



GEORGE MEREDITH AS A POET AND DRAMATIC NOVELIST

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PREFACE

The scope and nature of this Thesis excludes at once the possibility of dealing exhaustively with so towering and complex a genius as George Meredith. He is so wholly sui generis that neglect of him involves neglect of nothing else, implies no deficiency of taste, no literary limitation. He cannot be placed. He has no derivation and no tendency; and yet he bridges the gap between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries as though the Victorian era had never been. It has, therefore, been natural to concentrate attention on the man's work itself rather than on its relation to that of contemporary or succeeding craftsmen. Consideration of space have made it necessary to isolate certain of his essential conceptions and salient characteristics. These have been considered analytically. While not claiming real novelty for many of the views set forward, there is a considerable degree, especially in the last two chapters. Needless to say, the portions of Meredith about which the critics are agreed, are much more important than anything "new" that can be said about him. For this reason the aim has been to go to the man's work so far as it was compatible with a moderate array of authority. Originality has been sought by going to origins rather than in eccentricity of opinion.

Chapter 1.

MEREDITH'S EDUCATION AND PERSONALITY.

George Meredith is one of those dazzling figures who are never considered to have had an environment or history such as other men. He flashes before us like those splendid Renaissance figures, unaccountable and almost superhuman. His own remarkable reticence on all matters pertaining to his early life gave rise to many legends, none of which he was at pains to dispel. The consequence is, that concerning George Meredith who lived from 1828 until 1909 when the lives of great men were subjected to minute scrutiny, we know for certainty, not much more than we know of Chaucer, Spenser or Shakespeare. We know that he was born at Portsea, that his grandfather and father were Welsh and Irish respectively. His contemporaries did not know that he had filled "Evan Harrington" with many facts about himself and his family. They rather supposed that "Harry Richmond" contained his story. And they were right, insofar as it describes a most unhappy and unfortunately circumstanced little boy. We may account for Meredith's reticence partly on the grounds of his unhappy childhood and partly on the grounds of a dark oracular tinge in his temperament, which in spite of his intellectual honesty, taught him a love of mystery.

Meredith's mother died when he was only five. He early developed an hostility to his father which was never mitigated till the end. When he was fourteen the executors of his mother's small estate sent him to the justly celebrated Moravian School at Neuwied. Here, in this live, cultured part of the Rhine country, he remained continuously for two years. To the careful student of Meredith's life and work these two years will appear to be the largest single influence in his life. It must be remembered that in 1848 a new current of fresh ideas and noble emotions was sweeping through the educated classes of Germany. Romantic liberalism had penetrated even to Theology and the youth were imbued with a fine enthusiasm for social service. That Meredith was bathed in this atmosphere, instead of that of the Apostles Club at Cambridge, explains how he escaped the complacent attitude of the isolated provincial, which was undoubtedly the greatest vice of Victorian England.

At Neuwied he got more than the inspiration for "Farina" and the German scenes in "Harry Richmond". He was confirmed in a large romantic enthusiasm for great and healthy men and deeds and books. Through even the most analytical portions of his high social comedy there stirs constantly a breeze from this spirit. Here too, he commenced his familiarity with Jean Paul Richter and Goethe and German metaphysics. The influence of Jean Paul Richter is as patent in Meredith as in Carlyle and is the reason why Carlyle and Meredith have sometimes been compared. It was not entirely fortunate that the German writer con-

firmed these men in a wilfull love of the fantastic, which often dilapidated their structure and style.

The second, and perhaps last, formative influence traceable in Meredith, commenced when at twenty-two he married a brilliant and gifted widow of thirty, Mary Ellen Nicholls was a daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. The tragedy of the deep incompatibility of this marriage is adumbrated in "Modern Love". Thomas Love Peacock, the scholar and epicure, portrayed in "The Egoist" as Dr. Middleton, had an even more notable effect on ^{the} turn or determination given to Meredith's genius. It was probably Peacock who turned the attention of the romantic young poet to intellectual comedy, as well as to the spiritual refinements of the higher gastronomy. Peacock was an ardent follower of the Comic Spirit and an enthusiastic student of comeny in all its forms, as his novels show. It is unlikely that Meredith could have been in close contact with a forceful and fascinating personality like Peacock without incurring some debt of influence. "Meredith's long service to the Comic Spirit, to which he dedicated a richer mind and greater genius than ever Peacock possessed, probably began over the madeira and port in Peacock's study. The marriage with the daughter may have been a disaster to Meredith the man, but the association with the father was undoubtedly a godsend to Meredith the writer". (1)

(1) George Meredith by J. B. Priestly. "English Men of Letters"...p.16.

It is perhaps to his friendship with Frederick Maxe, a young naval officer of distinction, who is portrayed in the character of Nevil Beauchamp (1), that we can trace the swift development of Meredith's radical sympathies. This life-long friendship was cemented while Meredith was planning "Richard Feverel". As this work shows, he was now complete in his development as a man, if not as an artist. The romantic, the comic and the radical features are all represented.

Throughout his life a wide and constantly increasing circle of friends and acquaintances bespoke his keen interest in men, and also supplied him with endless matter for character portrayal. There is no character, great or small in his novels that is not owing to his direct observation. But if he was owing to them for many vivid subjects, we are owing to them for accounts of the character and personality to Meredith himself. To those who knew him he always appeared greater in life than in his works. Sir Francis Burnand expressed a common sentiment when he burst out, "Damn you George, why don't you write as you talk?" (2). The exuberent energy and joy, combined with resilient intellectual fibre, that went into his chief characters, was even more characteristic of Meredith. "He came to the morning meal after a long hour's stride in the tonic air and fresh loveliness of the cool woods and green slopes, with the brightness of sunrise upon his brow, re-

(1) "Beauchamp's Career".

(2) "George Meredith" by S. M. Ellis...p. 163.

sponsive penetration in his glance, the turn of radiant irony in his lips and peaked beard, his fine poetic head bright with crisp brown hair, Phoebus Apollo descending upon us from Olympus. His voice was strong, full, resonant, harmonious, his laugh quick and loud. He was born with much power both of muscle and of nerve, but he abused muscle and nerve alike by violent gymnastic after hours of intense concentration in contracted posture over labors of brain and pen". (1).

Exuberent vitality of body and mind was the most notable thing about him. Chesterton has pointed out that the parents of the grotesque are energy and joy, (2) and Meredith is a further confirmation of this. The sad and pessimistic Hardy displays nothing grotesque in his style, but the joyous and optimistic Meredith is often harsh and peculiar.

Justin McCarthy did not see Meredith until he was past middle life, "and yet he had the appearance and movements of one endowed with a youth that could not fade; energy was in every movement; vital power spoke in every gesture.....He seemed to have in him much of the temperament of a fawn: he seemed to have sprung from the very bosom of nature herself.

"His talk was wonderful, and, perhaps, not the least wonderful thing about it was that it seemed so very like his writing. Now it was Richard Feverel who talked to you, and now Adrian Harley, and then Beauchamp--not that he

(1) "Lord Morley". Recollections. Vol. 1, p.37.

(2) Robert Browning, by G. K. Chesterton, "English Men of Letters"...p.148.

ever repeated any of the recorded sayings of these men, but that he talked as one could imagine any of them capable of talking on any suggested subject.....He was a man of strong likings and dislikings in letters and in art; his very prejudices had a charm in them because they gave him such admirable opportunities for scattering new and bewildering fancies around his subject.

".....it amazed me when I first used to visit him, to see a man, no longer young, indulge in such feats of strength and agility. It delighted him to play with great iron weights, and to throw heavy clubs into the air and catch them as they fell and twirl them round his head as though they had been light bamboo canes". (1)

William Sharp, the naturalist, was amazed at Meredith's knowledge of life in field and forest. "It's never safe with our wily friend, to take for granted that he doesn't know more about any subject than anyone else does!" (2) Not even Richard Jeffries, who gave his whole thought to what is in Meredith only a background, knew nature more intimately.

The unanimous testimony of all who heard him, ascribed to Meredith a pre-eminence in conversation and talk that must rank him among the greatest of all time. He was not a monologist like Coleridge or Carlyle, but preferred, like Johnson, to allow his company to choose the theme. "His talk like his best writing, had an

(1) "George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism". J.A. Hammerton...p. 58.

(2) Ibid...p. 67.

immense range, and was crammed with wit and observation, poetry and humour. He had a trick common to most of the best literary talkers of allowing his humorous fancy to go soaring into the very blue of absurdity, sometimes, as one of his friends relates, raising an account of the life and character of an acquaintance into a monstrously comic and entirely imaginary biography, in which, however, truth of character would be observed to the very end. Like Dickens, he lived intimately with the chief personages of his novels, having imagined them intensely and would talk of them as if they were real people." (1) The lively play of his spiritualized face, along with a resonant and exquisitely modulated voice, which played lightly and easily with great sentences, combined to produce an unforgettable experience for his audience. And no less notable was his magnificent capacity and love for "thunders of laughter, clearing air and heart". (2)

No matter from what point Meredith is viewed, he shows strength and brilliance, and to follow his mixed fortunes as he flashed into English society and letters, is to be no less fascinated than by the romantic histories of the gallant social adventures he so delighted to portray. The Countess de Saldor (3) and Richmond Roy (4) were no more daring or consummate in their generalship than George Meredith, the self-educated son of a tailor, who by the sheer force of his genius carved for himself an unique and lustrous position in English letters. It is

- (1) Priestly. op. cit...p. 50.
- (2) "The Spirit of Shakespeare".
- (3) "Evan Harrington".
- (4) "Harry Richmond".

true that he made one mistake fatal to his popularity. He assumed that the world was craving for enlightenment on certain perplexing problems, whereas it was seeking obscurity and forgetfulness. But it was a mistake any man would like to have made. And so, while he never attained and never will attain popularity, true fame is his by indefeasible right. "For fame is not popularity. The shout of the multitude, the idle buzz of fashion, the venal puff, the soothing flattery of favor or of friendship; but it is the spirit of a man surviving himself in the minds and thoughts, undying and imperishable. It is the power which the intellect exercises over the intellect, and the lasting homage which is paid to it, as such, independently of time and circumstances, purified from partiality and evil-speaking. Fame is the sound which the stream of high thought, carried down to future ages, makes as it flows--deep, distant, murmuring evermore like the waters of the mighty ocean". (1) No caprice of fashion or opinion can deprive Meredith of fame in this deeper sense.

Many critics have observed that in some peculiar manner Meredith does not "date". His work has a timeless quality that is all the more extraordinary when one considers the numerous and abortive compromises which so definitely mar the thought and work of his Victorian contemporaries. He is of the truly great who "have all one age, and from one visible space shed influence!"(2) And he has all the joyous freshness that belongs to the morning of the world, besides the inspired commonsense that is

(1) Lectures on the English Poets by William Hazlitt.
"Everyman". P. 144.

(2) "To A Gentleman" by S. T. Coleridge.

sadly associated with that twilight in which the owl of
Minerva commences its flight.

Chapter 11.

MEREDITH'S ART AND STYLE IN PROSE AND POETRY.

Most critics have been content to speak of Meredith as an artist in whose work great faults struggle with rare beauties for the ascendant, and provided that they have been able to quote passages that are clearly faulty and others that are indisputably beautiful, they conceive that justice has been done. By comparing Meredith with Browning at certain points in this chapter, it will be shown that these men who were alike only insofar as they were not easy reading, were badly misunderstood by the generality of their critics. For it is no more true to say that Browning is a great poet in despite of his grotesqueness than to say that Meredith is great in despite of his frequent harshness and intense compression. Browning has been triumphantly vindicated by many understanding admirers. But Meredith, while in many respects equally deserving, has not been so fortunate.

In attempting to display Meredith's true artistry it will be more effective to pay particular attention to his poetry. For "his prose achievement is a natural growth, while his work in verse is the product of deliberate choice. His speaking voice is an affair of organization, his singing voice is the result of careful training".

(1) And while there is no essential feature of either his

(1) Hammerton. op. cit...P.263.

poetry or prose that is not exhibited in either, it is true that he regarded his prose as secondary. "The novel is my brawny scullery jill." (1) Speaking late in life to his friend Edward Clodd, he said: "Chiefly by that in my poetry which emphasizes the unity of life, the soul which breathes through the universe do I wish to be remembered: for the spiritual is the eternal. Only a few read my verse and yet it is for that for which I care most.....I began with poetry and I shall finish with it." (2) He was forced to novel-writing by practical considerations. And some will think this an excellent argument against the leisured, scientific utopias of the future.

It was once thought very profound to say something like this of Browning: The poet's processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis; the sudden conclusion that he imposes upon them is transcendental and inept. There are many equally curious examples of a similar inability to appreciate Meredith. Of these W. C. Brownell is a typical instance: "His perversity is a natural bent toward the artificial. Its delight is in disappointing the reader's normal expectations. Simplicity is its detestation.....He does not love the obscure but hates the apparent.....and as one cannot always avoid the obvious, especially if one is also extremely prolix, he does his best to obscure it.....He can be crispness or curtness itself at need,.....He loads a phrase with meaning but it is apt to be compression without pith.....His devotion

(1) Letters...p. 390.

(2) "Memories". Edward Clodd...p...186.

to the trickery spirit of comedy led him early to emulate her elusiveness.....The obscurity lies in his whole presentation of his subject. He doles it out grudgingly and endeavors to whip your interest by tantalizing your perceptions..It is impossible not to conceive that he is enjoying himself at your expense, at least that he is the host having a good time at his own party.....His artifice is mainly mystification. It is the coquetry of comedy, not its substance." (1)

And yet, the most angry critics of both men freely admit that they are great, and that they are sincere in their desire to communicate their thoughts and feelings to their readers. They would, no doubt, subscribe to Buffon's "Le style c'est l'homme"; but they have not the patience or desire to see how that truth applies to Browning and Meredith.

Meredith published a series of works, both prose and poetry, vigorous, perplexing and unique. The critics read these and then say at great length: "As a writer he has mastered everything except language; as a novelist he can do everything except tell a story; as an artist he is everything except articulate." (2) And Mr. Priestly has a conception of poetry according to which Meredith's poetry reminds him of "an excited talker rather than a moved and moving singer." (3) They describe him as a poet in his novels, and as a philosopher in his poetry; and a critic

(1) "Victorian Prose Masters". p...253.

(2) "The Decay of Lying" by Oscar Wilde. Nineteenth Century. Jan. '89.

(3) Priestly. op. cit. p...98.

and psychologist who pulverizes both his prose and poetry by excess of thought. Then they proceed to show that his philosophy is unphilosophical and that it is really a poetical attitude to life. But there is no wisdom in quarreling with genius. It speaks and goes away. Those who wish to understand will follow, and in the case of Meredith this latter company has been a very small one.

And since all the clever phrases and antitheses framed by those who had some idea of what they wanted him to be, fail to account for him, let us try to discover whether he is not more valid in the capacity he professed, that of poet and artist.

Aristotle believed that the poets mind was distinguished by a spontaneous use of metaphor. (1) And if metaphors vivid and exuberant did by themselves constitute poetry, Meredith could have no rival. "His metaphors sometimes strive, one on the back of another, like fierce animals in a pit, and deal each other dismembering wounds in the struggle for existence". (2) But his occasionally fatal fertility of metaphor is the symptom of an impetuous imagination. Before he had tamed or disciplined this power, as for instance in "The Shaving of Shagpat", it rushed rioting and clamorous across the twice-enchanted sky of Eastern Romance. The same power, chastened and restrained except for brief revolts, illuminates the whole of his prose. "It is his imagination

(1) Poetics. Chap. 22.

(2) Trevelyan. op. cit. p...10.