

The Uses of Criticism: Narrativized and Contingent Discourse in *The Egoist*, *Diana of the Crossways* and *One of Our Conquerors*

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In considering the novels of George Meredith, it is the virtuosity of the prose with its high concentration of allusions and figurative language which frequently catches the eye and inspires scholarly as well as non-academic comment; less recognized are the numerous embedded passages which pertain to theoretical concerns of structure and form. With the exception of his “Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit” (1877), Meredith did not divide his critical comments from his creative prose but presented the two intermixed, such that encounters with his novels require simultaneous engagement with the artistic convictions of the former and the narrative of the latter. As a simple observation, this fact would not seem to make much of a difference in perceptions of either author or writing, as one may easily accede to it and then return to debating the long-established praises or complaints of obscurity. The utterance of the statement, however, does not exhaust its importance, for it leads us to reconsider the actual distinctions between the two types of discourse, ultimately following their transmutations back to the novel’s capability as both an absorbing and modifying medium.

Since scholarship examining Meredith’s writing seldom fails to make reference to obscurity (the prevailing term), whether it is only a passing glance or the primary subject to be treated, I too will begin with the due offering which is by now something of a ritual for official entry into the field but still a relevant source of meaning.<sup>1</sup> At the same time that considerations of obscurity serve as the common point of ingress, they are primarily a point of departure for this thesis, in some respects providing prerequisite context and in others functioning as assumptions to be complicated. It is difficult to foresee successfully convincing anyone of the novels’ accessibility, although a few scholars, like Nicholas Dames, have made persuasive attempts to emphasize Meredith’s overlooked efforts to cater to contemporary popular reading

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<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, Ian, ed. 1971. *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 2-12.

culture.<sup>2</sup> However, for the sake of putting the issue of obscurity into focus and preventing the distortion that can often arise out of intense discussion of a single topic, I offer the healthy reminder that Meredith remains well within the pale of intelligibility, otherwise he could not make the strong impression he does and very little would be learned in discussing his work. Obscurity naturally brings up questions of purpose and intent and a review of current literature shows a consensus in favor of the effect as deliberate, shrewdly calculated but not solidly impenetrable. One rather strong proponent of this reading, Allon White, organizes his entire argument around the idea of Meredith's prose as a sort of involuntary twitching, an authorial response to the phenomena of symptomatic reading that is equal parts concealment and self-exposure.<sup>3</sup> Looking back to Virginia Woolf's characterization in one of her essays, perhaps the best-known and cited almost as often as the word obscurity is mentioned, we also see acknowledgment of careful design, with the additional recognition of an alternating effect: "For pages all is effort and agony; phrase after phrase is struck and no light comes. Then, just as we are about to drop the book, the rocket roars into the air; the whole scene flashes into light and the book, years after, is recalled by that sudden splendor."<sup>4</sup> Even if the imagery comes across as conventional in its contrast of light and dark, the description remains suggestive and telling in so far as the impression describes a common reading experience. In fact, Woolf echoes a similar earlier reaction from Oscar Wilde, who offers the following remark, without a doubt more ironic but not the less accurate: "Ah Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos illuminated by flashes of lightning."<sup>5</sup> Significantly, both comments foreground the perception of bursts of

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<sup>2</sup> Dames, Nicholas. 2007. *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 172-176.

<sup>3</sup> White, Allon. 1981. *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 5-9, 85-91.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1932. *The Second Common Reader*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, pp. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, (Blitz Editions, 1993), pp. 915.

confusion and awareness, which is figuratively communicated as moments of shadow and light which simulate a movement bordering almost on volatility. Taking a cue from these two more contemporary readers, we are invited to prioritize movement rather than content in seeking, through reevaluation, a better understanding of the uniqueness and mechanics of Meredith's varied, mosaic prose.<sup>6</sup>

From these statements indicating a tradition of reception, both past and present, which recognizes careful design, we make a fairly logical jump to self-consciousness, specifically as it is manifest in the writing itself - a compositional feature whose meaningful presence in novels of the period has been at times questioned, in one instance by Robert Alter. My study is not intended to be a response to Alter, but because his claims touch on a fundamental assumption of my own argument, starting with my position on this matter points the direction to the more immediately relevant concerns which form the body of this thesis. Despite his claims about the general "eclipse" of the self-conscious novelist during the major social and political changes of the nineteenth century (and previous to its revival with modernism), there are numerous important examples which call into question the soundness of such a broad assertion, at the very least expose it as misleading.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the falseness of his position regarding this period of literary production betrays itself when he tries to disqualify Thackeray's reasonable claim to a place alongside Fielding and Sterne; indeed, a short quote from his own selection, *Vanity Fair*, would appear more than sufficient to challenge the unexceptionable nature of his claims:

All which details, I have no doubt, JONES, who reads this book at his Club, will pronounce to be excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental. Yes; I can see Jones at this minute (rather flushed with his joint of mutton and half pint of wine), taking out his pencil and scoring under the words "foolish, twaddling," &c., and adding to

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<sup>6</sup> Harris, Margaret. "The Fraternity of Old Lamps': Some Observations on George Meredith's Prose Style." *Style* 7:3 (Fall 1973). Pp. 271-276.

<sup>7</sup> Alter, Robert. 1975. *Partial Magic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 86-104.

them his own remark of "QUITE TRUE." Well, he is a lofty man of genius, and admires the great and heroic in life and novels; and so had better take warning and go elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

I do not at all mean to say that there is no validity to his arguments - especially as they concern the eighteenth-century examples he analyzes - but his strict criteria seem unduly narrow. A large part of Alter's error, as I believe it is, traces back to his insistence that self-conscious texts must be almost mercilessly consistent in providing reminders of their own artificiality and may never allow us for an instant to be unaware of that fact.<sup>9</sup> Besides the arbitrariness of implicitly requiring an unspecified measure of this quality, the artificial distinction, on the one hand, forgets the inherently mixed nature of novels as a genre, and on the other, mistakenly draws the conclusion that one net either catches all fish or proves the ocean empty. If the novels of the nineteenth century do not exactly follow the model of their eighteenth-century predecessors, their self-conscious elements should not be dismissed as minor or merely accidental touches; rather, these elements should be understood as a thoughtful digestion as well as adaptation of the more overt gestures employed in foregoing prose fiction. While retaining clear signs of their literary genealogy, the experiments with written self-consciousness during the latter nineteenth century also lay claim to the tradition in their own right, and Meredith not only proves the continuance of this novelistic work but stands as one distinct example of a particular turn: a critical one.

Insofar as reflexive comment in novels interrupts the flow of narrated events, it is closely related to the creation and sustaining of that effect referred to as realism, which, as the dominant mode of the period, has attracted and still draws a large part of scholarly attention; however, this overlap does not mean that criticism can be equated with or limited to anxieties over producing

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<sup>8</sup> Thackeray, William Makepeace. 2003. *Vanity Fair*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, pp. 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Partial Magic*, pp. 115-127.

realistic effects.<sup>10</sup> Distinguishing critical statements only to the degree that they further or hinder the particular formal project of an -ism overlooks the fact such commentary does not exist solely for the purpose of promoting literary ideology and may lend itself but ill to being so mapped out. Thus, the treatment of this discourse calls for a return to considerations of function rather than a protracted cataloging and theorizing about generic allegiances. While the conventional search for telltale commitments tends to demand exclusivity as well as literary sorting and policing, the exploration of consciously reflexive comment stresses, even urges, the recognition of mutual support and exchange between elements. What we are freer to remember and admit, which this study of some of Meredith's prose intends to show, is that the boundary between creation and evaluation can be extremely blurred, to the effect that the exchange between them (neither definitively the originating point) and the constant potential for movement - a kind of slippage - remain continually present to our consciousness. Consequently, for roughly the first half of this thesis, I will begin by laying out at length the several features which establish my opening claim that the chosen novels represent consciously constructed and self-critical pieces of writing, and the second half will be devoted to identifying and analyzing at length significant moments of blurring between commentary and narrative. Some general thoughts about the novel form and Meredith's significance in relation to a study of it will serve in the way of a conclusion. In order to keep this study to manageable proportions, I will be limiting my inquiry to three novels, the choice of which has been determined by several considerations: *The Egoist* (1879), *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), and *One of Our Conquerors* (1891). The reason for this particular selection is that the first is still in print - which circumstance does not, of course, have

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<sup>10</sup> Watt, Ian. 1957. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 11-34

any objective bearing on the book's greater literary value but does have the practical advantage of addressing something in continued circulation and thus implicitly recognized outside scholarship as a standard work; alone available out of his nineteen novels, it is something that the non-academic reader may more easily consult. Regarding the others, the second has been recognized as one of his most commercially popular works and offers revealing considerations about the profession of writing, and the third, by the author's own estimation, represents a "strong dose of [his] most indigestible production."<sup>11</sup> All three works are very well represented in the scholarly literature by a range of different approaches, and the ability to engage more freely with the fruits springing from a well-cultivated part of the field allows me to more easily integrate my own arguments on a less explored topic.

#### Method and Caveats

Determining a methodology for this study is complicated by Meredith's wide-ranging interests and maximalist approach to writing; accordingly, both circumstances suggest the wisdom of a brief outline of caveats and personal justifications. Against the backdrop of nineteenth-century experimentation and reflectiveness, the eclectic compositions of philosophical, poetic, epigrammatic, and scientific discourse which Meredith presented as novels certainly do credit to his reputation as a persistent innovator, and it is largely in this spirit that he has been and should continue to be understood. Generally speaking, it is quite difficult to define either individual works or groupings within the oeuvre because of their more than hybrid composition, and those familiar with Meredith know too well that often the best one can do with regards to such arguments about what sort of writer he is or what genre his writing represents, is to say that there are numerous elements in play which lend themselves to the formulation of as

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<sup>11</sup> Photiades, C. 1913. *George Meredith His Life, Genius and Teaching*, tr. A. Price. London: Constable, pp. 8.



many possible theories.<sup>12</sup> I offer this statement to stress the freedoms Meredith's writing both takes and invites - which make for a highly interesting and fruitful rather than forbidding interpretive situation. Keeping in mind that Meredith's works tend so strongly toward the experimental, and experiment itself likes to continually survey new ground, it is only fitting to treat each of his novels as its own distinct artistic attempt. To say a word to the effect on past analysis, the interpretative constraints associated with contextual materials are borne out by the nature of much of the scholarship that has already been done; setting aside biographically-inflected readings such as Allon White's, analysis of physiological engagement during reading like Nicholas Dames', or inquiries into Meredith's feminist tendencies like Phyllis Bartlett's; the overwhelming majority are studies concentrating on individual novels rather than theories that seek to encompass or order his entire body of prose. Another consequence related to the insular quality of many extant studies, the modest proportions of Meredith scholarship in general, either past or present, also mean that the field has been little disturbed by any controversies, large or small. Although a number of images and themes do recur from work to work - persecution, exposure, the materiality of books - the novels are clearly animated by different stylistic concerns: *The Egoist*, in its respect of the classical unities is plainly rooted in a dramatic tradition; *Diana of the Crossways* draws from the double source of a historical scandal and the novelist's own experiences; and *One of Our Conquerors* is a complex meditation on national and individual success and defense, as well as the manner of relating fragments to a whole.<sup>13</sup> From this thematic/formal variety, it follows that the critical comments expressed in each are equally contextual, intimately bound to the questions and ideas most at hand at the moment. Thus

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<sup>12</sup> Fanger, Donald. "George Meredith as Novelist." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16:4 (Winter 1962). Pp. 318-323.

<sup>13</sup> Beer, Gillian. 1970. *Meredith: A Change of Masks*. London: Athlone Press, pp. 140-144.

mutually influencing and influenced by the particular narrative structures, the respective critical remarks of each work not only express opinions but demonstrate distinct methods for their own representation and integration; in *The Egoist*, convictions, design and justification are situated in their own space at the beginning; *Diana* offers a slightly more diffuse but still compact concentration, and *One of Our Conquerors* involves an overall scattered arrangement. As the case is stated in *Diana of the Crossways*, “smart remarks have their measured distances, many requiring to be a brule pourpoint, or within throw of the pistol, to make it hit” (1), and so theories set forth in one work must be acknowledged as arising from the immediate occasion, whose events, themes and characters only fall within the range described. To finish on this subject, one way of accounting for the situation of Meredith’s repeatedly being drawn to favorite subjects yet avoiding the formulaic, is to recognize that a fairly consistent set of elements are employed to produce numerous, striking effects. Out of respect for material that is so insistently contextual, my argument will be primarily grounded in the novels’ form and organization, their variations on recognizable patterns, from which our sense of obscurity and, what is less observed, the paradoxical, emerge.

So far as the situation described bears on my method, a constant awareness of context makes close reading one of the more useful strategies for studying Meredith, if it is not also one of the wisest. Since passages must inevitably be taken out of context, I intend to handle those selected as carefully as possible in order to preserve the integrity, movement, and complexity of these moments intact. Paraphrase and summary are more than usually inimical to communicating the play and structure of these passages: it is possible to say of a certain passage that here is an endorsement of metaphor or there the narrator begs patience for what seems a delay in the plot, but once summarized a reader cannot help but wonder what this fuss is about or

what is so extraordinary that someone should write a study of such apparently simple statements. Since there is only so much one can do to mitigate the distortions caused by necessary omissions and truncation, the longer passages (some of which are quite extended) will be included as an appendices so the reader may easily review these without the cutting that I must make for the sake of space.

With regards to moving from one novel to the next, my study follows a chronological order, but this should not be interpreted as a statement of relative value or an implied narrative of authorial development. If it can be admitted that nothing is to be argued for a chronological order, there is conversely nothing really to argue against it - in a word, this order is adopted simply because it seems to me the most neutral. On the same point, I warn the reader that the order in which I examine key critical elements is not equivalent to a hierarchy of value or importance; in fact, I would stress that any of them could serve as an entry point and causeway to the others - no matter what thread is pulled, there is a guarantee of unravelling. As will be repeated throughout this thesis, the structure of my argument is considerably impacted by this mutual association of elements which are, therefore, more or less interchangeable. Indeed, a handful of scholars have pointed out the Chinese box structure of the novels, a metaphor which nicely illustrates the point that elements may be contained within each other and there are multiple ways to touch upon them all. I raise this point because it highlights something that can too easily be forgotten when it comes to novels in general, but to one's especial disadvantage in Meredith: novel structure is composed of elements existing in a network of association rather than isolation. A corresponding recognition is the difficulty, if not sheer impossibility, of locating the "original node," and we should be satisfied with picturing the mutually supporting

spokes of a hub emanating outward, with the additional disorientation caused by their constant movement.<sup>14</sup>

### Meredithian Criticism

At the end of his essay “The Perfect Critic,” T.S. Eliot offers a closing statement which, because it played so large a role in framing my initial thoughts about this subject and anticipating the following theories, seems better suited than anything else to set up my reasons for focusing on criticism and the role it plays:

It is fatuous to say that criticism is for the sake of “creation” or creation for the sake of criticism. It is also fatuous to assume that there are ages of criticism and ages of creativeness, as if by plunging ourselves into intellectual darkness we were in better hope of finding spiritual light. The two directions of sensibility are complementary; and as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person.<sup>15</sup>

The connections made in this statement are by no means anything novel, but their formulation underscores the mutuality of both aspects of writing and firmly denies the phenomenon Alter suggests, in which fictional invention in the novel seems “a mode of action and as such cannot afford the luxury of self-criticism.”<sup>16</sup> Beyond Eliot’s warning against such a way of writing (and by extension, interpreting), it has been long acknowledged in literary criticism, to the point of cliché, that the text on the published page came into being as the result of certain decisions and attitudes, which collectively represent the writer’s working system of beliefs - practice and theory in one. A basic version of the standard practice/theory schema, admittedly oversimplified, tends to position criticism as a justification for treatment of narrative while narrative proves the integrity of stated principles; and this is not wrong, except that it implies too

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<sup>14</sup> Doody, Margaret. 1996. *The True Story of the Novel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 458.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, T. S. 2015. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, pp. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Partial Magic*, pp. 102.

much of a one-to-one correspondence, especially unhelpful in the case of Meredith. Added to this view of criticism, the more specific issue of obscurity only further reinforces misleading notions of essential difference, for commentary is supposed, if not through itself then via direction, to keep confusion in check with its own clarity and explanations, and by virtue of an aloofness from the work ostensibly offered and distinguished as “creative.” Central to the inadequacy of the general schema described are the assumptions of a linear relationship as well as the ability to distinguish between the two, when the reality shows the relationship to be one far more tautological. In an ideal world, there would already be a thorough study weighing Meredith’s novels’ claims and descriptions against actual practice in accordance with the assumptions of the standard model, but this has yet to be accomplished, and it is not the objective of my study to supply the deficiency. The two should go hand-in-hand but, perhaps, it is not the worst outcome to obtain a partial survey of some key features of the criticism, which in any case would be required to give context to the process of applying expressed standards as an evaluative measure. In order to gain a better understanding of Meredith’s and make the most of this early stage of inquiry, we must first completely do away with the idea of criticism as a monolithic or homogeneous discourse. I would add as my own contribution that criticism more or less displays one of two relationships to the other prose with which it appears: shedding light on the elements, tone, structure of what is there in order to instruct readers in a manner of comprehension or indicating some kind of a lack - this latter often taking the form of an admission accompanied by either a qualification or promise. The second type, which forms an area of special interest, will be explored more fully in an upcoming section, referred to as the contingent or conditional mode of criticism. The definition should also be expanded to acknowledge that criticism does not have to point to other prose, but may very well keep attention focused on itself, demonstrating that it

too may be taken apart and recognized as possessing layers and complexities of meaning. To phrase this another way, one can break criticism down into key components just as it can be used as a tool for dissecting “creative” prose. My main break with the traditional model of relationship: I propose that difference, wherever it may be located, be taken not as one of kind so much as of degree. Naturally, there could be no better test case than one in which the often underlying or paratextual structure of criticism is deliberately exposed to the reader within the text itself, the space supposedly dominated by narrative. If we recall Wilde’s and Woolf’s comments about movement through states of perception, we observe that they also, even specifically, apply to the subtle interactions between criticism and narrative, which like light and darkness can display a variety of shades in between that linger and fade into each other.

As stated before, the practices of self-evaluation and self-referentiality are not unique to Meredith and have parallels in the work of many contemporaries, for example that of the much better known George Eliot. In one way, the similarity is merely indicative of the on-going refinement occurring throughout the nineteenth century of theories regarding the possibilities and boundaries of their chosen form.<sup>17</sup> Predictably - if not inevitably - an awareness of practices leads to reflection and a more direct statement of judgments or concerns regarding decorum and the challenges of composition. A look at the following lines from Eliot’s *Middlemarch* confirms just such a heightened sensitivity mixed with an attendant desire to offer an explicit statement partly in excuse and partly in justification:

Fielding lived when the days were longer (for time, like money, is measured by our needs), when summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings. We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a campstool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be

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<sup>17</sup> Wilt, Judith. 1975. *The Readable People of George Meredith*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 3.

concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.<sup>18</sup>

A clear example of self-consciousness, the thoughts herein expressed contrast the modern conditions of writing and reading with the more leisurely ones of the eighteenth century, yet the very space and time they themselves occupy directly belie the disclaimer of the defunct literary tradition of an earlier age. More importantly, these lines reveal a contradictory, or at least highly ambiguous, impulse almost inherent in moments of reflective criticism, for while Eliot indulges an impulse for metacommentary she turns it to the purpose of apparently admitting the inappropriateness of that same digression. The tensions of this possibly sincere apology or ironic apologia lie precisely in the simultaneous recognition and transgression of the boundaries supposedly delimiting more and less permissible types of discourse - the narrative from the mere "relevancies" to which self-criticism belongs. Leaving aside the determination of the passage as an apology striving for self-effacement or an apologia calling for attention, the prose simply does not behave as an "objective" statement, for *this* "particular web" of metacommentary also begs to be unraveled. Within the context of this nineteenth-century practice of openly addressing narrative and critical concerns, it becomes necessary to inquire into the ways Meredith is distinct, and second, what it is that can be derived from extended analysis of the ways he disposes of his material. Of the two, the second question is the more difficult, as matters of significance typically are, yet it seems particularly valid when one remembers the ambivalent relationship he had with reviewers and the public at large who criticized his prose and questioned his methods, and even more valid when considered in light of a gap in present scholarship despite efforts to recover his work by way of a general reevaluation.

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<sup>18</sup> Eliot, George. 2001. *Middlemarch*. Naples: Trident Press International, pp. 116-117.

Before proceeding, a few words are due relating to the gap caused by general neglect of Meredith's critical passages, a clue to which can be found in the *Middlemarch* excerpt, where statements both assert themselves and pull back. On the face of the matter, it seems puzzling that few to no modern critics have chosen to take up the subject of Meredith's comments in any systematic way, aside from one or two lines selected because more conveniently generalizable, such as the "dirty-drab" and "rose-pink" comparison in *Diana of the Crossways*, a lively debate about the relative merits of realism and sentimentality as modes of conveying truth. This more established approach, broadly historical in its focus on stylistic factions, is in one way understandable because it offers a form of retreat from the obscurities and idiosyncrasies of Meredith and relief from his specific pressures; however, the subsequent concentration of already negligible interest on these moments reinforces a broader lack of recognition. Quotes of this favored type reappear with considerable frequency, while there is, to my knowledge, no extensive, standalone analysis of the Prelude to the *Egoist*, a circumstance almost inconceivable given Meredith's challenging tone and characteristically virtuosic sample of prose. All of which begs the question, central to the present inquiry of Meredith's linking of theory and practice, why so little has been said since earlier critics stamped admiring but general dismissal on the seriousness of his non-narrative statements? At the very least, it is safe to say that interpreting the silence on this head as an indication of perfect comprehension would be laughable, for even the ontological difficulty George Steiner establishes in his well-known taxonomy would invite some kind of comment, and it is no more logical to argue that the prose creates such a taste for itself that the understanding readers gain through pleasure they then take for granted as obvious.<sup>19</sup> Honesty and better sense alike point to the persistence of general confusion and

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<sup>19</sup> Steiner, George. "On Difficulty." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36:3 (Spring 1978). Pp. 263-276.



frustration, and in seeking the advantages of this strange but calculated effect, a few possibilities do present themselves. One potential way of accounting for it is self-indulgence, throwaway statements by a writer who doesn't take them seriously himself and neutrally allows us to forget them so that we focus more on the narrative than the intrusions, which would be supposedly compartmentalized to serve this purpose. Rather than imagine the indifferent relegation of discourses to their corners, the infinitely more interesting option to consider, is that the criticism, while striking and lavishly rhetorical in the immediate moment, does not foreground itself in the text as a whole and, beyond the high pitch defining its immediate reading, is tempered into an apparently smooth surface not intended to "catch" memory. The strange lack of response from casual or academic readers, if we follow this explanation further, therefore traces back to these passages paradoxically taking a step into obscurity in spite of their full ability to impress stylistically.<sup>20</sup> To put the case another way, the supposedly underlying or explanatory apparatus, integral and visible in the nineteenth century, here deliberately tries to bury itself, slipping before us and slipping just as imperceptibly away. If we turn once more to the comments made by Woolf and Wilde, which have proved to be of great assistance thus far, I would like to draw out a less obvious suggestion they both make - that of a kind of blindness or indistinctness induced by the brilliancy of the flash; the lingering effects of the glow which imperceptibly soften back to the prior state - in Woolf's comment, a process unfolding over the period of years. Wilde also points out that the chaos which is lighted, despite being a solid landscape, does not give one anything convenient to hold onto for the purposes of memory, a consideration strengthened by the fact that both he and Woolf required figurative language to fix and communicate the

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<sup>20</sup> Gallagher, Catherine. "The Rise of Fictionality." *The Novel*, edited by Franco Moretti, (Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 336-339.

experience. What remains, as a challenge to a reader and an accomplishment by the writer, is a strong impression which awes in the moment but fades to be reilluminated. Naturally, in a situation defined by such a degree of dazzling indeterminacy and where wandering is the associated risk, it is necessary to be extra careful in both the selection of a term and its defining criteria.

Speaking to terminology and scope, although philosophy is the more frequently used term when discussing any of Meredith's theories, literary or otherwise, I will continue to refer to the passages in question as 'criticism' because of its being more in line with my interpretation of the statements as a kind of literary criticism, and therefore having the subsequent advantage of a more specific set of evaluative connotations. For another writer this change in terminology might not have any significance with regards to indicating the material being referenced, and we find either option suitable for the purposes of identification and reaching the intended interpretive conclusions. For Meredith, however, drawing this distinction is an especially necessary step given that his "philosophy" - so collectively recognized - ranges freely (and a little voraciously) over subjects as varied as education, morality, history, social organization and evolutionary science; and within each of these fields does not hold itself responsible for a systematic presentation of views. Thus, any attempt to comprehensively account for, interpret, and apply his philosophy must needs be impressively nimble and encyclopedic; lacking the qualifications, I gratefully pass over the task and admire the work others have done over the years in carrying it out. An even more important point, by preferring "criticism" to the broader reference of "philosophy," I am much better equipped to ground my arguments in concerns of method and technique, whereas the latter term almost inevitably demands a much more extensive treatment of content: themes, objects of meditation, listable sets of concepts. I do not want to be

misunderstood as devaluing questions whose phrasing begins with “what”, which *are* essential and can never be lightly dismissed, but the questions of “how” seem to allow for a closer access to paradoxical elements of his obscurity.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it seems appropriately cautious to begin with a theory of treatment and selectively pull in the thematic rather than prioritize content and fall prey to the temptation and ultimate distractions of adding yet another example of a certain device or image, which, in the end, seems tantamount to an overcomplicated reassembly of Meredith. Whatever the reasons for beginning in that way, content-based inquiries are hard to leave off once started and commitment can soon become a circumstance-enforced loyalty. Additional support for both my preferences can also be found throughout the contemporary criticism which, despite recognizing the novels as proof of a formidable intellect, did not hesitate to point out that the theories expounded lacked the consistency to constitute a true system of thought. Moreover, as one critic phrased it in his review of *The Egoist*, there is too much incongruity between content and handling to permit their naive conflation: “the story, such as it is, would be better plainly dressed; its clothes are too good for it. Perhaps no story would be good enough for such clothes.”<sup>22</sup> Modern readers, lacking exact historical context for the social and literary debates of the moment, are likewise inclined to agree that Meredith’s thought, whatever the particular topic may be, conveys a strong sense of irregularity, intuited before understood. In speculating as to causes for irregularity, we come once more to the conclusion that content is inadequate as a primary source of possible answers, for the social and literary issues handled are very much those of the day, engaged in by numerous individuals in the respective communities, and not concerns peculiar to the life or writing of a maverick

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<sup>21</sup> Zola, Emile. 1893. *The Experimental Novel*. Rahway: Cassell Publishing Company. Pp. 6-37.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, Ioan, ed. 1971. *Meredith: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 213.  
R. H. Hutton, *Spectator*, November 1879.

individual. Taking this cue, it is ultimately much more important to examine the perception to see what it reveals about the relationship between the critical commentary and supposedly demonstrative prose, and to trace it back to subjective presentation rather than objective assertion. My underlying belief for this additional justification of method is that a shift to formal concerns yields insight because such study frequently requires articulation of the problems, highlighting ambiguities rather than encouraging belief in an elusive essence. Problems, like plants in various climates, are unique to their contexts - all problems do not appear in all cases, and the presence of certain ones consequently suggests important things about the necessary conditions for their existence. By nature obscure, problems are not fully opaque, which would make them impossibilities calling for omniscience instead of challenges permitting the application of careful analysis. Furthermore, as reminders of structure, both in the sense of total integration and varyingly arranged common elements, they actually contain hints for their own best study; and just as prevalence helps in making sense of themes and motifs, problems can also alert us to resemblances and patterns of reappearance.

Although I have already mentioned my hostility to a perception of criticism as monolithic, I would like to briefly set out one or two distinctions still within the category of the specifically literary and method-focused, not for the sake of arguing strict or mutual opposites but to distinguish variations whose differences, while obvious, do not detract from their similarity of composition. The first to consider, obvious though it may be, relates to length, for some passages of Meredith's criticism constitute but a few sentences while others stretch to fill pages, self-generating according to their own suggestions in a manner that anticipates the style later perfected by the Modernists. Regarding the longer passages, the motive may be reasonably attributed to a desire to build up the endurance of the reader's mind, while the briefer sets of

comments work to sensitize perception to detail and implications just above the threshold of notice.<sup>23</sup> The second distinction involves the focus and direction of the criticism, of which there are at least two modes: 1.) reflections on the quality and characteristics of the writing present within the level of the narrative, and 2.) commentary pointedly directed outside the confines of narrative or turned back upon itself to create a layered effect. While the distinctions laid out do have structural importance and will be apparent in the examples analyzed, I bring them up not in order to foreground them but to head off the charge of simple disregard; ultimately, they remain secondary to the principle of Meredith's criticism as a highly flexible medium that can take on a variety of forms, including the appearance of the prose in which it is situated. Even in less complicated instances when criticism claims to exist as the mere theoretical companion to practice, there often remains some kind of discontinuity, since the former statements unavoidably possess a degree of autonomy despite the assumption of complete referentiality. As an example of such discontinuity, we observe in rather surprising contrast to reputation that Meredith, in several of his critical passages, such as the first few lines of *The Egoist's Prelude*, can actually be found outlining the elements he has chosen to highlight and explore. On the one hand, this circumstance forces readers to admit that there are straightforward moments which deprive them, if only temporarily, of the grounds for frustrated complaint, but on the other hand, it does not lead to a greatly increased sense of comprehension. What emerges is the realization that critical telling does not equate to a retelling of the content of a supposedly narrative statement, but can be a telling of something else entirely or a performed demonstration, which accordingly calls for a distinct act of interpretation. Of course, this is an oversimplification of Meredith's subtler management, but it is nevertheless true that the paradox of this surprising clarity forces a

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<sup>23</sup> *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading*, pp. 179-182.

confrontation of sorts and shifts the possible grounds for misunderstanding. In any other case, straightforwardness could be taken for such and open the prose up to an equally straightforward process of examination but Meredith's noticeably unnoticed criticism escapes from traditional assumptions of stenographic retelling. Freed from the limits of referentiality, the peculiar direction it takes is often to appropriate qualities of narrative, with the end result of an indeterminate weaving of discourses. Thus, the criticism presents itself as "dramatic" in effect as well as in function, offering us an unexpectedly independent display that is, again and again, characterized by weight and substance more so than "theory."

#### The Critical Vignette: Narrativizing the Comment

By far one of the most remarkable features of Meredith's criticism is his usage of the discourse as a means of representation rather than or in addition to our conventional understanding of it as a vehicle for explanation. Once the initial shock of this realization is over and we reflect a little more closely, it is not that fantastic after all, since criticism often involves aspects of summary as well as the introduction and tracking of things, and both these elements provide the raw materials for narrative, so far as that is defined as having a story and a plot.<sup>24</sup> Although my focus here is the narrativizing of criticism, I would like to point out that a similar process can also be seen operating in the reverse direction, since Meredith's preferred technique for revealing the thoughts of his characters is frequently that of narrative summary rather than verbatim transcription, and this supplies something of that distance which sets up the potential for a critical stance.<sup>25</sup> Naturally, the difficulties of tracking this two-way transmutation are enormous and a first attempt should wisely limit itself to one or the other - my own

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<sup>24</sup> Frye, Northrup. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 52-53.

<sup>25</sup> Cohn, Dorrit. 1978. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pp. 494-498, 503-505.

preference in favor of narrativized criticism because it is the more surprising of the two. The brief scenes, or critical vignettes, that crop up in the midst of a moralizing line or a self-defense are numerous enough to be almost unavoidable and while they typically are not elaborated beyond a few vivid lines, the impulse to pursue them further is almost palpable in a kind of creative tension which needs little more than a suggestion to start pulling in several directions. As part of the larger fabric of the novels, these scenes are almost always detached from the main narrative, even insistently unrelated, and they tend to strike one as rather anecdotal because of the casual way they are offered; peripheral in respect to the content of their plots, they are nonetheless inextricably worked in to be encountered in the same way as the prose of the “narrative proper.” Another proof of representational usage can be drawn from the fact that the space in which these critical vignettes occur is not inhabited by the sole voice of the usually third person narrator but is conspicuously peopled with a variety of other figures, active agents whose movements and scenarios are alike described. Because minimally developed as characters, these figures do betray a certain flatness, but their existence at all and the vignettes as a whole indicate the same phenomena of world-making that is more often associated with narrative. Taking *The Egoist* as an example, the flood of pronouncements in the Prelude section is variously attributed to and translated from such shallow, and usefully shallow figures as “wise men” and “humorists,” or more overtly vaporous abstractions like the Comic Spirit and its attendant imps. While tempting to equate their convictions and beliefs with Meredith’s - which are in fact virtually the same - they are still included as mediating elements and cannot be carelessly dismissed or labelled as nothing but mouthpieces. Projections of the author though they may be and likely are - puppets according to the term Meredith sometimes uses to underscore his work’s fictionality - these unnamed figures testify to the argument of reported

speech or diagesis which is so significant a part of narrative discourse.<sup>26</sup> Rather than understand them as sources providing explanation, it would be more accurate to describe them as reinforcing the independent, critical “telling” of the telling of the story. A further critical feature worth noting, related to the strategy of creation for the sake of indirect attribution, is the novels’ practice of addressing the reader through frequent recourse to “we,” which represents another direction of the prose’s outward movement. While it may seem that this movement remains centered around or anchored by the narrator, the gesture is actually a dissolving of that voice into the audience even in the middle of the speech act, with the result that the source of the criticism becomes that much harder to put one’s finger on, if at all. In fact, a basic search for first person plural and second person pronouns as well as their corresponding possessive adjectives actually offers one way, albeit very rough, of sifting through and identifying critical passages, for the clustered occurrences often stand out amid sections where the use of either seems almost deliberately avoided. The imposition that the criticism puts the readership under is thus, in some ways, a shifting of authority and, by extension, of responsibility; however, certain anxieties and whims remain which give rise to an elaborately structured contingent or conditional mode. Before transitioning to this concept, it seems necessary to speak to the risk of becoming too complacent through the smoothing tendency of a general theory. Having proposed narrativized commentary as a response to the mystery of Meredith’s neglected prose, I do not, however, want to fall into the error of over-familiarizing it, for by taking the oddity of the phenomenon for granted, we risk overlooking both its constructedness and deep roots in the broader definition of the novel.

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<sup>26</sup> Genette, Gerard. 1982. *Figures of Literary Discourse*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 128-133. Herman, Luc and Bart Vervaeck, ed. 2019. *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 175-1



Keeping in mind that critical vignettes are indeed made things, it is worth mentioning that there is the same potential for shortcomings as with any produced object, but in the case of narrativized discourse, these shortcomings are not defects but symptoms tracing back to the genre in which they appear. It is because of these shortcomings of appropriation or imitation that we are able to even speak of a narrativized form of criticism, successfully and subtly as it is carried out. If we look back to Bakhtin's theories of the novel, we recall that one of its central features is its ability to absorb other generic material or types of writing, such as poetry; significantly, though, the phenomenon occurs in such a way that the material is changed from what it was before, becoming embedded as an image.<sup>27</sup> Critical discourse, as one such object swallowed, therefore cannot be what it is standing on its own, and it is easy to see how its display within the novel, as an object that has been collected, is more connected to the process of narrativization than to functional theorizing. Housed within the museum-like casing of the novel, it is only natural that critical statements should fail to signify in the expected way and require an alternative kind of animation. Largely cut off from the evaluative meanings which we are accustomed to extracting from them, Meredith's embedded passages, like artefacts, are in many ways self-evident, for they often leave one with the impression that they cannot fulfill the conventional purpose. An end-stop in themselves, the recursive comments made, which produce a mise-en-abyme effect of layering, prove that there is little chance in this contaminating environment of deeper penetration or arriving at truly critical discourse. Although the idea of criticism as end-stopped would appear to contradict the characterization of the prose as always moving, they both describe the same situation, for the statements' self-evident quality and incompleteness as measured by non-novelistic standards of discourse, allow readers very few if

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<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 276-278.

any places to rest on as objective. In light of criticism's position as a collected discourse of the novel, and a correspondingly narrativized one, there is less reason to be surprised at its appearing at times fragmentary, scanty in objective comments, or extensively hedged. I have already mentioned hedging in the usage of abstract figures for the sake of authorial projection/redirection, but there are additional strategies employed to performatively frame statements in the conditional mode, which forms the last major feature to be examined.

### Contingent Criticism

Since the narrativizing phenomenon discussed emerges as both a response to and denial of discourse limitations, it makes sense that an awareness of barriers not only remains present but is repeatedly incorporated back into the rhetorical structure of the criticism. Moreover, just as narrative often involves a measure of uncertainty as to events or conclusions, so too is Meredith's criticism phrased to reflect a self-conscious understanding of its own constructedness and therefore contingencies.<sup>28</sup> In this way, it demonstrates several of the statements made at the beginning of the Prelude to *The Egoist*, which confess to that work being deliberately situated on a somewhat artificial plane: "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" (3). Like the concept of representational or narrative commentary, that of contingent criticism requires a similar correction of preconceived notions. Despite the large dose of skepticism that frequently goes into the process of evaluating any writer's literary pronouncements, disclaimers such as Meredith's nevertheless go strongly against our tendency -

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<sup>28</sup> Levine, George. 1981. *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 614-620.

and assumption regarding authorial intention - to esteem theory as inherently “truer” than creative work. In place of the more expected dual confession from authors or narrators that fictive work is indeed a construction but the principles behind it are not, Meredith’s criticism, as a direct effect of narrativization, is treated as something also produced, all the more so as it arises spontaneously from the whim of the moment. While sometimes phrased as imperatives or delivered with an authoritative air, the criticism does not come across as an imposition from a space above but more as a complex episode requiring a kind of suspension of the mind during the reading of it.<sup>29</sup> Putting it another way, the criticism remarkably doesn’t seem to make more privileged pleas than the fiction itself; in fact, there even appears to be a democratic impulse to allow the criticism to fend for itself, without the external fortification of authorial mandate, so that when it passes with the reader, it passes on the basis of other merits, particularly that of its quasi-narrative elements. One of the more curious manifestations of contingency that may be observed in his novels is a characteristically hypothetical approach, which is also a process of recuperation that further softens the lines between the reflection of commentary and the progressive generation of writing. Offering examples of what “does not work” is one aspect of this process, as in the following line from *Diana of the Crossways*: “To say of the great erratic and forsaken Lady A\*\*\*\*, after she had accepted the consolations of Bacchus, that her name was properly signified in asterisks 'as she was now nightly an Ariadne in heaven through her God,' sounds to us a roundabout, with wit somewhere and fun nowhere” (12). Thematically, in the same work, we also are told of the annoyance caused to the eponymous heroine by the existence of one of her novels in a rough but not immediately fixable form, a detail which points to a similar situation of creative misjudgment and critical clarity: “she felt how greatly THE YOUNG

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<sup>29</sup> “The Rise of Fictionality,” pp. 343-347.

MINISTER OF STATE would have been improved had she retained the work to brood over it, polish, re-write passages, perfect it” (221). To add another example, this time from composition history, it is a fairly well-known fact that Meredith rummaged through the Pilgrim’s Scrip for the epigrams scattered through his early novel *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. Ultimately, the inclusion of what might be conveniently termed the misjudged or unfortunately phrased leads us to interesting considerations about literary waste and repurposing, since a number of inadequate expressions are thus written into being and exist in the criticism though they were rejected for perceived shortcomings when offered, without any ironic distance, as part of the narrative proper. While recovery accounts for some portion of almost all writing, the recycling process employed here goes further in its conscious speculation as to what the effects might have been for these aborted but not erased hypotheticals which could be neither completely nor permanently abandoned. All in all, the process amounts to an even-handed balancing of creative failure and evaluative tastefulness, accomplished by the ability of criticism to restore and rehabilitate discarded fragments of practice.<sup>30</sup> Thus, criticism appropriates for itself yet another partly creative function, continuing to write and edit the novels in real time as the reader makes their way through them.

Some of the hypothetical mode, as has already been mentioned, exists as a recycling of material from the past, but a large portion of it is also future-oriented and filled with phrases in the anticipatory subjunctive mood. For all that the declarative statements appear to establish timeless rules, they are offered more as temporary bridging supports until a time whose new standards might very well be expected to replace them. As a further underscoring of the tentative, ideals laid out are sometimes formulated by negative definition, and an acute

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<sup>30</sup> Henry, Anne C. “‘Explorations in Dot-and-Dashland’: George Meredith’s Aphasia.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61:3 (Winter 2006). Pp. 325-330, 336-339.

awareness of necessary conditions which are still absent and uncertain as to the moment of their coming: “A thousand years! You may count many a thousand by this route before you are one with divine Philosophy.”<sup>31</sup> With respect to the signaling of this, the criticism displays surprisingly frequent moderating tendencies; for instance, it is not at all unusual for it to hedge its bets by introducing strategic “ifs” into the logic, several dependent on the supposed inclination of the imagined reader or the precise definition of the creative task at hand: “Now, if you are not for insisting,”<sup>32</sup> “if a man’s mind is to be taken as a part of him,”<sup>33</sup> “if we do not speedily embrace Philosophy in fiction,”<sup>34</sup> etc. With these “ifs”, we are plainly invited into the territory of narrative out of the supposedly recognizable demesnes of criticism, yet, as with fiction more broadly, this space is itself illusive, persuasively conjured but logically insubstantial. Contrary to the assumption that criticism and narrative, from being set down on the page, possess authority deriving from the author’s implicit selections and rejections, they represent and mark the engagement with uncertainty and the compositional anxiety that other possibilities, if followed, might have proved more suggestive or successful. To a certain extent, the inclusion of almost any critical commentary offers the opportunity for justification or revision from above; yet, indecision and artistic doubt, while uncomfortable also give rise to the productive, dialectical movement of to do or not to do, and how. Unsurprisingly, this movement tends to emerge as instability; however, this is something Meredith both exploits and controls through another manifestation of the contingent, the prophetic or oracular. The oracular mode, here defined as fragmentary and suggestive as well as visual, is actually a rather prominent strain in the criticism and one that has biographical connections, since the author was recognized

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<sup>31</sup> Meredith, George. 1906. *Diana of the Crossways*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, pp. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Meredith, George. 1975. *One of Our Conquerors*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp. 189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Diana of the Crossways*, pp. 16.

during the later part of his own life by the honorific title of “sage of Boxhill.”<sup>35</sup> By tradition and nature, the oracular mode is highly paradoxical and is thus a fitting one to be associated with Meredith’s prose, gesturing towards a foretold yet unfulfilled future, comprehensible enough to be sought but ambiguous enough to remain a riddle. In this mode, what is cryptic takes on overtly mystical undertones, claiming a kind of authority in one sense, but also highlighting the now familiar phenomena of redirection specifically linked to the vagueness of attribution, since an oracle serves as a means of expression and not the source itself, though the two cannot be rationally distinguished. The question that then looms over such cases is that of the moment when the speech of the vessel becomes that of the divinity and vice versa. In the novels, the invocation of this mode has the additional advantage of expanding the critical and narratively critical resources available, allowing the third person speaker to present visions of the self-creating future, which both is and is not. To emphasize this mystical effect of peering down two paths simultaneously, Meredith strives for balance in persuading us of the equal possibility and palpability of the scenarios presented. Whether out of motives of restraint or a democratic creative urge, Meredith in effect levels the ground, essentially gaining the “movement” of seeing each set of circumstances to their ultimate ends and circumventing the problem of menace by ideas of the static or unfulfilled for himself and reader alike. Interestingly enough, the obscurity of comprehension in these cases relates back to the idea of not being able to discard anything since there is the risk that imperfect understanding does not judge rightly, the same anxiety likely motivating the recovery of failed narrative. To briefly note another affinity between the oracular critical mode and narrative, we observe that the oracular, rather than opposing an impassable or random field of meaning and suggestions, has zones of recognition not unlike those which allow

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<sup>35</sup> *The Second Common Reader*, pp. 226-227.

one to navigate a story: if the most basic structure of narrative follows an incline of rising action, climax and falling action, with the middle demonstrating the greatest prominence, then so too does the middle of the oracular feel like most definite point, with an equal view of the past and the coming. Accordingly, Meredith's contingencies and equally present futures acknowledge the high potential for misunderstanding and reassure us that these very misunderstandings are simply part of the normal functioning of his novels - in fact, worked into their textures.

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For these reasons and a few supplementary ones to be demonstrated in the course of the following close readings, Meredith's offerings in the critical vein are of a very unique sort, being all at once 1.) paradoxical - written for immediate notice, but also buried and put at a distance through narrativization and artificial attribution, 2.) layered - enacting evaluation of its own commentary, which makes for hypersensitivity in the passages under our immediate perusal and increased awareness of fictionality, and 3.) consciously limited and contingent. Most important of all is the principle, which underlies each of these individual strategies, that critical statements not only demonstrate writerly composition but function as important parts of the novel that lend themselves to interpretation and analysis just as much as any other component. The total result of this elaborate critical apparatus is that we find ourselves over and over again hard pressed either to locate objectivity or distinguish the supposed boundary separating discourses such as evaluation or narrative - which, even if recognized when in the middle of, we are significantly unable to tell where the transitions occurred. Furthermore, these closely interlocking features prove that a deeper examination of Meredith's critical passages is desirable for far more than to sift his views with regards to the respective advantages and disadvantages of certain literary styles, which is as far as most analyses of his participation in the criticism-in-novels tradition

have gone.<sup>36</sup> Nor is the study of them most useful or interesting in the light of a key for elucidating elements of plot, this is decidedly not where the most promising labor lies. While the framework of features so far outlined is wide-ranging, my primary concern is to avoid the practice of mechanically picking through and compiling all the instances when the speaker declares a preference for devices such as metaphor or simile, for a catalog compiled in this way implicitly treats the commentary just as Meredith, by his mode of subtly integrating narrative and critical discourse, did not intend for them to be read or perceived. What remains useful, however and thus should be a reassurance to those intimidated by the intricacies hinted hitherto, is the overarching and underlying tradition of the novel, to which the following works not only still belong but even exemplify in their innovative idiosyncrasies.

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#### Compositional Values in *The Egoist*

The earliest work of the three novels to be discussed, *The Egoist* (1879) as is suggested by its subtitle, "A Comedy in Narrative," presents a more easily discernible structure than either *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) or *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), aligning itself with a dramatic genre whose recognizable features of frustrated love, substitutions of characters, and conclusion in marriage are apparent in the plot. As with a number of Meredith's novels, there is a strong contrast between the extended accumulation of highly wrought scenes and the surprising simplicity with which the story itself can be summarized. It is true that a great deal of literature can be subjected to the same process of reduction, but few works so markedly strive to maximize the distance between the reading experience of a page, and the act of retrospective review; even fewer directly draw our attention to the discrepancy between all the material that is treated as

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<sup>36</sup> Tenney, Charles Dewey. "'Rose Pink and Dirty Drab': George Meredith as a Critic." *The Sewanee Review* 39:4 (Winter 1931). Pp. 407-418.



important in the moment and what ultimately survives in the memory to be taken away at the conclusion. Obscurity in Meredith is frequently attributed to a demanding compression of language, and this in turn is taken as a clear sign of an approach to writing heavily influenced by poetic practice, namely the tendency to weigh words carefully and remove those that are obtrusively unnecessary. In a novel, of course, without the determining factor of metre, the distinctions of essential and excessive are far less obvious if they can even be said to exist at all. The *Egoist* treats this principle thematically, in the characterization and motives of the protagonist Willoughby Patterne, but it is also extensively in play at the level of the criticism, which is concentrated in the Prelude section that appears before the first chapter, the novel's official start. Without claiming that Meredith's novels come with instructions for reading, I do propose that there is in each, and located specifically in the critical passages, an identifiable central concept or set of questions related to evaluation, in other words, a built-in framework of aesthetics and functionality. What emerges in *The Egoist* is nothing less than the question of the relative importance of constitutive parts, and this can be broken down further into considerations of importance vs. unimportance, or abundance vs. gratuitousness. These are all matters involved in the novel's composition, but, according to the schema of explicit and narrativized criticism, they have been included in such a way as to be more than superimposed or integrated to the point of invisibility.

While the Prelude section stands as the longest and most elaborate example of the critical discourse in the novel and thus makes for a certain convenience in determining an analytical focus, its placement within the text as the first prose encountered should itself be recognized as having considerable significance. In spite of analysis sometimes claiming for itself an impersonal attitude, it is still the case that we continue to be strongly influenced by our first and

fundamental role as readers, and it is therefore natural to be attracted to and direct our critical attention to beginnings - if not exactly privileging them with greater weight, then consciously acknowledging the degree to which they can affect our reception of and receptivity to the following material.<sup>37</sup> For an author, on his or her own end, a beginning holds value for much the same reason since it is a strategic position most logically occupied by concepts requiring priority. In Meredith's case particularly, the intense scrutiny applied as a general practice is more than appropriately justified since the rigor of the opening pages so immediately determines the impression and subsequent reaction, whether or not one even decides to continue reading. As the introduction to *The Egoist*, the Prelude, as a piece of criticism, displaces the expected narrative opening, but as a collection of narrativized statements, takes on some of the functions of conventional storytelling. Much like the entrance to a building, its introductory position allows it to bring about a reorientation of readerly perception, and more forcefully unsettle preconceived notions about what kind of writing belongs where and the respective work that it can accomplish. Ultimately, moving through its blurring of critical/narrative boundaries is a contextualization of the novel as a whole.

In light of the Prelude's overarching concern as to the judgement of value, its descriptive subtitle, "A Chapter of Which The Last Page Only is of Any Importance", is a thoroughly provoking statement which becomes more intriguing when considered with regards to the rest of the novel itself. Even if the concern is one ultimately dismissed by a reader as nothing but a kind of perverse play, the forced interaction with it, in at least some degree of seriousness, highlights the game-like quality involved in the constructed standards of the criticism; indeed, the act of submitting to these rules is similar to the way in which readers give themselves over to narrative

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<sup>37</sup> *Meredith Now*. Preface, viii.

by a certain suspension of belief in fiction and the assumed coherence of related events. Irreverent as the subtitle may be and quite likely is, it functions as part of the direct challenge issued with relation to the strict separation of critical and narrative discourses, the coding of commentary belonging to the former as unnecessary and events making up the latter as the primary or sole substance of a novel. If one takes the bait and attempts to actually sort out what is essential from what is unnecessary and, in some measure, worthless, the categories themselves begin to fracture since they rest on a division of discourses which the Prelude aggressively resists. To follow it is to continually encounter unanswerable questions in attempting to determine where the supposedly rigid boundaries lie, whereas a more holistic approach, centered around narrativization and contingency, is able to largely avoid this highly, if not entirely, speculative pursuit. Returning to the provocative statement about what is of any importance, so much rests on the perceived tone - which may possibly be resignation that a limited amount of text is all that makes an impact on minds, or satirical comment on contemporary reading culture with ever diminishing attention spans. Regardless, the tone is less meaningful than the signal, the broad gesture to the introduction of a critical framework, whose substance is less about taking a side or interpretations according to binaries than about the possibilities which are generated. While a reading for objective opinions leads to actually setting about an application of the measurement system of relative importance, a subjective reading more appropriately considers the alternative or multiple outcomes which the statements suggest. So far as the result, by deriving meaning from tone and signal rather than authority and creating criticism rather than sincerely demanding its application, the Prelude does far more to upset the discourse binary than uphold it.

An example of criticism taking upon itself a representational or narrative function can be identified in the first paragraphs of the Prelude, which opens with a surprisingly straightforward definition of comedy but proceeds to issue the following challenge: “being a spirit, he [the Comic Spirit] 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” (3). Even on a very small scale, we can see the strength of Meredith’s impulse to narrate in his critical reflections - instead of concluding with the direct line “What is the value of a run at his heels?”, which invites more response than his chosen formulation, he chooses to report the existence of the question, objectifying it with the phrase “there is” - and thus setting up everything to come with the same basic construction we expect from stories which require the immediate establishment of a subject. The use of an indefinite rather than a definite article, small though the detail may seem, also imperceptibly prompts the mind to understand that 1.) there is a field of questions to select from, 2.) each question is essentially different according to focus, scope and expectation, and 3.) since the question has been “selected” from among these, there is correspondingly an implicit qualification of the response that is given. We are called upon to recognize that it strikes the note of narrative possibilities rather than the usual strictness of theory, that it both limits itself and recognizes an initial open-endedness. The choice of phrasing also influences our perception of the location of the voice that is offering these statements; as a true interrogative, the speaker would be taking accountability as the origin of the thought, but as a declarative, the “question” is allowed to paradoxically stand as a certainty despite the connotations of doubt - furthermore, it is exhibited as something completely external and disconnected, having its origin entirely outside himself, and something which he is only associated with so far as he is pointing it out to our

attention. On the same note, it is also striking that he attributes the ideal design of comedy completely to the abstract figure of the Comic spirit, further distancing himself from responsibility and suggesting a certain self-made quality in the nature of the genre, which is organically “conceived.”

To raise an additional point regarding narrative, non-question formulation and demonstrate another effect of what Meredith evidently chose not to do, the decision to begin with a question is an abrupt, almost *en medias res* introduction, while “there is,” by contrast, begins at the true beginning and anticipates indulgence in a fullness of narration in spite of the fact that comedy, only a few lines earlier, is postulated as an artificially narrow “definite situation for a number of characters.” Upon this subtly meaningful statement of comprehensiveness depends all the profusion of images and abstractions following, which, collectively taken, compose the response to the “question.” A little further on, we see a series of rhetorical moves emphasizing the relation of ideas second-hand, this time a translation from the unnamed humorist, a shrugging sort of venture at communication that rises almost to absurdity with the double hedging of “I conceive him to indicate.” There are also “wise men” (4) charged with the burden of handing down pronouncements as well as directing readers in the latter part of the passage, nor are they the last to be recognized, for another transfer in this relay of attributed speakers comes about which brings us to “one with an index on the Book [of Egoism]” (5). If there could possibly be any doubts about the narrator’s conscious manipulation and disorienting of the reader via this round-about game of attribution, they are absolutely finished off by the nonchalant reminder at the end of one lengthy piece of narrative summary: “-So far an enthusiast perhaps; but he should have a hearing” (6). The mock-generosity towards a conveniently abstract mouthpiece after he has already commandeered the vessel is deeply ironic, as well as the remark that this figure’s

style is “pardonable to his fervency” (5). Even an uninformed reader cannot but be struck and made suspicious by the apparent affinities between this figure’s manner of expression and that of the initial speaker: to support the case for a close resemblance, there is the same accumulation of images, direct address and appeal to abstractions and personifications - only a degree more ardent, with a higher concentration of imperatives perhaps but not essentially different.

Parallel to the narrative creation of all these not quite speaking figures in a presumed present or timelessness, the Prelude also gestures to a past of almost myth-like temporality, (“Aforetime a grand old Egoism built the House”). As a part of this framing in a time-line, we also receive a miniature allegory which supplies both rationale for characterization and prospective summary for the novel:

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. (6)

An even more pointed indication of this sustained chronological perspective in the criticism, there is also the submission of a possible epitaph for Willoughby, which closes the trajectory of the Prelude in such a way that the novel could easily be interpreted as an immensely extended parenthesis to be fitted in between the two design plans quoted above, of comedy in general and the egoist type in particular. As wide-ranging as the Prelude is, if there were a phrase which best summarizes the movement and underlying strategy of its criticism - or the entire novel, really - it would be “-So far an enthusiast perhaps; but he should have a hearing.” A large part of what makes the chosen line so representative and all-encompassing, is the fact that the subject of the phrase could be potentially substituted with the Egoist, lover or novelist-critic, the last of which would reinforce the overall self-referentiality. Furthermore, the contingent element earlier proposed is supplied with the qualification “so far,” while the attitude of tolerance hints at the

novel's structure as an episodic series of the characters' opportunities to be granted their own "hearings." The idea of extended "hearings" is, of course, immediately suggestive, but I would like to stress as the most significant connotation, the linkage of presumably narrative telling and a synchronous act of judging.

Returning to the irony of the critical statements about worth in the context of hearings, which the characters give to each other much as a reader allows the same to them, we observe that the self-consciousness of the false but nonetheless still critical discourse of importance, is one which is actually taken up by some of the characters, which further underscores its constructedness. Based on a recognition of the petty and trivial, the system of worth not only reflects but fits the shallowness of the protagonist as well as the hermetic, equal parts classical and claustrophobic design of the novel as whole. "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" - this introductory blueprint or resolution to extreme, almost unnatural selectiveness from the Prelude finds its thematic echo repeatedly sounded in Willoughby's actions, which are collectively characterized by the chief virtue of "cutting" described in the aptly titled chapter "A Minor Incident [once more a pointed insistence upon ostensibly inconsequential things] Showing An Hereditary Aptitude in the Use of the Knife." During the incident, we discover the extent to which Willoughby is "endowed with the power of saying No to those first agents of destruction, besieging relatives" ... "For if the oak is to become a stately tree, we must provide against the crowding of timber" (7). This incident, as the Prelude is to the novel, stands as a representative scene which sets the tone and demonstrates the stated critical design in several ways: first of all, while it can never be believably argued that the novel is lean in its execution, there is a comical population control that is effected as early as this first chapter

when others, who stay on throughout, have yet even to be introduced. The introduction of the distant relation Crossjay Patterne is no sooner completed than the character is rejected by both protagonist and novel (on the basis of importance) as extraneous, bothersome and in poor taste, then sent away without any other mention or appearance. Willoughby's contempt for his relation, and the narrator's ironic handling of the former's snub is notably and self-referentially on specifically literary grounds; after all, the basis for the aborted introduction of the cousin is the attractive story of his heroism, the romance and respectability of which permit association with a social inferior. What is more, the acknowledged allowances that might be made for a more prepossessing figure also involve criticism according to certain criteria of plausibility and the literary question of execution or appropriate mediation between objects of supposedly different inherent values: "A young subaltern, even if passably vulgar in figure, can be shuffled through by the aid of the heroic story humorously exaggerated in apology for his aspect" (9).

For all that the previous example demonstrates the extensive ironizing which attends falsely applying a disingenuously offered principle of literary evaluation, this does not mean that the criticism falls short of being criticism. In fact, the very opposite is true, since the provocative assertion of it has, on the one hand, the advantage of drawing attention and therefore suspicion to itself, and on the other, the greater complexity of having been disproved through being embodied. It is worth noting further, that a corrected version of the system of importance cannot be constructed by a simple inversion that assumes omnipresent importance instead of worthlessness; in fact, there is a strong indication of doubt so far as the possibility for any definitive statement of importance is concerned. In short, the criticism here works by not working, for having thrown off the burden of handing down final judgments, the criticism gains the ability to continually work itself out, deliberately and with a great deal of challenging wit.



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*Diana of the Crossways* - A Poetics of Repetition

One of Meredith's more commercially popular works, *Diana of the Crossways* derives its main plot from a public scandal of the 1840s involving socialite Caroline Norton and her violation of a confidence made to her about a planned repeal of the corn laws.<sup>38</sup> To offer an extremely brief overview, the novel follows its title character through an unhappy marriage ending in scandalous separation, troubled independence as a female novelist, a romantic relationship broken off by revelation of a political secret, and a second, sober but more promising union with a long-time male friend. In addition to these primary incidents, there are numerous brilliant drawing-room scenes depicting the rapid-fire exchange of witty remarks and anecdotes, and though these typically function as episodes with more levity than other social gatherings depicted, they receive distinction from the fact that the same tone and emphasis on stylish discourse opens the novel. If the critical passages of *The Egoist*, with its almost claustrophobic study in the anxieties of evaluation of and through others, are organized according to ideas and self-conscious explorations of "importance," those in *Diana*, are heavily invested in considerations that may be conveniently grouped under the heading of repetition.

The point of interest which forms the center of *Diana*'s critical discourse is early on introduced in the statement that "dinner table wit of the time [is] not always worth quotation twice" (1), a line which establishes not only the particular focus of the discourse but a criteria for its judgment. As in much of the criticism that has been discussed so far, it contains a certain amount of apparent contradiction, since there is something rather counterintuitive in the idea of repeating anything twice when so much of the impact, according to a "dinner table" context, relies on immediate physical presence at a social event and such occasions in turn demand

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<sup>38</sup> Arata, Stephen. "George Meredith," *Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*, ed. Dino Franco Felluga, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Linda K. Hughes (Blackwell, 2015) pp. 4-5.

novelty, little tolerating what isn't new. However, on the level of the novel's events, we see the title Diana's power within and conditional admittance into society after separation from her first husband as heavily dependent on her continuing ability to recall and share entertaining bits of gossip. In fact, her strongest motivations for increased sparkle are not so much confident self-promotion but a necessity to defend herself from falling lower in society's esteem - a circumstance that corresponds to the terms of consumption used, which emphasize wit's value as a currency to be lived on or starved for lack of:

She discovered the social uses of cheap wit; she laid ambushes for anecdotes, a telling form of it among a people of no conversational interlocution, especially in the circles depending for dialogue upon perpetual fresh supplies of scandal; which have plentiful crops, yet not sufficient. The old dinner and supper tables at The Crossways furnished her with an abundant store; and recollection failing, she invented" ... "Anecdotes also are portable, unlike the lightning flash, which will not go into the pocket; they can be carried home, they are disburseable at other table. (124)

Conversely, when she is absent from the city for some length of time, she finds her being behind-hand on current events translated into a troubling decrease in her personal value: "The great editor rebuked her for her prolonged absence from London, not so much because it discrowned her as Queen of the Salon, but candidly for its rendering her service less to him. Everything she knew of men and affairs was to him stale" (265). As was the case with the concept of importance in *The Egoist*, criticism relating to social value - measured by demand for the repetition of admired statements - is likewise shown as being comprised of more than just a set of stated principles, as having concrete effects whether the application of those criteria is tolerant or intolerant.

On the basic grounds that the novel deals in the retelling of past events (though it does not bind itself to a strictly faithful account), there is already support for the argument of it being strongly informed by considerations of repetition; however, it is not the headline "facts" of a

previous time which are selected as the testing site for exploration of its requirements and assessment. As a reflection of the work's overall episodic structure, with a frequent return to social scenes, the greatest part of the critical interest is not in the occurrence and recurrence of plot events but the representation of them at second hand in their respective written forms. A variation on the theme of compositional value, our entrance into this novel is not therefore the incidents of History but a sampling of history's ephemera, insignificant trifles bearing pompous titles - "Leaves from the Diary of Henry Wilmers" - which highlight rather than conceal banality and pettiness. In keeping with its role as a preserver, as well as a collector which puts its acquisitions on display like the furniture of a gallery, criticism has saved what History has either overlooked or rejected; however this salvaging, by the deliberate choice of minor objects, emphasizes their selection on the sole basis of interest rather than any serious importance. Accordingly, our perusal of the various diaries quoted is arranged as an occasion for amusement and not objective information: "Diarists of amusing passages are under an obligation to paint us a realistic revival of the time or we miss the relish" (13). Further reinforcing this context of superficiality, the self-awareness and irony we have come to expect from Meredith's criticism is furnished by the fact that the reprinting of certain slightly ridiculous lines instantiates repetition even while the criticism pretends to still be deciding the question of whether they bear repeating or anything more than brief discussion. It must also be mentioned that the criticism is not the only entity engaging in these concerns, for similar thoughts are significant motivations in the behavior of central characters and collective society alike, the latter of which is far more heartlessly if not more frequently attentive to the first and second mention of things. Unlike *The Egoist*, in which both the setting and number of characters are restricted for purposes of narrowest observation - to the effect that everything and everyone appears enclosed and nothing

exists outside their defined orbit, society figures in *Diana* much more prominently as an entity with force and substance. Moreover, in its role as an audience and consuming public, its susceptibilities to whispered scandal and a mania for novelty are emphasized as defining features. Our sense of “society” as we see it filtered through Willoughby is entirely made up of the named characters of his exclusive circle and there are no hints of a wider audience for triumphs or embarrassments, whereas in *Diana* there is an intimidating anonymous component in the society by which Diana stands condemned, which increases the judicial power of the collective in proportion to their undifferentiated bulk. Indeed, the first thing to which we are introduced is a wide-ranging sample of writing from some of its constituent members, counterparts to the quoted beliefs from Diana that we receive afterwards. As a scene analyzing the merits, phrasing and motives of writing, this initial chapter fits fairly easily into a traditional notion of literary criticism.

By virtue of their being personal chronicles of social events, the diaries are already, in a very general way, forms involved in the passing on of second-hand details, but closer examination shows that they are also consciously imitative of voice and character for the dual purpose of presentation and preservation of information. Through them, the reader encounters not a direct image of the main character but an extended, doubly revealing view of the diarists’ styles, perspectives, and even methods. In fairly quick succession, one is recognized as “created for popularity,” another is indicated as “conveying his opinions without stating them” (4), and a third is thoroughly summed up in the following characterization:

His unadorned harsh substantive statements, excluding the adjectives, give his Memoirs the appearance of a body of facts, attractive to the historic Muse, which has learnt to esteem those brawny sturdy giants marching club on shoulder, independent of henchman, in preference to your panoplied knights with their puffy squires, once her favourites, and wind-filling to her columns, ultimately found indigestible. (4-5)

In keeping with the practice of narrativization, each of these assessments constitutes and is treated rather episodically, like its own individual event, and the truth of this becomes clearer when one registers that they almost invariably contain pseudo-historical scenes and interventions of “we” - which might be the “we” implicated in a generalization affecting us all, or that pulled into a judgment in whose formulation we did not participate, despite being included in its assertion. It should also be noted, as a reaffirmation of critical substance, that far from the interspersed comments being airily or extravagantly theoretical, they are firmly grounded in the specific concrete objects of the individual diaries, which in turn are conceived as being written by non-abstract diarists on multiple, independent occasions in a constructed past. This is not to say that the criticism limits itself to a dissection of component parts and makes no contribution of its own, for while it identifies and speaks of an object - a person or writing - it moves progressively but not continuously away from it in a sequence of association rather than one of linear cause and effect. One such section can be broken down thus, beginning with the initial object of scrutiny: “Dorset Wilmers,” who “repeats on two occasions when her name appears in his pages, “handsome, lively, witty,” an evaluation subsequently stamped with the remarks “stressed repetition of calculated brevity” and “implies weighty substance,” before an abrupt shift to “We have not to ask what he judged”, a statement not directly tied to the initial words, yet requiring their foundation and gesturing toward a further step into the more narrative mode (4).

Compared to the Prelude of *The Egoist*, this opening chapter in *Diana* includes more frequent interventions of the different “we’s,” nor is there any monopolizing by long “hearings,” and we do not lose sight of attribution only to be pricked with the reminder of who is actually accountable for the words communicated. To elaborate on this last key difference between the

respective approaches in the two works, we observe here a more definite separation between reported and summarized speech; there being a greater ability to distinguish voicing in the diarist passages which stresses sources and prevents the narrator from being overly identified with the demonstratively unimaginative writing shared: “Henry Wilmers is not content to quote the beautiful Mrs. Warwick, he attempts a portrait. Mrs Warwick is “quite Grecian.” She might “pose for a statue”” (3). That the difference might be emphasized to the utmost degree and leave no chance of slipping by us undetected, the quotations begin mid-sentence so that we might immediately discern the transition from the narrator’s voice to that of another entity. Generally speaking, the quotations from the diarists are carefully kept to snippets and we are held back from entering into them in the same way we might if this were dialogue, or the reported contents of characters’ minds when their psychological depths are sounded. On this note, it is important to mention that while the whole cast of diarists are more fleshed out than the abstract “Comic spirit” or “wise men,” in having been given proper names, distinguishable characters, and even unique styles of discourse to go with their relatively greater substance; there is still a notable hollowness to them, since they do not appear beyond this chapter. Once they have had their “hearing” through the narrator, who continually intrudes upon the consciousness of the reader with framing commentary, they are dismissed, and by this careful limitation, we understand that they are artificial imitations of criticism which are themselves being subject to criticism. With regard to the narrator’s location, while it is not placeable, it is also not confused by being passed through a series of mouthpieces and he maintains a kind of negative integrity of personality. While statements can be partly broken down into a they/we or a they/you, “I” is relatively rare, indicating the narrator as a definite critical presence but not a fully committed one. By contrast, several parts of the diarist passages employ an aggressive use of the plural first

person, such that we are continually encountering ourselves through “we,” up until the point of the often-quoted “rose-pink” and “dirty drab section, when inclusivity dissolves into “you,” “I” and “they.” This idea of self-confrontation is more than a suggestion and evidence for its deliberate reference is provided in the vivid injunction to undergo thorough ablutions: “you must turn on *yourself*, resolutely track and seize the burrower, and scrub and cleanse him” (16). Since the themes of gossip, scandal and society are so central to the novel, the divisions between the speaker and ourselves also become more important in the metacommentary, and it is necessary to read these as confrontations forcing meditation of where we want to be as well as the positions into which the criticism actually places us: “when the fictitious creature has performed that service of helping to civilize the world, it has become the most dangerous of delusions, causing first the individual to despise the mass, and then to join the mass in crushing the individual” (17). In addition to providing a generalized description of the interaction of parties, which hints at the on-going they/I/you divisions despite the absence of the tell-tale pronouns, this pronouncement on the one hand, offers repeated reminders of fictionality, while on the other hand, also speaking to the phenomenon of it becoming naturalized.

If repetition, thus figured as a wide-scale conversion of individuals into society, can be imagined as having such a significant effect, we also observe that the phenomenon involves a transformation of the theoretical or abstract into something possessing substance and weight; furthermore, we recognize in it another formulation of the complex relationship between critical and narrative discourse. Despite being less consequential in its outcome, the following example of a “candid old critic” giving an unpretentious answer serves the dual purpose of laying out what writers who deal in the economy of repetition and socially-influenced discourse are

accountable for providing, and demonstrating a literalization of a sensual metaphor offered in a very brief critical vignette:

Diarists of amusing passages are under an obligation to paint us a realistic revival of the time, or we miss the relish. The odour of the roast, and more a slice of it is required ...  
 “He gives good dinners,” a candid critic said when asked how it was he could praise a certain poet. In an island of chills and fogs, *coelum crebis ac nebulis foedum*, the comic and other perceptions are dependent on the stirring of the gastric juices. (13)

On its broadest level, this particular scene shows us an instance of Meredith adhering to the precept of vivid writing given at the same moment, but it also provides an opportunity to draw attention to the repurposing of or drawing from the same figures of speech - a move that is reminiscent of sleight-of-hand tricks in that it involves reappearance under different and unexpected circumstances, here the materializing of the figurative roast through the interposition of the little scene of the critic’s response. Putting it another way, it can be conceived of as a three-dimensional object drawn into the two-dimensional plane of the figurative then made three-dimensional (with all its native capabilities of appealing to taste and satisfying appetite) once more through the single-line but nonetheless complete story. Besides the mechanics, the little passage also provides further evidence for the passages as behaving in an almost self-generating way, both offering and accepting their own suggestions. Another word can be said of this brief story, one that may have some bearing on the ordering of critical and narrative elements and contain within it an implicit critique of readers’ expectations: the critic’s answer is reported before we are informed as to the initial question. Paradoxically, there is a certain abruptness and incomprehensibility in giving the privileged part of the discourse first since we are unable to do anything with it until the question and situation at large is revealed; any impatience for immediate explanation is baffled in being handed exactly that thing which is desired but stripped of the meaningful context, the necessary lead-up. The lesson can be extracted in this narrative



way, but it is repeated in the more abstract admonition that “such a revival by any of us would be impolitic, were it a possible attempt, before our systems shall have been fortified by philosophy” (13). As an anticipation of the possible failure of a message, we are reminded of that kind of repetition or reformulation which contains within it an element of both the contingent and frustration at the required restatement before an unreceptive audience.

Apart from its broad thematic significance as the primary concern of the title heroine, antagonism has a noticeable influence on the formulation of critical meditations in another extended passage, one devoted to identifying and analyzing binary oppositions. Probably some of the most quoted lines in Meredith criticism for the insight they provide into the author’s position in the debate of realism, the negative appraisal of both “rose-pink” and “dirty-drab” simultaneously recognizes their difference in the underlying outlook and similar inadequacy as governing modes of representation. Contingency as a characteristic critical element is at play here as well, since the consequences of adhering to either sentimentality or realism are both tracked but require or can be explained by discernible catalysts: “your recurring rose-pink is rebuked by hideous revelations of the filthy foul; for nature will force her way, and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she comes up, not the fairest part of her uppermost! Peruse your Realists—really your castigators for not having yet embraced Philosophy” (13-14). Rose-pink, it is true, is acknowledged as a current problem, but it is also referred to as “recurring,” which imagines the concept not as monolithic but rather made up of separate incidents that are thus a continuous stream of failures and opportunities to “stifle her by drowning” or refrain from doing so. In turn, the “Realists,” through subtle manipulation, although they represent a group whose practice he disapproves, are turned to his own purposes to correct the shortcomings of the other group. Additionally, through the use of concrete details - “realists” whose physical work one can

actually peruse, in place of the more abstract concept of realism; the reference to implicitly visual and sensible “revelations” as well as a body capable of drowning - reminds us again of the pervasiveness of narrativized criticism. To make this point even more apparent, the stories by which rose-pink and dirty drab are conveyed are familiar, easily paraphrasable types: the former a lurid account of an attempted crime (a drowning), the latter an almost biblically tinged cycle of penitence at the hands of an enabled oppressor (the empowered Realist). It is through this pattern of insistently laying out all the possibilities, and mixing certainty of prediction with the openness of uncertain factors, that Meredith is able to achieve the strange ambivalence that is somehow an image of conflict and anxiety, bombast and assuredness in his strongly accented rhetoric, which aims, unlike the frivolous social repetition of the diaries, at an improved conclusion rather than continued restatement.

Given that an endless round of repetitive hearsay, quotation, anecdote and characterization animates both the plot and critical commentary of *Diana*, it might seem a little strange that continuation should be questioned, but in the tone of the rose-pink and dirty-drab section, there is a clear recognition of the value of positive cessation. Critical beginnings, with all their convolutions and redirections are one thing, but their end is no less a concern, since it is paradoxically the only way to truly continue on in the sense of progress: “But a multiplication of similar instances, which can serve no other purpose than that of an apology, is a miserable vindication of innocence. The more we have of them, the darker the inference. In delicate situations the chatterer is noxious” (6). Thematically, it is true, this is a statement about the correct balance of rhetoric in a situation of scandal and the suspicion cast on an overabundance of protestations; however, it is just as much a compositional reflection and decision, one quite important for the theory I have been building about the mutual relationship between criticism and

narrative. Absence and lack are not qualities that immediately if ever come to mind when thinking of Meredith, who freely helps himself to all manner of literary devices and takes an overall maximalist attitude toward his writing, so the restraint and the pointed indication of absence, a refused opportunity, should catch our attention and bring us to pause over it as a rare and telling instance. Although it might sound hopelessly obvious because it is a premise we generally take for granted, criticism, just like other writing, has to find its own stopping point since it can flow virtually forever with examples. It is primarily by allying itself with and taking on certain features of narrative that it can build a stopping point into itself and prevent itself from being entirely run away with, swept up interminably by its own momentum with the ultimate and undesirable result of being stalled in its own setting out. Just as there are chronological ends to events, and natural ones to characters, so too is there a limited and self-recognized vitality in criticism, which does better to consider repetition than actually strive for a perpetuation of its own: “Wherewith let us to our story, the froth being out of the bottle” (17). In this final example, there is a necessary release and channeling of critical energy, profitably spent and, as is implied in the barest narrative hints of this metaphor, marked by a celebratory culmination.

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The Puzzle of Critical Fragments - *One of Our Conquerors*

A highly ambitious novel aimed at both a wide-ranging survey and critique of British imperial civilization, *One of Our Conquerors* is, like the other two works discussed, chiefly concerned with questions of societal dysfunction and possible projects for improvement. Correspondingly, there are a great many scenes which revolve around the occasion of a large social gathering, where we can observe various and competing aspects of British national identity represented by an eclectic array of personages exchanging debate on the

subject.<sup>39</sup> The most striking difference between *One of Our Conquerors* and either *Diana* or *The Egoist* is that the beginning of this later novel does not follow the practice observed in these predecessors, of immediately providing a dense critical foundation for the subsequent chapters - instead a reader's first step is, surprisingly for Meredith, into the realm of quick definite action: the comic description of the protagonist Victor slipping on a piece of litter while crossing London Bridge, to remain there for a considerable period of time. Equally unexpected is the bit of genuine dialogue that follows this action, as opposed to a presentation of quotations or statements originating in suspicious abstractions. Any intervention and commentary from "above" or "outside" is minimal, kept to and not exceeding the usual psychologically probing narrative summary. Likewise, the "we's" that do appear are mostly bracketed as vivid fragments of Victor's mental impressions in the suggestive environment of the city, nor do they function in the same fashion as do the charged pronouns considered in the preceding sections of this study. In staying close to the conflicting anxieties and fancies that make up the internal monologue of the protagonist, there is even a consistency of pattern that supports this interpretation of the character's consciousness being uninterruptedly foregrounded though he has been externally rattled by the fall. For assurance of this straightforwardness, we can rely on the stylistic and typographic evidence provided by the formulaic posing of a question, allowed to stand as its own paragraph in simulation of a mental unit of thought, followed by the longer, realistically loosely connected cogitations stirred: "Surely a scene pretending to sublimity?" or "But is the Jew of the usury becoming our despot-king of Commerce?" or "And how of the law?" (7-9). Occasional exclamatory statements punctuating both narrative summary and quoted speech, and dashes to further establish the essential link between the two, reinforce the overall

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<sup>39</sup> Stone, Donald D. "Meredith and Bakhtin: Polyphony and Bildung." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 28:4 (Autumn 1986). Pp. 698-700.

cohesiveness of this part of the passage, its singular unity of voice and mental action. We end with an identifiable statement from the narrator at the end of the chapter - "Not until, nigh upon the close of his history did she [his idea] return, full-statured and embraceable to Victor Radnor" (10) - but this only serves the purpose of foreshadowing, and does not really rise above the level of plot, given, as it is, unaccompanied by any self-conscious comments about designs or standards for characterization and structure. As a break from what we have been examining thus far, the lack of introductory commentary may appear to constitute a flaw in my argument and be negligible with regards to extensive discussion; however, such an opening is clearly a strategy in itself and there is also the appearance of more explicit criticism in the following chapter. Nevertheless, the manner of thus setting up along with the dispersion and delay rather than concentration of criticism does require a slightly different set of approaches to carry out the task of recognizing and parsing. Considering that criticism in this novel repeatedly brings itself closer to narrative, it is not surprising that the novel form should increasingly accommodate it (in spite of Meredith's comment about readers' or reviewers' inability to do so), incorporating it to the point that, with a few notable exceptions, we appear to be dealing with a few surface ripples of something now choosing fuller submersion. Thus, there is a correspondent shift requiring something of an adjustment and focusing of perception; in the first place, there are fewer long, continuous passages, and a more complete integration into the overall texture. With regards to the necessary method, as the criticism more closely reflects narrative, narrative must therefore increasingly be turned to in the process of analysis.

At the same time, this does not mean an entirely unfamiliar field of interpretation or an abandonment of narrativization in favor of "pure" narrative. There are tracings of the former to be found within the prominently action-oriented scene of the fall as well as the foreshadowing of

its ominous aftereffects, which is suggested by Victor's anxiety over his potentially impacted cognitive ability. Particularly notable is the treatment of the loss of and constant haunting by his elusive Idea; indeed, the pointedly ironic outcome of the novel indicates another instance of the physical and the abstract having some kind of unavoidable affinity, an intimate relation, which Victor's inability to face or subconscious decision to turn away leaves him unprepared for with respect to a response. To a certain extent, his failure and later mental illness can be attributed to an underlying disinclination to reconcile these two entities or categories: "Definition seemed to be an extirpation enemy of this idea, or she was by nature shy. She was very feminine; coming when she willed and flying when wanted. Not until nigh upon the close of his history did she return, full-statured and embraceable, to Victor Radnor" (10).<sup>40</sup> While this may not immediately strike us as resembling criticism as to the length which we are accustomed to deal with in Meredith, it does indeed show elements of the oracular and transformation of the conceptual into the substantial. Despite this passage being largely an extension of Victor's ratiocinations, the last line clearly belongs to the narrator, and touches directly on this idea of manifestation in its reference to ultimate and consummating embodiment: "full-statured and embraceable." We also see another characteristic twist, as with, in *Diana*, the old critic's answer being given before the question is revealed - here the inversion is that the idea becomes embraceable when there is absolutely no chance of that occurring. The foreshadowing is also reminiscent of the epitaph that is prematurely offered for Willoughby at the end of the Prelude in *The Egoist*, and the anticipation here acts as another such bracket into which the following chapters of the novel could be fitted. Brief though these examples are, they testify to the continued presence of the critical themes that were first discussed.

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<sup>40</sup> Baker, Robert S. "Victorian Conventions and Imagery in George Meredith's "One of Our Conquerors"." *Criticism* 18:4 (Fall 1976). Pp. 320-327.

Having proposed an even closer relationship between plot and criticism, it is not unhelpful to examine two more moments when the literary practice is synchronous with what his criticism is describing, for example in the passage describing Dudley Sowerby's mental perturbation in learning of Nesta's illegitimacy: "The internal state of a gentleman who detested intangible metaphor as heartily as the vulgarest of our gobblegobbets hate it, metaphor only can describe" ... "metaphor, simile, analysis, all the fraternity of old lamps for lighting our abysmal darkness have to be rubbed, that we may get a glimpse of the fray" (314). Besides betraying a slightly perverse satisfaction in the irony of applying an unwelcome means of representation to a subject character, the statement balances a little ambiguously between the ideas that metaphor is chosen for exclusive fitness or that it is simply resorted to for lack of a better, wider array of tools. A similar moment appears a little earlier in the same novel, and the scenario likewise involves an interview with one of Nesta's suitors, this time, the Rev. Septimus Barmby:

Now, if you are not for insisting that a magnificent simile shall be composed of exactly the like notes in another octave, you will catch the fine flavour of analogy and be wafted in a beat of wings ... It is the excelling merit of similes and metaphors to spring us to vault over gaps and thickets and dreary places. But, as with the visits of Immortals, we must be ready to receive them. Beware, moreover, of examining them too scrupulously: they have a trick of wearing to vapour if closely scanned. Let it be gratefully for their aid. (188-189)

What we receive in both these cases, thanks to the allusions to taste and music, is a criticism dressed in the terms of sensual connoisseurship, which appears to invite or rather restrict readers to the act of appreciation only, a contingent grasp through feeling rather than an intense scanning and murderous dissection. It is also somewhat characteristic of the tone taken in passages like these, that the address to the reader begins with a shrugging promotion of what is to be gained and ends in a heavier warning of conditions and potential loss. To continue in the vein of criticism as a means of controlled representation, the same concerns and anxieties about essential

composition and superficial ornament are also at play here: getting at the operation of the unit while avoiding the “stripping” reductiveness that discards the working parts. It is a part of Meredith’s characteristic ambivalence that he anticipates the question - what is there to really be gained in either knowledge or experience of method? - but frustrates through ambiguous answers which themselves conjure up substance yet issue a warning of untouchability.

To the extent that there is an organizing principle in the internal criticism of *One of Our Conquerors*, the commentary in this novel, because scattered, seems always to be in the introductory stages and this problem of the fragmentary seems to be dramatized thematically, as well as allegorically, in Victor’s and his partner Nataly’s being constantly engaged in introductions into new society. So far as they are forced to repeat introductions because of the secret of their not being legally married, they benefit from the use of narrative in a way not dissimilar to commentary taking on narrative elements to pass unnoticed or to control readerly notice. Introductions can also be understood as a kind of redirection, and this is another parallel between the criticism and the events unfolding within the plot; the significant difference is that the former is a redirection of attention to plot and still a free flow of action, while Victor’s attempts to stave off disgrace through exposure is an impediment to progress, ultimately ending his opportunities for self-fulfillment. Tragically, this very denial of honest expression returns with a vengeance at the end as a kind of madness which manifests at moments as amnesia. As a form of suppression, the redirection within the storyline cannot be set aside but has to be perpetuated vigilantly; thus, rather than being something that the main characters control they themselves are subject to it. With new and old acquaintances alike, Victor and Nataly benefit from the use of story, or, in other words, the implication that there is no story to be told about them; yet the difficulty that they face is precisely in revealing the true story to their daughter and



later to her chosen fiancée, Dudley Sowerby. Likewise, though in a collectively smaller volume of comments, the criticism, attended by its unavoidable irony, expresses an urgent interest in narrative building, both the effective story-telling that forms so much of social life and that imaginative construction of individual identity built from ambitions and hopes. Not only do the Radnors share with criticism the narrative impulse or need, the stories they generate are also consciously conceived of as layered and self-reflective, for both Victor's success story of having amassed a fortune and the couple's mutual desire for their daughter Nesta to marry into a respectable family, are striven for as possible substitutions or respectable coverings for the story of illegitimacy which has been far more cruelly received. In short, their situation is one in which narrative has to be called in aid of narrative, for stories demand repair and reinforcement through added details just as criticism makes use of the concrete to strengthen its abilities to persuade.

When the novel is considered in light of a necessity to convince and control, the element of overdetermination becomes more apparent, all the more so given the use of "one of" in the title, which, in relation to the overall larger narrative world of the work, hints at a decentralizing possibility of complete openness in determining the intended or most suitable object to be recognized as a "conqueror." Another hinge for interpretation involves the inclusivity of the possessive "our." These details taken together, the ambiguity in deciding both the significance and tone of the title allows it to be read variously as a reference to 1.) an individual whose superiority enables him to command the individuals around him and thus dominate a society of which we are recognized members, or 2.) a less definable condition which can and does befall everyone in the course of their life, something by which we are all conquered. What is to be taken away from this laying out of possibilities are two considerations, one related to the recognition and location of the involved parties, and the other to the concrete/abstract dialectic

which is challenged by Meredith's particular application and integration of criticism. Accepting the first option brings us to the more concrete and narrative, while the second looms as something more abstract; additionally, the former makes exceptions while the second is mercilessly inclusive. Whether one focuses on the possibility for an exception - an individual who by force of will manages to elude an abstract conqueror - or the vague distinction "one of," this leaves room for the unpredictability that we have been calling the conditional element of Meredith, which involves predictions and an overdetermined covering of all possibilities. While titles are not, strictly speaking, my concern here, I take the time to pause over this one for its pronominal element, which we have been interested in pursuing in relation to the position criticism puts us in – and what is a title if not a hyper-condensed cue to guide our interpretation?

In a similar vein, the fall Victor takes at the beginning of the novel, with its rich connotations of religious and epistemological significance, also belongs to the category of the overdetermined, especially in its role as both a kind of precondition for the reader in entering the novel and a literalization of the humble or uncomfortable position they can expect to find themselves occupying along with the protagonist. With all this body of implicit symbolism, however, the physicality of the environment is not neglected and much of the force of the novel's initial scene comes from its ability to convey an appropriate sense of urban population and movement. In fact, the crowd's existence as substantial rather than abstract, is expressly emphasized by the comment that the "sly strip of slipperiness" which tripped Victor had "more or less adroitly performed the trick upon preceding passengers, and now laid this one flat amid the shuffle of feet" (1), a downplaying of the fall's portentousness and hint of pre-narrative with latent but unactivated narrative possibilities. It is in the second chapter that the bulk of more

recognizable criticism awaits a reader, like the “sly bit of slipperiness” presenting a different obstacle to forward movement in the sense of perversely creating a delay:

The fair dealing with readers demands of us, that a narrative shall not proceed at slower pace than legs of a man in motion; and we are still but little more than midway across London Bridge. But if a man’s mind is to be taken as a part of him, the likening of it, at an introduction, to an army on the opening march of a great campaign, should plead excuses for tardy forward movements, in consideration of the large amount of matter you have to review before you can at all imagine yourselves to have made his acquaintance. This it is not necessary to do when you are set astride the enchanted horse of the Tale, which leaves the man’s mind at home while he performs the deeds befitting him: he can indeed be rapid. Whether more active, is a question asking for your notions of the governing element in the composition of man, and of his present business here. The Tale inspires one’s earlier ardours, when we sped without baggage, when the Impossible was wings to imagination, and heroic sculpture the simplest act of the chisel. It does not advance, ‘tis true; it drives the whirligig circle round and round the single existing central point; but it is enriched with applause of the boys and girls of both ages in this land; and all the English critics heap their honours on its brave old Simplicity: our national literary flag, which signalizes us while we float, subsequently to flap above the shallows. One may sigh for it. An ill-fortuned minstrel who has by fateful direction been brought to see with distinctness, that man is not as much comprised in external features as the monkey, will be devoted to the task of the fuller portraiture. (10-11)

While appearing to offer a sincere, reasoned explanation of method, the passage knowingly stalls the relief of the reader’s imagined impatience, coyly addressing the questions that naturally enter the minds of those who are making their way through these critical meditations: what is happening in the narrative while the narrator runs through his commentary? Does the criticism take up any “time” in the narrative?<sup>41</sup> Characteristically for the situation, answers to these questions are mostly limited to speculation, nevertheless the fact that they are needed suggest that these sections operate like narrative not only in being representative, possessed of compressed elements of plot and story, but have a kind of perceptible temporality as well. In the immediate context, the speaker is setting forth a generic distinction between novelistic and tale-telling procedures, the former excusable for its comprehensiveness of presentation and the latter

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<sup>41</sup> Sudrann, Jean. “‘The Linked Eye and Mind’: A Concept of Action in the Novels of George Meredith.” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 4:4 (Autumn 1964). Pp. 615-621.

seeming to recall the considerable license of romance, but one can also recognize it as a broader justification. Indeed, it is interesting to note, once more, how much in Meredith's prose is called upon to act in more than one capacity - for one can easily see that the issue of fair dealing which is invoked is just as relevant for all his excursions into criticism as it is for the deliberately slower pace of the preceding chapter, in which Victor begins to cross London Bridge.

Correspondingly, the action demanded of the reader is not only engagement, but, as in the metaphor, review and inspection.

Following the pattern laid out above in the analysis of the two earlier novels, we can identify and handle the by-now familiar presence of the anonymous, quasi-abstract figure of the "ill-fortuned minstrel" to whom the task of "fuller portraiture" at hand is deferred as well as the use of imagery by way of explanation, and the reliance on historically tinted material: "earlier ardours, when we sped without baggage, when the Impossible was wings to imagination, and heroic sculpture the simplest act of the chisel." To remember a lesson from the Prelude of *The Egoist*, the overall method is not that of *en medias res* but, in the context of "an introduction," likened to an "opening march" that respects full beginnings. Since, in consideration of tone, Meredith's critical passages usually come loaded with at least one charged or provocative phrase, the one to point out here is of course "fair dealing," which shortly after it is broached, is immediately obscured in a series of negations and transfers of subject which have the effect of disorienting a reader, who by the end, probably does not know whether he *has* been fairly dealt with or not and feels that the speaker who brought the issue up has slipped away in the meantime and changed strategies: "But a man's mind is to be taken as a part of him," "This it is not necessary to do." It is important to note that in making such a shift from an ethics of objective

obligation to one of personal judgment or whim, the criticism takes on a kind of game-like quality, which is further reinforced by a curious choice of figurative imagery.

Contrary to the logical assumption that criticism is conceived of as the product of difficult, intense, profoundly deep thinking and presented as work correspondingly marked by strain and effort; there seems to be a considerable amount of room in Meredith's critical vocabulary for terms that conjure up ideas of relaxation, allowances, basic adequacy, and loose approximations: "This should comfort us",<sup>42</sup> "fun", "amusing", "relish", "refreshment", "delight", "to suppose it [brainstuff] dull is the profoundest of errors; how deep, you will understand when I tell you that it is the very football of the holiday-afternoon imps below. They kick it for pastime."<sup>43</sup> In fact, a corollary to the idea that criticism is able to fulfill many of the same functions as representation is that it is also capable of providing entertainment. The imagery of the whirligig from the pseudo-excuse for a delay brings us quite directly to the game-like aspects in play in written language. As a sign of "simplicity," the toy's mobile limits are noted - "round and round the single existing central point" - but there is, besides an acknowledgement of nostalgia, a just recognition of the fact that it serves its purpose, and while it may turn unvaryingly in circles around the "single existing central point," it successfully closes its small circle and seems to at least be given respect for its completeness. A more forbidding manifestation of the game-like is by contrast offered by objects and objectified ideas very aggressively the opposite of the "brave old simplicity" which calls forth the passing tribute of a sigh. Belonging to this category are situations defined by a lack of proportion, such as Victor's excessive perturbation after the charge of "punctilio" by the man who helped him to his feet

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<sup>42</sup> *Diana of the Crossways*, pp. 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15.

following his fall, and small objects made the focus of inappropriate, even unnatural measures of attention, like the toys in the following passage:

Puzzles are presented to us now and then in the course of our days; and the smaller they are the better for the purpose, it would seem; and they come in rattle-boxes, they are actually children's toys, for what they contain, but not the less do they buzz at our understandings and insist that they break or we, and, in either case, to show a mere foolish idle rattle in hollowness. (3-4)

In large part, the more self-evident the triviality of the challenging object the more our frustrated efforts increase, fed by a consciousness of absurdity and the likelihood of appearing personally ridiculous. What is particular about this formulation of such a situation is that it includes a number of markers for the familiar contingency we by now come to expect, predictions that cover both possible outcomes, this time more menacing in relation to their grim succinctness: “they break or we.” The rattle-box, though defined by its stimulating through sound, shares affinities with the whirligig mentioned earlier in that it also involves a circularity of movement. Yet, the circularity and fixed point that compose the puzzle in question are not that of the whirligig's repetitive motion; rather it demonstrates the circularity of an inescapable catch-22 and the fixed point of a single unflattering outcome regardless of whether we or it breaks: “in either case, to show a mere foolish idle rattle in hollowness.” Notwithstanding the extensive reference to toys, the implications border on if they do not fully locate themselves in the nihilistic. While whirligig simplicity is cheered by applause and seems to have some rules that organize its play, there are no real rules in the case of such puzzles as that represented by “punctilio” or the rattle-box. Moreover, the former toy allows for augmentation by the applause of “boys and girls of both ages” while the characterization of the latter is entirely object oriented, centered around ideas of audience-independent existence and the inherent noise of language, from which it is impossible to extract anything definite but the thing itself - strenuous application

gets no further than an idleness matching the puzzle's responsive sound. To draw attention to another similarity, there is in both the passages on delay and puzzles a striking idea of doomed devotion - the ill-fortuned minstrel" brought to see with "fateful direction" and the "we" "vowed to the pursuit" of "an idea that was ours." While the critical techniques employed are in form a typical reuse of imagery, the resulting impression arising from the juxtaposition of treatments cannot but recognize the world of difference between the one view of the language-game as a form of amusement and the other possibility that it is more of a test, to whose rules all, without exception, are subject, whether willing to play or not. Yet, in spite of such hard, foreboding position taken by such statements, it is necessary to realize that the criticism, as Meredith's criticism in the three works examined has reliably been, is able, through its own existence, irony and world-making capabilities, to turn back on and contradict itself, offering a reason and a means for continued investment and interpretation.

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[W]e can testify even now that to read Meredith is to be conscious of a packed and muscular mind; of a voice booming and reverberating with its own unmistakable accent even though the partition between us is too thick for us to hear what he says distinctly ... He will be read, one may guess, by fits and starts; he will be forgotten and discovered and again discovered and forgotten ... But if English fiction continues to be read, the novels of George Meredith must inevitably rise from time to time into view; his work must be inevitably disputed and discussed. - "The Novels of George Meredith"<sup>44</sup>

To conclude with a judgment which originally inspired the ultimate topic of this study and also gave rise to reflections on its own relevance during the writing of it, I believe that the return to and continual revival of Meredith's works can be attributed to our instinctively recognizing in them an instructive lesson in the novel form which not only dominated the nineteenth century during which the author lived, wrote and thought, but continues to hold strong in contemporary

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<sup>44</sup> *The Second Common Reader*, pp. 236.

scholarship. As casual readers, but even more so in our capacity as critical readers, we seem to be repeatedly drawn back to writing that simultaneously provokes yet defies comment - which attraction is compounded by the work offering a substantial tissue of its own. My focus in analyzing three of his novels has accordingly been directed not so much toward the content as the questions and perplexities that hover over the events and characters of Meredith's novels, which, because of their distinct presentation, demand unusually direct engagement on the part of the reader. Without submitting the theories of narrativized and contingent criticism as definitive answers to their subtle mechanics, I hope to have at least brought some much needed attention to an array of fascinating strategies which are on their own well deserving of extensive discussion, but even more significantly lead us to reconsider the writing of both critical discourse and the possibilities of the novel. A final paradox to be noted in this series of unexpected relationships is that the discussion of Meredith, while it involves extensive consideration of a rather distinct example, in the end is something of an unconscious return to familiar territory, for in attempting to navigate his individual idiosyncrasies, we are reminded of the essential irreducibility of the novel genre itself and the commentary it produces both within and externally, of the ultimate and infinite extension of its own self-conscious impulses, which are like the strength of the ripple to affect the tide.



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Appendix A: *The Egoist*  
 Prelude: A Chapter of Which the Last Page 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. 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? 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 outsider? We may get 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!

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 milepost 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 that prolongation of the vasty and the noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, steams the malady of sameness, our modern malady. 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—they in the Oriental posture; whereupon we set up a primaevial chattering to rival the Amazon forest nigh nightfall, cured, we fancied. And before daybreak 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. 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 repletteness, 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 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 pan 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: 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 loblegs 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. And let them gallop; let them gallop with the God bestriding them; gallop to Hymen, gallop to Hades, they strike the same note. Monstrous monotonousness has enfolded us as with the arms of Amphitrite! We hear a shout of war for a diversion.—Comedy he pronounces to be our means of reading swiftly and comprehensively. She it is who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, 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. And this laughter of reason refreshed is floriferous, like the magical great gale of the shifty Spring deciding for Summer. 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! O for a titled ecclesiastic to curse to excommunication 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. 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 sustain 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. 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.

Appendix B: *Diana of the Crossways*  
Chapter I. Of Diaries and Diarists Touching the Heroine

Among the Diaries beginning with the second quarter of our century, there is frequent mention of a lady then becoming famous for her beauty and her wit: 'an unusual combination,' in the deliberate syllables of one of the writers, who is, however, not disposed to personal irony when speaking of her. It is otherwise in his case and a general fling at the sex we may deem pardonable, for doing as little harm to womankind as the stone of an urchin cast upon the bosom of mother Earth; though men must look some day to have it returned to them, which is a certainty; and indeed full surely will our idle-handed youngster too, in his riper season; be heard complaining of a strange assault of wanton missiles, coming on him he knows not whence; for we are all of us distinctly marked to get back what we give, even from the thing named inanimate nature.

The 'LEAVES FROM THE DIARY OF HENRY WILMERS' are studded with examples of the dinner-table wit of the time, not always worth quotation twice; for smart remarks have their measured distances, many requiring to be a brule pourpoint, or within throw of the pistol, to make it hit; in other words, the majority of them are addressed directly to our muscular system, and they have no effect when we stand beyond the range. On the contrary, they reflect sombrely on the springs of hilarity in the generation preceding us; with due reserve of credit, of course, to an animal vivaciousness that seems to have wanted so small an incitement. Our old yeomanry farmers—returning to their beds over ferny commons under bright moonlight from a neighbour's harvest-home, eased their bubbling breasts with a ready roar not unakin to it. Still the promptness to laugh is an excellent progenitorial foundation for the wit to come in a people; and undoubtedly the diarial record of an imputed piece of wit is witness to the spouting of laughter. This should comfort us while we skim the sparkling passages of the 'Leaves.' When a nation has acknowledged that it is as yet but in the fisticuff stage of the art of condensing our purest sense to golden sentences, a readier appreciation will be extended to the gift: which is to strike not the dazzled eyes, the unanticipating nose, the ribs, the sides, and stun us, twirl us, hoodwink, mystify, tickle and twitch, by dexterities of lingual sparring and shuffling, but to strike roots in the mind, the Hesperides of good things. We shall then set a price on the 'unusual combination.' A witty woman is a treasure; a witty Beauty is a power. Has she actual beauty, actual wit?—not simply a tidal material beauty that passes current any pretty flippancy or staggering pretentiousness? Grant the combination, she will appear a veritable queen of her period, fit for homage; at least meriting a disposition to believe the best of her, in the teeth of foul rumour; because the well of true wit is truth itself, the gathering of the precious drops of right reason, wisdom's lightning; and no soul possessing and dispensing it can justly be a target for the world, however well armed the world confronting her. Our temporary world, that Old Credulity and stone-hurling urchin in one, supposes it possible for a woman to be mentally active up to the point of spiritual clarity and also fleshly vile; a guide to life and a biter at the fruits of death; both open mind and hypocrite. It has not yet been taught to appreciate a quality certifying to sound citizenship as authoritatively as acres of land in fee simple, or coffers of bonds, shares and stocks, and a more imperishable guarantee. The multitudes of evil reports which it takes for proof, are marshalled against her without question of the nature of the victim, her temptress beauty being a sufficiently presumptive delinquent. It does not pretend to know the whole, or naked body of the facts; it knows enough for its furry dubiousness; and excepting the sentimental of men, a rocket-headed horde, ever at the heels of fair faces for ignition, and up starring away at a hint of tearfulness; excepting further by chance a solid champion man, or some generous woman capable of faith in the pelted solitary of her sex, our temporary world blows direct East on her shivering person. The scandal is warrant for that; the circumstances of the scandal emphasize the warrant. And how clever she is! Cleverness is an attribute of the selecter missionary lieutenants of Satan. We pray to be defended from her cleverness:

she flashes bits of speech that catch men in their unguarded corner. The wary stuff their ears, the stolid bid her best sayings rebound on her reputation. Nevertheless the world, as Christian, remembers its professions, and a portion of it joins the burly in morals by extending to her a rough old charitable mercifulness; better than sentimental ointment, but the heaviest blow she has to bear, to a character swimming for life.

That the lady in question was much quoted, the Diaries and Memoirs testify. Hearsay as well as hearing was at work to produce the abundance; and it was a novelty in England, where (in company) the men are the pointed talkers, and the women conversationally fair Circassians. They are, or they know that they should be; it comes to the same. Happily our civilization has not prescribed the veil to them. The mutes have here and there a sketch or label attached to their names: they are 'strikingly handsome'; they are 'very good-looking'; occasionally they are noted as 'extremely entertaining': in what manner, is inquired by a curious posterity, that in so many matters is left unendingly to jump the empty and gaping figure of interrogation over its own full stop. Great ladies must they be, at the web of politics, for us to hear them cited discoursing. Henry Wilmers is not content to quote the beautiful Mrs. Warwick, he attempts a portrait. Mrs. Warwick is 'quite Grecian.' She might 'pose for a statue.' He presents her in carpenter's lines, with a dab of school-box colours, effective to those whom the Keepsake fashion can stir. She has a straight nose, red lips, raven hair, black eyes, rich complexion, a remarkably fine bust, and she walks well, and has an agreeable voice; likewise 'delicate extremities.' The writer was created for popularity, had he chosen to bring his art into our literary market.

Perry Wilkinson is not so elaborate: he describes her in his 'Recollections' as a splendid brune, eclipsing all the blondes coming near her: and 'what is more, the beautiful creature can talk.' He wondered, for she was young, new to society. Subsequently he is rather ashamed of his wonderment, and accounts for it by 'not having known she was Irish.' She 'turns out to be Dan Merion's daughter.'

We may assume that he would have heard if she had any whiff of a brogue. Her sounding of the letter R a trifle scrupulously is noticed by Lady Pennon: 'And last, not least, the lovely Mrs. Warwick, twenty minutes behind the dinner-hour, and r-r-really fearing she was late.' After alluding to the soft influence of her beauty and ingenuousness on the vexed hostess, the kindly old marchioness adds, that it was no wonder she was late, 'for just before starting from home she had broken loose from her husband for good, and she entered the room absolutely houseless!' She was not the less 'astonishingly brilliant.' Her observations were often 'so unexpectedly droll I laughed till I cried.' Lady Pennon became in consequence one of the staunch supporters of Mrs. Warwick.

Others were not so easily won. Perry Wilkinson holds a balance when it goes beyond a question of her wit and beauty. Henry Wilmers puts the case aside, and takes her as he finds her. His cousin, the clever and cynical Dorset Wilmers, whose method of conveying his opinions without stating them was famous, repeats on two occasions when her name appears in his pages, 'handsome, lively, witty'; and the stressed repetition of calculated brevity while a fiery scandal was abroad concerning the lady, implies weighty substance—the reservation of a constable's truncheon, that could legally have knocked her character down to the pavement. We have not to ask what he judged. But Dorset Wilmers was a political opponent of the eminent Peer who yields the second name to the scandal, and politics in his day flushed the conceptions of men. His short references to 'that Warwick-Dannisburgh affair' are not verbally malicious. He gets wind of the terms of Lord Dannisburgh's will and testament, noting them without comment. The oddness of the instrument in one respect may have served his turn; we have no grounds for thinking him malignant. The death of his enemy closes his allusions to Mrs. Warwick. He was growing ancient, and gout narrowed the circle he whirled in. Had he known this 'handsome, lively, witty' apparition as a woman having political and social views of her own, he would not, one fancies, have been so stingless. Our England exposes a sorry figure in his Reminiscences. He struck heavily, round and about him, wherever he



moved; he had by nature a tarnishing eye that cast discolouration. His unadorned harsh substantive statements, excluding the adjectives, give his Memoirs the appearance of a body of facts, attractive to the historic Muse, which has learnt to esteem those brawny sturdy giants marching club on shoulder, independent of henchman, in preference to your panoplied knights with their puffy squires, once her favourites, and wind-filling to her columns, ultimately found indigestible.

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But a multiplication of similar instances, which can serve no other purpose than that of an apology, is a miserable vindication of innocence. The more we have of them the darker the inference. In delicate situations the chatterer is noxious. Mrs. Warwick had numerous apologists. Those trusting to her perfect rectitude were rarer. The liberty she allowed herself in speech and action must have been trying to her defenders in a land like ours; for here, and able to throw its shadow on our giddy upper-circle, the rigour of the game of life, relaxed though it may sometimes appear, would satisfy the staidest whist-player. She did not wish it the reverse, even when claiming a space for laughter: 'the breath of her soul,' as she called it, and as it may be felt in the early youth of a lively nature. She, especially, with her multitude of quick perceptions and imaginative avenues, her rapid summaries, her sense of the comic, demanded this aerial freedom.

We have it from Perry Wilkinson that the union of the divergent couple was likened to another union always in a Court of Law. There was a distinction; most analogies will furnish one; and here we see England and Ireland changeing their parts, until later, after the breach, when the Englishman and Irishwoman resumed a certain resemblance to the yoked Islands.

Henry Wilmers, I have said, deals exclusively with the wit and charm of the woman. He treats the scandal as we might do in like manner if her story had not to be told. But these are not reporting columns; very little of it shall trouble them. The position is faced, and that is all. The position is one of the battles incident to women, their hardest. It asks for more than justice from men, for generosity, our civilization not being yet of the purest. That cry of hounds at her disrobing by Law is instinctive. She runs, and they give tongue; she is a creature of the chase. Let her escape unmangled, it will pass in the record that she did once publicly run, and some old dogs will persist in thinking her cunninger than the virtuous, which never put themselves in such positions, but ply the distaff at home. Never should reputation of woman trail a scent! How true! and true also that the women of waxwork never do; and that the women of happy marriages do not; nor the women of holy nunneries; nor the women lucky in their arts. It is a test of the civilized to see and hear, and add no yapping to the spectacle.

Thousands have reflected on a Diarist's power to cancel our Burial Service. Not alone the cleric's good work is upset by him; but the sexton's as well. He howks the grave, and transforms the quiet worms, busy on a single poor peaceable body, into winged serpents that disorder sky and earth with a deadly flight of zig-zags, like military rockets, among the living. And if these are given to cry too much, to have their tender sentiments considered, it cannot be said that History requires the flaying of them. A gouty Diarist, a sheer gossip Diarist, may thus, in the bequest of a trail of reminiscences, explode our temples (for our very temples have powder in store), our treasuries, our homesteads, alive with dynamitic stuff; nay, disconcert our inherited veneration, dislocate the intimate connexion between the tugged flaxen forelock and a title.

No similar blame is incurred by Henry Wilmers. No blame whatever, one would say, if he had been less, copious, or not so subservient, in recording the lady's utterances; for though the wit of a woman may be terse, quite spontaneous, as this lady's assuredly was here and there, she is apt to spin it out of a museful mind, at her toilette, or by the lonely fire, and sometimes it is imitative; admirers should beware of holding it up to the withering glare of print: she herself, quoting an obscure maximonger, says of these lapidary sentences, that they have merely 'the value of chalk-eggs, which lure the thinker to sit,' and tempt the vacuous to strain for the like, one might add; besides flattering the world to imagine itself richer than it is in eggs that are golden. Henry Wilmers notes a multitude of them. 'The talk fell upon our being creatures of habit, and how far it was good: She said:—It is there that

we see ourselves crutched between love grown old and indifference ageing to love.' Critic ears not present at the conversation catch an echo of maxims and aphorisms overchannel, notwithstanding a feminine thrill in the irony of 'ageing to love.' The quotation ranks rather among the testimonies to her charm.

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The instances of her drollery are rather hinted by the Diarists for the benefit of those who had met her and could inhale the atmosphere at a word. Drolleries, humours, reputed witticisms, are like odours of roast meats, past with the picking of the joint. Idea is the only vital breath. They have it rarely, or it eludes the chronicler. To say of the great erratic and forsaken Lady A\*\*\*\*, after she had accepted the consolations of Bacchus, that her name was properly signified in asterisks 'as she was now nightly an Ariadne in heaven through her God,' sounds to us a roundabout, with wit somewhere and fun nowhere. Sitting at the roast we might have thought differently. Perry Wilkinson is not happier in citing her reply to his compliment on the reviewers' unanimous eulogy of her humour and pathos:—the 'merry clown and poor pantaloon demanded of us in every work of fiction,' she says, lamenting the writer's compulsion to go on producing them for applause until it is extremest age that knocks their knees. We are informed by Lady Pennon of 'the most amusing description of the first impressions of a pretty English simpleton in Paris'; and here is an opportunity for ludicrous contrast of the French and English styles of pushing flatteries—'piping to the charmed animal,' as Mrs. Warwick terms it in another place: but Lady Pennon was acquainted with the silly woman of the piece, and found her amusement in the 'wonderful truth' of that representation.

Diarists of amusing passages are under an obligation to paint us a realistic revival of the time, or we miss the relish. The odour of the roast, and more, a slice of it is required, unless the humorous thing be preternaturally spirited to walk the earth as one immortal among a number less numerous than the mythic Gods. 'He gives good dinners,' a candid old critic said, when asked how it was that he could praise a certain poet. In an island of chills and fogs, *coelum crebris imbribus ac nebulis foedum*, the comic and other perceptions are dependent on the stirring of the gastric juices. And such a revival by any of us would be impolitic, were it a possible attempt, before our systems shall have been fortified by philosophy. Then may it be allowed to the Diarist simply to relate, and we can copy from him.

Then, ah! then, moreover, will the novelist's Art, now neither blushless infant nor executive man, have attained its majority. We can then be veraciously historical, honestly transcriptive. Rose-pink and dirty drab will alike have passed away. Philosophy is the foe of both, and their silly cancelling contest, perpetually renewed in a shuffle of extremes, as it always is where a phantasm falseness reigns, will no longer baffle the contemplation of natural flesh, smother no longer the soul issuing out of our incessant strife. Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab; and that instead of everlastingly shifting those barren aspects, the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight. Do but perceive that we are coming to philosophy, the stride toward it will be a giant's—a century a day. And imagine the celestial refreshment of having a pure decency in the place of sham; real flesh; a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending. Honourable will fiction then appear; honourable, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood. Why, when you behold it you love it—and you will not encourage it?—or only when presented by dead hands? Worse than that alternative dirty drab, your recurring rose-pink is rebuked by hideous revelations of the filthy foul; for nature will force her way, and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she comes up, not the fairest part of her uppermost! Peruse your Realists—really your castigators for not having yet embraced Philosophy. As she grows in the flesh when discreetly tended, nature is unimpeachable, flower-eke, yet not too decoratively a flower; you must have her with the stem, the thorns, the roots, and the fat bedding of roses. In this fashion she grew, says historical fiction; thus does she flourish now, would say the modern transcript, reading the inner as well as exhibiting the outer.

And how may you know that you have reached to Philosophy? You touch her skirts when you share her hatred of the sham decent, her derision of sentimentalism. You are one with her when—but I would not have you a thousand years older! Get to her, if in no other way, by the sentimental route:—that very winding path, which again and again brings you round to the point of original impetus, where you have to be unwound for another whirl; your point of original impetus being the grossly material, not at all the spiritual. It is most true that sentimentalism springs from the former, merely and badly aping the latter,—fine flower, or pinnacle flame-spire, of sensualism that it is, could it do other? and accompanying the former it traverses tracts of desert here and there couching in a garden, catching with one hand at fruits, with another at colours; imagining a secret ahead, and goaded by an appetite, sustained by sheer gratifications. Fiddle in harmonics as it may, it will have these gratifications at all costs. Should none be discoverable, at once you are at the Cave of Despair, beneath the funereal orb of Glaucoma, in the thick midst of poniarded, slit-throat, rope-dependant figures, placarded across the bosom Disillusioned, Infidel, Agnostic, Miserrimus. That is the sentimental route to advancement. Spirituality does not light it; evanescent dreams: are its oil-lamps, often with wick askant in the socket.

A thousand years! You may count full many a thousand by this route before you are one with divine Philosophy. Whereas a single flight of brains will reach and embrace her; give you the savour of Truth, the right use of the senses, Reality's infinite sweetness; for these things are in philosophy; and the fiction which is the summary of actual Life, the within and without of us, is, prose or verse, plodding or soaring, philosophy's elect handmaiden. To such an end let us bend our aim to work, knowing that every form of labour, even this flimsiest, as you esteem it, should minister to growth. If in any branch of us we fail in growth, there is, you are aware, an unfailing aboriginal democratic old monster that waits to pull us down; certainly the branch, possibly the tree; and for the welfare of Life we fall. You are acutely conscious of yonder old monster when he is mouthing at you in politics. Be wary of him in the heart; especially be wary of the disrelish of brainstuff. You must feed on something. Matter that is not nourishing to brains can help to constitute nothing but the bodies which are pitched on rubbish heaps. Brainstuff is not lean stuff;—the brainstuff of fiction is internal history, and to suppose it dull is the profoundest of errors; how deep, you will understand when I tell you that it is the very football of the holiday-afternoon imps below. They kick it for pastime; they are intelligences perverted. The comic of it, the adventurous, the tragic, they make devilish, to kindle their Ogygian hilarity. But—sharply comic, adventurous, instructively tragic, it is in the interwinding with human affairs, to give a flavour of the modern day reviving that of our Poet, between whom and us yawn Time's most hollow jaws. Surely we owe a little to Time, to cheer his progress; a little to posterity, and to our country. Dozens of writers will be in at yonder yawning breach, if only perusers will rally to the philosophic standard. They are sick of the woodeny puppetry they dispense, as on a race-course to the roaring frivolous. Well, if not dozens, half-dozens; gallant pens are alive; one can speak of them in the plural. I venture to say that they would be satisfied with a dozen for audience, for a commencement. They would perish of inanition, unfed, unapplauded, amenable to the laws perchance for an assault on their last remaining pair of ears or heels, to hold them fast. But the example is the thing; sacrifices must be expected. The example might, one hopes, create a taste. A great modern writer, of clearest eye and head, now departed, capable in activity of presenting thoughtful women, thinking men, groaned over his puppetry, that he dared not animate them, flesh though they were, with the fires of positive brainstuff. He could have done it, and he is of the departed! Had he dared, he would (for he was Titan enough) have raised the Art in dignity on a level with History; to an interest surpassing the narrative of public deeds as vividly as man's heart and brain in their union excel his plain lines of action to eruption. The everlasting pantomime, suggested by Mrs. Warwick in her exclamation to Perry Wilkinson, is derided, not unrighteously, by our graver seniors. They name this Art the pasture of idiots, a method for idiotizing the entire population which has taken to reading; and which soon discovers that it can write likewise, that sort of stuff at least.

The forecast may be hazarded, that if we do not speedily embrace Philosophy in fiction, the Art is doomed to extinction, under the shining multitude of its professors. They are fast capping the candle. Instead, therefore, of objugating the timid intrusions of Philosophy, invoke her presence, I pray you. History without her is the skeleton map of events: Fiction a picture of figures modelled on no skeleton-anatomy. But each, with Philosophy in aid, blooms, and is humanly shapely. To demand of us truth to nature, excluding Philosophy, is really to bid a pumpkin caper. As much as legs are wanted for the dance, Philosophy is required to make our human nature credible and acceptable. Fiction implores you to heave a bigger breast and take her in with this heavenly preservative helpmate, her inspiration and her essence. You have to teach your imagination of the feminine image you have set up to bend your civilized knees to, that it must temper its fastidiousness, shun the grossness of the over-dainty. Or, to speak in the philosophic tongue, you must turn on yourself, resolutely track and seize that burrower, and scrub and cleanse him; by which process, during the course of it, you will arrive at the conception of the right heroic woman for you to worship: and if you prove to be of some spiritual stature, you may reach to an ideal of the heroic feminine type for the worship of mankind, an image as yet in poetic outline only, on our upper skies.

'So well do we know ourselves, that we one and all determine to know a purer,' says the heroine of my columns. Philosophy in fiction tells, among various other matters, of the perils of this intimate acquaintance with a flattering familiar in the 'purer'—a person who more than ceases to be of else to us after his ideal shall have led up men from their flint and arrowhead caverns to intercommunicative daylight. For when the fictitious creature has performed that service of helping to civilize the world, it becomes the most dangerous of delusions, causing first the individual to despise the mass, and then to join the mass in crushing the individual. Wherewith let us to our story, the froth being out of the bottle.

Appendix C: *One of Our Conquerors*  
Chapter I. Across London Bridge

A gentleman, noteworthy for a lively countenance and a waistcoat to match it, crossing London Bridge at noon on a gusty April day, was almost magically detached from his conflict with the gale by some sly strip of slipperiness, abounding in that conduit of the markets, which had more or less adroitly performed the trick upon preceding passengers, and now laid this one flat amid the shuffle of feet, peaceful for the moment as the uncomplaining who have gone to Sabrina beneath the tides. He was unhurt, quite sound, merely astonished, he remarked, in reply to the inquiries of the first kind helper at his elbow; and it appeared an acceptable statement of his condition. He laughed, shook his coat-tails, smoothed the back of his head rather thoughtfully, thankfully received his runaway hat, nodded bright beams to right and left, and making light of the muddy stigmas imprinted by the pavement, he scattered another shower of his nods and smiles around, to signify, that as his good friends would wish, he thoroughly felt his legs and could walk unaided. And he was in the act of doing it, questioning his familiar behind the waistcoat amazedly, to tell him how such a misadventure could have occurred to him of all men, when a glance below his chin discomposed his outward face. ‘Oh, confound the fellow!’ he said, with simple frankness, and was humorously ruffled, having seen absurd blots of smutty knuckles distributed over the maiden waistcoat.

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Puzzles are presented to us now and then in the course of our days; and the smaller they are the better for the purpose, it would seem; and they come in rattle-boxes, they are actually children’s toys, for what they contain, but not the less do they buzz at our understandings and insist that they break or we, and, in either case, to show a mere foolish idle rattle in hollowness. Or does this happen to us only after a fall?

He tried a suspension of his mental efforts, and the word was like the clapper of a disorderly bell, striking through him, with reverberations, in the form of interrogations, as to how he, of all men living, could by any chance have got into a wrangle, in a thoroughfare, on London Bridge, of all places in the world!—he, so popular, renowned for his affability, his amiability; having no dislike to common dirty dogs, entirely the reverse, liking them and doing his best for them; and accustomed to receive their applause. And in what way had he offered a hint to bring on him the charge of punctilio?

‘But I am treating it seriously!’ he said, and jerked a dead laugh while fixing a button of his coat.

That he should have treated it seriously, furnished next the subject of cogitation; and here it was plainly suggested, that a degradation of his physical system, owing to the shock of the fall, must be seen and acknowledged; for it had become a perverted engine, to pull him down among the puerilities, and very soon he was worrying at punctilio anew, attempting to read the riddle of the application of it to himself, angry that he had allowed it to be the final word, and admitting it a famous word for the closing of a controversy:—it banged the door and rolled drum-notes; it deafened reason. And was it a London cockney crow-word of the day, or a word that had stuck in the fellow’s head from the perusal of his pothouse newspaper columns?

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A short run or attempt at running after the idea, ended in pain to his head near the spot where the haunting word punctilio caught at any excuse for clamouring.

Yet we cannot relinquish an idea that was ours; we are vowed to the pursuit of it. Mr. Radnor lighted on the tracks, by dint of a thought flung at his partner Mr. Inchling's dread of the Jews. Inchling dreaded Scotchmen as well, and Americans, and Armenians, and Greeks: latterly Germans hardly less; but his dread of absorption in Jewry, signifying subjection, had often precipitated a deplorable shrug, in which Victor Radnor now perceived the skirts of his idea, even to a fancy that something of the idea must have struck Inchling when he shrugged: the idea being... he had lost it again. Definition seemed to be an extirpation enemy of this idea, or she was by nature shy. She was very feminine; coming when she willed and flying when wanted. Not until nigh upon the close of his history did she return, full-statured and embraceable, to Victor Radnor.

#### Chapter II. Through the Vague to the Infinitely Little

The fair dealing with readers demands of us, that a narrative shall not proceed at slower pace than legs of a man in motion; and we are still but little more than midway across London Bridge. But if a man's mind is to be taken as a part of him, the likening of it, at an introduction, to an army on the opening march of a great campaign, should plead excuses for tardy forward movements, in consideration of the large amount of matter you have to review before you can at all imagine yourselves to have made his acquaintance. This it is not necessary to do when you are set astride the enchanted horse of the Tale, which leaves the man's mind at home while he performs the deeds befitting him: he can indeed be rapid. Whether more active, is a question asking for your notions of the governing element in the composition of man, and of his present business here. The Tale inspires one's earlier ardours, when we sped without baggage, when the Impossible was wings to imagination, and heroic sculpture the simplest act of the chisel. It does not advance, 'tis true; it drives the whirligig circle round and round the single existing central point; but it is enriched with applause of the boys and girls of both ages in this land; and all the English critics heap their honours on its brave old Simplicity: our national literary flag, which signalizes us while we float, subsequently to flap above the shallows. One may sigh for it. An ill-fortuned minstrel who has by fateful direction been brought to see with distinctness, that man is not as much comprised in external features as the monkey, will be devoted to the task of the fuller portraiture.

#### Chapter XVIII. Suitors for the Hand of Nesta Victoria

When, upon the well-known quest, the delightful singer Orpheus took that downward way, coming in sight of old Cerberus centiceps, he astutely feigned inattention to the hostile appearances of the multiple beast, and with a wave of his plectrum over the responsive lyre, he at the stroke raised voice. This much you know. It may be communicated to you, that there was then beheld the most singular spectacle ever exhibited on the dizzy line of division between the living and the dead. For those unaccustomed musical tones in the last thin whiff of our sustaining air were so smartingly persuasive as to pierce to the vitals of the faithful Old Dog before his offended sentiments had leisure to rouse their heads against a beggar of a mortal. The terrible sugariness which poured into him worked like venom to cause an encounter and a wrestling: his battery of jaws expressed it. They gaped. At the same time, his eyeballs gave up. All the Dog, that would have barked the breathing intruder an hundredfold back to earth, was one compulsory centurion yawn. Tears, issue of the frightful internal wedding of the dulcet and the sour (a ravishing rather of the latter by the former), rolled off his muzzles.

Now, if you are not for insisting that a magnificent simile shall be composed of exactly the like notes in another octave, you will catch the fine flavour of analogy and be wafted in a beat of wings across the scene of the application of the Rev. Septimus Barmby to Mr. Victor Radnor, that he might enter the house in the guise of suitor for the hand of Nesta Victoria. It is the excelling merit of similes and metaphors to spring us to vault over gaps and thickets and dreary places. But, as with the visits of Immortals, we must be ready to receive them. Beware, moreover, of examining them too scrupulously: they have a trick of wearing to vapour if closely scanned. Let it be gratefully for their aid.

So far the comparison is absolute, that Mr. Barmby passed: he was at liberty to pursue his quest.

#### Chapter XXVI. In Which We See A Conventional Gentleman Endeavouring to Examine a Spectre of Himself

The girl was caught away to the thinnest of wisps in a dust-whirl. Reverting to the father and mother, his idea of a positive injury, that was not without its congratulations, sank him down among his disordered deeper sentiments; which were a diver's wreck, where an armoured livid submarine, a monstrous puff-ball of man, wandered seriously light in heaviness; trembling his hundredweights to keep him from dancing like a bladder-block of elastic lumber; thinking occasionally, amid the mournful spectacle, of the atmospheric pipe of communication with the world above, whereby he was deafened yet sustained. One tug at it, and he was up on the surface, disengaged from the hideous harness, joyfully no more that burly phantom cleaving green slime, free! and the roaring stopped; the world looked flat, foreign, a place of crusty promise. His wreck, animated by the dim strange fish below, appeared fairer; it winked lurefully when abandoned.

The internal state of a gentleman who detested intangible metaphor as heartily as the vulgarest of our gobblegobbets hate it, metaphor only can describe; and for the reason, that he had in him just something more than is within the compass of the language of the meat-markets. He had—and had it not the less because he fain would not have had—sufficient stuff to furnish forth a soul's epic encounter between Nature and Circumstance: and metaphor, simile, analysis, all the fraternity of old lamps for lighting our abysmal darkness, have to be rubbed, that we may get a glimpse of the fray.