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The role of the comic spirit in the novels of Henry Fielding and George Meredith.

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

THE RÔLE OF THE COMIC SPIRIT IN THE NOVELS OF
HENRY FIELDING AND GEORGE REEBELINE

by

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INTRODUCTION

In connection with the study of the Nineteenth Century English Novel, conducted by Professor John M. Williams, George Meredith's Essay on Comedy was read by way of clarifying Meredith's point of view. Although Meredith states that good comedies are rare in English, he accords a very high place in prose literature to Henry Fielding. It seemed valuable, therefore, to discover whether Fielding and Meredith possessed characteristics in common, and how far these common characteristics determined the tone of their novels in view of the fact that they lived in centuries which had not too many points of resemblance.

To this end the writings of both authors have been studied, as well as critical and biographical works dealing with the two novelists. Most of the critical works read are recorded in the Bibliography.

Within the thesis itself an attempt is made to discover what each novelist understood by comedy and then to analyze his conclusions in the light of his life and writings in order to discover points of similarity or of difference.

For assistance rendered by Professor Williams, grateful acknowledgment is made.

THE RÔLE OF THE COMIC SPIRIT IN THE NOVELS OF
HENRY FIELDING AND GEORGE MEREDITH

Chapter I

FOREWORD

Percy Bysshe Shelley in his Dedication to "The Revolt of Islam" says,

"I will be wise,
And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies
Such power."

Such an aspiration is typical of him as philosopher and poet, for wisdom and virtue have ever been the quest of such, who hold these ideals to be indispensable to the richest and highest realization of life. But since all men are not moved by similar lofty motives, reformers of society endeavor by various means either to urge men to the pursuit of goodness and wisdom by making these ends seem most desirable, or else by ridiculing folly and vice, to awaken men to a sense of their ignominy. The latter is the aim of the comic artist, who believes in the therapeutic power of laughter in bringing about a saner attitude in society. Among those who have espoused the Comic Muse for the purpose of penetrating sham and hypocrisy by revealing the truth beneath the cloaked surface, George Meredith is significant, partly because of his essay On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, partly because of his novels which allow us to recognize the Comic

Spirit at work in society whenever the unnatural or the pretentious appear under the various disguises of sentimentalism and egoism. In his discussion on Meredith, M. Firmin Roz suggests the scope of the Comic Spirit and its kinship with wisdom when he says:

"Cette muse comique qui l'inspire, c'est l'amour de la vérité, de la vie telle qu'elle pourrait être, telle qu'elle est quand elle échappe aux ravages de nos faiblesses, de nos passions ou de nos vices; c'est le goût de la rectitude et de l'équilibre, contre lesquels toute faute met l'homme dans une attitude comique. Savoir rire de cette attitude, voilà la véritable sagesse, entre la folie des sentimentalistes ou agelastes, qui ne rient de rien, et celle des hypergelastes, qui rient de tout."¹

Concerning the three elements Meredith sees in man and the order they must follow if men are to fulfil their highest destiny, the same author continues:

"Comment donc faut-il vivre, et que doit faire l'homme pour rester dans cette voie droite hors de laquelle l'esprit chasse comme sur ses terres, cette voie dont nous ne pouvons sortir sans nous exposer aux souffrances et aux désastres? L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête. Meredith distingue trois éléments dans sa nature; le corps, l'intelligence, l'âme.... Il faut les développer ensemble, laisser à chacun sa place et son rôle, nourrir la vigueur animale, la subordonner à la pensée, s'élever ainsi jusqu'à cette vie supérieure, cette vie forte, ardente et noble, où la passion est guidée par la raison, la pensée réchauffée par l'émotion."²

1. Firmin Roz, Le Roman Anglais Contemporain, Librairie Hachette et Cie., Paris, 1912, p. 33.

2. Ibid., p. 37.

Linked with Meredith in his espousal of the Comic Muse is Henry Fielding, like Meredith a philosophic novelist. The fact that they both expressed allegiance to the Comic rather than the Tragic Muse leads to another idea they held in common, the belief that men were the victims of their own folly rather than of a universal force, whether that force be apostrophized as the gods, fate, destiny, or the immanent. So in Amelia we find Fielding urging that we should not blame Fortune for an event which can be explained by wholly natural causes. And in Diana of the Crossways, when Diana's financial plight has become perilous, Meredith points out that the folly is her own and that the world is not responsible.

"Vain to be shrewish with the world.
Rather let us turn and scold our nature for
irreflectively rushing to the cream and
honey."³

Both protest against the term, the irony of life, since they felt that men determined their own destinies without the intervention of any outside force, although it might very well be that strong evil characters imposed upon weaker though better persons and caused suffering and misery to the latter.

Another factor linking the eighteenth-century Fielding and the nineteenth-century Meredith lies in their common admiration for the master of French comedy, Molière, as well as for Cervantes, Shakespeare, Aristophanes, and the Greek and Roman

3. Diana of the Crossways, Chapter 30.

writers of comedy.

In their effort to make philosophy a part of the novel and their expressed belief that the novel could best serve its purpose of arousing men to the perception of folly only when it made use of philosophy, Fielding and Meredith were also in accord. Indeed, Meredith is quite explicit on this point, indicating the function of philosophy and suggesting the fate of fiction if there is not an alliance between them. He writes:

"Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab; and that instead of everlastingly shifting those barren aspects, the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight....And imagine the celestial refreshment of having a pure decency in the place of sham; real flesh; a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending. Honourable will fiction then appear; honourable, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood."

"And how may you know that you have reached to Philosophy? You touch her skirts when you share her hatred of the sham decent, her derision of sentimentalism."

"The forecast may be hazarded, that if we do not speedily embrace Philosophy in fiction, the Art is doomed to extinction.... Philosophy is required to make our human nature credible and acceptable."⁴

In a letter to G. P. Baker, Meredith suggests that the novel is to be regarded as a civilizing force for he avers:

"Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead to great civilization. I have supposed that the novel, exposing and illustrating the natural history of man, may

4. Diana of the Crossways, Chapter 1.

help us to such sustaining roadside gifts."⁵

Later through Alvan in The Tragic Comedians, Meredith sees the novel as not the least worthy of the handmaidens of Wisdom, when he declares:

"Light literature is the garden and the orchard, the fountain, the rainbow, the far view; the view within us as well as without. Our blood runs through it, our history in the quick....Poet, novelist, essayist, dramatist, shall be ranked honourable in my Republic. I am neither, but a man of law, a student of the sciences, a politician, on the road to government and statecraft: and yet I say I have learnt as much from light literature as from heavy--as much, that is, from the pictures of our human blood in motion as from the clever assortment of our forefatherly heaps of bones."⁶

Just as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were disparate in many respects, the nineteenth attaining to a degree of general culture in society that the eighteenth for all its emphasis upon decorum and etiquette did not attain, so in Meredith we read a refinement and a delicacy that Fielding does not afford. And whereas in Fielding we perceive realism with traces of sentimentalism, in Meredith there is realism combined with lofty idealism, a combination that permits not only the portrayal of folly but also the delineation of characters whose richly sounded personalities are best suggested by recalling how often the word "Shakespearean" is applied to them.

To make the distinction between the two men somewhat

5. Letters of George Meredith, collected and edited by W. M. Meredith, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1912, p. 398.
6. The Tragic Comedians, Chapter 6.

clearer, there is a sketch of Fielding by Ernest A. Baker wherein he says:

"Fielding's was an open, full-blooded, hearty nature, that disposed him to warm sympathy with all classes of Englishmen and a thoughtful delight in every idiosyncrasy and vagary of the human mind. He was the outdoor man, roaming the woods and hills and farming the broad fields of life."⁷

Opposed to this we have the personality of Meredith suggested by J. H. E. Crees, who states:

"He had besides the mastery of words that stamps the literary artist, the wisdom of the sage, and till the end the glow chivalric of a Spenserian knight roaming through Faeryland, combating strange monsters, champion of distressed maidens."⁸

In Meredith the same author later points out that we have

"the passion of the poet, the vehemence of the orator, the serene wide outlook of the philosopher, the arch-smile of the Comic votary, the phantasy of the Euphuist, the wittiness of the Athenian, combined in one prodigious whole."⁹

Apart from the fact that Meredith makes frequent reference to Fielding in his essay on Comedy, various critics have drawn parallels between Tom Jones and The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, Elmer James Bailey saying in this respect:

"Almost without question, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel may be looked upon as a

7. Ernest A. Baker, The History of the English Novel, H. F. and G. Witherby, London, 1930, vol. 4, p. 77.

8. J. H. E. Crees, George Meredith, A Study of His Works and Personality, Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1918, p. 69.

9. Ibid., p. 182.

purified Tom Jones....Of the several authors who seem to owe a part of their inspiration to Fielding's frankness in portrayal, Meredith comes nearest to a reproduction of his spirit. Meredith freely admits the natural impulses of his hero, and shows whither, under certain conditions they would inevitably lead him."¹⁰

Frederic T. Blanchard in his extensive work on Fielding is among those who have linked the eighteenth and nineteenth century novelists, stating::

"As long as he lived, Meredith was not forgetful of the master of the comic-prose-epic. It must be admitted, of course, that Meredith is a poet and that Fielding is not; the passages in Feverel in which are mingled romantic love and poetic feeling for nature have no counterpart in Tom Jones. There is much more love of nature in Fielding's works than he has usually been given credit for; but he lived before the days of poetical exploitations in prose fiction of the beauties of earth, air, and water. Again, Meredith is a phrase-maker and Fielding is not; eloquent Fielding can be at times and his works are sprinkled with wise sayings, but he was averse to conceits as a staple of expression."¹¹

"Both authors were at war against pride and sentimentalism, against vanity and hypocrisy, against undemocratic ways of thinking; both took the point of view of comedy, following Molière in regarding the comic as the spirit of intellectualized laughter and in believing that its high mission is to laugh men out of their follies; both incorporated in their books as an integral part of the structure the actual commentary on life of the essayist; and both intended that their novels should

¹⁰. Elmer James Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith: A Study, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1907, p. 55.

¹¹. Frederic T. Blanchard, Fielding the Novelist: A Study in Historical Criticism, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1926, p. 456.

furnish wisdom as well as mere entertainment by illustrating a philosophy of life saner and more charitable than was to be found in the works of their immediate predecessors."¹²

Recognizing, therefore, that in Fielding and Meredith we have two distinct personalities placed amid societies that have not too many characteristics in common, it appears valuable to discover the particular follies revealed by each age, and the manner in which the Comic Spirit plays upon such folly. To this end it seems advisable to discover what each author understood by Comedy and how far he felt it compatible with the novel to fuse philosophic speculation with his comedy of manners. And if it should appear that the Comic Muse is more gracious to one author than to the other, it may prove interesting to see in how far the century and how far the personality of the man was responsible for this difference.

12. Frederic T. Blanchard, op. cit., p. 457.

Chapter II

THE COMIC SPIRIT

In order to understand comedy and the significance of the comic spirit, one does well to consider it in relation to that form of literature that appeals to contrary emotions, that is to say, tragedy, which has been defined as "the imitation of an action, that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; embellished by poetic language; through pity and fear effecting a purgation of the emotions."¹ Comedy, on the other hand, appeals to the intellect rather than to the feelings. In the comedy of manners, its purpose is usually corrective, attempting as it does to arouse laughter by revealing the ridiculous features of social life or of men in society.²

The reason underlying the preference of both Fielding and Meredith for comedy becomes clear when we recognize that both esteemed the therapeutic value of laughter, that both directed their appeal to the intellect or reason of men, and that both were reformers.

Fielding, for instance, in the Preface to Joseph Andrews, declares that mirth and laughter are "probably more wholesome physic for the mind....than is generally imagined." And he questions whether people are not more full of good humor and benevolence after they have been sweetened by comedy "than

1. Percy Hazen Houston and Robert Metcalf Smith, Types of World Literature, Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., Garden City, New York, 1930, p. 141.

2. Ibid., p. 347.

when soured by a tragedy or a grave lecture."

By way of making even clearer his purpose in writing comedy, he differentiates comedy from burlesque or caricature, showing that the latter are concerned with monstrosities whereas the comic confines itself strictly to Nature, "from the just imitation of which," he says, "will flow all the pleasure" that can be furnished to a sensible reader since, "life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous." Of the Ridiculous, which falls within the province of the Comic writer, affectation is the only source.

Under affectation Fielding groups vanity and hypocrisy, but regards the latter as the more reprehensible because the more vicious. A vain person, he explains, may affect falseness in order to secure applause, but a hypocritical person pretends to virtue in order to conceal actual vice, having none of the virtue he feigns, whereas the vain person may possess it to a lesser degree than he would have people think.

Of themselves ugliness, infirmity and poverty arouse pity rather than ridicule, for the victims of these misfortunes are not responsible for their misfortune. The element of the ridiculous enters only when such a victim affects a contrary state, and makes laughable the contrast between his actual condition and that to which he pretends.

In writing Joseph Andrews Fielding had a didactic purpose, for he wished to combat the false idea of virtue portrayed by Richardson's Pamela. In the dedication to Tom Jones Fielding

reiterates his moral intent in writing as well as his reason for invoking the Comic Muse. So he states that in this book will be found "nothing prejudicial to the cause of religion and virtue, nothing inconsistent with the strictest rules of decency". To recommend goodness and innocence has been his aim. But in addition to revealing the beauty of virtue with the thought that such beauty would be its own strongest advocate, he has likewise tried to convince "men that their true interest directs them to a pursuit of her." And thus he concludes:

"For these purposes I have employed all the wit and humour of which I am master in the following history; wherein I have endeavored to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices."

In the Covent Garden Journal Fielding pronounces again respecting the efficacy of laughter as a social corrective. Why, he queries, should not an author promulgate truth with a smile on his countenance? For, is not ridicule usually a stronger and better method of attacking vice than the severer form of satire?³

Meredith represents a development over Fielding in his conception of the comic spirit as well as in the loftier role he assigns that spirit. For whereas Fielding regards comedy as a corrective for folly, Meredith sees it as a civilizing force as well as a gauge for measuring social progress. Hence he declares in the Essay,

3. Gordon Hall Gerould, editor, Selected Essays of Henry Fielding, Ginn & Company, Boston, 1905, Essay No. 19, "The Purpose of Letters".

"One excellent test of the civilization of a country, as I have said, I take to be the flourishing of the comic idea and comedy; and the test of true comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter."

With Fielding there is a comic attitude toward characters, but with Meredith there is the perception of the Comic Spirit as a social emanation, an essence radiated by the general common sense for the preservation of society. Such a conception recalls Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," although it must be stated that Shelley envisaged an intelligence that was consonant with the universe, while Meredith has in mind a "spirit born of our united social intelligence".

Meredith's ideas regarding comedy he has revealed in his poems, "The Ode to the Comic Spirit" and "The Two Masks" as well as in his Essay and the Prelude to The Egoist. We shall confine ourselves to his prose writings on comedy. In The Egoist there is the definition of high comedy which the novel itself illustrates.

"Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing."⁴

"Comedy....proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness yet to be found among us. She is the ultimate civilizer....If....she watches over sentimentalism with a birch rod, she is not opposed to romance. You may love, and

4. The Egoist, P. 5.

warmly love, so long as you are honest.
Do not offend reason."⁵

In the Essay Meredith extols Molière because of his deeply conceived reflections on social life and because of the wit and reason with which he vindicates common sense, rightness and justice, by revealing the imposture of folly.⁶ Yet Molière's end is not to ridicule, but rather to restore sanity. For his is "the wit of good breeding, the wit of Wisdom," and hence "full of healing".⁷

In Meredith's opinion a perception of the comic connotes not only a sympathetic appreciation of men, but likewise a mental receptiveness that permits correction at the hands of others. Therefore he says:

"You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes."⁸

A much-quoted yet ever fruitful passage is the following wherein are synthesized many of Meredith's convictions regarding the Comic Spirit and its relation to society.

"If you believe that our civilization is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the

5. The Egoist, p. 7.

6. An Essay on Comedy, George Meredith, edited by Lane Cooper, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1918, p. 96.

7. Ibid., p. 99.

8. Ibid., p. 133.

rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied....Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate;....whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk; the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit."⁹

And lest the appeal of the Comic Spirit still may not attract, he adds:

"A perception of the Comic Spirit gives high fellowship....Good hope sustains you; weariness does not overwhelm you; in isolation you see no charms for vanity; personal pride is greatly moderated.The Comic Spirit is not hostile to the sweetest songfully poetic. Chaucer bubbles with it; Shakespeare overflows."¹⁰

He might have added that the charming creations of his own brilliant fancy are part of the exalted company afforded by his portraying of the Comic Spirit. But before considering Meredithian creations we propose to look at the two masters of comedy themselves, in order to understand as far as possible the contrast their novels suggest.

9. An Essay on Comedy, p. 141.
10. Ibid., pp. 143-144.

Chapter III

HENRY FIELDING: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

A consideration of Henry Fielding's life is significant because of the light it affords respecting the influences and experiences that are most richly realized in this master of the comic prose epic. The life itself may be divided into six phases, though it must be made clear that the phases are not absolutely distinct from each other. Even so, we must look at Fielding as a child, a student, a dramatist, a lawyer and magistrate, and a journalist, if we would wholly appreciate Fielding the novelist.

Born in Somersetshire on April 22, 1707, Henry Fielding was the son of an army officer, Edmund Fielding, and the grandson of an archdeacon of Dorset. His mother, Sarah Gould, was the daughter of a magistrate. The Fielding family was related to the Earls of Denbigh. A cousin of Fielding, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, showed her interest in the novelist on several occasions. But though of aristocratic lineage, the family to which Henry belonged was not wealthy, and hence much of the novelist's time and energy was spent in trying to earn his livelihood.

However, in 1719, he was sent to Eton where he spent five or six years. Of this period, Aurelien Digeon remarks:

"He must have studied to some purpose, for his works show a profound knowledge of Latin poetry. He knew French very well,

and Italian if we may believe him."¹

Greek he was able to read, and the Greek satirist, Lucian, he made his chief model.

While in London in 1728, Fielding published his first poem, "The Masquerade," and likewise prepared his first play, Love in Several Masques. After this brief experience as a dramatist, however, Fielding resumed his studies, registering at the University of Leyden in the same year. Regarding the benefits he derived while at Leyden, M. Digeon says:

"For two years Fielding was entered in the faculty of letters,....and doubtless his Latin scholarship and his knowledge of French gained from his sojourn there. Holland was the home of free, vigorous, and active thinkers. It was also, at this time, famous for its caricaturists. Fielding may have sharpened and cultivated his sense of comedy by looking at their cartoons."²

In 1730 Fielding was again in London, confronted with the necessity of earning his living. And so he began to write and to produce plays in rapid succession, plays which are little esteemed today, and were apparently little esteemed by their author save insofar as they served to aid him financially. Their significance for us lies in the fact that they afford faint intimations of the gifts of parody and satire that were later to prompt the novels. Too, the dramatist's interest in pointing out the political and social evils of his day prefigure

1. Aurelien Digeon, The Novels of Fielding, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., London, 1925, p. 4.

2. Ibid., p. 7.

the journalist, magistrate, and novelist who were to be concerned with reform as well as with revealing sham and hypocrisy.

Four plays were produced in 1730, The Temple Beau, The Author's Farce, and The Pleasures of the Town. The Tragedy of Tragedies; or The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great, and Rape upon Rape, the title of which was later changed to The Justice Caught in his own Trap, or The Coffee-House Politician. Of these the most important is probably Tom Thumb, in the opinion of Austin Dobson, "certainly one of the best burlesques ever written."³ Beyond this, it has interest for us in that it contains what is probably the first allusion to Sir Robert Walpole, the statesman whose corruption was later to be satirized more boldly in Pasquin, The Historical Register, and Jonathan Wild.

In 1731 were written The Letter-Writers or a New Way to Keep a Wife at Home, The Welsh Opera, and The Grub-Street Opera. The first two were produced the same year, but the last was probably not produced at all. More significant was the year 1732 which included The Lottery, The Modern Husband, The Old Debauchees, or the Jesuit Caught, The Covent Garden Tragedy, and The Mock-Doctor or The Dumb Lady Cured. Concerning The Modern Husband, it has been suggested of Fielding:

"The prologue gives one the impression that he wanted to try a new type of comedy, and at all events to abandon farce in which the taste of the public had imprisoned him.

3. Austin Dobson, Fielding, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1883, p. 19.

He considered his talent to lie rather in a drama of moral and social criticism. But for this new kind of comedy the stage offered no scope. The traditions of the English stage hampered him, and he was destined to escape them only in the novel."⁴

The Mock Doctor is important in that it gives tangible evidence of Fielding's interest in Molière, this play being an adaptation of Le Médecin malgré lui. In the preface to his translation, Fielding writes,

"One pleasure I enjoy from the success of this piece is a prospect of translating successfully some others of Molière of great value."

This prospect was realized the following year when Fielding produced The Miser, an adaptation of L'Avare. His version pleased so well that Voltaire was moved to commend it, suggesting that the translator had excelled all previous attempts.

In 1734 there was an adaptation of Regnard's Retour Imprevu, under the title The Intriguing Chambermaid. More significant, however, is Don Quixote in England since here we have evidence of Fielding's regard for another great master of comedy, Cervantes, whose work he admired and references to whom are to be found scattered throughout Fielding's plays.⁵ In Don Quixote, it has been pointed out, Fielding caught somewhat of the spirit of Cervantes. And in Squire Badger of the play we see prefigured Squire Western of Tom Jones.

1734 also saw the marriage of Fielding and Miss Charlotte

4. Aurelien Digeon, op. cit., p. 11.

5. Austin Dobson, op. cit., p. 33.

Cradock, whose personality is believed to be suggested in Sophia Western as well as in Amelia Booth. With her Fielding enjoyed ten years of happy married life, despite the financial difficulties that presented themselves from time to time.

Two plays were brought out in 1735, An Old Man Taught Wisdom, or the Virgin Unmasked and The Universal Gallant or The Different Husbands. Following these in 1736 were Pasquin, A dramatic Satire on the Times, Tumble-down Dick or Phaeton in the suds; in 1737, Eurydice, a farce, and The Historical Register for the year 1736, to which was added the short Eurydice hissed.

The fact that Pasquin enjoyed a run of sixty performances had induced the author to attempt the same sort of satire in The Historical Register, but for us the chief interest lies in the circumstance that the satire was directed to the government of Sir Robert Walpole and hastened the reform movement that had been contemplated for some time. Thus the Licensing Act of 1737 was passed, as a result of which unlicensed theatres, among them Fielding's, were closed, and so the dramatist had to turn his talents elsewhere to earn his living.

Critics unite in regarding the plays as inferior to the novels, giving various reasons for such inferiority. Austin Dobson, referring to the comedies, sees one reason in Fielding's attempt to imitate the "artificial world of Congreve and Wycherly."⁶ Aurelien Digeon stresses carelessness and hurry

6. Austin Dobson, op. cit., p. 56.

as primary reasons when he observes:

"All these plays which interested his contemporaries, because they borrowed an ephemeral life from contemporary events, had never really interested their author as works of art. Hardly more than once or twice do we see him taking special pains over a play. Most of the time he writes with lightning speed....He never attempts to refute the reputation he had of being careless. His characters are seldom really observed. They are the traditional, stereotyped heroes of Restoration drama. Their names are like so many labels attached to their persons and allow the author to dispense with psychology."⁷

With the theatre closed to him, Fielding turned to law, becoming a student at the Middle Temple in 1737. In 1740 he was called to the Bar, but meanwhile he had been working at journalism, serving as editor-in-chief of The Champion, or British Mercury, one of the many papers modeled upon the Spectator and Tatler made reputable by Addison and Steele earlier in the century. From 1739 to 1741 Fielding wrote under the pen name of Captain Hercules Vinegar, threatening the enemies of common sense and the public weal. Such an attitude certainly suggests the later antagonist of sentimentalism, even as the concern for the common welfare links him with the dramatist calling attention to political corruption and the magistrate working to remedy social evils.

Stirred by the falseness he saw in the conduct of the much-extolled Pamela, Richardson's heroine, whose calculating attitude passed for virtue, Fielding in 1742 wrote The

7. Aurelien Digeon, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

Adventures of Joseph Andrews in which he essayed realism rather than the sentimentalism of Richardson, and endeavored to oppose truly virtuous types to the conventionally virtuous characters of the latter.

In 1743 were issued the three volumes of the Miscellanies, containing poems, a fantasy entitled A Journey from This World to the Next and his second novel, The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great, wherein Sir Robert Walpole is again satirized in the person of Wild, as one who may have claims to greatness but none at all to goodness.

Various pamphlets were issued between 1741 and 1745 when Fielding started to write for The True Patriot, an anti-Stuart paper, that allied itself against the Pretender on the side of the Hanoverian house.

Fielding's first wife had died in 1744. He remarried in 1747 since his servant, Mary Daniel, was to have a child by him within a few months. During the same year Fielding wrote for the Jacobite's Journal.

1749 saw the publication of The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling, the book that remains an enduring tribute to the genius and comic spirit of its author. Unlike the plays sent forth in rapid succession, Fielding acknowledges that thousands of hours were dedicated to this history, in which are to be found sanity and wisdom, humor and realism, vital personalities against a living background, characters who exemplify the goodness as well as the evil of mankind. There are more

sinner, perhaps, than saints, yet a healthy outlook on the part of many characters bodes well for them, we are made to feel. Pertinent in this connection is the statement by Harold Child that to much of human life Fielding was blind.

"He could have understood a saint as little as he could have understood an anarchist. The finer shades....were lost to him. Of love as a spiritual passion, he shows himself almost entirely ignorant. He was wholly in sympathy with the average morality of his time....He had never known a perfect character; therefore, he will not put one in his book....But, of human nature that was not perfect, not exalted by any intellectual or moral or religious passion, he knew more than any writer, except, possibly, Shakespeare."⁸

Fielding was appointed Justice of the Peace at the Bow Street court in 1749, following the publication of Tom Jones, an appointment due partly, it is believed, to his journalistic activities supporting the government against those who favored the return of the Stuart line. Thereafter he devoted much time to his duties as magistrate, as well as to publishing papers which embodied his ideas on reform. In his writings he directed attention to the low morality and the unhealthy love of luxury among the masses of people, which urged to crime and idleness. Partly responsible for this state of affairs, in his opinion, were the gaming houses, the increasing consumption of liquor, the public hangings, the inefficient laws dealing with receivers of stolen goods, and the inadequate police force. As a result of his efforts,

8. Harold Child, The Cambridge History of English Literature, Cambridge University Press, London, 1913, Volume X, Chapter II, p. 31.

"Parliament soon followed some of his advice and passed various laws dealing with the principal abuses which he had denounced."⁹

We are also told that,

"Fielding's part in the legal and administrative reforms that eventually suppressed street robberies, improved the prisons, and alleviated the social conditions which bred crime, gained him in his own time nothing but abuse, although it was these years of magisterial overwork in unhealthy surroundings that were mainly responsible for his death in the prime of manhood."¹⁰

Amelia, Fielding's last novel, was published in 1751, and is generally held to be inferior to Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews though many persons declare that Amelia is the finest character Fielding has drawn, because sketched with more sentiment.

An interesting parallel between the novels of Fielding and those of Richardson has been pointed out by M. Digeon who links Joseph Andrews with Pamela, which the latter inspired to some extent, Tom Jones with Clarissa Harlowe, wherein we see very clearly illustrated the comic as opposed to the tragic point of view, and Amelia with Sir Charles Grandison, this last novel of Fielding's preceding Richardson's, unlike the previous novels. The conflict between Fielding and Richardson is the conflict between the realist and the sentimentalist and yet the fact that the age was a sentimental one and that Fielding brought the comic spirit to expose such unwisdom is

9. Aurelien Digeon, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

10. Ernest A. Baker, The History of the English Novel, H. F. & G. Witherby, London, 1930, vol. 4, p. 156.

explained by Frederic T. Blanchard, who asserts:

"The statement is often made that Fielding entirely expressed in his novels the ideals of the eighteenth century; and it is true he portrayed the life of his times most realistically....But, for all that, it was not he but Richardson who reflected the taste and temper of the Mid-Century. Fielding was not a mere delin-eator of his age; he was a critic and a severe critic of the faults of that age. Richardson, on the other hand, did not disturb conventions; he flattered and in-tensified them."¹¹

Aurelien Digeon also reveals Fielding and Richardson against the century they represent, making clear the distinc-tion between them when he says:

"It is in their moral interpretation that the two writers are so decidedly op-posed. The society which they paint is essentially the same, a society of egoisms upheld by conventions....The real difference lies in the author's point of view and in his appreciation of moral values. Richard-son has the tragic outlook, the fatality of his characters dominates him; in spite of himself he admires them, or at the least he submits to them. Fielding, on the con-trary, always keeps his detachment. He never loses that critical faculty, which is essential to the comic spirit, he always sees his characters intellectually and is never in their power."¹²

After Amelia, Fielding once more turned to journalism, for in 1752 he was writing for The Covent Garden Journal under the name, Sir Alexander Drawcansir, Censor of Great Britain.

"His main object seems to have been to contribute to that deep moral reform, which he thought was becoming increasingly neces-sary in the England of his day. Besides, as

11. Frederic T. Blanchard, op. cit., p. 135.

12. Aurelien Digeon, op. cit., pp. 139-140.

a magistrate he was making a great effort to raise the standard of morality and he wanted to win the favour of and obtain help from the public."¹³

For several years Fielding had been suffering from poor health, aggravated by gout and overwork. In 1754 he thought to gain relief by a journey, but on the eighth of October he died at Lisbon and was buried there in the British cemetery.

Now, looking back over his life, we may say that as a student, Fielding revealed an interest in classic authors, evidence of which we find in his writings as dramatist, journalist, and novelist, since many of the essays he wrote for the journals and at the beginning of various Books in his novels give evidence of wide reading. In his work as a dramatist, we come upon his interest in Molière and Cervantes, the spirit of whom was to characterize his epic prose poems. Also, as a dramatist we find him interested in calling attention to the need for reform, an attitude that likewise moved him as journalist and novelist.

In the novels we find him giving freest scope to his genius and to his inclinations as guided by that genius. No longer can it be said that his characters are mere labels, for they breathe and live after the fashion of the men and women whom he has observed about him. And because Fielding worked in the theatre for many years, he has the gift of presenting his characters in a highly dramatic manner so that his novels have

13. Aurelien Digeon, op. cit., p. 34.

vigor and life.

So we finish the life of this master of comedy, perceiving the moral stature of the man as well as the humanly critical spirit that motivated him. He saw the ridiculous in those he loved without loving them less, yet loving mankind as he did, saw that vice was a blight that must be eradicated and that folly dwarfed man's personality.

Yet his own healthy instincts combined with his deep admiration for the grave comedy of Molière and Cervantes as well as his early emulation of Lucian, united in urging him to attempt reform through the medium of thoughtful laughter. That the comic spirit sometimes grows boisterous and sometimes, ironical, unlike the ideal envisioned by Meredith, is to be explained by the difference in the eighteenth century from the nineteenth as well as by the fact that Meredith was moulded by different influences. What these influences were we shall endeavor to discover in the ensuing chapter.

Chapter IV

GEORGE MEREDITH: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Meredith as a votary of the Comic Muse we shall comprehend somewhat better if, as in the case of Fielding, we regard his life from various angles, if we consider his family background and educational influences, his brief apprenticeship in law, and then his experiences as a journalist, before turning to the more significant aspects of the man as poet, philosopher and novelist.

George Meredith was born on February 12, 1828 at Portsmouth, England, where for three generations his father's family had been naval outfitters. The father, Augustus Armstrong Meredith, was of Welsh extraction, while his mother, Jane Eliza Macnamara, was of Irish lineage. Here we have perhaps one reason for Meredith's persistent interest in the influence of Celtic blood, an interest to which he recurs in nearly all his novels.

For us Meredith's family has particular interest in view of the fact that several members are portrayed in Evan Harrington and The Adventures of Harry Richmond. In the first novel, the background of tailordom that is responsible for much of the conflict in the story recalls Meredith's own family inheritance. The "great Mel" of the story has much in common with Meredith's grandfather, Mrs. Mel recalls Meredith's grandmother, and the three sisters of Evan are modeled upon

Meredith's aunts. For Meredith's father we must turn to the romantic comedian and adventurer, Roy Richmond, father of Harry, and for a glimpse of Meredith's early school life in England, there is the colorful background of Harry Richmond's schooling. Many of Meredith's friends furnished traits from which he drew other characters, but them we shall consider later.

Meredith was first sent to school in Portsmouth, but when he was eight or nine he was removed to St. Paul's School at Southsea where he remained several years. When the boy was about thirteen, however, the father re-married and the son was removed to a private school near Petersfield. Between father and son there had always been a pronounced antipathy. So when the boy learned that he was a ward in chancery and that money was available for his education, he requested to be sent to a Moravian school at Neuwied near Coblenz on the Rhine. This religious sect, known as Herrenhütte or The Church of the Brethren traced its origin to the ancient Bohemian Brethren. One of their purposes was to recommend religion by themselves practicing the virtues they recommended.

The two years that Meredith spent at Neuwied are significant in view of his life-long admiration for Goethe and Heine, for when Meredith was in Germany Goethe's influence was still dominant though he had died in 1832, and Heine was still living, though in exile. That his later admiration for Carlyle did nothing to check the worship of Goethe and German literature, we know.

Following his return to England, Meredith remained with his father for nearly two years, until in 1846 he was apprenticed to a London solicitor, Mr. Charnock. The latter shared Meredith's liking for literature and for walking. As a result of the former it was decided to publish a magazine, the Monthly Observer, among the contributors to which, besides Meredith and Charnock, were the son of Thomas Love Peacock and the widowed daughter, Mary Nicolls. From this friendship with the Peacocks resulted the marriage in 1849 of Meredith and Mrs. Nicolls, a marriage that was to prompt the lyrical passages in Richard Feverel, but was to end unhappily, since Meredith and his wife separated after seven years, Mrs. Meredith later eloping with a young painter, Henry Wallis.

Before considering Meredith's novels and poetry, though he began to publish in 1849, we shall continue with his life in order to examine his writings by themselves. Always Meredith was enthusiastic about the outdoor world, an enthusiasm that colors his philosophy and has been transmuted into his novels and poems. This love of nature we may also read in his delight in long walks, thirty mile stretches sometimes, when he and chosen companions strode about the English countryside or enjoyed mountain climbing about the Alps. Incidentally, it is to be noted that many of his heroes, including Goethe and Heine, shared this enthusiasm for walking, as do many of the characters in his novels, notably Gower Woodseer of The Amazing Marriage, a personality interesting in his own right

as well as because he is based upon Robert Louis Stevenson with whom Meredith was friendly for many years.

With Rossetti and Swinburne, Meredith shared a house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, during 1863, but though the friendship with Swinburne continued, as evidence of which we have the letters written over a period of several years, as well as the lively portrait of Tracy Runningbrook in Sandra Belloni, Meredith and Rossetti did not prove wholly sympathetic.

Meredith's marriage to Marie Vulliamy, of French Huguenot extraction, took place in 1864 and resulted in almost unalloyed happiness to both. The fact that Miss Vulliamy possessed a private income also assisted in making the financial situation of the Meredith household somewhat more comfortable.

For many years Meredith had earned part of his living through journalism, having contributed to Household Words and Once a Week. In 1860 he became attached to The Ipswich Journal and in 1866 was selected to go to Italy as war correspondent when the hostilities broke out between Italy and Austria. A liberal, Meredith's sympathies were entirely on the side of the Risorgimento movement and Mazzini, of whom he has left a memorable portrait in his epic of the struggle, Vittoria. In 1867 he became editor of The Fortnightly during the absence of his friend, Lord Morley. But Meredith had always disliked journalism and so when his income enabled him to dispense with it, he was glad to do so.

Meredith's thirty years spent with Chapman and Hall as reader and literary adviser enabled him to help many worthwhile

writers, but the assistance he rendered to Thomas Hardy is probably most memorable. Yet in the letters edited by his son, William Meredith, we find that he did not stint himself when advising lesser figures.

About 1880 Meredith's health began to fail and until his death in 1909 he grew increasingly feeble as a result of locomotor ataxia, sometimes complicated by other disorders. In 1884 his wife died and so made a chasm in Meredith's life, though his utterances at this time attest the high spirituality of this highly human man.

For years Meredith's reading public had been scant. Several volumes of poems he had found necessary to publish at his own expense. But with Diana of the Crossways in 1885, the reading public was enlarged. Seven years later, various honors accorded him began to give evidence of the esteem with which he was regarded in the literary and social world. He was elected to succeed Tennyson as President of the Society of Authors in 1892. That same year he was granted an LL.D. from St. Andrew's University. In 1899 Oxford offered an honorary doctorate but Meredith was too frail to attend the Encaenia and so had to decline. In 1902 he became Vice-President of the London Library and the same year was offered a baronetcy, though he declined the latter. The Royal Society of Literature conferred its gold medal upon him in 1905. Likewise in 1905 he was admitted to the Order of Merit by Edward VII.¹

1. Robert Esmonde Sencourt, The Life of George Meredith, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1929, p. 290.

On the occasion of his eightieth birthday there were letters of tribute from all over the world and though he was a sick old man and although he speaks of the burden of acknowledging such correspondence, there must have been some satisfaction to the man who had tried so long to reach the public heart.

For most of Meredith's writings, Elmer James Bailey has provided a convenient classification according to decades, grouping four works under each decade.² The period beginning in 1849 and including the poem, "Chillianwallah," as well as a volume of poems, The Shaving of Shagpat, described as an Arabian entertainment, and Farina, a Gothic novel, is termed one of experiment or preparation. To clarify, Mr. Bailey adds:

"The composition of the poems, of the extravaganza, and of the medieval tale showed no fixity of purpose; and these works may be said, without undue disparagement, to exhibit a hesitancy which characterizes the apprentice rather than the experienced workman."

The decade beginning in 1859 is termed the period of influenced production since therein it is possible to find the result of Meredith's education and reading. The novels are further characterized by their attack upon sham and conventionality, or sentimentalism. This period includes The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, 1859; Evan Harrington, 1861; Sandra Belloni, 1864; Rhoda Fleming, 1865; and Vittoria, 1867, best considered in relation to Sandra Belloni, the story of which it continues.

2. Elmer James Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith: A Study, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1907, pp. 8-11.

The decade beginning 1871, Bailey terms the period of free invention, characterized chiefly by its attack upon egoism, this quality being manifested in various ways by each of the principal characters in the four novels, Roy Richmond, Nevil Beauchamp, Sir Willoughby Patterne and Alvan. The novels are The Adventures of Harry Richmond, 1871; Beauchamp's Career, 1876; The Egoist, 1879; and The Tragic Comedians, 1880. Perhaps nowhere is it clearer that we have a comic interpretation of society than in these novels, for though we perceive the ridiculous in each of these characters, they have all been made sympathetic to a greater or lesser extent.

For Roy Richmond we long feel much of his son's romantic enthusiasm, even though the failure to mature on the father's part makes him a sorry figure in the end. And though Nevil Beauchamp suffers from mental elephantiasis, there is a sincerity about him that attracts. Sir Willoughby, it is true, we detest at moments, especially as regards his playing with Laetitia, yet the man has good qualities that would make him admirable if the comic imps might free him from egoism. Alvan is a tragic figure in many respects, yet the spirit of the man glows long after we have met him.

The decade beginning in 1885, Bailey calls a period of concentrated interest and of attack upon conventional ideas of marriage, for in each of the four novels included the characters find their first marriage impossible. Diana leaves her husband; Victor Radnor leaves his wife and lives with the more

congenial and more suitable Nataly: Lord Ormont fails to pay proper respect to Aminta, and so she and Matthew Weyburn go to Switzerland to live a richer life with each other's assistance; Lord Fleetwood cannot reconcile his strange idea of freedom with marriage and so Carinthia and he part. The novels of this period include Diana of the Crossways, 1885; One of Our Conquerors, 1891; Lord Ormont and his Aminta, 1894; and The Amazing Marriage, 1895.

In 1877 Meredith delivered his Essay on Comedy and published it the same year. Posthumous and unfinished was another prose piece, Celt and Saxon. Meredith did not devote himself to the field of the short story, yet he has left some exquisite pieces, among them, The Gentlemen of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen, The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper, The House on the Beach, The Sentimentalists, and The Case of Chloë.

Meredith found poetry unremunerative, yet in the intervals between novel writing and editorial and journalistic work, produced several volumes. Modern Love, a volume of sonnets that are eloquent respecting Meredith and his first wife and that in the opinion of some critics constitute their author's most enduring achievement in poetry, was published in 1862. Poems and Lyrics, 1883, embodies much of Meredith's philosophy regarding the kinship between man and nature. Other volumes include: Ballads and Lyrics of Tragic Life, 1887; Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History, 1898; A Reading of Earth, 1901; and Last Poems, published posthumously in 1910.

Meredith's concern with regard to revealing sham and sentimentalism, the classification of novels following E. J. Bailey's scheme, has suggested to some extent. But if we would understand the poet and philosopher in Meredith, and these aspects of him are fused with the novelist, we must look to his philosophy. Because of his Essay on Comedy discussed above, we know somewhat of his beliefs. But besides being influenced by Molière and his comic point of view, George Meredith was also influenced by the scientific theories current in the latter part of the nineteenth century and these we must consider in relation to his worship of nature.

"He was of necessity a believer in Darwin's theory of evolution, and his interpretation of it was optimistic. He saw humanity as the flowering of nature, and the mind of man as the flowering of humanity. He believed that the process of evolution was still at work in brain and intelligence, that its future was beyond our dreams. Nature he presented under the metaphor of a rough but kindly mother who with a purpose which might be described as conscious had brought forth man and mind. Natural selection through conflict was the means she used in the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest."³

W. T. Young further analyzes Meredith's ideas regarding mind as an agent in the evolutionary process and the significance of struggle in life as these are illustrated in the lives of the men and women in the novels. He says:

"The key is the idea of an evolution carried on into the spheres of mind and spirit. Life is a continuous unfolding

³. Robert Morss Lovett and Helen Sard Hughes, The History of the Novel in England, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1932, p. 312.

of the germinal powers of earth until the spiritual essence in earthly things is liberated. Blood, brain and spirit are the names given to the successive stages of the process."⁴

The instincts of blood, it is pointed out, govern the primal man, but breed a progeny of evil. Recognizing this, the ascetic proposes to disregard instinct or stifle it, yet a saner view recognizes that instinct affords the means by which man keeps firm hold upon the earth. In the strife between the nobler and baser parts of man, brain is evolved, as well as society with its laws for preserving itself. And thus we move on towards the ultimate aim.

"Spiritual valiancy, which is tried in passionate ordeals of love, friendship and patriotism is the final goal; the 'warriors of the sighting brain' are the ideal type. The sanction of this ethical code is found in the 'good of the race,' the most prevalent idea in Meredith's writing."⁵

So we perceive Meredith's point of view. He would rid man and society of folly and unwisdom by making him more conscious of nature and its purifying elements, by causing him to perceive the benefits to be derived from such ordeals as life may impose, by forcing him always to distinguish between nature and convention, requiring a proper regard for social laws but never at the expense of natural laws. Though a reformer, he is not concerned with imposing new social systems or destroying the present social structure. His reform is directed towards

4. W. T. Young, The Cambridge History of English Literature, Cambridge University Press, 1916, vol. 13, Chap. 14, p.443.

5. Ibid., p. 443.

the spiritual and intellectual nature of men and society. To that he addresses his Comic Spirit.

Meredith's style has occasioned much discussion and some adverse criticism. W. T. Young's estimate merits consideration.

"The general effect of oracular allusiveness in Meredith's style appears, on examination to arise mainly from incidental comment, in which the figurative and aphoristic elements, due, in some degree, to the influence of Carlyle and, therefore, indirectly of Jean Paul Richter, abound to such a degree that we often seem to be looking at similes and metaphors instead of at the thing which was to have been said. On the other hand, the narrative prose, and that directly expressive of character, has, in general, a fine precision, an almost ostentatious felicity of phrase and diction. The writings of La Bruyère, Saint-Simon and Stendhal are parallels and, sometimes, models, for the clear exposition of intricate psychological and moral situations, and for the predilection for wit and epigram, which overflow into receptacles such as 'The Pilgrim's Scrip' and 'Maxims for Men.' The pervasive irony, exultancy and poetic distinction of Meredith's writing are native to his own mind."⁶

When glancing back over Fielding's life we saw how dramatist, journalist, reformer and novelist reflected themselves in greater or lesser degree in the novels. So a retrospective view of Meredith's life reveals that in the novelist we have the poet and philosopher, and in the presence of poet and philosopher we can explain to some extent the fusion of idealism and realism that pervades Meredith's work as contrasted with the realism of Fielding's. Both novelists, as has been stated, had a deep regard for Molière, but beyond this Fielding

6. W. T. Young, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

was influenced by Lucian whereas Meredith came under the influence of Goethe, the first a satirist of a critical and skeptical temper, the other a poet and philosopher who invigorated the cultural life of his time through his profound interest in and knowledge of humanity commingled with a calm and wisdom that saw much as possible even if at present unrealized. Fielding waged war against corruption and maudlin sentiment. Meredith, living through Victorian times, was not faced with public corruption but did perceive false reasoning and false standards in sentimentalism and egoism, and turned his comedy upon these.

Unlike Fielding and unlike many of the earlier nineteenth century novelists, we shall find Meredith to be concerned not so much with tangible social evils as reflected in the need for industrial or prison or debtor legislation as with defects in civilization. He is not concerned with vice, whether deliberate or the result of impulse, but with characters who to superficial eyes are gentlemen and gentlewomen in the finer sense of the word. On the whole, Meredith's characters will not be of the newly rich flaunting their gentility or making clear their social status. Nor will his characters lie or cheat after the fashion of so many of Fielding's hypocrites. Usually they will have a true scorn for such behavior, yet the flaws in their characters the Comic Spirit will discern and the analyzing of such flaws will be followed by a consideration of the social interaction. Were a person to suffer by

himself for egoism, the result might be pitiable yet not too significant. But individuals are not isolated and hence the necessity for comic perception to the end that civilization may be more nearly perfect.

In Fielding, therefore, we may expect to find a society where crudeness and vulgarity frequently intrude, where sanity is evidenced in its physical state of good health rather than in intellectual acumen. Occasionally we shall see evidence of a practical joker whose robust nature finds pleasure in plunging people into physical combat. But with Meredith we shall have drawing-room manners whether indoors or out.

Chapter V

COMEDY IN THE NOVELS OF FIELDING

Of Fielding's four novels, Jonathan Wild is not characterized by a comic point of view so much as by intense irony. There is no question of liking Jonathan Wild even though we see the ridiculous in him, for Wild's character is wholly depraved, without any redeeming trait to commend him to our sympathy. His moral standards are contrary to those upon which our civilization rests. Not only is he an enemy to society in general, he is not even true to his allies. Of the honor that is said to be among thieves, Wild gives no evidence. To achieve his ends, he sacrifices everyone, giving no thought to the misery he may cause to such generous, guileless persons as the Heartfrees represent. Wild is not a subject for comedy, for he personifies vice rather than the folly of human nature.

If we would seek comic touches in the novel, however, we have one instance in the narrative of Mrs. Heartfree following her return to England after a series of adventures. In her we recognize honesty and courage, yet there is a touch of vanity too, as we perceive when she shows a tendency to recall all the praise that had been addressed to her beauty, although her listeners try to evade such a recital. The episode, however, bears recalling. Mrs. Heartfree avers:

"If I mistake not, I was interrupted just as I was beginning to repeat some of the compliments made me by the hermit."--

"Just as you had finished them, I believe, madam," said the justice.--"Very well, sir," said she; "I am sure I have no pleasure in the repetition. He concluded them with telling me, though I was in his eyes the most charming woman in the world, and might tempt a saint to abandon the ways of holiness, yet my beauty inspired him with a much tenderer affection towards me than to purchase any satisfaction of his own desires with my misery."¹

But this incident is isolated in the novel, for the author's purpose in writing was twofold: to satirize the corruption he saw in the leading political figure of the day, Sir Robert Walpole, and to ridicule those readers who were showing an unhealthy interest in criminal biographies, distorting values so that the enemies of society were being romantized into heroes without consideration of their true status.

Of Jonathan Wild Ernest A. Baker has written:

"Grimmer satire than this cannot be found in English literature....Fielding maintains his calm intellectual attitude right to the end, except for a few unguarded explosions of human feeling in the story of the Heartfrees which scarcely interrupt the sustained irony. It is the sardonic humour of a man who detests heartlessness and hypocrisy, but who never despairs of humanity even in a world that is black with turpitude."²

"Jonathan Wild, then, a work in which pure intellect is the creative force rather than the genial and tolerant spirit that gave life and humanity to Joseph Andrews and the two later novels, turns out to be a double allegory; the satire has a general and also a particular subject."³

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1. Jonathan Wild, Book IV, Chapter XI.
 2. Ernest A. Baker, op. cit., p. 111.
 3. Ibid., p. 116.

For comic treatment of character we turn, therefore, to Joseph Andrews. Drawn with the greatest sympathy is Mr. Abraham Adams, the parson who accompanies Joseph Andrews upon his journey. Because of his long study of the classics, Parson Adams enjoys a pleasant sense of superiority over his fellowmen, believing that none can surpass him in knowledge of human nature since he is familiar with philosophers and poets, a master of Greek and Latin, able to read French, Italian and Spanish, and with some knowledge of Oriental languages. Yet it is his lack of perspicuity in reading the characters of those he encounters that draws the laughter of comedy upon the worthy parson. Because he himself is willing to follow the Gospel precept regarding charity, he expects that the world is similarly disposed, and despite experiences that prove otherwise, his persistent childlike confidence in human nature continues. When wishing to dispose of some sermons he has written, he believes he is making his case stronger by urging his need of money. The humor in the situation is increased, of course, when Adams learns that though he has made a journey expressly to dispose of his manuscript, the manuscript itself he neglected to bring.

His innocent vanity is deftly suggested when, following a conversation with Mr. Wilson in which the latter states that most people have a tendency towards pride over one thing or another, Adams interrupts by stating that he has always abhorred such a tendency in human nature, has indeed written a

truly excellent sermon on that very subject, and is certain Mr. Wilson would find it splendidly developed, if only he might read the sermon. But Mr. Wilson smiles without further comment as the Parson continues to think of the merits of his sermon.

Another instance of a failure to practice that which he preaches we recognize in the scene wherein Parson Adams is counselling Joseph against immoderate grief and extolling the virtue of resignation, commended so highly by the philosophers whose works he reads. The dialogue is interrupted by the news that the son of the Parson has been drowned. Immediately philosophic reflections give way before the lamentations of a father, who proceeds to tell that of all his children, this little boy had been dearest and nearest to his heart. None of them would he lose, but this little fellow was more endeared than the others. Word is brought, however, that the little boy was not drowned but still lives. His own heart now at ease, the Parson wishes to continue with his exhortation regarding resignation, but Joseph feels the force of actions as well as words.

Among the comic characters in the book, none equal Parson Adams in human sympathy and kindness, even though their vision of their fellowmen may be clearer. Parson Adams, though a good man, is curiously blind as to his own character as well as to defects in those about him. Ridiculous, but without the Parson's compensating qualities, is Mrs. Slipslop whose

fantastic language and affected manners make her memorable. She has pretensions to gentility and so is always concerned about trying to gain entrance to the society of those above her in rank, but infinitely scornful of those she feels beneath her. In her the author pokes fun at all who affect hard words, who use language to impress primarily rather than to communicate. In her hands language becomes a means for cloaking thought rather than expressing it, despite her lack of subtlety. From her we learn that hints sophisticate, passions are resulted, she is treated with ironing, and that always she is confidous.

Fanny and Pamela the author uses as types of the natural and the artificial. The fact that the two are discovered to be sisters only throws a more ridiculous light upon Pamela's attitude in scorning Fanny whom she regards as a mere servant and hence unworthy of Joseph. That Pamela herself but recently held the same social status as Fanny, she chooses to forget. Gentility to her mind is restricted to outward formal behavior and has in it nothing of "noblesse oblige". And Pamela is true to type in emphasizing decorum.

The contrast between Lady Booby and Mrs. Slipslop when both are maneuvering to entangle Joseph in amours is rendered more comic when one calls to mind the conduct of the pseudo-virtuous Pamela in the presence of Squire Booby. Both Joseph and Pamela talk of virtue, but the guilelessness of the one is a foil to the scheming, calculating attitude of the other.

Respecting Joseph Andrews and its author, one critic says:

"The illusion that he achieved was unprecedented in its completeness. It was the first time that anyone had depicted the scene of life with its background and surroundings in perfect verisimilitude. But it is Fielding's reading in the Book of Life, not the Book of Life itself, that we are invited to peruse. He claims the right to explain what may be obscure or open to a wrong interpretation, and of making any comment he thinks fit....He stood above like the Spirit of Comedy, illuminating all with the flashes of his irony, and at the end, with appropriate gesture, sent the company on their way."⁴

All the characters in Joseph Andrews, therefore, manifest in one way or another the follies or minor vices that cause them to fall a little or a great deal short of perfection. But the author would have his readers more wary of self-satisfaction by making them conscious of the universality of such defects. He is the moralist calling attention to those who talk of virtue and fail to exemplify it in their own lives, or who have greater regard for being esteemed virtuous than really being so. "Non videri sed esse", he counsels indirectly. The laughter of comedy he brings upon the optimistic view of mankind that regards humanity as excellent rather than as speckled with various follies. Goodness may have in it much of childlike candor, but wisdom calls for the recognition of realities, not abstraction in ideal realms.

The opening chapters of Tom Jones give a generous intimation of what we may anticipate in the rest of the book. Opposed to the simple directness and generous sympathy of

4. Ernest A. Baker, op. cit., p. 102.

Squire Allworthy, we have a host of characters in whom duplicity is always at work. The Squire's sister, Mrs. Bridget, attempts amiability and compliance with her brother because she is dependent upon him and it is politic to do so. But her lack of gratitude is evident in the mumbling to which she resorts when the Squire is out of hearing. She would have herself regarded as a martyr, acting against her better judgment for the sake of peace. The trace of servility and obsequiousness evidenced in Mrs. Bridget's conduct is more clearly revealed in Mrs. Deborah Wilkins, who from a spirit of policy never expresses an opinion until she first learns what the Squire and his sister think, upon which she fulsomely echoes their sentiments. Fielding's comparison of Mrs. Wilkins to a kite, he explains, when he shows her visiting the parish, conscious of her dignity as the Squire's housekeeper.

"As it is the nature of a kite to devour little birds, so it is the nature of such persons as Mrs. Wilkins to insult and tyrannise over little people. This being indeed the means which they use to recompense to themselves their extreme servility and condescension to their superiors; for nothing can be more reasonable, than that slaves and flatterers should exact the same taxes on all below them which they themselves pay to all above them."⁵

It is this same spirit of hypocritical fawning and abnegation which we find in numerous other characters throughout the book. What such persons say can never be depended on, for honesty never enters into their conversation, and the

5. Tom Jones, Book I, Chapter 6.

sentiments change according to the company. In one sense it is the spirit of egoism to which Meredith was to bring his comic spirit, for self-interest is the determining motive in action and altruism is practiced only when there is a desire to impress. An amiable person might very well withhold his own opinions in order to maintain harmony, but amiability, we know, is not a characteristic trait in such a person as Blifil, who is agreeable through policy with those who may be in a position to help him. Yet Fielding shows that such duplicity brings about its own reward, or its own punishment.

Just as Fielding brought the comic spirit to play upon the hypocrisy of Parson Trulliber in Joseph Andrews, a churchman who preached charity but failed to see why he should illustrate his precepts by the force of example, so there is a comic interpretation of the characters of Square and Thwackum, both of whom descant endlessly on goodness yet reveal themselves repeatedly to be pharisees and parasites, without any prompting towards active goodness and even without simple gratitude.

Indeed, Fielding distrusts all who talk overmuch of goodness. Squire Allworthy has little to say in that respect, but his actions are always prompted by generosity and human sympathy. Indeed, the Squire has in him that sense of the comic so highly regarded by Meredith, for the author says he is of those men of true wisdom and goodness who are content

"to take persons and things as they are,
without complaining of their imperfections,
or attempting to amend them. They can see
a fault in a friend, a relation, or an

acquaintance, without ever mentioning it to the parties themselves, or to any others; and this often without lessening their affection....Forgiveness of this kind we give and demand in turn. It is an exercise of friendship, and perhaps none of the least pleasant....There is, perhaps, no surer mark of folly than an attempt to correct the natural infirmities of those we love."⁶

It is to be observed, however, that Meredith would have a man of wisdom enjoy not only the role of tolerance and sympathy, but the more active one of accepting correction and growing to a higher level. To this end he writes in the Essay:

"You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes."⁷

Tom Jones, though without the mature wisdom of the Squire, has an instinct towards kindness and tolerance, even though his impulsiveness tends to dominate his character throughout most of the book. So he bears no ill-will towards those who have injured him or tried to injure him. Even, he is willing to forgive the theft of Black George, the poacher, though he had reason to expect gratitude from the man.

But through Squire Allworthy we have Fielding's judgment on ingratitude, when Allworthy says:

"I have often pitied the fate of a highwayman, when I have been on the grand jury, and have more than once applied to the judge on the behalf of such as have had any mitigating circumstances in their

6. Tom Jones, Book II, Chapter 7.

7. An Essay on Comedy, p. 133.

case; but when dishonesty is attended with any blacker crime, such as cruelty, murder, ingratitude, or the like, compassion and forgiveness then become faults."⁸

Herein we have a clue to Fielding's major tenets. Depravity and vice as represented in Jonathan Wild merit condemnation without sympathy. But a heart that is not moved by gratitude is also unnatural and therefore not greatly removed from utter depravity.

"In the moral teaching of Fielding, feeling holds the first place; on the one hand happiness does not lie in outward prosperity but in inward contentment; and in the same way perfection does not consist in the accomplishment of actions which are reputed virtuous, but in the consciousness of a good intention. All Blifil's actions are outwardly virtuous, but Blifil is a rogue; all Tom Jones's actions appear to be vicious, but Tom Jones is an excellent fellow."⁹

Yet though Fielding would give an important place to feeling as a guide to action, he does not deny position to reason. Thus Aurelien Digeon declares:

"His sentimentalism is never unbridled; it is always restrained and supported by his intelligence. Even when he attacks the moral standards of his age, his blows are methodically directed by the power of reason."¹⁰

Of Tom Jones as an example of comedy as well as an example of the epic which Fielding intended his work to resemble, Ernest A. Baker says:

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8. Tom Jones, Book XVIII, Chapter 11.
 9. Aurelien Digeon, op. cit., p. 165.
 10. Ibid., P. 167.

"In spirit Tom Jones is a close analogue to the grave philosophic comedy of Molière. It is, however, to a large extent epical in structure, or rather an alternation of epical and dramatic, the narrative complicating itself so as to bring various conflicting interests and rival intrigues to a close encounter, and then, by means of a sudden disclosure unravelling the complication. In common with epic and with the higher comedy, it is distinguished by the rigorous linkage of cause and effect, the agency of causation residing in the characters in whom the play of motive is clearly exposed."¹¹

"The philosophic reflections and the comic irony are addressed to our intellect, the sentiment and pathos to the heart, our intuitive sense of what is like nature constitutes the test of his verisimilitude."¹²

In Tom Jones, therefore, we see as it were a pageant in which affectation and pretense are espied in manifold disguises. We are invited to compare what a person says with what he does, to note how many who are loudest in their protestations regarding a particular virtue have the least of that virtue. Generous, open natures have no thought of parading their goodness; their instinct is towards sympathy and altruism; their easy conscience frees them from any concern about reputation. Mistakes they make, but of treachery and duplicity they will not be guilty.

Amelia, Fielding's last novel, does not instance comedy in the manner of Joseph Andrews or Tom Jones, for the major appeal of the book is to the heart rather than to the mind. In part the story reflects the author's interest in the cause

11. Ernest A. Baker, Op. cit., p. 124.

12. Ibid., p. 146.

of social reform, especially as related to debtors, for the early scenes reveal the evils inherent in the prison life and court procedure of the time. Persons are flung into prison and then released without any real thought of justice. Yet the author's characteristic interest in disclosing hypocrisy we note in the conversation between Fanny Matthews, a woman of the town, and Captain William Booth, the husband of Amelia, but a weakling who always proves a tool in strong hands. He is lengthy in his praise of his wife, yet accepts the invitation of Fanny Matthews. He has reason to suspect his own judgment and to place confidence in that of his wife, yet he chooses to believe her guilty of nursing fancies.

Booth and Fanny show a tendency to pose, to magnify themselves in their account of their lives, yet their actions, as in the case of all of Fielding's hypocrites, reveal that both are but paltry creatures. Another hypocrite we have in the person of Mrs. Ellison, the keeper of a lodging house, who frequently assures her listeners of her good family and the emphasis she places upon virtue. Yet she is in the pay of a libertine and has no hesitancy about lending her efforts towards the attempt to ensnare Amelia.

Yet, as has been said, the book is not so much intent upon bringing intelligent laughter to light upon folly and imposture as with imbuing the portrait of Amelia with loveliness and goodness. She is a loving wife and mother, unchecked in her affection despite the evidence of her husband's weakness. In her the author limns his own wife who had died some years

before and hence would be unlikely to serve as an example of folly.

By way of summary regarding Fielding's use of comedy, therefore, one may say that he is interested in exposing the falseness behind much of the morality he saw about him. Viciousness and the tendency to romanticize such viciousness he would first excoriate. Bourgeois morality that schemed for worldly advantage while talking of virtue he would also expose. All that savored of the pharisee he would make ridiculous. To a code of ethics that tended always towards materialism, he would oppose one that instanced generosity and human kindness. The spoken word he would have paralleled by the deed. Instead of endless talk about virtue, he would have some evidence of it.

Chapter VI

THE COMIC SPIRIT IN MEREDITH

Since the purpose of comedy, according to Meredith, is to preserve sanity and so safeguard society and civilization, we shall find that when men wax pretentious, overblown, or unduly self-centered, either the comic imps will be released or in the event that they are not, at some point society will be jeopardized. The silvery laughter of the imps affords a happier outcome; tragedy or near-tragedy will result when individuals are without the saving grace of comic perception.

Among the works published by Meredith in the decade beginning in 1849, there is no touch of comedy comparable to that we find in his later books. Yet it is significant that in The Shaving of Shagpat there is reference to the importance of laughter, a point, incidentally, which induces Augustus Henry Able to see therein the influence of Meredith's father-in-law, Thomas Love Peacock since, as he mentions,

"Meredith and Peacock both identify laughter with the power of self-examination, which is the center of sanity, and with joy, which is the outward token or sign of sanity."¹

According to the discovery of Noorna of Oolb in Shagpat, a person who has lost his human form may be restored to that form and to sanity, if he can be induced to laugh.

1. Augustus Henry Able, George Meredith and Thomas Love Peacock: A Study in Literary Influence. A thesis. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1933, p. 38.

The novels published in the ten years following 1859, however, reveal the particular human foibles for which the comic spirit is the only remedy, that is, undue stress upon convention at the expense of instinct, undue faith in a system as opposed to instinct, and "sentimentalism", the game of "Fine Shades and Nice Feelings."

In the person of Sir Austin Feverel, father of Richard, in The Ordeal we confront one type of egoist, for as a result of having been disappointed in life, Sir Austin endeavors to perfect a system which will justify his own existence, prove his superiority. In his infatuation with the system, however, Sir Austin gives no thought to the propensities of his son. And for all his concern about Richard's welfare, physical and mental, he proves his essential cold-bloodedness when he imposes an arbitrary punishment upon the recently married husband by way of satisfying himself that he does possess influence over his son. Like the more famous egoist, Sir Willoughby Patterne, Sir Austin Feverel seeks the applause of those around him, acts so that he may be considered both good and wise. Of Sir Austin might be made a comment similar to that voiced by Harry Richmond regarding his father: "I chafed at his unteachable spirit, surely one of the most tragical things in life." If the test of civilization is to be seen in the perception of the comic, then the inadequacy of men like Sir Austin is apparent. Not even after suffering what would have developed most men, does Sir Austin become more

sympathetic to life. He is still intent upon his system, still untaught and seemingly unteachable. Of the mixture of the comic and the tragic that we find in him, Hugh Walker says:

"The comedy lies in the futility of his attempt to play Providence, the tragedy in the fateful consequences which that attempt, futile as it is, brings in its train."²

An example of comic mingled with humorous treatment we find in Louisa, Countess de Saldar, Evan's sister in Evan Harrington. Frequently she is regarded as the feminine counterpart of that other adventurer, Roy Richmond, since like him she is a snob, concerned with securing admission to a society from which the circumstances of her birth would probably exclude her. But just as Roy Richmond develops a fantastic lineage in which he partly believes, so the Countess by innuendo and often outright lying, leads those around her to believe her aristocratic rather than the daughter of a famous tailor who through her marriage to a Portuguese nobleman gained her title.

Despite the fact that the Countess reveals herself as intriguing and deceitful, there are moments when her strategy forces an amused admiration. If she counsels Evan regarding the importance of manners, of carrying one's shoulders properly, and of similar details, she herself certainly practices what she commends. Let the situation be ever so critical--

2. Hugh Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, Cambridge University Press, London, 1931, p. 785.

too critical for such as the gentler sister, Caroline--the Countess maintains her composure. Were her end only a nobler one, she would have our entire admiration. Skill and courage such as hers merit the battlefield rather than the drawing-room. But just as Sir Austin conceived his educational scheme without sufficient regard for the healthy instincts of his son, so Louisa elaborated her plans without sufficiently regarding the instincts of her brother Evan, especially when those instincts are swayed by the common sense of Mrs. Mel, Evan's mother, and old Tom Cogglesby. For a long time, however, Evan's fate is in doubt. He is in love with the attractive Rose Jocelyn (for whom Mrs. Janet Ross, a friend of Meredith, furnished the portrait) just as later Harry Richmond is to be in love with a princess above him in rank. But Evan determines to accept his position as the son of a tailor, only to find that circumstances permit the marriage with Rose after all. Yet Evan had made the noble gesture.

In Sandra Belloni we are introduced to sentimentalism or undue deference to conventional ideas, concerning which Joseph Warren Beach points out:

"The whole conception of the sentimentalist as an object of comic treatment is one of the most original of Meredith's contributions to the English novel."³

Sentimentalism is the fetish of the Pole sisters, opposed to whom is the fresh naturalness of the heroine, Emilia Alessandra

3. Joseph Warren Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith: An Interpretation, Longmans, Green & Co., New York, 1911, p. 86.

Belloni, or as she is known in the later volumes, Vittoria Campo. She is of those souls of whom Meredith has written that their harmony with Nature reveals "a reverence for the laws of their being, and a natural obedience to common sense."⁴ Of the three Pole sisters, Elmer James Bailey declares:

"Arabella, Cornelia, and Adela Pole stand as the embodiment of that attitude of mind which, knowing itself to be wholly commonplace, still undertakes to deceive not only the world but itself also into the belief that it is possessed of innate grace and charm. This mental condition and the conduct to which it gives rise, Meredith looked upon as a phase of what he terms 'Sentimentalism'. As expressed in the three sisters, it shows that they felt themselves to be in exclusive possession of the Nice Feelings and unsurpassed in comprehension of the Fine Shades."⁵

The sisters serve as foils to Sandra, but it is their brother Wilfrid who is subjected to trial, somewhat after the manner of other heroes. Like his sisters, he is a victim of Sentimentalism, yet the author points out that he is not unteachable. He will not end up as did Sir Austin and Roy Richmond, but because he is a sentimentalist, he will be longer in achieving spiritual manhood. The distinction between his artifice and the more natural conduct of Sandra is emphasized in the scene treating of Hippogriff, which the author defines as "the foal of Fiery Circumstance born out of Sentiment" or "Sur-excited sentiment". When Emilia is in love, she is described as "noble strength on fire" whereas with Wilfrid

4. Sandra Belloni, Chapter 51.

5. Elmer James Bailey, op. cit., p. 81.

who is riding on Hippogriff, it is a case of madness, characteristic of sentimentalists who are not actuated by nature but by extraneous images and sensations.

Because sentimentalists are the legitimate prey of the comic imps, opposed as they are to the natural working of society, they are ridiculed as well as worsted. The three sisters and Wilfrid all play with love and meet the disappointment they earn for themselves.

"Meredith's most terrific example, however, illustrative of the more serious dangers of the Sentimental, the story of the utter tragedy that may result from a too exclusive addiction to the 'fine shades of feeling,' he has presented in the persons of Purcell Barrett, and his female companion-piece, Adela Pole of Sandra Belloni."⁶

In Vittoria where the scene is laid in Italy at the time of the war with Austria, we find most of the characters of Sandra Belloni, but save for occasional references, the author is not concerned with sentimentalism so much as with revealing the development of Emilia and to a lesser extent of Wilfrid Pole, the latter attaining his spiritual majority as a result of suffering and of the growth of a genuine feeling for somebody other than himself. Merthyr Powys, whom Emilia marries, is less fully drawn than many of the other characters, yet his strength is evident, and though there is a trace of sentimentalism in him, it is superficial rather than deep-seated.

Rhoda Fleming is not of the genre of Meredith's other

6. Augustus Henry Able, op. cit., p. 48.

novels and so does not afford a proper consideration of the comic spirit at work, though the character of Dahlia Fleming gives significance to the novel itself, perhaps because she is so frequently looked upon as a more tragic Clarissa Harlowe.

In the decade beginning 1871 we have the four novels dealing with egoism under various manifestations, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, Beauchamp's Career, The Egoist and The Tragic Comedians. Roy Richmond in the first novel engrosses much of our attention, partly because of his romantic imagination which enraptures us in the beginning even as it did his young son, Harry. But gradually the spirit of comedy tears away the romantic glamour that Roy Richmond has flung about himself and so we see a creature who is both impostor and snob. He tries to maneuver a marriage between his son Harry and the German princess, Ottilia, but rather to satisfy his own vanity than because of love for that son, whom he had abandoned years before. Harry remarks that his father's spirit was unteachable. His imprudence in directing his own life had not assisted him to any better judgment, for he proceeded to squander his son's money with the same unthinking spirit with which he had spent his own. But the Comic Muse shows us the ridiculous in people, without making us love them less. And when we learn that Roy Richmond entered the burning house in order to save Dorothy Beltham, the woman on whose income he had lived unknowingly for years, the final romantic gesture does much to beg forgiveness for the man. Romantic, imprudent, an impostor and

social parasite, he yet was not without heart and a bit of gratitude. Unromantic, prudent, forthright, Squire Beltham is the antithesis of Roy Richmond, and a splendid illustration that the mind rather than the heart must rule an individual. One who trusted to his emotions would be swayed by the brilliance of Roy Richmond, perhaps to his chagrin. But the solid Squire proved himself always dependable, a man of integrity, but without any of the qualities that capture the imagination and set the fancy aglow. Yet he would discharge his responsibilities whereas Roy Richmond would consider such matters beneath his attention.

Meredith's philosophy regarding the undisciplined heart he intimates in this book during the course of a conversation between Harry and Dr. Julius, Ottilia's teacher, when the latter urges the advantage of aiming one's head at a star, saying: "Even if you miss it you don't fall." But when the heart aims at the unattainable it is doomed to fall, for, "Give that organ full play and you may make sure of a handful of dust."⁷

Interesting also is the comment,

"Egoism is not peculiar to any period of life....I remember....blaming everybody I knew for insufficiency....I blamed the Fates for harassing me, circumstances for not surrounding me with friends worthy of me."⁸

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7. The Adventures of Harry Richmond, Chapter 29.
 8. Ibid., Chapter 45.

Here indeed is epitomized the misfortune of that uncivilized person, the egoist. Lacking comic perception, he tends towards seeing himself as the particular object of Fate, and blames Fate when he should look to his own shortcomings. But were the egoist wiser, he would not be an egoist.

A second type of egoist we find in Nevil Beauchamp of Beauchamp's Career, but Nevil's egoism arises like Roy Richmond's and unlike Sir Willoughby's from an excess of heart that is not guided by his mind. A victim of mental elephantiasis, he spent himself in the effort to reform society, without any true idea of the nature of the people whom he wished to reform. Yet despite his quixotism, most people who knew Nevil Beauchamp liked him, Rosamund's interest being evidenced from the beginning when she visits the Doctor and allows the absurd tale of the insult to go undenied. Cecilia would have loved Nevil had he shown any real sympathy, loved him despite his impatience, his jumping "from first principles to extremes," his acting as if he alone were possessed of solutions.

Through Nevil the author brings the comic perception to play upon many of the fads that prevailed during part of the nineteenth century, fads that Peacock laughed at in his perfectibilians and deteriorationists and to which Meredith recurs in his description of the company assembled at dinner in the home of Victor and Nataly Radnor of One of Our Conquerors where we see those who make a cult of meat-eating or a vegetable diet or similar vagaries. Nevil's unwisdom lies in his

fanatical adherence to one idea at a time, which in his mind assumes a significance incommensurate with its actual importance.

So the author is moved to write of him:

"In this respect he seemed to have no memory. But who has much that has given up his brains to a single idea? It is at once a devouring dragon, and an intractable steam-force; it is a tyrant that has eaten up a senate, and a prophet with a message. Inspired of solitariness and gigantic size, it claims divine origin. The world can have no peace for it."⁹

Of this noble rebel against the easy conservatism represented by Nevil's uncle, Everard Romfrey, Rosamund suggests the spirit in her comment, "He runs too much from first principles to extremes." Jenny Denham completes the characterization when she says:

"Men who do not live in the present chiefly, but hamper themselves with giant tasks in excess of alarm for the future, however devoted and noble they may be.... reduce themselves to the dimensions of pigmies; they have the cry of infants."¹⁰

In Nevil Beauchamp, therefore, we see a type of reformer and fanatic, not personally selfish, but imprudent and without sagacity. The end to be attained makes them negligent of means, as well as somewhat scornful of all who will not hurry upon the same mad quest. Because Nevil was suggested by Captain Frederick Maxse, a friend of Meredith for many years, two excerpts from letters addressed to Captain Maxse are illuminating.

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9. Beauchamp's Career, Chapter 38.
10. Ibid., Chapter 55.

"The fanatical worship of truth will always be fruitless."¹¹

"Don't forget that mental arrogance is as a fiery wine to the spirit--a little of it gives a proper pride; but you carry too much."¹²

"All Meredith's comic figures are studies in civilization unperfected," Joseph Warren Beach has stated, and Sir Willoughby Patterne of The Egoist is to be so regarded.¹³ Defective education and a craving for adulation we read in Sir Willoughby, yet the man has a desire to be generous, indeed is generous so far as money is concerned, but because he lacks spiritual independence, because he is not self-reliant but must have the tribute of others, he moves from one ridiculous pose to another. To him public opinion matters tremendously; he has little life outside of what people will think. He writes travel letters to Laetitia Dale with the thought that such letters will be read and that he will be seen as a romantic, colorful personality. He desires to have Vernon Whitford live with him as a sort of literary pensioner in order that the contrast between their persons will redound to Sir Willoughby's credit. Beyond this, he sees a measure of prestige accruing to himself as a result of literary articles written at the Hall while Vernon is there, just as the Pole sisters chose to play hostess to Sandra Belloni with the thought that her musical talent would somehow shed light upon them.

11. Letters of George Meredith, collected and edited by W. M. Meredith, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1912, p. 169.

12. Ibid., p. 177.

13. Joseph Warren Beach, op. cit., p. 157.

Sir Willoughby's egoism is expressed in his attempt to realize himself in the inner lives of other persons, in the lives of Laetitia and Clara, of Vernon and young Crossjay, and of the two aged aunts. But such realization is at variance with the aims of society and so the Comic Imps are released and Sir Willoughby is frustrated, with the result that instead of being a lordly personage disposing of lives and money, he dwindles into a pathetic figure. Yet the Imps appear to have treated him better than they did some other recipients of comic laughter. One feels that Sir Willoughby, though he may not acquire comic perception, will nevertheless take care to shield himself henceforth from the silvery laughter.

The Tragic Comedians is inspired by the comic point of view, but there is no note of silvery laughter at the end. Rather is the dénouement instinct with tragedy, a tragedy that the unwisdom of sentimentalism has brought about, for sentimentalism with its stress upon the conventional at the expense of true feeling has wrecked the love of Alvan and Clotilde.

The novel is based upon an incident in the lives of Ferdinand Lassalle, German socialist, and Helene von Dönniges, who become Alvan and Clotilde. Both suspect that Clotilde's family will not approve of any alliance between a Jewish socialist and a Christian family of some wealth. Yet they wish the stamp of approbation, and thus forfeit the chance for happiness that Alvan's wife may be honorably won.

"He who had many times defied the world in hot rebellion, had become, through

his desire to cherish a respectable passion, if not exactly slavish to it, subservient, as we see royal personages, that are happy to be on bowing terms with the multitude bowing lower....Ceasing to be a social rebel, he conceived himself as a recognized dignitary, and he passed under the bondage of that position."¹⁴

And so later Alvan, knowing he has lost Clotilde, must say to himself:

"What impious villain was it refused the gifts of the gods, that he might have it bestowed on him according to his own prescription of the ceremonies!....The laughter of the gods is the lightning of death's irony over mortals. Can they have a finer subject than a giant gone fool?"¹⁴

But sentimentalism is indicated not only by its stress upon convention, but also by inadequate perception of facts and persons. As evidenced in Clotilde, this revealed itself in insufficient knowledge of her own character while Alvan's fault lay in failing to estimate the character of Clotilde. Brilliant, sympathetic, they nevertheless lost happiness because of trifling with what Meredith regarded as among life's most precious gifts, the love of two people for each other.

"Haply if he had lingered....he.... might have cast a thought on the irony of the fates felling a man like him....He might have fathered some jest at life, with rueful relish of the flavour: for such is our manner of commenting on ourselves when we come to shipwreck through unseaworthy pretensions."¹⁵

Written during the decade beginning in 1885 were the four novels characterized by an attack upon the conventional ideas

14. The Tragic Comedians, Chapter 9.

15. Ibid., Chapter 19.

of marriage, Diana of the Crossways, One of Our Conquerors, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, and The Amazing Marriage.

Brilliant and witty in conversation, beautiful to look upon, and admittedly a favorite heroine with her creator, Diana Merion has nevertheless been frequently regarded as a feminine egoist. Some points she has in common with Sir Willoughby, in that she likes an audience as background for her charm, and yet Meredith does not design her as the subject for comic laughter especially. Rather is that reserved for Percy Dacier and Constance Asper, in comparison with whom Diana appears, if not entirely natural in the sense that Sandra Belloni is, at least not guilty of fiddling "harmonics on the sensual strings." Lady Emma Dunstane's impression of Constance Asper is thus described:

"She was white from head to foot; a symbol of purity. Her frail smile appeared deeply studied in purity. Judging from her look and her reputation, Emma divined that the man was justly mated with a devious filmy sentimentalist, likely to 'fiddle harmonics on the sensual strings' for him at a mad rate in the years to come."¹⁶

In contrast with this was Diana, somewhat smirched perhaps from her contact with life, yet still eager and honest and wiser as a result of her ordeal. She would never resort to frail smiles nor expressions studied in purity nor in any artifice of similar design. Mistakes she still might make, yet she was impressed by the remark, "There is nothing the

16. Diana of the Crossways, Chapter 39.

body suffers that the soul may not profit by." She would go on living, but such persons as Constance Asper and Percy Dacier would continue to shut their eyes to much of life, and so lose contact with reality as well as with each other.

In One of Our Conquerors the Comic Spirit turns upon sentimental optimism as represented by Victor Radnor. As a young man, Victor had married an older woman largely for the sake of her money, though being sentimental he did not so analyze his motives. Later he met his true mate, Nataly, and chose to live with the latter. Had Victor been content with that, all would have gone well, but he like Alvan wanted the approval of society, even though he had broken one of society's laws. Therein lay his tragedy. He would not consider the situation truly, but directed by emotions, moved from one environment to another, learning nothing from repeated experiences, closing his eyes to what was before him, intent upon what he wished, but heedless of difficulties. His was the tragedy of one who would not reconcile ambition with his capacity for achieving it. He thought much of some vague "Idea" for bringing happiness to society, yet never reached the point where he could seize his thoughts and put them into coherent form. But that did not trouble him too greatly. The Idea was there and with his unthinking optimism, he felt he would catch up with it eventually.

Egoism in the form of autocracy is the defect in the character of Lord Ormont in Lord Ormont and His Aminta, that brings his marriage to disaster. Like Lord Fleetwood in the

later novel, he cherishes the illusion of independence, and for the sake of such freedom jeopardizes his marriage, refusing to take the step that would allow to his wife the social recognition of her status. Too late he decides to make atonement to his wife. She has wearied of his trifling, his lack of comprehension, and has taken the chance for growth and love offered by Matey Weyburn, and so the two go to Switzerland to render mutual assistance in carrying out the educational scheme that Weyburn had thought about and talked about.

But though Lord Ormont had the tendency towards autocracy, there was magnanimity in the man. He grew through suffering, paying for his folly in the loss of happiness, yet generous in seeing that the fault was his rather than Aminta's. And thus he could prove his nobility when he trusted his nephew to the care of Aminta and Weyburn, believing they could bring out the good qualities of the boy if anyone could.

Throughout his books Meredith has many passages that glow with poetic fervor, either because some natural loveliness grows vivid under the artist's hand or because the bond of sympathy between radiant, aspiring natures becomes a theme for rapture. Other passages there are that halt the reader because the moment is a solemn one and treated with eloquent simplicity. Such a scene we have in Lord Ormont and His Aminta when Matey Weyburn's mother has died and he comes to hear of her death from Aminta. But apart from the persons involved in the drama, the paragraphs have interest for us because they express their

author's disclaim of mysticism in favor of a religion never separate from the earth. Shelley in Adonais saw beauty as eternal and the beauty that men created as living on in Nature, so that all men may have it as their heritage. So Meredith sees goodness as eternal, living on in our mind. Thus he writes:

"Death was a stranger to him. The still warm, half-cold nerveless hand smote the fact of things as they were through the prayer for things as he would have them. The vitality of his prayer was the sole light he had. It drew sustainment from the dead hand in his grasp, and cowered down to the earth claiming all we touch. He tried to summon vision of a soaring spirituality; he could not; his understanding and senses were too stricken. He prayed on. His prayer was as a little fountain, not rising high out of earth, and in the clutch of death; but its being it had from death, his love gave it food.

"Prayer is power within us to communicate with the desired beyond our thirsts....The good life gone lives on in the mind; the bad has but a life in the body, and that not lasting....We do not get to any heaven by renouncing the Mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is best to believe that Earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations."¹⁷

A far less agreeable egoist than Lord Ormont is Lord Fleetwood in The Amazing Marriage for his was sentimental egoism which prevented his learning from experience. A puzzling character he remains with his high regard for keeping a promise combined with his unchivalric treatment of Carinthia. To marry, attend a boxing match, then remember an appointment to attend a ball, and as a result to leave his wife without further ado,

17. Lord Ormont and His Aminta, Chapter 14.

and to forget her until others saw fit to stir his recollection --such actions invite the comic imps. But Fleetwood was impervious to the imps. His marriage he had entered upon without love. Carinthia he did not wish to envisage as a woman so much as a strange mixture of wood nymph and goddess. For the love she would have given, he had no desire. Rather did his romantic sensibilities wish for mystery and illusion, nothing that the word wife betokened. For that implied a limitation of his freedom, and entire freedom, without ties or bonds linking him to anybody or anything he must have. Such freedom he could not find in society and so we hear of his retiring to a Welsh monastery to enjoy his illusions undisturbed by the reality the world might force upon him.

"Snobbery, sentimentalism, egoism-- these are the three comic traits which Meredith finds to be most characteristic of our half-refined society. They all run together in this last of Meredith's figures.The sentimentalist proves a self-indulgent egoist. The modern egoist is a sentimental self-deceiver."¹⁸

The various weaknesses that Meredith discerned in the life of his time and his method of scrutinizing such weaknesses we have shown. His was not a temper unduly critical of his fellow-men, but the vision of what men might be urged him to lift the veil from other eyes. Meredith's beliefs regarding goodness, wisdom, benevolence, freedom, and the relation between nature and circumstance, George Rogers Swann has outlined in the parallel he sees between Meredith and Hegel. Because it

18. Joseph Warren Beach, op. cit., p. 156.

embodies what the Comic Spirit intends, we shall quote:

"The good may be summed up as wisdom and benevolence united in free personality.

"Wisdom implies ability to judge the character of the self, the good of the self, the characters and goods of other selves.

"Benevolence implies a sense of one's own true value, generosity, affection, and sympathy, with other natures and wishes and a whole-hearted desire to advance the common good.

"Freedom implies ability to pursue the good. It is voluntary, for it lies in everyone's power.

"Nature or personality, and circumstance are naturally harmonious. This harmony is disturbed by evil. Good restores the harmony between human nature and circumstance."¹⁹

19. George Rogers Swann, Philosophic Parallelisms in Six English Novelists. The Conception of Good, Evil and Human Nature. A thesis. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1929, p. 101.

Chapter VII

FIELDING AND MEREDITH JUXTAPOSED

The part which comedy plays in the novels of Fielding and Meredith we have suggested in previous chapters. Yet, though both authors employ laughter as a device for cleansing men's minds of folly, it is obvious that the follies they select as the butt of such laughter are not identical. Partly this is because of the society they portray, for in general Fielding's characters are characterized by blood and brawn rather than mind and spirit. And from this partial distinction arises the fact that Fielding confines himself to rather more superficial defects than does Meredith. Beyond this, Fielding's characters are more easily divided into good or bad than are Meredith's. Blifil is hypocritical and plausible; Tom is generous and frank, even though a creature of impulse. But though we should rank Sir Willoughby lower in the moral scale than Vernon Whitford, Sir Willoughby is by no means evil. His is not a simple but rather a complex defect. His motives are not purely generous, neither are they purely selfish, but always fused and twisted. He does not wish to be ungenerous ever, but this wish is swayed and colored by the deep-seated egoism of the man, the craving for esteem and adulation. He would be generous and yet he is selfish. His actions are usually reasoned rather than spontaneous, but the reasoning is devious, colored overmuch by concern about the opinion of others.

Redworth is also a rational creature who thinks before undertaking a project, yet where the one thinks in circles, as it were, Redworth considers ends and means without regarding everything only in its relation to himself and the honor it may shed upon him. Sir Willoughby wishes to be a hero; Redworth is content with being a man.

Fielding's characters reflect the average humanity of his time, but in Meredith we find the flowering of civilization, unperfected, it is true, yet towering spiritually above the men and women revealed by Fielding. In general, the latter's characters are concerned largely with tangible ends, marriage with the assurance of a comfortable income or physical union without the formality of marriage. But Meredith's men and women frequently seek to realize themselves by pursuing some end that seems to afford greater freedom to men, either through education or through a different form of government. So Emilia or Sandra enlists in the cause of freedom when Italy is struggling with Austria. Carinthia and her brother Chillon merge themselves in the conflict between Spain and France. Aminta and Weyburn conduct their school in Switzerland that youth may move out from the old fetters and prepare for a more civilized society. Nevil Beauchamp strives to reform politics in England.

Another distinction between Fielding and Meredith is that one presents his characters in a comic light, but usually the benefit from the comic representation lies primarily with the reader whereas Meredith indicates his characters under the

influence of the comic spirit, which in most instances exercises a chastening power so that there is tangible development on their part, a spiritual awakening, as it were. Parson Adams at the end of Joseph Andrews is really no more experienced as regards the practical concerns of daily living than he was in the beginning, although Tom Jones has matured as a result of his adventures. But Lord Ormont has very definitely grown broader visioned as a result of the suffering that followed upon his persistence in egoism for so many years. Diana has a truer appreciation of herself and of Redworth than was true at the beginning of her story. Evan Harrington and Harry Richmond both achieved a better sense of values as a result of their contact with social adventurers in the form of sister and father.

Of the verisimilitude of Fielding's characters there is no question, yet as characters they fall below those of Meredith. Fielding's men do not combine good health, wisdom and sympathy in the degree that we find these qualities in such persons as Weyburn, Redworth, Vernon Whitford and Merthyr Powys, even though Mr. Wilson and Squire Allworthy are to be esteemed for many good qualities.

Frederic T. Blanchard declares that

"Fielding's women have a manly honor, tolerance, greatness, in addition to their tenderness and kindness. Literature has not their peers, and life has never had many to compare with them."¹

But note the enthusiasm evoked by Meredith's heroines of

1. Frederic T. Blanchard, op. cit., p. 508.

whom Louis Cazamian has written:

"They often possess, with the charm of sweetness, a valiant energy, and a spiritual brightness which throws into shade the more prosaic virtues of the men. Lucy, Vittoria, Clara, Renée, Diana, Aminta, Nesta, through their freshness, their purity, their courage, and at the same time their sure, intuitive intelligence, are not unworthy of their Shakespearean sisters. The imagination which has created them has added to the treasure of nobleness some of its most graceful and most brilliant visions."²

Fielding is concerned with tearing away the disguise of hypocrisy and making clear the distinction between the materialistic bourgeois morality of a Pamela and an instinctive feeling for goodness that is not exercised for the sake of reward. He would have truth and goodness respected because of themselves, not because it may be prudent to esteem them. Meredith, too, allied himself on the side of truth and clear thinking in his excoriating of sentimentalism, which he regarded as the besetting sin of his day. So he analyzes the serpentine reasoning of the sentimentalist, notes his tendency to be guided by convention rather than by nature, and by losing sight of reality to grow more and more muddled in his thinking so that instead of pursuing a single end, he attempts to reconcile what are irreconcilable.

As apostles, therefore, of sanity and commonsense, which is wisdom applied to the problem of everyday living, Fielding and Meredith regarded themselves. Through their novels both

2. Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1935, p. 1276.

men sought to disseminate their own store of wisdom and their own vision of life. With Fielding, the vision was concerned with life as it is, but need not be; with Meredith the vision is of life as it is generally and as it is in the lives of the finest characters, the men and women who have harmonized blood, brain and spirit, who feel and think and aspire, who live fully in the present, who bring ideals and circumstance into accord. The poem by Meredith epitomizes such characters.

TEST OF MANHOOD

Obedient to Nature, not her slave:
Her lord, if to her rigid laws he bows;
Her dust, if with his conscience he plays knave,
And bids the Passions on the Pleasures browse.

DIGEST OF THESIS

Just as wisdom and virtue are in natural harmony with each other, so wisdom and folly are naturally antipathetic. Hence, the Comic Muse which appeals to sanity finds its inevitable prey in manifestations of folly. Since, however, each age fancies new forms of folly, the Comic artist will be interested in discovering such folly and exposing the true state of affairs. Such a rôle Henry Fielding assumed in the eighteenth century, when vice and hypocrisy assumed the guise of virtue and thought by mouthing moral sentiments constantly to conceal the truth. Though intent upon reform, Fielding did not try to win men to his manner of thinking by uttering lofty sentiments or describing noble characters. Therein lay the danger of the pharisaical spirit, too many exemplars of which he saw about him, giving frequent evidence of the disparity between what was said and what was done.

Fielding espoused the Comic Muse and thus brought intelligent laughter to bear upon hypocrisy and vanity, describing these according to the frequent examples he found in the society about him. Intelligent laughter he used not only to make hypocrisy and pretentiousness ridiculous, but also to disrobe vice of the romantic glamor with which writers of criminal biographies were endowing it. Clear thinking he tried to vindicate, seeking in this way to promote a heightened consciousness in society. Goodness he would have practiced

for its own sake. The semblance of goodness worn in the hope of reward he tried to reveal as policy rather than virtue.

In the nineteenth century George Meredith also dedicated himself to the Comic Muse, but the age in which Meredith was writing was characterized not so much by a false bourgeois morality as by the child of sensibility, sentimentalism, and by egoism. Villainy and plausibility were not typical as in Fielding's time, but there was a tendency to neglect common sense on the part of those who were too intent upon convention. The age was moving towards refinement and culture, but in some cases this process was checked by too great concern with the self, the ego, and too little concern for nature and society. The sentimentalist lost himself in developing niceness of feeling without any thought of regard for others, for spontaneous generosity. Goodness was practiced because of the pleasant aura it might diffuse about the benefactor, not because of genuine sympathy with a fellow being. Similarly, the egoist, though he might have no desire ever to be evil, was likewise without positive goodness. He might be kind, but his was a weak, devious kindness, that looked not to the welfare of the recipient so much as to its reflection upon the donor. Spiritual debility was evident; egoists sought to realize themselves in the persons of others, but because such realization was frequently out of accord with natural promptings, there was failure and sometimes tragedy.

Fielding and Meredith lived in centuries that were at variance in many respects. Yet the two men shared many sympathies. Both believed in the cleansing power of laughter to clear the mental horizon. For the great writers of comedy, especially Molière and Cervantes, both were outspoken in their admiration.

The contrast their novels afford is partly a reflection upon the men themselves, their personalities and the influences that moulded them, but also a reflection upon the age in which each lived.

In the field of the novel each remains significant, Fielding because he is commonly regarded as the father of the novel, Meredith because of the philosophy with which he has colored his novels as well as because of his gift of characterization.

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