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George Meredith

An Essay on the Idea of Comedy  
and the Uses of the Comic Spirit  
A Critical Edition

Introduction, Comments and Notes by  
Stefano Bronzini

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## CATALOGUE, LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND ESSAY

About a quarter of a century had passed when the publisher Penguin asked Frank Swinnerton to expand the “catalogue”, drawn up by Bennett in 1903 and published six years later. The valuable small book, with the ambitious title *Literary Taste. How to form it, with detailed instructions for collecting a complete library of English Literature*, drawn up with plenty of information – the price and editions included – in the mid-1830s certainly needed updating. Bennett, a faithful interpreter of the principle dear to Arnold – “not even in favourable conditions is it possible for the living to judge the works of other living beings” – had ended it with George Gissing. Thus, there were so many writers missing and it is not surprising that the revision would have had to be extended to a large fourth section. Hence the *Complete Library of English Literature* came to include Swinburne, Hardy, James, just to mention a few from among the one hundred and twenty-two names mentioned. Among these, there was also George Meredith. In the beginning of *Novelists and Dramatists*, consisting of eighty artists and one hundred and forty-six books, there were four of Meredith’s works: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Egoist*, *Evan Harrington*, *Poetical Works*, and *An Essay on Comedy*.

Hence, only three novels, the collection of poems and an essay: the first novel was of 1859, the republication by Everyman’s Library was mentioned; the second – so famous as to be often identified with the name of its author – was of 1879, and the third – the last of the three novels mentioned – was of 1861, both in the Mickleham edition; there followed the poems, probably – as there is no indication – in the Constable edition edited by Trevelyan, which, between 1912 and 1928, had gone through three reprints and had enjoyed a moderate success among the public; finally, the essay of 1877, even if the recommended edition was a reprint by Mickleham published in 1932 which, by drawing upon the version printed in a book in 1879

by Constable and Company, included some variants of the first draft. Up to this point, this was Swinnerton's catalogue.

Therefore, a very severe selection. There were too many omissions. Some difficult to accept. Nevertheless, in the albeit meagre space accorded to Meredith, what is even more surprising than the omissions is the presence of the small book – just under a hundred pages – entitled *An Essay on the Idea of Comedy, and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit*.

After the censure by Pound who, by eliminating from the manuscript of Eliot's *The Waste Land* every reference to Meredith, had sanctioned the expulsion of the English artist from the twentieth century and the widespread, even if not unanimous, scathing judgement of the modernist period which, with its desire to draw a clear demarcation line with the past, had consigned the artist – and his essay – to the «Victorian didactic and moralistic atmosphere». Swinnerton's catalogue suggested that the *Essay*, sixty years after its first publication, should be considered an integral work in the formation of twentieth-century «literary taste». That felicitous insight has been taken up in the last forty years, which have witnessed the re-reading and the detailed study of the extensive non inventive nineteenth-century literature, promoted by Levine for its artistic quality and quantity as the most representative expression of the century<sup>1</sup>. The interpretations put forward, even by the most meticulous and philologically rigorous critics, although paying more attention to the *eccentric digression* – as Wellek would have defined it – «on the history of comedy [...] with very few concessions to the theory», only suggested, apart from some rare examples, interpretations useful for understanding a difficult or even unreadable narrative, as Meredith's was considered<sup>2</sup>. The *Essay on Comedy* was thus linked with the first, certainly more theoretical, chapters of the novels of his maturity: *The Egoist* – it is not by chance that still today the Norton Edition has included a summary of the essay as an appendix to the novel –, *The Tragic Comedians*, *Diana of the Crossways*, *The Amazing Marriage* and *One of Our Conquerors*. Novels which were considered «veri-

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. G. LEVINE, *The Art of Victorian Prose*, Oxford University Press, New York 1968.

<sup>2</sup> V. S. PRITCHETT, *George Meredith and English Comedy*, Chatto & Windus, London 1970, p. 11: «But there's no doubt that Meredith not only is but always was a difficult case».

fication documents to give a concrete example»<sup>3</sup> of what the artist had stated in his dissertation on comedy. It was partly true. There are many points of contact between the essay and the novels; and yet from among those written after the lecture, from which the essay was drawn, it was only *The Egoist*, which was included in the *Complete Library of English Literature*. Pure chance? Certainly at times things do turn out like that; but the suspicions and perplexities about the particular nature of George Meredith's essay remain. Doubts which have not found an answer, I believe, either in the albeit extensive bibliography dealing with the nineteenth-century artist or in the critical editions of *An Essay on Comedy*, among which mention must be made of Lane Cooper's and the more recent one edited by Maura C. Ives<sup>4</sup>. In the albeit widely diverging – in terms of methods and aims – heterogeneous interpretations, one can observe a common uneasiness: defining and understanding precisely the specificity and significance of Meredith's *non-inventive* writings. It is a fundamental and, I would say, indispensable aspect for a more complete and correct interpretation of *An Essay on Comedy*. Precisely for this reason, after having discussed some problems regarding the history of the text and the various editions and having indicated some links between Meredith's works and the lecture, in the final part of the introduction an attempt is made to find out what were the *need* and the *desire* which led Meredith to adopt the – for him – unusual recourse to the format of the essay.

A hard task. The artist himself had referred to the difficulty in confronting such an inaccessible terrain: «Why did I write it? Who can explain a need?» he asked himself after having drafted *Modern Love*. The essay presents the same difficulties. No answer therefore, but only a hypothesis which, perhaps, can facilitate the interpreta-

<sup>3</sup> G. CAPONE, *Spazi della scena comica nella narrativa inglese*, Editrice Libreria Goliardica, Pisa 1973, p. 137. Translation mine.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. LANE COOPER, Scribner, New York 1918; Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1956 and later Kennikat Press, New York 1972 (henceforth Cooper) and MAURA C. IVES, *George Meredith's Essay on comedy and Other New Quarterly Magazine Publications: A Critical Edition*, Bucknell University Press, Lewinsburg 1997, (henceforth Ives). On the critical editions of the essay cfr. note 56. The biographies of Meredith have also only dealt marginally with a reconstruction of the history of the essay and even less attention has been paid to the drafting of the text. A lacuna which can be found both in the older biographies – S. SASSOON, *Meredith*, Constable, London 1977 – and in the recent M. JONES, *The Amazing Victorians*, Constable, London 1999.

tion of *An Essay on Comedy* and reveal new aspects of the artistic formation of *the last great Victorian*.

*The drafting of the Essay: not only a problem of dating*

Surrounded by the greenery of the countryside of Box Hill in Surrey, Flint Cottage offered its occupant a safe haven. Whoever has visited it can readily feel the tranquillity of that place where George Meredith moved at the end of November 1867<sup>5</sup>.

The preceding years had been difficult for the artist who, despite having published some novels and two collections of poems, had not yet achieved fame. Also the years spent at Box Hill were not always happy, although certainly a little more serene. Having forgotten the turbulent events and the tragic outcome of his first marriage<sup>6</sup>, which had found an ample echo in the fifty sonnets of *Modern Love* (1862), Meredith married his second wife Marie Vulliamy and, precisely, thanks to her, he had been able to move to the house in Box Hill<sup>7</sup>.

Life in the country, with long walks in places made famous by Jane Austen<sup>8</sup> and interrupted by sporadic and always fleeting journeys to London where, meeting George Eliot, Meredith at-

<sup>5</sup> According to Lady Butcher, formerly Alice Brandreth, the move from London took place in the summer of 1867 (*Memories of George Meredith*, Constable and Co., London 1919); for Priestley, instead, the move occurred in the early months of 1868 (*George Meredith*, Macmillan, London 1926). The first letter sent to Lord Houghton from Box Hill is dated December 2, 1867: cfr. C.L. CLINE (ed.), *Letters of George Meredith*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1970, no. 399, henceforth *Letters* 1970. Meredith remained at Box Hill until his death, aged eighty-one, on May 18, 1909.

<sup>6</sup> His first wife was Mary Ellen Peacock, daughter of the famous artist Thomas Love Peacock. In 1857 Mary Ellen fled to Capri with the painter Wallis, who had produced the famous *The Death of Lord Chatterly*, for which Meredith had posed. On Meredith's relationship with Mary Ellen cfr. D. JOHNSON, *Lesser Lives, The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1972.

<sup>7</sup> He married on September 20, 1864. The marriage with Marie Vulliamy was not always happy and, even if he always had words of praise for her, the artist probably never felt the same passion he had shown for his first wife. Marie Vulliamy asked her father for financial help for the purchase of the house. Cfr. D. WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-79.

<sup>8</sup> The reference is to *Emma* (1816) by Jane Austen. See G. BEER - M. HARRIS (ed.), *The Notebooks of George Meredith*, Universitat Salzburg, Salzburg 1983 (henceforth *Notebooks*), p. 54, IV.70.iv: «A picnic: Cuckmare Haven over Seaford downs [...]». Cuckmare Haven is the name of the bay east of Seaford. Box Hill, near Dorking, is the place where Meredith lived from 1867 onwards and where Jane Austen set a famous picnic in *Emma*. Meredith never really appreciated the woman writer's artificial plot construction, see LADY BUTCHER, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 ff.



tended public concerts or participated in the reading, with several voices, of some works of Shakespeare in the house of the Brandreths – constituted the most suitable venue for the English writer. In an atmosphere of placid monotony the ‘clouds’ seemed to disperse and with the return of the ‘sereno’ Meredith proposed writing pages of greater intensity and delicacy. With the fading of the characteristic feature that had weakened his early novels, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) and *Evan Harrington* (1861), Meredith used a more intense linguistic register focusing on an analysis of the “deep”, which became intertwined with actions and descriptions, dialogues and reflective pauses, creating a harmony which was alien to his early narrative works. Thus, the Victorian reader read of indomitable passions, sudden revelations, sudden escapes in a carriage or long walks without having to take into account the long and sometimes boring dissertations with their obvious pedagogical intentions that had had such a negative impact on his first ‘prose experiments’.

Certainly the lesson of Thackeray, the «calm command of material», so admired by Meredith had left its mark in his prose<sup>9</sup>; but far beyond that example or the tranquillity of the countryside at the origin of the «course correction» of Meredith’s poetics, there was a “silent engine” that would have found its appropriate placement in the *Essay on the Idea of Comedy, and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit*. Meredith published it in the «New Quarterly Magazine» in April 1877, taking up the pages of the lecture read on February 1st of the same year.

The text was among the first completed by the artist in the small chalet which he had had built between the summer and autumn of 1876 near his house in Box Hill<sup>10</sup>. According to Alice Brandreth, the cottage was «very small, so in 1876 [Meredith] built for himself at the top of his orchard a chalet containing a sitting-room and a bedroom»<sup>11</sup>. In the autumn of 1876, in fact, closed in the small rooms of his ‘hatbox’, as the artist liked to define the pavillion of which in the early twentieth century Edith Wharton<sup>12</sup> would offer a

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Letters* 1970, no. 42, to E. Crowe, 4 January, 1858. The influence of Thackeray’s works on *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* was very evident.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. *Letters* 1970, no. 572, to J. Morley, September 8, 1876.

<sup>11</sup> LADY BUTCHER, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. E. WHARTON, *A Blackivard Glance*, Constable and Co., London 1934, pp. 251-253. A charming description of Meredith’s daily life was also given by MARCEL SCHWOB, *Spicilege*, Société du Mercure de France, Paris 1896.

touching description, Meredith was «very busy with literary work of all sorts poetry and prose»<sup>13</sup>.

Yes, he worked a lot in those days: he resumed and completed the story *The House on the Beach*, which, in January, would have been published as always by the «New Quarterly Magazine»<sup>14</sup> and certainly, he wrote about it to John Morley, he composed some poems; what however occupied most of his time was writing the paper he would have had to present at the London Institution for the Advancement of Literature and the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge whose headquarters was in the elegant Finsbury quarter of the capital<sup>15</sup>. In September, in fact, Meredith had been invited to give a lecture by Edward W.B. Nicholson, the librarian and curator of the prestigious London cultural centre. It was the second invitation the artist received in the summer of 1876. The previous one had been from F.J. Furnivall, a well-known scholar of Old and Middle English, who proposed to the writer to conduct a cycle of lectures in England and the United States. At that time, Meredith had declined the invitation alluding to his exclusive interest in poetry: «I am possessed of verse as of a demon, and it will not allow any diversions

<sup>13</sup> LADY BUTCHER, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> «New Quarterly Magazine», VII (January 1877), pp. 329-410. The story was published in the United States in 1877 by Harper.

<sup>15</sup> The headquarters was in London. The Institution, which was founded in May 1805, with the main aim of promoting the study of the national history and literature, had only begun to organize cycles of lectures in 1819 (the first on 5 May 1819 by W.T. Brande on *The Connection between the Scientific and Commercial interest of a Country, and especially those of Great Britain*), having concentrated, in the first thirteen years of activity, on the promotion and construction of a library collection which would have been included in the *Institution's* library, one of the most well-stocked libraries in 19th century England. The first speaker who dealt with literary themes was Thomas Froguall with a cycle of lectures on: *The Rise and Progress of Literature in Great Britain*. Among the succession of speakers over the years, mention should be made of: Basil Montagu, *The Philosophy of Laughter*, 1832-33 and Charles Cowden Clarke, *The Poetry of the Prose Writers of England, and the Ancient Ballads of England*, 1835. The latter, the author of the monograph on Molière (*Molière-Characters*, William P. Ninno, Edinburgh 1865) and of fifteen articles published monthly in «The Gentleman's Magazine» from April 1871 with the title *On the Comic Writers of England*; on the same subject and with the same title, between 1845 and 1849, C. Cowden Clarke had given a cycle of lectures at the Institution. Cfr. *A Catalogue of the Library of the London Institution Systematically Classed, preceded by An Historical and Biographical Account of the Establishment*, vol. I, MDCCCXXXV (1835), and *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Lectures delivered at the London Institution*, London 1854, both published for the use of the *Institution's* members.

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