
THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

GEORGE MEREDITH

Edited by
IOAN WILLIAMS



GEORGE MEREDITH: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B. C. Southam

The Critical Heritage series collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature. Each volume presents the contemporary responses to a particular writer, enabling the student to follow the formation of critical attitudes to the writer's work and its place within a literary tradition.

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GEORGE MEREDITH

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IOAN WILLAMS



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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B. C. S.

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Note on the Text and Acknowledgments

This collection contains reviews of most of Meredith's publications and a selection of articles and comments about his work which were made during his lifetime. The documents are presented in chronological order, except that the sequence is interrupted so as to keep reviews of each volume under one heading and to relate closely connected items (e.g. Nos. 27 and 28). Quotations from Meredith's works have been for the most part replaced by references: in the case of poems, to the lines concerned; in the case of novels, to the chapter. Where material relating to Meredith has been omitted the omission is indicated by a row of dots within square brackets. When a passage is reprinted from a longer article or book its origin is indicated in the title and/or the head-note. All documents are reprinted as they occur, except for minor alterations for standardization of titles. Errors of sense and significant errors of spelling have been retained. Footnotes followed by an asterisk belong to the original.

I am grateful to the management of the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator* for enabling me to identify some of the authors of articles in *Athenaeum* and *Spectator*. I should also like to thank Mr Harold Beaver and Mrs J. Rawson, of the University of Warwick, and Dr V. J. Daniel of St Hugh's College, Oxford, for their help with various points of information.

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Introduction

There are certain features of Meredith's work which made him a difficult author for his contemporaries: his dynamic conception of character; his metaphoric style; his rejection of convention; his oblique narrative methods; and his attempt to create a fictional structure which would permit the full development of his subject. Meredith's work is not only difficult, however; it is also liable to charges of affectation, obscurity, structural weakness, and a lack of proportion. It has always been hard for individual critics to distinguish between his successful experiments and his lapses from good taste; different critics have chosen the same passages as examples of both. Consequently, his reputation has been more than usually liable to fluctuate, and it cannot be said that there has ever been a clear general agreement about his permanent place in letters. Even now, so long after his experiments have ceased to shock, critics are often without the understanding of his aims and methods needed to distinguish between the superlatively good and the annoyingly bad. Meredith's work is a trial for the reader which has brought out the best in only a few and which has left the field of criticism—littered with examples of bitterness and exaggeration.

The history of Meredith's reception involves more than one dramatic change of public taste. From the publication of his first volume of *Poems* in 1851 to *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* in 1859, Meredith enjoyed a fair and encouraging reception. After *Richard Feverel*, from 1860 to 1875, while he tried to reconcile his artistic purpose with the demands of the reading public, his work met with an inadequate and disheartening response. During these years, as the author of *Modern Love* (1862), *Sandra Belloni* (1864), *Rhoda Fleming* (1865), *Vittoria* (1867), and *Harry Richmond* (1870), Meredith steadily gained reputation among a younger generation of readers, but failed to make an impact on the public at large or to obtain from the critical Press the degree of respect and understanding to which he was entitled. By 1874 he had given up the attempt to reach a wide public and had retired behind a mask of indifference. Ironically, it was at this point that his popularity began. From 1875 to 1885 there was a dramatic improvement in his position.

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New writers studied his work with an enthusiasm which was all the keener because they could accuse their predecessors of neglecting it. Young men, like W. E. Henley, R. L. Stevenson, James Thomson, Arthur Symons, Richard Le Gallienne, welcomed Meredith as the opponent of mid-Victorian attitudes and the apostle of modernism. They came to his novels with a sense of excitement and discovery and succeeded in imparting something of their feeling to a wider audience. Meredith could never have been a popular writer as Dickens was, or even as Thackeray and George Eliot were, but by 1885, with the publication of *Diana of the Crossways*, he had reached a public as wide as he could ever have expected. That year also saw the publication of the first volumes of his collected works and marks the beginning of another phase of his reputation. From 1885 to the end of the century his position was established as the leading English writer. His seventieth and eightieth birthdays (1898 and 1908) brought acknowledgments from all over the world. In his later years he became the subject of thousands of articles and books; he was offered several honorary degrees and granted the Order of Merit. When he died the once-neglected novelist was generally considered to have been the last of the giants, a great teacher, a writer of heroic merits and heroic defects, whose death marked the end of an epoch. His reputation stood at this point until the end of the First World War. Then people began to speak of his work as dated, his philosophy barren, his literary achievement minor. His late recognition and rise to fame meant that the inevitable reaction was delayed. The change in taste and sensibility which followed the First World War accentuated the natural decline in his popularity, and from this last phase of under-estimation he has not yet been recovered.

THE EARLY PHASE (1851-9)

Meredith's first volume of poems did not escape censure for shallowness, inequality, and lack of proportion, but reviewers were generous with their praise. The *Leader's* reviewer found no depth of insight, but praised the elegance and charm of the poems (No. 1). William Rossetti discerned 'engaging human companionship and openness', marred by some disproportion (No. 4). Charles Kingsley condemned the same fault, but discovered health and sweetness (No. 5). *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856) met with a similar reception. The *Spectator* critic raised a charge of cleverness against it, which was later to be used with devastating effect on the reading public.¹ George Eliot and G. H.

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Lewes were more sympathetic. The former thought that interest lagged towards the end of the story but called it 'a work of genius, and of poetical genius' (No. 7). Lewes used the same phrase, called the language 'simple, picturesque, pregnant', and added in compliment that Meredith's name had now become known as 'the name of a man of genius—of one who can create' (No. 8). Naturally enough, the reaction to *Farina* (1857) was less favourable, because it lacked certain of the qualities which had made its predecessor popular. Writers in the *Spectator* (No. 12) and *Critic* (No. 14), thought it an improvement on *The Shaving of Shagpat*, the *Athenaeum* reviewer said that it was full of 'riotous and abundant fancy' (No. 16), but the *Saturday Review* foreshadowed more recent judgments in calling it relatively flat and dull (No. 13). Meredith himself described it as 'an original and entertaining book' (No. 15).

Up to 1859 Meredith was considered an intelligent and able writer who was steadily increasing his reputation. One or two critics even took him to task for misapplying his talents, warning him: 'The problems of our times, and the wants of the men around us, are such as to demand all our best energies.'² *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* satisfied demands that the author of poems and fantasies should show his substantial qualities in a serious novel, set in the times around him (No. 8), and in doing so it put an end to his honeymoon with the critics. *Richard Feverel* transformed Meredith into a painfully original and earnest novelist whose work enforced the most serious consideration. The reaction of the critics was by no means entirely favourable, partly because as it was first published the novel contained evidence of confused purpose which successive revisions only partly removed. As it appeared in 1859 *Richard Feverel* deserved Samuel Lucas's description as 'extremely weak in the development of its main purpose' (No. 23). Early readers found it difficult to decide whether the author meant to attack all systems, to attack the particular system of Sir Austin, or merely to enforce a moral about the sowing of wild oats. The fully developed and original statement within the novel could not clearly emerge. Even so, the book was well received. The seduction scene and Meredith's boldness in treating delicate subjects earned him some hostile criticism and lost him the circulating-library sale which would have brought financial success, but taken as a whole the reviewers honestly tried and in large measure succeeded in giving the novel the consideration which it merited. No other novel by the same author was to receive so favourable a treatment for many years.

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THE MIDDLE YEARS (1860-75)

The period between 1860 and 1875 was the most productive of Meredith's life, although he had to work as editor, publisher's reader, war correspondent, ghost writer, reviewer, and hack. Even in spite of his sustained efforts, he was often embarrassed for money, and had to abandon the publication of poetry and finance several of his novels himself. Yet he kept up an attempt to reconcile his higher interests with those of the reading public which had so enthusiastically responded to some of his contemporaries. Each of his novels between *Evan Harrington* and *Harry Richmond* was the result of a new attempt to achieve popularity. The wider public, however, was busy with Mrs Wood and Miss Braddon and was deaf to his appeal, while reviewers were sparing in their appreciation of an effort which should have put Meredith at the forefront of contemporary English letters.

In 1860 Meredith's situation was promising. As the author of *Richard Feverel*, with *Evan Harrington* appearing serially in *Once a Week* in opposition to Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White*, he had a good deal of public attention. *Evan Harrington*, however, was not very well received. Reviews were scarcer than for *Richard Feverel* and reviewers showed little sense of Meredith's distinctive aims and qualities. The *Spectator* critic approved the change in tone and subject-matter from *Richard Feverel* and found that the author's vein of humour was clearing as he grew older (No. 25). The *Saturday* reviewer praised the novel's freshness, said that the characterization of Louisa was excellent and approved the tone (No. 26). A short notice in the *Examiner* described the story as 'cleverly told in vigorous and pointed English'.³ Unlike the other novels of this period, *Evan Harrington* went into a second edition within five years, but after *Richard Feverel* it was clearly an anti-climax.

Meredith's next volumes brought him once more into full public attention, but not with effects which were calculated to improve his general popularity. *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside* (1862) attracted vigorous comment. One of the most favourable reviews was contributed to the *Morning Post* by Commander Maxse, to whom the book was dedicated, but even Maxse censured the obscurity of Meredith's manner.⁴ The *Saturday Review* compared Meredith with Browning and said that his main talent lay in the 'racy and vigorous style' of the 'Roadside' poems. To this critic the 'Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn' was a 'ranting rhapsody', and he agreed with writers

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in the *Spectator* and *Athenaeum* in censuring the author for his choice of subject in 'Modern Love'—'a mistake so grave as utterly to disqualify the chooser from achieving any great and worthy result in art' (No. 30). Meredith spoke of this reviewer as having 'gently whipped' him. The *Spectator* review (No. 27) caused him pain which he remembered until the end of his life. Swinburne's famous reply to the *Spectator* (No. 28) took a stand against crude moralistic criticism of literature, but left untouched the real basis of defence against the charges of meretricious sensationalism which the *Spectator* critic urged. The final effect of the reviews on the public could not have been pleasant. Meredith's name was strongly associated with indecency and obscurity. And there was no other edition of 'Modern Love' until 1892.

Meredith's next publication, like *Evan Harrington*, was designed to procure him a degree of popular success, but even before it was published he became doubtful about its chances. *Sandra Belloni* was published at his own expense and does not seem to have brought him much return, though reviews were neither scarce nor hostile. In the *Saturday Review* Mrs Hardman expressed doubts about the novel's 'exact drift' and the benefit to be derived from 'profound analysis of the characters of young women' (No. 33). Richard Garnett, in the *Reader*, detected an excess of artifice (No. 31). G. E. Jewsbury thought that it would be an improvement if Meredith wrote more simply (No. 32). On the whole, however, critics were sympathetic and understood what he was trying to do. The *Examiner* gave a clear exposition of the subject (No. 35), and the *Westminster Review* even prophesied Meredith's future popularity, explaining the lack of contemporary appreciation by his 'subtlety of expression', the dramatic quality of his talent, and his insistence on the development of character, ending with an earnest recommendation of the novel as a serious study of modern society (No. 34).

Meredith thought that the failure of *Sandra Belloni* to make a popular appeal resulted from its lack of external action, its open ending, and its obtrusive didactic commentary. His next two novels, *Vittoria* and *Rhoda Fleming*, a 'Plain story', were planned to give excitement and more straightforward narrative interest. In both cases he was disappointed with the response of the critics and the public at large. Reviewers found *Rhoda Fleming* an unattractive novel, though they were not without appreciation of its seriousness of purpose. The *Saturday* reviewer showed an understanding of Meredith's art, pointing out his tendency to distance himself from the action and to use oblique

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methods of narration, and suggested that his chief defect was weakness of construction (No. 38). The *Morning Post*'s critic wrote with sympathy, though he thought that readers would find the story difficult to follow. The *Westminster Review* followed the *Spectator*'s example and accused Meredith of over-cleverness (No. 39), and in the *Athenaeum* J. C. Jeaffreson observed a 'factitious sprightliness and ponderous gaiety' (No. 37).

Though *Vittoria* had the advantage of an exotic background and a subject involving exciting external action, it made less impact on the public than its predecessors. G. E. Jewsbury spoke for many readers when she protested against its complexity: 'How are human beings with limited faculties to understand all the distracting threads of this unmerciful novel?' (No. 41). A writer in the *Saturday Review* (No. 40) discerned originality and conscientious labour, skilfully applied, but thought it was overstrained, weakly constructed, and lacking in 'due repose'. In a private letter Swinburne expressed the growing concern of more sympathetic readers who mistrusted the direction of Meredith's development:

How very noble is most of Meredith's *Vittoria*; but of late he has been falling or tripping rather here and there into his old trick of over-refining. Art must dispense with hair-splitting; and he can so well afford to leave it. . . . Nothing can be more truly and tragically great than the operatic scene or the 'Duel in the Pass'; indeed the whole figure of Angelo is (as the French say) 'epically' noble. Such a painter has no right to put us before or behind the scenes with riddles and contortions in place of clear narrative and large drawing.⁵

Vittoria, Meredith told Swinburne, passed 'to the limbo where the rest of my works repose', and 'the illustrious Hutton of the *Spectator* laughs insanely at my futile effort to produce an impression on his public.'⁶ Before long he moved on to *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, still thinking 'by drumming to make the public hear at last'.⁷ By reflecting the adventures of Richmond Roy in his son's account of his own development he thought to reconcile the interests of the public with his own and make 'a spanking bid for popularity',⁸ though he was aware of the danger he ran in developing the subject with subtlety. The novel certainly came closer than anything else he wrote to satisfying the demand for romance, excitement, adventure, and humour, but it fell as flat as its predecessors, sales were slow, and the critics unenthusiastic.

The best review of *Harry Richmond* appeared in the *Spectator*. The

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writer thought that the novel was below the first-rate, lacking 'movement, stream, current, narrative flow', outlined the author's faults of affectation, obscurity and weakness of construction, and criticized the characterization of Janet Ilchester. But the final effect of his review is one of appreciation for Meredith's high qualities (No. 44). In the *Athenaeum* A. J. Butler was moderate in his praise (No. 42). The *Westminster* reviewer was mildly approving (No. 45). The *Examiner* critic complained petulantly about what he considered the excessive praise that Meredith had been receiving, calling him a 'prophet to a few' (No. 43). To this reviewer Meredith's 'gospel' was that women's hearts are only toys to play with 'or coin to profit by' (No. 43). Mrs Oliphant, who was later to comment in similar vein about *The Egoist* (No. 64), found *Harry Richmond* an 'odd but very clever book' (No. 47).

Meredith's position during the period which ended in the middle 1870s was outlined by Justin M'Carthy in his *Reminiscences*:

The truth is, that just then George Meredith was not known to the general public at all. He had a small circle of enthusiastic admirers scattered here and there among English readers—wherever you happened to go you were sure to meet some one of these, and when you did meet one of them, you met with a man or woman to whom the reality of George Meredith's genius was an obvious and a positive fact.⁹

M'Carthy claimed to be among the very first of these admirers who directed public attention to Meredith's work. In his article in the *Westminster Review*, July 1864 (No. 36), he offered an assessment of Meredith's qualities and defects. He condemned the ending of *Richard Feverel* and was cool towards *Sandra Belloni* as a whole because he could not sympathize with any of the characters; he also suggested that Meredith's compositions lacked the 'fusing heat' of emotion and that he was without the narrative skills of Victor Hugo or Wilkie Collins. But the character of Emilia, M'Carthy thought, proved that Meredith possessed the 'essential qualities of a great novelist'. His article was a landmark in the criticism of Meredith's work. Though he was aware of defects, M'Carthy had an enthusiastic appreciation which was not seen again for several years.

Meredith was never, as M'Carthy said, without any following at all, but the persistent lack of interest in his achievement and development as a writer shown by the critics as well as the public at large eventually made him withdraw into himself. Over the years between 1859 and

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1875 his attitude to English readers and critics hardened into contempt. Criticism in England, he wrote to James Thomson, 'gets no farther than the half-surfeited boy in the tuck shop, he likes this bun, he hates that tart'.¹⁰ As successive novels failed to attract a fitting response, he began to assume a cynical indifference and to comment bitterly on reviewers as 'Sunday parsons, the children of pay, slaves of the multitude, leaders of the blind'.¹¹ 'Have you ever met a Reviewer?' he asked Augustus Jessop. 'It is curious how small this thing that stings can be.'¹² Eventually he gave up the attempt to reconcile his artistic vision with public taste. Ironically, this happened just as his work began to meet with enthusiastic approval and public response.

AN APPROACH TO FAME (1875-85)

Beauchamp's Career (1876), Meredith informed a correspondent, was not likely to be popular. But the critical response to this novel was unprecedentedly enthusiastic and marked a turning-point in Meredith's own career. After 1876 his work received respectful attention. Increasingly he came to be regarded as the leading figure in English literature and an established master of prose. Through the later 1860s and early 1870s appreciation for his work had been growing among a younger generation, to whom he brought an exciting challenge. Sir W. Robertson Nicoll, born in the year when Meredith's first volume was published (1851), told the story of his own growing enthusiasm for the scarcely known author in *A Bookman's Letters* (1913). According to Nicoll, a story was current that five young men met and resolved that Meredith should be boomed: 'These were Grant Allen, and Saintsbury, and Minto, and Henley, and another unnamed. The result of the gathering was that Meredith *was* boomed.'¹³ The story may be apocryphal, but similar incidents could well have happened, and the list of young men determined to praise Meredith could be lengthened indefinitely with names of writers and critics like William Sharp, R. L. Stevenson, James Thomson and George Gissing. The effects of their work were seen in the quickly spreading influence of Meredith's name. The way in which his reputation developed during this period is illustrated by Mrs Humphrey Ward's account of how she came to appreciate the novelist she was later to call the foremost among English writers:

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Of his work and his genius I began to be aware, when *Beauchamp's Career*—a much truncated version—was coming out in the *Fortnightly* in 1874. I had heard him and his work discussed in the Lincoln circle, where both the Pattisons were quite alive to Meredith's quality; but I was at the time and for long afterwards, under the spell of French limpidity and clarity, and the Meredithian manner repelled me. About the same time, when I was no more than three or four and twenty, I remember a visit to Cambridge, when we spent a week-end at the Bull Inn, and were the guests by day of Frederick Myers and some of his Trinity and King's friends. Those two days of endless talk in beautiful College rooms with men like Frederick Myers, Edmund Gurney, Mr Gerald Balfour, Mr George Prothero, and others, left a deep mark on me. . . . And among the subjects which rose and fell in that warm electric atmosphere, was the emergence of a new and commanding genius in George Meredith. The place in literature which some of these brilliant men were already giving to *Richard Feverel*, which had been published some fifteen years earlier, struck me greatly; but if I was honest with myself, my enthusiasm was much more qualified than theirs. It was not until *Diana of the Crossways* came out . . . that the Meredithian power began to grip me. . . .¹⁴

With the appearance of *Beauchamp's Career* Meredith's reputation was assured; with *The Egoist* it was confirmed; and with *Diana of the Crossways* it spread beyond the circle of enthusiastic admirers to affect, if not the widest novel-reading public, the whole number of those who pretended to culture or education.

From W. C. Carr, writing in the *Saturday Review* (No. 53), *Beauchamp's Career* received one of the most thoughtful appreciations that could have been given to a contemporary novel. Carr identified Meredith's dual interest in the personal and social aspects of his subject and showed their relationship, pointing out the fitness of the novel's form and style. At the other extreme, Alexander Shand and Dr Littledale thought that Meredith would have done better to have continued in the manner of *Farina* (Nos. 50 and 51). Other writers, in the *Athenaeum* (No. 48), *Examiner* (No. 49), and *Canadian Monthly* (No. 52), considered Meredith's lack of popularity, attributing it to his difficulty, circuitous style, and oblique narrative methods. In the *Secularist* James Thomson was enthusiastic (No. 54). Starting from a comparison between Meredith and Browning in respect of their relationship with the public, he described the characteristics of Meredith's fiction with overwhelming enthusiasm. His was a less measured praise than the reader of Meredith was used to hear.

The appearance of *The Egoist* (1879) was the occasion for an equally enthusiastic review, but in the meantime Thomson had used the pages

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of *Cope's Tobacco Plant* to introduce *Richard Feverel* to readers who were still unaware of its existence. Here Thomson again compared Meredith and Browning:

He may be termed, accurately enough for a brief indication, the ROBERT BROWNING of our novelists; and his day is bound to come as Browning's at length has come. The flaccid and feeble folk, who want literature and art that can be inhaled as idly as the perfume of a flower, must naturally shrink from two such earnestly strenuous spirits, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions. . . . But men who have lived and observed and pondered, who love intellect and genius and genuine passion, who have eyes and ears ever open to the mysterious miracles of nature and art . . . will find a royal treasure house of delight and instruction and suggestion in the works of George Meredith.¹⁵

In his review of *The Egoist* (No. 62), Thomson surveys contemporary criticism of Meredith's work. In his diary, referring to the *Athenaeum's* review of *The Egoist*, he called it: 'The first critique of any of George Meredith's books I had ever come across, in which the writer showed thorough knowledge of his works and anything like an adequate appreciation of his wonderful genius.' A week later he wrote: 'cordial praise from *Athenaeum*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Spectator*, *Examiner*. At length! Encouragement. A man of wonderful genius and a splendid writer may hope to obtain something like recognition after working hard for thirty years, dating from his majority.'¹⁶ These expressions are too vivid to be accurate, but they contain a good deal of truth. As S. M. Ellis put it: 'With the publication of *The Egoist* Meredith took possession of his kingdom.'¹⁷ There were still hostile voices, but the general tone was changed to one of respect and admiration.

In her review of *The Egoist* Mrs Oliphant wrote with a sharpness which reflected the sudden growth of his popularity. Other critics were more moderate. The *Examiner* critic thought the prelude appalling and said that Meredith was 'a great deal too clever', but discovered among the characters the most subtle analyses that had appeared since Balzac. Similarly, the criticisms of the *New Quarterly Magazine* appeared in a generally approving context. Meanwhile, W. E. Henley and James Thomson were doing their best to push the novel into public notice. Thomson, who thought it the critic's duty to make an audience for the novelist, went so far as to assert that Meredith's dialogue was 'the best of our age': 'It is so spontaneous, unexpected, involuntary, diversified by the moods, the blood, the nerves, the ever-varying circumstances and relations of the inter-

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locutors' (No. 62). Henley, more objective, charged Meredith with affectation, obscurity, and artificiality, but at the same time praised him most liberally (Nos. 57, 59, and 61).

To most of the reviewers who welcomed *The Egoist*, *The Tragic Comedians* (1881) was a disappointment. The novel sold well, perhaps because of its political interest, but was poorly and sparsely reviewed. Joseph Jacobs in the *Athenaeum* concentrated on the relation between Meredith's fiction and the heroine's autobiography and found it difficult, he said, to judge the novel because of its dependence on the factual source.¹⁸ A writer in *Truth* thought that Meredith's characteristic faults were more pronounced in *The Tragic Comedians* than elsewhere:

His morbid vivacity of style, his anxious brilliance, his restless wordiness, his unscrupulous and unconquerable passion for self display, are more apparent, I think, in the *Tragic Comedians*, than in anything (in prose) of his I have read.¹⁹

The *Daily News* was more enthusiastic:

He has in a wonderful way, and with a command of brilliant language all his own, analyzed and commented on an episode of life as strange, as mystifying, and as interesting, as is to be found in the repertory of the world's dramas. The personages are few and the action brief. Fateful, however, and tragic is the story as an old Greek play.²⁰

The *Westminster Review*, in the shortest of notices, remarked nothing but the author's affectation.²¹

Readers and critics were unanimous in finding Meredith's next novel more attractive. Like *The Tragic Comedians*, *Diana of the Crossways* had a story based on fact, involving a notorious scandal in high life; but it also had a pronounced love-interest and a relatively straightforward plot. Henley called it an ordinary novel written by a genius and said that it atoned for *The Tragic Comedians*. The *Spectator* was characteristically impervious to Meredith's design and called the novel an 'apologia for witty and beautiful ladies who love to skate on thin ice' (No. 74). Several reviewers observed the discrepancy between Diana's actions and the narrator's assessment of her character, but all with due allowance for the brilliance of the portrayal and the novel's 'excitement, romance, realistic force'. Arthur Symonds defended even Meredith's affectation on the grounds of its suitability for the realization of a 'rarely revealed nature' of the heroine (No. 75).

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THE FIRST COLLECTED EDITION

By 1885 many critics and reviewers had begun to wonder why so many of Meredith's works were out of print. Early editions of all his books before *Diana of the Crossways* were attracting high prices in book sales while readers like Symons lamented that even the very latest novel would soon be unavailable. Eventually in 1885, Chapman and Hall, in conjunction with Roberts Bros of Boston ventured to begin to issue the first collected edition.

Many writers in literary journals and newspapers took the occasion to observe the value of Meredith's work, the length of his apprenticeship, and the late but enthusiastic reception of his novels by a wide public. The *Saturday Review*, unusual in its understanding of Meredith's aims and methods, was typical of many in the respectful tone of its remarks and the fair-mindedness of its conclusion: 'There ought to be curiosity and mental activity enough in the English speaking and English reading world to give Mr Meredith a fame and a recognition corresponding to his deserts.'²² W. L. Courtney was less enthusiastic (No. 77), finding in Meredith's work a 'desperate cleverness', 'which is always isolated, repellent, obstructive'. Some of Meredith's gifts, Courtney thought, could not be rated too highly, but he possessed a deficiency of creative and a superfluity of critical faculty which prevented him from being among the greatest artists in fiction. The tone of this article from an unsympathetic writer is one of the many indications that Meredith, in 1885, had at last arrived.

THE LAST PHASE

The free availability of Meredith's novels after 1885, the enthusiasm of influential writers, did much to spread his name among a wide audience. A factor of equal importance was the length of time since he had begun to write. By the 1880s the British public was beginning to catch up with Meredith, so that ideas which had earned him the mistrust of earlier generations were now recognized as foreshadowing exciting modern attitudes. His continuing fertility and restless mental activity enabled him to adapt his art to the circumstances of the day and gave it an air of modernity greater than it actually possessed. The author of *One of Our Conquerors*, though he was sixty-three years old and had been formed in an earlier period, was a present element in the contemporary scene.

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The influence of non-literary factors in the consideration of Meredith's work was reflected in one of the earliest articles exclusively devoted to it. Arabella Shore's thoughtful and intelligent literary appreciation in the *British Quarterly* (No. 55) was motivated by her interest in Meredith as an opponent of repressive social and moral codes, as an advocate of women's rights. Towards the end of the century there were many readers who took a similarly non-literary interest in the novelist and poet, as the representative of modernism and the proponent of a creed even more suitable than Browning's for adaptation to the conditions of ordinary living. Even while the public disliked the direction his work was taking, he remained the foremost intellectual of the day. By 1900, however, his work seemed more advanced than it actually was; and by 1914 his kind of intellectualism had begun to appear facile and academic.

From the 1880s, as Meredith came to be considered the established leader of English letters, he drew the fire of iconoclastic writers like George Moore. At the same time, as the apostle of modernism and the leader of an *élite* he attracted the praise of Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds, who made his work serve strange purposes (see below, Nos. 84 and 115). The praise of disciples was sometimes indiscreet. R. L. Stevenson, for example, acknowledged his great debt to Meredith in terms which gave wide offence. He told an American reporter:

I am a true blue Meredith person. I think George Meredith out and away the greatest force in English letters, and I don't know whether it can be considered a very encouraging thing that he has now become popular or whether we should think it a discouraging thing that he should have written so long without any encouragement whatever. It is enough, for instance, to disgust a man with the whole trade of letters, that such a book as *Rhoda Fleming* should have fallen flat; it is the strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died, and if Shakespeare could have read it he would have jumped up and cried, 'Here's a fellow!' No other living writer of English fiction can be compared to Meredith. He is the first, and the others—are not he. . . . I serve under Meredith's colours always.²³

Similarly, J. M. Barrie, in the *Contemporary Review*, asserted that Meredith was 'the greatest wit this country has produced' and 'one of the outstanding men of letters, since the Elizabethan age'.²⁴

These statements irritated more conservative writers, like William Watson, who struck back decisively in the name of common sense (No. 85). Watson thought that popularity was a necessary condition of quality in fiction. In his article Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot

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and Shakespeare were brought forward to prove that difficult material need not cause obscurity or affectation. Watson subjected the statements of Stevenson and Barrie to fair and rigorous examination. His position was similar to that of many later critics—that Meredith, though an able writer, was not a good novelist, but, like many of his conservative colleagues before and since, he used a tone which was unnecessarily sharp.

A counterblast to Watson's attack was delivered by Richard Le Gallienne (No. 87), an enthusiastic student of Meredith who was soon to become the author of the first book-length study of his work. Le Gallienne took Watson as the type of the Philistine. Despite some affectation, Le Gallienne was moderate in his assertions, urging as his strongest argument that Meredith's difficulty stemmed from the nature of his purpose. After a survey of the confusingly diverse statements of the critics, he concluded: 'Whatever else is to be proven, one thing is certain, that George Meredith is a centre of power, of whatever nature, in whatever degree.'

The debate over the novelist's merits was intensified by the publication of his next novel. The audience which had welcomed *Diana of the Crossways* was stunned by *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), at once among the most original and eccentric of novels, and, Meredith himself confessed, a 'trying piece of work'.²⁵ The 'darkness' of the critics, however, was not as great as he later asserted, though there was no lack of sharp criticism.²⁶ The *Spectator* characteristically said that Meredith lacked the qualities of even a good second-rate novelist, concluding: 'So affectedly grotesque a style would ruin even a good novel, and to describe *One of Our Conquerors* as a good novel is impossible' (No. 92). The *Saturday Review* found the the author's 'usual faults' of 'incoherence, prolixity, straining after epigram, seeking after the uncommon, lack of firmness of character-drawing and allusiveness' (No. 91). *The Times* thought that there was an underlying fine conception, but that it had been spoiled in execution (No. 90). On the other hand, critics in the *Anti-Jacobin* and *Athenaeum* (Nos. 88 and 89) were prepared to accept Meredith's demands. Lionel Johnson set aside the common argument that the years in the wilderness had spoiled Meredith, and suggested that close attention would make the 'whole greatness of the design evident' (No. 93). Johnson's appreciation was an unusually intelligent apprehension of Meredith's purpose and achievement.

Critics were less dogmatic about *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (1895).

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Some who had been unable to accept *One of Our Conquerors* welcomed this novel. A writer in the *Literary World*, for example, who thought that the Meredith cult had taken a hard knock with the publication of *One of Our Conquerors*, placed *Lord Ormont* among the best of his novels (No. 104). Another writer, in the *Cosmopolitan* (No. 103), declared that it contained the 'essentials of romantic sanity and health'. One or two critics were harsh. In the *Pall Mall Gazette* a reviewer said that, although the swimming incident provided one great scene, the novel as a whole was a 'tirade', in which 'the jaded reader gets not an instant's respite' (No. 99). The *Spectator* critic was also unsympathetic, and accused Meredith of being unable to attain organic integrity (No. 100), and Henry James, from his special standpoint, denounced Meredith's handling of the subject (No. 102). Lionel Johnson found grounds for appreciation again, pointing out that the novel, though typical in 'tone, intention, spirit, theme', was untypical in execution and yet contained some qualities which were uniquely Meredith's own (No. 97).

Meredith's position was not materially affected by the publication of his last novel, *The Amazing Marriage* (1896). In the *Spectator* James Ashcroft Noble reaffirmed the journal's view that Meredith was no more than a second-rate writer with a few good things (No. 113). W. E. Garrett Fisher thought the style of the novel beyond all praise (No. 112), while Edmund Gosse thought it 'deplorably clever and distressing' (No. 106) and Alice Meynell emphasized the book's painfulness (No. 108). Several critics objected to the character of Carinthia, one in a pointed and memorable phrase: 'Life had to bore holes with a pickaxe to let understanding into her' (No. 111).

While these last novels were being published, writers were making serious attempts to analyse the character of Meredith's work and to assess the importance of his long career, and on the whole these critics of his later years showed understanding and appreciation.²⁷ Many who were willing to criticize the novelist's affectation or obscurity respected his ability to vitalize an abstract subject and to inform the elements of character 'with the very essence of humanity' (No. 95). Others, like William Barry, found his genius the 'very head and front' of his offence:

Sooner than ride round in the trodden sawdust, Mr Meredith leaps the barrier and declines the customary feats of horsemanship. There shall be no story because he cannot invent a new one. He slurs over the moving incidents, slackens his pace when he should be running full tilt, narrates instead of painting a scene,

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and balks the primitive instinct which longs for picturesque and exciting action. No wonder that he is dry beyond any writer of novels known to us—dry and exasperating; tediously brilliant; witty and wise out of season; filling our eyes with diamond dust which is as blinding as sand or steam. . . .²⁸

H. M. Cecil, in the *Free Review* (No. 105), anticipated later criticism in accusing Meredith of contriving the actions of his characters, or failing to provide them with a realized context and being unable to give his novels a proper vertebrate structure. He also repeated Socialist charges that Meredith's fictional world was entirely artificial and that his characters were drawn from the higher reaches of society.²⁹ J. M. Robertson, in the *Yellow Book* (No. 114), attacked Meredith on literary grounds, though he was keenly aware of his ability and agreed with Cecil in thinking that his faults were produced by isolation. Like G. S. Street, Robertson and Cecil treated Meredith as a classic; their measured assertions and analyses indicated the extent to which he was already regarded as the representative of a past generation.

THE LATER POETRY

The increased leisure and financial security which Meredith attained after his middle years renewed his willingness to be known as a poet. Between 1862 and 1883 he published no volume of verse, and even after that date he had to publish his poems at his own risk. Partly in resentment at what he called the refusal of the English public to accept him as a poet, he prevented copies from being sent out for review. Even so, the later volumes were not inadequately reviewed, though many critics were obliged to conclude that increasing age had a more serious effect on the author's verse than on his prose. *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883) was sympathetically received by Mark Pattison, Alice Meynell, and Walter Kerr, all of whom found freshness and originality in the volume. *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life* (1887) obtained less favour. In a review which seriously annoyed the poet, W. E. Henley pointed out that, with very fine qualities and occasional successes, Meredith's verse was unequal and at times uninspired (No. 79). The *Westminster Review* fell back on the figure of the wheat and the tares (No. 80). By this time most writers were agreed that Meredith's verse deserved high respect for the quality of thought, the evident ability and flashes of genius, but that it was not of the highest order. The

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increase in ruggedness and tortuousness as Meredith grew older brought continual protest. As one sympathetic critic remarked, the fools who rejected the poet in his earlier years were no longer of any importance; what mattered now was his inability to communicate with the new audience which he had gained (No. 94). Gradually the idea became current that Meredith has lost his ability to distinguish between effective metaphor and hopeless eccentricity of statement. What doubts remained after *The Empty Purse* (1892) were dispelled by *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History* (1898). Reviewers were unanimous in preferring 'France, December 1870', written over twenty years before the other three poems which comprised the volume. Francis Thompson, declaring himself amazed at the power and fragrances, the anarchy and turbulence of the volume, called it an 'unlawful wonder' (No. 116). The *Saturday* reviewer wrote with 'bewilderment and acute distress', pointing out the lack of proportion which marred the later poems (No. 177). The *Athenaeum* critic remarked that outside 'France, December 1870' there were sometimes touches reminiscent of Lewis Carroll (No. 119). More than one writer drew attention to the line, 'The friable and the grumous, dizzards both'. The reviewers of *A Reading of Life* (1901), had nothing new to add. The views of many readers were summarized by the reviewer of *Selected Poems* (1897):

We would not seem ungracious: the Poems leave untouched our feeling of high respect for their author; they display an intensely poetical nature; a mind daring, original, and profound, and a marvellous command of language. But we feel, on laying the book down, what Meredith himself says in the beautiful poem, 'The Lark Ascending'. . . . That is just what these beautiful writings lack. The poet must interpret: it is not enough for him to analyze or lecture; and so, though they reveal a personality that is massive, and a genius that is magnificent, these verses remain just outside the fold.³⁰

MEREDITH'S ATTITUDE TO CRITICISM IN LATER YEARS

Meredith might fairly have complained about the unfairness or stupidity of individual critics at any time in his career, but he preferred to assume an attitude of contempt. His early sensitivity and willingness to respond to intelligent criticism ended with his attempt to reconcile his aims with the interests of the public at large. He retained a sharp eye for the comments of reviewers and critics, and was not above taking offence,

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but persisted in declaring his alienation from the British public. Thus, he told an interviewer towards the end of his life:

The press has often treated me as a clown or a harlequin—yes, really! and with such little respect that my fellow-citizens can scarcely put up with me. Do not cry out! Certainly at this late hour they accord me a little glory: my name is celebrated, but no-one reads my books. As for Englishmen, I put them to flight because I bore them. With regard to foreigners I am but an illustrious unknown. Think! all my poems were, until 1896, published at my own expense! Really it is so! No-one has bought by books—my novels or my poems. And now, book-collectors snatch up my first editions, which are sold for twenty or twenty-five guineas.³¹

On these grounds he discouraged Walter Jerrold and G. M. Trevelyan from writing about his work and pretended indifference to the republication of his poetry. Probably this pose was as much the result of embarrassment about praise as of sensitivity to hostile criticism. In familiar conversation he showed that he was far from indifferent. Robertson Nicoll reported:

Once I heard him talk much about criticism. He laid great stress on the fact that he had never replied to a critic. Of this he seemed to be very proud. He owned that he had felt the temptation on more occasions than one. He spoke of the sick feeling with which he had read Hutton's reviews of *Modern Love* in the *Spectator*. There was compensation, however, in Swinburne's noble reply. He was distinctly hurt about some remarks about *One of Our Conquerors*. . . .³²

Meredith's sensitivity, however, was never great enough to make him turn aside from his pursuit of originality or idiosyncrasy. He possessed artistic integrity; but he also had a peculiar reserve, heightened by his isolation from audience and critics. Individual reviews hurt or pleased him, but critics never influenced him to modify his style or technique. He was aware of defects in his work, but regarded them as inevitable; he asked his readers to appreciate his virtues until he became tired of their exclusive concentration on his vices; and then he retired into himself.

MEREDITH'S RECEPTION IN AMERICA

It was part of Meredith's affectation in later years to exaggerate the quickness and enthusiasm of the American response to his work. The *Literary Digest* reported in the year of his death:

America would have been glad to welcome Meredith to her shores, and he is said to have regretted that he never came. "They have always liked me better in

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America,' he remarked recently to an American visitor. 'They don't care about me in England.'³³

The basis of his impression of American enthusiasm seems to have been the relatively high financial returns which he received after the publication of the first collected edition of his novels. He wrote in 1888:

Yesterday I had a startler myself, in the shape of a Draft on Barings from the publishers of my works in Boston, U.S.A. by way of Royalty. Honour to that Republic! I had heard of large sales over there, and a man of experience wrote, through the publishers, to tell me it is nothing to what it will be. But I confess the touch of American money has impressed me with concrete ideas of fame.—I have not been writing much. I must soon be doing, or the trick will quit me. Without placing myself high—or anywhere,—I am, I moan to think, disdainful of an English public, and am beset by the devils of satire when I look on it.³⁴

Yet the impression that he had been more quickly received in America was certainly an illusion. E. J. Bailey has remarked: 'In the first fifteen years of Meredith's literary career . . . there was not apparently a single work referring to Meredith in any American periodical.'³⁵ Until 1885 very few of his works had been published in America at all. *Evan Harrington* appeared there in 1860, but the only public response was a short notice in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*: ' . . . a spirited novel, illustrative of the distinction of rank in English society, and remarkable for the vivacity of its narrative and the dramatic raciness of its dialogue.'³⁶ After *Evan Harrington* came *The Egoist* (1879) and *The Tragic Comedians* (1881). Then in 1885 came two editions of *Diana of the Crossways* from two different publishers and the beginning of the first collected edition. According to W. M. Fullerton, it was only then that the American public began to awaken to Meredith at all. In a note appended to Le Gallienne's *George Meredith* (1890) he wrote:

I remember so well when the name of Meredith first became in America a name to conjure with and most clearly of all I remember the surprised awakening for some of us when we realised for how long this man had been writing, and that we had known nothing of him. . . .

Before the appearance of the first uniform edition . . . George Meredith was scarcely known at all in America. I recall Professor Crosswell of Harvard once saying to me that he had just been reading a very remarkable book, the work of a great mind, naming one of the novels of Meredith, and his asking me if I knew anything about the book. . . . For a long time even the great libraries were without a volume by Meredith except a small poorly-printed Bowdlerised edition of *Diana* which did scarcely any service whatever in making him known

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in America. And then the first uniform one-volume edition appeared from Roberts Brothers in Boston, and the triumphal progress began.³⁷

According to Fullerton, one of the most influential factors in making Meredith's work more widely known was an article by Meredith's friend, Flora Shaw, who described for her American audience a visit to Boxhill and outlined the novelist's opinions about life and literature.³⁸ More critical was an article by G. P. Baker, which was stimulated by Shaw's essay, in which he treated Meredith's works not as 'mere novels', but as 'immensely expanded statements of a philosophical theory of their author's' (No. 81). Baker anticipated a change in taste which would bring about the conditions demanded in the opening chapter of *Diana*.

A year later George Parsons Lathrop published a thoughtful but rather eccentric consideration of Meredith's work in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Lathrop made some errors of fact and of sense: the lesson of *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria*, he remarked, 'seems to be For freedom and country everything must be sacrificed, even the love and hopes of all individual patriots'. *The Egoist*, moreover, he asserted, 'is Meredith's worst novel, an inflated, obese, elephantine comedy, which is not comic'. Finally, the fact that *Diana of the Crossways* involved a report of a divorce case gave him grounds for accusing Meredith of titillating the impure appetites of readers by introducing scandal. On the whole, however, Lathrop's comments were well considered—diffuseness, lameness of movement, and lack of proportion—and his conclusion was eminently sensible: 'Meredith is simply Meredith and we must take him as he is.'³⁹

Another article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, eleven years later, subjected Meredith's whole work to careful scrutiny—again with rather uneven results. Paul Elmer More, reviewing the Scribner 'Boxhill' edition of the novels, found 'the same lack of graceful ease, the same laboured ingenuity in his narration and character-drawing' as in his style. More thought that Meredith's method of characterization put him in the same category as the naturalists and made him liable to the charge of presenting only a partial and false view of human character. He discerned the characteristics of Meredith's technique, but he attributed the novelist's attempt to realize his characters in visual and physiological terms to a desire to underplay the element of volition. Accordingly, More saw Clara Middleton's fate not as the final victory over passion and egoism, but the 'final succumbing in marriage with a character of placid but undeveloped strength'.⁴⁰

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Among the most perceptive of nineteenth-century American studies was the work of Stuart P. Sherman, published in the *Nation* to mark the novelist's death (No. 123). Beginning with a sketch of the development of Meredith's reputation, Sherman went on to analyse his achievement; 'He desired to represent men and women dramatically, revealing the secret springs of their characters in their speeches and acts. But for fatally long periods in many of his novels he would allow them neither to speak nor to act.' Sherman carefully assessed Meredith's contribution to literature and thought, suggesting that his future reputation would be based on his work as a constructive thinker rather than as an artist, though he had solved the problem of contemporary literature fifty years before it existed. Sherman also sketched out Meredith's relationship to his contemporaries, including those who had achieved a larger measure of artistic success, none of whom, he thought, 'fused within himself so many and so diverse powers'. The tone of balanced and objective appreciation which is struck here is not atypical of late nineteenth-century American criticism of Meredith. Beginning a little later than the English, American critics have on the whole fewer errors of commission to lament before the end of the century and fewer of omission since.

MEREDITH'S REPUTATION ON THE CONTINENT

Outside England and America, Meredith's work found an earlier reception in France than in Italy and Germany. In spite of Meredith's own interest in Germany, little attention was paid to him there before 1910, though an authorized translation of his works began to appear in 1904 and one or two articles came out before his death. German criticism after 1910 has been selected, translated, and edited by G. B. Petter in his rather confusing book, *George Meredith and His German Critics* (1939). According to Petter, German students have atoned for their delay in appreciating Meredith by the frequency of their later efforts. In Italy *Richard Feverel* was translated as early as 1873, *Diana of the Crossways* in 1906 and articles on Meredith were published in *Nuova Antologia* in 1906 and 1909.

In France there were few translations. *Sandra Belloni* appeared as early as 1866, but nothing else came out until Henri Davray's translation of the *Essay on the Idea of Comedy* in 1898. This was followed by *The Egoist* (1904) and *The Tragic Comedians* (1901). Criticism in France

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was also slow to start, and it was not until the present century that Meredith's work received very much attention. Emile de Forgues' short note on *Vittoria* in 1867 remained the only sign of critical interest in France until Marcel Schwob's *Spicilège* and Madame Daudet's *Notes sur Londres* (1896). Between 1898 and 1909, however, a number of essays were published by Henri Davray, Emile Legouis, Firmin Roz, and P. Heriot, so that by the year of Meredith's death French critics had made a substantial contribution towards the study of his work. Constantin Photiades, in 1910, published his *George Meredith: sa Vie—son Imagination*, which contains some useful notes of the novelist's conversation. Then in 1923 René Galland's two scholarly studies appeared: *George Meredith: les cinquante premières années* and *George Meredith and British Criticism*. Within two years Galland's books were followed by a critical study by Lucien Wolff (1924) and a chapter by Ramon Fernandez in his *Messages* (1926) which contains a striking description of Meredith's dynamic technique of character presentation.

MEREDITH'S REPUTATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Sixty years ago Meredith's work was an unavoidable fashion, its appreciation part of the literary orthodoxy which had grown slowly over preceding decades. Book-length studies of his work, bibliographies, and comments on the critical history began to appear long before his death and continued in a steady flow until 1914. In the post-war period, however, his reputation underwent a decline from which it has not yet recovered. Since the end of the war writers have frequently contrasted the height of Meredith's fame at the turn of the century with the lack of contemporary esteem for his works. In 1928, for example, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'Twenty years ago the reputation of George Meredith was at its height. His novels had won their way to celebrity through all sorts of difficulties, and their fame was the brighter and the more singular for what it had subdued.'⁴¹ A year later Sencourt observed that Meredith was read neither by the wider public nor by those who followed the literary fashion,⁴² and twenty years after that Edward Sackville West found occasion to remark that 'Mention of his name in instructed company at any time since the First German War has produced an instant reaction of impatience or disgust'.⁴³ The situation has not changed greatly since 1949. Meredith's

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work still remains, for the most part, without readers and his critics often fall short of what he deserves. The high point of criticism was reached in 1910 with Percy Lubbock's review article (No. 125). Since then Meredith has not received attention proportionate to the quality of his work or the degree of his historical importance. Critics less rigorous than Lubbock have been too often content with applying critical formulae and repeating the platitudes of their predecessors.

Meredith's continuance in the desert to which all the great Victorian writers were at one time or another banished is probably to be attributed to two main factors: that he has not yet been out of favour for more than a generation, and that his work conflicts with what has been the dominant mode of criticism since the 1920s. Influential writers like F. R. Leavis and E. M. Forster reacted against Meredith in their youth, and the resulting derogatory or dismissive statements remain prominently on record to discourage readers who have not yet had an opportunity to incur a familiarity with his novels or his poetry.⁴⁴ And comparison with George Eliot, whose popularity had begun to fade before Meredith achieved his greatest fame, suggests that an important factor in his continued unpopularity is his refusal to provide a certain type of 'felt' life or realized context of life. A period which gives as much attention to *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina* as that recently past is likely to admire Meredith only after an effort of adjustment greater than most readers would wish to make. Meanwhile, whether he is read or not, he remains, as Le Gallienne called him, 'a centre of energy', a figure of immense importance in his period, a writer as vigorous as and more versatile than his contemporaries, an artist with a unique capacity to present an impression of unified intellect and passion, and, as Virginia Woolf observed, one whose work 'must inevitably be disputed and discussed'.⁴⁵

NOTES

1. *Spectator*, xxviii, 29 December 1875.
2. *Eclectic Review*, May 1858.
3. *Examiner*, 23 March 1861.
4. *Morning Post*, 20 June 1862.
5. Letter to F. C. Waugh, October 1866.
6. 2 March 1867; *Letters* (1970), ed. C. L. Cline, I, 354.

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7. Letter to William Hardman, September 1870; *Letters* (1970), I, 426.
8. Letter to Augustus Jessop, 18 May 1864; *Letters* (1970), 255. The phrase is actually used with reference to an early version of the novel.
9. J. M'Carthy, *Reminiscences* (1899), 375.
10. Letter to James Thomson, 27 November 1879; *Letters* (1970), II, 588.
11. Letter to James Thomson, 4 July 1879; *Letters* (1970), II, 576.
12. Letter to Augustus Jessop, 18 May 1864; *Letters* (1970), I, 255.
13. W. Robertson Nicoll, *A Bookman's Letters* (1913), 6.
14. Mrs Humphrey Ward, *A Writer's Recollections* (1918).
15. James Thomson, 'An Old New Book', *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, May 1879. The occasion of this article was the publication of the revised edition of *Richard Feverel* (1878).
16. Quoted from H. S. Salt, *The Life of James Thomson* (1889), 140-1.
17. S. M. Ellis, *George Meredith* (1919), 306.
18. *Athenaeum*, No. 2776, 8 January 1881.
19. *Truth*, ix, 20 January 1881.
20. *Daily News*, 27 January 1881.
21. *Westminster Review*, lx, April 1881.
22. *Saturday Review*, lxii, 24 July 1886.
23. R. L. Stevenson to a reporter; see *Pall Mall Gazette*, xlviii, 8 August 1888, 'An Evening with Mr R. L. Stevenson', originally in *Daily Examiner*, San Francisco.
24. J. M. Barrie, *Contemporary Review*, liv, October 1888.
25. Letter to J. H. Hutchinson, 15 October 1906; *Letters* (1970), III, 1573.
26. Meredith told Photiades that the reviewers of *One of Our Conquerors* 'groped blindly in their own great darkness'; *George Meredith* (1913), trans. A. Price (1923), 9.
27. The writer of an article on 'Mr Meredith's Novels' in *Edinburgh Review*, clxxi, January 1885, was an exception. He thought that the moral of *Lord Ormont* was that it was advisable and excusable to seduce your benefactor's wife.
28. William Barry, *Quarterly Review*, clxxiii, October 1891, 'English Realism and Romance'.
29. Interesting information as to how Meredith appeared to the Fabians is given in an exchange of letters in the *Star*, I, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17 September 1891. There is also G. B. Shaw's letter to S. M. Ellis (*George Meredith* (1919), 247), which described how Meredith appeared outdated to Shaw long before the end of the century.
30. *Pall Mall Gazette*, xlv, 13 October 1897.
31. *George Meredith* (1910), trans. A. Price (1923).
32. *A Bookman's Letters* (1913), 10.
33. *Literary Digest*, xxviii, 29 May 1909.
34. Letter to George Stevenson, 15 January 1888; *Letters* (1970), II, 902-3.

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35. E. J. Bailey, 'Meredith in America: a Comment and a Bibliography', *Studies in Language and Literature in Celebration of the Seventieth Birthday of James Morgan Hart* (1910), 44.
36. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, xxii, January 1861.
37. Richard Le Gallienne, *George Meredith* (1890), Appendix.
38. *New Princeton Review*, iii, April 1887.
39. G. P. Lathrop, *Atlantic Monthly*, lxi, February 1888.
40. P. E. More, *Atlantic Monthly*, lxxxiv, October 1899.
41. Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of George Meredith', January 1928; *Collected Essays* (1966), i.224.
42. B. de Sencourt, *The Life of George Meredith* (1929), 314.
43. *Inclinations* (1949), 33.
44. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) (1962 ed.), 96-100, and F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948), 33; *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) (revised ed., 1950), 25. Leavis's brief comment in the latter book could have come from R. H. Hutton.
45. Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of George Meredith', January 1928; *Collected Essays* (1966), I.232.

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LIST OF GEORGE MEREDITH'S PUBLICATIONS

- 1851 *Poems*
 1856 *The Shaving of Shagpat*
 1857 *Farina*
 1859 *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*
 1860 *Evan Harrington, Once a Week*, 11 February–13 October
 1862 *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside*
 1864 *Emilia in England* (later renamed *Sandra Belloni*)
 1865 *Rhoda Fleming*
 1866 *Vittoria*, *Fortnightly Review*, 15 January–1 December
 1870 *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, *Cornhill Magazine*, September 1870–November 1871
 1874 *Beauchamp's Career*, *Fortnightly Review*, August 1874–December 1875
 1879 *The Egoist*, *Glasgow Weekly Herald*, 21 June 1879–10 January 1880
 1880 *The Tragic Comedians*, *Fortnightly Review*, October 1880–February 1881
 1883 *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*
 1884 *Diana of the Crossways*, *Fortnightly Review*, June–December
 1887 *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life*
 1888 *A Reading of Earth*
 1890 *One of Our Conquerors*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Australasian*, and *Sun* (New York), October 1890–May 1891
 1892 *Poems. The Empty Purse*
 1893 *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, *Pall Mall Magazine*, December 1893–August 1894
 1895 *The Amazing Marriage*, *Scribner's Magazine*, January–December 1895
 1898 *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History*, *Cosmopolis*, March, April, May 1898. When published in volume form, the three odes, 'The Revolution', 'Napoleon' and 'Alsace-Lorraine', were accompanied by the earlier 'France, December 1870' from the *Fortnightly Review*, January 1871
 1901 *A Reading of Life, with Other Poems*

POEMS

1851

I. Unsigned review, *Leader*

ii, 5 July 1851

The *Leader* was a Radical newspaper which ran between 1850 and 1860, to which Meredith seems to have contributed regularly; it was edited by G. H. Lewes (see below, No. 8, headnote).

Among the many volumes of ambitious verse which the inconsiderate 'request of friends' annually usher into public oblivion, there are generally two or three to 'repay' the reader, if not the publisher—volumes with glimpses of 'the enchanted gardens'—verse writers who have something more than the 'accomplishment of verse,' Mr Meredith's volume is one of these. Amidst pages of indifferent writing, carelessness, and commonplace, are mingled pages bright with fancy, and musical with emotion. A nice perception of nature, aided by a delicacy of expression, gives to these poems a certain charm not to be resisted; and, although they betray no depth of insight nor of feeling, although they are neither thoughtful nor impassioned, yet they rise from out the mass of verses by a certain elegance and felicity of expression which distinguish them. Read this and judge:

[Quotes 'South-West Wind in the Woodland', ll. 1-98.]

The versification of these poems is frequently careless and unmusical to a degree that nothing can excuse; and in general we complain of a want of that care and thought which a true poet would bestow upon his trifles. There is something piquant and alluring in the opening of a pastoral we are about to quote; but the rugged verse and commonplace conclusion make us regret it was not a fragment ending where our extract ends:

[Quotes 'Love in the Valley', st. 1-4.]

*

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Deekar, in one of his chaotic plays, uses the quaint but truthful simile, 'untameable as flies';¹ the same observation of Nature is implied in Mr Meredith's—

Then Winter, *he who tamed the fly!*

But the verse is rather quaint than poetic, inasmuch as it is throwing Winter into insignificance to select fly-taming as *the* characteristic of its power. We noticed other examples of this same tendency; but the whole volume is too obviously a collection of trifles to demand close criticism. We notice it because the workmanship of these trifles is elegant and fanciful.

2. Unsigned review, *Spectator*

xxiv, 22 August 1851

Meredith's relations with the *Spectator* is a subject in itself. This review, and No. 12, below, was perhaps by *Spectator's* first Editor, Stephen Rintoul (1787–1858), who had no prejudice against the young novelist. In 1861, however, the journal was acquired by R. H. Hutton and Meredith Townsend. From then on literary reviews were the responsibility of Hutton (1826–97), whose inclination to the moralistic interpretation of literature prevented him from treating Meredith's work objectively. Hutton was a very intelligent and important critic, respected by Arnold, Clough, F. D. Maurice, Browning, and Newman, and there is no doubt that his opposition did much to damage Meredith's reputation.

This volume possesses considerable poetical feeling and poetical faculty, but displays more of promise than performance. Mr Meredith has the

¹ Thomas Dekker, *The Honest Whore* (1604), part 1, scene xiii.

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characteristics of young or unstudied writers. His subjects are often too limited or common, and an attempt to impart attraction by treatment does not always succeed, the result being a curious quaintness rather than novelty. With the power of independent judgment and observation, Mr Meredith falls too much into the ruts of a school, and, without very closely imitating any writer in particular, frequently reminds the reader of Tennyson or Keats, with occasional touches of the Brownings; though this manner is so common among poetical aspirants, that it may be as much a literary fashion as an individual imitation. Mr Meredith has occasionally, too, a sensuous warmth of image and expression, which, though not passing propriety, might as well be tempered. With the exception of want of breadth and novelty in the subjects, these things, though they may injure the style or lower the class, can hardly be said to impair the interest of the poems. Mr Meredith's greatest fault is overdoing: he rarely knows when he has said enough: besides continually overlaying his ideas by expansion, he introduces similes not always the aptest, and in addition to making them more prominent than the principal idea, runs them on till they become a new subject. This fault would detract from the interest of any composition; but it admits of an easy remedy. If Mr. Meredith intends to cultivate poetry, this over-exuberance must be steadily repressed. For example, 'The Sleeping City' consists of twenty-nine stanzas, fourteen of which are devoted to the Eastern Princess in the city whose inhabitants were turned to stone; a mere illustrative image being nearly as long as the incident itself. It may seem that there is something of the spirit of Sterne's stop-watch in this; but, to borrow a remark from Sir Fretful Plagiary, 'the watch on these occasions, you know, is the critic.'¹

The poems are mostly of the kind called occasional; consisting of everyday incidents, or themes suggested by some object common to every observation. These are occasionally varied by classical subjects running into a short tale—as the metamorphosis of Daphne, or the shipwreck of Idomeneus. In most of them there is poetical imagery, feeling, and diction; the last if not altogether original yet unhacknied, with frequent felicity of idea or phraseology, though sometimes of an odd kind. Description is perhaps Mr Meredith's strongest point; but he has also looked upon society and the questions which now agitate it. This glance may not have produced absolute originality, but it has saved him from the commonplaces of poetasters. The following stanzas are from a poem called 'The Olive Branch'—the name of a vessel thus

¹ *Tristram Shandy* (1760-7), III. xii, and R. B. Sheridan, *The Critic* (1779), I. 1.

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christened because a dove dropped an olive sprig upon it at the moment of launching.

[Quotes 'The Olive Branch', st. 15-20.]

3. J. A. Heraud, *Athenaeum*

No. 1243, 23 August 1851

John Abraham Heraud (1799-1887) wrote regularly for the *Athenaeum* between 1843 and 1868. He also wrote for the *Quarterly* and *Fraser's* and published several epic poems, including *The Descent into Hell* (1830) and *The Judgement of the Flood* (1834).

From the mass of volumes of verse which load our table, we select one that deserves a somewhat better introduction to our readers than could be given under our accustomed title of 'Poetry of the Million'.

It would seem that the class of 'singers' is on the increase. The Singer is distinguished from the Poet much in the same manner as aptitude is from genius. The poet is a fully developed spirit, uniting to a wide experience a philosophical judgment and the qualifications of an artist in verse. The 'singer' simply requires an instinct for song and a desire to use the gift on exciting occasions. The form is accordingly, for the most part, lyrical, and the matter frequently personal. The turn of a phrase, a delicate cadence, some grace of diction or tenderness of sentiment will suffice as a distinguishing merit, and establish the claim of the minor minstrel, whose themes are generally as fugitive as his flight is brief.

Mr Meredith is to a certain extent a writer of the class indicated—but he may even claim to be something more. His small volume contains some essays with an epic ambition in their aim not unlike the classic imitations of Tennyson. 'Daphne', 'Antigone', and 'The Shipwreck of Idomeneus' are the titles and themes of such attempts. These are not without poetic fervour. They show a fair acquaintance with Greek models, and a power of verbal combination of considerable 'mark and

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likelihood'. Occasional negligences betray his want of mastery. Thus, in the lyrical poems, some of which might almost be called beautiful, we meet at times with stanzas that are quite prosaic in feeling and in diction. Many of the pieces, too, are set exercises—such as the leading poem of the series, entitled 'The Olive Branch'. This is the name of a ship—and the moral is this:

[Quotes 'The Olive Branch', st. 29–30.]

This mere theme-writing is the fault of the volume, and betrays the young writer. But his 'juvenilia', if such they be, are of positive merit—and of more promise. Take the following tricky ditty:

[Quotes 'Song', 'Love within the lover's breast'.]

This, in fact, is merely pretty—yet it has a smack of Herrick in it. The example is not a sound one—and we counsel Mr Meredith not to let the spell of the old erotic poet lead him into paths where the master himself found more weeds than flowers—and whose flowers, even as culled and bound by Herrick, look pale beside those that grow in the atmosphere of nobler thought.

As a quaint example of Mr Meredith's poems, take the following:

[Quotes 'Will o' the Wisp'.]

It is not always, however, that the author is so elaborate in his verbal and rhythmical displays. One more example must suffice our readers, to enable them to determine on Mr Meredith's chance to keep his permanent station *without* the poetical playgrounds of 'The Million'.

[Quotes 'The Death of Winter'.]

It will be said, no doubt, that these are small beauties—and even as such are chargeable with affectation. We fear that the objections must be allowed—and in an older writer they would have determined our verdict in a harsher sense. But where the 'prentice-hand' is so manifest as in this volume, we accept the signs of care and intention which it exhibits as indications of an artistic tendency in the 'singer', and to a certain extent as pledges that one day he may become a poet.

4. W. M. Rossetti, *Critic*

x, 5 November 1851; signed 'W.M.R.'

William Michael Rossetti (1829–1919), younger brother of Dante Gabriel and Christina, was twenty-one when he wrote this article. Later Meredith became intimate with the Rossettis and for a time in 1863 rented a room in Dante Gabriel's house in Cheyne Walk.

The full poet is a thoroughly balanced compound of perception and intellect. By the first faculty he sees vividly, and feels to the inmost; by the second, he understands deeply and largely, and applies with a subtle searching breadth. The power of expression is a correlative of both; but it belongs more immediately to the first. Though TENNYSON had not been the author *in posse* of *In Memoriam*, he might equally have produced such perfect word-painting as we find in *Mariana*; but a want of that perception which constitutes the essence of the latter would have made the former more faint from first to last.

Of the perceptive poet we have had no other such complete example as KEATS. It is the delight in what he sees, the sympathy with what he narrates, that endows him with his marvellous power of expression. To him everything was an opportunity. Yet, he saw nature and emotion as rather suggestive than typical; as exciting the thoughts outwards, not leading them inwards. His poems have but little of the unconscious simile (to be found so largely in those of TENNYSON for instance), the implication in description of an inner essence and ulterior meaning. KEATS portrays his object with keen exquisite picturing, but which aims only at the phenomenal fact; or else he makes use of the simile direct. His enthusiasm was less an inner fire than a visible lambent halo. He saw loveliness in nature, or found it the incentive to lovely thoughts. He rested in the effect. 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'

Mr MEREDITH seems to us a kind of limited KEATS. He is scarcely a perceptive, but rather a seeing or sensuous poet. He does not love nature in a wide sense as KEATS did; but nature delights and appeals closely to him. In proportion, however, as his sympathies are less vivid, excitable,

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and diffusive, he concentrates them the more. He appropriates a section of nature, as it were; and the love which he bears to it partakes more of affection. Viewing Mr MEREDITH as a Keatsian, and allowing for (what we need not stop to assert), the entire superiority of the dead poet—we think it is in this point that the most essential phase of difference will be found between the two: and it is one which, were the resemblance in other respects more marked and more unmixed than it is, would suffice to divide Mr MEREDITH from the imitating class. The love of KEATS for nature was not an *affectionate* love: it was minute, searching, and ardent; but hardly personal. He does not lose himself in nature, but contemplates her and utters her forth to the delight of all ages.¹ Indeed, if we read his record aright, he was not, either in thought or in feeling, a strongly affectionate man; and the passion which ate into him at the last was a mania and infatuation, raging like disease, a symptom and a part of it. It is otherwise with Mr MEREDITH. In his best moments he seems to sing, because it comes naturally to him, and silence would be restraint, not through exuberance or inspiration, but in simple contentedness, or throbbing of heart. There is an amiable and engaging quality in the poems of Mr MEREDITH, a human companionship and openness, which make the reader feel his friend.

But, perhaps, it is chiefly in the impressions of love that our new poet's likeness and unlikeness at once to the author of *Endymion* and *Lamia* are to be recognized. We are told that women felt pique at KEATS for treating them in his verses scarcely otherwise than flowers or perfumes; as beautifiers and the object of tender and pleasurable emotion—a charm of life. They missed the language of individual love, dignified, and equal. Nor was the quarrel without a cause: but the reader will probably, at the first reading of the very charming, melodious, and rhythmical poem which we proceed to quote, think us unfair in trying to fasten it on Mr MEREDITH:

[Quotes 'Love in the Valley'.]

Surely, it may be said, there is passion enough here, and of a sufficiently personal kind. True, indeed: this is not a devotion which sins through lukewarmth, and roams uncertain of an object. It will not fail to obtain an answer, through dubiousness of quest: and if it shocks at all, it shocks the delicacy, not the *amour-propre*. But its characteristics are, in

¹ We hope it is superfluous to explain that, in what is here said of Keats, we seek only to discriminate, not to depreciate; and that we love and reverence him as one of the most glorious of poets.

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fact, the same as those at which exception was taken in the case of KEATS. The flame burns here, which there only played, darting its thin quick tongue from point to point: but the difference is of concentration only. The impressionable is changed for the strongly impressed—the influence being similar. Here again the love, like our poet's love of nature, has the distinct tone of *affection*. It is purely and unaffectedly sensuous, and in its utterance as genuine a thing as can be. We hear a clear voice of nature, with no falsetto notes at all; as spontaneous and intelligible as the wooing of a bird, and equally a matter of course.

The main quality of Mr MEREDITH's poems is warmth—warmth of emotion, and, to a certain extent, of imagination, like the rich mantling blush on a beautiful face, or a breath glowing upon your cheek. That he is young will be as unmistakably apparent to the reader as to ourself; on which score various shortcomings and crudities, not less than some excess of this attribute, claim indulgence. The 'Rape of Aurora' for example, is certainly too highly-coloured; 'Daphne' objectionably spun out, even if but in regard to length; and 'Angelic Love' other than angelic. The following, against which this plea cannot be urged, is a graceful and fitting companion to 'Love in the Valley'.

[Quote 'Song', 'Under boughs of breathing May'.]

Our last quotation displays Mr MEREDITH in one of his more exclusively descriptive pieces. But we may observe that, here too, the emotion is what most distinctly impresses itself, while the description proper, though not wanting in precision and minuteness, looms somewhat faintly:

[Quotes 'Song', 'The daisy now is out upon the green'.]

We have assigned Mr MEREDITH to the Keatsian school, believing that he pertains to it in virtue of the more intrinsic qualities of his mind, and of a simple enjoying nature; and as being beyond doubt of the perceptive class in poetry. In mere style, however, he attaches himself rather to the poets of the day: the pieces in which a particular bias is most evident being in a Tennysonian mould—as the 'Olive Branch', and the 'Shipwreck of Idomeneus'—while some of his smaller lyrics smack of HERRICK. He has a good ear for melody, and considerable command of rhythm; but he seems sometimes to hanker unduly after novelty of metre, attaining it, if there be no other means to his hand, by some change in length or interruption of rhyme which has a dragging and inconsequent effect. That his volume is young is not its fault: nor

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are we by any means sure that is its misfortune. Some jingle-pieces there are, indeed—mere commonplace and current convention, which mature judgment would exclude: but the best are those whose spirit is the spirit of youth, and which are the fullest of it. We do not expect ever quite to enrol Mr MEREDITH among the demigods or heroes; and we hesitate, for the reason just given, to say that we count on greater things from him; but we shall not cease to look for his renewed appearance with hope, and to hail it with extreme pleasure, so long as he may continue to produce poems equal to the best in this first volume.

5. Charles Kingsley, *Fraser's Magazine*

xliv, December 1851

Charles Kingsley (1819–75) was already an established author when he wrote this appreciative review. The passage reprinted is part of a general review article and the reference in the first line is to Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803–49), whose *Poems, Posthumous and Collected* (1851) Kingsley had just been discussing.

Quite antipodal to the poems of Mr Beddoes, and yet, in our eyes, fresh proofs of the truth of those rules which we have tried to sketch, are the poems of Mr George Meredith. This, we understand, is his first appearance in print; if it be so, there is very high promise in the unambitious little volume which he has sent forth as his first-fruits. It is something, to have written already some of the most delicious little love-poems which we have seen born in England in the last few years, reminding us by their richness and quaintness of tone of Herrick; yet with a depth of thought and feeling which Herrick never reached. Health and sweetness are two qualities which run through all these poems. They are often overloaded—often somewhat clumsy and ill-expressed—often wanting polish and finish; but they are all genuine, all melodiously conceived, if not always melodiously executed. One often wishes, in reading the

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volume, that Mr Meredith had been thinking now and then of Moore instead of Keats, and had kept for revision a great deal which he has published; yet now and then form, as well as matter, is nearly perfect. For instance:

[Quotes two songs, 'The Moon is alone in the sky', and 'I cannot lose thee for a day'.]

In Mr Meredith's Pastorals, too, there is a great deal of sweet wholesome writing, more like real pastorals than those of any young poet whom we have had for many a year. Let these suffice as specimens:

[Quotes 'Pastorals', vii, ll 38-48.]

Careless as hexameters; but honest landscape-painting; and only he who begins honestly ends greatly.

[Quotes 'Love in the Valley', st. 1-3.]

What gives us here hope for the future, as well as enjoyment on the spot, is, that these have evidently not been put together, but have grown of themselves; and the one idea has risen before his mind, and shaped itself into a song; not perfect in form, perhaps, but as far as it goes, healthful, and consistent, and living, through every branch and spray of detail. And this is the reason why Mr. Meredith has so soon acquired an instinctive melody, which Mr Beddoes, as we saw, never could. To such a man, any light which he can gain from æsthetic science will be altogether useful. The living seed of a poem being in him, and certain to grow and develope somehow, the whole gardener's art may be successfully brought to bear on perfecting it. For this is the use of æsthetic science—to supply, not the bricklayer's trowel, but the hoe, which increases the fertility of the soil, and the pruning-knife, which lops off excrescences. For Mr Meredith—with real kindness we say it, for the sake of those love-poems—has much to learn, and, as it seems to us, a spirit which can learn it; but still it must be learnt. One charming poem—for instance, 'Daphne'—is all spoilt, for want of that same pruning-knife. We put aside the question whether a ballad form is suitable, not to the subject—for to that, as a case of purely objective action, it is suitable—but to his half-Elegiac, thoughtful handling of it. Yet we recommend him to consider whether his way of looking at the Apollo and Daphne myth be not so far identical with Mr Tennyson's idea of 'Paris and CEnone', as to require a similar Idyllic form, to give the thoughtful element its fair weight. If you treat external action merely (and in as far as you do so, you will really reproduce those old

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sensuous myths) you may keep the ballad form, and heap verse on verse as rapidly as you will; but if you introduce any subjective thought, after the fashion of the Roman and later Greek writers, to explain the myth, and give it a spiritual, or even merely allegoric meaning, you must, as they did, slacken the pace of your verse. Let Ovid's *Fasti* and *Epistles* be your examples, at least in form, and write slowly enough to allow the reader to think as he goes on. The neglect of this rule spoils the two best poems in *Reverberations*, 'Balder', and 'Thor', which, whatever were the faults of the rest of the book, were true and noble poems;¹ and the neglect of it spoils 'Apollo and Daphne'. Mr Meredith is trying all through to mean more than the form which he has chosen allows him. That form gives free scope to a prodigality of objective description, of which Keats need not have been ashamed; but if he had more carefully studied the old models of that form—from the simple Scotch ballads to Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis'—a ballad and not an idyl—he would have avoided Keats' fault of too-muchness, into which he has fallen. Half the poem would bear cutting out; even half of those most fresh and living stanzas, where the whole woodland springs into life to stop Daphne's flight—where

[Quotes 'Daphne', st. 84 and 86.]

Every stanza is a picture in itself, but there are too many of them; and therefore we lose the story in the profusion of its accidentals. There is a truly Correggiesque tone of feeling and drawing all through this poem, which is very pleasant to us. But we pray Mr Meredith to go to the National Gallery, and there look steadily and long, with all the analytic insight he can, at the 'Venus and Mercury', or the 'Agony in the Garden'; or go to the Egyptian Hall, and there feast, not only his eyes and heart, but his intellect and spirit also, with Lord Ward's duplicate of the 'Magdalen'²—the grandest Protestant sermon on 'free justification by faith' ever yet preached; and there see how Correggio can dare to indulge in his exquisite lusciousness of form, colour, and chiaro-scuro, without his pictures ever becoming tawdry or overwrought—namely, by the severe scientific unity and harmonious graduation of parts which he so carefully preserves, which make his pictures single glorious rainbows of precious stone—that Magdalen one living emerald—instead of being, like the jewelled hawk in the

¹ *Reverberations* (1849) was by W. M. W. Call.

² Kingsley is referring to the current exhibition of Lord Ward's collection of paintings in the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. The building was erected in 1812 by William Bullock, originally to house his museum of natural history.

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Great Exhibition, every separate atom of it beautiful, yet as a whole utterly hideous.

One or two more little quarrels we have with Mr Meredith—and yet they are but *amantium iræ*, after all. First, concerning certain Keatist words—such as languorous, and innumeros, and such like, which are very melodious, but do not, unfortunately, belong to this our English tongue, their places being occupied already by old and established words; as Mr Tennyson has conquered this fault in himself, Mr Meredith must do the same. Next, concerning certain ambitious metres, sound and sweet, but not thoroughly worked out, as they should have been. Mr Meredith must always keep in mind that the species of poetry which he has chosen is one which admits of nothing less than perfection. We may excuse the roughness of Mrs Browning's utterance, for the sake of the grandeur and earnestness of her purpose; she may be reasonably supposed to have been more engrossed with the matter than with the manner. But it is not so with the idyllist and lyrist. He is not driven to speak by a prophetic impulse; he sings of pure will, and therefore he must sing perfectly, and take a hint from that microcosm, the hunting-field; wherein if the hounds are running hard, it is no shame to any man to smash a gate instead of clearing it, and jump into a brook instead of over it. Forward he must get, by fair means if possible, if not, by foul. But if, like the idyllist, any gentleman 'larks' his horse over supererogatory leaps at the coverside, he is not allowed to knock all four hoofs against the top bar; but public opinion (who, donkey as she is, is a very shrewd old donkey, nevertheless, and clearly understands the difference between thistles and barley) requires him to 'come up in good form, measure his distance exactly, take off neatly, clear it cleverly, and *come well into the next field*'. . . . And even so should idyllists with their metres.

THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT

1856

6. Unsigned review, *Critic*

xv, 1 January 1856

This short notice is part of a general review article. The Owen Meredith referred to was the pseudonym of Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton (1831–91), poet and dramatist, the son of Edward Bulwer Lytton, novelist and politician. To mistake George for the better-known Owen was common, and this is the first of several warnings from the reviewers to readers.

It is necessary to premise that George Meredith, the author of *The Shaving of Shagpat*, is *not* Owen Meredith, the poet who, under that name, thinly disguises his relationship to Sir E. L. Bulwer Lytton. It is an Eastern tale, told in imitation of the Eastern style, and therefore, like all such imitations, a mistake. It is a good story spoilt by the adoption of a bad medium for telling it. This is the reason. An Englishman cannot think Eastern thoughts; the Western mind is cast in a very different mould. Hence there is a manifest discrepancy between the ideas and their dress. They are not in keeping; the drapery does not sit naturally upon the foreign figure; all is stiff and constrained. The Briton is seen palpably under the turban. So it has ever been, and so it must ever be. Mr George Meredith's skill in making a story, and humour in relating it, does not compensate for the imperfections of an impossible imitation. If he would write an English story in the English manner, laying his scenes among places familiar to him, and making his personages of those whom he has met in the actual world about him, he would, we believe, be entirely successful, for he has a playful fancy, much invention, and a pleasant manner of telling a tale, which would

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be sure to win and keep the attention of an audience. As a mere *brochure* for Christmas, this volume may be accepted; but the author designed something more than a book for the season, which has failed only because he has attempted that in which nobody has ever yet succeeded. Even burlesque comedy cannot be endured through so many pages.

7. George Eliot, *Leader*

vii, 5 January 1856

Like G. H. Lewes (see below, No. 8), George Eliot probably got to know Meredith through his contributions to the *Leader*. Later Meredith took over the 'Belles Lettres' section of the *Westminster Review*, which had been written previously by Eliot. She disliked the tone of Meredith's reviews, which she called 'flippant and journalistic', and wrote to John Chapman, Editor of the *Westminster*, urging that he replace Meredith. In their early years the two novelists must have been familiar. Later, however, they showed little awareness of each other's work.

No art of religious symbolism has a deeper root in nature than that of turning with reverence towards the East. For almost all our good things—our most precious vegetables, our noblest animals, our loveliest flowers, our arts, our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery tales and romances, have travelled to us from the East. In an historical as well as in a physical sense, the East is the Land of the Morning. Perhaps the simple reason of this may be, that when the earth first began to move on her axis her Asiatic side was towards the sun—her Eastern cheek first blushed under his rays. And so this priority of sunshine, like the first move in chess, gave the East the precedence though not the pre-eminence in all things; just as the garden slope that fronts the morning sun yields the earliest seedlings, though those seedlings may attain a hardier and more luxuriant growth by being transplanted. But we leave this question to wiser heads—

'Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.'¹

¹ Virgil, *Georgics*, ii. 490: 'Happy he who can discern the causes of things.'