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Vigor and Correctness

"VIGOR, of course, not correctness, is the mark of good critical, as it is the mark of good creative writing," says Mr. Carl Van Doren, reviewing in the sixtieth anniversary number of the *Nation* the literary history of the most distinguished critical journal which America has ever produced. Yet Mr. Van Doren, we are sure, would be the first to protest that vigor alone does not make good criticism, and that more often than not the best critical writing is correct as well as vigorous—that, indeed, to the extent to which thought is correct is it apt to be vigorous.

We have had much of late in American critical writing of a sort of false vigor—a vigor that is vehemence with an axe to grind—and it has done something to keep criticism from enjoying its due estate. For it has helped to spread abroad in the public mind the impression that criticism is a propagandist vehicle, that it makes cause with the beliefs of a coterie, or the prejudices of a school, and in its lowest form is enlisted in the service of the reputation of an individual or a circle. Admit, whatever its disputants may say, that the great part of this critical writing has sprung from an honest enthusiasm, or from an honest intolerance, and has been informed with sincerity and earnestness. Nevertheless it remains true that it has lacked genuine vigor, the vigor of which Mr. Van Doren writes, and we venture to say that it has lacked it in part because it has written down the academic and the correct as synonymous and the correct therefore as anathema, and in part because it has been too volatile.

* * *

Mere zest for literature, and readiness to kindle to sincere endeavor, or striking performance, no matter how animated emotions they may be, do not constitute true vigor. Nor does animosity against a supposedly outworn creed or time-honored dicta. The vigor which lies at the heart of good criticism, and which Mr. Van Doren rightly holds to be the essence of good writing, is not mere energy, or frenzy, or even enthusiasm, but something sturdier than any of these, something that presupposes caution born of knowledge, tastes alert to the new through familiarity with the old, and a very passion of desire for the true and lofty. Eagerness there must be, and an immense curiosity, in the critic who is worth his salt, but with it all a seasoned judgment and the restraint that knows how to balance achievement against intention, and both against precedent.

We have had few, if any, critics in the past decade such as the rolls of the *Nation* could show when Lowell and Howells, Henry James and William James were among the long list of distinguished contributors who lent a ripe penetration to its pages. And we have lacked them at a period when more than ever before in our history criticism has been offered opportunity for expression. Perhaps we have lacked them because of the very increase in the number of popular reviewing mediums and the ready accessibility of their columns to the amateur who thinks liking for books sufficient equipment for writing about them. The great extension of the reading public brought about by the vast number of cheap reprints and the increase of the library facilities of the country has made an interest in books the property of the many, and has shaped criticism to the tastes of the general public rather than to the more discerning judgment of the cultured. News, rather than interpretation of liter-

Antiphon

By JOSEPH CAMPBELL

THE mind of man is a door:
A song will open, or close it.
A song will open, or close it.

Mother of Songs, secret mother,
Sitting by the reeded banks of bright waters,
Open, thou, our minds.

Open, thou, our minds.

We see clearly, and not darkly.
The clouds have crowned us with mitres of under-
standing.
The ferns have set their gold croziers in our hands.
We are shepherds of thoughts.

We are shepherds of thoughts.

Death cannot touch us.
His quiver is arrowless against us.
Moon is our breathing, and sun the beating of our
hearts.
We live for ever.

We live for ever.

For ever through time,
And through the life that is not time,
But an endless folding and unfolding.

But an endless folding and unfolding.

George Meredith

GEORGE MEREDITH'S reputation has undergone curious vicissitudes. Reviewing the state of English fiction in 1883, Mark Pattison mentioned him as "well known by name to the widest circle of novel readers. By name because his name is a label, warning them not to touch." This ban was lifted for a while by the publication in 1885 of "Diana of the Crossways" with its sensational plot turning on the revelation of a state secret by a beautiful rebel against the social conventions of her day, and first the novels, then the poetry, became the chosen mental pabulum of the young intellectuals in college. Lately this class, so far as it exists in any force, has turned its attention elsewhere, and Mark Pattison's ironical verdict again holds good.

Meredith's works, however, continue to be issued in new editions, and Professor René Galland of the University of Grenoble, known to readers of *The Saturday Review* as an acute critic of contemporary French literature, has recently made Meredith the subject of one of those elaborate doctoral studies which excite the envy of our graduate schools by their combination of meticulous scholarship with ease and skill in presentation. Dr. Galland evidently began his investigation in the closing years of Meredith's life, when the novelist's fame was at its height, and the thoroughness of his treatment may be judged from the fact that his portly volume* of over 400 pages brings his survey of Meredith's work only to 1878. The main lines of his study and its conclusions are, however, clearly indicated; not only are new facts presented, especially with reference to the beginning of Meredith's literary career and the causes of his rupture with his first wife, the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock, but the development of Meredith's genius is traced in such a detailed and careful way as to make clear much that has hitherto remained unknown or unrealized, and the analysis suggests some reasons why Meredith's novels fail to appeal to the younger readers of today.

Students of Meredith whose sympathies have been enlisted by his liberal attitude on such issues as the position of women, marriage, and the relation of evolution to orthodoxy, have found it difficult to bring into focus an early letter of his written to a schoolfellow, in which he expresses himself with the conventional piety of the Moravian Brothers, from whose tuition he was just then issuing to begin independent life in London. Dr. Galland points out that this evangelical Christianity, far from being entirely discarded, gave Meredith the moral ideal which is the foundation of all his work. The rites, the dogmas, were indeed discarded; the moral ideal was held all the firmer.

Dr. Galland finds moral significance in Meredith's first venture into fiction, "The Shaving of Shagpat," in spite of its oriental form, which goes back to the "Thousand and One Nights." The moral intention of "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" is more evident. "Evan Harrington" is the young author's effort to free his soul from the snobishness of the circle in which he was born. "Rhoda Fleming" attacks the conventional notions of provincial respectability, and "Sandra Belloni" opens the long Meredithian campaign in fiction against sentimentalism. This campaign is continued in "The Adventures of Harry Richmond," which is at

* George Meredith, *Les Cinquante Premières Années*. By René Galland. Paris: Les Presses Françaises, 1923.

This Week



"The Sonnets of Shakespeare" and
"The Shakespearean Insignia." Reviewed by *W. A. Neilson*.

"Prairie Fires." Reviewed by *Louis Kronenberger*.

"The Negro and His Songs." Reviewed by *Eric Walrond*.

"The Religion of a Skeptic." Reviewed by *Adrian Richt*.

The Bowling Green. By *Christopher Morley*.

Next Week, or Later

"Edward Everett." Reviewed by *M. A. DeWolfe Howe*.

"The Torch Bearers." Reviewed by *Sir Oliver Lodge*.

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ature, is what the masses want. In the general confusion of values correctness has come to wear a forbidding air, and sprightliness and cleverness to masquerade as vigor. Against these false conceptions the abler criticism must be constantly warring, and is never more effectively warring than when it can show vigor in alliance with correctness.

the same time a companion study in education to "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel." "Beauchamp's Career," suggested by the personality and experience of Meredith's friend Maxse, whom he had helped in an unsuccessful parliamentary candidature for Southampton in 1867, is not merely a picture of the crass conservatism of the British public at that time, but also a struggle between the forces of egoism and sacrifice in the hero's own breast; even the protests of Meredith's adored Marie Vulliamy, whom he had married not long before, could not dissuade him from the sacrifice of his hero's life, which gives the story such a grim ending; Dr. Shrapnel, the older friend who stands in the same relation to Beauchamp as Meredith did to Maxse, is, as Dr. Galland points out, essentially a moralist, insisting that love involves self-sacrifice.

It seems unnecessary to continue Dr. Galland's thesis by a further examination of the novels; the moral significance of "The Egoist" is as obvious as the skill of its psychological analysis. It was because of its moral side that it was appreciated by Robert Louis Stevenson, and it was on the same score that Henry James classed Meredith as fundamentally English, Victorian, and "bourgeois." As early as 1877 Swinburne in his "Note on Charlotte Brontë" described Meredith and George Eliot as artists of the first order of intelligence, but of the second order of genius, whose work is "of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and to make direct demand on our grave for deliberate assent or dissent," but does not command our instinctive response to genius of the first rank. Dr. Galland exclaims at Swinburne's collocation of Meredith with George Eliot, but the conjunction seems to be broadly consistent with his own point of view.

Meredith himself, in his examination of the English novel in the first chapter of "Diana of the Crossways," said it needed to be "fortified by philosophy," and by philosophy he meant ethics, for he had no taste for metaphysics. With reference to his "Grand Ode," "France 1870," he wrote to John Morley, then editor of the *Fortnightly Review*:

From my point of view of sympathy and philosophy. . . . Latterly I have felt poetically weakened by the pressure of philosophical reflection, but this is going, and a fuller strength comes of it, for I believe I am within the shadow of the Truth, and as it's in my nature to sing, I may now do well.

As the general opinion of Meredith's admirers agrees with that of the poet as to the effective combination of feeling and philosophy in the Ode, which marks the height of his poetic achievement, it seems worth while to inquire wherein that philosophy consists. He ascribes the humiliation of France, not on the one hand to a Special Providence on the side of Germany (after the fashion of the new made Emperor) nor on the other merely to superior German skill and organization, still less (as the French were inclined to do themselves) to treachery on the part of their leaders; the French were betrayed by what was false within their own hearts, their worship of the military glory of the First Napoleon and their acceptance of the hollow imitation of it by Napoleon III. They appealed to force, and force failed them.

Lo, Strength is of the plain root—Virtues born:
Strength shall ye gain by service, prove in scorn,
Train by endurance, by devotion shape.
Strength is not won by miracle or rape.
It is the offspring of the modest years,
The gift of sire to son, thro' those firm laws
Which we name God's; which are the righteous cause,
The cause of man, and manhood's ministers.

He exhorts France to return to her better self:

Die to thy Vanity and strain thy Pride,
Strip off thy Luxury: that thou mayst live.

The same moral intent is to be noted in the series of short poems by which Meredith is most likely to be remembered, "Modern Love":

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.

Curiously enough, we find the same moral conviction controlling Meredith's policy as "reader" for Chapman & Hall, a post which for many years supplied the main part of his income. We have a signal example of this in his treatment of one of the most popular novels of the day, "East Lynn." He gave a curtly hostile opinion when the manuscript was submitted to him, and in spite of the protests of the novelist's friends and his own publishers, he refused to reconsider that opinion, even when the novel had

been issued with general acclaim by another house. Dr. Galland says, no doubt rightly, that Meredith was anxious to contribute to the moral and literary education of the public; he believed in the good or bad influence of a book on ideas and morals. The works of Mrs. Wood, Lynn Linton, and Ouida, more or less hostile to the emancipation of women and little conducive to their moral development, provoked his vigorous hate and indignation, and he did all that was in his power to prevent their publication.

This view of Meredith as a moralist, which Dr. Galland works out in detail, puts Meredith into line with his great predecessor, Carlyle, his great contemporary, George Eliot, and his successors in English fiction. The "philosophy" with which he fortified the novel was continued on its political and educational sides by H. G. Wells, and on its social and personal side by Galsworthy. But his own novels have fallen into neglect. His preoccupation with the moral significance of his work led him perhaps to give insufficient attention to its form; either he had little narrative skill or he underestimated this important element of the novelist's art. The novel was not his first choice of a medium for conveying his ideas to the public; he thought of himself first of all as a poet, and he was driven to novel writing, as to journalism and the office of Chapman & Hall, by sheer economic necessity. With dogged persistence he continued, in these various activities, to force upon the public the ideas in which he had faith. These ideas were unpopular because they were in advance of the time; the public had to grow up to them, and it proceeded, in large part, to outgrow them, chiefly by a process of absorption. So that, while Meredith's place in the history of English literature is secure, there seems little prospect of such a return to popular favor as has been reported recently in England for Anthony Trollope and George Eliot. The section of contemporary life he describes is more limited, and he puts greater difficulties in the way of the reader, not only by his idiosyncrasies of style but by the demands he makes on the reader's knowledge and intelligence. Hardy's great novels have continued to hold their own as masterpieces of the novelist's art, in spite of the grim philosophy which lies behind them. But Hardy, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope are all willing to go at least half way to meet the reader and to engage his interest. Meredith makes no concessions; he said in so many words that in the face of public neglect, he wrote "only to please himself." He has wit, but in its most brilliant coruscations it is more likely to dazzle the ordinary reader than to enlighten or amuse him. Meredith will always win the admiration of a select few, and some of his poems hold a permanent place in the rich treasury of English verse; but his novels seem likely to retain their Victorian reputation of being "caviare to the general," though not altogether for the reasons which earned that reputation half a century ago.

The style and method of presentation still offer obstacles to the average reader; the "philosophy," which once offended by its radicalism, now seems hedged in by Victorian reserves which give it a flavor of antiquity. No doubt there are many young conservatives who have not yet caught up to the essential liberalism of Meredith's point of view, and would be greatly benefited by a perusal of his novels, but they are frightened away by their reputation for difficulty; and the young radicals find his moral teaching behind the times. He would not have been content, like Joseph Conrad, to uphold such primitive virtues as loyalty and solidarity by romantic stories directed first of all to make the reader see and feel; he strove to teach more precise, moral virtues, to advocate a sound intellectual discipline, and to declare himself on definite social and political issues, which seemed to him important in his own time. On these issues, partly owing to Meredith's advocacy, the battle has been won; but, much as one may admire his independence of character and the extraordinary vigor of his mind, one is bound to acknowledge that his novels have less chance of enduring interest than the work of men who gave their chief attention to the art of the novel in itself. If the English-speaking nations, or any one of them, can develop a race of intellectual giants who can easily leap the crags and ravines of Meredith's poetry and can take a simple pleasure in the keen dialectic of the novels, there will be a good chance of a revival of his fame; but that eventuality seems at present rather remote.

Shakespearean Criticism

THE SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE. Edited from The Quarto of 1609, with Introduction and Commentary. By T. G. TUCKER. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1924.

THE SHAKESPEAREAN ENIGMA AND AN ELIZABETHAN MANIA. By JOHN F. FORBIS. New York: American Library Service. 1924.

Reviewed by W. A. NEILSON
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THESE two volumes are admirable examples of two contrasted types of Shakespearean interpretation. Professor Tucker's volume is obviously the result of many years of study and thought by a man of wide culture and scholarly habit. Equipped with a knowledge of the technique of textual criticism, he has become saturated with the scholarship of the Elizabethan period and especially of the Sonnets, and so furnished has produced what one is tempted to regard as a final edition. The Introduction deals critically with all those theories of the origin and significance of the Sonnets as a group which may be regarded as still in the field. His judgment is both sane and subtle, and his own conclusions are urged with modesty and restraint. The Commentary is very full and extraordinarily candid. One seldom finds so valiant a determination to shirk no obscurity, whether one has a solution or not. Many readers will find many notes unnecessary; but for a definitive edition, Dr. Tucker has erred, if at all, on the safer side.

The book challenges comparison with the admirable variorum edition of the late Professor R. M. Alden. The latter, by its method, was bound to record much that was of merely curious or historical interest, much that was absurd; and like all variorum editions, had its bulk swollen and its convenience reduced by masses of dead matter. Dr. Tucker was free to ignore all that was not relevant to the question of actual meaning, and so has produced a more serviceable volume. Editions more brilliant, like that of Wyndham, have been produced, none more workmanlike, and none so satisfactorily supplying the needs of the student who wants to know what the Sonnets are and what they mean.

The equipment of the author of "The Shakespearean Enigma" is indicated by the complete inaccuracy of his opening sentence: "The authentic facts relating to the life, habits, and writings of Shakespeare are curiously vague and meager, if not altogether wanting." In order to compensate for this alleged vagueness and meagerness, Mr. Forbis turns to a scrutiny of Shakespeare's poems, and finds there what he regards as indubitable information not merely as to the meaning of these documents, but as to the life of the poet. With a single key he unlocks all the mysteries of Mr. W. H., "the onlie begetter," the dark lady, the rival poet, and the rest. This key is ALCOHOL. Shakespeare, he tells us, in his youth "contracted the habit of using intoxicants, and at the same time was developing his poetic art . . . It was a question with him, whether he was at his best, when free from stimulants or when writing under the inspiration which he imagined he gained through them." "The Sonnets," "The Lover's Complaint," "The Phoenix and the Turtle," all record the struggles of the poet with this question and with the temptation to alcoholic excess; and the present volume reprints all these poems with a prose paraphrase of each, and an application of the key. Here is an example of the method from Sonnet No. 130.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

Interpretation.

My mistress' (Wine's) eyes are nothing like the sun; coral is redder than her lips; if snow be white her breasts are dun; if hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. (There is a possibility that the color "dun" and "black wires" may give a clue to what particular liquors Shakespeare indulged in. The dun of course refers to color, and it is suspected the black wires refer to the retainer in which the liquor was sold or delivered. If so, the reference is probably to the manner in which the top or cork was secured.)

So much for the Shakespearean Enigma. The Elizabethan Mania is of the same nature. Not Shakespeare alone, but Petrarch, Sidney, Daniel, Lodge, Willobie, Drayton, and Spenser—all were dipsomaniacs, and wrote their sonnets in celebration not of any real or ideal Lauras or Stellas, but of Wine.

Comment is tempting, but we forbear.