

THE POETRY OF GEORGE MEREDITH

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IN his Essay on *Meredith in his Poems*, Dr. Dowden says that "prose is proved by the achievement of his forty years of authorship to be the main stream, verse is no more than a slender affluent," but adds that "his prose is such, at times, as a poet writes, and the thought and feeling expressed in his words are fed from the contemplation of the poet." If this be so, it means that, so far from our having to view Meredith in two separate aspects, the "slender affluent" will have all the sparkle of the "main stream," and, perhaps, other qualities peculiarly its own. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that Meredith's verse preceded his prose, and continued after it. He has now reached an assured place as a great novelist. But, without venturing on prophecy, the question is worth asking whether, unless love for "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge" has grown cold, it may not be Meredith the poet who longest survives the destructive forces of time.

We are told that he is obscure. But obscurity is a relative matter. Anyone who takes up Meredith's poems expecting to find in them the easy lilt of superficial thought will soon put them down again. He often seems less concerned about the form of expression than about the choice of what is worth expressing. "Inveterate of brain" in all his work, he pays his readers the compliment of assuming that they have intelligence, and the will to give it exercise; and, if he is ever intolerant, it is not of natal stupidity, which he would be disposed to deny, but of the stupidity which some achieve with considerable pains, and which others permit to have thrust upon them.

If, then, it be urged that Meredith appeals only to an elect few, this does not quite state the case. From the outset he shows no nervous anxiety to placate popular taste; but, on the other hand, he does not go out of his way to make himself unpopular. Almost every great writer attracts some ardent disciples who would like to make him the demi-god of an esoteric cult. But Meredith wants none of this. His language, even when most difficult, is not a jargon framed for the behoof of the initiated. Himself a true

aristocrat he does not disdain the vulgar herd, because he believes it is not irredeemably vulgar, nor are the inspirations of Nature beyond it:

If we screw ourselves up to a certain pitch,
She meets us— that I know of her.

She is ready to meet the grim cabman half-way!
Now! and where better than here, where, with thunder
Of waters, she might bathe his clay,
And enter him by the gate of wonder? ¹

Meredith may present the simple in complex forms, the usual in unusual forms; but he is too worldly-minded, in the finest sense, ever to break the bonds which unite him to his kind.

It follows that what Meredith says repays the labour of trying to understand and appreciate his modes of saying it. He has many modes which would require his own swiftly-changing metaphors to describe them. He is like the zig-zag of the lightning, but also with its unique power of illumination; like the tangled thicket through which one must make one's way, not without some rough contacts, in order to find the lovely wild flower; like the wind that blows where it will, yet whose unfettered flight makes earth more sweet and clean. All Meredith's critics are agreed as to the baffling, yet attractive, unconventionality of his style; and most of them justify and explain it by the nimbleness of his intellect, the sweep of his vision, "the rapture of the forward view." His verse is never a mere pastime. He summons the Muse to aid some noble aim. As William Sharp says, "The passion of song for song's sake, irrespective of its significance, does not seem to be his. He is not a singer for the sake of singing, so much as a poet for the sake of poetry." This may make him less spontaneous, but when he speaks it gives him a voice whose influence grows the more we listen to it. Unlike the little book which the angel gave to John on Patmos, his words may not always be honey in the mouth; but, when digested, they afford good nutriment. Though his mind keeps his eye from "in a fine frenzy rolling," he sees more than most observers, and what he sees is there. The philosopher works with the poet, not to elaborate a system, but to get at the root of things; and, while expressing to a greater degree than any of his contemporaries the thought of the modern scientific age, he does not express it in the cold, precise way of science, but with a splendid power which widens the horizon of life.

¹ By the Rosanna.

One can imagine Meredith faring forth from Box Hill on a long tramp through the woods or over the Surrey downs, a stalwart, wholesome figure, rejoicing in earth and sky. He has not the excitable gaze of Shelley, nor the calm contemplation of Wordsworth, nor the introspective habit of Matthew Arnold; but he has "the cosmic consciousness" more acutely than any of them. He is part of the great world, not engulfed in it so that self is lost, nor yet separate from it so that self is everything. He studies its moods, he reads its lessons, he feels the throb of its multitudinous life. And, when he writes, the glow is not gone. He holds it, or rather he is held by it. There are no barren patches in his field, though sometimes the tares and wheat may grow together. He is not seeking a new earth, but the secret of the earth that is, a secret which cannot be unfolded in any trim formula. *The Woods of Westernmain* is an ordered riot, challenging the strong soul to enter it. Francis Thompson says of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* that "the final scenes especially are such a Bacchic reel and rout and revelry of beauty as leaves one staggered and giddy; poetry is spilled like wine, music runs to drunken waste." In Meredith there is more restraint, but also more profound thinking. Though he, too, drives a chariot drawn by wild horses, the vagaries of whose separate individuality may bewilder the observer, he keeps them all under rein. Like Wordsworth, he felt in earth "something far more deeply interfused." But it is his distinctive merit to show that, instead of "other-worldliness" being the open road to revelation, it is only those in harmony with earth who can discover its true meanings, and pierce through the sensuous to the spiritual that underlies it. To quote again Thompson's prose poem, he says of Shelley that "his Nilotic flood too often overflowed its banks." Meredith keeps within his broad, swift channel, though the scenery is in constant change, and the stream itself crossed with many eddies, and now lit up with sunshine, now darkened by furious storm. But it bears on its bosom some answer to human problems, some reflection of a wondrous glory, and the leaves of the trees which overhang it are for the healing of the nations.

Meredith's faith leads him "at his grandest to the grave," If he had died as early as Keats, it is doubtful whether any poem of his would have survived. The slender volume published in 1851, at twenty-three years of age, was praised by Tennyson, Kingsley, and W. M. Rossetti, and genially dealt with by most reviewers. *Daphne, Will o' the Wisp, Sunrise*,—its short, crisp lines contrasting with Sidney Lanier's swan-song, *To a Skylark*, though a trifle compared to Shelley's,—*The Pastorals, South-West Wind in the Wood-*

lands, and others, could not have been written by an ordinary youth. Yet in one sense Meredith as a poet is not born, but made. His genius for poetic expression, as can be seen from the later version of *Love in the Valley*, grows out of prolonged thought and wide and wise observation rather than from a compelling innate force. But when to an alert brain are joined imagination, passion, the touch—even though fitful—of a rare harmony, the more the singer himself learns from experience the more he has to give to others.

Like his own good physician, Melampus, the poet has sympathy with life in all its varied forms which lets him into the secret of things closer to Nature than we consciously are:

Where others hear but a hum and see but a beam,
The tongue and eye of the fountain of life he knew,

* * * * *

The deeper chord of a wonderful instrument.

Mr. Trevelyan thinks that in *Phoebus with Admetus* "there is civil war between the lyrical aspirations of the piece on the one hand, and its occasional uncouthness of phrase and audacity of metaphor on the other." But too much may be made of this. The "brown evetide," "the scarlet cicalas," "the stony lizard," the wolf "helpless in his froth-wrath," the "crocus, the year's new gold," bulls "in kingly-flashing coats," and the gods "excellent in things aimed to make life kind"—these are not "uncouth", and their "audacity" is that of a man who sees. Even the adjectives—the besetting sin of so many writers—are never superfluous. The fact is that while Meredith, sometimes by elision, sometimes by periphrasis, is puzzling in places, and clothes his thought in strangely-assorted garments, there are few poets from whom might be culled within the same compass a larger number of sentences which haunt by their wizardry, and where the change of a single word would be an impertinence. *The Lark Ascending* may not have the lyric beauty of Shelley's poem, but it tells us even more about the lark, and

The song seraphically free
From taint of personality.

No finer description of sunset is to be found in English poetry than in the *Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn* which, revels in earth's moods, and finds in her the great minister to man:

She can lead us, only she,
 Unto God's footstool, whither she reaches:
 Loved, enjoyed her gifts must be,
 Reverenced the truths she teaches.

Meredith does not counsel us, like Matthew Arnold, to imitate the calm of the great world, but rather to learn from her storm that all is well. For after sunset comes the great wind:

His mantle streaming thunderingly behind,
 Across the yellow realm of stiffened Day.

It is like a painting of Corot. "Stripped Autumn" brings a prophecy of regeneration. The unfatigued spirit of the "Bacchante Mother" is shared by the children who own her sway:

Death shall I shrink from loving thee?
 Into the breast that gives the rose
 Shall I with shuddering fall?

Meredith faces the whole problem bravely and hopefully, and, so far from ignoring the elements of turbulence either in earth or man, finds in them the chief goad to progress:

Behold the life of ease; it drifts.
 The sharpened life commands its course.²

Earth is to him like an old palimpsest which has more written on it than first meets the eye; and, if man will only yield himself to its suggestiveness, he will gain the courage needed on the thoroughfares of life. Even the stars are "Not distant aliens, not senseless Powers."³ *Earth and a Wedded Woman* is a characteristic poem in praise of rain; and the rain cures the woman of her sense of loneliness, and revives her fidelity to the absent one.

To Meredith the worship of earth is a religion. So far from thinking that the world's great altar-stair "slopes through darkness up to God," he believes that the true reading of the seen prepares for the true reading of the unseen. Yet he does not expect earth to answer every question, especially that of human suffering. He is not a theologian any more than the simple cobbler who studies crippled, cheerful little Molly. But the cobbler, like Hamlet, says, "I'll go pray," and Meredith would not refuse to go with him:

2 Hard Weather.

3 Meditation under Stars.

Is the Universe one immense Organ, that rolls
 From devils to angels? I'm blind with the sight.
 It pours such a splendour on heaps of poor souls!
 I might try at kneeling with Molly to-night.⁴

A Faith on Trial was written at the time of his wife's death, and is the only poem with a marked personal note. At first, when he goes forth to his "disciplined habit" of communion with Nature, grief blurs his vision; and even when it grows clearer, not so much from mere observation of familiar objects as by the sympathy kindled for other lives, earth's message is still limited. He knows

That natures at interflow,
 With all of their past and the now,
 Are chords to the Nature without,
 Orbs to the greater whole.

This is the same cold comfort as in *Adonais*. Yet

If we strain to the farther shore
 We are catching at comfort near;

And the poet seeks rather the wisdom which "neither desires the sleep nor the glory," but is able to brave everything without being sure of everything. The absolute confidence of Browning's *Evelyn Hope* and *Prospice* is foreign to his thinking.

Perhaps this rejection of super-mundane influence on life goes too far. But it is the outcome of the poet's resolute temper and fine distaste for unhealthy sentimentalism. Of some efforts in our time to pierce the veil of the unseen he would have said,

These are our sensual dreams;
 Of the yearning to touch, to feel
 The dark Impalpable sure,
 And have the Unveiled appear;⁵

and, when we reflect on the crudely materialistic methods of much so-called "Spiritualism", we cannot but agree with him. Yet Meredith is not a Stoic who affects to be without feeling, nor will the garden of Epicurus suffice, even though "fenced from passion and mishap":

Our world, which for its Babels wants a scourge,
 And for its wilds a husbandman, acclaim
 The crucifix that came of Nazareth.⁶

4 Martin's Puzzle.

5 *A Faith on Trial*.

6 *The Garden of Epicurus*.

In his eager desire to show the perverting effects of selfishness Meredith contends that it is unworthy of man to clamour for individual perpetuation, and that he will not do so if he believes in the indestructibility of good. He derides "the egregious, the elect" "who are always seeking celestial aid."⁷ But, while there may be a great deal of egotism in the longing for "a mansion in the skies", it is something far more than mere egotism which makes men hope for a continuance of conscious being. Meredith says,

Overhead, overhead,
Rushes life in a race,
As the clouds the clouds chase;

And we go,
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,
Even we,
Even so."

This half-Buddhist creed, which swallows up the single life in the all-encompassing embrace of the universe, may seem to have a self-abnegating nobility to which Christian faith does not aspire. But is such quixotic disinterestedness rational? How can any one be sure of the final triumph of the light if, some day, the light-bringers are themselves put out? Persons are of more worth than processes, if for no other reason, because personality gives to processes their trend and significance. The *ego* which has found "a larger self" offers no menace by its survivals. It may be true enough that "spirit raves not for a goal;"⁹ but if it has no goal, or only the goal of annihilation, the progress of "the race" is a chimera. There can be no immortal certitudes if there are no immortal souls.

Yet Meredith is to be thanked for showing the hidden glory of the present, and earth's constant warning not to judge from appearances. For "the fuel, decay, brightens the fire of renewal."¹⁰ Any post-graduate education would be wasted but for this mandane school of ours. Meredith believes that the great lessons of life brook no postponement, that true piety will show no disdain of earth and its revelations, that the impalpable thing which some call "the higher life" is really the lower lived in the finest way, that he whose sordid purpose is just to "save his soul" will soon have very little soul to save. No orthodox teacher could be more rigid than he, or insist more on the truth that character foreshadows destiny. He is so enamoured of moral strength that

7 The Test of Manhood.

8 Dirge in the Woods.

9 A Faith on Trial.

10 Seed-Time.

at times he may seem almost without pity for moral weakness. He would have a man hold up his head instead of grovelling, and accept earth's buffets unmoaningly. By no means devoid of emotion, he never allows it to slip into a maudlin groove. He is an "ascetic" in the literal sense of the word, though not at all in its accepted usage, facing the tasks of earth's tumultuous arena instead of seeking a cloistered calm. He will not try to solve the problem of life like Empedocles, by burying himself beneath it. He will use the strength gained in Nature's solitudes for healthful comradeship with the abodes of men. Even "Juggling Jerry" commands his admiration, and "The Old Chartist," and "Jump-to-Glory Jane." They are not among the intellectuals, but they are human, and have their own philosophy.

If, then, Meredith is "the singer of strange songs," it is because his songs have about them the strangeness of life, and of love, the strangest thing in it. Swinburne thought *Margaret's Bridal Eve* not far below Rossetti's *Sister Helen* "the greatest ballad in modern English." In *Love in the Valley* there is a winsome music scarcely found in the same degree elsewhere in Meredith's verse. The joy of dawning love and the joy of earth intertwine, and the beautiful rustic maiden cannot be separated from the beauty that frames her round. She is embowered in the wealth of the changing year, and yet remains the richest thing in it. The lilt of the poem is better than a bird-song, and to snatch a fragment from it here and there would only break the haunting melody. Very different is the theme of *Modern Love* where the poet boldly undertakes to write a "problem novel" in the form of a sonnet-sequence. It is not surprising that such an unusual venture should have provoked widely divergent opinions. Richard Le Gallienne discovers "a Shakespearean ring in the verse." Ashcroft Noble, on the other hand, though flattering Meredith by an unconscious suggestion of his style, calls it "a morbid conception embodied by a huddling together of strangulated metaphors and hints for epigram." Dr. Dowden holds a middle course: "If Meredith does not prescribe a remedy for the disease of marriage perverted from its true ends, he at least makes a careful diagnosis of the case"; and Swinburne puts it fairly when he says, "Praise or blame should be thoughtful, serious, careful, when applied to a work of such subtle strength, such depth of delicate power, such passionate and varied beauty." For in *Modern Love* we have realism without the nausea which so often accompanies it.

George Eliot once remarked to Meredith, "Your knowledge of women is almost indecent." Whether this be so or not, he is

the chivalrous champion of what he believes to be Woman's Rights—even in capitals. One of his letters to a friend says, "Since I began to reflect I have been impressed by the injustice done to women, the constraint put upon their natural aptitudes and faculties, generally much to the degradation of the race. I have not studied them more closely than I have men, but with more affection, a deeper interest in their enfranchisement and development, being assured that women of the independent mind are needed for any sensible degree of progress." Meredith's novels, even more than his poems, supply portraiture of women not found elsewhere. He does not view even the best of them as ethereal essences committed to absolute perfection, but rather as possessed of qualities of whose power they themselves are often unaware. Yet he desires for them no separate destiny. As the old Chartist says,

Women, you'll observe,
Don't suffer for a Cause, but for a man;"

and on account of this concrete instinct, this individualizing habit, he would have them so trained that, unlike the simple wife in Tennyson, they shall both understand and love. He complains that

Their sense is with their sense all mixed in,
Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
Utterly this fair garden we might win.¹¹

Unless love between the sexes is intelligent, they run the risk of being

League-sundered by the silent gulf between.¹²

And though, in the end, women must find out for themselves their own true world, Meredith thinks that man's complacent egotism and the desire for rulership which fears too much freedom for "the sex" has tended to suppress women's powers, and narrow their range of opportunity.

A Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt proves that these intricate matters can be discussed without dragging them down to the level of tedious and blatant prose. Meredith supports that nonconformity which women are almost sure to evince if they are natural and not merely imitative, provided it is of a high order, and has a sufficient reason. He would have women so cultured that they

11 Modern Love XLVIII.

12 Ibid.

cease to be semi-parasitic, and take their rightful place in shaping the fortunes of the world. The conservative in his poem says,

To be divine,
'Tis Nature bids you to be nature true,
Flowing with beauty, lending earth your grace,
Reflecting heaven in clearness you.

But, while something of this is possible under any conditions, the womanliness of woman is seldom uninfluenced by the manliness of man;

Sir, get you something of our purity,
And we will of your strength: we ask no more.

* * * * *

We share the primal curse;
Together shake it off, say we.

Then the wide-branching practicality of our time will be upheld by those deep-nourished roots of idealism without which it is sure to have many crooked growths, and to fail of the richest fruitage. The "fair ladies" do not need to be in chronic revolt in order to rule the situation by the might of native gifts which, prompting above all else to loveliness of mind and soul, will never allow "freedom" to slip the wings of their inspiring ministry. And, though Meredith does not subscribe to the doctrine of eternal punishment for a past mistake, he would have frankness and an equal comradeship in whatever exile from Eden is involved in it. Then even the desert may have its bloom.¹³ He goes more fully than any other modern poet into the relations between man and woman, and perhaps in certain quarters it may be asked why he should deal at all with matters in regard to which there is either a widespread conspiracy of silence or a prurient sloppiness. But few will question their importance, or the large-brained, wholesome-hearted way in which he presents them before us.

The Spirit of Comedy broods over all Meredith's work. In his essay on the subject, he says, "The test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter"; and again, "You may estimate your capacity for Comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less; and still more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes." Comedy, therefore, is the sworn foe of dulness, the quality of laughter the gauge of intelligence. "We know," he says, "the degree of refine-

¹³ Cf. *The Sage Enamoured and The Honest Lady*.

ment in men by the matter they laugh at, and the ring of it." The "fine unaccented scorn" of the Comic Spirit is the

Sword of Common Sense,
Our surest gift.¹⁴

It broadens sympathy and quickens insight. It delivers from the extreme of unillumined despair, and from the other extreme of a too blind faith in progress. It un.masks hypocrisies, and breaks the chain of morbid egotism. To Meredith the Comic Spirit is what the old theologians would have called "a means of grace". It helps to make life sane and clean. It is the "keeper of the Muse's key," because it unlocks the door of truth; and, though it must be admitted that in the poet's *Ode* the hinges sometimes grate in turning, the door opens upon a wide and fascinating realm which, if unexplored, would rob life of a great exhilaration.

If Meredith had written nothing else than the *Hymn to Colour*, it would have stamped him as having a masterful note peculiarly his own. No poet is more sensitive to colour in Nature, or has a more copious witchery in the delineation of its shades and blendings. But here "colour" has a deeper significance. It makes the difference between prose and poetry, between unproductive solitude and rich companionship, between a dull resignation to earth's unsolved riddle and the joy of a spiritual enlightenment which scatters the shadows and sees "the dawn glow through". Colour, "the soul's bridegroom," swayed by Love, will ennoble everything. Neither Life nor Death is aught without Love, but with it humanity exults in a new-found, ever-growing freedom which presses onward to the heights:

More gardens will they win than any lost;
The vile plucked out of them, the unlovely slain.
Not forfeiting the beast with which they are crossed,
To stature of the Gods will they attain.
They shall uplift their Earth to meet her Lord,
Themselves the attuning chord.

It has been said that Meredith is a poet for poets. But his vocation is rather to bring out the poetry which lurks, often unsuspected, in every human soul. A critic of Turner once objected that she had never seen a sky like his, and the painter answered, "Madam, don't you wish you had?" Eclipse depends upon the point of view. What seems opaqueness may sometimes be excess of light. At

¹⁴ Ode to the Comic Spirit.

all events, if the *Hymn to Colour* reveals nothing, the fault is not with Meredith.

He seems to find it difficult to deal with narrative in a straightforward way. He called *The Empty Purse* "a Sermon to our later Prodigal Son"; and, like many other sermons with much less in them, it is somewhat tedious and long-winded. Even preaching may be poetic, but precedent is against it. The youth of the poem has "a disgust for the sermon in rhyme"; though, if he takes the trouble to listen, and has brains enough to understand, he will learn a good deal about the true laws of life and the relative unimportance of externals. Meredith's idea of Democracy is not a levelling down but a levelling up "till brain-rule splendidly towers." The unattractive hero, handicapped at the start by the inheritance of money, is "converted", not by the preacher, but by his own experience, which gives him at least a chance to become rich after he has become poor. The whole sermon is fine; and, though it lacks poetic beauty, it does not lack thought deserving the attention of this age if we are to

Keep the young generations in hail
And bequeath them no tumbled house.

Mr. G. K. Chesterton, with his own unconquerable love of paradox, insists that Meredith is "a great and powerful paradox; he is an optimistic reformer." But, apart from the question whether a pessimistic reformer might not have to break free from the hampering adjective, or else need another noun to describe him, Meredith is a reformer only in so far as he reveals the possible bigness of life, and an optimist only in so far as he believes that its crown belongs to him who overcometh. He has no sugar-coated pill as a panacea for earth's maladies. He is arrayed under no theological banner. He does not attempt either to lead a forlorn hope or to win the Hosannahs of a flushed multitude. And, though he might be called an apostle of advanced thought, his radicalism, so far from being anarchic or utopian, is based on laws built into the very structure of the world and man. In *Foresight and Patience*, he says,

To strengthen our foundations is the task
Of this tough age.

Though *Foresight* seems to be the more airy idealist, because she chafes against the sordid tendencies of the time, she is not more ideal than *Patience* who is "not *Resignation's* counterpart," but discerns in the midst of many disillusioning spectacles the slow

evolutionary process which, in spite of retrogressions, and to some extent even because of them, struggles on towards the dawn of a better day;

Counts conquest but a step, and through disaster sings.

As might be expected, then, Meredith has a keen interest in world-politics. He would have Britain free from snobbery and the enervation of materialism.¹⁵ He throws light upon the Irish question:

Excess of heart obscures from view
 A head as keen as yours to count.
 Trust her, that she may prove as true
 In links whereof is love the fount.

* * * * *

She, generous, claims a generous dole;
 That will not rouse the crack of doom.
 It ends the blundering past control
 Simply to give her elbow-room.
 Her offspring feel they are a race,
 To be a nation is their claim;
 Yet stronger bound in your embrace
 Than when the tie was but a name.¹⁶

In *The Call* to a right kind of preparedness, he says,

It cannot be declared we are
 A nation, till from end to end
 The land can show such front to war
 As bids a crouching foe expend
 His ire in air, and preferably be friend.

His *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History* unite a penetrating vision of things as they are with a prophetic forecast of things as they yet may be. These lines might have been written at the outbreak of the war:

On France is laid the proud initiative
 Of sacrifice in one self-mastering hour.¹⁷

The Revolution is like a storm-swept sky in which it is difficult to see objects clearly. The people's foes are "insanely rational;" they are "rationally insane," "a radiance fringed with grim affright," because they have fallen from their first ideal of Liberty, and uttered "the shriek that tore the world." Of course the staccato movement of *Napoleon* has been parodied. Indeed, Meredith's

¹⁵ Aneurin's Harp.

¹⁶ Ireland.

¹⁷ Alsace-Lorraine.

frequent grimace of expression, both in prose and poetry, lends itself to caricature. But where else, within the space of this poem, have we such a complete survey of Napoleon's character? Though the description is packed, "The Necessitated" stands out in bold relief with his "escalading triumphs", "earth's chosen, crowned, unchallengeable upstart," "humanly great, inhumanly unwarmed," "enormous, with no infinite around." These are bold, strong strokes of a great impressionist, and the portrait is alive. *France* is a noble poem, full of insight and sympathy. Her foes have trodden her down:

We see a vacant place;
We hear an iron heel.

Yet her past must not be forgotten when she "made the brave appeal for manhood," though the "wanton" in her for a time triumphed over the "angel", and brought the blows of the gods who "remember everlastingly," but whose discipline, however stern, is to be preferred to "the happiness of pitiable brutes." France, "inveterate of brain," recognizes the justice of this, and

She shall rise worthier of her prototype
Thro' her abasement deep."

* * * * *

Soaring France!

Now is Humanity on trial in thee:
Now mayst thou gather humankind in fee:
Now prove that reason is a quenchless scroll;
Make of calamity thine aureole,
And bleeding head us thro' the troubles of the sea.

Every poet needs to be guarded, on the one hand, against the hasty rejection of inconsiderate listeners to whom the seductive tones of the singing voice mean more than the intrinsic value of the song; and, on the other hand, against the intemperate adulation of disciples who resent any criticism of their idol, and try to discover unutterable meaning in passages of which the poet would feel least proud. If the Parnassian ghosts could revisit earth, it is not so much the sceptical neglect of ignorance that would affright them as the superstitious worship of self-appointed devotees. Meredith's own poetic sincerity ought to dispose students of his verse to approach it in a sincere way, extenuating nothing, nor setting down aught in malice. In order to an adequate appreciation of the poet, the man must be understood, and some sympathy felt with his love of earth, his ardent search into its deeper meanings, his cham-

pionship of righteousness, his scorn of the selfish and the hypocrites, his power to sound the depths and scale the heights of human thought and emotion, his faith in the final triumph of good, and the unflinching athleticism of his spirit in the effort to have some part in it. A creed of this sort may not of itself make a poet, but it tends towards poetry; and, though its articles may be interpreted in different ways by different followers of the Muse, there can be no great poetry without some acceptance of them. If Meredith had less to say, he might show a more even fluency in saying it. At times he has a limp which is almost grotesque; but since it is an aesthetic—not an intellectual—limp, it means far more than the confident stride of some men. At other times he has such eccentric and dazzling swiftness that it is hard for less practised runners to keep up with him. But, if he provokes, he also allures; and the allurements grow, while the provocation diminishes with better knowledge of the ways of his adventurous soul.

Mrs. Browning says that poets are "the only truth-tellers now left to God." Even if it is not quite so bad as that, the poet is always needed to "give worn Humanity new youth,"¹⁸ to open the vistas before the oftentimes disenchanted plodder on life's road. For, though truth has no date-mark, each age must learn to interpret it and to apply its message. Meredith helps modernity to do this more than any other poet of his time except Browning; and he has some chords which Browning, with all his riches, does not strike. A psychological poet, an evolutionary philosopher, he is also a prophet, not so much because he foretells as because he forthtells, reading the signs of the times in the light of laws which are eternal. Instead of idly gazing into heaven, he brings idealism down to earth that it may find embodiment there. He keeps his song not in the sunshine only but through the driving storm and the blackness of night. He believes that hard weather has its compensations in strengthened courage and broadened sympathy. He is splendidly careless of the future, from a personal point of view, because he is so careful of the rich treasure which, unless it is spilled, may be an inheritance for ever. No more fitting epitaph could be found for him than Camilla's words in *Vittoria*,

There is an end to joy; there is no end
To striving; therefore ever let us strive
In purity that shall the toil befriend,
And keep our poor mortality alive.

18 The Thrush in February.