

MAKING SENSE OF MEREDITH'S  
*MODERN LOVE*

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It is difficult to read. The page is dark.  
Yet he knows what it is that he expects.  
—Wallace Stevens, 'Phosphor Reading  
by His Own Light'

George Meredith (1828–1909) wrote a fair amount of poetry in his lifetime. In fact, he started his literary career as a poet and ended it as a poet, and there is good reason to believe that he wished to be thought of as a poet rather than a novelist. But destiny decreed otherwise: his poetry is overshadowed by his novels. His poetry is now mostly unread, much less studied, except by serious students of Victorian poetry. How did this come about?

His philosophical poetry, which is often Wordsworthian with a Darwinian twist, and to which he devoted most thought, is too insistent and didactic to appeal to modern taste, and his topical poetry is 'old hat.' In his ballads and narrative poems he does not know how to tell a story in spite of occasional felicities. He wrote many remarkable sonnets (a much anthologized "Lucifer in Starlight" is one), but their subject-matter is often remote from today's concerns and treated with so much ingenuity that it sometimes eludes understanding. But what repels more than anything else intelligent readers today is the difficult, obscure language in which most of his poems are couched.

When a poet has something original to say (and Meredith is nothing if not original), he is forced to seek or invent his own fresh way of saying it, and it is the reader's obligation to try to accommodate himself to the poet's expression, but there seems to be the borderline of sense beyond which communication becomes disrupted. When the reader comes across such a line as,

In me the tiger sniffs the rose. (Sassoon)

he can intuitively comprehend its meaning, even though he may have difficulty in paraphrasing it into intelligible prose. Even mystic experiences can be communicated by means of words to a degree, as can be seen in the case of Dickinson and Hopkins. A poet, no matter how original-minded, must have something like tact, a delicate perception of the right thing to say at the right time, in default of which he must despair of ever being understood, much more of being widely read. On the language of poetry, no precept is wiser than that of Keats:

Poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thought, and appear almost a remembrance.  
(Letter to John Taylor, 1818)

Meredith was lacking in that kind of tact in communication. When we come to such lines in a long poem as:

Precedents icily written on high  
 Challenge the Tentatives hot to rebel.  
 Our Mother, who speeds her bloomful quick  
 For the march, reads which the impediment well. (“The Empty Purse”)

we are thrown into an anxious state of suspended judgment as to whether we are too dull-witted to respond to them properly, or whether the poet is being original, profound, or just clever, or whether he is talking complete nonsense, and as a result our pleasure of reading poetry is lost. In most of his more important poems are sprinkled intractable lines of that kind in various places to the dismay of the ordinary poetry reader. Oscar Wilde’s rhapsody over Meredith is by no means merely rhetorical:

Ah, Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: . . . as an artist he is everything, except articulate. (“The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,” 1888)

Concerning Meredith’s singular way with words, an unsigned review in *Saturday Review* (XCII, 13 July 1901) has this to say:

He thinks in flashes, and writes in shorthand. He has an intellectual passion for words, but he has never been able to accustom his mind to the slowness of their service; he tosses them about the page in anger, tearing them open and gutting them with a savage pleasure. He has so fastidious a fear of dirtying his hands with what other hands have touched that he makes the language over again, so as to avoid writing a sentence or a line as anyone else could have written it. His hatred of the commonplace becomes a mania, and it is by his headlong hunt after the best that he has lost by the way its useful enemy, good.<sup>1</sup>

Despite some unavoidable sensationalism in a review article, the above observation is adequate enough as an identification of communication problem regarding Meredith’s poetry. In this connection, J.B. Priestley, a sympathetic critic of Meredith, touches on the same problem so far as the reader is concerned:

He (=Meredith) is not in a tradition; he has no ready-made symbols, but must, like Blake (whose obscurity partly proceeds from the same source), manufacture his own, and unless these are understood, the meaning cannot be caught. The reader, therefore, has not only to comprehend the meaning of the poet’s words in combination, he has also to puzzle out the special meaning of some of the individual words, otherwise the whole passage is nonsense.<sup>2</sup>

If we are to believe Priestley, reading Meredith’s poetry must be a daunting task, and it is. The reader has very little to fall back on except his mental agility. Of course, there is a

<sup>1</sup> *Meredith: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) ed. Joan Williams, pp. 479–480.

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Priestley, *George Meredith* (English Men of Letters, Macmillan, 1926), p. 100. John D. Cook and Lionel Stevenson, *English Literature of the Victorian Period* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949) also is frank: “Much of Meredith’s poetry is as abstruse as his prose . . . in most of his poems the meaning is not easy to follow, because of the effort to convey intellectual ideas concisely and with originality.” (p. 299).

thrill of joy in puzzle-solving, and, if he does succeed in it, he feels special joy. Great passages of poetry, it is true, have a habit of taking on an increasing value and significance with familiarity, but how much familiarity is needed to appreciate Meredith's verse no one can be sure. While reading his verse, we are made to feel as if we were trudging through impenetrable forests or swamps most of the time. But sometimes a glade or a meadow comes into view, and everything becomes clear as day. This can be illustrated very simply by a glance at one of Meredith's most charming short lyrics, "Wind on the Lyre":

That was the chirp of Ariel  
 You heard as overhead it flew,  
 The farther going more to dwell,  
 And wing our green to wed our blue . . .

In the last line, if it flashes upon our mind that the two symbols "green" and "blue" represent Earth and Heaven respectively, the meaning suddenly becomes crystal-clear. One of the pleasures of reading Meredith's poetry is to receive this kind of heaven-sent revelation, although it is another matter whether that constitutes a genuine aesthetic pleasure.

However, not all his poems are hopelessly inaccessible. In spite of their difficulty and abstruseness, some are even impressive and deeply moving. Among the superior longer poems, "Love in the Valley," *Modern Love*, "South-West Wind in the Woodland," "Ode to the Spirit of Autumn," "The Lark Ascending," "The Woods of Westermain," "Earth and Man," and "The Thrush in February" are fairly accessible and worth close study. Of these, I am going to discuss here *Modern Love*, "the most successful long poem in the [Victorian] period"<sup>3</sup>, in some detail.

## I

*Modern Love* is the title poem of Meredith's second volume of poems published in 1862, *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside*. It is a sequence of fifty sixteen-line "sonnets" reflecting upon—rather than recording—the disastrous ending of Meredith's first marriage. In 1849, when he was twenty-one, he married Mary Nicolls, daughter of the novelist Thomas Love Peacock and widow of a naval officer. Nine years older than Meredith, his wife was a man of sensitive intelligence, wide knowledge, and striking beauty. Both were imaginative, emotional, witty, inclined to egocentric self-absorption, and given to satirical remarks. As years passed, Meredith, in single-hearted devotion to his literary career, perhaps neglected his wife for his work. In 1858 she deserted him and their young son, eloping with Henry Wallis, a Pre-Raphaelite painter, and dying three years after that. From the collapse of his marriage came Meredith's *Modern Love*, though the poem is not strictly autobiographical (for in life there was no suicide). The title itself adumbrates irony: these up-to-date lovers are caught in an age-old situation; their broad-minded "modern" morality, their habits of acute analysis, instead of freeing them, entangle them even more hopelessly in the mesh of pride and passion. What makes this poem a continually fasci-

<sup>3</sup> Edith C. Batho and Bonamy Dobrée, *The Victorians and After, 1830-1914*, Third edition (The Cresset Press, 1962), p. 51.

nating one is the enormous depth of psychological insight Meredith shows into the relations between two persons longing for unity but prevented by their own minds and desires from ever finding it. It is no exaggeration to say that Meredith has put as much insight into these half-hundred sonnets as went into one of his long, complicated novels.

The story of the poem is not difficult to follow. The protagonist (who doubles as third-person narrator) is consumed with his own inability and that of his wife to repair their crumbling marriage. Each is tortured by the memory of their happy past, each is racked by physical need for the other, and each seeks happiness in an extra-marital affair. As the husband finally comes to a recognition of his own share of guilt in the wreck of their lives and feels a resurgence of love for his wife, she commits suicide in order to free him for his mistress. But to tell the story of this sonnet sequence, as Jack Lindsay did sonnet by sonnet,<sup>4</sup> is not much helpful, if not futile, for the movement of the poem is primarily mental, internal, and psychological. Style shifts from sonnet to sonnet—now grand, now plain, now austere, and now familiar. To follow the quick-silver tergiversations of Meredith's mind is very demanding. On a more elementary level, what does "widowed" mean in "a cheek . . . clear as widowed sky" (XXVII), for instance? *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives no answer. The volume of poems in which *Modern Love* is included is not mentioned in a list of books quoted in *OED*.

## II

The sonnets of which *Modern Love* is composed offer some initial difficulty, not only because of their compressed and symbolic imagery, but because the characters are not named, so that "the reader who wants to be clear who did what to whom, and when and where, is going to be rather baffled by *Modern Love*, which is often very cryptic."<sup>5</sup> Shifting his point of view frequently, the poet-husband sometimes calls himself "he" and sometimes "I." But "he" is sometimes the wife's lover. The "she" is usually the wife, but is sometimes the "Lady" to whom the husband turns partly to find an anodyne for his pain and partly (as he well knows) in childish spite. "Madam" is always the wife.

With the first sonnet, Meredith places the reader *in medias res*, as he often does in his novels.

Husband and wife, once passionate lovers, are estranged; they lie together sleepless, so tortured by irrevocable past that they long for death:

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,  
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed  
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes

<sup>4</sup> Jack Lindsay, *George Meredith* (The Bodley Head, 1956), pp. 83–87.

<sup>5</sup> W.W. Robson, *A Prologue to English Literature* (B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1986), p. 176.

Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat 10  
 Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet  
 Were moveless, looking through their dead black years  
 By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
 Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;  
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all.<sup>6</sup> (I)

Paradoxically, cursorily read, everything seems plain and clear here: they are lying awake at midnight, side by side, but divided in heart. But several difficulties or ambiguities emerge on closer reading. The "low sobs" of the wife are personified ("strangled mute") and compared to "little snakes." In what way are sobbing sounds comparable to "gaping snakes"? The hissing of a snake has some similarity to human sobs, it is true, but is such a comparison intended here? Or is the reader meant to visualize the snakes and linger over the image? Since the snakes are described as "gaping," the reader is expected to visualize to some degree, but the image of midnight having a giant heart, still more that of the heart, "drinking the pale drug of silence" and "beating sleep's heavy measure" is hard to visualize. The heart image here should be considered as largely intellectual, not visual.

Toward the end, the couple is pictured as looking through their years past which are imagined as forming a dreary calendar written by the hand of Regret on the blank wall facing them as they lie, and then come the final two lines which are extra lines added to the normal sonnet form. They lie side by side like "sculptured effigies," that is, figures on tombs as in European churches, on "their marriage-tomb," not on their marriage-bed. The imaginary "sword between" them, which in medieval romances is meant to enforce chastity as was the case with Tristan and Isolde, symbolizes, ironically, their psychic separation or estrangement, while "the sword that severs all" in the last line is made to represent death—a powerful denouement in which an identical symbol is employed to stand for something related but subtly different. It was not for the sake of affecting eccentricity that Meredith added two lines to the regular sonnet form, but because he felt that 14 lines were inadequate for achieving a psychological realism. It is worth noticing that Meredith usually ends more strongly than Shakespeare in his *Sonnets*.

What first strikes us from reading the first sonnet of *Modern Love* is that imagery, in conjunction with bold personification, is all over the place, so dizzily abundant as to overwhelm us: snakes, pulses, giant heart, pale drug, blank wall, effigies, marriage-tomb, sword. Seventy-five years ago G.M. Trevelyan, a percipient admirer of Meredith's poetry, wrote:

Whenever he fails, it is not through want, but through excess of imagination; his metaphors sometimes strive, one at the back of another, like fierce animals in a pit, and deal each other dismembering wounds in the struggle for existence.<sup>7</sup>

and again,

You are meant to catch the first light that flies off the metaphor as it passes: but

<sup>6</sup> All references to *Modern Love* are to G. M. Trevelyan, *The Poetical Works of George Meredith* (Constable, 1912), pp. 133–155, and will include stanza numbers in parentheses in the text.

<sup>7</sup> *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith* (Constable, 1912), p. 10.

if you seize and cling to it, as though it were a post, you will be drowned in the flood of fresh metaphor that follows.<sup>8</sup>

Which is to say that he was essentially a dramatic poet. Generally speaking, the dramatic impulse will leap wider gaps between images than will the lyric or contemplative. Meredith's images are predominantly intellectual rather than sensuous. He flits from image to image without letting the reader linger over each one, but when he is properly controlled by intellectual passion, as he is most of the time in *Modern Love*, he does not give the reader an impression of diffuseness or confusion. For some time I would like to look into the way this device of Meredith works with several successive sonnets.

### III

It ended, and the morrow brought the task.  
 Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in  
 By shutting all too zealous for their sin:  
 Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.  
 But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!  
 He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers:  
 A languid humour stole among the hours,  
 And if their smiles encountered, he went mad,  
 And raged deep inward, till the light was brown  
 Before his vision, and the world forgot,  
 Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot.  
 A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown  
 The pit of infamy: and then again  
 He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove  
 To ape the magnanimity of love,  
 And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain. (II)

10

The night of agony and suspicion for both having ended, with the day they have to resume the task of everyday association, or specifically of assuming the air of serenity. The lines 2-3 are not very clear; they might mean is that her eyes are guilty of looking at him as serenely as if nothing mentally tormenting had transpired between them, by concealing now all their loveless physical passion, or what? At any rate, wearing a mask, each nurses a secret; she has a suspicion that he is aware of her being in love with another man, while he suspects that she is aware of his suspicion. In line 5, "But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!" the point of view momentarily shifts to the husband's subjective self. With the next line, "He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers," the strange fascination her beauty still has for him is implied. The lines 7-11 demonstrate his maddening jealousy that comes from suspicion of his wife's faithlessness. In the lines, "A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown/ The pit of infamy," the ambivalent feeling of the husband toward his wife, implied in lines 5-6, finds vehement expression; she seems to be an alluring being though scandalous to the last degree. Thus still tied irresistibly to her, he strives to restrain his primitive im-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

pulse to violence (the words "To ape the magnanimity of love" showing derision for so restraining himself) and forgive her, chastising himself instead—a 'modern' touch in view of what Othello did to Desdemona.

The next sonnet is spoken directly by the husband, the *man* in line one is the suspected lover of his wife.

This was the woman; what now of the man?  
 But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,  
 He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,  
 Or, being callous, haply till he can.  
 But he is nothing:—nothing? Only mark  
 The rich light striking out from her on him!  
 Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim  
 Across the man she singles, leaving dark  
 All else! Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,  
 See that I am drawn to her even now! 10  
 It cannot be such harm on her cool brow  
 To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!  
 But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well  
 I claim a star whose light is overcast:  
 I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.  
 The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell! (III)

In lines 2–4, the wife's lover is likened to something like the hateful serpent (a variant of the snake image in the first sonnet) who tempted Eve (Genesis 3:15), and the next few lines describe the husband's vain struggle to set her lover at nought in spite of the apparent fact that she now devotes her undivided attention to her lover. Still the husband cannot break with her, claiming with a bad grace that "she is mine," though he knows too well that she is so changed as to be only the ghost of the woman he loved and married.

The last line probably means that the time has come unawares when the ghost, that is, the woman who loves him no longer, must leave him.

In order to break free from the ties of love gone sour, the husband tries in vain to relieve his feelings by plunging into other interests:

All other joys of life he strove to warm,  
 And magnify, and catch them to his lip:  
 But they had suffered shipwreck with the ship,  
 And gazed upon him sallow from the storm.  
 Or if Delusion came, 'twas but to show  
 The coming minute mock the one that went.  
 Cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent,  
 Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe:  
 Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison-bars,  
 Is always watching with a wondering hate. 10  
 Not till the fire is dying in the grate,  
 Look we for any kinship with the stars.  
 Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,

And the great price we pay for it full worth:  
 We have it only when we are half earth.  
 Little avails that coinage to the old! (IV)

It is not clear whether the poet has the metaphor of dough in mind by using such verbs as “warm,” “magnify,” and “catch,” but these verbs are somehow effective in conveying the sense of conscious effort. The third and fourth lines, going off at a tangent, employ the sea metaphor. The “ship” symbolizes their marital relationship, and the “storm” stands for the breakdown of their marriage. The meaning of line 5 and the following line seems to be that if he succeeds in deluding himself into “other joys of life” the feeling only makes the preceding (or succeeding) misery more intense, or perhaps passion returns all the stronger for being willed aside? From line 7 to the end is a gnomic statement typical of Meredith, in which is declared the truth that philosophic calm and wisdom are not possible while the blood is hot with passion and that we can only rule ourselves with philosophy when we are old, half dead.

The psychological moment comes and goes:

A message from her set his brain aflame.  
 A world of household matters filled her mind,  
 Wherein he saw hypocrisy designed:  
 She treated him as something that is tame,  
 And but at other provocation bites.  
 Familiar was her shoulder in the glass,  
 Through that dark rain: yet it may come to pass  
 That a changed eye finds such familiar sights  
 More keenly tempting than new loveliness.  
 The “What has been” a moment seemed his own: 10  
 The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,  
 Nor less divine: Love’s inmost sacredness  
 Called to him, “Come!”—In his restraining start,  
 Eyes nurtured to be looked at scarce could see  
 A wave of the great waves of Destiny  
 Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart. (V)

The wife’s casual air of being preoccupied with household affairs infuriates him; she seems to treat him like a tame dog that is only provoked by her attention to the other man. He happens to see her making herself up before the glass. Her shoulder reflected in the glass with her dark hair down is a familiar sight to him, but he finds it “more deeply tempting than new loveliness” since he now looks at it with “a changed eye”—with a stranger’s eye. By an odd quirk of psychology he feels for a moment that his wife loves him again (“The ‘What has been’ a moment seemed his own”). Almost beguiled to express love,

In his restraining start,  
 Eyes nurtured to be looked at scarce could see  
 A wave of the great waves of Destiny  
 Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart.

i.e. he checks himself, reasoning that her eyes, accustomed to be looked at but not to see, could not perceive his sudden impulse of love for her.



In terms of the dissection of psychology and the shifting points of view, the following sonnet is one of the most difficult to interpret in the whole sequence.

It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.  
 She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.  
 Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:  
 And most she punishes the tender fool  
 Who will believe what honours her the most!  
 Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow  
 Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,  
 For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost,  
 Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.  
 The love is here; it has but changed its aim. 10  
 O bitter barren woman! what's the name?  
 The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?  
 Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!  
 That will I not do, though the sting is dire.  
 —Beneath the surface this, while by the fire  
 They sat, laughing at a quiet joke. (VI)

When his lips chanced to touch her forehead, she just slanted down her eye without blushing. Why didn't she blush? Is it because she wanted to hide her guilt? Or is it because she did not feel guilty enough to have to blush? All is left to the reader's imagination. At least the husband is sure that she is ashamed of her new love, which fact gives evidence that love is not permanent. In lines 4 and 5, "she" and "her" probably refer to "nature" in the preceding line, not the wife; if this reading is correct, those two lines might mean that nature punishes the fool who (like the husband) believed that love lasted for ever. From lines 6–14, the husband speaks in his own person. He asks himself if love is dead in her. It cannot be, for she still has a throb of emotion and is capable of grieving over "Love's ghost" at midnight. He has no doubt that love is alive in her, but has only been transferred to another object. In his egoistical pride he address her as "bitter woman," and is tempted to fling at her the ugliest of all names for a woman, 'whore,' yet at the last moment restrains himself from doing so. In the last two lines, Meredith, by a brilliant distancing comment, reminds the reader that suspicions are all internal, unspoken by the husband. It should be pointed out that the line 8, "For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost", is a bold personification, referring back to the first sonnet (lines 3–5), and that there is an allusion to the snake-serpent image in "the sting is dire."

She comes out from her dressing room, bewitchingly made-up for the other man perhaps:

She issues radiant from her dressing-room,  
 Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:  
 —By stirring up a lower, much I fear!  
 How deftly that oiled barber lays his bloom!  
 That long-shanked dapper Cupid with frisked curls  
 Can make known women torturingly fair;  
 The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair

Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.  
 His art can take the eyes from out my head,  
 Until I see with eyes of other men; 10  
 While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,  
 And sends a spark up:—is it true we are wed?  
 Yea! filthiness of body is most vile,  
 But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse.  
 The former, it were not so great a curse  
 To read on the steel-mirror of her smile. (VII)

She looks like an angel, so “torturingly” beautiful indeed that she might well jolt those below. The barber has done as well as his magic skill can do. “The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair” (line 7) is a recurrent snake image besides being a variant of “A star with lurid beams” in the second sonnet. Her beauty deprives him of reason and makes him look at her “with eyes of other men.” He almost forgets that he is her husband while he can hardly repress his sexual desire for her. Driven to this despicable state of mind, he asks himself “is it true we are wed?” (line 12), or he might well ask, “Is this not adultery?” Transferring his own state of mind to his wife, he reasons that infidelity (“faithlessness of heart”) is viler than adultery (“filthiness of body”). He concludes that it would not be so great a torment to read adultery on her vague smile.

The husband pities his wife, but pride halts his impulse to make advances:

Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt  
 Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.  
 Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!  
 Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?  
 My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped  
 As balm for any bitter wound of mine:  
 My breast will open for thee at a sign!  
 But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:  
 The God once filled them with his mellow breath;  
 And they were music till he flung them down, 10  
 Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown  
 Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!  
 I do not know myself without thee more:  
 In this unholy battle I grow base:  
 If the same soul be under the same face,  
 Speak, and a taste of that old time restore! (VIII)

He knows that she has struggled against her love for the other man, which makes her an object of pity rather than contumely. The oxymoronic expression “Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!” bespeaks the pity, love, even deference he still feels for her (“worm” is a snake or serpent, now archaic). To the question “Where came the cleft between us? Whose the fault?” no proper answer is possible. He really feels pity for her; he says he is ready to respond and open his heart to her if she would make the least sign. But no, there is no hope to bring back their past; they are now, as it were, two reed-pipes poorly tuned, which Apollo, god of music and poetry *once* filled with rich and soft sound and



The facts of life, you still had seen me go  
 With hindward feather and with forward toe,  
 Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince! (X)

To young people Love is a matter of sentiment, sentimentality even, which has nothing to do with the harsh realities of life. In his youth the husband dreamed of ideal, romantic life in "Love's deep woods": the offense is in the false dreams of young love—Love's dreams will glow with unusual light for young lovers ("Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled"). At least, the sun of love shone far brighter in a dream. His offense is that, governed in his conduct by a dream of love, he planned to do something worthwhile. The last four lines are difficult to interpret. If "mince" means 'to make little of, minimize' (*SOD*), the meaning would be that, if he had ignored ambition and the need for hard labour in conformity with his wife's wishes, he could have played the role of Fairy Prince for her. The original cause of the division between them is suggested here: when the first rush of their love-passion had calmed down, and other interests called to the husband, the wife resented his caring for anything but their lovers' selfishness *à deux*. Had he simply compromised with her wilfulness, he might have appeared to the world as her happy husband. In this connection, we are forced to notice an interesting contradiction between the above passage spoken by the husband in his own person and the poet's objective comment on the couple's failure in love: "*they fed not on the advancing hours:/Their hearts held cravings for the buried day*" (L) (italics mine).

On another occasion, when the husband tries to realize that in nature nothing is permanent, and that Love's dream of immortality must pass away, he cries,

—but, oh, our human rose is fair  
 Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,  
 When the renewed forever of a kiss  
 Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair! (XIII)

By contrast with the rose in nature which dies when the season comes, "our human rose," that is, love (or has the speaker his wife in mind?) is surpassingly beautiful. The last sentence is in an ornate style and a little obscure, but probably means something like this: 'can we calmly accept the fact that love dies when we are caught up in passion?' The husband refutes the thesis that love, like everything in nature, has its season and must pass.

Also interesting for its relevance of Love to Nature and even more difficult in its argumentation is the following sonnet addressed to the husband's mistress:

What are we first? First, animals; and next  
 Intelligences at a leap; on whom  
 Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,  
 And all that draweth on the tomb for text.  
 Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:  
 Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.  
 We are the lords of life, and life is warm.  
 Intelligence and instinct now are one.  
 But Nature says: "My children most they seem  
 When they least know me: therefore I decree

That they shall suffer." Swift doth young Love flee,  
 And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.  
 Then if we study Nature we are wise.  
 Thus do the few who live but with the day:  
 The scientific animals are they.—  
 Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes. (XXX)

This sonnet opens with six noble lines on the triumph of Love over the fear of Death. First, we are animals, and at the next stage we grow into intelligent beings by making an immense advance, but the pale shadow of death and the thoughts that arise from the fact of man's mortality lie upon us. Into that state comes Love, the crowning sun, beneath whose light Death loses fearfulness. We are the lords of life which is warm, intelligence and instinct now being one. In short, Love seems to be the human triumph over flesh and mortality. So far, we can trace argument fairly easily. But from line 9 to the last line but one, the husband's cynical mood seems to find expression: he says that Nature is a deceptive and cruel mother; the young, in the purity and joy of their first love, seem to be her happiest children and close to her, but they do not know her, or realize that her law is that Love should be only for the day (cf. XIII). She teaches them by the torture of loss to live for the day only, and to study themselves scientifically as animals with animal desire. This is an argument for animalism in its most cynical form, and is a mocking tribute from the husband to the Lady, his mistress.

The Lady is attractive enough, with her beauty and common sense (XXXI), but he finds it difficult to be satisfied with her. He longs for the exaltation of true emotion:

Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed  
 Our human nakedness, and could endow  
 With spiritual splendour a white brow  
 That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?  
 A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave  
 Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea. (XXIX)

He looks back to the day when he first fell in love with his future wife. At that time he felt that he had transcended mortality ("human nakedness"), and was able to believe in the immortality of Love. Exalted in soul, he could invest a white brow of his wife with "spiritual splendour," without which it would have "grinned at him" like a loathsome skull. A kiss is no more than a kiss, with nothing spiritual in it; it is not an overflow of powerful feelings like a "wave of a great flood that whirls him to the sea." How far he has fallen from grace! He and his wife seem to be "League-sundered by the silent gulf between" (XXII). And yet he cannot completely break with the past:

One restless corner of my heart or head,  
 That holds a dying something never dead,  
 Still frets, (XXXII)

and poignant regret will not go away:

Terrible Love, I ween,  
 Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave  
 The lightless seas of selfishness amain:

Seas that in a man's heart have no rain  
To fall and still them. (XL)

Few descriptions of ineluctable lost love can be more exact or more analytical and modern than this: "even dead, half sighing" is exactly right, and acknowledgement of "selfishness" as regards lost love had, no doubt, never been made before. One is reminded of Tennyson's dreamy contemplativeness:

'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.

It would be unthinkable of Meredith to concede that "I do not know what they mean" or to admit to feeling "some divine despair," and also how remote his use of the rain image is from that of the early sixteenth century:

WESTRON winde, when wilt thou blow,  
The smalle raine downe can raine?  
Christ if my love were in my armes,  
And I in my bed againe.

This lyrical cry from an early anonymous song is from the heart or the instinct, from which are excluded the modern lovers with their contrived self-consciousness.

After many a complication of feelings, husband and wife vow marital fidelity without love ("We two have taken up a lifeless vow / To rob a living passion") (XLI), but he knows what is little known to human beings:

How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel!  
They waste the soul with spurious desire,  
That is not the ripe flame upon the bough. (XLI)

The renewal of love between them is impossible, and they seek refuge from this truth in each other's arms only to remind themselves of the gulf between them. Wandering by the sea the next morning, the husband, no longer cynical, knows he cannot love his wife:

Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like  
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!  
Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;  
Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,  
And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:  
In hearing of the ocean, and in sight  
Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.  
If I the death of Love had deeply planned,  
I never could have made it half so sure,  
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid  
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!  
'Tis morning: but no morning can restore  
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:

The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,  
 No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
 We are betrayed by what is false within. (XLIII)

Here in the description of "a fitting spot to dig Love's grave" in the first half of the sonnet are brought together words that create bleak yet very vivid images which at the same time suggest, by their very sound, the emotion of the onlooker. Everything there is controlled; the agonizing reality of "wedded lie" (XXXV) can only be faced with stylish despair. The drift of lines 19-11 is that kisses that are not expressions of genuine love only inspire disgust, "sense" meaning mental faculty or the ability to think or reason soundly. In the last passage beginning with "I see no sin," the poet-husband declares that as a modern man he is no longer subject to the divine law or some moral principle, a transgression of which by a willful act used to be called sin; that the wrong we do is not a violation of religious law or moral code but the result of incongruous human attributes; that in such domestic tragedy as this there needs to be no villain; and that, passions beyond our control unfolding the plot of such tragedy with inexorable force, "we are betrayed by what is false within" —man's, and woman's, own limited nature: egoistic and yet other-seeking, longing for freedom and yet jealously possessive, but above all earnest, self-analytical, and therefore dissatisfied. This is "modern love."

There is a harrowing earlier sonnet whose tenor is premonitory of the conjugal tragedy to come, a memory of the time before their marriage, which is described as a shipwreck:

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,  
 When in the firelight steadily aglow,  
 Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow  
 Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower  
 That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat  
 As lovers to whom Time is whispering.  
 From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:  
 The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.  
 Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay  
 With us, and of it was our talk. "Ah, yes!  
 Love dies!" I said: I never thought it less. 10  
 She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.  
 Then when the fire domed blackening, I found  
 Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift  
 Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:—  
 Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound! (XVI)

That evening they were lent the library as a secluded lovers' retreat. It seemed to them as if the "firelight steadily aglow" in the fireplace symbolized their steadfast love for a while, but joined only "slackly," not closely, they faced the image of their own future and greater separation in the "red chasm" inevitably growing in the coals. Hushed they sat as lovers immersed in each other, while they heard elderly people enjoying themselves with wine and chat in another room, as though it were a matter of no concern; for they, the loving couple, knew that Love, "Life's greatest treasure" was with them. During their talk about Love, he jokingly remarked, "Love dies," though he "never thought it less" (a bitter aside, that

he then really thought Love to last for ever), when she wished him to unsay “that sentence” (the legal sense is relevant also). In the meantime, the fire, having burned down, “domed blackening” (a prophetic touch), and he found her sobbing bitterly with her cheek salty against his kiss. Might that have been a portent of the collapse of their love, he wonders. Thinking back to that evening, he is now haunted by the ghost of Love.

## V

However, *Modern Love* is not all interior monologue in the grip of retrospection and introspection; it also has a social dimension. Much of the power of the poem comes from the contrast between the husband’s inner feelings, and the way the couple continues their middle-class social life as if nothing had altered.

In the social world, the husband and the wife keep up all appearances of happiness, admiring each other’s skill in the pretence:

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.  
 Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps  
 The Topic over intellectual deeps  
 In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.  
 With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:  
 It is in truth a most contagious game:  
 HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.  
 Such play as this the devils might appal!  
 But here’s the greater wonder: in that we,  
 Enamored of an acting naught can tire, 10  
 Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;  
 Warm-lighted looks, Love’s ephemerioë,  
 Shoot gayly o’er the dishes and the wine.  
 We waken envy of our happy lot.  
 Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.  
 Dear guests, you now have seen Love’s corpse-light shine. (XVII)

They are intent on “playing” the parts of host and hostess perfectly. She is discussing marriage or adultery perhaps, impersonally and unembarrassedly, with the guests, who never suspect that the couple’s marriage is on the rocks (“They see no ghost”). With feigned enthusiasm they play the conversational game of witty repartee, which is truly “a most contagious game,” most likely fatal like a contagious disease. The game should be named “Hiding the Skeleton,” a keeping-up-appearance game (“the skeleton” being the skeleton or ghost of love or marriage). The devils themselves might be appalled by such a human society game as this. But the greater wonder is that each of the couple admires the character the other acts out in public “like true hypocrites”; they exchange over the dishes and wine “warm-lighted looks, Love’s ephemerioë,” that is, the transient outward signs of love. No one present notices that they are playing a deadly middle-class society game; everyone envies them their happy marriage. But that their marriage appears so happy in public prophesies its break-up (“Love’s corpse-light shine”).



There is a brilliant, conversational sonnet, in monologue form, where the husband questions his wife ironically about a French novel she is reading, a trifling story of a love triangle, without either of them mentioning their own situation:

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.  
 You think it quite unnatural. Let us see.  
 The actors are, it seems, the usual three:  
 Husband, and wife, and lover. She—but fie!  
 In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,  
 The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;  
 Blancmange and absinthe are his penitent fare,  
 Till his pale aspect makes her over-fond:  
 So, to preclude fresh sin, he tries *rosbif*.  
 Meantime the husband is no more abused: 10  
 Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.  
 Then hangeth all on one tremendous IF:—  
 If she will choose between them. She does choose;  
 And takes her husband, like a proper wife.  
 Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:  
 And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse. (XXV)

In line 4 (“she—but fie!”), the husband starts to say something nasty about the wife in the novel but just checks himself, an idea flashing across his mind that his own wife is in the same situation, and only spits the word “fie.” After all, he cannot completely disguise his feelings, for according to *SOD* “fie” is “An exclamation expressing disgust or reproach. Not now in dignified use.” In line 5 (“In England we’ll not hear of it”) he ironically avoids the embarrassing word “adultery.” In lines 6–9, the words, both concrete and abstract, are chosen with utmost irony (“absinthe,” new, and fashionable liqueur, its first English usage, 1854; “*rosbif*,” French for ‘roast beef,’ used sarcastically). He mocks her belief that the story is not true to life, and says matter-of-factly,

My dear, these things are life:  
 And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.

Here the husband speaks for Meredith himself, who uses the events of his own life to form his poem, *Modern Love*.

In a later sonnet, there is depicted a pregnant scene in which three people, the husband, the wife, and his mistress stroll in the twilight:

Along the garden terrace, under which  
 A purple valley (lighted at its edge  
 By smoky torch-flame on the long cloud-ledge  
 Whereunder dropped the chariot) glimmers rich,  
 A quiet company we pace, and wait  
 The dinner-bell in prae-digestive calm.  
 So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm  
 Breaths round, we care not if the bell be late:  
 Though here and there gray seniors question Time

In irritable coughings. With slow foot  
 The low rosed moon, the face of Music mute,  
 Begins among her silent bars to climb.  
 As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread,  
 I hear the laugh of Madam, and discern  
 My Lady's heel before me at each turn.  
 Our tragedy, is it alive or dead? (XXXVII)

10

Apparently, the scene is romantic enough. The sun ("the chariot") having set, they walk quietly in the soft twilight—"pace" is the word used—they walk with slow or regular steps as respectable middle-class people are supposed to do on such a social occasion. They do not care if the dinner-bell is late in ringing in this "prae-digestive calm"—a sly dig at the decorum with which they behave. (Only elderly people can afford not to bother much about decorum.) With all that is "false within," it is as if they were dancing a minuet to the "Music mute" the moon plays; they merely go through the motions. So insubstantial is life that the sonnet ends with the husband wondering if anything at all is happening in his world: "Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?" This subtle picture of middle-class respectability is typically Meredithian.

## VI

The workings of the husband's mind as well as of the wife's as revealed in the latter part of the poem are too bewilderingly complex to keep track of with ease.

He cannot return to his wife: he no longer pities her, for she values love now only after she has killed it. He asks his Lady to give him a romantic love (XXXVIII), to which she agrees. She and the husband are happy in a moonlit nook, till the wife appears there with another man (XXXIX). The shock of the scene in the nook destroys the husband's illusions about the Lady. Knowing now that he still loves his wife, he is "helplessly afloat,"

I know not what I do, whereto I strive.  
 The dread that my old love may be alive  
 Has seized my nursling new love by the throat. (XL)

The note of cynicism that marked the middle of the poem almost disappears from the husband's soliloquies.

The husband and the wife agree to forgive each other and renew their love, though not without misgivings that they have vowed marital fidelity without love ("have taken up a lifeless vow / To rob a living passion") (XLI). They attempt to renew love, but their kisses only remind them of the gulf between them. Apparently, the wife attempts suicide, but the husband stops her.

Wandering by the sea the next morning, the husband, no longer cynical, knows he cannot love his wife, but he profoundly pities her. He mediates the tragedy wrought by confused passions (XLIII).

The husband tries to hide his feelings, but the wife detects that his restored affection is more pity than love, and will have none of it (XLIV).

By this time the Lady has left him, and the husband, in his misery for having failed in

the attempt to renew love with his wife, thinks of the abandoned Lady and plucks a wild rose that symbolized her:

It is the season of the sweet wild rose,  
 My Lady's emblem in the heart of me!  
 So golden-crownéd shines she gloriously,  
 And with that softest dream of blood she glows:  
 Mild as an evening heaven round Hesper bright!  
 I pluck the flower, and smell it, and revive  
 The time when in her eyes I stood alive.  
 I seem to look upon it out of Night.  
 Here's Madam, stepping hastily. Her whims  
 Bid her demand the flower, which I let drop. 10  
 As I proceed, I feel her sharply stop,  
 And crush it under heel with trembling limbs.  
 She joins me in a cat-like way, and talks  
 Of company, and even condescends  
 To utter laughing scandal of old friends.  
 These are the summer days, and these our walks. (XLV)

The first half of this sonnet, if carefully read, is obscure. The first question that puzzles us is, "What or whom do the "she"s in lines 3-4 refer to?" Grammatically speaking, its most natural reference would be to "My Lady" in the preceding line, but given that the two lines are in the present tense and that the Lady has now left him, the "she"s might refer to the personified "sweet wild rose." Between the two readings I am rather inclined toward the latter, but it may not be unreasonable to think that the Lady and the flower are being overlapped in the husband's subconscious. (His Lady was addressed earlier as "my golden-crowned rose") (XXXIX). The second difficulty is with the line, "The time when in her eyes I stood alive." Again grammatically, "she" here must refer to the Lady, but then we are forced to wonder if there was any earlier mention of such a belief. True, there was a time when *she* (The Lady) stood alive in *his* (the husband's) eyes (XXXIV), but not vice versa. If this speculation is correct, would it not be possible that "she" refers to his wife in whose eyes the husband truly had stood alive before their love turned sour, considering the weighty next line, "I seem to look upon it (=the time) out of Night"? Whether Meredith is just careless here or being deliberately enigmatic, I cannot decide.

The rest of the above sonnet is a plain and straightforward description of the wife's actions, an illustration of the husband's earlier characterization of her:

Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound  
 Deep to her soul, . . . . .  
 No confidence has she: but relief  
 Must come to one whose suffering is acute.  
 O have a care of natures that are mute!  
 They punish you in acts: their steps are brief. (XXXV)

and the tone is one of resignation to the eternal feminine (or should we call it the modernized feminine?).

At last the husband and the wife have a talk about the situation in which they are placed, but they are “so strangely dumb / In such a close communion” (XLVI). Missing her early the next morning, the husband finds her talking with the other man—probably their last talk to settle their love affair once for all. Ignoring the lover and declaring his faith in her, the husband leads her away.

Then comes the beautiful sonnet in which description and comment are exquisitely interwoven and of which Swinburne said, “a more perfect piece of writing no man alive has ever turned out.”<sup>9</sup>

In the twilight the husband and the wife stand together:

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,  
 And in the osier-isle we heard them noise.  
 We had not to back look on summer joys,  
 Or forward to a summer of bright dye;  
 But in the largeness of the evening earth  
 Our spirits grew as we went side by side.  
 The hour became her husband and my bride.  
 Love, that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!  
 The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud  
 In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood  
 Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood  
 Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.  
 Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,  
 This little moment mercifully gave,  
 Where I have seen across the twilight wave  
 The swan sail with her young beneath her wings. (XLVII)

10

They recapture the transcendence of love for a moment. Overcome in this instant is the separation of past, present, and the future which has plagued the speaker throughout the poem, as the couple need look neither “back” nor “forward” for answers. In the largeness of the evening earth with “the swallows gathering in the sky” and their “multitudinous chatterings,” both husband and wife are fulfilled in the knowledge that this moment has yielded. They each feel that they have been individually married in a new sense (become “her husband and my bride”). That the swan sails at a distance (“across the twilight wave”) from the husband at the end of the sonnet, however, reminds us of the transience of the moment. The couple’s vision is not finally of “immortal things,” but only “a little moment” in which a fuller, but still distant unity (the swan with her young close together in flight) is glimpsed, not realized.

The husband and wife talk together in all frankness. But at a mention of the husband’s Lady, the wife ceases to reason. In an impulse toward martyrdom she declares that she would set him free for his Lady. He knows her motive but is afraid the world will judge otherwise thinking that she has fled to her lover. When he speaks of modern women:

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,  
 Destroyed by subtleties these women are! (XLVIII)

<sup>9</sup> Meredith: *The Critical Heritage*, p. 99.

unwittingly, he defines, in a sense, his own nature. (Here, there is a pun on the word "sense," the first "sense" meaning "understanding or intelligence," the second "feeling.")

The husband finds the wife by the seashore in a subdued mood. To the husband, they seem quietly united. She thinks his love for her has returned, and allows herself to dream that their old mutual relations are restored. But she knows her own heart well enough to be aware that this is a dream, and to forestall the awakening she takes poison. Perhaps by committing suicide, she tried to forget the stress of their married life and remember only their love (XLVIII).

So ends the tortured tale of love. The last sonnet summarizes what has gone before and designates what has already been implicit, the comic folly deep-seated in human lives:

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:  
 The union of this ever-diverse pair!  
 These two were rapid falcons in a snare,  
 Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.  
 Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,  
 They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:  
 But they fed not on the advancing hours:  
 Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.  
 Then each applied to each that fatal knife,  
 Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole. 10  
 Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul  
 When hot for certainties in this our life!—  
 In tragic hints here see what evermore  
 Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,  
 Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,  
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore! (L)

As Trevelyan said, here the metaphors are striving "one at the back of another, like fierce animals in a pit:" but they do not dismember each other. The imagery of two "rapid falcons in a snare, / Condemned to do the flitting of the bat" is a description of the institution of marriage, at once tragic and comic, reminding us of,

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,  
 Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve  
 He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave  
 The fatal web below while far he flies.  
 But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.  
 He moves but in the track of his spent pain,  
 Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,  
 Binding him to the ground, with narrow range. (XXVI)

while the "Lovers beneath the singing sky of May" who "wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers," recall the happiness of

Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee  
 Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,  
 And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing

Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we . . .  
The golden foot of May is on the flowers. (XI)

The final simile of the waves has been anticipated in the previous sonnet (“He found her by the ocean’s moaning verge”) and in the opening lines of sonnet XLII (“Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like . . . those ribbed wind-streaks running white”). As the mysterious movements of the ocean, unquestioned, can only be seen in the thin line of foam, so the mystery of modern love can be seen only in the faint picture given by the poem.

As a writer said nearly eighty years ago,

in the searching and poignant sequence of poems entitled ‘Modern Love,’ it is not easy, even after a second or third reading, to make out the precise facts which underline the actions and emotions of the husband and the wife as they blunder against one another in the snare of their own devising<sup>10</sup>.

But if we could exercise Keats’s Negative Capability,” that ability of “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”, in reading “*Modern Love*,” we might be able to the better understand what the poem has to offer.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 499.