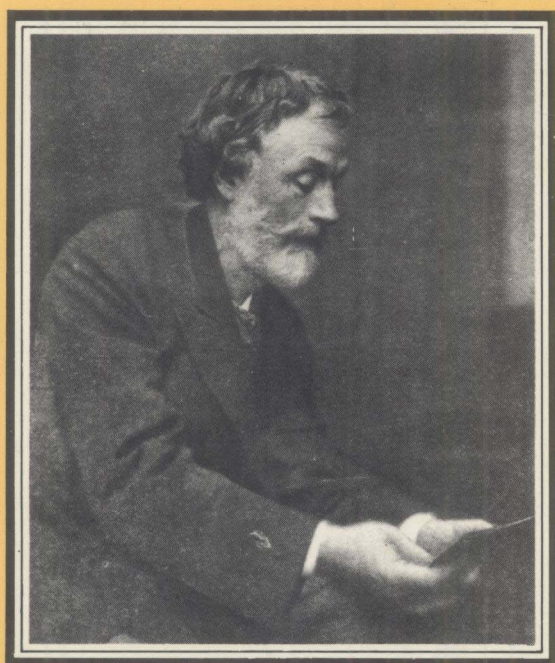

GEORGE MEREDITH

A Reappraisal of the Novels



◊ Mohammad Shaheen ◊

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TO
S.J.C.

‘Were I a dashing writer of railway prose
or even a composer of practical flimsy, this
would not matter; but I write studying . . .’

The Letters of George Meredith (I, 505)

Preface

This book consists of an introduction and six chapters. The introduction gives an account of the thematic and technical issues which are explored in the body of the book. The six chapters have as their unifying theme Meredith's effort to exploit the art of the novel as a flexible instrument for recording personal and social experience.

References to *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* are to the Riverside Edition, edited by C. L. Cline (New York: 1971). References to other works of Meredith, not otherwise specified, are to the Memorial Edition, 27 vols (London: 1909-11). Chapter and page number are used for the text referred to or quoted.

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M.S.

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I Introduction

In a controversy over whether to admit Meredith to the Cambridge English syllabus, two fundamental questions were raised in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1960.¹ The first question was the extent to which Meredith's novels are Victorian. André Gomme placed him among 'the more Victorian Victorians', and consequently suggested that one of his novels would be just enough for undergraduates 'to find out for themselves why they cannot afford the time for more'. The second question was raised by W. J. Lucas, who, in response to this antipathy, asked Gomme which novel he would have them read pointing out that Meredith's fiction varies from one novel to another. He concludes: 'It could as well be argued that one has only to read "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" to see that Yeats is a minor poet of a singularly unrewarding kind.'

After the appearance of his first novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Meredith confronted a hostile reaction from the public because of the alleged immorality of the novel. He was distressed that Mudie, after ordering five hundred copies for his circulating library, suppressed the book from his reading list. Meredith wrote to Samuel Lucas: 'O canting Age! I predict a Deluge. Mudie is Metternich: and after him—. Meantime I am tabooed from all decent drawing-room tables.' (1, 39) He told Samuel Lucas that the book would not attract a second reading: 'At least not among newspaper critics—to whom all honour and glory.'

After this setback, Meredith, driven by financial necessity, embarked in the 1860s on an attempt to reconcile his artistic bent to the taste of the reading public. His first book in this period was *Evan Harrington*. This was serialised in *Once a Week*, of which Lucas was editor. Meredith's anxiety over the reception of the novel is seen in his correspondence with Lucas. While working on the book he wrote: 'But Oh! Heaven! Why have you advertised me as a "popular author"? Isn't it almost a fraud on the public? Won't they stare when they behold this notorious child they are quite

Unless otherwise stated, all references to the letters are to C. L. Cline's edition (Oxford, 1970).

unacquainted with?' (1, 48) In another letter written while the book was running in serial, Meredith wrote: 'Read and let me have your opinion. It develops the character of the hero partly: the incidents subsequently affect him. But I wish to know how you take it. It does not much move the tale. But do not insist on that entirely, at present.' (1, 49)

Evan Harrington was designed to combine the popular themes of snobbery and romantic comedy. The picture of the Countess de Saldar is reminiscent of Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair*, and the portrayal of the Cogglesby brothers and Mr John Raikes come close to Dickens's comic figures. The result is low comedy.

The second novel of this experimental period was *Emilia in England*, in which Meredith turned to a wider range of theme and character in his attempt to win popularity. The novel offers that ever-popular form of fiction, historical narrative while at the same time it tries to avoid what the public had found unacceptable in *Evan Harrington* and immoral in *The Ordeal*. Meredith wrote to the American publisher Harper: 'The present volume is of a different texture, [from *Evan Harrington*] and will not offend as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is said to have done.' (1, 234) *Emilia*, however, neither satisfied its author nor won popularity for him. To Dr Jessop he wrote (May 1864) that he was 'unpleasant in review style' and that he 'gets slaps from the reviewers' for having written *Emilia*. (1, 255)

In his next work, *Rhoda Fleming*, Meredith tried to find a balance between theme and character by introducing many incidents of an improbable nature such as to allow scope for the delineation of character. The result, however, was a melodrama which was even less well-received by the reviewers than *Emilia* had been.

Meredith then returned to *Vittoria*, a sequel to *Emilia* which he had started earlier but put aside in order to write *Rhoda Fleming*, a work 'of the real story-telling order'. (1, 250) In *Vittoria* (or *Emilia in Italy*), Meredith exploits his knowledge of Italy, and on one occasion asked his friend, Wyse, to stay with him in order to help with some Italian 'local colourism'. (1, 276-7) But local colour did not please the reviewers as Meredith had hoped. One review, for example, commented: '*Vittoria* is a tale of the manqué Italian Revolution of 1849, by Mr George Meredith, an author hitherto known as a novelist of some ability and a rather low ethical tone.'² Though, like *Emilia*, *Vittoria* was a sensationalised presentation of history, it did achieve wider circulation and a better sale than its predecessors.

The foregoing brief account of Meredith's fiction in the sixties is intended not to disparage these novels, which do provide special interest for particular researchers, but rather to indicate that it was not within Meredith's capacity to become 'Victorian' even when he attempted to conform to public taste. His novels of the sixties were destined not to win popularity, though as experiments they contributed towards the further development of his fiction.

In the 1870s Meredith gave rein to his artistic bent and, consequently, remained unpopular with the reading public. In the eighties, he again courted public taste, though now with more confidence in his art, and reached the peak of his popularity with *Diana of the Crossways*, a novel cast in the biographical form which was currently popular. The achievement of popularity did not, however, lead Meredith to continue writing in the same vein. *One of Our Conquerors*, his next novel, made no concessions to public taste, and it is Meredith's most difficult as well as most typical work. Its condemnation by reviewers led him to write *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, which has a thematic pattern similar to the preceding and following works, but a much simpler presentation of character. The result was a story of more popular appeal but which gave less satisfaction to its author. *The Amazing Marriage*, Meredith's last complete novel, reconciled what pleased the public with the author's own purpose through the two-fold function of romance in the novel, but it did not win Meredith any considerable popularity; and his audience remained limited until the end of his literary career.

The development of Meredith's fiction which extended over the last three decades of the century, and the wide range of purpose explored in the novels, caused W. J. Lucas to ask which one novel epitomised Meredith's art. Gomme, in reply to Lucas, chose either *The Egoist*, which he thought 'represents Meredith at his best', or *Beauchamp's Career*, which he believed 'would do equally well'. Such an argument overlooks the fact that, although both novels were written during the same period, each introduces us to a different Meredith.

Gomme's choice, however, is not unusual in modern criticism. E. M. Forster, by whom Gomme is clearly influenced, illustrated his criticism of Meredith in *Aspects of the Novel* mainly from *The Egoist* and partly from *Beauchamp's Career*. In an unpublished lecture, Forster chose *The Egoist*: on this occasion to illustrate the civilisation of the pre-war period, since he takes Meredith to be representative

of that era, in contrast to Proust and Auden who are taken as representative of the twenties and thirties respectively.³

It has been common practice in modern criticism to approach Meredith mainly through *The Egoist* and to consider him a writer of comedy and anatomist of egoism. Christopher Caudwell, for example, writes that 'not only *The Egoist*, but all Meredith's books are about egoists and careerists. . .'.⁴ The main reason for this judgement comes from the direct relevance of the novel to the only critical document that Meredith produced: *An Essay on Comedy and the Comic Spirit*. The essay, too, bears similar relevance to Meredith's short fiction.

These works of the late seventies are presumably the only body of Meredith's writings where the critic can apply theory to practice. This perhaps explains why *The Egoist* has received more critical discussion than any other of Meredith's novels, and why critics have been tempted to extend the comic interpretation backward to *The Ordeal* and forward to *The Amazing Marriage*. An example is Joseph Warren Beach's study: *The Comic Spirit in George Meredith*. Such criticism forces on Meredith's work an interpretation which applies only to one stage of his development. It ignores the fact that Meredith himself realised the limitation of comedy when he wrote to R. L. Stevenson that he yearned to have finished *The Egoist* because 'it came mainly from the head and had nothing to kindle imagination'. (II, 573) Meredith 'thirsted to be rid of it soon after conception', when he realised that the idea of comedy epitomised the spirit of the time.

Comedy is the only aspect of Meredith that can be described as Victorian, in that the comic spirit is basically a moral power and comedy deals with deviations from the norm of society. However, neither the popularity of *The Egoist* nor its success in catching the tone of society satisfied Meredith, and as soon as he had finished it he began *The Amazing Marriage* as a recast of *The Egoist*.

The Egoist then is typical of Meredith only in a limited sense. What is especially typical of him is the continual development of his fiction. Unlike many of his fellow Victorian novelists, Meredith was not concerned to justify himself to reviewers and readers through critical introductions or prefaces. His criticism as it exists consists of scattered remarks, of which most are interpolated in the novels themselves, the rest in his letters and reports to Chapman and Hall as a publisher's reader. But these remarks form no coherent critical theory and at the same time they lack the technicality of criticism.

David Daiches once said that 'Meredith is the most difficult Victorian writer to come to critical terms with.'⁵ This comment raises the most crucial problem of how to approach Meredith critically, and acknowledges Meredith to be deserving of more serious study than would be granted by those who dismissed him from the 'great tradition' and were reluctant to admit him to the curriculum of the Cambridge English school.

The present study is an attempt to provide a critical assessment of Meredith's fiction and hopes to bring readers and critics to closer terms with the author and his world of fiction. Five novels are chosen for this purpose: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, *Beauchamp's Career*, *One of Our Conquerors*, and *The Amazing Marriage*. They are selected as being more representative than other novels of Meredith's independent mind, in that they were written with less concern for popularity. Although each novel is examined as a study in itself, similar patterns of theme and character are explored to show how Meredith combined the diverse elements of his fiction.

In describing the thematic and technical issues explored in the study I am aware that some simplification is involved, and would like to remind the reader of not attributing to such terms as are used any clear definitive capacity. Theme, for example, may be used to indicate the author's implied norm, or may simply mean the objective of the book, otherwise referred to as the author's purpose.

The question explored in this study is not the identification of theme but rather how the theme is presented in character. The study holds that theme and character are inextricably mingled and the theme acquires specificity only through character. A common practice which this study hopes to counter is the tendency to abstract a theme, or certain themes, for the evaluation of Meredith's work. Meredith's reputation has suffered from the tendency of contemporary reviewers and critics arbitrarily to select a theme which fits their own critical view. It is regrettable that this practice should continue in modern criticism. Donald Fanger, for example, sorts out themes in which, he claims, Meredith found an expression of his view of life in general and a reflection of his personal life. Fanger parallels the father-son relationship with Arthur's upbringing, the unhappy marriage with Meredith's first marriage, the constricting role of social convention with the shame of his origin, money as a social lever with his grave need of money, and egoism and sentimentality in the novels with Meredith's own. Fanger

concludes that 'Meredith's chief compulsion was what he would have called "loquency": he could not stop talking in company or in his books . . . even long enough to hear himself.'⁶

Concentration on theme has often led to the conclusion that Meredith's works are repetitive. Typical of this trend is V. S. Pritchett's criticism. It is true, as Pritchett says, that Meredith's novels are essentially stories of an education, and that in *Richard Feverel*, in *Evan Harrington*, in *Harry Richmond*, in *Beauchamp's Career* and in *The Egoist*, 'the hero has to unlearn by passing through an ordeal and, when he is stripped naked, has painfully to build upon his new, strange self-knowledge'.⁷ Such a thematic account lacks that perceptive reading of character which would lead to the realisation that education in the books mentioned is a façade. Being itself repetitive, Pritchett's criticism of Meredith over the last two decades has not penetrated behind this façade.

A similar practice is that of grouping together characters from various novels as types on the basis of similar traits that can be traced in them. In the course of her study Gwendolyn O. Stewart remarks that:

Princess Ottilia, Harry's first love, provides an example of an immature, romantic girl, while Janet Ilchester, whom Harry finally marries, belongs to the Rose Jocelyn category. In *Beauchamp's Career* Cecilia Halkett is similar to Ottilia and Jenny Denham resembles Janet. As would be expected, both Ottilia and Cecilia lack guidance, their immaturities parallel those of Harry and Beauchamp, whose growth is remarked by Janet and Jenny.⁸

It is the main concern of this study to demonstrate that the purpose of each novel selected lies in its exploring the individuality of character and not in its presentation of topicality of theme or typicality of character. To provide a comprehensive picture of the way character is individualised a detailed character analysis of each novel is given. It is hoped to establish that development in Meredith's fiction can be traced in the individuality revealed by each character and not in a thematic unity arbitrarily imposed on Meredith's fiction. Before I proceed to the scrutiny of the novels themselves I propose to give a brief account of the various aspects of characterisation explored later in the body of this study.

In his letter to Bainton (September 1887) Meredith wrote: 'I do not make a plot. If my characters as I have them at heart before I begin on them, were boxed into a plot, they would soon lose the lines

of their features.' (II, 888) Meredith's disregard of plot as a sequence of incidents arranged in time appears in various forms throughout his writings. The external unity of the narrative is kept at a minimum in the novels. In the first revision of *The Ordeal* (1878) Meredith compressed the first four chapters of the book into one, eliminating much of the introductory history of Sir Austin's system. Beauchamp's past career occupies one chapter (IV). *One of Our Conquerors* begins with internal action, and incidents come to us refracted through the consciousness of character right from the opening sentence. The history of Carinthia and her brother is given in the first four chapters of *The Amazing Marriage*.

Meredith deliberately avoided the popular straightforward exposition of narrative. His contemporary readers found it difficult to follow the crippled story whose events occur in fragments and whose incidents are presented as allusions. However, plot in Meredith's fiction remains loose only in the sense of falling short of providing a flowing narrative. It has its own unity which springs from character. Forster credited Meredith with what his contemporaries failed to recognise, and his description of plot in Meredith is, I think, most ingenious when he says that. 'A Meredithian plot . . . resembles a series of kiosks most artfully placed among wooded slopes, which his people reach by their own impetus, and from which they emerge with altered aspect. Incident springs out of character, and having occurred it alters that character. People and events are closely connected, and he does it by means of these contrivances.'⁹

Action in Meredith's fiction is what he describes in connection with *Harry Richmond* as 'actions of the mind'. In one of his letters he refers to it as 'the natural history of the soul'. (II, 876) Words are deeds. Characters are revealed to us by what they say rather than by what they do. We know them through their contemplative selves. Meredith's heroes are all brought back from the battlefield to embark on a new heroism—the heroism of the mind. In *The Ordeal* he alludes mockingly to an audience impatient for blood and glory in fiction; in *Beauchamp's Career* he warns the reader that his characters 'conquer nothing, win none' (XLVIII, 553); and Victor of *One of Our Conquerors* achieves no victory.

Character and action can be identified as motive and deed, or what Meredith describes in *Diana of the Crossways* as man's rationalised image of himself and his self in action. (I, 19) In *Beauchamp's Career* Meredith says that ideas are actually the motives

of men. (1, 7) Motive then can be described as the impulse which drives the individual to test the existence (or the validity) of his idea. The two prevailing ideas in Meredith's fiction are nature and egoism in proportions which vary from one character and occasion to another. For this reason I propose to leave them without definitive description here.

Character and action on the one hand correlate with the ideal and the actual on the other. The friction between them is the most characteristic feature in the development of character in Meredith's fiction, and this study shows how variable in structure and intensity the conflict is. In *The Ordeal* there are two different motives in Sir Austin: one is his love for his son, another is the egoism originating from his anger with his wife. The action is supposedly carried out through the system of education adopted by Sir Austin for his son's upbringing. Meredith's design for the purpose of the book as revealed in his letter to Lucas (1, 40) is that the System fails and the tragedy happens because of the discrepancy between the two motives. The study of *The Ordeal* shows that the main flaw in its design comes out of Meredith's confusion over the total correspondence between motive and action, and a close examination of the book will show that the father's egoism is never actually tested to the conclusion that love is overcome by egoism. Meredith's theory of the design remains itself untested.

A serious preoccupation for Meredith in his early writings was to relate character to action and to explain one in terms of another. While his second novel *Evan Harrington* was appearing as a serial he wrote to Lucas: 'This cursed desire I have haunting me to show the reasons for things is a perpetual obstruction to movement.' (1, 57) In the 1860s he continued to be haunted by this desire which reached its limit in *Rhoda Fleming*.

With *Harry Richmond* the problem of internal consistency between character and action is solved through the evolving nature of their design. The driving force in Harry to explore his relationship with the world at large (not with society) is tested against time and experience. Conflict in the book emerges with the evolution of Harry's mind. However, conflict in *Harry Richmond* remains limited because the division in Harry is between his individual desires, or, to use a stock term used for the criticism of the nineteenth century intellectual background, between will and necessity. The conflict is resolved by the reconciliation of one desire to another, and it is the only one of Meredith's novels where the conflict is happily resolved.

The last three novels show how conflict becomes more complex as the individual self acquires social and political drives. In *Beauchamp's Career* the conflict is between the ideal of the individual and the actuality of society. Here the ideal in Beauchamp (whether related to his own affairs or to public life) conflicts with the actual outside. The conflict grows more complex in *One of Our Conquerors* because both sides are internal. In *The Amazing Marriage* conflict grows even more complex as the distance between the ideal and actual becomes less, for Fleetwood is capable of putting the ideal into practice briefly, but remains in conflict because he is incapable of sustaining this state of affairs. Fleetwood lives with both nature and egoism in him as contraries.

The degree of complexity may be viewed in the light of the perspective envisaged in each novel. In *Beauchamp's Career* reconciliation would have been possible had society been responsive; in *One of Our Conquerors* resolution of conflict appears to be less possible because the ideal is counteracted both by the actual in Victor and the same 'actual' in society; and in *The Amazing Marriage* the possibility of reconciliation becomes elusive.

Though Meredith was writing outside the field of popular fiction (at least in the five novels selected) he was not unaware of current critical issues related to narration; but as usual he expressed his concern for them in his own way. In an early review he wrote: 'After a satisfactory construction of plot, when to dramatise and when to narrate is the novelist's question.'¹⁰ In his unpublished *Notebook* he wrote: 'The first point in studying others is to be disengaged from ourselves.'¹¹

On various other occasions Meredith expressed his awareness of what is generally known as the point of view or the aesthetic distance. It is what W. J. Harvey describes as the sense of implied reality which centres around a certain axis in the novel, and the second is simply the mode of narration.¹² The interpretation of Meredith's writings has often suffered from the arbitrary emphasis which results from the adoption of a particular point of view.

Meredith confronts the question of aesthetic distance right from the beginning, and the discussion of *The Ordeal* points to the inadequate control over sympathy with and detachment from character as he compounds tragedy with comedy. The discussion examines the interaction of two norms. The thematic norm of the novel is the recounting of the ordeal of father and son which is in origin autobiographical. Comedy, which provides a technical