MEREDITH IN FRENCH EYES*

BY GEORGE MIDDLETON

UT you who do me an honour in presenting me to the French public, why put yourself to that barren work?"

Save for some articles in the reviews, Marcel Schwob's article in *Spicilège,* Alphonse Daudet's comments in *Notes sur la Vie* and Charles Legros's *Chez nos Contemporains d' Angleterre,* nothing unusual has been written in French on George Meredith. True, Davray has made an adroit translation of an *Essay on Comedy* and versions of *The Egoist, The Tragic Comedians, Sandra Belloni,* and others have been published, but Constantin Photiadès, author of *Le Couvre-Feu* and *Les Hauts et les Bas,* is the first to offer a serious and elaborate introduction of Meredith to the French. When one recalls that until recently the author was little read by his own countrymen this is not surprising, especially since the subtlety of his ethical scheme is expressed in a style of such allure and syntactical eccentricity that translation is well-nigh impossible.

But Meredith was cosmopolitan, and peculiarly in love with the French. One has only to review his famous *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History,* his comments on French language and character in the eighth chapter of *Sandra Belloni* and the eleventh chapter of *One of Our Conquerors,* as well as his spirited resentment of the Countess of Brownlowe's criticism of French women in her *Reminiscences,* to realise what personal interest Meredith could exact of Gallic readers. M. Photiadès has himself expressed this conviction. "In the novels of Meredith, the English gain nothing when opposed to the French. Madame d'Auffray, Louise de Seilles, minor characters, attach themselves in unforgettable relief upon the British background. Diana Warwick pales before the ravishing Renée de Croisnel. Truly, this loved one of Nevil Beauchamp symbolises all the grace of France. Is it not of her that Meredith in old age said: "Is she not a delicious creature? I believe I am still in love with her . . ." But no homage to France is more precious than the *Odes.* The most ardent Frenchman did not sing his country with more enthusiasm. And why? Because France for Meredith is not only the "mother of heroes"—she is above all things "mother of Reason"—or, if one wishes, the older daughter of the "Comic Spirit." And Meredith himself said to the author, "I think perpetually of France. I am aflame to serve her." Yet, in a letter written in 1908, he accuses himself of not having rendered her justice. "It is true that always my heart beats for France: and it is not less true that until now I have not with sufficient testimony recognised the debt that the human race owes her. My *Odes* are an effort in that direction. If I were younger I would do more and better." In this connection, Meredith confessed he loved the *Ode to Napoleon* more than the famous *France, 1870.* "Without doubt the latter is more successful, perhaps more perfect: but the other moves me more because I flatter myself in having grasped the character of Napoleon and having shown that his genius was the absolute antithesis to the traditional genius of France."

It was this phase of Meredith which no doubt first attracted the author of the present study, and on the whole an interesting volume results. It cannot be said that he has contributed any new information concerning the facts of Meredith's life or the ground plan of his philosophy which the reader of Trevelyan, Henderson and Baily does not know. He also admits indebtedness throughout to Edward Clodd's "Recollections" (*Fortnightly Review,* July, 1909). He has attempted skilfully to defend the latter's information concerning Meredith's birth and early years, but until Constable brings out Meredith's correspondence

*George Meredith, par Constantin Photiadès. Librairie Armand Colin. 1910.

with a promised biographical preface little that is positive may be expected, if at all. Many will continue to believe the Great Mel in *Evan Harrington* was Melchisedec Meredith, his grandfather, a naval outfitter at Portsmouth. It may be mentioned, however, that M. Photiadès denies the "club gossip" of Meredith's relation, through his father, to the poet O'Shaugnessy and the author of *The City of Dreadful Night*—concerning whose early years there is equal vagueness. Meredith was not autobiographic like Balzac, and whatever legal irregularity there may possibly have been concerning his birth it did not affect his ethical viewpoint as it did Dumas, *fils*. Only once, in *One of Our Conquerors,* did he touch upon this subject, though his well-known attitude toward the marriage convention, stripped of its spiritual bond, is not without interest. Perhaps *Modern Love,* as M. Photiadès points out, may be the nearest suspicion of an autobiographical mood, for this map of the passions was written after his first marriage and contains some "tragic hints" of its unhappiness.

There is no attempt in the present volume to analyse in detail each novel, as in Mrs. Sturge Henderson's admirable study, though under two chapters a very clear presentation of Meredith doctrine and ethical scheme is presented. It is unnecessary to comment on this, for it is merely a rereading of G. M. Trevelyan and Basil de Sélincourt, touched with considerable imaginative sympathy and understanding. But to introduce Meredith to the French, M. Photiadès has selected *The Adventures of Harry Richmond,* which he subjects to a hundred-page digest, because of all his novels it best suggests the essence of Meredith to those who can find it, and for the others it is truly *une belle histoire.* The important passages of this varying novel of adventure are translated with considerable *verve,* and though the flavour of Meredith is necessarily lost for those whose palates are sensitive to it, to the uninitiated it will not be without delectation.

But what makes this study particularly interesting to us is a rather vivid picture, which the author gives, of his interview with Meredith. Near a favourite reproduction of a Titian, beside a desk littered with foreign periodicals, the eminent author, nearly deaf, scarcely able to move his limbs, but with his large mobile mouth curving to each thought, spoke in a high, distinct voice with sharp underlining gestures. It is impossible to translate precisely back into Meredith's mouth exactly what he said, for obvious reasons, but even approximately phrased his views on various subjects are of importance and best reveal the extraordinary vibrant mentality he retained till almost the end. Reluctant with interviews, he began at once, as M. Photiadès records it, concerning reporters:

"Don't expect anything original of my fellow-countrymen: to-day they choose their models across the sea and copy, by preference, the French and Americans. France naturally purifies their taste. But the United States, that Hercules in a cradle, passes on to us the cavalier manners, truly too brutal, of its cowboys and rough riders. Those trappers communicate to us their aberration: the mania of finding fault with well-known persons in order to strip them naked as a hand. Such easy-going dumbfounds us: we take that impudence for strength. That is the way the English journalists ape the worst insolence of their transatlantic fellow-workers.

"With regard to the journalists, a class as influential as susceptible, a young author has the choice of two alternatives: flee them or manage them. The critics give me goose-flesh: I have never been able to court them. The truth is, Browning did not neglect them in his old age. Dickens and Thackeray caressed them as a cavalier pats his mount before rushing against his opponent. As for Lord Tennyson, he was past master in the art of provoking panegyrics and dithyrambs. There was a business man! He succeeded in literature as well as anybody: he made a fortune out of it. Clever cultivator, he transformed that run-down field into a gold mine. 'He bleeds me,' piteously groaned his publisher: all the same, he paid. Our publishers vainly upbraided the rapacity of Tennyson: they capitulated before it. For the crowd, cost what it would, imposed its well-

loved poet on them. . . . My nation takes pleasure in those pretty little elegiac histories, those edifying apologues, those psychic crises of young pastors discreetly tortured by doubt. If they adore these peaceful conflicts, these comfortable combats, they are able to intrust themselves without any risk to the ordeals in which the young pastor, after many vicissitudes, does not fail to affirm his faith. Such emotions, exempt from fever, have their charm. *In Memoriam* was a huge success! . . . Let us be just. Lord Tennyson, whom I admire, has the very enviable honour and miraculous privilege of making our villainous monosyllable language sing. For an English musician is, in a fashion, a blue bird. How compose with some words of one syllable in a vocabulary that hobbles and skips? We have at our disposal an old flute. It is shrill and sour. Shakespeare played on it by a *tour de force;* Milton with more ease and nearer to us. Tennyson and Swinburne have modulated on this shabby instrument a melody grave, warm and sustained.

"It is the custom to become ecstatic over the verbal imagination of my old friend Swinburne. Good! But another splendour which one ought to reveal to the public is his impetuous facility. What torrents of hot lava! Do you love Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyám?* The plastic seduction of that work fully justifies its immense success. I relish infinitely the rhythm of Fitzgerald, his beautiful minor harmonies, so mysterious! But how approve of his pessimistic tendencies? Omar is in vogue to-day—I know it only too well—but a more bracing nourishment is needed for the children of the earth. . . . In 1859 I was at Copsham Cottage, near Esher, with some friends one afternoon in the open air. Swinburne rushed up brandishing a small, thin book which far off resembled a holy pamphlet or prayer-book. One would have said he was an illuminated fanatic! Perhaps we would have feared a preacher if we had not from long standing known his religious sentiments. When Swinburne approached, he commenced to recite in a very loud voice the beginning of that grandiose paraphrase. He had just discovered it. His enthusiasm conquered us so completely that the twilight surprised us under the trees, reciting those sensuous and murmuring strophes. On his return, after dinner, Swinburne had gone to find something to write about, and there, under our very eyes, he composed at a burst his poem *Laus Veneris,* one of the most perfect in our literature."

Meredith was especially fond of Anatole France, "who mixes so much irony with common sense," and Mistral, "who has the abundance and clarity of a spring." It will be recalled in this connection that Meredith studied the Provençal dialect and translated a portion of *Mireille* in *The Reading of Life,* under the title of *The Mares of Camargue.* Daudet was "a man as brilliant and captivating as his novels." In painting, Meredith confesses to admiring the Wallace collection; Watteau, Chardin. Fragonard he loved, and, above all, Corot, "who regarded nature more tenderly than any other and painted it with the morning dew." But he did not admire Turner's "venetian phantasmagoria." In music, before his deafness, he loved the violinist Joachim, but less than Sarsate, whose virtuosity appealed strongly. One can remember *Vittoria* and *Sandra Belloni* for his comments on Beethoven, "a black angel," and the Italian operas.

Speaking of *One of Our Conquerors,* which Meredith suggested to M. Photiadès, was a sort of literary vengeance: "I was able to prove from my first battles that nothing upsets the critics like that which departs from banality and, in addition, demands attention. Toward sixty, after a small inheritance had assured me a pecuniary independence, it pleased me to serve to these gentlemen a strong dose of my most indigestible *cuisine.* I maliciously presented to them *Diana of the Crossways* and the novels which followed. But nothing overwhelmed them like *One of Our Conquerors.* The poor devils no longer knew which way to turn themselves. How render account of this hated volume! It was necessary to commence by understanding it, and the blind groped in their thick shadows.

Have you read the book X—— has published on my poems? I'm astonished that he has separated my poetry

from my prose. Why? My thought is united as spontaneously to my prose and verse as my body to my intelligence and soul. But every critic has an unconscious defect. X—— having decreed that the poet in me was less tiring than the novelist relieves himself entirely of my prose. . . . Each [critic] is more or less a slave placed near the conqueror to recall to him his mortal condition. They exalt the object of their liking to the clouds. Here and there they blame a weak rhyme, an obscure image; then they organise some distribution of prizes, enumerate the masterpieces, classify them, comment upon them. The others are hurled overboard—they are finished. Don't go implore their clemency. These magistrates constitute a tribunal without appeal—they render quick and summary justice!

"The press has often treated me as a harlequin—with so much the less deference that my fellow-countrymen love me little. Don't let's protest! Certainly, later, they accorded me a little glory; my name is well known, but they never read me. I put my fellow-countrymen to flight because I cudgel them. To foreigners I am an illustrious unknown! Consider that all my poems were published at my own expense! It's true—no one bought my books, novels or verse. And now book collectors fight for my first editions, which sell for twenty and twenty-five guineas. It's absurd—absurd and makes me indignant. Once they would like to stifle my voice. I was excessively poor; I laboured like a negro to gain my daily bread. What chronicles and patched-up criticisms for the magazines and provincial newspapers! Finally my inheritance permitted me to live at ease, very modestly, as you see, in this peaceful cottage. If I continue to write in spite of the general indifference it is because certain magazines, notably *Scribner's* in America, pay me very liberally for what I send. Last year I gave the *Oxford and Cambridge Review* a poem [*The Call*]. I had hoped my poetic warning would be useful to my country. It passed absolutely unnoticed! Oh, my people don't love me; believe me, at the most they will love me after my death.

Sometimes, by the fireside, I close my eyes and whole chapters of novels file past me. But why write them? Verse, that is all I can produce now. I am too old. My countrymen do not encourage me enough."