

MEREDITH AND THE ENGLISH NOVEL*

By G. A. WILKES

AT the time of Meredith's death in 1909, he and Thomas Hardy had come to be regarded as the two dominant novelists of the later nineteenth century. By 1927, however, when E. M. Forster referred to Meredith in his Clark lectures, he remarked that his reputation was now "rather in the trough of a wave",¹ and by the 1940's it was becoming clear that Meredith and Hardy were no longer the two major figures of late nineteenth-century fiction—that position was held instead by Henry James and Joseph Conrad. The "dislodgement" of Meredith was finally effected in 1948, when Dr. Leavis formally expelled him from "the great tradition" of the English novel.² As Fielding, Richardson, Dickens, Thackeray and Hardy fell under the same sentence, this may not be a judgement to compel assent, but it does indicate the critical trend. We now have a situation not unfamiliar in literary criticism, where it is possible for a critic to regard Meredith of no account, and to feel a certain security, a degree of satisfaction with his critical principles in doing so, even though he may never have read anything that Meredith wrote. The status of Meredith, then, is the problem I wish to explore this evening.

The immediate cause of his lapse from favour was that by the turn of the century Meredith's reputation had become insecurely based; he had begun to be valued for the wrong reasons. He was thought of as the patriarch of Box Hill, visited by literary pilgrims who took down his statements on what the nation must do to be saved: the role of author was lost in the role of sage and pundit. This reputation—to be counted well lost, as its passing cleared the way for a sounder estimate—was largely responsible for the decline noted by E. M. Forster in 1927. Meredith then continued in disfavour during the thirties and forties, because of the historical course on which the English novel was then set. We are able now to see the earlier twentieth century as the post-Jamesian age in the theory of the novel, when the particular qualities James had valued in fiction were conceded an intrinsic superiority: his preferred effects came to acquire almost the status of universal laws for the writer, and absolutes for the critic. The presence of the author in the world of the novel was assumed to impair its "illusion", and narrative was approved only in the degree it aspired to the dramatic. With this cult of the novel as microcosm, and the vogue of "compositional

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Dr. Wilkes was on 3 September, 1962, appointed to be the Professor of Australian Literature. This Chair has recently been established.

¹ *Aspects of the Novel* (Pocket Edition, 1949), p. 85.

² F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948), pp. 12, 15, 22-23, 124.

centre" and "point of view", such conventions as the intrusive author, and the narrative submitted to analysis and commentary, came to seem of an inferior order, and the novelist using them either outmoded or untutored. Though this vogue is now passing,³ it dominated the thirties and forties, and Meredith is to be numbered among the casualties.

Dr. Leavis's judgement of Meredith endorses both Forster's criticism of him as supposedly "philosophically profound", and the strictures of Henry James on his art.⁴ The qualities which "the great tradition" demands of its members are exemplified in Dr. Leavis's appraisals of the five English novelists who qualify, and summarized in his general account of them as "major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life".⁵ While as a formula of literary greatness, this may seem too moralistic in its assumptions and too vague in its terminology ("human awareness", "possibilities of life"), it may yet suffice for our present purpose. It is by reference to this standard that Leavis classifies Meredith as a "shallow exhibitionist".⁶

The phrase at once recalls the reputation that dogged Meredith, for the larger part of his career, as "a harlequin, a performer of antics",⁷ a reputation that sprang from the baffled response of the reviewers to his seemingly perverse and incomprehensible books. Any consideration of Meredith's work must begin with the theory directing it, for the "perversity" apparent on the surface comes of one of the major attempts made in the nineteenth century to take up the existing tradition of the novel, and shape it afresh to intellectual and psychological purposes. It is well enough known that Meredith was the author of an *Essay on the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, but less well known that this essay is but a segment of a larger intellectual system, which his novels from almost the first to the last were written to express.

This system can be gathered from the novels themselves, from Meredith's letters written in commentary on them, and especially from his poetry, where it is distilled. Meredith indicated one basis of it when he explained in his later years that "when I was quite a boy, I had a spasm of religion which lasted about six weeks, during which I made myself a nuisance in asking everybody whether they were saved. But never since have I swallowed the Christian fable. . . . The man who has no mind of his own, lends it to the priests."⁸ Meredith's outlook is then agnostic: there is no

³ Cf. Kathleen Tillotson, *The Tale and the Teller* (1959); W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (1961); Phyllis Bartlett, "The Novels of George Meredith", *Review of English Literature*, III (1962), 31-46.

⁴ Cf. *The Great Tradition* (1948), pp. 22-23, and notes.

⁵ *The Great Tradition* (1948), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁷ Cf. R. E. Gordon George, "Unpublished Letters of George Meredith", *The Nineteenth Century and After*, CIII (1928), 159.

⁸ E. Clodd, "George Meredith: Some Recollections", *Fortnightly Review*, XCII (1909), 26

revealed truth by which man should order his conduct, no providence governing human affairs, no life after death. He saw this situation as not at all an occasion for dismay, but as bracing and challenging. Since when we are dead we are dead forever, the important thing is what we do with life while we have it, how we exercise a mind emancipated from deception and illusion. Although Meredith cannot be altogether classified as an evolutionist, he saw a progression going on from lower to higher forms of life : man, in whom Nature achieves self-consciousness, is the highest so far reached, but there are still further stages he may attain by realizing the natural forces in him. In Meredith's thinking, the two basic terms are Nature and Earth, for they are the source from which the whole process springs, and it is only by obeying their laws, making himself part of their activity, that man can go forward. When Meredith sometimes uses the term God, he uses it as though God is to be identified with a purpose or law behind the whole operation ; as in a quatrain he was fond of quoting from his own poetry

Our life is but a little holding, lent
 To do a mighty labour. We are one
 With heaven and the stars when it is spent
 To serve God's aim. Else die we with the Sun.

This sense of the challenge which the fact of existence presents, this sense of the necessity to use life while we have it to carry the evolutionary movement forward, is the master principle of Meredith's thinking. It colours his view of politics (as in his attitude to the revolutionary movement of 1848, or to the cause of Italian independence), it colours his view of religion ("the error of all religions" has been "to raise a spiritual system in antagonism to Nature"), and it enters into his notions of national character.⁹ But we are more concerned with these convictions as they affect his writing. Here Meredith's first premise is that all the crude forces implanted by nature in man—his instincts and impulses, his animal energies—are fundamentally wholesome, and should be fulfilled in the unfolding of the personality. This natural endowment is man's strongest bond with earth, and is meant to supply the energy that will raise him to a higher stage. But in the world in which we live, the personality is not free to develop according to this inner law : ranged against it Meredith saw the forces of morality and convention, false codes of sentiment, sham ideas of respectability—all the values upheld by British Matrondom and British Parsondom. These were the two institutions Meredith found most powerful in Victorian life, holding back the movement springing from Nature and Earth. Every youthful spirit felt an energy in him, the same energy that from the beginning had propelled the movement from lower to higher forms of life ; but this energy could be blocked by the customs and usages it encountered, or misdirected into some form of affectation

⁹ Meredith—like some of the favoured characters in his novels—was of Welsh descent, and he was fond of making a racial distinction between Celt and Saxon. The one had a temperament eager to accept Nature's challenge, the other was unresponsive and phlegmatic, rarely advancing the evolutionary movement.

or artificiality—if it fell under the influence of British Parsondom, for example, it might be converted into prudery or sanctimoniousness.

This is the conflict—the struggle of the forward movement with powers hostile to it—that Meredith analyses in novel after novel. It helps account for the singularity of his heroines in Victorian fiction. Meredith was especially indignant at the fate of women in this unequal contest, seeing them as having personalities to be freely developed, but encountering instead the convention that required women to be enchanting but brainless, dependent on the superior wisdom of men. In the *Essay on Comedy*, Meredith denounced the cult in sentimental fiction of “the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices”,¹⁰ and his own heroines are typically clear-sighted and able to use their wits. In a heroine like Clara Middleton, even an apparently harmless characteristic like her willingness to race with Crossjay is part of Meredith’s design. When we find a Meredith character (like Vernon Whitford) who walks from the station instead of riding, or who shows a tendency to climb mountains before breakfast or take an early morning swim, we can usually wager that he is going to turn out rather well. His animal energies have not been extinguished by false ideas of civilization; he is still a creature of Earth and drawing nourishment from her. I said that Meredith’s theory could not be formulated altogether in terms of evolution: so much of it is an expression of his own abounding vitality, his belief in strenuous exercise as the cure for any malady that might afflict him.

It will already be apparent why the typical pattern in Meredith’s early novels is the pattern of a trial or ordeal. The hero of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) is the youthful, unspoiled figure who tries to respond naturally to the promptings within him, but is beset by forces that hinder and impede his development—this is the ordeal he undergoes. Richard has been brought up at Raynham Abbey according to the System of his father, Sir Austin Feverel (whose wife had eloped with his best friend while Richard was still a child). The System is philosophically designed to cope with every phase of Richard’s growth, and is meant to show the conquest of Nature by Science. To deal with the Magnetic Age, Sir Austin goes to London to select the bride Richard will marry some years hence (with some idea of having her trained in the meantime), interviewing the different candidates and enquiring how much time they devote to gymnastics. Back at Raynham, meanwhile, Richard, following the leadings of Nature, has found the perfect bride for himself in Lucy Desborough, a farmer’s niece. So the pattern of the ordeal continues, partly in terms of Richard’s combat with the System, and more intimately in the contention within Richard at each test he undergoes.

This is a pattern consciously pursued by Meredith, and in the departures it compels from the orthodox form of the Victorian novel, he is already changing the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers. Meredith is prepared to sacrifice all the conventional demands of plot and narrative, all the interest in “what happens

¹⁰ *Works* (1909–11), xxiii, 14.

next", to focus attention on the development of Richard. The method is made plain in the early episode of Farmer Blaize's haystack, which Richard had set fire to as a revenge on Blaize for whipping him for trespassing. For ten chapters Meredith holds the action still while he analyses this incident, for the light it sheds on the motives of all those involved: on Richard, chiefly, who struggles with himself until the right feelings win, and he exculpates the ploughboy who has been blamed; on Sir Austin, who learns his son's secret early, and finds an unconfessed pleasure in acting and feeling like Providence, able to observe and provide for the movements of creatures in the dark; on Adrian Harley, the civilized Wise Youth, whose answer to the moral difficulty is to bribe the material witness. The movement of the story is held in abeyance while Meredith exploits this episode for his purpose, and then the incident is perfunctorily dropped—the reader agog to discover the outcome has to pick it up from a retrospective letter from Richard to Ripton Thompson.

From the bewildered response of the public and the reviewers to such procedures, arose Meredith's reputation as a harlequin and a performer of antics. Already he is the master of a glancing, elusive dialogue, and his prose style can range from the epigrams of *The Pilgrim's Scrip* to the picture of Lucy picking dewberries beside the river, where the whole episode is rendered as it figures in Richard's spellbound vision. Though there is an element of wilfulness in the brilliance of *Richard Feverel*, the shortcoming of the book is rather that the various dislocations made in the conventional form of the novel do not find their justification in any higher harmony; Meredith has dispensed with unity of one kind before he has achieved unity of another. This is felt especially in the latter stages of the narrative, where Richard and Lucy marry, but are then arbitrarily separated so that Richard's ordeal may continue. The later episodes—notably Richard's seduction by Mrs. Mount—sustain Meredith's intention to "describe realistically the temptations that a young man has to face",¹¹ just as the conclusion is possibly meant to enforce his sardonic view: but the improbability of the separation has now made all improbable. The minute attention given to Richard's motives from the outset requires that his separation from Lucy be accounted for in the same way: a novelist who has sacrificed the demands of orthodox narrative to some higher law (as Meredith has in the earlier chapters) cannot then deny that law itself, without some disintegration occurring.

Amid the collapse, the study of Sir Austin Feverel stands secure. Richard, not Sir Austin, is the nominal centre of the book, and yet Meredith's theme is perhaps worked out more successfully in the subordinate character than in the major one. The System of which Sir Austin is author is sound to the extent that it does not seek to suppress Nature, but to supervise its workings. It is not envisaged that Richard shall never marry, for instance, but that his marriage shall be in accordance with philosophical principles. The fundamental weakness of Sir Austin's System is that it becomes tainted with his own egoism and vanity. As the author of a misogynist collection of aphorisms, Sir Austin has an intellectual reputation to sustain; he finds

¹¹ Cf. J. P. Collins, "Conversations with George Meredith", *Pall Mall Magazine*, L (1912), 679.

it flattering to preside over his son's growth like an omniscient deity, providing for what he will do even before he has done it ; his relation to Lady Blandish makes him struggle to seem infallible in her eyes. In the study of Sir Austin's self-deceptions—which are his offences against Nature—and the retribution visited on them, Meredith taps the vein he is to explore further in *The Egoist* and *One of Our Conquerors*.

As a first novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is a bold experiment. The novels immediately following, however, are a retreat from the position there gained. It is as though Meredith, dependent for his livelihood on his pen, is now trying to fulfil his aims within the existing tradition, instead of trying to overthrow it. His intentions have not changed : *Evan Harrington* describes the ordeal of a tailor's son unexpectedly introduced into aristocratic society, and exposed to such temptations as misrepresenting his own background ; *Sandra Belloni* is the story of a girl who is lively and intelligent, but ignorant of current notions of decorum, pitchforked into a genteel society upholding the values of British Matrondom and British Parsondom ; in *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* another young man is subjected to a series of trials and shocks that prove his character. Meredith's intentions have not altered, but he seeks to fulfil them by more conventional methods. As novels like *Evan Harrington* and *Harry Richmond* were published in serial parts, he was also under some pressure from editors to curb his habits of analysis and keep the story moving—as he did, protesting in one letter that “ this cursed desire I have haunting me to show the reason for things is a perpetual obstruction to movement ”.¹²

The interest of the series of novels subsequent to *Richard Feverel* is that they show Meredith's perfect awareness of what the public required of fiction (an awareness found again in his reports as publisher's reader to Chapman and Hall), and his consciousness of how his own aims as a writer conflicted with such requirements. When in *Sandra Belloni* he had to leave the heroine unmarried at the end, he worried about the public response to the book, writing to Jessopp, “ what the public will make of 3 vols. without a climax of incident (Finis waving no nuptial torch)—the climax being all in a development of character—I am at a loss to imagine ; and so wait patiently, hoping for here and there a critic to interpret me to the multitude ”.¹³ Baulked of this success with *Sandra Belloni*, he hoped to capture the popular imagination with its sequel, and wrote to Jessopp in 1864, “ All story, tell Mrs. Jessopp : no philosopher present : action, excitement, holding of your breath, chilling horror, classic sensation ”.¹⁴ *Vittoria*, when it appeared, hardly conformed to this description, any more than its reception corresponded to Meredith's hopes,¹⁵ but he went on to *Harry Richmond*, planned as “ a spanking bid for popularity on the part of this writer ”.¹⁶ It was à propos of *Harry Richmond* that Meredith wrote in 1867 “ The

¹² Cited by Lionel Stevenson, *The Ordeal of George Meredith* (1954), p. 78.

¹³ *Letters* (ed. W. M. Meredith, 1912), i, 140.

¹⁴ *Letters*, i, 143.

¹⁵ He wrote to Swinburne in March 1867 (*Letters*, i, 189) that “ *Vittoria* passes into the limbo where the rest of my works repose . . . I see the illustrious Hutton of the *Spectator* laughs insanely at my futile effort to produce an impression on his public ”.

¹⁶ *Letters*, i, 143.

English public will not let me probe deeply into humanity. You must not paint either woman or man : a surface view of the species flat as a wafer is acceptable. I have not plucked at any of the highest or deepest chords. (Hence possibly) those who have heard some of the chapters say it must be the best novel I have written."¹⁷

This period ends with the rejection of traditional methods in *Beauchamp's Career* (1876), followed by *The Egoist* (1879), with the *Essay on Comedy* (1877) published in between. Although Meredith sometimes nominated *Beauchamp's Career* as his favourite among his books, I find it unsatisfactory in ways I have not time to specify, and refer instead to *The Egoist*, where the pattern of the ordeal (as Meredith's technique for exploring his master theme of the combat of the true and the false) is superseded to a degree by his method of comedy.

It is well known that Meredith's *Essay* advances a conception of comedy as above all refined and civilized, set apart from the English tradition of the comedy of manners which " might be imaged in the person of a blowsy country girl—say Hoyden, the daughter of Sir Tunbelly Clumsy . . . transforming to a varnished City madam ; with a loud laugh and a mincing step ".¹⁸ This popular conception—to be hit by " the sculptured group of Laughter holding both his sides, while Comedy pummels, by way of tickling him "¹⁹—Meredith invokes to define his own, by contrast. For him comedy " laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it ", and " the test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter ".²⁰

The doctrines of the *Essay on Comedy* are familiar enough, but they need to be related to Meredith's wider literary theory. He explains in the *Essay* that the function of comedy is corrective. Its role, in the wider scheme, is to correct all offences against Nature—all affectation and pretence, all the self-deceptions to which human beings are liable if they once betray their bond with Nature and Earth. *Evan Harrington*, the first of Meredith's novels to be styled " A Comedy ", is an early example of the method, but it is not fully developed until it is applied to Sir Willoughby Patterne, Meredith's most searching study of the offence against Nature of the personality fully absorbed in admiration of itself. Sir Willoughby presents egoism in one of its most cultivated forms, and in its most piquant situation : a little unkindly, the egoist is seen in the situation of being in love.

The Comic Spirit exhibits Sir Willoughby through his relationship to three women : to Laetitia Dale, daughter of a retired army surgeon living on his estate, whom Sir Willoughby prizes for her adoration of himself ; to Constantia Durham, who appeals to him because her beauty makes others envious, being " of a kind to send away beholders aching " ; and to Clara Middleton, the " dainty rogue in porcelain " who becomes engaged to Sir Willoughby some time after Constantia

¹⁷ Bertha Coolidge, *A Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of George Meredith in the Yale University Library* (New Haven, 1931), p. 54.

¹⁸ *Works* (1909-11), xxiii, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

has strangely run off with someone else. A vivacious and athletic girl of eighteen, Clara is the true representative of Nature in this book, and it is mainly through her reactions to Sir Willoughby that his egoism is exposed. The first act of the comedy traces her gradual awakening to his true character, which is complete by chapter X ; then for the forty chapters that follow, as Clara tries to free herself from Sir Willoughby and he devises stratagems in turn, the analysis is prolonged until no hidden recess of his egoism has been left unexplored. So persistent is Meredith that all the subsidiary characters are made to provide additional points of view on Sir Willoughby, from young Crossjay to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, whose personalities have been so extinguished that when Sir Willoughby uncrosses his legs, they know it is a signal to rise and leave the room. More than one reader has become restive and fidgeting as the narrative advances. "As you join in the gleeful pursuit of a Sir Willoughby", Priestley has commented, "you hear the sickening patter of a hunted creature somewhere at the back of your own mind and realize that there is a tiny Sir Willoughby perishing there."²¹

It would be a mistake to assume that the Comic Spirit has no quarry in the book apart from the egoist himself. Laetitia Dale, in her adoration of Sir Willoughby, embodies the sentimentalism that Meredith abhorred, and so has to be brought to an awareness of her folly ; Colonel de Craye offends against Nature by being so clever that he dupes himself, and so must suffer his humiliation too. Only Clara (with Vernon Whitford, to a less degree) evades the shafts of the Comic Spirit, for unlike the others, she is without artificiality or pretence, struggling on in her immaturity, often making mistakes, but remaining true to the promptings of Nature within her. The effect of Clara's trial is not to correct anything in her character, but to give freer expression to the qualities latent in it : through her the forward movement can continue.

The singularity of *The Egoist* in Meredith's development is that it fulfils the intention of the sequence of novels preceding it, by realizing his distinctive aims as a novelist within the conventional framework of the form. No novel could be more Meredithian, and yet the work of analysis on which Meredith is bent is constantly served by the mechanics of "plot" : he relies on complication and intrigue to satisfy his further purposes, and provides a brilliant display of his dramatic talent. Such dislocations as occur are caught up into another harmony, and the normal resources of fiction serve to intensify instead of to obstruct its expression.

Having once achieved this brilliant compromise, Meredith seems not to have tried to repeat it. In the novels following he seeks new paths, and the dramatic quality of *The Egoist* is lost in a new intricacy and reflectiveness. The novels of this last phase are continuous with the others in that they still sustain the theme of the impulses of Nature and Earth seeking fulfilment in conditions antagonistic to them. But there is now a change of emphasis. Whereas earlier the combatants in the struggle had been equal to the ordeal, worthy opponents of the forces ringing them

²¹ J. B. Priestley, *George Meredith* (1927), p. 120.

about, now Meredith tends to study less heroic figures—victims of the powers of darkness, perhaps, rather than champions of the powers of light. The more fundamental change is that where the earlier conflicts had been overt—the natural liveliness and candour of Emilia versus the genteelism of society, the crusading zeal of Nevil Beauchamp against the established social and political structure of his day—now this open conflict of the true and the false gives way to an analysis of its more secret workings. I mentioned that in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Meredith had treated his theme in a major and a minor key: in the contest of Richard with the System, and in the personality of Sir Austin himself, as his scientific scheme became impregnated with his own vanity and self-regard, so that the nobler principles animating it were secretly weakened by these others, and gradually overthrown. This is the process—one almost completely hidden from the character in whom it occurs—that comes to dominate the later novels. Meredith follows the concealed workings of the false against the true in the human mind, the growth of self-delusion, with behaviour becoming more ineffectual as the instinctively right impulse is denied.

The beginning of this development can be seen in *The Tragic Comedians* (1880). Alvan and Clothilde are not two lovers sacrificed to social convention—outside themselves there is no code that they acknowledge—but two lovers defeated by their own feelings of self-esteem. Priding themselves on their independence of ordinary standards, they go on striking attitudes and making gestures until they have become incapable of simplicity and directness, and this is their undoing. Not itself a significant novel, *The Tragic Comedians* yet shows the direction in which Meredith is moving, and when in *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) he reverts to the pattern of the ordeal, he uses it in a more subtle and analytic fashion than ever before.

Diana Warwick is another woman of lively temperament and nimble wits who seems a fit instrument of the evolutionary process—especially as she is a Celt. She is a married woman, separated from her husband, who wishes to take an independent place in society, keeping a dinner-table of her own, behaving as the friend and equal of men. If Meredith had treated this subject ten years before, he might have been content to make it a study of the struggle of such a woman against social prejudice, and no more. But now Diana's exposed social position is merely the context for the struggle of rival forces for control of her personality. She is enlightened and courageous, but there are other areas of her mind that have been captured and held by convention, preventing her from using fully the intelligence that she has; given the courage to elope with Dacier, Diana draws back because she will not stoop to intrigue; she is independent and emancipated in maintaining her circle of men friends, but her position is insidiously weakened by her vanity about it. The betrayal of the state secret is then used to bring all these contending impulses to a crisis. Meredith made the best analysis of the situation in one of his letters, describing Diana as "a passionate woman, a wife widowed, in love, much needing to be on her guard against the man, ready to fly with him, hating to intrigue; and while she totters in this juncture, assailed by monetary needs, vain of her touch on political

secrets, subject in a crisis to a swoon of the mind"²²—and it is in this confusion, with her mind reeling under so many pressures, that the cabinet secret is divulged. Meredith had used the ordeal pattern before, but never with this intensiveness of scrutiny. *Diana of the Crossways* is a treatment of a theme of his earlier work in the manner of his later.

The later manner is not fully developed here, however, as Meredith allowed his sense of what the public demanded of a novel to influence its closing stages.²³ The full development is reached with *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), the central work of this last period. *One of Our Conquerors*, and the two books that followed it, *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* (1894) and *The Amazing Marriage* (1895), have sometimes been represented as an act of literary revenge by Meredith on his critics. "When I was about sixty", he told one interviewer, "and I had inherited a small sum of money which made me independent, it pleased me to put before these critics a strong dose of the most indigestible material. . . Nothing enraged them so much as *One of Our Conquerors*. These poor fellows knew not by what saint to swear. How could they give an account of the cursed volume? It was necessary to commence by understanding it, and they groped blindly in their own great darkness."²⁴

Whether this is taken seriously or not, *One of Our Conquerors* remains the most experimental of Meredith's books. It has a superficial affinity with his earlier work in that Victor Radnor is a parvenu in society, and has in his conduct defied the social code. As his history is gradually disclosed, we learn that in his youth Victor married a woman much older than himself, to launch himself on his career, and then deserted her for her young companion. Victor and Nataly have lived together since as man and wife, and have a daughter who is unaware of her illegitimacy. But this novel is not at all a study of the individual in conflict with social convention. Victor's act of defiance occurred long ago, and Meredith analyses instead the operation of feelings of guilt and self-esteem in Victor's mind: the guilt he feels towards Mrs. Burman, the wife married and deserted; the guilt he feels towards his present wife, because he cannot legalize their union; and the attempt to conquer these thoughts by pursuing his ambitions, building up a public image of himself that he can admire, since he is unable to face his private self.

As the novel now turns inward, Meredith seeks to pass as much of the action as possible through someone's mind. We are enveloped in the method in the first chapter, where the only thing that "happens" is that Victor is crossing London Bridge when he slips, and his white waistcoat is smudged by the man who helps him to his feet. This is the only event in the chapter (in the ordinary sense), but it touches of all the tensions in Victor's mind, reveals all the involutions of his thinking.

²² *Letters*, ii, 542-3.

²³ He wrote to Mrs. Leslie Stephen in May 1884 (*Letters*, ii, 357) that "'Diana of the Crossways' keeps me still on her sad last way to wedlock. I could have killed her merrily, with my compliments to the public; and that was my intention. But the marrying of her, sets me traversing feminine labyrinths, and you know that the why of it never can be accounted for".

²⁴ C. Photiadès, *George Meredith* (1913), p. 9.

It demonstrates, incidentally, Meredith's control of "point of view", as everything is rendered here in the perspective it assumes in Victor's distorted vision, and the springs of his behaviour are gradually revealed to us while they remain hidden from him.

The designation of Victor as "one of our conquerors" is ironical: as the heroic figure recedes from Meredith's work, he is the flawed personality who comes to replace him. Meredith is even more searching in his treatment of Victor's wife Nataly than with Victor himself. Although Nataly had been courageous in violating a major social convention, the course of events since has found out weaknesses in her character. Having broken a social law, she comes to wish she could be punished, and so find peace of mind; anxious to protect Nesta from the facts of her illegitimacy, and yet unwilling to conceal them from her suitor, Nataly allows the awkwardness of the situation to appear as a blemish in the girl herself—whom she could not in any event regard as quite innocent, lest this should be excusing herself. Noth Nataly and Victor are personalities unequal to their ordeal, personalities in whom the original impulses of Nature have so atrophied, been so worsted by self-deception, that they have become incapable of honesty with themselves. The secret combat within them ends only with Victor's insanity and Nataly's death.

The last two novels, *Lord Ormont* and *The Amazing Marriage*, add little to the achievement of *One of Our Conquerors*. To some extent a reworking of older material (*The Amazing Marriage* had been begun some fifteen years before), they are basically simple books: the "difficulty" here comes from Meredith's treatment of simple themes as though they were complex. He had written his first experimental novel in 1859, before he had the technique to handle it; these last novels encourage a misgiving that by the time he had entered into full possession of his method, his powers were no longer at their height. A graph of Meredith's career would describe a pattern of peaks and declivities, the peaks marked by his most characteristic work—*Richard Feverel* at the outset, *Beauchamp's Career* and *The Egoist* in the middle period, *Diana of the Crossways* and *One of Our Conquerors* in the last—and the declivities marked by the more conventional novels written in between. The whole sequence is informed by a single purpose, and in seeking to fulfil it Meredith extended the frontiers of nineteenth-century fiction as did George Eliot and Henry James. Whether his achievement gives him the necessary credentials for admission to "the great tradition" I cannot tell, but certainly some phrase other than "shallow exhibitionism" seems needed to define it.