

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

GEORGE MEREDITH
THE ORDEAL OF
RICHARD FEVEREL



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GEORGE ELIOT

The Mill on the Floss



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J. H.

INTRODUCTION

Mamma, whose views on education are remarkably strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted; it is part of her system.

Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

MEREDITH's masterpiece, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), has sometimes been criticized for being inconsistent. How should one respond to a novel, it has been asked, which is two-thirds comedy (Chapter XXIX signals 'The Last Act of a Comedy') and ends with a series of monumental tragedies?

Well, life too is a mixed genre; and many things which may seem amusing enough ultimately turn out, as Hardy says, to be not quite so amusing after all.

A reference to Hardy is not irrelevant here. For in writing a story which quite deliberately refuses to provide the mid-Victorian reader with the expected happy ending and a full round of poetic justice, Meredith—born thirteen years after Trollope, sixteen after Dickens, seventeen after Thackeray, and eighteen after Mrs Gaskell—was in fact signalling a new direction for the novel. He is generally, and rightly, classified with the 'later' Victorian novelists (Hardy, Gissing, Butler, Moore), who tended to find themselves at odds with contemporary standards and conventions and whose novels present us with what Matthew Arnold termed a 'criticism of life' (which Hardy thought of as the function of art) rather than with various examples of ways of

accommodating ourselves to it. While Dickens, Trollope, and Mrs Gaskell find plenty of things to complain about and to ridicule, in their novels the world is perceived as a place in which, finally, things are made to make sense, poetic justice flourishes, everyone gets his just reward. Do what is right, and you must come through: Thackeray and Wilkie Collins sometimes question this; the others, never. This is by no means the view of the later novelists; in their works we find no such confidence in the organization of the universe. The discoveries of the 'New Sciences' and the difficulty of maintaining religious faith, the failure of economic prosperity (in the 1870s) and the collapse of the One Nation ideal—these, as well as creative sensibilities which, in good 'modern' fashion, had been alienated, prevented the later generation of novelists from seeing their world as a benign place.

A pivotal figure here is George Eliot. The fact that *Adam Bede* appeared in the same year as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* has sometimes tempted literary historians to point to 1859 as a watershed moment for the novel. In this same year, doing business as usual, Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities*, Mrs Gaskell published *Round the Sofa and Other Tales*, Trollope published one of his most mediocre novels, *The Bertrams*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* was appearing serially, and Thackeray brought out what is arguably the worst book ever produced by a great novelist, *The Virginians*. (*The Origin of Species* also appeared in 1859.) But *Adam Bede* and *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* pointed in a different direction. These are novels which emphasize psychological development and analysis of character over the demands—or perhaps in place of the demands—of plot, and many of the other conventional requirements of early Victorian story-telling. Perhaps 1859 was indeed the year in which the novel began to change. While such generalizations

are both dangerous and often wildly overstated, this one may contain a few seeds of truth.

Like *Adam Bede*, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* focuses on the psyches of its characters; and, like *Adam Bede*, it has a highly controversial (for the time) seduction in it. The camera swings away at the crucial moment in both novels, however, in obeisance to contemporary taste; for novelists of this period were dependent for their livelihood on the puritanical requirements of Charles Evans Mudie and his colleagues in the circulating library business. How the libraries reacted quite simply determined sales.

The seduction in *Adam Bede* is that of an inexperienced girl by a rich man—the standard type—and Arthur Donnithorne is given plenty of time to repent of his action before the novel comes to an end. And while Hetty's baby is not allowed to live, she—unlike Tess, later—does survive, though in vastly changed circumstances. Dinah and Adam come together at the end, and the novel closes on a happy note. Born nine years before Meredith, George Eliot, though a transitional figure, is temperamentally closer to the early Victorian novelists than to her successors in the field. Her faith in the goodness of people, her 'religion of humanity', allowed her to let her foolish people commit their folly early in the story, repent at their leisure, and survive. The idea that she is a tragic novelist surely invites re-examination.

In *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, the seduction is that of a virtuous boy by a woman of the world, and occurs near the end of the novel—different premises indeed. There is no happy ending. For these reasons—and for its irreverence—Meredith's novel got itself into serious trouble with the circulating libraries. While *Adam Bede*, doctrinally clean, was an immediate best-seller, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* initially became little more than a *succès de*

scandale, not at all the same thing, and by no means as gratifying to an impecunious author as a healthy sale. But Meredith did not see life as a Dickens novel. For him acts had consequences, and the consequences of rash and foolish conduct were not easily sidestepped or atoned for.

It may be argued, then, that the appearance of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, even more emphatically than that of *Adam Bede*, marks the beginning of the end of the 'old' Victorian novel and the advent of something new. It was Meredith, not George Eliot, whom Gissing worshipped (*Feverel* was his favourite novel); nor was Gissing the only late Victorian novelist to lionize Meredith. It is difficult to appreciate now how towering a figure Meredith was for the novelists of the 1890s. Trollope was in eclipse, Dickens thought fit only for children. Though Henry James read George Eliot and Gissing read Charlotte Brontë, Meredith and Hardy were the contemporary heroes, and the old-fashioned novel with a happy ending was an object of mirth. Writers simply didn't perceive their world that way any more. Meredith, who was born in 1828, had been seeing the universe as an ominous place, and writing about it that way, for a long time by the 1890s. He was a giant to the younger men in his trade, who noticed no similarity between the world they lived in and that depicted by George Eliot or Trollope or Dickens.

The setting of Meredith's great novel is shadowy, the chronology obscure. Still, one can place its action, roughly, from the late 1820s to the mid-1830s (like almost all Victorian novels, this one is set in the recent past). These dates are suggested by the fact that Austin Wentworth, after four years abroad, is greeted upon his return (XLI) by Adrian with news of the Reform Bill (1832) and its consequences; by the dependence of most of the characters on carriages and horses for long trips,

and trains only infrequently—in the 1840s they would have been jumping on one train after another (like Dickens in many of his novels, Meredith wants the atmosphere of an earlier time; horses instead of trains brought with them the ambience of the late Regency and George IV); by the description of Blaize as a ‘free-trade farmer’, a characterization that would have been relevant in the Twenties and Thirties but not in the Fifties, after the Corn Laws had been repealed; by the brief debate in the novel over the comparative merits of Byron and Wordsworth, which would not have been possible later (in the 1840s, say), when Wordsworth was a revered figure and Byron a bad joke; by the mere presence in the story of a duel, something in which no mid-Victorian gentleman, no matter how highly strung, would have become involved, for Prince Albert had made duelling not only illegal but, more importantly, both immoral and unfashionable (the duel in which Trollope’s Phineas Finn gets himself embroiled is highly anomalous); and by the libidinous evening party at Richmond, replete with unbuttoned ladies and lascivious lords—again, a scene simply impossible to imagine a few years after Victoria ascended the throne, in 1837 (the Twenties and Thirties were the last decades, until the Seventies and Eighties, when such things could be written about: the Nancy of *Oliver Twist*, published 1837–9, could not, and indeed was not, repeated in any form in Dickens’s later novels). For such amorous adventures as Richard’s, Meredith needed an earlier time, when a hero with romantic illusions could jump on a horse.

But the debates over science that were taking place in the middle of the nineteenth century are very much present in the novel’s main target, the spurious ‘scientific’ System by which Sir Austin Feverel brings up his son.

Meredith believed in evolution—the view of character development in his novels is patently evolutionary—and his protagonists are often changed by a kind of organic growth. Undoubtedly he welcomed *The Origin of Species* and the publications by Lyell and Darwin and others which had preceded it. But one can believe in evolution and at the same time abhor the application of scientific principles to human conduct, and there can be no doubt that this is what Meredith is doing in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*—whose villain is neither Lord Mountfalcon nor Lady Mountfalcon nor anyone other than Sir Austin Feverel himself.

Only by involving himself with other people in society can a person learn what he is: it is this (very sound) principle which Sir Austin violently opposes. Now one of Meredith's most constant themes is what he calls the 'comedy of egoism', which arises, he believes, out of man's failure to perceive his rightful place in the human hierarchy and his vision of himself as being at the centre of the world. Meredith's important *Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (1877), as well as the famous Prelude to his only other great novel, *The Egoist* (1879), make clear his commitment to the idea that the egoist must be ridiculed, not tolerated—and certainly not taken seriously or at his own valuation of himself. Meredith speaks of the virtues, indeed the necessity, of laughter, and of the need to recognize folly, advocating 'Olympian' mockery rather than sympathy for the egoist. What Meredith calls the 'Comic Spirit' provides moral progress by deflating egoism and establishing in its place a sense of proportion. It is the perspective of this 'Comic Spirit' from which the story is told, and which we encounter in the narrative voice, from first to last, in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*; the result of this is an ironic, sometimes jeering tone which makes the novel complex,

and perhaps hard going for the reader unused to Meredithian mockery.

One form egoism frequently takes in Meredith's novels is the unreasonable desire of some to possess others entirely. Among the amazing gallery of egoists, hedonists, and solipsists in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*—extensively revised by Meredith in 1878 (see Note on the Text); that is, during the same period in which he wrote the *Essay on Comedy* and *The Egoist*—Sir Austin (like Dickens's *Dombey*) is prominent for his desire to possess completely the heart and soul of his son. 'I require not only that my son should obey; I would have him guiltless of the impulse to gainsay my wishes,' declares the baronet (XVI). The boy must not only be obedient; he must be innocent of Thoughtcrime. Indeed, there is something Orwellian about Sir Austin; he is the Victorians' most spectacular anticipation of Big Brother. In his wish 'to be Providence to his son' (IV), he destroys him. Richard's 'ordeal' is his moral education, which is the edifice of his father and which, due to his father's System, suffers fatal delays in construction. 'His son's ordeal was to be his own,' Meredith remarks of the baronet (XXVIII). Acts have consequences. What we do, how we act, inevitably affects others besides ourselves: it is one of Meredith's most deeply felt precepts. Unfortunately for the hapless Richard, all of Sir Austin's diseased chickens come home to roost in the breast of his romantic, idealistic, and tragically inexperienced son.

It is clearly wrong to have a 'system' of any kind in dealing with others, especially those who are close to us. Meredith believed that the novel must affirm human freedom in the face of scientific determinism. Sir Austin places his faith in the scientific control of human nature; but human nature cannot be 'controlled'—either scientifically or in any other way. Instinct, which finally 'beats'

the System, is alien to it, as is humour. It is indicative that the baronet has no sense of humour: 'the faculty of laughter . . . was denied him' (XXII). 'Honest passion', the novel reminds us, 'has an instinct that can be safer than conscious wisdom' (XXIX). But it is instinct that Sir Austin fears above all—and rightly so. The System works, more or less, so long as Richard is young and malleable, without instincts of his own. Eventually he begins to think for himself. The combination of heroic idealism and personal naivety prove to be catastrophic.

Love—and what can be more instinctive than that?—marks the end of the System (the chapter titled 'The Last Act of a Comedy' is that in which Richard is married); for science, as we have seen, takes no cognizance of instinct. The breach between Richard and his father begins when the boy is commanded to burn his poetry. Art, of course, is always anathema to tyrants, who fear what they cannot control; love, we remember, is the great enemy of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The gulf between Sir Austin and his son becomes impassable when Lucy enters the picture and Richard falls in love with her. The baronet refuses to accept her because she is not his own choice. There is an obvious irony here. The System has worked so far in that it has rendered Richard capable of choosing for his wife the one woman in the world with whom he has a chance of happiness. Indeed, when Richard meets and loves Lucy, 'Then truly the System triumphed' (XV), as Meredith observes. But the System, being a system, does not 'know its rightful hour of exaltation' (XIX). A bad scientist as well as a bad father, Sir Austin cannot refrain from tinkering with a process which has, after all, turned out an admirable adolescent. In the paroxysm of jealousy and anger which overtakes him, the baronet never gives the marriage a chance to work; he has been balked in his chosen role as

his son's one God. Nothing the boy does without his consent and encouragement can be acceptable. 'It was the first of the angels who made the road to hell' (XXI), he remarks; but he seems to have forgotten that the original sin was Pride. That Sir Austin takes the Devil's side is clear enough. After Richard's marriage, in his determination to close his heart and mind against his son, the baronet 'did not battle with the tempter. He took him into his bosom at once, as if he had been ripe for him, and received his suggestions, and bowed to his dictates' (XXXIII).

'Love of any human object is the soul's ordeal,' Sir Austin observes (XXI); Meredith obviously agrees with him. But *how* we love is important. Sir Austin, and ultimately Richard too, can be seen as people who love the wrong way. To love possessively—so jealously as to turn vindictive and unreasonable—is the wrong way. But to love too selflessly, without any ego, is also dangerous, for it leaves us with no defences, vulnerable to the smallest pinprick. Richard's blind romantic love, while morally preferable to his father's more selfish brand, is dangerous too. It is indicative that he is described as 'an engine . . . at high pressure' (XXIX); as having 'the character of a bullet with a treble charge of powder behind it' (XLI); and, in an image which recurs, as 'strung like an arrow drawn to the head' (e.g., XV). Those who recommend to his father what Lord Heddon calls 'a little racketing' (XVIII) for Richard are undoubtedly right. Had the boy been allowed some experience of the world before meeting the Mountfalcons and their set—had he, in short, stopped living in a dream of knight-errantry—the final tragedies might have been avoided. But Richard, until the end, exists in a world of his own, as his father does—different worlds, to be sure, but equally divorced from reality. One cannot make a

career out of 'saving' women any more than one can bring up a child scientifically. The old family doctor who declares that Richard 'ought to see the world, and know what he is made of' (XXIII) is ignored. So is Lord Heddon's prophetic warning: 'Early excesses the frame will recover from; late ones break the constitution' (XVIII). Even Mrs. Doria sees that Richard's 'education acts like a disease on him. He cannot regard anything sensibly. He is for ever in some mad excess of his fancy, and what he will come to at last heaven only knows!' (XXXV). The problem, of course, is the father. He understands as little of the world as his son; the egoist perceives nothing, being blinded by self-regard. Indeed, we are told that 'Sir Austin . . . knew less of his son than the servant of his household' (XII). When the baronet advises Mr. Thompson (XVII) to let Ripton see the vices of London in order to take away their mystery and allure, we know that he won't allow Richard the same freedom. Feverels, of course, are not Thompsons. It is all pride, Satanic pride.

Richard should have been sent to school, like Ralph Morton, where he would have learned a few things worth knowing. 'Mystery is the great danger to youth' (XXV), as Adrian rightly declares. But the father cannot let the son out of his sight; is it to be expected that God should send his only son to Eton? The father knows nothing; the son is brought up to know nothing. 'The danger of a little knowledge of things is disputable,' the novel reminds us (XXX), '*but beware the little knowledge of one's self!*' (the italics are Meredith's). Sir Austin never has any self-knowledge—not even, as Lady Blandish makes clear, at the end, when he fails to see that he is responsible for all that has happened. 'As he wished the world to see him, he believed himself' (XL); yes, *believed himself*. It is here that the baronet's egoism is thrown into greatest relief, in

his putting himself and his own wishes before the welfare of the son he claims to love. 'He lost the tenderness he should have had for his experiment—the living, burning youth at his elbow' (XXII). For this, he cannot be forgiven. Even when vaguely cognizant of some possible guilt, Sir Austin manages to turn his conduct to his own advantage: 'His was an order of mind that would accept the most burdensome charges and by some species of moral usury make a profit out of them' (XL).

What ultimately renders the novel so moving and so indelible is the attractiveness of Richard Feverel himself, a character we so readily and enthusiastically admire and commune with until, in the final third of the novel, the results of his pernicious 'education' catch up with him and he behaves like an imbecile. The tale is brilliantly and beautifully written from first to last, however, and even in the final section Meredith is able to preserve our feeling for Richard—most notably in the much-praised chapter called 'Nature Speaks' (XLIII), in which, alone in the German forest, Richard achieves some insight into himself and into the meaning of his past actions. But it is the trimming of the bright flame—the fact that 'Richard will never be what he promised' (XLVI)—that we must come to terms with at the end. By then it is too late; Richard is a failure. Meredith wishes us to see that acts *do* have consequences, that how we treat others is important, and that human interaction, since the ultimate results of it cannot be fully known or understood at the time, is a fragile thing, more deserving of our consideration than what we may conceive our own momentary needs and desires to be. And so there is no happy ending.

In the book's final chapters, though Sir Austin has met Lucy and realized that only through 'blind fortuity' could Richard have found such a perfect mate and that

'instinct' has indeed 'beaten science' (XLIII), he has still understood little more than that, as he says, 'it is useless to base any system on a human being'. Meredith comments on Sir Austin's error: 'If, instead of saying, Base no system on a human being, he had said, Never experimentalize with one, he would have been nearer the truth' (XXX). Humans can be nurtured by love, but not by science. It is this lesson that Richard learns in the German forest—the value of unselfish love of another. But too much has happened that cannot be undone; Richard cannot escape fully the mad fancies and illusions fostered in him by his pernicious upbringing. Egoism and sentimentality, taken in large doses, are capable of turning comedy into tragedy after all. 'The Fates must indeed be hard, the Ordeal severe, the Destiny dark, that could destroy so bright a Spring!' (XII). Indeed they are. And so it is that in our last view of Richard Feverel we see the defeated hero lying silently in his bed, striving to imprint the image of his dead wife upon his mind.

JOHN HALPERIN

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel was published by Chapman and Hall in three volumes on 20 June 1859; the original price in boards was 31s. 6d. The novel appeared in two volumes in the Tauchnitz series. A revised edition in one volume was brought out in 1878 by Kegan Paul & Co. A sixpenny edition was published by Newnes in 1899, and another in 1900 by Constable. The revised (1878) version of the novel appeared as part of the De Luxe Edition of Meredith's works, 39 vols. (1898–1912). The 1878 version was also reprinted in what has become the standard edition of the works: the Memorial Edition, 29 vols. (1909–12). *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* was published in the Everyman Library series in 1935; since then there have been several paperback versions, none of which was in print in 1983.

The present edition is a reproduction of Volume II of the Memorial Edition and follows the 1878 revised version of the novel rather than the 1859 original. Meredith preferred the later to the original version, needless to say—and with good reason. In the revised edition, the opening (and rambling) four chapters of the first edition were conflated into one. The sections thus excised depict, satirically, troops of ladies pursuing Sir Austin Feverel; the ladies are irrelevant to what follows in the novel, and painlessly dispensed with. The first edition also contains a chapter in which a Mrs Grandison, the mother of a daughter who might be a candidate to marry Richard, figures; like the ladies in the original opening chapters, the Grandisons have no real connection with the main action of the story and thus are not missed in the revised edition.