

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

The Egoist

GEORGE MEREDITH



EDITED BY ROBERT M. ADAMS

AN ANNOTATED TEXT
BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM



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ROBERT M. ADAMS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY
New York *London*

- Gillian Beer: Selection from "The Two Masks and the Idea of Comedy," in *Meredith A Change of Masks* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 114-39. Reprinted by permission of the publisher and the author.
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Published simultaneously in Canada by George J. McLeod Limited,
Toronto.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Meredith, George, 1828-1909.

The egoist.

(A Norton critical edition)

1. Meredith, George, 1828-1909. The egoist.

I. Adams, Robert Martin, 1915-

II. Title.

PZ3.M54Eg 1978 [PR5006]

823'.8

77-25313

ISBN 0-393-04431-9

ISBN 0-393-09171-6 pbk.

Printed in the United States of America.

Preface

When George Meredith set about writing *The Egoist* in the late 1870s, the movement for the improvement of women's social position and for the assertion of women's legal rights was just gaining momentum. For a long time the voices of isolated precursors had been heard in the land. Mary Astell was one of the first to speak out when in 1697 she published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, wherein a Method is Offered for the Improvement of their Minds*; but it was almost a hundred years later when Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her trenchant *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Other and less powerful voices were raised both before and after these authors, but essentially the cries of protest were isolated and intermittent; not surprisingly, they accomplished very little. But, starting about the middle of the nineteenth century, the individual, occasional voices started to blend into a chorus, and the message they delivered started to echo down the corridors of power.

In 1847 the first stirrings of agitation began, aimed at gaining for women the right to vote; in 1848, Queens College, the first dedicated to providing higher education for women, opened in London. A decade later, *The Englishwoman's Journal* began to offer women an independent voice. In 1861, John Stuart Mill, with the encouragement of his wife, wrote *The Subjection of Women* (though he did not publish it until eight years later); and in 1865, when he was elected to Parliament, he made votes for women part not only of his election platform but of his legislative program. Between 1870 and 1880 petitions calling for women's suffrage were forwarded to Parliament every year, and they had on the average 200,000 signatures attached to them. Women began to be accepted in the universities (Newnham and Girton colleges opened, at Cambridge, during the 1870s) and in the professions. Finally, starting in 1870, Parliament passed a series of important acts under the common title of Married Women's Property Acts; their general tendency was to give women increased control over the money and the children of a marriage at a level that we can start to recognize as distinctively modern.

The rising arc of the movement for women's rights inter-

sected in 1879 with the line of George Meredith's career as a writer of fiction, and gave us, not precisely the character, but the fearful situation of Clara Middleton. She appeals to us not on the basis of legal or ethical technicalities, but as a human being caught in an inhuman system of commodity relationships. By her father, by Willoughby, by "right-thinking society" as a whole, she is valued for her purity, her docility, her serviceability to men. Meredith's intuition of the suffocating web that can be woven about a young woman by playing on these "virtues" of hers is a tremendous imaginative achievement. What makes her struggle so exasperating is that breaking the net would be so easy for her, if only she would forfeit her fragile reputation. How she guides herself surely, instinctively, without calculation or crudity, through a labyrinth of blinding dilemmas to safety is the heart of Meredith's book.

He had written, before *The Egoist*, about a dozen books, among them several volumes of poetry, an oriental fantasy, and eight novels. His reviews were often good and his sales invariably small. He was understood to be a clever, difficult author, and these were qualities that readers appreciated even less a hundred years ago than they do today. To gain a living, Meredith therefore turned his pen to periodical journalism, as Vernon Whitford in the novel plans to do; in addition, he worked on a retainer basis as literary adviser for the publishing house of Chapman & Hall. When he began to write *The Egoist*, he was fifty years old, and had not yet enjoyed any popular success at all. But none of his earlier work had struck quite so resonant a theme as the story of Sir Willoughby Patterne and "his" Clara. *The Egoist* did not gain instant, best-seller popularity for Meredith—that came with an even later book, *Diana of the Crossways*, in consequence of its supposed closeness to a political scandal of the day. But *The Egoist*, as it approaches its century mark, is by all odds the novel of Meredith's that has best stood the test of time. It is likely to prove a permanent part of the heritage, for in Sir Willoughby Patterne Meredith uncovered a figure of comic fatuity whose roots go deeper than any particular set of legal or social arrangements.

We have all known Sir Willoughby. He flourishes, only slightly transformed, in the guise of a college president, a professor of English, or a connoisseur of art; he is one of the "oldest inhabitants" of a small town; he is chairman of the board; there is a streak of him in any politician you care to name. Wherever men act like peacocks, preening and swelling and strutting for the admiration of women and the envy of other men, there Sir Willoughby is found, and there the comic

imps foregather. Willoughby himself as Meredith drew him is a rare and (to us) exotic flower; but the process from which he grew is common as dirt. And, as with dirt, there's no good professing to be above it; the stuff is not only common, it's common to us all. One of the chief qualities that gives Meredith's novel its enduring interest is his awareness of the primitive inside the civilized. Human life, as we can't help being aware nowadays, is built around a core of instincts, the original uses of which are largely anachronistic, but which must somehow be adapted to civilized ends. The comic spirit as wielded primarily by women does some of this civilizing work on the interior barbarians who are universal among us. The comic spirit is the cutting edge of culture; we need its keen and flashing blade. But without the primal instincts that culture is constantly alert to lop, men would be tame and hollow creatures indeed. Culture and instinct are permanently and inconclusively at war; civilization is unthinkable without its discontents.

Thus I think it is a superficial view of *The Egoist* which complains that adequate poetic justice isn't in the end visited on Willoughby. He should be stripped and whipped, some think, as the moral monster he is; he and the social order that bred him should be arraigned, denounced, rejected. Of course that isn't the method of comedy, but it doesn't answer, either, to the deeper vision of the case—which is simply that the Willoughby in us is immortal, universal, and consequently not subject to moral approval or disapproval. You might as well denounce the law of gravity, Meredith seems to be saying, as expect to eradicate egoism from the character of men—or, for that matter, of women either, though certainly under Victorian circumstances they got less chance to display the quality. Comedy, in any case, is not the cure for this or any other social condition; it is a state of mind particularly open to cool, inconclusive, distanced observation. Of this stance *The Egoist* is the supreme example in English.

ROBERT M. ADAMS

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PRELUDE

A CHAPTER OF WHICH THE LAST PAGE ONLY IS OF ANY IMPORTANCE

COMEDY is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing. Credulity is not wooed through the impressionable senses; nor have we recourse to the small circular glow of the watchmaker's eye to raise in bright relief minutest grains of evidence for the routing of incredulity.¹ The Comic Spirit conceives a definite situation for a number of characters, and rejects all accessories in the exclusive pursuit of them and their speech. For, being a spirit, he hunts the spirit in men; vision and ardour constitute his merit: he has not a thought of persuading you to believe in him. Follow and you will see. But there is a question of the value of a run at his heels.

Now the world is possessed of a certain big book, the biggest book on earth; that might indeed be called the Book of Earth; whose title is the Book of Egoism, and it is a book full of the world's wisdom. So full of it, and of such dimensions is this book, in which the generations have written ever since they took to writing, that to be profitable to us the Book needs a powerful compression.

Who, says the notable humourist, in allusion to this Book, who can studiously travel through sheets of leaves now capable of a stretch from the Lizard to the last few poor pulmonary snips and shreds of leagues dancing on their toes for cold, explorers tell us, and catching breath by good luck, like dogs at bones about a table, on the edge of the Pole?² Inordinate unvaried length, sheer longinquity, staggers the heart, ages the very heart of us at a view. And how if we manage finally to print one of our pages on the crow-scalp of that solitary majestic out-

1. "watchmaker's eye": hidden behind its magnifying glass (*loupe*) for close vision.

2. "Lizard": a headland at the south-

west tip of Cornwall, the southernmost point of England. The Book of Egoism, laid out leaf to leaf, would cover the British Isles

sider?³ We may with effort get even him into the Book; yet the knowledge we want will not be more present with us than it was when the chapters hung their end over the cliff you ken of at Dover, where sits our great lord and master contemplating the seas without upon the reflex of that within!⁴

In other words, as I venture to translate him (humourists are difficult: it is a piece of their humour to puzzle our wits), the inward mirror, the embracing and condensing spirit, is required to give us those interminable mile-post piles of matter (extending well-nigh to the very Pole) in essence, in chosen samples, digestibly. I conceive him to indicate that the realistic method of a conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible, is mainly accountable for our present branfulness, and for that prolongation of the vasty and the noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, steams the malady of sameness, our modern malady.⁵ We have the malady, whatever may be the cure or the cause. We drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote; which was as if tired pedestrians should mount the engine-box of headlong trains; and Science introduced us to our o'er-hoary ancestry — them in the Oriental posture: whereupon we set up a primeval chattering to rival the Amazon forest nightfall, cured, we fancied.⁶ And before day-break our disease was hanging on to us again, with the extension of a tail. We had it fore and aft. We were the same, and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science.

Art is the specific.⁷ We have little to learn of apes, and they may be left. The chief consideration for us is, what particular practice of Art in letters is the best for the perusal of the Book of our common wisdom; so that with clearer minds and livelier manners we may escape, as it were, into daylight and song from a land of fog-horns. Shall we read it by the watchmaker's eye in luminous rings eruptive of the infinitesimal, or pointed with examples and types under the broad Alpine survey of the spirit born of our united social intelligence, which is the Comic Spirit? Wise men say the latter. They tell us that there is a constant tendency in the Book to accumulate excess of substance, and such repleteness, obscuring the glass it holds to mankind, renders us inexact in the recognition of our individual countenances: a perilous thing for civilization. And these wise men are strong in their

3 "crow-scalp": the top leaf, one supposes, on the mountain of leaves making up the book.

4. "Dover": the cliff in *King Lear*, Act IV. Meredith fancies Shakespeare atop it, comparing the immeasurable oceans outside and inside himself.

5. "branfulness": an excess of bran

(chaff) and a deficiency of grain.

6 "ancestry": the anthropoids, whose possible relation to man had been disturbing Victorian England since Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). Monkeys "hunker down" on their heels, and Meredith refers to it as an "Oriental posture."

7. The precise cure, the right solution.

opinion that we should encourage the Comic Spirit, who is, after all, our own offspring, to relieve the Book. Comedy, they say, is the true diversion, as it is likewise the key of the great Book, the music of the Book. They tell us how it condenses whole sections of the Book in a sentence, volumes in a character; so that a fair part of a book outstripping thousands of leagues when unrolled, may be compassed in one comic sitting.

For verily, say they, we must read what we can of it, at least the page before us, if we would be men. One, with an index on the Book, cries out, in a style pardonable to his fervency:⁸ The remedy of your frightful affliction is here, through the stillatory of Comedy, and not in Science, nor yet in Speed, whose name is but another for voracity. Why, to be alive, to be quick in the soul, there should be diversity in the companion throbs of your pulses. Interrogate them. They lump along like the old lob-legs of Dobbin the horse; or do their business like cudgels of carpet-thwackers expelling dust, or the cottage-clock pendulum teaching the infant hour over midnight simple arithmetic. This too in spite of Bacchus.⁹ And let them gallop; let them gallop with the God bestriding them, gallop to Hymen, gallop to Hades, they strike the same note.¹ Monstrous monotonousness has enfolded us as with the arms of Amphitrite!² We hear a shout of war for a diversion. — Comedy he pronounces to be our means of reading swiftly and comprehensively.³ She it is who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us. She is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, a sweet cook. If, he says, she watches over sentimentalism with a birch-rod, she is not opposed to romance. You may love, and warmly love, so long as you are honest. Do not offend reason. A lover pretending too much by one foot's length of pretence, will have that foot caught in her trap. In Comedy is the singular scene of charity issuing of disdain under the stroke of honourable laughter: an Ariel released by Prospero's wand from the fetters of the damned witch Sycorax.⁴ And this laughter of reason refreshed is floriferous, like the magical great gale of the shifty Spring deciding for Summer.⁵ You hear it giving the delicate spirit his liberty. Listen, for comparison, to an unleavened society: a low as of the udderful cow past milking hour!⁶ O for a titled ecclesiastic to curse to excommuni-

8. "index": index finger; "stillatory". distillery.

9. Drink, liquor—from the Roman god of wine, Bacchus.

1. "Hymen . . . Hades": whatever our human destination (marriage or hell or both), our pulses keep the same monotonous time.

2. Amph-i-tri-te is a sea-nymph, wife of the sea-god Poseidon; into her bower drowned men are gathered.

3. "he": still the man with an index on the book, above.

4. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I; Prospero, when he came to the island, freed Ariel from the hag Sycorax.

5. "floriferous": flower-bearing.

6. The delicate ironies of the free comic spirit are contrasted with bovine society, content with its gross satisfactions, sensitive only to gross discontents.

cation that unholy thing!—So far an enthusiast perhaps; but he should have a hearing.

Concerning pathos, no ship can now set sail without pathos; and we are not totally deficient of pathos; which is, I do not accurately know what, if not the ballast, reducible to moisture by patent process, on board our modern vessel; for it can hardly be the cargo, and the general water-supply has other uses; and ships well charged with it seem to sail the stiffest:—there is a touch of pathos.⁷ The Egoist surely inspires pity. He who would desire to clothe himself at everybody's expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the actual person. Only he is not allowed to rush at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation.

You may as well know him out of hand, as a gentleman of our time and country, of wealth and station; a not flexile figure, do what we may with him; the humour of whom scarcely dimples the surface and is distinguishable but by very penetrative, very wicked imps, whose fits of roaring below at some generally imperceptible stroke of his quality, have first made the mild literary angels aware of something comic in him, when they were one and all about to describe the gentleman on the heading of the records baldly (where brevity is most complimentary) as a gentleman of family and property, an idol of a decorous island that admires the concrete. Imps have their freakish wickedness in them to kindle detective vision: malignly do they love to uncover ridiculousness in imposing figures. Wherever they catch sight of Egoism they pitch their camps, they circle and squat, and forthwith they trim their lanterns, confident of the ludicrous to come. So confident that their grip of an English gentleman, in whom they have spied their game, never relaxes until he begins insensibly to frolic and antic, unknown to himself, and comes out in the native steam which is their scent of the chase. Instantly off they scour, Egoist and imps. They will, it is known of them, dog a great House for centuries, and be at the birth of all the new heirs in succession, diligently taking confirmatory notes, to join hands and chime their chorus in one of their merry rings round the tottering pillar of the House, when his turn arrives; as if they had (possibly they had) smelt of old date a doomed colossus of Egoism in that unborn, unconceived inheritor of the stuff of the family. They dare not be chuckling while Egoism is valiant, while sober, while socially valuable, nationally serviceable. They wait.

Aforetime a grand old Egoism built the House. It would appear that ever finer essences of it are demanded to sus-

7. "moisture": tears; so also "briny drops," below.

tain the structure: but especially would it appear that a reversion to the gross original, beneath a mask and in a vein of fineness, is an earthquake at the foundations of the House. Better that it should not have consented to motion, and have held stubbornly to all ancestral ways, than have bred that anachronic spectre.⁸ The sight, however, is one to make our squatting imps in circle grow restless on their haunches, as they bend eyes instantly, ears at full cock, for the commencement of the comic drama of the suicide. If this line of verse be not yet in our literature,

Through very love of self himself he slew,
let it be admitted for his epitaph.

CHAPTER 1

A MINOR INCIDENT SHOWING AN HEREDITARY APTITUDE IN THE USE OF THE KNIFE

THERE was an ominously anxious watch of eyes visible and invisible¹ over the infancy of Willoughby, fifth in descent from Simon Patterne, of Patterne Hall, premier of this family, a lawyer, a man of solid acquirements and stout ambition, who well understood the foundation-work of a House, and was endowed with the power of saying No to those first agents of destruction, besieging relatives. He said it with the resonant emphasis of death to younger sons.² For if the oak is to become a stately tree, we must provide against the crowding of timber. Also the tree beset with parasites prospers not. A great House in its beginning lives, we may truly say, by the knife. Soil is easily got, and so are bricks, and a wife, and children come of wishing for them, but the vigorous use of the knife is a natural gift and points to growth. Pauper Patternes were numerous when the fifth head of the race was the hope of his county. A Patterne was in the Marines.³

The country and the chief of this family were simultaneously informed of the existence of one Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne, of the corps of the famous hard fighters, through an act of heroism of the unpretending cool sort which kindles British blood, on the part of the modest

8 Sir Willoughby Patterne, in whom the greedy instincts of his ancestors survive under a veneer of social graces

1. Parents and imps; "premier": the first-born, the eldest son

2. Primogeniture is the law of England; the oldest son inherits the title and the estate, the younger sons whatever the

father wants to give them, generally nothing.

3. As distinguished from county regiments, rich in tradition and social prestige (the Hampshire Rifles, Seaforth Highlanders, etc.), the Marines were plebeian fighters.

young officer, in the storming of some eastern riverain stronghold, somewhere about the coast of China.⁴ The officer's youth was assumed on the strength of his rank, perhaps likewise from the tale of his modesty: "he had only done his duty." Our Willoughby was then at College, emulous of the generous enthusiasm of his years, and strangely impressed by the report, and the printing of his name in the newspapers. He thought over it for several months, when, coming to his title and heritage, he sent Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne a cheque for a sum of money amounting to the gallant fellow's pay per annum, at the same time showing his acquaintance with the first, or chemical, principles of generosity, in the remark to friends at home, that "blood is thicker than water." The man is a Marine, but he is a Patterne. How any Patterne should have drifted into the Marines, is of the order of questions which are senselessly asked of the great dispensary.⁵ In the complimentary letter accompanying his cheque, the lieutenant was invited to present himself at the ancestral Hall, when convenient to him, and he was assured that he had given his relative and friend a taste for a soldier's life. Young Sir Willoughby was fond of talking of his "military namesake and distant cousin, young Patterne—the Marine." It was funny; and not less laughable was the description of his namesake's deed of valour: with the rescued British sailor inebriate, and the hauling off to captivity of the three braves of the black dragon on a yellow ground, and the tying of them together back to back by their pigtails, and driving of them into our lines upon a newly devised dying-top style of march that inclined to the oblique, like the astonished six eyes of the celestial prisoners, for straight they could not go.⁶ The humour of gentlemen at home is always highly excited by such cool feats. We are a small island, but you see what we do. The ladies at the Hall, Sir Willoughby's mother, and his aunts Eleanor and Isabel, were more affected than he by the circumstance of their having a Patterne in the Marines. But how then! We English have ducal blood in business: we have, genealogists tell us, royal blood in common trades. For all our pride we are a queer people; and you may be ordering butcher's meat of a Tudor, sitting on the cane-bottom chairs of a Plantagenet. By and by you may . . . but cherish your reverence.⁷ Young Willoughby made a kind of shock-head or football hero of his gallant distant cousin, and wondered occasionally that the fellow had been content to despatch a letter of effusive

4. During the mid-nineteenth century the British entered China by force to export religion, manufactured goods, and opium. Merchants worked hand in glove with the military to force open Chinese ports and rivers—hence "riverain," on the analogy of "sovereign "

5. He who dispenses (Fate), with the overtone of a free clinic.

6. "dying-top": a top which is losing momentum and so wobbling.

7. Presumably, you may meet in trade some members of the royal family.

thanks without availing himself of the invitation to partake of the hospitalities of Patterne.⁸

He was one afternoon parading between showers on the stately garden terrace of the Hall, in company with his affianced, the beautiful and dashing Constantia Durham, followed by knots of ladies and gentlemen vowed to fresh air before dinner, while it was to be had. Chancing with his usual happy fortune (we call these things dealt to us out of the great hidden dispensary, chance) to glance up the avenue of limes, as he was in the act of turning on his heel at the end of the terrace, and it should be added, discoursing with passion's privilege of the passion of love to Miss Durham, Sir Willoughby, who was anything but obtuse, experienced a presentiment upon espying a thick-set stumpy man crossing the gravel space from the avenue to the front steps of the Hall, decidedly *not* bearing the stamp of the gentleman "on his hat, his coat, his feet, or anything that was his," Willoughby subsequently observed to the ladies of his family in the Scriptural style of gentlemen who do bear the stamp. His brief sketch of the creature was repulsive. The visitor carried a bag, and his coat-collar was up, his hat was melancholy; he had the appearance of a bankrupt tradesman absconding; no gloves, no umbrella.

As to the incident we have to note, it was very slight. The card of Lieutenant Patterne was handed to Sir Willoughby, who laid it on the salver, saying to the footman, "Not at home."

He had been disappointed in the age, grossly deceived in the appearance of the man claiming to be his relative in this unseasonable fashion; and his acute instinct advised him swiftly of the absurdity of introducing to his friends a heavy unrepresentable senior as the celebrated gallant Lieutenant of Marines, and the same as a member of his family! He had talked of the man too much, too enthusiastically, to be able to do so. A young subaltern, even if passably vulgar in figure, can be shuffled through by the aid of the heroic story humourously exaggerated in apology for his aspect. Nothing can be done with a mature and stumpy Marine of that rank. Considerateness dismisses him on the spot, without parley. It was performed by a gentleman supremely advanced at a very early age in the art of cutting.

Young Sir Willoughby spoke a word of the rejected visitor to Miss Durham, in response to her startled look: "I shall drop him a cheque," he said, for she seemed personally wounded, and had a face of crimson.

The young lady did not reply.

Dating from the humble departure of Lieutenant Cross-jay Patterne up the limes-avenue under a gathering rain-

8. "shock-head": a bumpkin-hero.