CURRENT MAGAZINES

George Meredith:—Mrs. R. H. Gretton, in the *Contemporary*.

George Meredith; A Vindication:—Mr. R. E. G. George, in the *Fortnightly*.

G. M., A Reminiscence:—Mr. T. Hardy, in the *Nineteenth Century*.

THERE was a delightful custom long ago, in such magazines as *The Edinburgh Review*, under which a writer took the titles of certain recent publications as a pretext for discoursing himself on the same subject. He used them as a preacher often uses his text. After a courteous but somewhat distant salaam to the author cited, he indulged himself in even more than the latitude of treatment which is understood to be "homiletic licence." This ancient privilege will here be revived, and some reflections will be offered about George Meredith who occupies so great a place in the current magazines. Of those critics who have recently discussed him, and whose names stand at the head of this article, nothing more need be said than that their estimates will be read with general pleasure, and that the enthusiasm they show is part of their country's long deferred discharge of debt to one of the very greatest but less appreciated of the Victorians.

The centenary of Meredith's birth falls in the same year in which we keep a like anniversary for Tolstoy and for Ibsen. To anticipate the inevitable criticism, let the reader be warned at once that it is only a few sides, and these by no means the most commendable, of Meredith which will here be noted. His genius has been extolled again and again. The present writer takes his place with ever increasing delight in the company of those who re-read many times such novels as *The Egoist, Beauchamp's Career, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,* or such poems as *The Woods of Westermain.* That subtle psychology of human nature, the tangled web of motive which Meredith perhaps for the first time revealed to some of us in its bewildering complexity, his pictures of national life with so much of which one had not thought but which one can immediately recognize when it has been pointed out,—all these and many other features have of late been fully described and appreciated. Perhaps not enough has been said about the artist's special power in drawing his female characters. George Eliot once said to him, "Mr. Meredith,

your knowledge of women is almost indecent", and one can understand what she meant. But with all this the present paper will have no concern. It is mentioned here merely to avoid the reproach that this article takes no account of the glories, but only of the foibles. The glories have been celebrated often enough. And the foibles are not without instruction.

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Criticism is still discordant about both the degree and the character of George Meredith's literary merits. Perhaps the best proof of this lies in the vehement and otherwise needless reiteration by the Meredith enthusiast that there can no longer be any difference of estimate at all. Between those who can find no adequate parallel except in Shakespeare, and those who fall back upon such a term as "mere coxcomb", there is room for many an intermediate judgment. Meredith began publishing poetry at the age of twenty-three, and at intervals until he was almost seventy he issued, at his own expense, occasional verse to a heedless world. Yet Tennyson had declared that he was haunted by those "exquisite cadences", and Robert Louis Stevenson had said that they intoxicated him like wine. Mr. W. E. Henley felt that his Diana Warwick was an imaginative rival to Rosalind in *As You Like It,* but Mr. Bernard Shaw had found *Diana of the Crossways* impossible to read. To Oscar Wilde it seemed that George Meredith was the one living "incomparable novelist" in England, while Mr. William Watson could find nothing in his work but affectations, sham profundities, counterfeit subtleties and pseudo-oracularisms. Meredith, said Mr. Le Gallienne, had been a philosophic influence so strong that no other English writer could be compared with him. In Henry James, on the other hand, he stirred an "artistic fury" which destroyed all respect—with his extravagant verbiage, his airs and graces and alembications, presenting not a single figure nor constituting a single scene, "not a dim shadow condensing once into either audible or visible reality." For Mr. G. M. Trevelyan there was in his books an imagination extraordinarily rich, a gift of the intellectual rather than the sensuous metaphor, a flow of phrase that was unforgettable. Yet when we turn to Mr. J. M. Robertson, we hear about "just the lava and cinders of language", with hardly a sentence and never a paragraph well written in such a book as *Lord Ormont and his Aminta,* but just the perpetual grimace of expression, twisting the face of speech into every shape but those of beauty and repose. "It is a constant irritation", said Swinburne, "to see a man of such rarely strong and subtle genius, such various and

splendid forces of mind, do so much to justify the general neglect he provokes." To explain the neglect is easier than to appraise the genius.

Whether it be true or not that "the style is the man", in this case it is by the style that the man has first been judged. The obstacle to general appreciation of Meredith is, beyond all doubt, his use of the language now known as "Meredithese." In his later books at least, he showed not the least desire to be lucid. In his more obscure passages the darkness is indeed indescribable, far too gross—one is tempted to say—for any admirer to explain it as mere negligence, but rather intentional and wilful mystification. Those critics who in tangled and confused sentences of their own have asserted over and over again that Meredith is perfectly clear to "readers with brain" have added more to the gaiety than to the instructiveness of our critical literature. *Securus iudicat orbis terrarum.* As Meredith's dear friend, Lord Morley, has remarked, it is idle to attempt to clear him from the charge of being obscure,—as idle as to say that a speaker is quite audible though his audience cannot hear him.

Moreover, in all meekness be it urged upon the notice of the devotees,—obscurity is not in itself a merit in a piece of literature. Even Mr. Laurie Magnus ought to be willing to concede so much as this to the dull-minded. But he has been at pains to explain how Meredith is so cryptic because of the advanced character of the thought he is struggling to express, and because the English language is inadequate to such exceptional strain. One who differs from Mr. Magnus on this point must have either a lower estimate of Meredith's thinking or a more robust faith in the still unexhausted potentialities of the English tongue. The thesis at least calls for a good deal of proof, especially as other explanations will occur at once to a less reverential reader. Broken-backed sentences, begun on one principle and finished—or dropped—on another, laws of syntax utterly ignored, metaphors mixed until the resulting picture is a hopeless blur, are not so often marks of uncommon genius as of quite common and very exasperating slovenliness.

Take one example out of a multitude. In *Beauchamp's Career* one finds this baffling description of a lady's appearance:

> He was attracted by a happy contrast of colour between her dress and complexion, together with a cavalierly charm in the sullen brow she lifted; and seeing the reverse of a look of indifference on his face, after what he had heard of her frivolousness, she had a fear that it existed.

Now, what exactly is this picture of a sullen-browed lady showing a cavalierly charm? How is it helped by a contrast between her dress and her complexion? What kind of a look is merely the reverse of a look of indifference? And what was the thing referred to as "it" which she feared might exist? If one is going to read Meredith, one must be prepared for these trials of temper pretty often. One will be rewarded by much that compensates for them. But the zealots of his school must stop asking us to take his very follies as an object of adoration.

It was reserved for a Scottish admirer to complete this comedy of criticism. Just before Meredith's death a quaintly humorous tribute to him was published by Dr. James Moffatt, of Glasgow. This was a book entitled *A Primer to the Novels*, now unfortunately out of print, for it was as useful in substance as it was facetious in conception. It assumed, on quite ample evidence, that for most readers George Meredith the story-teller needed to have his stories re-told by someone else if they were to be made generally intelligible. So Dr. Moffatt supplied a sort of compendium of the plot in each piece, to which one might turn as to a guide-book as often as the thread of the mystery was lost. It was at first sight the same sort of compliment to the novelist as an art-critic might pay to a painter by marginal notes descriptive of what each part of the picture was meant to represent, or as the chorus in a Greek tragedy sometimes paid to the dramatist by explaining what the action of the piece was to typify. Dr. Moffatt must have had in mind a service comparable to that first aid to the perplexed when the Browning Society did its best for those who had given up *Sordello* in despair. Further than that, surely, the "Comic Spirit" could not have gone in revenge upon its delineator! Any novelist but Meredith would have felt insulted. But at Box Hill, no doubt, there was grim satisfaction at the thought of a reader with *Lord Ormont* in his hand and the "key" on his desk. This, by the way, is the same Dr. Moffatt who has published the Bible in modern speech, that its meaning may be made clearer and its vogue may thus be furthered in the reading world of our time.

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The Meredith mystery is not limited to his obscure and yet challenging books, for his life presents an enigma at least equal to that of his writings. He left no personal memoir. From two of his novels, *Evan Harrington* and *Harry Richmond*, one may extract with much doubt and misgiving a few autobiographic hints. To the curiosity of interviewers and pressmen he opposed an obstinate

silence. Not until after his death were his admirers even admitted to the secret of his birthplace.

The reader who turns back to an issue of *Who's Who* for 1909 will find that in the very last year of his life the only statement Meredith would make to the public about his origin was that he was born "in Hampshire." But *where* in Hampshire? In Winchester? In Bournemouth? In Portsea? Perhaps in some sequestered hamlet, known to no tourist and not even marked on the map? After his death, when it was announced that the place was Portsmouth, the mystery had a still darker hue. For his intimate friend, Mr. Edward Clodd, then informed us that the long concealment had not been accidental. The novelist had hidden his birthplace from everyone, including the compilers of the census return! Despite the warning that his "blue form" would be sent back for closer details on the point, Meredith would authorize no amplification beyond the words "near Petersfield." But Petersfield is a mere village, distant some forty miles from that city of one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants which—in truthfulness—ought to have been entered on the record. A native of Glasgow might as well have reported himself as born "near Falkirk."

One recalls what Flaubert has said about that "logic of the empty-headed" which argues that he who does not take the world into his confidence must have something to conceal. At the same time, even the least inquisitive are tempted by the spectacle of a distinguished man of letters who deliberately falsifies his census return. When at length it became known that Meredith's father was a tailor, and that his birthplace—73, High Street, Portsmouth—was "above a shop", there was one obvious solution of the mystery. But readers of *Evan Harrington* were then perplexed still further. Was it possible that a man ashamed of his lowly birth should have chosen to write a satiric novel on just this kind of social sensitiveness? And was it possible that in such a piece he should have introduced, as examples of such snobbery, his own near relatives who could be at once identified by their Christian names? Scores, or hundreds, of people living in Portsmouth must have thought of the tailor Melchisedec Meredith—"the great Mel" of local tradition—when they read of a tailor called Melchisedec Harrington whose qualities were just the same. And not a few would remember the three daughters of such a sire—Caroline, Harriet, Louisa—when they were introduced to three sisters in the novel, Caroline Strike, Harriet Cogglesby, Louisa de Saldar.

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In the three great domestic relationships Meredith was singularly unfortunate. As a son he quarrelled with his father, as a husband he quarrelled with his wife, as a father he quarrelled with his son. In each case, assisted by what we know of his disagreement with other people—with his literary colleagues, for example, and his literary critics—it is easy to guess the cause of such discords at home. An intense feeling of his own talent was constantly precipitating a breach with someone by whom his work was insufficiently appreciated. And it seems that a single disparaging comment was enough to obliterate the memory of even the most cordial tributes in the past. No one, for instance, had been a more enthusiastic panegyrist of his early work than Swinburne; yet when Swinburne—expressing an almost universal judgment—declared *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* to be unreadable, there was an immediate rupture of personal friendship. Against the public that would not buy his books, and against the reviewers who pointed out their flaws, Meredith raged with the pettishness of a child, and we have his own word for it that the outrageous obscurity of his latest writings was a piece of studied revenge upon those who had ventured to say he was losing his lucidity as time went on. His feud with George Augustus Sala arose from resentment against a visitor who at his own table did not follow with sufficient quickness or applaud with sufficient rapture that ceaseless flow of epigram which, in truth, though it was often brilliant, was not seldom artificial and vapid. Such a man is likely to be, as Carlyle's mother said of her own son, "gie hard to live wi'." Though there is perhaps nothing peculiar in these foibles of a man of genius, it is distinctly unusual that even a man of genius should describe his own father as "a bungler and a fool", should compose a burlesque narrative in which the most ridiculous characters are his own near relatives, and should absent himself—though only a few miles away—from the funeral of the woman who a few years before had been his wife. The picture is completed when we learn that his own son at an early age refused to have any further dealings with him, and that though in straitened circumstances and racked with disease he could not be induced to accept from such a source a single shilling of help. Oddest of all is the fact that such a man should have chosen as his favourite topics in fiction to write about the faults of parents in alienating the sympathies of children, about the faults of husbands in showing inadequate consideration for their wives, and about that fundamental though subtly disguised egoism by which the general harmony of human life is everywhere poisoned!

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Making ends meet financially was always a hard problem for him. He had produced his poems and his first two novels in an atmosphere of domestic strain. Living with his wife at Weybridge, in the home of his father-in-law, then a widower of sixty-eight, he had illustrated once more the old motto that no house is large enough for two families. Still less, perhaps, is any house large enough for three writers, as Meredith was to prove again some years afterwards when he set up a *menage* at 16 Cheyne Walk with Rossetti and Swinburne. At Weybridge old Mr. Peacock had his nerves tried beyond endurance by the shrill notes of a baby grandchild, and by the queer personal habits of an impecunious son-in-law planning yet another unsaleable romance. So he rented "Vine Cottage", across the street, for his daughter and her husband. It was there, constantly interrupted by the visits of tradesmen impatient about "a small account long overdue", that Meredith finished the manuscript of *Shagpat*. But, though George Eliot certified that it was a work of genius, the publishers were left with much of the edition on their hands, and disposed of it in a rage as a "remainder." Four years afterwards, avoiding Smith, Elder and Co., the novelist sent *Richard Feverel* to Chapman and Hall. It met with a better fate than *Shagpat*, but the reviews were generally cold, and the author's financial prospect was growing desperate.

So in 1860 Meredith turned to less exalted pursuits. By chance he made the acquaintance of an old lady, Mrs. Benjamin Wood, of Eltham Lodge, whose taste was for literature, and who used to issue from time to time at her own expense various volumes of prose and verse for private circulation among her friends. She engaged him at a trifling sum to read aloud to her twice a week. About the same time he obtained newspaper work on the staff of *The Ipswich Journal*, at a salary of £200 a year,—not bad remuneration according to the standard of the period, for the light duties which were required of him. He had to write, in London, a weekly article on current events, and before long he had similar occasional work for *The Morning Post*, *The Standard*, and *The Manchester Guardian*.

Things were looking better, in a pecuniary sense. But there was another sense in which his fate was galling. *The Ipswich Journal* and *The Morning Post* were Tory organs, and a glance at their files will show how remote was their spirit from that of Meredith himself during the years 1860-1868 when he thus acted as contributor. Those years were marked by stirring events both at home and abroad—the American Civil War, the struggle for

unification of Italy, the rising in Jamaica with the subsequent conflict over the proceedings of Governor Eyre, Gladstonian economies in public finance, agitation for the ballot and for the lowering of the franchise. Meredith's personal attitude to problems such as these is well known. He was definitely and even vociferously "radical." But the papers to which he was attached were organs of the Tory view which they shared with *Blackwood's*, with the *Quarterly*, with the *Saturday*. Sad to relate, Meredith seems to have written to order. It is not indeed possible to identify his contributions with complete confidence, for they were unsigned. But some of them at least are unmistakable for those who know his style. It is a probable guess that he wrote the attack on Gladstone for ceding the Ionian Islands to Greece in 1862. And no one can doubt that from his hand came those scornful denunciations of the North and that glowing eulogy on the Confederate States in which *The Ipswich Journal* did its best for the slave-owners during the great war. Sneers at Abraham Lincoln, mockery of the Abolitionists in general, chuckling over the early reverses of the Northern armies, malodorous nicknames hurled at John Bright,—in short the whole familiar stock in trade of writers for the Tory press of the time—may be found in the commissioned articles of this eager radical.

It was with a sense of disgust that the Meredith of later years recalled this episode in his career, and he had in truth abundant reason for shame. He thought newspaper work a low occupation; and on hearing that some enthusiast was on the search for those bygone articles, he prayed that the Commination Service might be thundered in his ears.[1] But it surely depends on how such work is done. After all, what he so much contemned was good enough for Sainte-Beuve, for Anatole France, for his own attached friend Lord Morley. It is a different matter when a journalist on high public questions is content to write as he is bidden for pay, and thus—as Thackeray said of Swift—"put out his apostasy to hire." It is no doubt in the seventh chapter of *The Tragic Comedians* that Meredith has given us on this point a piece of remorseful autobiography. "Journalism for money", says Alvan, "is Egyptian bondage. No slavery is comparable to the chains of hired journalism."

It is probably best for our novelist's fame that most of those early pieces are irrecoverable. For the disingenuousness of the writer is not the only fault of those articles which have survived.

1. "Some ghoul has threatened to make search for these articles. May the Commination Service be thundered in his ears." (Clodd, *Fort. Rev.*, July, 1909).

Bad enough as was the style called "Meredithese" in fiction, it was exasperating beyond words in a newspaper paragraph. Here and there, indeed, he tried to be sprightly and vivid, as in the passage which discussed whether Louis Napoleon had done more harm to mankind by the coup d'état or the Empress Eugénie by the introduction of the crinoline, and gravely decided that on the whole the crinoline was worse. Gossip about a coming divorce action in which Lord Palmerston was to figure as co-respondent called forth a set of reflections not unlike those in *Diana* or in *The Amazing Marriage*. But not even the stimulus of battle scenes, in which Meredith acted as representative of *The Morning Post* at the seat of war in Italy in 1866, could produce from him work higher than a perfunctory earning of his wage. No touch of the colourful genius of Mr. Winston Churchill in a like situation is found in that somewhat mechanical and dreary narrative. In truth George Meredith had not found his *metier*. The single value of his experience on that heated arena of Central Europe was the preparation it supplied for *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria*.

How far his political convictions contradicted his political journalism, was made obvious in his next novel. In 1874 Meredith completed the manuscript of *Beauchamp's Career*. From a literary point of view, it is perhaps his best work, with more of his peculiar merits and fewer of his peculiar faults than any other in the long series of his novels. But the *Cornhill*, which had published *Harry Richmond*, declined to run a risk with this manifesto of radicalism. It was accepted, in condensed form, by the *Fortnightly*.

The historic value, as well as the artistic brilliance, of this piece is very great. It is the picture of a young naval officer returning, with the laurels of active service in the Crimean War, to the England of the middle fifties of last century. Meredith there wrote of a period in English life which he had closely observed in his own early manhood. It was the England that worshipped Palmerston, distrusted the Prince Consort, passed from one hectic alarm to another about probable designs of Napoleon III, bewailed the loss of the last great national safeguard in the passing of "the Iron Duke." In political assemblies men were listening alternately to the fierce anti-Russian propagandism from Disraeli and to the glowing appeals for world-peace from John Bright. At the quiet of the fireside the householder was reading the literature of the day, learning about domestic architecture from Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, wondering whether Carlyle had gone crazy or had taken to drink before he wrote the last of his *Latter Day Pamphlets*, or glowing with national pride over the last chapter of that extended

and eloquent argument for the Whigs which Macaulay had published under the quaint title, *History of England.* Such was the situation and such the social life which Meredith undertook to describe. His description is indeed incomparable. Who can forget, for example, the Hon. Everard Romfrey,—the crotchety, unintelligible old Whig, who had lost his seat in parliament, and whose subsequent political understanding was for ever obscured by that black vision of popular ingratitude? Regarding the game laws as the corner stone of Law in general, and the three Estates of the Realm as his head gamekeepers, he delighted most of all in arresting a poacher with his own hand, and afterwards sitting as magistrate at the trial—for it was plain that he who could attest a villainy was best qualified to punish it. Mr. Romfrey was disgusted with the premature end of the Crimean War. His conversation at his table was directed in the main against the hideous Manchester School,—those vulgar cotton-spinners who were destroying the national *morale*, with a keen eye to a landlord's poultry roost for pillage.[2] His pet similitudes for John Bright were with the wild bee's nest in a tree, or with the worm in a ship's timbers. We know Mr. Romfrey.

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And with Mr. Romfrey we have to come to know many another unforgettable figure in the Meredith novels,—many of which I should wish to write, but my space is almost filled, and it is hard to select. They stand out, chiselled in such individuality of form and character that one feels the past to which they belong with all the vividness of the present. To the coming historian many of these will serve as photographs of a bygone time; and in taking them so, the coming historian will not be much misled. For as his contemporaries were able to testify, Meredith did so reflect that time's essential features, though—as an artist will and must—be both idealized and intensified. But his figures are more than material for the historian. They are studies of the human nature that knows no limit of age or country or period. It is not too much to say that there are both depths and subtleties in this which Meredith probed and revealed with a skill beyond that of any other novelist of his century.

Because he counts for so much, one is unwilling to see his true significance lost in mere cloudy adulation of everything he did or said or wrote. Like Wordsworth, he was great when on the heights, "but often not on the heights". To celebrate him as a profound philosopher, as a master of English prose, or as an eminent saint

2. *Beauchamp's Career*, chap. iii.

of the new dispensation, is to make him ridiculous. He had an uncanny insight into the oddities of personal impulse and motive, and could draw pictures exemplifying them with a verisimiltude that took one's breath away. But there was no enigma of the universe or of destiny on which he showed any power to think better than his neighbors, though he coined many a "sham profundity" which his panegyrists affect to admire. At times a startling metaphor or a dazzling comparison will light up his subject for the moment as by an electric flash, only to let it sink back into the obscurity which was so much his native element. And even the "new dispensation", not over-rich in saints, had others by whom it can with more prudence ask to be judged. But, as Carlyle would have said, "subtracting the due subtrahend", we have this year to recall the birth of a great Englishman—great enough to deserve that he should be shown as he was, in his weakness no less than in his strength.

H. L. S.