless for me to tell him that he is not popular and destroys my chance.⁸

To hypostatize the novelist as Comedian is of course to say that his novels are about -- in addition to whatever their subject is -- the practice and the art of writing novels. In this reconsideration and reevaluation of the form, therefore, it is inevitable that the writer should stumble across truths, or as Meredith says "verities," which seen from the vantage of his presumably new perspective should themselves appear to emanate a light of understanding. Meredith does this -- and especially as we hear in his condemnation of romantic sentimentality the strong echoes of Cervantes and see in his play with the reader and in his critique of narration the undeniable traces of Fielding and of Sterne.

The difference is, however, that with Meredith the ironic mockery and exquisite self-consciousness take place at a later date and further along in the development of the novel. Meredith has a more completed form upon which to exercise the play of his self-scrutiny. Sterne presents his reader with an empty page and Fielding abuses Vanity by telling her: "...know to thy confusion, that I have introduced thee for no other purpose than to lengthen out a short chapter...."⁹ But these are intrusions imported into the form. With Meredith, it is the form itself which intrudes -- or obtrudes. For the novel form is as Meredith says a "partnership" between

the philosopher and the historian. It is the product of the interaction of both forces and to eliminate one is to distort the form. Thus there is a relationship between the essential nature of fiction and the roughness of its stylistic surface, the peculiarity of its uneven pacing which "should not flow, or, at least, not to a given measure," and the autonomy and realism of its characters who "are moved by their own impulsion."

But even in Sandra Belloni the tension between incident and meaning is artificially highlighted. While frequently forced into the cramped and squirming intimacy of many of the other novels, intellect and act are here conspicuously isolated also. Much of the play of narration is in the dialogue of the two claimants as they are awkwardly and clumsily sundered. Whether this is the consequence of Meredith's inexperience in the examination of his means and provided an easier method of juggling the two, or whether it was an experiment in explicitness is not clear. Probably both are true. In any case, the comedy of competing authors provides a prologue for the examination of the comedy of narration itself. And for this we turn to the most stylistically notorious of all Meredith's novels, One Of Our Conquerors.

"With the exception of Zola's 'La Terre' -- hard reading for a different reason -- 'One Of Our Conquerors'

was the hardest novel to read that I ever met with...." The statement comes from an essay on "Preciosity" by J. M. Robertson published in 1897.¹⁰ And with the exception of Finnegans Wake or an occasional passage in Faulkner's fiction (hard reading, again, for different reasons) this egregious distinction may still hold quite true. Even in as recent an essay on Conquerors as that by Fabian Gudas, published in 1957, we find only the general and cursory justification for Meredith's style offered by most of his advocates: "...he was presenting his materials in a style which required concentration, intellectual agility, and imaginative response if it was to be understood and appreciated."¹¹ All this is quite true. But such a brief list of requisite traits which we all believe ourselves to possess can hardly be preparation for the opacity of style greeting us at the very first page of the novel:

A gentleman, noteworthy for a lively countenance and a waistcoat to match it, crossing London Bridge at noon on a gusty April day, was almost magically detached from his conflict with the gale by some sly strip of slipperiness, abounding in that conduit of the markets, which had more or less adroitly performed the trick upon preceding passengers, and now laid this one flat amid the shuffle of feet, peaceful for the moment as the uncomplaining who have gone to Sabrina beneath the tides.¹²

It would appear reasonable that opening a novel with a single sentence of over eighty words unrelieved even by the semicolon of correlative thoughts or by a series of parallel phrases, would prove sufficient discouragement to

a reader. But the sentence is not merely long and syntactically complicated; it is complicated by an excessive number of shifts, ellipses, and verbal contortions. For example, we are told that the character in question has a "lively countenance," a rather ambiguous description at best; for does it mean his color, the play of his features, the light in his eye, or what? We might be helped out of our vagueness by being told that his countenance was as lively as his waistcoat, which we might then conclude to mean that both were colorful. But that is not the case. Rather the vagueness of allusion to the countenance is then made the basis for describing the waistcoat and the usual inferential activity of a reader's mind is frustrated by being given the form of an idea, but no identifiable content to it. A somewhat similar shift occurs all too soon again in the sentence. This personage of ambiguous facial character and vaguely waistcoated is, we are told, crossing London Bridge and it is very windy. He is then "almost magically" blown over. But what is magical about it? And if it is magical, to what purpose are we given the vague qualifier, "almost?" Not only that, but if he is "detached" we would expect that detachment to describe the relationship of his feet to the pavement. But again it is not the expected relationship that Meredith has described; he is instead "detached from his conflict with the gale." In other words, Meredith unexpectedly shifts away from the

anticipated and more easily visualized effect to an abstract and new relationship here introduced into the description for the first time.

The substitution of "some sly strip of slipperiness" for banana peel, in its exasperating and alliterative circumlocution, is too obvious to require comment. But the phrase "which had more or less adroitly performed the trick upon preceding passengers" is worth a few words. The "more or less" like the preceding "almost" is rather gratuitous. The adroit performance of this banana peel would again seem an isolated and unnecessary embellishment since it focuses attention on a piece of garbage and raises it to a level of significance which has by this time commanded more attention than the gentleman crossing the bridge. Yet this is not quite a fair statement, since close attention reveals that there is here implied still another cluster of ideas in which the magical, the adroitness, and the performance are the constituent parts. We are the witnesses here, Meredith tells us, to a fall which can be metaphorically described as the legerdemain of a banana peel, a fanciful idea enough, but one which again shifts us away from the actual event. It drains our attentive energies for the perception of an arbitrary and gratuitous analogy, an abstract analogy, an analogy which has no rightful claim on our attention except that it is a configuration of ideas which has occurred by association in the mind of the author.

As if this were not enough, we are indebted to the author for a bit of history about the banana peel. It had done this very same trick to other passers-by before. The point of knowing this, the necessity of the image of a multitude of pedestrians falling on their backs, these are unanswerable questions -- unless perhaps it is the author's device for returning us to a concern with the gentleman who started out the sentence. We have gotten so far away from him that Meredith can return only by pointing him out as a member of a larger group who have slipped on the same banana peel. The phrase "and now laid this one" enjoins the vague recollection that, yes, there was a character that we were watching in particular. But even this reference is no more than a momentary respite, for he is isolated now from one group only to be placed in another, "the uncomplaining who have gone to Sabrina beneath the tides." Another group, another metaphor, and complicated here by mythological allusion. How perfectly justifiable is Moffat's statement that "No novel by a first-rate writer ever began worse...."¹³

But it is, of course, not only the beginning of the novel that is disfigured by the cramped pose, distorted and concealed by a verbal surface delighting in its own waywardness and perversity. We do not have to agree with Moffat's assertion that One Of Our Conquerors is among Meredith's most poorly executed novels in its plotting

and construction to see that these faults derive from a fictional "dissociation of sensibilities" in which the reader and to some extent the writer has difficulty in grasping the substance of the work because of a high impenetrable narrative surface. Without involving ourselves in another extended analysis, one more example of the "detestable" style, somewhat different in its perversity from the first, will establish the point and indicate the versatility of Meredith's narrative obscurantism:

When upon the well-known quest, the delightful singer Orpheus took the downward way, coming in sight of old Cerberus centiceps, he astutely feigned inattention to the hostile appearances of the multiple beast, and with a wave of his plectrum over the responsive lyre, he at the stroke raised voice.

It may be communicated to you, that there was then beheld the most singular spectacle ever exhibited on the dizzy line of division between the living and the dead. For those unaccustomed musical tones in the last thin whiff of our sustaining air were so smartingly persuasive as to pierce to the vitals of the faithful Old Dog before his offended sentiments had leisure to rouse their heads against a beggar of a mortal. The terrible sugariness which poured into him worked like venom to cause an encounter and a wrestling: his battery of jaws expressed it. They gaped. At the same time, his eyeballs gave up. All the Dog, that would have barked the breathing intruder a hundredfold back to earth, was one compulsory centurion yawn. Tears, issue of the frightful internal wedding of the dulcet and the sour (a ravishing rather of the latter by the former) rolled off his muzzles.

Now, if you are not for insisting that a magnificent simile shall be composed of exactly the like notes in another octave, you will catch the fine flavor of analogy and be wafted in a beat of wings across the scene of the application of the Rev. Septimus Barnby to Mr. Victor Radnor, that he might enter the house in the guise of suitor for the hand of Neta Victoria.¹⁴

The danger that we may have by this time entirely forgotten what normal narrative discourse is like plus the fact that Rev. Septimus Barmby is an obvious descendant of Miss Austen's notorious Mr. Collins, makes the following contrast more than merely malicious:

Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society....

Having now a good house and very sufficient income he intended to marry; and in seeking a reconciliation with the Longbourn family he had a wife in view, as he meant to chuse one of the daughters, if he found them as handsome and amiable as they were represented by common report.¹⁵

Even these brief citations enable us to understand and to sympathize with the harsh criticism of Meredith's style in general and the almost universal condemnation of this novel in particular. The many anecdotes of readers, including Jane Carlyle for one, flinging down a Meredith novel in disgust appear quite plausible. Henry James's censure and Oscar Wilde's mockery are, by Meredith's own pen, triumphantly vindicated. Sassoon himself, among the most admiring of Meredith's readers, could hardly dissent from the prevailing reaction to One Of Our Conquerors.

...A chorus of critics complained that he had put too great a strain upon his readers. How right they were I have learnt by recent experience. Not until half-way through does one begin to be carried along by interest in the story. And, dutifully though I perused every word, there were pages and pages of analytic explanation which my mind refused to take in. The sense was so enwrapped in words that I could only unravel it by a special effort.... I was performing a task. At the end I asked myself whether the effort had been worthwhile.¹⁶

Although Sassoon loyally claims that the novel does reward its reader's efforts, he goes on to list his own catalogue of Meredithian monstrosities:

...a telegram is "the brown-paper envelope of the wires"; a riding master is "the hallowing squire of the stables." What most people would call "a grudging admission" becomes "he toned his assent to the diminishing thinness where a suspicion of the negative begins to wind upon a distant horn." And when a man kissed his wife "he performed his never omitted lover's homage."¹⁷

Perhaps the most perceptive and accurate thrust on the quintessential Meredithese as highlighted in One Of Our Conquerors has been made neither by his avowed partisans nor his declared antagonists. It is, as a matter of fact, not -- strictly speaking -- literary criticism at all. But as a faithful rendering of Meredith's turns of mind and of word, and therefore as a criticism of it, Max Beerbohm's masterful parody -- "The Victory of Aphasia Gibberish" -- is unsurpassed.

In the heart of insular Cosmos, remote by some scores of leagues of hodge-trod arable or pastoral -- not more than a snuff-pinch to gaping tourists' nostrils accustomed to inhalation of prairie-winds, but enough for perspective -- from these marginal sands, trident-scraped, we are to fancy, by a helmeted Dame Abstract, familiarly profiled on discs of current bronze, price of a loaf for humbler maws disdainful of Gallic side-dishes for the titillation of choicer palates, stands Ghibberish Park, a house of some pretension, mentioned at Runnymede, with the spreading exception of wings given to it in latter times by Daedalean monsters not to be balked of billiards or traps for Terpischore, and owned for unbroken generations by a healthy line of procreant Gibberishes, to the undoing of collateral branches eager for the birth of a female. Passengers in cushioned chambers flying through space, top-speed or

dallying with obscure platforms not alighted at apparently, have had it pointed out to them, as beheld dimly for a privileged instant and then forgotten, for the most part, as they sink back behind crackling barrier of instructive paper, with a 'Thank you, sir,' or 'Madam,' as the case may be.¹⁸

But if we come in this chapter not to praise Meredith, we come still less to bury him. And after exposing the deformities of his style and the peculiarities of a frequently opaque narrative mode, we now have the responsibility of trying to fill in around it a context which will define its action, distinguish it from other difficult styles, and explain its source and motivation. It has been suggested that the Meredithian excesses of One Of Our Conquerors can be explained by Meredith's disgust and impatience with the reading public, which having incurred his disdain by neglecting his earlier works, was suffered to accept his whimsicality once he became established. As appealing as this explanation may be to our vengeful intellectualism, it accounts for neither the easier style of the two novels that followed, Lord Ormont and His Aminta and The Amazing Marriage, nor for the obvious continuity of style with the earlier novels. One Of Our Conquerors is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Meredith's style has been a potential threat since before The Egoist, at least as far back as Sandra Belloni.¹⁹

It may be useful to begin by trying to understand Henry James' annoyance with Meredith's style. We are at

first inclined to dismiss it simply by saying that indeed "It takes one to know one." But a slightly closer examination of James will reveal how distant the two actually are. The opening sentence of "The Beast In the Jungle" can serve as an illustration.

What determined the speech that startled him in the course of their encounter scarcely matters, being probably but some words spoken by himself quite without intention -- spoken as they lingered and slowly moved together after their renewal of acquaintance.²⁰

This is not James at his worst, but it will do. We have the typical Jamesian frustration of numerous pronouns -- him, their, himself, they -- but all without benefit of referent and antecedent. Who is this "him"? What are we talking about? Who is this other person? And what about the speech? Apparently it is significant enough to start the story. Yet after being informed of it in this roundabout, backhanded manner of compounded relative clauses, we are informed to the contrary; it scarcely matters. Now it is extremely annoying to be teased with a bare hint at the beginning of a tale and then to be told that it has no significance. Especially since this meaningless speech between unidentified characters in an anonymous setting continues to be the main item in the following long phrase, and in the one after that which ends the sentence. As a matter of fact it is some two hundred words later that we finally discover John Marcher to be the "him," and another

two hundred odd words still after that before we learn the identity of May Bartram.

Nevertheless, the difficulty of Jamesian prose differs in kind if not always in degree from that of Meredith. Admittedly, there is something circuitous in the verbal trip which James has mapped out in the first sentence. We end almost where we began. Almost. But even the most grudging estimate must confess that the sentence gives us a dramatic locus that is relevant to the progress of the tale. If we feel closed off by a verbal opacity from the apprehension of necessary facts and information, we are at least confined within the story, confused by this method of opening in medias res, but locked in rather than -- as in the case of Meredith -- locked out. We want to know how these ideas relate to the rest of the world and part of the problem is that we are not given an outside, objective, and factual perspective by which to define them. We are momentarily disoriented and are indeed, like the four pronouns, in search of an antecedent. But that pull of the reader into the experiencing consciousness is, of course, primary for James. The interior placement is for him the anterior requirement. And once that is accomplished or the process initiated, he can then widen his narrative focus to comprehend more of the factual background.

The difficulties that James presents to a reader are not that he erects himself into a barrier between the

reader and the story. The difficulty is that his narrative priorities dictate too severely at times his narrative method. The state of mind lying at four or five removes from the circumstance which provoked it is naturally more important than that circumstance, so we begin there. The "finely felt" crisis of whether or not to dissuade a young man from an unfortunate marriage when one is oneself in love with him, as in The Spoils of Poynton, the continuous series of delicately balanced and "finely felt" decisions of Lambert Strether in which his own moral being is hazarded by the nuances of acts toward Chad Newsome and Mme. de Vionnet more so than by their crude or gross meanings -- these are for James the real counters of fictional action. Ian Watt has said of The Ambassadors that "The primary location of the narrative [is] in a mental rather than a physical continuum...."²¹ Clearly the description applies to almost all of James's fiction, and highlights the narrative need to narrow, sharpen and refine statement. James' characteristic method of doing this is by qualification. The method thus creates a prose pattern of meaning and substantive being constantly impeded by and strained through qualification before finally released.

Taking a sentence almost at random from The Ambassadors, we can see how intrusive and distracting this modification of even ordinary statement becomes.

"Almost the first thing, strangely enough, that about an hour later, Strether found himself doing in Sarah's presence was to remark articulately on

this failure, in their friend, of what had been superficially his great distinction."²²

The ostensible purpose of this sentence is to inform us of Strether's assessment of a marked change in Waymarsh, but what we remark in almost equal degree is how very reluctantly the qualifiers and modifiers permit that meaning to emerge in a thirty-five word sentence. It is not the first thing Strether says, for that would make it appear too pressing; so it is "almost" the first thing. But the deferment of "almost" is not sufficient. We must understand that Strether's making such an observation is "strange." Yet not so strange as to constitute a marked inconsistency or paradox; it is just "strangely enough." We then get to the main business of the sentence which has somehow gotten concealed in a relative adjectival clause, an example of what Richard Chase describes as James's "infinitely syntactical language."²³ But that clause is not allowed to march forth unimpeded. It is interrupted before it can say anything, after its very first word -- which is no more than the connective -- by the prepositional phrase, "about an hour later." We hardly need to continue this analysis in order to see how diffused the energy of the ordinary Jamesian sentence can be. Watt observes a similar pattern in the last sentence of the opening paragraph in The Ambassadors: "Mixed with everything was the apprehension, already, on Strather's part, that it would, at best, throughout, prove the note of Europe in quite a sufficient degree."²⁴

Despite the complexities and the frequent knottiness, however, it is possible and it is reasonable to assert an organic appropriateness in regard to Henry James' style. The "infinite syntax" of the sentence bears an analogical relationship to the infinite syntax of the character's mind, or at worst the community of mind (Watt's phrase) shared by character and author and reader. But certainly no such defense can be made for a writer who describes a scene of two spinsters retiring in the following manner: "On entering their spacious bed-chamber, they were so fatigued that sleep appeared to their minds the compensating logical deduction. Miss Dorothea suppressed a yawn, and inflicted it upon Miss Virginia, who returned it, with an apology, and immediately had her sister's hand on her shoulder, for an attempted control of one of the irresistibles; a spectacle imparting bitter shudders and shots to the sympathetic jawbones of an observer."²⁵

On the contrary, an analysis of Meredith's prose style seems to reveal that his continuous intrusive syntax is a journey always away from the action and the character, that he develops no community of mind with characters, and that even the presumed community with the reader is constantly jeopardised by prodigious and fantastical play, by allusive leaps in which the reader can only be a lame if not a halt partner.

It is not universally held, however, that fictional style must be self-efacing and the author's presence submerged in narration. Particularly in recent years critics like Philip Rahv have defended the practice of the novelist introducing his own character into the novel, and while not presenting any coherent theory to accommodate such invasions have proceeded on the rather safe pragmatic observation that War and Peace and Anna Karenina are both greater works of literature than any of Jane Austen's or James's novels."²⁶ And Rahv proceeds to take on such institutionalized advocates of the "well-made novel" as Mark Schorer and John Crowe Ransom. In that same collection of essays which contains the Rahv piece there is an article by the novelist George P. Elliott whose title appears at first glance to be a vindication of Meredith in One Of Our Conquerors. It is called "The Novelist As Meddler." But upon closer scrutiny we discover it to be again an intelligent, though not very "chancy" defense of conventionally accepted -- if discursive -- novelists and methods. Elliott says:

The theory that the Dostoevsky-Fielding-Balzac method is so inferior to the Conrad-Joyce-Flaubert method as to render their novels inferior as works of art makes one huge assumption: that the reader of a novel should not feel himself in the hands of an artificer or story-teller and that the novelist's true art is to create an illusory actuality, appearing to have no art. But this assumption goes too far. ...the reader of a novel does not really forget he is being told a story.²⁷

Elliott is not too much of a help for us at the moment, and may actually add to our problem of finding a critical background against which we can see and understand Meredith. For while proclaiming the writer's licence to speak in his own voice, Elliott cautions that it is a right to be exercised always with restraint and never at moments of "greatest intimacy." At these times he admonishes: "Like a god grant your creatures their free will. Like a father, give your children their independence. Like a friend, love them and leave them alone."²⁸ Clearly such advice is violated on every page of One Of Our Conquerors.

We come closer I think to the problems of this novel and to the problem of Meredithian narration in general by making an about-face from the theorists of the well-made novel to their polar opposites, the Formalist critics. Here we find the possibility of an approach derived not from premises of psychological or historical realism but from quite contrary assumptions. The Formalists were interested in treating literature from a purely literary point of view. They wanted to isolate and then examine those features of literature which distinguished novels and poems from other forms of verbal expression and communication. In other forms it is the content, the information which is to be communicated while in literary art the form itself is an integral part of the information being communicated.²⁹ "Clearly," says Victor Ehrlich in

summarizing this position of the Formalists, "the difference between literature and non-literature was to be sought not in the subject matter, i.e., the sphere of reality dealt with by the writer, but in the mode of presentation."³⁰ From this preoccupation with how literature "makes it new" and from the reversal of the old doctrine that the images of literature serve to familiarize the strange, there grew the formalist doctrine that literature proceeds by defamiliarizing by foregrounding, by de-automizing experience. In Ehrlich's words again, "The act of creative deformation restores sharpens to our perception, giving 'density' to the world around us. 'Density (faktura) is the principal characteristic of this peculiar world of deliberately constructed objects, the totality of which we call art.'"³¹

It is clear that such a doctrine bears close affinities with the practices of George Meredith in which the strange, the angular, and the capricious so frequently occur. As a matter of fact a major Formalist spokesman and its foremost critic of fiction -- Victor Shklovsky -- in an essay dealing with Tristram Shandy, draws the following conclusions at its end: "The forms of art are explainable by the laws of art; they are not justified by their realism." "The assertion that Tristram Shandy is not a novel is common; for persons who make that statement, opera alone is music -- a symphony is chaos. Tristram Shandy is the

most typical novel in world literature."³²

But congenial and accepting as we may find Formalist theory, we have refrained from invoking it previously and must finally reject it here, too, as an explanation of Meredith's narration. In the first place, our novelist does not really seem to fill the Formalist prescription which, while exalting "density" really subordinates it to another purpose: "It creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it."³² Meredith's crochets draw attention to themselves, especially in One Of Our Conquerors and even in the other novels. They cannot therefore create a "special perception of the object."³³ Frequently they have no relation to any visible or present object. In answer to the objection that so does Tristram Shandy too draw attention to itself, we must point out an important difference. Tristram is after all a main character in the work and by attracting attention he is in effect focusing it on the work and illuminating the fictional situation. This is hardly true of Meredith whose only novel written in the first person is the one most free of the usual shenanigans.

The second disclaimer is really a variant of the first -- namely, that the dislocations Shklovsky finds useful and interesting are major dislocations of structural elements rather than of stylistic ones. "The action is

continually interrupted; the author repeatedly goes backward or leaps forward; whole ten-page passages are filled with whimsical discussions about fortifications or about the influence of a person's nose or name on his character."³⁴ Such violent structural discontinuities are never part of Meredith's design. The action of One Of Our Conquerors is conventionally organized and plotted. There is always the pretense there and in the other works of a smoothly working surface. Meredith does not, in other words, attempt the destruction of novelistic form. He seems quite intent on keeping the enterprise going while at the same time allowing liberty to an ironic self-consciousness. But the mode of his questioning is subtler and the tones of his questioning require less startling contrast.

The theoretical ground for the rejecting a Formalist defense of Meredith is, however, the most important one. The Formalist position is too sweeping, too extreme. Even were it the perfect description of Meredith, which it is not, it would place him in the center of the fictional tradition, where he does not belong. And by thus distorting his significance, would deny his real importance as a maverick muse. It would make out of his perverse inclination to question and to mock, pure virtue; and out of his work it would make a model. On the other hand Formalism seems to dismiss too easily, or to denigrate too casually, the great majority of accepted novelists who survive

unplugged by a reflexive sensibility -- while it is in the setting of a tradition they created that Meredith becomes most important.³⁵

The preceding discussion has, nevertheless, returned us to the problem of justifying the narrative style of One Of Our Conquerors in terms of its relation to Meredith's immediate concern in the novel. We have spoken very little thus far about the actual subject matter of the novel and for the very good reason that it seems to have very little bearing, at least superficially, on the narrative style. The story deals mainly with the failure of Victor Radnor to become a conqueror in those spheres where he mistakenly believes success to reside, society and politics, and where Meredith accurately knows it to reside, in a man's own nature. Now a prodigy of financial power, Victor Radnor made the mistake -- in his extreme youth -- of marrying a woman almost twice his age for her money. Subsequently falling in love with her young and beautiful companion, Nataly, and unable to get a divorce from Mrs. Burman, Radnor has been living with Nataly ever since without benefit of clergy or legal license. Whenever the now immensely rich Radnor has attempted to come out into fashionable society, in a new neighborhood, in a new home, the vindictive first wife has allowed the true marital condition between himself and Nataly -- or the lack of it -- to become known. Victor Radnor is no coarse money grubber;

he has charm and warmth, imagination and scope. But he is also a social and political creature -- and for over twenty years he has starved for the rank in society that is rightfully his. At the same time he is remarkably insensitive to the compliant and quiet martyrdom that Nataly has been forced through, the role and status of a woman being so much more vulnerable. They have a daughter now approaching twenty-one, and Radnor seizes this fact, along with the rumors of Mrs. Burman's impending forgiveness or death or both, as grounds for a third major campaign to appear in society with his family. It is at this point that the novel opens with his accidental, but symbolic fall while crossing London Bridge.

Victor is a combination of contradictory qualities. In his marriage to Mrs. Burman and his frantic efforts to secure a divorce from her, in his purchase of the estate at Lakelands and his plans to marry his daughter into the rank and respectability represented by Dudley Sowerby, in his design to enter Parliament, in all these Victor shows himself throughout as a schemer. Yet he is also a generous and loving man, blind to the effects of his determined ambition on those around him and on his own capacity to enjoy the simple benefits and beauties of life.

The book ends in the pathetic collapse of all Radnor's aspirations and schemes. He subjects both himself and Nataly to the final humiliation of a horrible last inter-

view with Mrs. Burman. The strain of the interview added to the tensions of her now exposed existence proves too much for Nataly. She has been gradually consumed by the circumstances of her life, by the fineness of her own moral awareness. She dies the very night that Victor is to deliver the first of his planned political speeches. He never is to utter a word of those speeches. He hears the tragic news and is driven to madness, a madness from which he does not recover. Nesta does not give her hand to the aristocratic Dudley in a marriage which would have been assuredly deadly, though brilliant for her in theory. She marries instead the somewhat older man who was her mother's choice. Dartrey Fenellan has seen the world and has known the sorrows of an unhappy first marriage but he has nonetheless retained a gallantry for women which only a man who views them as equals can exhibit. In marrying him, Nesta is, in a sense, vindicating her mother's life. And in rejecting the material attractions of the worthy but flaccid Dudley, she rejects the error of her deluded father, what Meredith calls "the shallowness of the abstract Optimist."³⁶

There we have it, the barest of possible outlines to indicate the main business of the novel. What we are now about, to point the question once more, is trying to find an understandable relationship between it and a narrative technique which informs, for example, in the following manner: "Mr. Dudley Sowerby was not one of the youths

whose presence would rectify such an abstract estimate of the genus pursuer." Or later in the same passage: "Gossip flies to a wider circle round the members of a great titled family, is inaudible; or no longer the diphtherian whisper the commonality hear of the commonality: and so we see the social uses of our aristocracy survive."³⁷

It is perhaps time to interject at this point the very real possibility that no such relationship exists. We have been at some pains in this study to point out that Meredith is constantly testing the limits of the novel and exerting pressure in order to discover how much strain and dislocation the novel can sustain and accommodate. We observed that ironic reflexiveness at work on various structural elements of fiction, isolating one in particular for such "playful" attention in one novel and isolating another in another novel. Throughout, it has been clear that the habit of self-consciousness was not a tidy or compulsive one, that the ironies were more diffuse and buckshot than our neat pigeonholing would indicate. The classification was a convenience of our analysis rather than a reflection of the operative realities of the novels. The testing of language, therefore, and of narrative technique has existed not merely as a potential in all the works but as a constantly present actuality -- a fact which has been remarked with dismay by many critics. We must recognize then the inevitability of style itself moving into the center of comic

attention and stress. Just as plot or meaning or character become in various novels the objects of self-conscious examination, so eventually Meredith must turn to the examination of the mode of narration itself. And this is what happens in One Of Our Conquerors, as it happens in a somewhat different form in Sandra Belloni. We must remember that these novels, in both of which the narrative technique is flaunted in our faces, are also the two novels in which we find a novelist, in other words, a narrator present among the characters that Meredith has collected: Tracy Runningbrook in Sandra Belloni and Colney Durance in One Of Our Conquerors. We might push the matter a bit further, at least in the case of the latter novel, by urging attention to a strange coincidence. For not only is Durance a novelist, and not only do we have portions of his tedious work "unforgivably" inserted in the novel, but the subject of Colney Durance's fictional work is -- of all things -- language. The Japanese nation has decided to abandon its own tongue, we are to understand, and the event summons representatives of various countries, partisans of English, German, French, Russian, etc., each to urge the greater excellences of his own language. They are embarked for the Orient on a voyage of adventure and intrigue on board a vessel named the Polypheme. It is as if Meredith is trying to out-Meredith himself. And although Colney Durance is

presumably using language as a metaphor or symbol for national characteristics, the combination of linguistic play in the sub-novel and the hyperbolic style of the main novel is too obvious to be considered unwitting.

If there is a broader sanctioning principle or justification implicit in Meredith's narrative technique, it is possibly the one with which we began this discussion of his style. It is expressed most clearly in an essay by Richard Ohmann, entitled "Prolegomena to Prose Style."³⁸ We would place Meredith in that small and select company who make the attempt, in Ohmann's words, "...[to] reshuffle linguistic forms in an attempt to draw aside the curtain that English places between us and the world of psychic and physical phenomena...."³⁹ Although Meredith is not as violent a "reshuffler" as Joyce and Gertrude Stein, who are Ohmann's examples, he clearly betrays an equal impatience with the restrictions and inadequacy of conventional language and he uses a method of heaped disjunctive allusions and overloaded syntax. The attempt is further complicated in Meredith in that he is ostensibly referring to an objective and continuing reality which seems, at the same time as he renews his relation of that reality, to demand that he attend more closely to the business of communicating it. In other words, he violates the demands of disclosure by constantly compelling us to see it the way he sees it before we can even be sure exactly what it is

we are supposed to be looking at. It is the distinction we made earlier in regard to his difference from James, i.e., that he forces us always into his mind and that there we recognize the danger of being closed off from the objective action occurring in the novel. This is perhaps another way of saying what many of Meredith's earlier admirers meant when they called his style a "poetic" one.

But let us return again to Ohmann:

...most conventional writers permit English to govern their epistemologies, as do all who merely speak the language. In other words, writers in English deal with bare experience only as it is censored by their language; they manipulate linguistically a world which is already highly organized for them.⁴⁰

Ohmann is here very much to Meredith's point -- and not only regarding style. For what Ohmann calls the censoring effect of linguistic convention, is true of course for all conventions, linguistic or artistic. Only when the artist turns an ironic self-awareness upon those conventions of form, can he modify and transcend and outwit them. Otherwise he remains the baffled captive of their superimposed organization of reality. Only to the extent that the novelist becomes a comedian of form does he become free of the confining definitions inherent in the language of novelistic and fictional form. Ohmann's description is extremely useful to us because it not only describes Meredith's narrative technique but it allows us to place in an analogous context Meredith's refusal to allow the conventions of the novel to dominate his epistemology --

though the hazardous alternative for him is to be thrown back on an ironic self-consciousness. Nevertheless, the widening of what Ohmann calls "epistemic choices"⁴¹ becomes discernible as the consistent and coherent principle unifying not merely a fictional or novelistic stance but tying that stance to its proper and appropriate style in a deeply organic and interdependent wholeness.

Our question has altered somewhat, then. And we are now asking why so much responsibility for redefining epistemic choices falls, in One Of Our Conquerors, on the element of style and so little on any of the other constituent elements. The answer I should like to suggest is that One Of Our Conquerors was in many ways Meredith's most complete work. It contained his most complete vision and most coherent view of existence. In no other work do we have a sweep which moves from the commercial to the social to the political, from personal blindness and decadence to the same flaws in the national character. Meredith started out in this novel with a large meaning. Though we may perhaps say that in many novels the meaning exceeds the story, in no other work does it become as crucial as in One Of Our Conquerors. Right from the very beginning then, even as event begins to unfold, Meredith cannot trust us to see the meaning contained in it. He must immediately and decisively intrude, providing the documentation that more clearly displays the play of his mind and subordin-

ates everything else to that coherence. The novel is thus like a frantic attempt to return to the presumed completeness of epic narrative, the difference being that this completeness exists not in a narrative surface, but in the comprehending mind of the writer. One Of Our Conquerors may be the greatest evidence of the final impossibility of that disproportionate attempt.

Footnotes

CHAPTER IX

1. It is the poignant recognition of that disruption and disparity in his own life that breaks in upon Professor Cornelius in the story by Thomas Mann. See "Disorder and Early Sorrow," in Stories of Three Decades, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1936), pp. 500-528.

2. There are numerous examples among the contemporary novel to illustrate this point. Faulkner, for instance, finds a solution to the problem by moving to different consciousnesses within a novel. This not only breaks down our "claustrophobia," but establishes a verification between the experiencing consciousness and a historical reality in the novel. Auerbach shows us even within a single passage from To The Lighthouse, that Virginia Woolf gives the reader some coordinates to a reality outside the mind of Mrs. Ramsay, even though he points out the diminished emphasis they receive (Mimesis, p. 534). Novels like Jealousy or The Voyeur by Alain Robbe-Grillet, for example, are quite different. His total artistic loyalty to the principle of a single consciousness, make the walls of the mind totally imprisoning.

3. The same rule or principle of compulsory authorial presence may be said to operate in such novels as Joseph Andrews and Bleak House. The latter would illustrate that when the narrating consciousness is repressed, and the character is held in a tight consistency, then resolution can only take place by a sudden turnabout as in the case of Bucket. This is not so in Jane Austen where there is a certain space provided for the development and evolution of character into new awareness -- as when Emma Woodhouse has her revelation beginning with Box Hill or when Elizabeth Bennet recognizes that "...until now I never knew myself." The planned evolution of Jane Austen's main characters gives the appearance of "organic resolution" to her novels and permits a restriction of authorial dominance to minimal and subtle intonations. The degree of the narrator's obtrusiveness, which is always a "reciprocating" relationship, is thus adjusted to the declared and obvious artificiality of the construct.

4. SB, I, pp. 110-111.

5. SB, I, pp. 113-114.

6. SB, I, p. 63.
7. SB, II, pp. 185-186.
8. SB, II, pp. 229-230.
9. Henry Fielding, The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews (New York, 1950), p. 67.
10. Reprinted by J. A. Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 183.
11. "George Meredith's One of Our Conquerors" in From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad, Essays Collected in Memory of James T. Hillhouse, ed. Rathburn and Steinman (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 222.
12. OOOC, p. 1.
13. Moffatt, Primer to the Novels, p. 313.
14. OOOC, pp. 188-189.
15. Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice (Boston, 1956), pp. 52-53.
16. Sassoon, Meredith, p. 206.
17. Sassoon, pp. 207-208.
18. Originally published in the December 1896 issue of the Saturday Review and quoted by Hammerton in Anecdote, p. 192. Beerbohm later published the piece along with some parodies of other literary figures (James, Galsworthy, etc.) in a volume called A Christmas Garland. He made a few minor modifications and changed the name of the heroine to Euphemia Clashthought. Cf. pp. 187-188 in A Christmas Garland (New York, 1921).
19. Priestley is ready to take Meredith to task for his alleged malice: "...if Meredith did deliberately make his later work obscure, then he ought to have been ashamed of himself. Authorship is not a standing feud with a few indolent or hostile reviewers, and a writer ought to have other things on his mind. But we may very well doubt..." (p. 44).
20. In The Portable Henry James, ed. Morton D. Zabel (New York, 1956), p. 270.
21. Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of The Ambassadors: An explication," in The Ambassadors, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York, 1964), p. 472.

22. Ambassadors, p. 274.
23. Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 137.
24. Ambassadors, p. 17.
25. OOOC, p. 275.
26. Rahv, "Fiction and the Criticism of Fiction," in Critical Approaches to Fiction, p. 296.
27. Also collected in Critical Approaches to Fiction, p. 342.
28. Elliott, p. 348.
29. A brief introduction to the principles of Russian Formalism is provided by Victor Shklovsky in an essay significantly titled: "Art as Technique." It can be found in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, trans. and ed. Lee P. Lemon and Marlon J. Reis (Lincoln, 1956). Shklovsky says: "An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object -- it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it" (p. 18).
30. Victor Erlich, Russian Formalism: History -- Doctrine (The Hague, 1963), p. 173. Also see Wellek and Warren, Theory of Literature, pp. 241-242.
31. Erlich, p. 177.
32. "Sterne's Tristram Shandy," Russian Formalist Criticism, p. 57.
33. Shklovsky. See above note #29.
34. Russian Formalist Criticism, p. 27.
35. Ehrlich makes essentially the same criticism, particularly regarding Shklovsky: "...the adjective 'typical' in Shklovsky's eulogy of Tristram Shandy is characteristically misapplied. The use of this term betrayed the Formalist's 'modern' bias in favor of non-objective art, his tendency to mistake the extreme for the representative, the 'pure' for the 'superior'. Obviously, the differentia of literature, its concern with its medium, was more conspicuous where the device, instead of serving as a catalyst to blend heterogeneous elements into unity, was made to recoil upon itself.

But did this make Zlebnikov more 'literary' than Pushkin, or Sterne more 'typical' than Henry James, indeed, than the large majority of novelists"(p. 194).

36. 0000C, p. 514.

37. 0000C, p. 125.

38. Style in Prose Fiction, English Institute Essays, 1958 (New York, 1959).

39. Ohmann, p. 10.

40. Ohmann, p. 10.

41. Ohmann, p. 12.

...but the chief thing which he remembered was Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also. To this they assented, being drowsy, and not quite following the argument.

Plato, The Symposium

CHAPTER X

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY:

The Comedy of Conflicting Visions

We have by no means exhausted the questions which our view of the novel has raised. We are far from having come full circle. The conception of fiction as "comic" testament written by self-conscious author does introduce and create the analogous visual metaphor of the artist holding up the mirror of his own ironic self-awareness opposite the comic mirror of his testament. The result is a theoretically or potentially infinite series of reflections, each qualified by a specific number of contexts, but eternally bouncing back and forth between an objectified subject and the subjectified object. In the impending paralysis of unending reflection, the novelist intercedes at what is in his decision the fullest yet least redundant point. The job of the critic should be to find that point and to define it in terms of language and style, character and mutation of character, event and the dislocation of plot. Even those tasks we have attempted, however, seem incomplete treatments, unfinished discussions. In addition there are yet questions which we have not really touched. And these include the notion of the "shape" of testament, distance, perspective, etc. We turn to this last chapter on the fusion of the comic and the

tragic with hesitancy and expectation. Clearly it has a relevance to every aspect of the novel we have just mentioned; possibly through exploration of this question we can close our circle.

We can begin by pointing out that whatever Socrates's argument was to show the identity of genius necessary for comedy and tragedy, we need today little urging to accept such a conclusion, or one very much like it. Our ironic sensibility and the contagion of relativism permit us to see comedy and tragedy as inhering not in a given situation itself, but in the perspective in which the situation exists, the distance from which it is seen and the criteria by which it is judged. We no longer hold the naive belief that in tragedy the character is overcome by circumstance and in comedy he overcomes the circumstance. Our view being more organic, we do not allow such determinations to be made merely in a final scene -- be it a scene either of death or of marriage. While such scenes may be important, their importance is, as Frye tells us, emblematic.¹ The treatment of a subject like impotence, therefore, will be humorous in Restoration comedy and quite serious in The Sun Also Rises. And even the attitude toward incest will vary depending on whether we find it in Sophocles or in Fielding. It will depend, in other words, whether we perceive the problem internally and subjectively or whether we perceive from a distance and objectively.

We come still closer to Socrates when we recognize the mode of tragedy and the mode of comedy not only as possible and coexistent, but as reciprocal, necessary, mutually completing. One need not be a devoted Kantian to be able to relate the subjectivism of tragedy and the objectivism of comedy to the subject-object dichotomy, the sundered dualism of human consciousness. "In Kant's philosophy," says Marcuse, "the basic antagonism between subject and object is reflected in the dichotomy between the mental faculties: sensuousness and intellect (understanding): desire and cognition; practical and theoretical reason."² These are, therefore, not merely two possibilities of apprehending events; they are the modes of understanding existence which answer and correspond to an essential human dualism. They are necessary. And to the list of balances -- or antinomies -- that Marcuse cites, we could affix such a continuation of the equation as internal versus external equals individual versus societal equals the doomed versus the continuing.

Furthermore both are simultaneously present. In the first chapter of Tragic Meanings in Shakespeare, Thomas McFarland makes the following statement: "The deepest paradox of existence resides in this fact -- that non-being is both alien and integral to our lives. Our minds cannot work except by the simultaneous affirmation of being and

non-being."³ Clearly, the purest affirmation of being is an assured social continuity and the survival of abstract truth, while the ineluctable recognition of non-being overtakes the individual and those truths that he himself knows. It is for very good reason -- to take a brief example -- that in Oedipus Rex Sophocles has Oedipus accuse Creon of treachery as an attempt to translate the conflict into political and social terms. For these are the terms of comic survival. And quite rightly too does he cry that the Chorus knows not what it asks when it pleads that he allay his suspicions against Creon.

Having gone this far in the reconciliation of the comic and tragic views, we must go a step, or a leap, beyond Scoresby and suggest that it is not the function of the novel to segregate one from the other or to maintain a separation which may have been appropriate to classical naivete or classical artificiality. When Meredith, consequently, forces a union of comedy and tragedy as he does in all the novels both before and after The Tragic Comedians, if like the most "metaphysical" of novelists he seems to "yoke" the two "by violence together," he is essentially exploiting an aspect of the novel native to its form. The abruptness, the jaggedness, even the crudity of his mode should not distract the critic from the theoretical propriety of such an accommodation. Admittedly there seems a certain amount of perversity in creating such excruciating pressures of antagonism and incompatibility, and in his

occasional harshness Meredith seems to "shotgun" this "marriage of Heaven and Hell." Nevertheless, "in laying bare" the character and the compass of the novel, in exposing through technique or lack of technique the extent of fictional freedom, Meredith is testing again the limits of fictional ambience as the comedian of form.

There is hardly a novel in which this mutual testing of the tragic by the comic and vice versa does not occur in Meredith. The one possible exception is Evan Harrington which comes closer to the form of a conventional romance than any of the other works, including Harry Richmond. Lionel Stevenson in The English Novel: A Panorama, calls it "a fairly conventional love story" in an attempt to satisfy the taste of the reading public, and remarks further that "Evan's ordeal by ridicule is totally different from Richard Feverel's emotional torture...."⁴ The relative lack of complexity is remarked by Walter Allen in The English Novel⁵ and is implied too by Grant C. Knight who calls it "surely one of the best comedies in English literature."⁶ Evan Harrington that is to say, certainly has its threats and its dangers besieging the comic denouement. But Evan is never seriously in danger of either life or soul. Or let us say that the seriousness of his jeopardy never grows beyond the proportions of the comic, never becomes more than the comic resolution can finally conciliate. The comic spirit is here at work on comic matter and we therefore

miss the abrasiveness rendered when comic failings produce tragic consequences, a paradoxicality and abrasiveness which is further heightened by subjecting the tragic and the serious to the intellectual scrutiny from a comic distance.

But as far as the other novels are concerned, we can hardly enumerate the cases and manner in which Meredith binds -- sometimes stiffly, sometimes incongruously -- the comic with the tragic. We would take even extreme samples in which no obvious interrelation is heralded forth as it is in The Tragic Comedians or in One Of Our Conquerors. Part of the ironic ambivalence, for example, even in The Shaving of Shagpat derives from Meredith's laconic distrust of purely comic transcendence. It is that suspicion which finally can be no longer contained and it erupts and pierces like Shibli Bagarag himself through the veil of Illusion.

Even the popular and "restrained" Harry Richmond provides us with an entire gallery of tragic comedians and of histories which, first precipitated into tragic event, are then reviewed by a comic perusal. Squire Beltham, though diminished a character in comparison with Richmond Roy, is no less of a tragic comedian, trapped by the pattern of a life he has not the ability or vision to rise above. The Princess Ottilia's marriage into safety like Julia Rippinger's marriage which does not keep her safe, are both instances of tragic waste enforced by social stupididy upon

individual weakness. The noble Heriot who plays Steerforth to Harry's David Copperfield and Harry himself are possibly Meredith's most poignant examples in that we follow them from their youth. Harry, of course, survives. (Triumphs is surely not the word.) But such allowance of comicality in the plot is his only after passing through the sobering effects of tragic experience. Even in the case of Janet Ilchester, Meredith appears to be enforcing Blake's doctrine that there is no such thing as "untested innocence." For only after Janet has risked herself in the tragicomedy of living can she become interesting to Harry -- although paradoxically and tragicomically, it is her risk and participation which almost prevent Harry from securing her.

For those who would object that the pattern being described does not fit The Egoist, that Meredith wrote in that book a pure comedy, we would answer two things. In the first place, one must not necessarily love Sir Willoughby in order to recognize in him the victim as well as the villain. The emptiness, the vacuity of his life are comically observed by Meredith. These and the tortures he undergoes are evidenced by the desperation with which he feels he must retain Clara, and the absolute frenzy with which, having lost her, he turns back to Laetitia Dale. The triumphs of Vernon and Clara are virtually lost in the more intense agony, albeit comically rendered, of Willoughby. Secondly, a view of the pure comedy of The Egoist and its

unalloyed comic resolution, would have somehow to be altered if it is to accommodate Laetitia Dale's speech on accepting Willoughby's proposal:

"He asks me for a hand that cannot carry a heart, because mine is dead. I repeat it. I used to think the heart a woman's marriage portion for her husband. I see now that she may consent, and he accept her, without one. But it is right that you should know what I am when I consent. I was once a foolish romantic girl; now I am a sickly woman, all illusions vanished. Privation has made me what an abounding fortune usually makes of others -- I am an Egoist. I am not deceiving you. That is my real character. My girl's view of him has entirely changed; and I am almost indifferent to the change."

It is somewhat redundant at this point to engage in reperusal of the works so far discussed, even if from an altered perspective. For the purpose of our preceding discussions has been to indicate how Meredith's ironic self-awareness, as the novelist's self-consciousness, has conditioned and created the special "shape" of his novels. In now trying to understand Meredith's peculiar enforcement of an intimacy between comedy and tragedy, however, we should begin to recognize that this strange conjunction constitutes no less than the most comprehensive irony of all. The "comedy of conjunctive modes" in other words, while not disqualifying or cancelling our previous inquiries, does -- in one sense -- subsume them all. Our previous analyses have all made use of traditional literary distinctions, like meaning or style or history. What has interested us and made Meredith's fiction significant was its deviation,

its freedom -- what we called its testing of the accepted limits because of an ironic self-consciousness. Surely then the most aberrant practice, and the most ironic deviation, the most arrogant of all authorial liberties, is to collapse the possibility of the analytic distinctions which have supported a traditional practice. The forced conjunction of comedy and tragedy thus represents Meredith's most audacious, comprehensive, and questing irony. The testing of meaning in The Shaving of Shagpat, therefore, can be translated into an instance of the ironic interplay between comic and tragic meanings. And similarly the comedy of style in One Of Our Conquerors can also be revealed as a comic use of language, as in Joyce, incessantly battering against a traditional story of tragic misfortune and defeat. The comic and self-conscious irony of Meredith does clearly become, when viewed in this wide perspective, a necessary insurance against the sentimentalism he feared and occasionally permitted himself to fall into.

We should remark here, however, that even the term tragicomedy in its commonly accepted sense is a misnomer for Meredith's novels. For the term implies reduction and lessening on either side of the tragic - comic equation. It implies a diminution of stature into which the characters of tragicomedy inevitably dwindle. But the ironic sensibility which sees us in terms of no more than Pru-

frockian mannerisms has not yet accomplished the erosion of human stature. Meredith's characters -- unlike even Chekhov's -- are still capable of great acts and great folly, and there is something of a moral-artistic integrity in his refusal to compromise them. At the end of The Tragic Comedians, Meredith gives us a description of the character of the tragic comedian and of his stature:

He was neither fool nor madman, nor man to be adored: his last temptation caught him in the season before he had subdued his blood, and amid the multitudinously simple of this world, stamped him a tragic comedian: that is, a grand pretender, a self-deceiver, one of the lividly ludicrous, whom we cannot laugh at, but must contemplate, to distinguish where their character strikes the note of discord with life; for otherwise, in the reflection of their history, life will seem a thing demoniacally inclined by fits to antic and dive into gulfs. The characters of the host of men are of the simple order of the comic; not many are of a stature and a complexity calling for the junction of the two Muses to name them.⁸

The conjunction of the comic and the tragic in Meredith becomes jarring and apparently crude.

Therefore, Priestley writes, for example, "Regarded as a narrative, every novel that Meredith wrote is not merely faulty but downright bad, even perverse in its badness.... proportion, balance, sound construction are everywhere wanting. A thousand examples of such weakness leap to mind. Richard Feverel is presented as a comedy, and has tragic ending thrust upon it, quite arbitrarily."⁹ The same criticism, to a somewhat lesser degree, can be made and has been made regarding the drowning of Nevil Beauchamp at the end of the novel.

Walter F. Wright, in his chapter on "Conspiracy of the Comic and Tragic Muses" has a great deal of trouble trying to find the elusive principle of consistency which would determine the proportions or even the occasions of comic analysis and tragic seriousness. He is unable to do so.

...he employed the tragicomic method at times in an arbitrary manner. In Sandra Belloni, for example, he used it for minor characters and built to minor climaxes, only to turn back to the main substance of the novel, the romantic adventure. In Diana of the Crossways, despite his stress on the intense pathos of Diana's suffering, he gave comic analysis of her faults and then, instead of finding a solution in tragedy, substituted the anti-climactic purging of these faults through romantic love. With certain other characters he also proceeded in a direction that should lead to tragedy, since they have serious falseness within, and yet, since his main interest was elsewhere, he did not give them their full tragic due.¹⁰

Wright's book is a thematic analysis of all of Meredith's writing, both the fiction and the poetry. However, it betrays the dangers which inhere in its approach. In the first place, the preoccupation with a set moral prescriptiveness leads Wright to assume a thematic consistency which must obtain rigidly within a work and from one work to another. The dicta of the poems must be dramatized and illustrated by the novels, regardless of the fictional context which may qualify and comment ironically. Thus Wright is a stern disciplinarian indeed in demanding a tragic "solution" for Diana Warwick rather than the romantic

one Meredith provides. It is for him the logical consequence of her comic faults. Similarly, Wright's apparent blindness to Meredith's indulgence and playful zest causes him to misread Sandra Belloni and see "the main substance of the novel" as centering on the virtue personified by Emilia's exemplary behavior rather than falling at least equally on the more interesting activities of the sentimentalists who fill that novel. And among those there is certainly both tragedy and comedy enough, even though this frustrates Wright's attempt to program his thematic computer.

The more serious fault, though, is Wright's failure to see the novel as its own form and therefore to recognize Meredith's relation to that form. There are a few indications of this insensitivity in Wright, and we may take as our text the paragraph with which he opens the chapter:

If comedy and tragedy are imagined as contiguous kingdoms, then persons whom Meredith called tragic comedians dwell in the marches, an area imprecisely defined and of wide expanse. For if what is false brings tragic disaster the falseness may still be comic. The author's perspective is involved, and it expresses itself most obviously as a matter of tone.¹¹

The first thing we notice about the paragraph is a treatment of comedy and tragedy as though they were literary entities solely, and it follows from this that those characters who "dwell in the marches" are composed of traits which entitle them to citizenship in neither literary kingdom. This impression is borne out later in the chapter in reading Wright's summary of The Tragic

Comedians where we observe him proceeding in a business-like psychological fashion cutting down Sigismund Alvan, the hero, and Clothilde, the heroine, to manageable size. Nor does the novel provide us with adequate grounds for Wright's denunciation of the characters. On the contrary, Meredith instructs us to look carefully in order to perceive the discrepancy between reality and the characters' view of it. Despite Wright's disclaimer¹² his understanding of "tragicomedy" is as an ironic literary convention and not what Meredith intends it to be or what a liberated conception of the novel makes possible.

For tragedy and comedy are, as we have said, not merely literary designations. They are coexistent awarenesses of a simultaneous reality. In effect literature was long able to deal with a perverse and paradoxical situation only by means of an artificial analytic distinction. It could present men either as better than we are, or as worse than we are. The classical separation of styles and separation of modes was an artistic convention and aesthetic fact which persisted in its dominance. But the novel was an attempt to transcend the artificial confinements. It sought to apprehend the complex reality without the traditional and conventional mediations which accommodated only the exclusive and the partial. The conjunction, the integration of the comic and the tragic is the clear and inevitable consequence of the novel

realizing the potential of its form. Although Auerbach does not specifically refer to a comic-tragic integration as part of the emancipation from a doctrine of separate "levels of literary representation," it too is implicit in his statement:

I came to understand that modern realism in the form it reached in France in the early nineteenth century is, as an aesthetic phenomenon, characterized by complete emancipation from that doctrine. This emancipation is more complete, and more significant for later literary forms of the imitation of life, than the mixture of le sublime and le grotesque proclaimed by the contemporary romanticists. When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of the distinct levels of style, for, according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment. They thus completed a development which had long been in preparation....¹⁾

But that is not all. We suggested earlier that the form of the novel derives from and is related to the form of Testament. And we suggested further that in the externalized and foregrounded classical world, the separability of phenomena and of states of feeling and thought was consistent and was symbolized by the separability and allocation of divine superintendence. As long as Poseidon and Pluto respected one another's sovereignty, so too would Apollo and Dionysus. But the mode of Testament and the monotheistic mythology supporting it is not one of externality and dispersion, but rather of intern-

ality and comprehensiveness. The Author of Testament is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. There can be no separation of styles or of modes within such total comprehensiveness. Once again, Auerbach, working from what seems superficially a different assumption, makes the point. "The sublime influence of God here reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable."¹⁴

We must nevertheless add that while the mode and the form of Testament can be humanly duplicated as it is in the novel, the infinity of divine intelligence cannot be. The mortal mind is limited and human wisdom inadequate. It can direct the narrative enterprise, it can bring into contiguity the visions of the comic and the tragic; but it cannot safeguard their discreteness or their integrity. Just as the mortal intellect cannot prevent its self-consciousness of behaviour and act, it can neither prevent the comic and the tragic from acting and commenting upon each other. The result in the case of one as in the case of the other is a multiplication of unending ironies.

There is, therefore, still one more way, at least, in which we must understand the creation of a tragic-comic irony in the novel. It has also to do with its testamental nature.

We have just acknowledged in a preceding paragraph the inadequacy and the relativism of human understanding, especially as contrasted with the absoluteness and sufficiency of Divine knowledge. It is a crucial admission. For all the problems of fictional narrative with which we have thus far been concerned, and perhaps many more, are born out of this in-immaculate discrepancy, this imperfect and flawed imitation of absolute narrative. We might even say that the perfection of Testament is unstained until the entrance of a human presence. Spitzer has pointed out the perfect identity in the Hebrew of the creating word of God ex nihilo, "Yehi Or; Va-Yehi Or." ("Let there be light; and there was light.")¹⁵ We need only contrast this identity of dictum and deed with the violated injunctions of the Decalogue to understand the corrupted condition of post-lapsarian man. Thus when the Lord speaks even to Abraham commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, the directive must be couched in the language of mortal corruption, of dependent yearnings, of human sentiment and emotionalism: "Take thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest...."¹⁶ It is through this divine anticipation of human weakness, that that weakness may be steeled for the abstract, inhuman act.

But although, paradoxically, it is the human dimension of testament that makes it accessible to us aesthetically as well as morally -- and what better example can there be

than the outcome of the story of the sacrifice which illustrates possible harmony between the abstract and the human law -- nevertheless, the integrity of Testament depends on the perfection, the abstractness, the superhuman distance of its Narrator. This is so at least theoretically. It includes accounts of imperfection of corruption, of fragmentary and ambiguous event; but they are all contained in the perfect completeness of the narrating intelligence. In Genesis, for example, the Lord reveals to Abraham the many trials that his children are to undergo. They will be aliens in a hostile land; they will be enslaved to harsh masters; they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But the disclosure ends, "and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge."¹⁷ It is the imposition of a perfect intelligence and a just order over the imperfection and injustice of history. Such an omniscience carries with it reassurance, completeness, infallibility.

Yet, though we speak in fiction of "the omniscient narrator," he is human and fallible, not distant and comprehensive. While the dilemma and paradox of "inadequate omniscience" may cause many novelists to abdicate completely from the paradoxical responsibility, it is not so for Meredith.

One aspect of fictional omniscience is a narrative ubiquity. That is, the author is able to describe events

and characters, thoughts and passions wherever they occur in a relevant relation to his story. However, in addition to doing this, the ubiquitous consciousness should also preserve for him the inviolability of his distance and detachment. We may admire Lord Ormont, let us say, or describe acts of his which are admirable. Similarly, we may see him in a position which causes deep pain and anguish. But at the same time, we must not move from the detached observation that he is misguided, unintentionally cruel, and occasionally foolish. Our ubiquity should in other words enable us to see him at once from the inside out and from the outside in. The same thing we observed to be true earlier about Victor Radnor in One Of Our Conquerors. He is both admirable and ludicrous, noble and mean, generous and self-centered. These are of course the paradoxes which in some degree or other mock all of us. However, in order to catch at both orders of truth we must maintain and preserve the dual perspectives.

In the same way an event or an act must be assessed by its immediate consequences on those directly affected and by assigning it a place within a larger order of history. The narrator cannot become so involved or so moved in describing or rendering immediacy that he loses his other obligation to detachment and external perspective, that he fails to perceive its larger though cooler signifi-

cance as part of a greater moral history. For such irresponsibility and blindness reduce the novel in his hands to a sodden sentimentality. The death of Julia Bonner in Evan Harrington is possibly a better illustration of the presence of narrative restraint and detachment than the death of Alvan in The Tragic Comedians, where the entire novel is so cast in a mood of detachment that it seems almost a tractate on the subject. There is no risk, no contrast, and -- consequently -- little novel.

In the death of Nataly in One Of Our Conquerors, Meredith also seems to preserve a dualistic perspective by an enforced matter-of-factness, and by the almost casual description of the events of the evening, although -- typically -- he cannot restrain himself from giving Nataly the line, "But I shall be happy, I shall be at peace when this night is over."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Nataly's death is not made the occasion of Dickensian hysterics; the actual death scene is omitted from the book. Perhaps because of that, an even better instance to cite is the grotesque interview of Victor and Nataly with Mrs. Burman, which is brilliant in its own way. Meredith maintains a control on this scene -- a meeting which has been building since the beginning of the book -- by touching on the ludicrousness, by transcribing the banality of the conversation, by mercilessly examining Victor's reverie as he is presumably

praying, and by carefully avoiding except by implication Nataly's mangled emotions. He ends the chapter with the ironic comment about Victor that " ...he was not speechless."¹⁹

To take another kind of example, when Edward Blencove returns to Dahlia Fleming the woman he has so horribly wronged and has in fact dehumanized, he comes back through a penitence in which "he had endured every earthly mortification, even to absolute abasement."²⁰ But there is no happy reconciliation, for the events of the history have passed irretrievably beyond the point where such a gratification is still possible. The disharmony between possibility and history is surely partly responsible for the falseness of sentimentalism. But in any case he returns to her chastened, penitent, guilty, conscious of her worth and of his love. He has risked whatever was his to risk, and it was considerable, for her. But she has changed. It might ordinarily seem that we should feel an intensification of the tragic and catastrophic. But Meredith comments as follows:

Can a man go farther than his nature? Never, when he takes passion on board. By other means his nature may be enlarged and nerved, but passion will find his weakness, and, while urging him on, will constantly betray him at that point. Edward had three interviews with Dahlia; he wrote to her as many times.²¹

We would not be understood to suggest that Meredith is a model of restraint, balance, and infallible non-

sentimentality. One would have to go no further than Rhoda Fleming to give that contention the lie. Meredith flounders many times and occasionally he flounders quite badly. His serious heroes, for example, are too much of the time conglomerates of virtue and social prowess, represented by the Matey Weyburns, the Merthyr Powys's and the Dartrey Fenellans. Compared to them, Sigismund Alvan of The Tragic Comedians or even Lord Fleetwood and Lord Ormont appear to have the greater human charm of their flawed character. Certainly the former would stand no chance at all matched against the magnetism and warmth of Richmond Roy. It seems as if Meredith were reluctant to give his serious heroes some humanizing faults for fear of turning them into tragic comedians. The best he can do with such characters is to hold their presence down to a minimum.²²

He does, in other words, sentimentalize. And although we have examined a number of the expedients by which Meredith sought to safeguard himself, the kind of novels he wrote, about a world in which truth is possible, goodness can exist, and beauty can be seen, make imperative a constant vigilance against the monistic, sentimental view. The pluralistic sensibility of Testament, of the human and the abstract, of the felt experience and the detachment from feeling, is the necessary dualistic condition for Meredith's novels.

Although most discussions of Meredith concern themselves exclusively with his view of comedy and the comic spirit, we can begin to understand that the lapses into sentimentalism are the incidental result of a necessary attention to complex and serious truth. Meredith's true model was Cervantes, more so than Moliere, as the following passage from the Essay on Comedy indicates.

The humorist of mean order is a refreshing laughter, giving tone to the feelings, and sometimes allowing the feelings to be too much for him; but the humorist of high has an embrace of contrasts beyond the scope of the comic poet.

Heart and mind laugh out at Don Quixote, and still you brood on him.... The knight's great aims and constant mishaps, his chivalrous valiancy exercised on absurd objects, his good sense along the high road of the craziest of expeditions, the compassion he plucks out of derision, and the admirable figure he preserves while stalking through the frantically grotesque and burlesque assailing him, are in the loftiest moods of humor, fusing the tragic sentiment with the comic narrative. The stroke of the great humorist is world-wide, with lights of tragedy in his laughter.²³

Nowhere could we find a clearer prescription for the form of Meredith's novels and for the form of the novel in general. It is the fusion of the "comic narrative" or the formal comedy of narrative, with "tragic sentiment" or the tragic content of human experience. It is, Meredith says, "an embrace of contrasts," a dualistic mode of rendering experience.

In an earlier chapter we spoke of the authorial presence in Testament and in fiction as inhabiting both the center and the circumference of narrative. A few pages

back we spoke of this same phenomenon as a "narrative ubiquity." We can also now agree that Meredith, both in practice and by intent, participates in the dualism of such a view.

One of the problems, though, is the impossibility for a human narrator to inhabit simultaneously both the fictional center of event and experience and the fictional circumference of narrative detachment. If such a "ubiquity" is an attribute of Testament, it is still not an option which is open to the novel. Or put somewhat differently, the only way such a reconciliation of views can be effected would require the subordination of both elements to a governing irony, in which the irony rather than the fictional substance becomes the central matter. Meredith's comments on irony²⁴ are enough to assure us of his rejection of such an alternative. What happens, consequently, in Meredith's fiction is that we often find a pattern of alternating, competing claims, rather than cooperating ones.

We seem to have been led by our train of thought into an interesting sort of hypothesis regarding the reasons for Meredith's formal comicalities which, fully extended goes something like this. There is one mode or model in our literature which disdains the narrative conventions, rules, unities, prescriptions, and which substitutes for

all of these the less artificial apprehension of the narrating consciousness itself. This narrative model is Testament, and it is as an analogue to the mode of Testament that the dynamics of the novel can be best understood.

However, in zestful pursuit of this apparently analogical truth we collide with one superb and insurmountable difference: the difference between the divine and infinite Narrator of Testament and the mortal, finite nature of His human analogue and imitator. Nor is it a difference which can be dismissed by convenient heresy, for it has an aesthetic as well as a theological implication or consequence. That God infinitely contemplates Himself is a theological axiom; that He does this unironically, is an aesthetic one as well. Consistency, un-ironic "straightness," and unreflexive perfection require the amplitude of infinity and of infinite consciousness. Or, in the absence of that rarely available condition, a diminished and artificial consistency and "straightness" may be attained by the conventions of separation and segregation, unities and prescriptions. When we speculate about human testament, about the novel, however, where neither of the above conditions are present, it is essential that we make some determination -- depending in each case on the novelist and the individual novel -- of how the potentially anarchic and indiscriminately maiming ironic energy is subdued or

harnessed, neutralized or focused.

In our discussion, the problem of eroding irony, the problem in other words of the insidious consciousness, has arranged itself most conspicuously around the dilemma of the comic - tragic polarity, the simultaneous compulsions of desire and detachment, the necessary dual perspective from center and circumference. Thus we can move in the direction of specificity, from the abstract to the general, and from the general to the case of Meredith himself. That Testament comprehends and accommodates both the tragic and the comic we can affirm not just theoretically but by referring to such an event as the death of Moses in Deuteronomy, or even more interestingly, the death of Aaron's two sons in Leviticus who are consumed for having introduced "strange fire" before the sacred altar. When we look for the same phenomenon in fiction, however, we discover that it is actually not quite the same. The poles of desire and detachment are both present, say, in the death of Marmeladov in Crime and Punishment. But what happened in that conjunction is that a fictional chemistry has taken place to effect the reduction of both the comic and the tragic, and what we are conscious of primarily is this new presence, this third viewpoint, the ironic perspective. The same is true at the death of Svidrigailov and the same is true again in the excruciating scene directly leading to Prince Mishkin's relapse into madness at the end of The Idiot.

I have taken the most tragic of great novelists to illustrate this point. How much more easily ironic is the death of Florence in The Good Soldier or the death of poor Maisie with her legs sticking up out of the trunk. We have the semblance of the comic and tragic there, but the substance of neither. In Dostoevsky, similarly, the intensification of the tragic does not preserve its integrity, but increases only the bitterness of the ironic. This seems to be the dilemma of the finite unmediated consciousness -- that in accommodating desire and detachment it forces them into an ironic resolution or dissolution. Yet what other option for "the representation of reality" can there be, other than the even worse sinking into the sentimentalism of at best a Dickens without the Dickensian redemption of a complete and apposite fictional world.

In pulling a possibly reluctant Meredith into the framework established by this question, we move to a clearer and deeper understanding of his fictional technique, his idiosyncratic style, his peculiar and mostly unread novels. We may begin to understand -- if I may be forgiven what has become a banal term -- the paradox of his irony.

For while Meredith is a supreme ironic craftsman, and as we have been at considerable pains to show, a comedian of his form, and although also he sees the contingencies of history and the delicate frailties on which

character may finally depend, while he admits the blindness of a Lord Ormont, the moral inadequacy of a Percy Dacier, the unpredictability of a Nevil Beauchamp's drowning, the wastefulness of a Purcell Barrett's suicide, while he recognizes, in other words, that life is frequently ironic and imperfectly lived -- nevertheless, he will not reduce its meaning to an ironic shrug. Whether he was merely the child of his optimistic century, whether he possessed a true and necessary moral wisdom, or whether the question is itself naive in the face of only ironic silence, we need not happily, determine here. What is much more relevant and significant is that in writing his novels, in using that form in which both the comic and the tragic do of necessity coexist, Meredith did not permit the two polarities to effect a mutual erosion or attrition. What we find in novels like The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Rhoda Fleming and The Amazing Marriage is an attempt to establish an option other than those of the ironic or the sentimental or the comic. While flaunting his irony and self-consciousness regarding every aspect of his craft, when it came to a decision which affected a philosophical view and the basic conception of human significance, Meredith seems to have insisted on the very un-ironic discreteness of comedy and tragedy within the same novel -- though possibly at times to the detriment of the novel.

Richard Curle, writing in 1908, is not particularly worried about the threat of ironic retreat, but he comments perceptively on the ideal Meredithian balance of the comic and tragic, and on the necessity of the dual perspective which Marcuse called desire and cognition:

...the novelist has to realize that tragedy is intensely personal, that to grasp it he needs great power of imagination and sympathy -- a thing quite apart from the philosophical survey of the comic spirit. Meredith's profound greatness lies in his double grasp of the subject. The comic spirit has saved him from sentimentality, the human understanding from too cold a basis of logic. They have together given him that insight which sees the tragedy of tragedy, but sees it from the hill of the optimist.²⁵

That hill of the optimist, though, wherever it may be, is certainly no spot for an ironist. Essentially though it is quite an appropriate vantage point for the author of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and even for the author of Rhoda Fleming and The Amazing Marriage. For while all three of these novels are "tragic" ones -- possibly the three most tragic of Meredith's -- we must contend rather perversely (at least as far as Curle is concerned) that it is less their comic content that defines the optimism of their author, than the "tragedy of their tragedy." It is, we would contend, an act of confirmed optimism that preserves the elevated possibilities of tragedy from being toppled into ironic compromise. Yet how do we conciliate a view which must affirm at least the abstract ideal of heroic existence with the contradictory practice of the ironic

novelist? We cannot merely say that the two exist in separate realms and let it go at that, for the question persists: Why should they?

In order to answer the question we should remark that it is not only the tragic-comedy polarity which is vulnerable to ironic disintegration. In theory the whole narrative enterprise is liable to such attack. Only Testament itself in its absolute and perfect un-selfconsciousness becomes impregnable -- but not its human analogy. Theoretically, then, narrative itself, its style, its authority, its character and action are all prone to an insidious distrust. For there are presumably no conventions to block by their arbitrary and unquestionable presence the legitimacy, the absolute validity, of novelistic utterance. It is impossible, we indicated, for the human narrator to actually inhabit both the center and circumference of his work simultaneously. And does not this emblematic incapacity invalidate the work and disable acceptance of it?

The function of the "ironic" self-consciousness in Meredith then may have quite the opposite of an ironic intent. Its function may be on the contrary to disarm by anticipating the objections and making the novel revolve around those objections, by usurping the grounds of ironic distrust and having that irony speak in the novel. Self-conscious irony may be in other words a purgation of irony,

a means of coming to terms and to a confrontation with the insidious consciousness by making explicit those qualities of artifice which evoke distrust, a laying bare of technique as a means of legitimizing a technique which boasts no other sanction. Meredith's irony, in other words, may be a corrective or an attempt to create a corrective for the artifice, falsity, and defenselessness of human testament. Shklovsky has said that the "typical" novel calls attention to itself as a means of becoming foregrounded in consciousness. But whatever the other effects produced by Sterne's ironic mode, one effect is certainly to move Tristram Shandy away from the aegis of an ironic criticism. Whatever we may say about that novel, we do not say "Why should I accept this?" or "How can the narrator claim to know such a truth?" For these are the very points of his craft that the author is flaunting and mocking.

Similarly, although Meredith's irony of form hardly equals Sterne's self exposure, its effect may be comparable. It is the point which was made earlier in regard to Dorothy Van Ghent's criticism of Sir Willoughby and in regard to McKechnie's determined moral reading of The Shaving of Shagpat. Both are irrelevant in so far as they persist in asking ironic questions of what the author has already declared as ironic. As outlandish as is the plot of Harry Richmond, it becomes a fool's errand to argue its un-

believability, since Meredith has already done that. In Sandra Belloni we do not question the validity of the "philosophical" meaning of the novel, nor in One Of Our Conquerors can we disbelieve the authority of the narrator. We are indeed, almost ready in that instance to swear eternal gullibility in return for just a few passage of coherent, lucid prose. The paradox of irony is frequently that it disables irony and purges it. In the novels generally, therefore, Meredith's mode as a comedian of form is ironic. But his end may not be necessarily any more ironic than in keeping separate the comic and tragic thrusts in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel.

We are understandably reluctant, however, suddenly to reverse ourselves or even to reverse our terminology in regard to Meredith. So we find it preferable to say not that Meredith is essentially unironic but that we see him now to be the ultimate ironist -- that the paradox of Meredith's novels is his attempt to pluck an irony beyond the reach of irony. What we commonly mean by the term is a view of man as the reduced and diminished victim of human contradiction, as incapable of nobility and largeness because the frustrations of blindness on the one hand and self-consciousness on the other annihilate the final vestiges of his dubious possibility. Irony most frequently sees man as the "jest" of the world rather than its "glory" or even its "riddle." Human awareness responds to this "low irony" by either the laconic acceptance of sardonic

humor or by the frustrated rage of maddened bitterness. But there is for Meredith, as there was for Plato in the Symposium, a "high irony," a view which recognizes paradox, which comprises both the comic and the tragic in its character, but in which the contending and conflicting forces are high comedy and high tragedy. It is the irony of Samson Agonistes as opposed to that of Sweeney Agonistes. But that high irony is not always attainable through utterance. As soon as we aim directly at the ironic paradox we become involved in and guilty of a despondent reduction. Consequently, for high irony, the simultaneity of desire and detachment necessary in the novel must be handled in such a way as to prevent diminution. Its coordinates must be approached more obliquely. And its "objective correlative" is what Meredith sought to accomplish in his novels, beginning with The Ordeal of Richard Feverel.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is in itself an ironic title for in a more real and profound sense the novel tells of the "ordeal" of his father, Sir Austin Feverel.²⁶ It is both conventionally and weakly plotted, though it is not this weakness which causes the divergent modes. Richard is the only son of an apparently stern and austere father who raises the boy according to a "system of education" he has worked out. Richard has no mother to mitigate

or soften the severity of his father or of the system, for we discover at the beginning that she has run off, after five years of marriage, with a friend of Sir Austin's. Consequently her prime agency in the novel is restricted to intensifying Sir Austin's reclusiveness and to reenforcing in his subconscious a distrust of women and of the natural, the emotional, and the open. Thus, it is an even more severe and "lofty" Sir Austin who is left to raise his son with what Moffat has well described as a "fussy, fingering attention."²⁷ Richard grows up in the cramp of his father's pedagogy; and while we are shown numerous and sustained instances of his nobility of character in accepting the responsibility for the burning Farmer Blaize's rick or later in reclaiming and redeeming his mother from the sordidness of her life, we also see the adverse instruction being seeded by both his father's system and his father's example. Sir Austin's refusal to bid his son good-night on the night of Richard's fourteenth birthday because he had displeased Sir Austin by his absence is paralleled by Sir Austin's refusal to welcome his son after his marriage to Lucy. But it is paralleled too by Richard's own incapacity later to deal with his guilt and by his refusal to appear before Lucy after having wronged her with Bella Mount. Similarly, the rigid self-indulgence and fanaticism of Richard's pride, culminating in his insistence on the futile duel with Lord Mountfalcon, is again partially

a reflection of the training he received in respecting the empty forms of pride and abstract systems over the more reliable dictates of nature and of human feeling. The perverse destruction of natural priorities in Richard is symbolized for Meredith as Richard burns sheaf after sheaf of his poems to satisfy the austere dictates of the paternal system.²⁸

The crucial event in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is of course Richard's elopement with Lucy Desborough. It is crucial in terms of the plot because it constitutes the ultimate act of filial disobedience for Richard, and it will now put Sir Austin to the test which he fails. It is the crucial act for Richard himself because by so doing he severs himself from a youth of protected dependency. He is no longer in the privileged position of merely reacting against his father or toward his father; he must now make determinations for which he is ill prepared. It is crucial too because it introduces another character into the drama in a relation of sheer and complete dependency. Lucy's destiny -- and she is very precious in the novel -- has become at this point a large responsibility. It is as if a tightrope act has been in progress for some time, but suddenly the ropes are raised higher above the ground, one of the performers is given a beautiful girl to carry -- and the safety nets are taken away. It is extremely appropriate that the scene has been moved from Raynham Abbey to London for the boundaries of both possibility and danger are thus ominously enlarged.

And it is ominous for this is the point in the novel at which the temper of the work shifts. Although Meredith makes recurrent comparisons between the two lovers and Miranda and Ferdinand in The Tempest, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel bears a much more precise comparison with Romeo and Juliet. The marriage takes place and we have but a short while to wait before Mercutio is killed. Meredith himself seems quite aware of the pivotal nature of Richard's marriage. He entitles the chapter: "In Which the Last Act of a Comedy Takes the Place of the First." It is difficult to say exactly what such an ambiguous and tautological statement means. But it clearly indicates that the author realizes the marriage may in fact be "the last act of a comedy." The beginning of the chapter talks of Caesar crossing the Rubicon and of fate; it even includes in what is a triple or quadruple irony (one does occasionally lose count with Meredith) a quotation from Sir Austin's Pilgrim Scrip which darkly foreshadows what lies ahead in the work: "The danger of a little knowledge of things is disputable; but beware the little knowledge of one's self!"²⁹

The movement of the novel toward tragedy is, if not swift, steady. The newly married couple go to the Isle of Wight for a few weeks. But plotted against by the interests of Raynham Abbey they are soon separated with Lucy remaining behind and Richard going to seek paternal blessing and reconciliation. It is, unfortunately, not this

that happens. For Sir Austin's conspiracy to separate the two becomes an instrument of still another conspiracy, a plot by the impassioned Lord Mountfalcon against Lucy's virtue which fails, and related to it, a plot against Richard's virtue which alas succeeds in a rather marvelous chapter entitled, "An Enchantress."

Still immature, terribly confused, oppressed by the guilt of having fouled the beauty of his and Lucy's love, and further depressed by the death of a cousin who had been in love with him, Richard is totally incapable of contending with his life. Although his father has relented to the point of willingness to accept Lucy if Richard brings her, it is too late for Sir Austin's lethargic humanity to have any effect. It is too late, as tragedy often for Meredith grows from scorned and neglected opportunities. Richard now refuses to approach Lucy and runs to the Continent instead. When his aunt endeavors to heal matters, Richard breaks out in what Meredith intends as Byronic misguidedness, "I cannot go with you to see my wife, because I am not worthy to touch her hand, and were I to go, I should do this to silence my self-contempt. Go you to her, and when she asks of me, say I have a death upon my head that ---- No! say that I am abroad, seeking for that which shall cleanse me. If I find it I shall come to claim her. If not, God help us all!"³⁰

Through all the torments of her recent life, Lucy has remained steadfast, swallowing much of her anguish and

pain. She has also, shortly after Richard's departure for the Continent, undergone another strain in giving birth to his son. Now, with the return of Austin Wentworth from a five year absence, there is a temporary amelioration in the course of events. Austin Wentworth is one of Meredith's most successful positive and unflawed characters³¹ and he acts to undo the folly. He takes Lucy and the baby to Raynham Abbey where Richard's father is immediately subdued and won. He goes after Richard and persuades him to return to his wife and his child. It seems almost possible that were the author willing to leave certain matters of character, responsibility, and consequence unresolved, the novel could end happily. And this appealing possibility is what makes the catastrophic ending so forceful, what has caused so many readers to complain of its gratuitous brutality.

On his way home Richard learns of the shameful plot which Lord Mountfalcon had attempted to use against Lucy. Against either pride alone or guilt alone Richard may have been proof, but he is at the mercy of the coalition of both feelings -- and he is presumably the product of his father's system. After arranging for the duel on the following morning, he reaches Raynham Abbey that evening. Between himself and most of the residents it is a warm homecoming; between himself and his father there is little understanding, and for the first time in the novel -- ironically -- we

feel it to be Richard's fault; but between himself and Lucy Meredith writes with a scene of compelling pathos describing Lucy's futile attempt to prevent Richard from leaving. He leaves.

Meredith puts the last chapter of the novel, in a letter from Lady Blandish to Austin Wentworth. It is a very effective tragic stroke for it makes possible a renewed horror at the disaster. Richard is recovering from a not very serious wound, but catastrophe has nevertheless struck. Lucy has succumbed to the inhuman wrenchings inflicted on her nature and on her love. Just before seeing Richard her mind gave way to brain fever and she has died in a delirious raving. Richard lies in bed staring "like a blind man." Sir Austin, despite the writer's rage with him, is clearly beside himself and not accountable for his behaviour. Richard's aunt mutters of her own daughter's death. Lady Blandish writes to Austin Wentworth: "I have the comfort of knowing that I did my share in helping to destroy her. Had she seen her husband a day or two before -- but no! there was a new system to interdict that!"³²

It is futile, I believe, in the face of the evidence of the novel itself, to argue for a tonal unity and consistency in the work. The mood of the first part is clearly different when it concentrates on Sir Austin and the implementation of his system. For example, Sir Austin's dismissal from Raynham Abbey of any servants who show signs of being

in love borders on the laughable and calls to mind not Romeo and Juliet, but rather Love's Labours Lost. The humour is clear even when it takes an ironic form -- for example, when it turns out that Richard learns more about love from watching his father flirt with Lady Blandish than he learns from any servant. Even pain itself is turned into comedy when we learn that Sir Austin dismisses Richard's nursemaid and gives her a pension after she discovers him in his lonely tears one night after his wife's desertion. Here, too, is the excessiveness of precaution and reaction carried to incongruous limits; this is Moliere and the stuff of comedy and farce.

The novel, we said earlier, should be read primarily as the ordeal of Sir Austin and only secondarily as Richard's ordeal. And this seems quite probably the case. Richard is on the whole a less interesting character than his father; and the complications of his life, although presented with all the charm and appeal of his youth, remain essentially too thin. He is of little interest to us except as the pawn of Sir Austin until his meeting with Lucy in the "Ferdinand and Miranda" chapter; and if we may carry Meredith's analogy a bit further, it seems fitting to point out that in that play it is Prospero who commands our attention, and quite rightly. Richard's flaws, like his virtues, are those of impulsiveness and youthful ardor. He falls in love with Lucy, becomes sullen at his family's interference, dives

headlong into marriage, but can without too much difficulty then be coaxed away. It is really the same impulsiveness of ardor that is successfully at work when he is beautifully, triumphantly seduced by Bella Mount. And there is a fine psychological accuracy in Meredith's ironic references in that scene to Richard's love for Lucy. Bella plays her cards perfectly. The same impetuosity is, again, the real operative principle of Richard's character in most of his decisions, including the awful one of satisfying his pride on "the field of honor" with Lord Mountfalcon. To blame the "system" as the responsible factor is to overstate and falsify the reality of the case. And while Lady Blandish does this, her letter of grief, rage, and disillusion has its own separate psychological legitimacy. The very fact of Richard's using the "system" as an excuse for his behavior gives him a vapid priggishness and disaffects us in the last scene that Meredith renders. Richard, in other words, is not the material of tragedy; were he the real focus of the novel, the critics would be right in condemning Meredith for the cruelty of the ending and Lucy's horrible death.

But we can, I believe, test the claim that Meredith's design was greater and truer. For in Sir Austin he gives us the parody of both a more comic and a more tragic Prospero. There are numerous allusions in the novel through which the doomed agency of the "system" is described in

terms not only of possible tragic effects, but in terms of the greater and more overwhelming tragic condition of man. At these points Meredith thrusts beyond right and wrong behavior, proper and improper pedagogy, and touches -- sometimes movingly -- on the essential tragic paradox of our mortality. For instance, when Sir Austin refuses to expose Richard to the risks of an uncontrolled school environment, and decides to further his education within the purged confines of Raynham Abbey, Meredith comments: "If immeasurable love were perfect wisdom, one human being might almost impersonate Providence to another."³³ A number of times we hear the "normative voice" of Austin Wentworth saying somewhat the same thing, that Sir Austin wishes "to take Providence out of God's hands." How much more explicit a description of the hubris of tragedy could we find? It is all the more poignant and pathetic in being motivated not by pure ego and ambition, but by "immeasurable love," which is, ironically, the only possible imitation of the Divine. We can go so far as to say that in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel the universal and subjective human paradox, from which all great tragedy derives, is translated into a particular social context from whose periphery it must also be objectively viewed.

The implied analogy with The Tempest in general and with Prospero in particular also reveals a metaphoric irony. For the condition Sir Austin aspires to is the

one from which Prospero operates effectively and with no trouble at all. He can defeat the Sycoraxes and imprison the Calibans. He can compel an obedience from Ariel that Sir Austin at his best hardly exacts from Adrian. He is that perfect control of human and inhuman elements which alone can insure success. But the real and moving comicality of The Tempest is, in Shakespeare's profound understanding, not superhuman control. The opposite side of that coin is isolation and loneliness. It is an inverted Faust legend which does not end in damnation -- assuming that is, that Faust was not damned to begin with. What "rounds out" the comedy of The Tempest, therefore, is that Prospero voluntarily "abjures" his "rough magic" and, having the choice of both options, elects to live in human risk, and as the subject not the sovereign of nature.

Sir Austin, on the other hand, is the ironic replica of Prospero; he can command neither the effective control nor the crucial wisdom. And as the former increases his comicality, so does the latter ordain his tragedy. However, despite the expressed and the implied ironies, I believe it is clear that Meredith would not allow Sir Austin to be whittled down by them to a dubious insignificance. In these terms, therefore, the death of Lucy, while overweighted within the context of Richard's relatively shallow tragedy, is significant, appropriate, even necessary as the measure of significant tragedy in the novel. To say, with

the malicious haste of some critics, that Meredith kills Lucy in order crudely to drive home his point about "systems" and to deliver his own message emphatically, is to understand Meredith very superficially. Furthermore, any extended reading of Meredith's novels can reveal that there is a level of social and comic resolution; and that tragic resolution is invoked when the questions reach deeper and more tryingly for a definition of man's nature and position in an ambiguous universe and misleading society.

The final necessary point to be made here then relates to the structure of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. We must admit a "disjunction of sensibilities," without attempting to vindicate it as an artistic triumph. There is, we acknowledge, a critical proclivity -- which has increased with the increase of practicing critics -- to both celebrate and resolve paradox, to discover unity in disjunction, concord in contradiction, and wholeness in fragments. To institute such a healing program on The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is -- aside from the violence it does to the thesis of this chapter -- a disservice to the novel itself and to criticism generally. It muddles criticism and confuses our very tenuous notions of what an honest reading should be. I should like to quote here a somewhat lengthy passage from Richard LeGallienne which -- while not conforming to the thesis here advanced either for Sandra Belloni or The Ordeal of Richard Feverel --

is nevertheless a useful corrective, and should be cherished, too, for its clarity and honesty.

...there are various degrees of chance in our lives, some so frequent as to be usual and unsurprising -- Richard's meeting with Lucy by the river, for instance -- and such are not, therefore, disturbances in art. But to be struck by lightening on the way home to dinner is another degree of chance, no less unusual than disagreeable. That Beauchamp should die by drowning as he did was, of course, quite a possibility in the case of a man so unselfish and intrepid, but in spite of the fine note of tragic irony such as is life's own so struck, one feels no such inevitability about his end as comes with the last chapter of The Egoist. It does not seem of the same colour with the rest of the book, but merely a wilfull darkening of the woof. Beauchamp might have so drowned on his way home to wife and happiness, but the chances were a thousand to one against it.

In Richard Feverel we are confronted with a similar perplexity, and though I doubt if, to set matters right, it would now be anyone's choice to lose a scene drawn with such vividness of power as that of Richard's terrible parting from his wife, yet as a part of a whole, I, for one cannot feel it homogeneous. ...if it be retorted that life gives no such warnings, one can only answer that, after all, Art is but a compromise.³⁴

Our own position is that Nevil Beauchamp dies because, in effect, his life is done, and that his death is artistically consistent, as Priestley and others have admitted. About The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, our position is between the determined reading of unity in the novel and Le Gallienne's "wilfull darkening of the woof." In the first part of the novel Sir Austin acts with the supreme confidence of the short-sighted and the blind. It is a comedy laced

with increasing irony as it continues. But in the last third of the novel, Sir Austin becomes "more sinned against than sinning." If we may invoke still another Shakespearean analogy, the first scene of Lear does have great comic potential, though it is not exploited for very good reason. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable parallel in Lear's forgetting he is a father and a man in the larger fact of his kingship, and in Sir Austin forgetting and attempting to deny the natural also. If therefore we measure Lear's change in the difference between his imperiousness at the beginning and continuing even through the "Reason not the need...." speech to the last speeches to Cordelia in Act V, we should apply the same measure to Sir Austin's gradual retreat from his 'system' to the point where we are told: "Sir Austin...expostulated, contradicted himself, confounded his principles, made nonsense of all his theories. He could not induce his son to waver...."³⁵ The ritualistic tragedy of drama demands, of course, that it be too late from the very first. In the novel we witness the way in which it becomes too late, and this process comprises various shades of the comic.

There seems little question that Meredith in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel sought to maintain an essential discreteness between the comic and the tragic. The design may be borrowed from drama. It is, in any case, not the one appropriate to the novel, and he never used it again.

It is crude and awkward, but by employing it he did preserve integrity and significance for the first of his tragic comedians.

The reason we have bracketed Rhoda Fleming and The Amazing Marriage with The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, is that these also appear to be novels in which the tragic-comic dynamic of the work seems to be the main determinant of its final shape. One of the reasons Meredith is an interesting writer to examine, despite his exasperating qualities, is that his experimentations and explorations in various aspects of the novel inevitably produce different configurations as the narrative pressure is applied from various points. We have made some beginning in examining a few of these. For example, it would seem that in both Sandra Belloni and in The Egoist, Meredith is testing the possibilities and the limits of character portrayal. But even where the defining concern is the same, his approach in each case is so different that the novels produced are radically dissimilar -- as they should be when in one instance the writer is concerned with the influences on character and in the other with the insularity of character. Similarly the authorial presence in One Of Our Conquerors creates a different pressure on the work from the one created in Sandra Belloni. Certainly the dominance

of thematic concerns in Lord Ormont And His Aminta creates certain demands and limits as to the possibilities of its form. The question of the tragic-comic balance or imbalance becomes more complicated in the majority of the novels for a study which has sought primarily to isolate and make cursory examination. The three novels cited appear to give the least difficulty in this regard. However, we can afford to say no more than a few words about the other two.

As far as Rhoda Fleming is concerned, it is an excellent example of the way Meredith subordinates thematic meanings and moralities to other elements in the novel. Only in Lord Ormont And His Aminta is there consistent violation of this principle. But Rhoda Fleming is unique in Meredith because it is the one major novel that is dominated by a tragic stance and a tragic view. It therefore has a unity which can be ascribed to only one other novel, the purely comic Evan Harrington. Some humor is provided by Algernon Blancove, cousin to the seducer of Dahlia, Edward Blancove, and by a few other characters. But these never reach into the heart of the novel.

Dahlia is seduced into elopement, and then abandoned. Her father's crude ignorance and her sister Rhoda's grim righteousness prevent reconciliation with the repenting

Edward and instead she is pushed into a horrible, though actually false, marriage because her father is grateful to the ugly wretch who pretends to want her enough to make an "honest woman" of her. The sequence of Dahlia's abandonment and the long arrangement of affairs leading to the disintegration of her will and her marriage to the despicable Sedgett is one of the most amazing performances of sustained and crippling tragedy in fiction. Eventually Dahlia poisons herself to escape being claimed by her alleged husband. Although Dahlia recovers and the invalidity of the marriage is discovered too, there is no longer a possibility of her accepting the contrite Edward Blancove; for while Dahlia lives another seven years, she is but half a person. Once again Meredith underlines the notion that tragedy is a process, not an event. It is therefore not reversible. Edward is too late. The novel is entitled after Rhoda, but she figures primarily in the novel as the well-intentioned instrument of her sister's destruction. Self-righteous and joyless, she is the grimmest beauty that Meredith created. Her lover, Robert, is a worthy yeoman type, but while he does have some humor it cannot penetrate into the novel past Rhoda. The quotation is from a love scene between them near the end of the novel:

Had he said, 'Be mine!' she might have softened to his embrace; but there was no fire of divining

love in her bosom to perceive her lover's meaning. She read all his words as a placard on a board, and revolted from the outrage of submitting her lips to one who was not to be her husband.⁵⁶

The Amazing Marriage, the last of Meredith's completed novels, and the best of those that are never read, seems curiously to contain all of the "essential Meredith." It has the crochets and entanglements of his style, though in relatively mild form. It has a personalized narrator, presented as Dame Gossip. It offers aphorisms as quotations from the heroine's father's Maxims for Men. The heroine, Carinthia Jane, is clearly a kindred spirit to Emilia, Clara Middleton, and perhaps most closely resembles the heroine of the preceding novel, Aminta. The subject is again marital relations, with Carinthia being rejected by her husband Lord Fleetwood, who feels he has been imposed upon and almost tricked into marrying a girl unworthy of his great wealth and social position. And again, he discovers her great, rare worth only after it is too late, after humiliating and degrading her beyond the point where forgiveness can even apply. For according to Meredith -- exclusive of rare cases of arrested development like Sir Willoughby -- change is the natural law. Tragedy can grow out of inevitable differences in the direction or in the rate of change. But it also grows out of a failure to be guided by Nature, and this we remarked in an earlier chapter is the disabling pride of Lord Fleetwood.

It must be admitted, surely, that The Amazing Marriage has a subject and a plot which scarcely summon the emotional commitment of either The Ordeal of Richard Feverel or Rhoda Fleming. But it is just as surely a mistake to assume that the tragic-comedy polarity in the novel is of such a weak order that it does not constitute the significant structural antagonism. The comicalities of Sir Austin Feverel are absent because Lord Fleetwood could not bear those and still be significant. He does not have the excuse of an "immeasurable love" to offer partial exoneration, since he is driven rather by self love. With a rare exception or two, as when Lord Fleetwood's first act as a husband is to drive his new bride to witness a prizefight, much of the novel's comicality is furnished by Gower Woodseer, who does, significantly, become used much more comically after Fleetwood has married Carinthia, by a few of the minor characters, and by Dame Gossip herself.

As opposed to the structure of Rhoda Fleming, however, and also of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, one of the major comic counters in The Amazing Marriage is the availability of comic resolution. Again Woodseer is significant as both foil and companion of Fleetwood because his presence communicates that possibility almost throughout, until Fleetwood is trapped in the toils of ascetic sentimentalism in the form of the Catholic Church. Another

important assurance Woodseer communicates is the value and worth of Fleetwood. In Meredith's final analysis, the loss of a Fleetwood is a significant loss, as the loss of any man must be tragically large rather than merely ironic.

We have come to the conclusion of these speculations regarding Meredith as a comedian of form. And it is pleasing to end with the idea that form itself can be an affirmation -- perhaps always must be an affirmation.

We have never meant to suggest throughout these many pages that Meredith was the perfect or even the ideal novelist. He is, we confirm, frequently maddening, perverse, and exasperating. Yet the stunning brilliance of his mind is apparent and visible in the marvelous and frustrating metaphoric leaps, in the delicacy of perception and insight, and most of all in the play of his mind over a form he was constantly modifying. Frank Kermode's The Sense of an Ending quotes a modern critic on a French novel: "Never has the novel been so thoroughly about itself, yet never has it been so engaged with reality."³⁷ It seemed to me that one hundred and ten years after Meredith began serious publication, the statement could honestly be applied to him. Actually it is no more than a capsulized version of what J.B. Priestley -- in what is still the best published work on Meredith -- wrote of him. Priestley is far from being a one-sided idolator of Meredith. But after cataloguing

throughout the book the author's many offences and crudities. Priestley gives the following tribute:

But the result was that he created for himself a new kind of novel, and thereby enlarged the scope of fiction.

What he did was to make the art more mobile, more fluid. He bent and twisted the form to suit his own purposes. More than one critic has told us when and with what publication the modern novel really began, and the dates and the works are extraordinarily various. So far as English fiction is concerned, however, there can be no doubt that the modern novel began with the publication of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel in 1859. In that novel, and those following, Meredith presented us, as we have seen, with a world radically different from those of contemporary novelists, a world bathed in a dry intellectual light occasionally coloured by outbursts of romantic sympathy, of almost lyrical ecstasy, a world of Romantic Comedy, in which the common substance of fiction, life as revealed to an ordinary observer and described by a realistic reporter, is entirely missing. And in order to do this Meredith had to adopt a new method of telling a story. We have already declared that he was no narrator, that the art of story-telling hardly interested him; nor is it necessary, if we cling to the common conception of the narrator and his art, now to reverse the judgement. Yet he may be justly considered as a great innovator in the art of narration, for he brought into existence a new method that did nothing less than begin a fresh chapter in the history of the novel.³⁸

A little later Priestley continues:

In examining Meredith's idea of Comedy...we saw how it contrived to bring together romantic figures and an intellectual background, a sympathetic interest coupled with a detached point of view, and thus achieving a curious dichotomy, self turning to examine self. It was his task (though not necessarily a conscious deliberate task) to work out this idea in prose fiction....³⁹

That "self turning to examine self" is of course a description of Meredith in general and throughout, not merely in regard to Priestley's subject here -- what we called the dualism of desire and detachment -- but the examining self in every aspect and facet of his craft. It has been our object to follow that examining self in a few of the most conspicuous instances, to observe its choices, to see what we might learn about the craft of the novelist, the form of his art, the modes of his imaginative grasp.

"A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art," wrote Conrad in the famous Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, "should carry its justification in every line." But criticism, being at least at one remove, may (we hope for our sake) face a less paralyzing imperative. Still, if by being fortunate, not deserving, we have gained partial accomplishment, if some of the truth of art is here, and some understanding achieved, we may then wearily and gratefully appreciate Conrad's wisdom as applying to our critical effort and to the works we have been examining: "a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile -- and the return to an eternal rest."

Footnotes

CHAPTER X

1. That is, these scenes signify and identify the perspective. The inevitability, in other words, resides in the point of view and not as an inexorable internal logic within the situation. Frye goes even further and suggests an arbitrariness or subconscious expediency as the basis for selection of the tragic or the comic. See, for example, the brief discussion on pp. 63-64 of the Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957).

2. Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization (New York, 1955) p. 158. It is Schiller of course, as we said earlier, who attempts to fashion a reconciliation between these two divergent modes through the disinterested play of art. He says, for instance, in the fifteenth letter of the Aesthetic Education, that "as our nature finds itself, in the contemplation of the Beautiful, in a happy midway point between law and exigency, so, just because it is divided between the two, it is withdrawn from the constraint of both alike" (p. 78).

3. New York, 1966, p. 6.

4. Boston, 1960, pp. 366-367.

5. The English Novel: A Short Critical History (New York, 1958), pp. 279-280.

6. The Novel in English (New York, 1931), p. 223.

7. Egoist, p. 417.

8. TC, p. 156.

9. Priestley, Meredith, p. 145.

10. Art and Substance in George Meredith, p. 164.

11. Wright, p. 162.

12. Wright states: "Meredith used the term tragic comedian to mean a person at one and the same time tragic and comic. In this study I have employed the traditional tragicomic, not in the loose sense to describe a narrative at times tragic at others comic, but to characterize tragic comedians and their experiences" (see "Notes" #10).

13. Auerbach, Mimesis, p. 554.

14. Auerbach, pp. 22-23.
- 15.
16. Genesis 22:2.
17. Genesis 15:13-14
18. OOOC, p. 496.
19. OOOC, p. 490.
20. RF, p. 493.
21. RF, p. 494.
22. As far as the much praised women are concerned, Meredith undoubtedly does better there. However, notwithstanding such critics as Crees and LeGalliene he does not always manage to succeed. Emilia of SB fails to come alive. Neither Janet Ilchester nor Princess Ottilia are particularly memorable as characters. One can honestly say that Meredith avoids as much as is possible the sentimentality of plot and the easy gratifications of harmonious completion and happy endings. But he does linger on too many occasions rather fondly over the pathetic or the bathetic.
23. Essay, pp. 44-45.
24. "There is one thing or another, according to his caprice. Irony is the humor of satire; it may be savage, as in Swift, with a moral object, or sedate, as in Gibbon with a malicious. The foppish irony fretting to be seen, and the irony which leers, that you shall not mistake its intention, are failures in satiric effort pretending to be the treasures of ambiguity" (Essay, p.44).
25. Aspects of George Meredith, p. 166.
26. It is sub-titled: "A History of a Father and Son."
27. Moffatt, p. 96.
28. The dehumanization is somewhat reminiscent of John Stuart Mill's description of his own upbringing and, in a different way, of the educational system of Gradgrind in Dickens's Hard Times.
29. ORF, p. 233.
30. ORF, p. 406.

31. Austin Wentworth is occasionally referred to as a "healing" character. And so he is. His understanding and compassion, along with the clear-sightedness of some one who has made his own peace with life, make him valuable and helpful. The problems occurs only during his absence.

32. ORF, p. 453.

33. ORF, p. 29.

34. George Meredith: Some Characteristics, pp. 30-31.

35. ORF, p. 444.

36. RF, p. 458.

37. See p. 152.

38. Priestley, pp. 163-164.

39. Priestley, p. 166.

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