

# THE POETRY OF GEORGE MEREDITH

BY MARTIN ARMSTRONG

POETRY is the expression of emotion: it is the fine emotions of life caught and crystallized into words. That is not to say that poetry cannot have an intellectual content, but that the intellectual and philosophical must be present in fusion only, fused, that is, into emotional significance.

Philosophy, in the narrow application of the term, is at the opposite pole to poetry. Poetry is the result of an intense sensation of life. Philosophy, strictly speaking, is a purely intellectual process which constructs out of the dry bones of life, duly collected and tabulated by science, a variety of facts and theories. By itself it is barren, just as by itself a printing-press is barren: each is a contrivance elaborated by man for his own use. Poetry is warm and living, it is action of body and soul and appeals directly to the feelings and emotions;—the living part of man. Philosophy, cold and mechanical, appeals to the intellect. The relation of poetry to philosophy is the relation of the dancer to the choreographer who records his dance. It is well that dances should be recorded and analyzed, but pages of diagrams can never give the exultant glow, the instantaneous conviction,—instantaneous because emotional,—which the dancer feels and inspires. And it is only so far as philosophy reaches beyond the intellect to the emotions and so becomes an organic part of man's life, its dry fuel changed by fire into fire, that it becomes creative, poetic.

In the work of some poets, poets such as Chaucer, Keats, and Bridges, the intellectual is implicit only. From a general survey of their work as a whole it may be possible to extract a philosophy, or perhaps no more than a mere attitude towards life, as a perfume-maker extracts attar from roses; but even so the attitude will be vague and general, incapable of detailed application. But in the work of other poets, of whom George Meredith is a notable example, a philosophy is explicit. It is to poets of this

type that we must turn if we wish to feel the influence of concentrated and passionate thought.

In the work of poets of the other type the intellectual is a fluctuating factor, now conscious, now subconscious. Regarding their art rather as a handicraft, they seem to choose at random unrelated themes and ideas, as a bird chooses twigs, moss, wool, feathers: and it is only when many poems have been brought together that they are seen to be controlled by a unifying purpose: and just as a bird's collected rubbish begins to reveal a rational entity,—a nest,—so in the aggregated poems of these writers a consistent attitude begins to reveal itself. But a single poem of such a poet may hardly give a clearer indication of his attitude than a fragment of moss will give of a bird's nest. We must collect a whole handful of twigs, moss and wool before they will suggest *hedge-sparrow* even to the most ornithological of schoolboys. This type of poet seems to show us his philosophy by accident. He is interested in his theme as an end in itself and it is merely because a hedge-sparrow can only build a hedge-sparrow's nest that his philosophy lurks inevitably in his work.

But the second type of poet deliberately projects his life-philosophy into that theme which he feels to be the best vehicle for it, and it is only as a vehicle for this passionate life-philosophy which is always raging for expression, that he is interested in his theme. These poets are always fully and passionately conscious of their philosophy: it is the central and absorbing fact of their lives. They see life through it, and therefore they do not build their work birdlike out of gathered external details; they build it like spiders out of themselves, choosing their themes, one might say, as a spider chooses the joists and window-frames which best serve his purpose. Almost any single poem of such a poet is unmistakably a part of his philosophy.

It is hardly necessary to remind ourselves that generalizations of this sort, though true in the main, are contradicted by countless details when applied to so complex a thing as human character, or to admit that there are many poets who cannot accurately and infallibly be classed under one or other of them, but the distinction of type is none the less true and evident.

Of the explicitly philosophic type, then, is George Meredith.

His action on life is to simplify it and to show it in its essential beauty: and it is this simplification of life, this dissolving of all the obscurities and accretions that darken and complicate it, which makes his art so stimulating and refreshing. In poem after poem throughout his work we discover this paramount impulse at work: and if we examine his themes, we see continually that they have been chosen because they are best fitted to display this liberation of life, either directly, by simple praise of free uncomplex forms of existence, or by the even more convincing method of showing life tragically marred by those disastrous clefts which multiply and spread as soon as conduct becomes crafty, involved and indirect.

The obvious danger for a poet who is also a philosopher is that he should become a philosopher who is also a poet, namely that he should occasionally lapse into expressing his philosophy intellectually instead of emotionally. For of poetry, as we have said, the vital concern is life and action, and though whole philosophies may be contained in it, they must be present not in crude form but dissolved into the golden wine of ecstatic life.

When Meredith fails as a poet, the failure in many cases seems to be due to this very accident, to the momentary preponderance of the philosopher over the poet. This accounts for the occasional obscurities in such a poem as *The Woods of Westermain* and the dry arguments and ratiocinations in some of his later poems in the volume called *A Reading of Life*. In these last we see the mere intellect still busy after the emotional fire has died down. But there is another source of occasional failure, a source more difficult to identify. Its effect is an extremely harsh ellipticity which appears both in his mature verse and prose. It is almost impossible to believe that this is not conscious, for it is evident from the novels and the complete poems that Meredith served a long apprenticeship both in prose and verse-writing, and neither his early prose nor his early verse exhibit any trace of this characteristic. Indeed his early verse is chiefly noticeable for its easy mellifluousness: it is often undistinguished and much of it lacks entirely the fine qualities which make his mature work so characteristic, so essentially Meredithian. It is, of course, natural that as his genius matured the resulting concentration of emotion

should express itself in a similar concentration of phrase which, while admirable in the case of success, resulted inevitably, in the case of failure, in harshness and obscurity. But for a writer of Meredith's powers of expression it seems that there must be a further explanation of a failing which became so strong a characteristic of his style, and it is possible that the answer is to be found in the seclusion in which he lived during the latter part of his life, a seclusion which perhaps left him a prey to his own style by enabling peculiarities to crystallize into mannerisms instead of being kept in solution by the mingled currents of wider human intercourse. Whatever may be the true explanation of Meredith's failures it is an interesting and obvious fact that the poems in which his philosophy is least directly stated, least intrusive,—poems like the *Hymn to Color* and *Modern Love*, in which it is completely dissolved into a symbol or story,—are always the most convincing and the most supremely poetical, and that a composition such as *The Empty Purse*, in which the philosophy appears most immediately, in which it is preached rather than revealed, is a quite amazingly bad poem.

Yet Meredith's philosophy is in its essence poetical because it is always concerned with vivid life, never abstract or speculative: for it is life in the living that interests him. For him, philosophy is valueless as soon as it ceases to be practical: when it becomes speculative he takes his hat, so to speak, and goes into the garden. Life, for him, is a splendid strife towards higher levels of living, a strife like the athlete's, joyous and stimulating to mind and body; and his poetry reveals a deep and glowing courage in face of life's problems. He has no sympathy with the hermit who seeks his own salvation and analyzes his own sensations in solitude. He is always the social artist. All his thoughts are for the human society. We must forget our narrow self, he tells us, accepting courageously all our private griefs and trials, rejoicing to live the progressive life of the race, and at last content to have lived and to be laid in the earth,

Leaving her the future task:  
Loving her too well to ask.

Escatology, religion in its conventional sense, mean nothing to him: dogma, theories, all that cannot be moulded directly into

life, are mere riddle-spinning. Let it not be supposed that this is materialism, for it is the very reverse. Indeed the nature of Meredith's thought seems often to touch a sane mysticism. His teaching that man must tame into obedience that self of the senses which is the *beast* in him and merge himself in the spirit of the race is more than a materialistic version of "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." And, although he has no belief in a personal life after death, yet his epitaphs and the sonnet *To a Friend Lost* tell of a belief in the survival of the good in us which is not merely a sentiment, an associative memory, but a full and vital actuality. It is this faith that the dead survive in the living and that the living souls are merged in the race spirit—a faith which to closer contemplation reveals a more and more deep significance—that gives glimpses of something far other than materialism in Meredith's philosophy.

That philosophy has grown up out of a loving study of Nature. Like his own "good physician Melampus,"

For him the woods were a home and gave him the key  
Of knowledge:

and it is this that makes his best nature-poems the very sap of the forest. They call up all the delicate country sensations, the smell of earth and green things, the pure enveloping light, the cooling sounds of leaves and running water: and, reading them, one seems to receive these sensations direct, the poetic medium forgotten. His delight in wells and brooks is typical of the limpidity of his mind. Water, for him, symbolizes the sweet vitality of Earth, the clean life

Seraphically free  
Of taint of personality:

and he sings of it over and over again, never more beautifully than in these lines from *Phoebus with Admetus*:

Water, first of singers, o'er rocky mount and mead,  
First of earthly singers, the sun-loved rill,  
Sang of him, and flooded the ripples on the reed,  
Seeking whom to waken and what ear fill.  
Water, sweetest soother to kiss a wound and cool,  
Sweetest and divinest, the sky-born brook,  
Chuckled with a whimper, and made a mirror-pool  
Round the guest we welcomed, the strange hand shook.

Meredith's love of Earth gives a health and sanity not only to his nature-poetry but to all he has written. He is never sentimental, never melodramatic, never a spinner of words and fantasies for their own sake. His emotions ring true because they are noble and profoundly felt. Earth, as Meredith understands her, is not merely what we are accustomed to call Nature: she is a living spirit, and so obedience to Earth is something more than to follow natural instinct. It is that keen power of self-analysis and clear understanding which is man's highest quality. For the laws of Earth are not mere forest law—the laws of appetite and fear, of pleasure and pain, reacting on each other—though that is Earth in her primary, her lowest aspect. Earth at her highest is the rational, self-controlled man, the man who has tamed the beast in him, the dragon of self, and has developed into a highly organized social being, living not for self in the narrow sense, but for that larger self, the human race: the man who is not all blood (which is animal) nor all brain (which is mere intellect) nor even all spirit, but a balanced blend of all three. The true son of Earth, the true children of Earth, are the man and the society which possess the Comic Spirit.

Meredith's Comic Spirit is that fine, piercing sense of humor which is ever ready to detect and expose pride, selfishness, fear, laziness and all the false motives which masquerade under the guise of virtue and disinterestedness. This conception of the Comic Spirit is one of the cardinal points of Meredith's philosophy. It remorselessly exposes the failings of old-age, can lay a sure finger on the melodramatic in Manfred or the fatal flaw in the Garden of Epicurus:—

That garden would on light supremest verge,  
Were the long drawing of an equal breath  
Healthful for Wisdom's head, her heart, her aims.

And it is this searching spirit of Comedy which by its cleansing and liberating power makes life pure and simple again.

Meredith has a golden mind. Like the atmosphere of a summer afternoon, it sheds a mature and golden serenity on all it touches. That is why one returns to him again and again, always sure of stimulation and refreshment. To the mass of undigested knowledge which is the inheritance of modern thought, he brings



the clarity and confidence of primitive Greece. Not that there is anything Greek in his style; but, like the early Greeks, he makes life seem simple and joyful and the world homelike once again. What a criticism on the jealousies, the fierce competition and selfishness of modern life is his sonnet *Internal Harmony*: to meet that spirit of brave and generous coöperation is to "draw the breath of finer air." It seems at first paradoxical that he who is so often called difficult and obscure should be the poet whose verse gives so simple and courageous a view of life. But in truth his thought is always lucid: what obscurity there is springs from its expression. In all his verse there is sound wisdom for those who have the patience to seek it. Even *The Empty Purse*, which, as we have said, is a very bad poem, contains sound wisdom and a rich humanity.

If we examine the themes Meredith chooses it is easy to see how this philosophy of his, this desire for the simplification and purification of life, perpetually finds expression. *Modern Love*, perhaps the greatest of his poems, is the tragedy of two lives divided and destroyed by the multitudinous discords that breed from discord. The four *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History* show the disasters which arose when France proved false to her true self as revealed in the noble ideals of the Revolution and entered on a career of plunder and violence under Napoleon, letting the old dragon of self take the upperhand once more and closing her ears to her ancient mentor the Comic Spirit, that infallible touchstone for sincerity of thought and motive. The ballad of *The Nuptials of Attila* shows how

the empire built of scorn  
Agonized, dissolved, and sank.

*The Woods of Westermain* teaches that peace and happiness spring from a loving trust of Nature and that, once the discord of fear and suspicion is admitted,

Discords out of discords spin  
Round and round derisive din.

*The Lark Ascending* is a hymn to frank, unselfish joyousness. In the *Ode to the Comic Spirit*, that spirit is shown to be a great cleansing and civilizing force, an alkahest for the petrifying action

of custom, prejudice and bigotry: while the *Hymn to Color* celebrates Love as the great interpreter and transformer of Life and Death. All are different facets of the one absorbing theme.

Perhaps Meredith's greatest poetic power is that of expressing intricate psychology in terms of poetry. Analyses which would seem to be expressible only by colorless abstracts are by him shown vividly and simply in a world of beautiful symbolism. It is this which constitutes the greatness of such poems as *Modern Love* and the *Hymn to Color*. The last-named is a spiritual philosophy of Color, an expression of the essential permanence in the most transient beauty:—

O bloom of dawn, breathed up from the gold sheaf  
Held springing beneath Orient! that dost hang  
The space of dewdrops running over leaf;  
Thy fleetingness is bigger in the ghost  
Than Time with all his host!

*Modern Love* is a wonderful example of psychological analysis expressed in a sequence of fifty sonnets. It seems as if Meredith's technical and imaginative powers increased with the difficulty of the subject, for in this poem they reach their highest level. In these fifty sonnets the tragedy is unfolded with most delicate insight, most poignant feeling and a wealth of human philosophy, all pictured in a vivid and stately imagery. It is a great and beautiful achievement of a great poet.

MARTIN ARMSTRONG.



## BACK IN BRITTANY

BY ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

HERE he was back in France—back in Paris, and idling pleasantly at one of those sidewalk cafés where you can sit all day and watch the world stream by.

When he sailed from home, it had been in his mind that he would make this trip something of a pilgrimage, that he would tramp once more along the La Ferté road where first he had watched the Marines going in, find again the Maxfield Parrish forest where the tattered but triumphant infantry fell back for breath after the smash under Soissons, pay an humble visit to the old friend and great priest who kept the faith during the long ordeal of St. Mihiel, nor turn back (as once another half-hearted runaway had done) at Varennes, but push on to explore the new life at each crest and ravine of the Argonne he knew so well.

Above all, he would seek out Savenay, that little Brittany village where he had been stationed for so many months that the very silhouette of its gaunt cathedral and the very color and lullaby sleepiness of its slow-revolving windmills would make a fond reunion. All these things it had been in his mind to do. Yet his two months' stay in France was almost spent and he had done none of them—or done few of them, and that cursorily.

Why? he wondered. Something was missing. What? He, at least, was not one of those varnished tourists who seemingly had expected each group of Frenchmen to welcome them wildly as the first troops of 1917 were welcomed, and so, perforce, went home in sulks. Served them right. But something *was* missing. Perhaps if a finer use had been made of the victory the unquestioning troops had forged, the old scenes of their sacrifice would have called him now more urgently. Maybe his was a mere nostalgia for the lost companionship, a feeling that he