

**GEORGE MEREDITH, A
STUDY OF HIS WORKS
AND PERSONALITY**

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George Meredith, a study of his works and personality by J. H. E. Crees

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H. J. Blackwell

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BY

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P R E F A C E

NINE years have passed since George Meredith was united again to Earth, the subject and the inspirer of so many of his finest pages, and it seems worth while to essay a considered judgment of his contribution to literature. The present writer has walked all round his subject and taken a Meredithian elevation from different points of view. He must now leave it to others to decide whether his judgments are correct.

To live in and with Meredith, to read and reread the eighteen or so volumes of four to five hundred pages that he has left us, is an ordeal as well as an experience, a discipline as well as a delight. It may result in the student's being swept into the Meredithian orbit to revolve as an obedient satellite around a more powerful luminary. One may be ever miscarrying with abortive epigram. Yet a conclusion safely on this side of moderation would be, first that the art of novel-writing is an art which even in the hands of but a middling practitioner demands more respect than is always accorded it, and secondly, that Meredith himself, in his combination of most vigorous intellect with fervent

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poetry and all the normal qualities of the novelist, in his creation of what is almost a new literary form—that of the didactic prose epos, the philosophy of history applied to life and its problems—is an unparalleled and wondrous phenomenon, one of those rarely appearing giants of speech and thought whose kinship in tenseness of intellectual life and myriad-mindedness win them the epithet Shakespearean.

With Meredith we climb to the Andes of the intellect, and the vastness of the prospect, the radiance of the sun illumining so many different intellectual kingdoms, atones for the touch of frost in the air. But the thin aether is a trial for weak hearts and lungs. Not all can scale these heights, still fewer can abide on these lone tablelands of intellect. Yet the hardened mountaineer will win full many a thrill of sudden discovery such as he can never gain in softer climes.

One must scale these ascents by oneself. Yet a word of recognition and of thanks is due to those who have climbed these altitudes before us. Mr. Trevelyan's handbook on Meredith's poems is of great service in one's earlier steps, and his fine essay in *Clio a Muse* is the more mature work of a critic who can now give free, easy, and delightful expression to his mellowed judgment. Dr. Verrall's brilliant essay, the work of a scholar whose gifts of heart and intellect would have made him a worthy comrade of any of Meredith's great intellectuals, does

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full justice to the master's wit so well defined as "manipulation of meanings," though the friendly controversy waged by Mr. Trevelyan with him as to the difference between poetry and wit seems to dissolve into verbal legerdemain. Mrs. Sturge Henderson has made a painstaking study of the various novels. Mr. Clodd's *Recollections* would seem to contain many interesting things,¹ and Mr. le Gallienne's enthusiastic essay should not be neglected. Yet probably everyone who journeys through Meredith will prefer to tell his own story for himself, and to each his own experience will seem the thing of highest value. Here no *catalogue raisonné* of Meredith's novels and poetry will be attempted, but rather a study of the different elements in his personality which contributed to his greatness.

With Meredith a writer's difficulty is not lack of matter. The vein is rich; one quarries and quarries. One admires at first his cleverness, then his poetic ecstasy, lastly his noble soul. It was his poetry, he told Mr. Clodd, that he valued most, yet perhaps a study of his genius must take account chiefly of that to which his most strenuous efforts were devoted, his novels, and moreover his poetic power can be triumphantly demonstrated best in some of his novels. They treat of life's problems not with too rosy a view, but they stand far apart

¹ I have not seen the book. Two references taken from it are gleaned from a review.

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from the novels of the stews, or the poetry of the overripe. It was his aim to treat life philosophically, to study character more minutely than before, to make the novel an aid to the art of living as well as an intellectual recreation.

How far does he rise to his own ideal? It would be needful to review each novel to answer fully. Not all have reached an equal height. Art abides constant but inspiration comes and goes, and few masters are always at their greatest. *The Egoist* is the Meredithian type supreme and unsurpassable, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is tenser, a rare example of the tragic, *Evan Harrington* is the finest example of the extravaganza, *Beauchamp's Career* stands not unworthily near *The Ordeal*, *One of Our Conquerors* is crammed so full of rich fare as to be difficult to queasy stomachs, *The Shaving of Shagpat* is an astonishing feat of virtuosity in style, *The Tragic Comedians* is a masterpiece of subtle psychology and impetuous narrative. And if we cease to enumerate we feel that it is unjust to slight the others, and then that much more than a passing word is due to the poems which—even the most abstruse—grow in force and meaning as we return to them. It is indeed an embarrassment of riches. Truly here is God's plenty.

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