3. The "New Fiction" Theorizes Cultural Consumption

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And yet there can be no doubt that, even judged by his novels alone, Meredith remains a great writer. The doubt is rather whether he can be called a great novelist; whether, indeed, anyone to whom the technique of novel writing had so much that was repulsive in it can excel compared with those who are writing, not against the grain, but with it. He struggles to escape, and the chapters of amazing but fruitless energy which he produces in his struggle to escape are the true obstacles to the enjoyment of Meredith. What, we ask is he struggling against? What is he striving for?

—Virginia Woolf, “On Re-Reading Meredith” (1928)

The time may hereafter arrive, in far distant years, when the population of the earth shall be kept as strictly within the bounds of number and suitability of race, as sheep on a well-ordered moor or the plants in an orchard house; in the meantime, let us do what we can to encourage the multiplication of the races best fitted to invent and conform to a high and generous civilization.

—Francis Galton, Hereditary Genius (1869)

If there is one thing that George Meredith’s critics agree on, it is that reading him is hard work. Not only do his novels defy generic categorization, but they are also “difficult”; they thwart identification, in some cases pleasure, in many cases interpretation. As one reviewer writes of Diana of the Crossways in the Pall Mall Gazette in 1885:

In reading Mr George Meredith one is perpetually divided between admiration for his genius and irritation at his perversity. The genius was always there, but the perversity increases. Mr Meredith has a theory of his own about style, and the more evident it becomes that
consistent adherence to that theory makes him unreadable to ordinary mortals, the more pertinaciously, defiantly he develops it. (265)

In particular, Meredith strains his reader’s patience and attention in the prefatory chapters of his novels, as if one were required to pass a test to enter into the rest of the novel. Gayla McGlamery describes such chapters this way: “Several of these ... are so turgid as to appear almost confrontational. Instead of proffering the customary lures to further reading, they tempt readers to ignore, or skim over them” ("Malady” 331).1

However, this “confrontational” writing style that dares its readers not to read lies at the heart of Meredith’s literary innovation and cultural critique. By insisting on the work of reading, Meredith inaugurates a new kind reader, and a new relationship to the novel, in which the pleasures of reading are explicitly the pleasures of critical acumen and resistance to the emotional pull of sensational or sentimental tropes. In challenging the generic boundaries of the novel, Meredith unmasksthe iniquities masquerading as romance in the relationship between the sexes. Using Meredith’s The Egoist as an exemplar, Henry Holbeach (W. B. Rands) writes in his 1880 essay “The New Fiction”:

Within the last twenty years the novel proper has undergone a development which may still be pronounced astonishing even by those who have been accustomed to consider it, and has taken rank side by side ... with poetry and philosophy, formally so entitled ... It may almost be said that there is now a branch of criticism specially, if not exclusively, applying to novels; and, perhaps, it may be added that the critics who cultivate this branch of work do not yet feel themselves quite up to their work. In fact, the New Fiction is a product for which the canons were not ready. (150)

Holbeach imagines fiction like Meredith’s as having evolved (although, given his amazement at the rapidity of the change, it might be more accurate to say “mutated”) into a “serious” genre, but he also imagines the New Fiction demanding an evolution in critical thought about what the novel does. Meredith’s fiction is therefore viewed (and views itself) at the vanguard of culture, participating in the evolution of “art” and, through “art,” society.

Critics have tended to stress Meredith’s “scientific” qualities—to consider him a post-Darwinian novelist, whose use of Darwin’s
theories of natural and sexual selection challenges the social violence of gender inequality and undermines the novel’s traditional faith in romance. Yet I argue that Meredith’s social critique is more complicated than that. Not only does he highlight the dangers of subjugating women for the future evolution of the “race,” but he also links that subjugation directly to what women (and men) read and how they read it. In this chapter I consider two of Meredith’s novels, *The Egoist* (1879) and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), both of which offer feminist critiques of Woman’s plight in a society that simultaneously sentimentalizes and denigrates the feminine. I maintain, however, that both novels, in addition to calling for “evolutionary” advance in the relationship between the sexes, imagine that the woman reader herself is crucially linked to that evolution. Meredith reminds his readers that the critical detachment on which they congratulate themselves is painfully elusive. Sensational investments are inescapable, and the seeming objectivity that science proffers must, therefore, be suspect.

In *The Egoist*’s turgid prelude, for example, Meredith’s narrator sets up the novel’s combined critique of the objective science of evolution and the objective art of literary realism. He says of realism: “The realistic method of a conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible, is mainly accountable for our present branfulness, and that prolongation of the vasty and the noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, steams the malady of sameness, our modern malady” (34). The belief that this moral and aesthetic malaise can be remedied by new scientific knowledge is, the narrator informs us, a gross mistake:

> We drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote; which was as if tired pedestrians should mount the engine-box of headlong trains; and Science introduced us to our o’er-hoary ancestry—them in Oriental posture; whereupon we set up a primeval chattering to rival the Amazon forest nigh nightfall, cured, we fancied. And before daybreak our disease was hanging on to us again, with the extension of a tail … We were the same, and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science. (34)

In other words, the novel warns its readers to be suspicious of the very answers that the novel itself seems to provide in its adoption of evolutionary rhetoric as unifying thread and narrative device. Indeed, as the quote suggests, literary realism and scientific positivism are
both driven by a similarly misplaced faith in progressive action, “headlong trains.” Instead, Meredith offers a blended critique of scientific and narrative progress that is infused in the novel’s “flaws,” in its interruptions of narrative action, its refusals of generic expectations.

Similarly, the preface of *Diana of the Crossways* presents the novel itself as an interpretive dilemma. The novel, which is the fictionalized account of real-life “witty Beauty” Caroline Norton, begins with the chapter “Of Diaries and Diarists Touching the Heroine,” in which the narrator offers an introduction to Diana and her high-profile scandal through the accounts of various fictional diarists. The Diarists’ accounts, we learn, are incomplete, biased, and in most cases representative of a savage, gossip-mongering world, which the narrator describes thus:

> It does not pretend to know the whole, or naked body of the facts; it knows enough for its funny dubiousness; and excepting the sentimental of men, a rocket-headed horde, ever at the heels of fair faces for ignition, and up staring away at a hint of tearfulness;—excepting further by chance a solid champion man, or some generous woman capable of faith in the pelted solitary of her sex, our temporary world blows direct East on her shivering person. (3)

The novel asks its readers to be better readers than those who condemn a woman unfairly, or who speculate on her guilt or innocence with incomplete information. As the narrator says, “It is a test of the civilized to see and hear, and add no yapping to the spectacle” (7). *Diana* offers, then, the illusion of “history,” of filling in the gaps that the Diarists leave, revealing the “naked body” of the famous scandal and its main actors. But it also provides a comfortable sense that, having sympathized with its heroine, one is free of the prejudices of the “yapping” hounds. However, as the quote above suggests, sympathizing for the wrong reasons—simply because the woman is sympathetic—is little better than condemning her out of hand. The sentimental men are still part of the pack at Diana’s heels, after all.

Yet the novel encourages the very sensational and sentimental reading that it criticizes. For instance, one reviewer notes that the novel’s appeal lies in its exciting “real-life” subject matter:

> Such a career as that of his Diana might well bring down upon his head the charge of extravagance if he could not point to well-known
facts in support of its most startling incidents. Diana’s beauty and wit; her social, literary, and political power; her unfortunate early marriage; her dangerous intimacy with a distinguished statesman, and the consequent scandal; her betrayal of an important Cabinet secret; the failure of her husband’s attempt to obtain a divorce—all these are facts, and quite sufficient to form the basis of a very “sensational” novel. (Monkhouse 262)

Moreover, the novel takes liberties with its subject that increase rather than palliate the very sentimentalizing that it criticizes; it offers a version of Caroline Norton rendered more “comic” than the original by the subtraction of Norton’s children and the tragic custody battles that she fought for them and by the addition of a suitable marriage to a passionate, wealthy, and ultramanly lover while Diana is still young and beautiful. Even as the novel advocates clear-sighted Philosophy—a term that Meredith uses very much like Comedy in The Egoist to signify moral and aesthetic advance in culture—it suggests that it is impossible for readers not to read sensationally.

*The Egoist* and *Diana* are “comedies” with the requisite romance plots and marriage resolutions, yet the romances and marriages that they offer are problematic at best. The tension between social critique and narrative satisfaction, however, is precisely where both offer their most trenchant appraisals of cultural (re)production and consumption. This critique might be described, at its most basic, as a deep anxiety about the conjunction of sex and culture or, to put it another way, about the conjunction of breeding and breeding.5

Critics have typically reckoned the concerns of the Victorian social scientists and reformers as antithetical to those of the cultural, aesthetic elite. As the century drew to a close, so the argument goes, the division of intellectual labor pushed literature and art farther from the public sphere, forcing a retreat of “serious” art from the vulgar demands of consumer culture and “the masses.” For example, T. W. Heyck writes:

As the size of the literate public grew, especially from the 1860s on, and as cheap literature for the masses poured from the presses, serious writers such as Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing sensed that there had come into existence an audience about which they knew little and with which they had no sympathy. Thus the doctrine of “art-for-art’s-sake,” clearly established as the ideology of the most advanced artists in England by the 1870s, was both a reaction against the values of the
middle-class reader and a revulsion from a new audience with which they had little contact or sympathy. It was an attempt to restore order to the world of serious literature by compressing the responsibilities and audience of art to a manageable perimeter. (176–77)

Yet Meredith, far from “compressing” art’s responsibilities or audience, conceives of aesthetic production and consumption as crucial to the progress of “the race,” an expansion of responsibility made possible in the latter decades of the nineteenth century by the rise of social Darwinist thought. For Meredith, the seriousness of being a “serious writer” lies not in alienating the philistine reading public with inaccessible, “highbrow” literature, but in cultivating an improved reading public.

Meredith suggests a couple of things for literary scholarship considered in this way: First, the familiar vision of an elevated, isolated modernist aesthetic may not necessarily repudiate the socially engaged didacticism of the Victorian literary market; rather, the “literati at the margins” stance of the modernists (by way of the aesthetes and decadents) may define an ethically responsible relationship of the artist—as cultural critic and prophet—to the educable masses. As Virginia Woolf writes of the reader’s responsibilities to know bad books from good: “Are they not the most insidious enemies of society, corrupters, defilers, the writers of false books, faked books, books that fill the air with decay and disease? Let us then be severe in our judgments; let us compare each book with the greatest of its kind” (“How Should One Read a Book?” 8–9). Woolf argues that the readers, with tastes shaped by their understanding of “the greatest” books, are in duty bound to judge what they read with “the rarest qualities of imagination, insight and judgment” and that “we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance” (11). In other words, the modernist aesthetic ideal may be the personal, psychological, and individual (as opposed to the social, didactic, and moral), but this ideal is urged on readers who must learn to appreciate and emulate it, so that they may resist “the enemies of society.”

Second, in stressing the necessity of cultivated critical reading and of examining the cultural embedment of literary production and consumption, Meredith’s social-aesthetic imperative suggests itself as a precursor to current critical practice in a way that both acknowledges and critiques the seductive appeal of imagining the critic as savvy cultural detective imbued with, to quote Amanda Anderson, “aggrandized agency.” Meredith insists upon the crucial responsibil-
ity of readers to recognize the power of literature to produce and shape cultural subjects—a credo still in force in much literary scholarship—but more important, he underscores the difficulty of reading through or beyond one’s own culturally produced subjectivity to achieve critical distance, a point that bears reiteration even now.

In *The Egoist* and his aesthetic manifesto, *An Essay in Comedy*, written two years earlier, Meredith develops an elaborate definition of comedy as disinterested perception with which to imagine a civilization evolving through the simultaneous refinement of its gender dynamics and aesthetic sensibilities. Comedy is the antidote to cultural stagnation and even degeneration. For Meredith, social and aesthetic refinements are routed through the “female of the species.” Meredith imagines Woman in a vexed relationship to culture: that is, by dint of social constraints, she is part free agent and part object. She is, in many ways, a product in circulation on the marriage market, with limited powers of choice, hampered by social conventions, class distinctions, and economic concerns; insofar as she has agency, it is in her ability to exercise her aesthetic taste as a consumer. Meredith describes this intersected relationship in *An Essay*:

> There has been fun in Bagdad. But there never will be civilization where comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes. I am not quoting the Arab to exhort and disturb the somnolent East; rather for cultivated women to recognize that the comic Muse is one of their best friends. They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that, where they have no social freedom, comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place, and a sentimental version of them ... But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty—there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions. (32)

In this conflation of Woman and Comedy both become superior products of culture, capable of being “the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.” But Woman must also be the cultural agent who chooses Comedy over sentimental or melodramatic
literature. Only through the correct aesthetic choices can social advances be made, or conversely, only through social advance may “refined” aesthetics be cultivated and appreciated. As Meredith writes in the prelude to *The Egoist*: “[Comedy] it is who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us. She is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, a sweet cook” (36). The fear, however, is that Woman will not be able to choose wisely, that she will prefer the sentimental, the melodramatic, the “easy read” over the challenge of Comedy, which offers an almost-painful, if beneficial, antidote to retrograde culture.

For Meredith, then, fears about the inadequacy of Woman’s aesthetic judgment extend to fears about the inadequacy of sexual selection to preserve and promote the “race.” Just as in the literary marketplace Woman chooses the sentimental over “true Comedy,” likewise in the marriage market she may choose according to foolish sentiments, false literary ideals. Meredith puts it this way in *An Essay*: “Is it not preferable to be the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices, very feminine, very sympathetic, of romantic and sentimental fiction? Our women are taught to think so” (15). This emphasis on the productive power of fiction suggests a crucial responsibility for the cultivated reader to be cultivated, to be willing to eschew pleasant fictions in favor of clear-sightedness, not just for the sake of personal enlightenment, but to protect and promote the “race” itself: eugenics by way of aesthetics.

**GOOD BREEDING**

*We must remember that progress is no invariable rule. It is most difficult to say why one civilised nation rises, becomes more powerful, and spreads more widely, than another; or why the same nation progresses more at one time than at another. We can only say that it depends on an increase in the actual number of the population, on the number of men endowed with high intellectual and moral faculties, as well as on their standard of excellence.*

—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871)

That the appreciation of “good art” should have the power to shape the future of civilization is an idea that by no means originates with Meredith; indeed, given his insistence upon cultural refinement in both *The Egoist* and *An Essay*, arguably one might read him as “post-
Arnoldian” as much as “post-Darwinian.” In Meredith’s definition of Comedy as “the ultimate civilizer,” one can hear distinct echoes of Arnold’s famous definition of culture:

If culture, then, is a study of perfection, and of harmonious perfection, general perfection, and perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances,—it is clear that culture … has a very important function to fulfill for mankind. (Culture 62–63)

Here Arnold advocates a kind of responsibility to the public sphere through individual, internalized consumption of culture, much as Meredith contends in An Essay that personal consumption of good (comic) as opposed to bad (melodramatic and sentimental) literature will save civilization.

But it is important not to imagine Darwin and Arnold as representing opposite poles of influences for Meredith. Inasmuch as Meredith’s program of literary innovation is linked to his critique of scientific positivism, so too the kind of cultural analysis and critique that Arnold offers in Culture and Anarchy or “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” implies a kind of evolution of humankind through the diffusion of culture, or, in Arnold’s terms, “sweetness and light”:

Culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater!—the passion for making them prevail. It is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light. (Culture 79)

The deciding factor in the rise or decline of civilization—the missing link, if you will, between aesthetic production/consumption and social evolution—is the public body and its appetites, a body that, left to its own devices, represents destructive (consumptive) potential almost without limit, but bred up properly has the potential to achieve an evolved state of perfection. Within this paradigm the “few” who understand and revere culture are responsible for the husbandry of the masses, a kind of cultural “selective breeding” and management to promote “sweetness and light” among the “raw and unkindled masses.”
Arnold’s emphasis on “good breeding” is articulated in his dictum to “know the best that is thought and known in the world” (“Function” 37). For Arnold, this disinterested appreciation of culture will save Britain from moral and social decline. In foundational eugenicist text *Hereditary Genius*, published the same year as Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, Francis Galton demonstrates a strikingly similar concern with the “greatest hits” of Western civilization and a similar goal of rescuing British civilization from degeneration. In *Hereditary Genius*, he uses a complex system of grades in which he blends considerations of natural and sexual selection with assessments of cultural sophistication and mental abilities. His grading system works both within a society, as a means of judging the numbers of men who meet or approach “genius level,” and without, as a means of comparing different societies by way of their total numbers of “high grade” individuals.

This system can be used to circumvent the “unnatural selection” that civilization forces upon human animals. For example, Galton uses a comparison of nineteenth-century Britain with ancient Greece both to illustrate the level of cultural perfection to which Britain might aspire (if it could produce geniuses like Socrates, Plato, Aeschylus, and Sophocles) and to suggest the unhappy possibility that if the Greek civilization could crumble, so too could the British Empire. He writes:

> The average ability of the Athenian race is, on the lowest possible estimate, very nearly two grades higher than our own ... This estimate, which may seem prodigious to some, is confirmed by the quick intelligence and high culture of the Athenian commonalty, before whom literary works were recited, and works of art exhibited, of a far more severe character than could possibly be appreciated by the average of our race, the caliber of whose intellect is easily gauged by a glance at the contents of a railway bookstall. (342)

Not only do the exemplary cultural achievements of the Greeks provide a high-water mark for the Victorians, but even further, a comparison of the consumers of those cultural products with the “bookstall” consumers of nineteenth-century England underscores the dangers of vulgar tastes.

Galton’s use of the “Athenian race” as a cautionary tale employs the same kind of aesthetic judgments as Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, but it ties the education of taste directly to the management (or
mismanagement) of Woman’s biological fertility. As he says of the ancient Greeks:

We know, and may guess something more, of the reason why this marvelously gifted race declined. Social morality grew exceedingly lax; marriage became unfashionable, and was avoided; many of the more ambitious and accomplished women were avowed courtesans, and consequently infertile, and the mothers of the incoming population were of a heterogeneous class. (342–43)

The most highly cultivated women are precisely the ones not breeding, and the influx of mediocre and prolific “breeders” undermines the physical and cultural superiority of the civilization. In other words, there is a disconnect between the efficiency of mechanisms governing procreative breeding and the promotion of civilized ideals of “good breeding.”

Galton’s “hands-on” approach to managed breeding of humans may seem antithetical to Arnold’s adherence to the disengaged contemplation of the “best that is known and thought in the world,” but it is precisely the “multiplication” of those culturally superior specimens about which both Galton and Arnold agree. For each of these writers, the vision of a (prolific) uncultivated mass of “railway bookstall” readers offers a frightening picture of England in decline. The acquisition and promotion of culture, then, is not just about aesthetic refinement, but also about perfecting the race. Galton expresses it this way:

The number of the races of mankind that have been entirely destroyed under the pressure of the requirements of an incoming civilization, reads us a terrible lesson ... [T]he human denizens of vast regions have been entirely swept away in the short space of three centuries, less by the pressure of a stronger race than through the influence of a civilization they were incapable of supporting. And we too, the foremost labourers in creating this civilization, are beginning to show ourselves incapable of keeping pace with our own work. (344–45)

To shepherd the masses in their procreative and cultural breeding demands experts in cultivation—intellectual figures who are capable of both identifying “good” culture (i.e. the art and philosophy of ancient Greece, not the fodder of railway bookstalls) and leading and breeding the masses to appreciate that good.
We have scarcely done justice in our preceding remarks to the delicate charm, at once a subtly sympathetic insight and a generous truthfulness, with which Mr. Meredith has portrayed the best feminine types among those that come to view on the social surface. Yet may we not hope from Mr. Meredith some day a fuller exposition of that ‘perfect woman’ who we are sure is no stranger to his conceptions? May we not trust that he who has seen so well and thrown with so bold a hand on the canvas the different lights in which the most serious problems present themselves to different minds, may, by some clear illuminating ray cast from his own in some future work, aid in the great task of social regeneration.

—Arabella Shore, “The Novels of George Meredith” (1879)

Recent critics like Amanda Anderson have suggested that Arnold’s emphasis on the individual’s consumption of culture places him on an intellectual trajectory with the increasingly individualized and isolated subject of aestheticism, and through aestheticism, the antisocial subject of high modernism. In this way the figure of the inward-looking and isolated aesthete offers the bridge over the “Great Divide” between the Victorian and the modern. In a chronological continuum of social interaction, the didacticism and reformative ethics of the Victorian realist social novel give way to the solipsistic introversion of the high modernist text. Anderson discovers in Arnold’s cultural theory “the inability to imagine reciprocal social relations as a site where one’s own principles might be enacted. His protestations about the social dimensions of culture notwithstanding, Arnold seems incapable of construing social interaction in concrete terms” (118).

I want to suggest, however, that reading midcentury theories of aesthetic consumption like Arnold’s against social evolutionary models of progress creates a very different trajectory: one that interprets late-Victorian literary consumption not in terms of the isolated experience of the aesthete, but in terms of the mass evolution or decline of the “race.” It offers an alternative path to high modernism—one in which the ethical, social interactions that Anderson finds absent in Arnold’s thinking manifest precisely within the process of cultural consumption. The “study of perfection” is not necessarily an unmediated or isolated activity but one structured by the critical discourse that precedes the moment of consumption. Arnold’s famous dictum in “The Function of Criticism” is to “know the best that is known and thought in the world.” But the “other half” of Arnold’s charge
to his readers is to transmit this knowledge and thus “to create a current of true and fresh ideas” (37). In other words, the ideals of culture are transmitted in the concrete form of cultural objects. And the interaction of individual with individual in the social realm may be asynchronous, but it is nonetheless powerfully engaged, engaging, and transformative. Viewed this way, literature, rather than being increasingly abstracted from the public realm and the marketplace, consolidates a pivotal ethical position in both, and the literary critic reaches for a new prominence as the “reader” of a civilization’s future—a prophet.

Meredith places himself, like Arnold, as an “expert” at the vanguard of culture, in a position to husband his readers. In his role as “cultural expert,” Meredith’s expertise is based on an understanding not only of aesthetics but also of evolutionary science and, more important, of the interconnections between the two. The authority that Meredith claims is just that “prophet in the wilderness” stance that Arnold adopts in *Culture and Anarchy* when he cautions that “culture has a rough task to achieve in this country. Its preachers have, and are likely long to have, a hard time of it” (63). It is via this outsider persona that Meredith represents the work the novelist should do. As he writes in the opening chapter of *Diana of the Crossways*:

> Dozens of writers will be in at yonder yawning breach, if only perusers will rally to the philosophic standard. They are sick of the wooden puppetry they dispense … Well, if not dozens, half-dozens; gallant pens are alive; one can speak of them in the plural. I venture to say that they would be satisfied with a dozen for an audience, for a commencement … But the example is the thing; sacrifices must be expected. The example might, one hopes, create a taste. (15)

By claiming a position in the unpopular minority, the cultural expert places himself in the position of writing to readers who don’t exist yet, or at least don’t exist in any great numbers. And he imagines both enlightened readers and writers as willing to sacrifice for a good cause.

It is a neatly circular self-authorization: the mass of readers lacks the cultural acumen to appreciate the lessons that an expert like Arnold or Meredith has to offer, and that is precisely why the expert must continue, lonely and misunderstood, to do the work of Culture, for the good of those very unappreciative masses who don’t see any need for the work. And eventually society will evolve,
through the influence of Culture, to value and foster Culture. Arnold, for instance, proclaims in “The Function of Criticism”: “The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are … That is as much as saying that whoever sets himself to see things as they are will find himself one of a very small circle; but it is only by this small circle doing its own work that adequate ideas will ever get current at all” (41).

It is important to recognize that this is, first and foremost, a rhetorical stance. Whatever may be the demographics of actual readership, the implied audience of the cultural expert is not the uncultivated reader who will flip past the turgid opening chapters to look for the first good love scene or melodramatic cliff-hanger. Rather, it is the fellow “apostle of culture” whose appreciation of the turgid but meaningful prose signifies his or her membership in the “very small circle” of true believers. For example, Arnold describes the nearly universal excoriation of the “lovers of culture” in England, but he refers to those lovers with a cozily inclusive “we.” And as Virginia Woolf writes: “Meredith pays us a supreme compliment to which as novel-readers we are little accustomed. We are civilized people, he seems to say, watching the comedy of human relations together. Human relations are of profound interest … He imagines us capable of disinterested curiosity in the behaviour of our kind. This is so rare a compliment from a novelist to his reader that we are at first bewildered and then delighted” (“Novels” 230). Meredith’s “difficulties,” Woolf argues, must be understood in evolutionary terms: he is an innovator, responsible for “mutations” in the genre of the novel. As mutations, these may sometimes be unlovely, but as she points out:

When [Meredith] wrote, in the seventies and eighties of the last century, the novel had reached a stage where it could only exist by moving onward … George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy were all imperfect novelists largely because they insisted upon introducing qualities, of thought and of poetry, that are perhaps incompatible with fiction at its most perfect. On the other hand, if fiction had remained what it was to Jane Austen and Trollope, fiction would by this time be dead … To read Meredith, then, to our greatest advantage we must make certain allowances and relax certain standards. We must not expect the perfect quietude of a traditional style nor the triumphs of a patient and pedestrian psychology. (230–31)

In other words, if Meredith’s work were enjoyable, it would only be
rehearsing the form and tropes of “dead” fiction; its unpleasantness is a mark of its advanced status, and insofar as one chooses to read Meredith (and make allowances), this too is a mark of the reader’s advanced status. This rhetorical insistence on including the reader has the very important effects of emphasizing the ethics of reading and of demanding the reader’s responsibility. For it is not simply reading, but breeding that is at work.

Thus, in 1892 (the time during which Woolf claims Meredith’s popularity was at its height) literary critic W. J. Dawson asserts:

Meredith is a fruitful force, working not directly but indirectly on the mass of readers, not in his own person so much as in a far wider degree through the persons of others who have received the impact of his teaching. It is perhaps not as we could wish it, and not as he could wish it. But if it be for the present a thing inevitable there is this compensation, that as the race progresses he will become more and more visible in the general life. (170–71)

In other words, to judge by Meredith critics and scholars, there is no time at which George Meredith has been understood or properly appreciated by “the masses,” and yet there seems always to have been a “mass” of critics working as Meredith apologists—present critic included even—who must explain and defend his cultural worth. Indeed, as a reviewer for the Saturday Review writes of The Egoist: “Those who persevere to the end of the book will find their reward. They have been fairly warned that there will be some hard reading to accomplish. There must be no skipping; the book must be read, not page by page like the ordinary novel, but line by line” (222). And C. Monkhouse in his 1885 review describes the experience of reading Diana of the Crossways thus:

What [Meredith] calls the “literary covering” of his ideas makes his books hard reading even to the hard-headed, and the swiftness and agility of his thought requires more intellectual exercise than most readers are able or willing to take. Those who take it will be rewarded not only mentally, but morally. (264)12

One might argue that these critics offer the proof that Meredith was a fruitful force, for their discussions of his work sound much like Meredith’s own theories of reading, literature, and culture. As Archibald Henderson claims, with “Meredithian” imagery in
Interpreters of Life and the Modern Spirit (1911): “The educative influence of his fictive achievement, so arabesque, so fantastically kaleidoscopic, so ravishingly tortuous, yet withal so clear-visioned, so intense and so hardly sane, has been imperceptibly if glacially slow and sure” (5).

What is more or less explicit in all these accounts is that working hard at novel-reading is a mark of the reader’s participation in the advance of culture. Whereas Woolf’s image of the “perfect but dead” novels of Trollope and Austen grants to Meredith the role of evolutionary mutation (an imperfect but necessary leap forward), Dawson’s discussion of the influence of his work is both explicitly Arnoldian in the picture of an almost-mystical diffusion of ideas and in its criticism of the “philistine mediocrity” that doesn’t appreciate Meredith, and also evolutionary in its language of racial progress. In accusing Meredith’s critics of “intellectual indolence,” Dawson accuses them implicitly of arresting the development of civilization:

To such people ... poetry and fiction are simply ingenious relaxations for the idle moments of life, of which they have too many, and they naturally demand the old commonplaces of pursuing love and ultimate marriage bells as the beginning and end of fiction, and resent a style of fiction which is charged with the gravest matter and is meant to make men think. (167)

Clearly Dawson’s assumption of a gendered demographic of the readership of “commonplace” fiction—in that readers with too much idle time upon their hands, enjoying the sentimental stories about love and “ultimate marriage bells” are contrasted with those vigorous intellectual readers who choose that matter which “is meant to make men think”—rehearses a well-known Victorian (and modernist) denigration of the popular, mass-market, and sentimental feminine as opposed to the innovative, intellectual, and antiestablishment masculine. This dichotomy, however, is one that is both reinforced and problematized in Meredith’s discussion of Comedy. Although Meredith certainly decries the sentimental female reader, he also explores the possibility, indeed necessity, of her education; consequently, the opposition lies not between the female mass-market consumer and male cultural expert, per se, but between the uneducated female consumer and the possibility of her evolution to culturally expert consumer.
Meredith’s mixed metaphor shows that women are simultaneously the consumers of texts and the texts themselves that are produced for and consumed by men in the marriage market who will then be civilized (at least imperfectly) by the women they consume. You may judge a civilization by the women that it rea(r/d)s. And what if the female reader clings to the “old commonplaces” of romance plots and marriage resolutions? Then she participates in her own enslavement and relegates herself and, by extension, her culture to a retrograde, uncultivated state. As the narrator tells us in The Egoist:

The capaciously strong in soul among women will ultimately detect an infinite grossness in the demand for purity infinite, spotless bloom. Earlier or later they see they have been victims of the singular Egoist, have worn the mask of ignorance to be named innocent, have turned themselves into market produce for his delight, and have really abandoned the commodity in ministering to the lust for it … Are they not of nature warriors, like men?—men’s mates to bear them heroes instead of puppets? But the devouring male Egoist prefers them as inanimate overwrought polished pure metal precious vessels, fresh from the hands of the artificer, for him to walk away with hugging, call his own, drink of, and fill, and drink of, and forget that he stole them. (152)

The image that Meredith offers here of the “devouring male Egoist,” demanding his women as “spotless” commodities on the market, points precisely to the aesthetic-evolutionary problem of Woman in culture: if woman is to be the cultural artifact, the “inanimate overwrought polished pure metal precious vessel,” then she cannot also be a “warrior.”

This would seem to suggest that agency is an either-or proposition (warriors have it; vessels don’t), but for Meredith it’s more
complicated than that, for if Woman is the overwrought vessel, she is also the “artificer.” She creates, and worse, consumes her own sentimentalized image. In other words, not only must she package herself for the market, but she must also buy what she is selling. According to Meredith’s narrator: “[Young women] are trained to please man’s taste, for which purpose they soon learn to live out of themselves, and look on themselves as he looks, almost as little disturbed as he by the undiscovered” (302). The work of femininity in this complex scenario is the work of “undiscovery,” of the violent subduing of knowledge in exchange for self-objectification, with the consolatory, sentimental illusions of “the old commonplaces of pursuing love and ... marriage bells” (Dawson 167).

From the vantage point of the cultural expert, the picture of women “indulging a craving to be fools” offers the most disturbing vision of the novel. This indulgence places the heroine, Clara Middleton, in the initial quandary—her betrothal to the morally repugnant Sir Willoughby—and it continues to thwart her efforts to free herself through the very end of the novel. The overwhelming questions that the novel seems to ask are these: How “free” is Clara, not just to make choices, but to make the right choices? How much is she hindered by the conventions of her social realm, not just in acting on her desires, but in desiring wisely? And, finally, how much is Clara hindered by what hinders the readers of her story: the conventions of the novel genre itself, which demand of its heroines that they marry and live happily ever after?

As has been ably discussed in previous analyses of The Egoist, the conflicts of the plot are represented in evolutionary terms. The parasitic Sir Willoughby imagines that Clara’s choice of him among suitors confirms the success of sexual selection and, therefore, his own superiority: “She cannot help herself; it is her nature, and her nature is the guarantee for the noblest race of men to come of her ... Science thus—or it is better to say—an acquaintance with science facilitates the cultivation of aristocracy” (72). Clara, regretting her choice of Willoughby, spends the bulk of the novel railing against her imprisonment and falling in love with Willoughby’s poor but physically and intellectually vigorous cousin, Vernon Whitford. The novel ends, happily, with Clara’s escape from Willoughby into Vernon’s open arms and with Willoughby’s winning, as a consolation prize, the hand of Laetitia Dale, a faded and sickly beauty who will marry him only for money, and who will not be strong enough to produce children. Thus, disaster is narrowly averted: the healthy breeders will breed,
and the effete and jaded will be removed from the genetic stock. This resolves the problems of the plot on a basic biological evolutionary level. But if one reads Meredith as not just post-Darwinian, but as post-Arnoldian as well, the resolution creates other problems for the more-complicated issues of cultural education and social evolution.

As Clara realizes, the female prerogative of choice is circumscribed, at best, by woman’s inadequate upbringing:

It must be an ill-constructed tumbling world where the hour of ignorance is made the creator of our destiny by being forced to the decisive elections upon which life’s main issues hang ... Without imputing blame to [Willoughby], for she was reasonable so far, she deemed herself a person entrapped. In a dream somehow she had committed herself to a life-long imprisonment. (133)

Clara is clear-sighted enough to understand that she has been led, by her ignorance and youth and susceptibility to romance, to attach herself to a man at once ridiculous and, by virtue of his absolute control over her, sinister. Nevertheless, she is not quite clear-sighted or strong enough to extricate herself; she is still ignorant, young, and susceptible to sentimental and melodramatic fantasies.

As a result, although one might place the conflict of the novel in the battle between Willoughby and Clara (he to hold on to her, and she to escape from him), one might also read it in Clara’s vacillation between the “woman warrior” she might be in an ideal world and the weak, sentimental woman that she has been taught to be. In the same way, the novel constantly blurs the difference between what one reads and what one is. It offers a series of passages in which the reader may read reading, or to put it another way, the novel presents a series of situations in which the choice between blind sentiment and clear-sighted Comedy is offered not only to the characters but also to the reader. This is a dynamic that The Egoist illustrates playfully; at the end of a description of Willoughby’s obtuse misreading of Clara’s physical aversion to him (which he interprets as feminine coyness), the narrator remarks: “And if you ask whether a man, sensitive and a lover, can be so blinded, you are condemned to reperuse the foregoing paragraph” (152). The throwaway one-liner seems to poke fun both at the reader who might miss the point and at the labyrinthine prose, the rereading of which is a punishment to be dreaded. The joke that Meredith shares with his reader here is one that is less obvious elsewhere when,
perhaps, the reader’s sympathies are more firmly engaged with less risible characters. I want to focus particularly on the instances when *The Egoist* simultaneously represents, encourages, and derides the “uncultivated” cravings for sentimental melodrama.

When, for instance, faced with the possibility of losing Clara, Willoughby comforts himself with a fantasy of her lifelong repentance and a tearful, bittersweet reunion, he is both ludicrous and malevolent—clearly not an attractive character to inspire imitation:

Supposing her still youngish, there might be captivating passages between them, as thus, in a style not unfamiliar:

“And was it my fault, my poor girl? Am I to blame, that you have passed a lonely, unloved youth?”

“No, Willoughby! The irreparable error was mine, the blame is mine, mine only. I live to repent it. I do not seek, for I have not deserved, your pardon. Had I it, I should need my own self-esteem to presume to clasp it to a bosom ever unworthy of you.”

“... Clara! one—one only—one last—one holy kiss!”

“If these poor lips, that once were sweet to you ...”

The kiss, to continue the language of the imaginative composition of his time, favourite readings in which had inspired Sir Willoughby with a colloquy so pathetic, was imprinted.

Ay, she had the kiss, and no mean one. It was intended to swallow every vestige of dwindling attractiveness out of her, and there was a bit of scandal springing of it in the background that satisfactorily settled her business. (278–79)

Willoughby’s blithe combination of “pathetic colloquy” and vampiric sadism, in addition to highlighting his desire for revenge, does a couple of things: First, it borrows wholesale from that melodramatic touchstone, Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*. Consider the tear-jerking deathbed scene between the fallen Isabel Vane and her stern but forgiving ex-husband:

“Do you remember ... my promising to be your wife?—and the first kiss you left upon my lips?—and oh, Archibald! do you remember how happy we were with each other? ...”

Ay. He did remember it. He took that poor hand into his, retaining there its wasted fingers.

“Had you any reproach to cast to me?” he gently said, bending his head a little.
“Reproach to you! To you who must be almost without reproach in the sight of Heaven! you, who were ever loving to me, ever anxious for my welfare! When I think of what you were, and are, and how I requited you, I could sink into the earth with remorse and shame.” (627)

Second, in borrowing from *East Lynne*, *The Egoist* suggests that the pleasure of melodrama lies in the reader’s feeding off the spectacular suffering of the heroine.¹⁴ In light of Meredith’s explicit linking of melodrama with the uncultivated civilization, Willoughby’s “favourite readings” must register as one of his more-serious flaws—indeed, inseparable from his subjugation of his women. The fiction consumed by Willoughby is, in fact, a fantasy of consumption, of “swallowing” the attractive female. For the female reader, then, to indulge in such fictions is to consume herself.

Yet this is precisely what Clara does when she constructs her own bittersweet reunion fantasy about a meeting with Vernon; she both creates and consumes a similarly “fictional” scenario:

What would he think? They might never meet, for her to know. Or one day in the Alps they might meet, a middle-aged couple, he famous, she regretful only to have fallen below his lofty standard. “For, Mr Whitford,” says she, very earnestly, “I did wish at that time, believe me or not, to merit your approbation.” The brows of the phantom Vernon whom she conjured up were stern, as she had seen them yesterday in the library. (302–3)

Clara’s desperate desire for a rescuer to carry her away from Willoughby (as his previous fiancée, Constantia Durham, was carried away by Harry Oxford) produces various scenarios throughout the novel in which Clara tries to fit Vernon into the role of romantic hero: “‘If I were loved! … If some noble gentleman could see me as I am and not disdain to aid me! Oh! to be caught up out of this prison of thorns and brambles. I cannot tear my own way out. I am a coward’” (141). Although Clara’s weakness in indulging the fantasy is clear, it is also clear that her circumstances provide little scope for imagination otherwise. In her semicultivated state, melodrama is the genre of choice.

But what of the reader’s aesthetic choices? When we read voraciously for the development of Vernon and Clara’s forbidden love—thrill to Vernon’s stoical suffering of his secret attraction to Clara,
feel Clara’s frustrated longing for his approval—is not the novel providing the very *East Lynne*-ish melodrama and sentimentality that it decries? We too, then, have bought into the sentimentality and romance of the domestic plot, and the violence that it both masks and perpetuates. The *Egoist* offers the reader the resolution of Clara and Vernon’s impending marriage. But the genre of the melodrama demands a female sacrifice: some woman must be swallowed up. In purchasing Clara’s freedom from marriage to Willoughby, the novel sells Laetitia into that very bondage. To read Laetitia’s fate and still be pleased with our happy ending means that we must forget our own clarity of vision and engage in our very own version of “knowing not when we do know,” a disavowal that Clara herself performs at the end of the novel. When Clara has been freed from her engagement, she suddenly cannot understand how Laetitia could possibly resist Willoughby’s entreaties:

“Dear, dear friend,” said Clara. “Why—I presume on your tenderness for me; but let me: to-morrow I go—why will you reject your happiness? ... Can it be that you have any doubt of the strength of this attachment? I have none. I have never had a doubt that it was the strongest of his feelings ... If I might know this was to be, which all desire, before I leave, I should not feel as I do now. I long to see you happy ... him, yes, him too. Is it like asking you to pay my debt? Then, please! But, no; I am not more than partly selfish on this occasion. He has won my gratitude.” (579)

Even Clara, who should know better than anyone Willoughby’s repulsive character—who even acknowledges the grim reality that Laetitia will pay her debt in marrying Willoughby—refuses to understand Laetitia’s objections and joins in the chorus of people attempting to persuade her to accept him.

Critics have tended to read Laetitia in terms of what she will mean to Willoughby as his wife, rather than as one who will enter into the marriage with her own thoughts and feelings. Even Patricia O’Hara, who concedes that Laetitia’s fate is “more than a little disturbing,” ends her analysis of the novel with this sanguine comment: “And as things turn out, nature has not selected Willoughby after all: Laetitia Dale’s faded health dims the prospect of Patterne heirs and increases the probability of the extinction of the line” (18–19). And Gillian
Beer, who astutely describes Laetitia’s psychological complexity, comes to the following conclusion: “When Laetitia at last declares her changed feelings for Willoughby, we can greet the stroke … with delighted recognition” (Meredith 127). Richard Stevenson builds the entire argument of his article “Laetitia Dale and the Comic spirit in The Egoist” around the premise that “there is nothing tragic or even pathetic about Laetitia’s marriage to Willoughby” (406).

Yet it is hard to imagine feeling a sense of “delighted recognition” in Laetitia’s final resistance to Willoughby:

“You will not detain me here, Sir Willoughby?”
“I will detain you. I will use force and guile. I will spare nothing.”

... “But do you know what you ask for? Do you remember what I told you of myself? I am hard, materialistic; I have lost faith in romance, the skeleton is present with me all over my life. And my health is not good. I crave for money. I should marry to be rich. I should not worship you. I should be a burden, a barely living one, irresponsive and cold. Conceive of such a wife, Sir Willoughby!”

“It will be you!”

She tried to recall how this would have sung in her ears long back. Her bosom rose and fell in absolute dejection. Her ammunition of arguments against him had been expended overnight. (593–94)

If, like Clara, readers are willing to pass over Laetitia’s fate, then they (we) are doing precisely what Meredith describes: choosing to “know not when they do know.”

Therefore, while The Egoist stresses the importance of reading rightly—comically and with a clear vision, and not sentimentally—it does not necessarily encourage that right kind of reading. In many ways the novel is not, as its subtitle says, “a Comedy in Narrative” so much as it is a “Comedy in Interpretation.” For if “Comedy” is the refined, disinterested lens through which to view the foibles of society and self, it is also the generic structure that depends on a sentimental attachment to romance and that demands marriage as its happy resolution. By forcing the reader’s complicity with the latter even as it preaches adherence to the former, the novel provides a complexly layered and uncomfortable critique of the role of novels and novel-reading in the progression or regression of civilization.
THE FUNCTION OF COMEDY AT THE PRESENT TIME

[The comic idea] is not provoked in the order of nature, until we draw its penetrating attentiveness to some circumstance with which we have been mixing our private interests, or our speculative obfuscation.

—George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy (1877)

For Meredith, the kind of critical reading we do has the potential to rescue or imperil civilization. However, one crucial dimension of Meredith’s literary theory—the significant responsibility of the reader—often seems to drop out of critical discussions of his work. Critics of The Egoist have certainly noted Meredith’s feminist sympathies, as they have his Darwinian leanings, and his experimentation with form. Likewise, they have observed that the controlling vision of The Egoist is an ironic one; they have pointed to the ironies of the civilized savagery of masculine sexual appetites, of the distance between the sentimental language of courtship and the brutal realities of the marriage market, of the imbedded meaning in Willoughby Patterne’s name, and of the use of the tropes of Restoration comedy in a “progressive” novel. Various critics have attempted to situate the ironic vision of the novel with one character or another. Richard Stevenson asserts that “[Laetitia’s] point of view is a primary means by which Meredith manages to keep our critical responses to Willoughby under control” (407). Conversely, Carolyn Williams argues that

through the narrator/Clara, we learn the proper ironic perspective on Willoughby … we learn to regard her confusion as an indication of the ironic distance between what Willoughby seems and what he means. This gap between Willoughby’s appearance and his reality, into which Clara falls as if it were a bottomless abyss, is the space of irony into which we fall with pleasure. (63)

And Gary Handwerk maintains that the novel’s “irony exists as a hermeneutic and intersubjective phenomenon embodied in a particular mode of interaction, linguistic though not necessarily conscious, between subjects” (166). These readings offer persuasive accounts of the intricate exchanges and nuances through which the novel creates an edifying picture of the Egoist, but they miss the point that Meredith is at pains to underscore from the very first chapter of the novel: in our “infinitesimal” reading of the “Book” we are in danger of losing sight of our own countenances.
In following the intricacies of Meredith’s comic plot, character development, or language, it is possible to miss a layer of his irony, falling into the same traps as the Egoist himself—that is, relying on a complacent distance between the object of critique and the ironically detached “I” of the observer. Gillian Beer, for example, asserts, “This detachment and control is of the essence of comedy, and Meredith sustains it almost throughout The Egoist.” Where ironic distance fails in the novel, Beer argues, is where Meredith diverges from his idea of comedy, so carefully articulated in An Essay ("Idea of Comedy” 167). If, according to Beer, Meredith’s “detachment and control” signals his use of Comedy, then the critical position from which Beer can claim that Meredith has “almost” sustained the artistic aim he set out to accomplish signals her own “detachment and control” over the text. As she writes: “If the reader’s role is to be primarily that of judge, it is necessary that our detachment should be sustained” (Meredith 130).

Yet in An Essay Meredith eschews this critical distance. He says of Comedy: “You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them the less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes” (42). In other words, comedy is not about “detachment and control,” but rather about acknowledging one’s complicity in the ridiculous, the fallible, and the correctable. This is an uncomfortable position, as Meredith acknowledges in his discussion of the failings of a cultivated and observant, but uncomic, middle-class readership:

Humorous writing they will endure, perhaps approve, if it mingles with pathos to shake and elevate the feelings. They approve of satire, because, like the beak of a vulture, it smells of carrion, which they are not. But of comedy they have a shivering dread, for comedy enfold them with the wretched host of the world, huddles them with us all in an ignoble assimilation, and cannot be used by any exalted variety as a scourge and a broom. Nay, to be an exalted variety is to come under the calm, curious eye of the Comic Spirit, and be probed for what you are. (13–14)

Comedy is precisely where ironic distance is not wholly possible, where critical objectivity must be suspect because we have been “mixing our private interests” with the object of study.
In its suspicion of the reader’s investments, the novel echoes Matthew Arnold’s disdain for a “polemical practical criticism [that] makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice” (“Function” 38). Like Arnold, Meredith questions the will to interpret, to inflict a particular reading on a text in order to get the satisfaction of a resolution, a lesson, a cure. The Egoist’s narrator, for instance, remarks:

Observers of a gathering complication and a character in action commonly resemble gleaners who are intent only on picking up the ears of grain and huddling their store. Disinterestedly or interestedly they wax over-eager for the little trifles, and make too much of them ... And they may be accurate observers without being good judges. They do not think so, and their bent is to glean hurriedly and form conclusions as hasty, when their business should be to sift at each step, and question. (288)

As a “turgid” narrative aside that freezes the plot, this passage offers a good example of the novel’s Arnoldian ethos and its trickiness. It asks for abstract contemplation at a moment when the plot is moving forward with a “gathering complication,” and an inattentive or uncultivated reader might be tempted to rush ahead to the fulfillment of plot expectations. The passage comes when Vernon and Laetitia, watching Clara interact with the rakish Horace McCray, both assume that she is in love with Horace and will elope with him. Of course they are wrong, as the reader, with the help of the narrator’s commentary, can see. The love story that seems self-evident to Vernon and Laetitia is no more than “the rapid advance to a familiarity, more ostensible than actual, of two lively natures” (289). But Vernon and Laetitia’s emotional involvement with Clara prevents accurate analysis. Supposing, however, the reader were to apply the narrator’s lesson to his/her own investment in the novel, there is very little difference between the two observers’ knowledge of Clara’s intimacies with Horace and the reader’s knowledge of Clara’s intimacy with Vernon. The information we are given about her budding romance with Vernon is not much more than the “little trifles” from which Vernon and Laetitia construct a narrative about Clara and Horace, but sifting and questioning are precisely what the novel’s very structure thwarts.

It is, Meredith suggests, in the nature of readers—desirous of happy endings or at least resolutions—to acquiesce, even collaborate,
in their hoodwinking. But in Comedy Meredith offers a new way of reading the world: “For verily ... we must read of [the Book of Egoism] what we can of it, at least the page before us, if we would be men ... The remedy of your frightful affliction is here, through the stillatory of Comedy” (35). Moreover, this new remedy is the responsibility of the cultural critic:

The chief consideration for us is, what particular practice of Art in letters is the best for the perusal of the Book of our common wisdom; so that with clearer minds and livelier manners we may escape, as it were, into daylight and song from a land of fog-horns. Shall we read it by the watchmaker’s eye in luminous rings eruptive of the infinitesimal, or pointed with examples and types under the broad Alpine survey of the spirit born of our united social intelligence, which is the Comic Spirit? Wise men say the latter. They tell us that there is a constant tendency in the Book to accumulate excess of substance, and such repleteness, obscuring the glass it holds to mankind, renders us inexact in the recognition of our individual countenances; a perilous thing for civilization. (34–35)

In his blending of the panoramic view with “individual countenances,” Meredith presents a picture of the individual as part of a larger social aggregate, as part of the “spirit born of our united social intelligence,” and, as such, an individual owing a responsibility to that aggregate: to advance civilization through his or her personal reflection.

In addition, he implies a moral failing in the generic tradition of realism, because it is the accumulation of detail, ostensibly with scientific detachment but in fact governed by the sentimental demands of the genre, that continues to obscure vision and impede development toward “perfection.” The work of the reader/critic in reading The Egoist, then, is not merely the work of interpretation, of analyzing the text, but also the work of contemplating the effects of reading the text. In other words, reading The Egoist is the labor of being cultivated to become the kind of reader that the novel requires: clear-sighted, compassionate, flawed perhaps (with a predilection for bad sentimental fiction, say), but striving for the “perfection which consists in becoming something.” In many ways, Diana of the Crossways seems to represent the triumph of Meredith’s cultivation of Comedy as civilizing process, yet as I will argue, Meredith’s novel of 1885 extends the earlier critique of reading in The Egoist to offer a troubling reevaluation of the enlightened woman reader.
DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS: “IT IS A TEST OF THE CIVILIZED”

But she would have us away with sentimentalism. Sentimental people, in her phrase, “fiddle harmonics on the strings of sensualism,” to the delight of a world gaping for marvels of musical execution rather than for music. For our world is all but a sensational world at present, in maternal travail of a soberer, a braver, a brighter-eyed. Her reflections are thus to be interpreted, it seems to me.

—George Meredith, Diana of the Crossways (1885)

Excitement and sensationalism of the best there are, surely, for those to whom such sensations are a necessity in their reading: in the ride of Redworth through the burning sunset “with junipers behind him”; the curious sensation stealing over his frame when he fancies he sees two figures vanishing through the churchyard, where in the moonlight the gravestones are legible … the nightwatch of Diana, so well drawn that it is not over-drawn; and the thrilling scenes between the passionate lovers.

—Review of Diana of the Crossways, Illustrated London News (1885)

The opening chapter of Diana of the Crossways begins with a series of layered interpretations of Diana Warwick by the Diarists, who recount her wit and beauty and her alleged indiscretions, and by the narrator, who assesses the Diarists and through them Diana. Thus, in the quote above, we have a bon mot that the narrator reports a Diarist reporting. Diana is reputed to have said that “sentimental people … ‘fiddle harmonics on the strings of sensualism,’” but the quotation marks shed doubt on how much of the statement is hers. And then this comment is elaborated on as if by Diana herself, although we learn at the end of the explication that this interpretation too is suspect: “Her reflections are thus to be interpreted, it seems to me.” It is here in the “it seems to me” that Meredith offers his toughest challenge to his readers.

Clearly, this preface provides Meredith with a platform from which to promote his theory of the art of fiction. Just as he espouses Comedy in An Essay and The Egoist, here he offers Philosophy as the bringer of a better world. When we have abandoned our attachments to sensationalism—whether it is conveyed in the sentimental or grossly clinical—in favor of Philosophy,

then, ah! then, moreover, will the novelist’s Art, now neither blushing infant nor executive man, have attained its majority. We can then
be veraciously historical, honestly transcriptive … Philosophy bids us to see that we are neither so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab … Do but perceive that we are coming to philosophy, the stride toward it will be a giant’s—a century in a day. 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. (13)

It would make sense, then, if Diana itself embodied neither the “rose-pink” of sentiment nor the “dirty drab” of naturalism, but Meredith’s own vision of the “New Fiction,” conveying our real selves to ourselves as “wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight” (13). Indeed, while the novel does strive for this aesthetic and moral ideal, it also tells the story of its own striving for an ideal with which the “sensational world” is still pregnant.

*Diana* tells the story of a woman more advanced than *The Egoist*’s Clara Middleton. In many ways Diana represents the “woman warrior” that *The Egoist* only imagines to be possible. She has attained, certainly, a higher level of civilization than “the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices” that Meredith associates with “romantic and sentimental fiction” (*An Essay* 15). The novel rehearses many of the same problems that *The Egoist* considers: gender inequality, women’s limited choices on the marriage market, the cultural preference for falsely sentimentalized versions of women over real, powerful, and free women. But Diana is more forceful, more independent, more experienced, wittier, and more passionate than Clara. Her objections to marriage are more emphatic and prolonged, and her relationships with men more materially and psychologically damaging. Her plight is more extreme, and so are her attempts to free herself. As Beer notes, Diana is Meredith’s “full-est attempt at psychological realism” (*Meredith* 144).\(^\text{18}\)

If the novel’s social critique exceeds *The Egoist*’s, so too do its sensational and romantic appeals. The scenes described in the *Illustrated London News* review quoted above are indeed emotionally fraught, even suspenseful, and if some of them reproduce scenes in *The Egoist*, they do so with more “bang for the buck.” For example, in *The Egoist*, when Clara attempts to run away from Willoughby and Patterne Hall, she walks a couple of miles in the rain to the train station, where she is apprehended by Vernon Whitford, who has followed her on foot and who suspects she may be eloping with
Horace De Craye (and although Clara in fact has no intention of doing so, De Craye hopes and suspects the same thing). Vernon’s rescue of Clara is not without sensational appeal. But although Clara’s temporary escape causes a miniscandal at the hall, and although Horace De Craye attempts to seduce Clara into confiding in him after Vernon has left her to her “free will,” the danger to her, if it really ever existed, is averted without much to-do; she resists De Craye’s charms and returns to Patterne Hall with her virtue and reputation intact. By comparison, in *Diana of the Crossways* Diana is trapped in a marriage, not merely a betrothal, to a terrible Egoist. She makes two ill-considered attempts to escape her marriage and is rescued from her folly both times by Thomas Redworth. The first instance: after her husband has filed for divorce, Diana plans to leave the country without fighting the charges (thereby buying her freedom from Warwick at the cost of her reputation), and Redworth, entrusted with a letter from Emma Dunstane, rides at breakneck speed through the night to the Crossways to intercept her. And the second: when Diana plans to elope with Percy Dacier, Redworth again arrives fortuitously, minutes before she is to meet Dacier, to tell her that Emma is undergoing life-threatening surgery and that “you must come with me at once!” (241). In both scenes Redworth appears as a kind of cavalier, in the first delivering Emma’s letter as a sacred trust, and in the second delivering Diana herself to Emma’s bedside. He is thus laden not only with his own emotional freight—his loyalty, chivalry, and unrequited love for Diana—but also with Emma’s passion for her friend.

In addition, *Diana* offers a much more-sensational resolution to its romance than *The Egoist*. When Clara is freed from her engagement with Willoughby, the novel hands her off to Vernon in the same breath, as it were, although it delays their “official” engagement until they are away from Willoughby’s house, suspending any consummation of their love, beyond the coy:

“Vernon, no! not in this house!”

That supplication coupled with his name confessed the end to which her quick vision perceived she was being led, where she would succumb.

She revived the same shrinking in him from a breath of their great word yet: not here; somewhere in the shadow of the mountains.

But he was sure of her. And their hands might join. The two hands thought so, or did not think, behaved like innocents. (586–87)
Conversely, when Diana is freed from her marriage by Augustus Warwick’s death, and is finally free to marry Thomas Redworth, we are treated to a passionate embrace, the strength of which takes Diana herself by surprise:

A really big storm-wave caught her from the shore and whirled her to mid-sea, out of every sensibility but the swimming one of her loss of self in the man.

... She was up at his heart, fast-locked, undergoing a change greater than the sea works; her thoughts one blush, her brain a fire-fount. This was not like being seated on a throne.

“There,” said he, loosening his hug, “now you belong to me! I know you from head to foot. After that, my darling, I could leave you for years, and call you wife, and be sure of you.” (406)

The elliptical satisfactions of *The Egoist*’s romance are thoroughly embodied in *Diana of the Crossways*.

But if Laetitia Dale’s fate dampens the comic ending of the former novel, Diana’s resistance to marriage should also make the reader pause in regard to the happy resolution of the latter. Diana resists Redworth and the idea of marriage vehemently for six of the last seven chapters of the novel. The narrator describes her as

the woman of a long widowhood, that had become a trebly sensitive maidenhood; abashed by her knowledge of the world, animated by her abounding blood; cherishing her new freedom, dreading the menacer; feeling, that though she held the citadel, she was daily less sure of its foundations, and that her hope of some last romance in life was going; for in him shone not a glimpse. He appeared to Diana as a fatal power, attracting her without sympathy, benevolently overcoming. (381)

Here the “romance” between Redworth and Diana is explicitly deromanticized, but this is a complicated move by the novel. Diana resists Redworth in part because he is not romantic enough to her: he is not an ideal lover, but “one of those good men, strong men, who subdue and do not kindle” (381). The narrator notes with gentle sarcasm: “The woman who talked of the sentimentalist’s ‘fiddling harmonics,’ herself stressed the material chords, in her attempt to escape out of herself and away from her pursuer” (381). But when Diana finally succumbs, she acknowledges “her subserviency to
touch and pressure—and more, stranger, her readiness to kindle” (409). How are we to read this resolution? The novel offers several possible readings.

In a way it might make sense to read it like Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* and *Miss Mackenzie*, in which the reluctant heroine must be brought to admit that she is not fit to pilot her own ship. Indeed, *Diana* offers an exchange between Emma and Diana that borrows the same nautical language:

“But marriage, dear Emmy! marriage! Is marriage to be the end of me?”

“What amazing apotheosis have you in prospect? And are you steering so particularly well by yourself?”

“Miserably! But I can dream. And the thought of a husband cuts me from any dreaming. It’s all dead flat earth at once!” (400)

In fact, this conversation with Emma is Diana’s turning point, when Emma’s eloquent representations of Redworth’s painful constancy are “an electrical bolt in [Diana’s] bosom, shaking her from self-pity and shame to remorseful pity of the suffering lover” (400). Having come to view his suffering as romantic, then, she can first sympathize with and then be “kindled” by him.

Or it is possible to read Diana’s transformation as the giving up of her dreams of romance and finding a more-mature satisfaction in a real rather than ideal man. Diana’s earlier relationship with Percy Dacier aids this reading, since he has represented a passion for which she is willing, at least temporarily, to throw away everything else. The failure of this passion, one could argue, is what allows Diana to appreciate Redworth’s humbler, and safer, charms. But if so, why does the novel emphasize Diana’s “kindled” feelings for Redworth? These certainly fiddled persuasive harmonics for the novel’s sensation-loving reviewer, who concluded his or her review this way:

The interest heightens as the story and life grow older—no flagging attention for the reader—on he is impelled—the beauty of some soft saying, the lure of some passionate love scene, the lament of the woman that, by the confession of her love, she is humiliated—all bear him on, on resistless wings. (270)

This reader, at least, does not seem to view the novel’s resolution as prosaic.
Still another option is to read in the novel’s parting thought, given to Emma, a happy ending for eugenicists. Emma, watching the sunset and reflecting on Diana’s honeymoon letters, thinks hopefully of the issue of their union. Those readers who find Meredith’s writing perverse rather than ingenious are warned beforehand:

Now the dear woman was really wedded, wedded and mated. Her letters breathed, in their own lively or thoughtful flow, of the perfect mating. Emma gazed into the depths of the waves of crimson, where brilliancy of colour came out of central heaven preternaturally near on earth, till one shade less brilliant seemed an ebbing away to boundless remoteness. Angelical and mortal mixed, making the glory overhead a sign of the close union of our human conditions with the ethereal and the psychically divined. Thence it grew that one thought in her breast became a desire for such extension of days as would give her the blessedness to clasp in her lap—if those kind heavens would grant it!—a child of the marriage of the two noblest of human souls, one the dearest; and so have proof at heart that her country and our earth are fruitful in the good, for a glowing future. (414)

Emma’s affection for her friends is blended with eugenicist solicitude for her “race.” Clearly, Diana and Redworth represent physical and mental superiority combined to produce equally superior children. It is fortuitous, then, that Diana has overcome her reservations about marriage in general and Redworth in particular.

But this final scene also becomes something else—Emma’s reading of Diana’s letters, in which Emma’s own desires, like the sunset, color the horizon of possible meanings. For Emma, Diana’s letters “breathe,” but they breathe especially what she wants to hear. And thus the novel brings us back to its initial difficulty—interpretation. Emphasizing as it does the shiftiness of “historical” truth, the novel permits all of these various sentimental and realist readings to coexist at its conclusion. Diana’s objections to the shackles of marriage are not negated by the kindling of her sexual desires, and just because Redworth and Diana are good breeding stock, it doesn’t mean they aren’t spiritually kindred lovers. But I would suggest one more layer to Diana’s comic resolution: the romance that is threatened by marriage to Redworth is not, or not only, the prospect of a more-poetical lover, but also the fantasy of her own critical and political agency.

Diana’s dearest vision of herself is, one might say, Meredith’s dearest vision of Woman, which is articulated by Arabella Shore,
following the publication of *The Egoist* in 1879, when she expresses the hope that Meredith might someday describe a more “perfect woman” and thus “by some clear illuminating ray cast from his own in some future work, aid in the great task of social regeneration” (147). Diana strives to be (and in many ways is) a woman of comic intelligence, capable of participating in the work of social regeneration. As Beer has pointed out, that Diana is a novelist, and one whose theory and practice of fiction closely approximate Meredith’s own, suggests that Meredith staged his own cultural influence through his representation of hers. (*Meredith* 142–45). However, if Diana is Meredith’s artistic proxy in the novel, then she bears witness to his willingness to turn the gaze of Comedy on himself, for Diana’s attempts at social reform and progressive thinking are hopelessly enmeshed in sentiment. The narrator, for example, describes Diana and Emma’s bluestocking-ish self-cultivation in this fashion:

They were readers of books of all sorts, political, philosophical, economical, romantic; and they mixed the diverse readings in thought, after the fashion of the ardently youthful. Romance affected politics, transformed economy, irradiated philosophy. They discussed the knotty question, Why things were not *done*, the things being confessedly to do; and they cut the knot … O for a despot! The cry was for a beneficent despot, naturally: a large-minded benevolent despot. In short, a despot to obey their bidding. Thoughtful young people who think through the heart soon come to this conclusion. The heart is the beneficent despot they would be. He cures those miseries; he creates the novel harmony. He sees all difficulties through his own sanguine hues. (39)

The novel clearly treats the two women’s intellectual endeavors with gentle satire here. They are compassionate, intelligent, but also foolishly romantic. The narrator tells us, however, that “by dint of reading solid writers, using the brains they possessed,” they gradually learn that their reformist zeal may have selfish motives. They discover that “their particular impatience came perhaps of the earnest desire to get to a comfortable termination of the inquiry:—the heart aching for mankind sought a nest for itself” (39).

This passage suggests, on the one hand, in classic bildungsroman fashion, that in the course of the narrative Diana and Emma are moving beyond youthful idealism to a more-reflective wisdom—coming closer to disinterested Philosophy as they move away from
sentimentalism. On the other hand, it shows Diana still clinging to her romance. Whereas Emma begins to acknowledge her own investments in their theories of reform,

Diana had to be tugged to follow. She could not accept a “perhaps” that cast dubiousness on her disinterested championship. She protested a perfect certainty of the single aim of her heart outward. But she reflected …

The discovery was reached, and even acknowledged, before she could persuade herself to swallow the repulsive truth. O self! self! self! are we eternally masking in a domino that reveals your hideous old face when we could be most positive we had escaped you? Eternally! the desolating answer knelled. Nevertheless the poor, the starving, the overtaxed in labour, *they* have a right to the cry of Now! now! They have; and if a cry could conduct us to the secret of aiding, healing, feeding, elevating them, we might swell the cry. As it is, we must lay it on our wits patiently to track and find the secret; and meantime do what the individual with his poor pittance can. A miserable contribution! sighed the girl. Old Self was perceived in the sigh. She was haunted. (39–40)

Diana’s social critique is not negated by the recognition of her own sentimental investments, nor is her sentimentalism banished by her self-knowledge. The novel therefore suggests that the best that can be hoped for is a kind of ambivalent agency—neither wholly philosophical nor wholly sensational, but always, painfully, both. At its conclusion *Diana of the Crossways* leaves its readers where Diana is left at the end of this passage—patiently tracking our Philosophy and our social regeneration, but haunted nonetheless by regressive sentimentalism and egoism.

As critics have noted, Diana’s gradual acceptance of Redworth is linked symbolically to the “red” of blood and fire that his name represents; he finally proposes “under the propitious flaming heavens,” which Diana coyly refers to as the “seductions of ‘Sol’” (394–95), and so on. So, too, Emma’s final “reflection” on Diana’s marriage is blended with her contemplation of the “flaming heavens.” But these passages, triumphant as they appear, must be linked to the failure of critical reflection described in the lines quoted above: “The heart is the beneficent despot they would be. He cures those miseries; he creates the novel harmony. He sees all difficulties through his own sanguine hues.” Emma’s conclusion, which is the novel’s conclusion,
creates a “novel harmony” that views the “difficulties” of the plot’s resolution, both literally and figuratively, through “sanguine hues.” Thus, even as the novel imagines itself doing the work of cultivating philosophical readers—and through them, civilization itself—it also shows that work unable to separate itself from romance.

The weight that is placed on the cultivation of the reader in The Egoist and Diana—wherein “cultivation” means both refinement of taste and careful husbandry of (human) resources—offers a way of reading through Meredith forward to modernism that suggests not a falling away of social and ethical engagement, but a development of the stance of the cultural critic whose very “disinterested” aesthetic critique signals his or her obligation to work for “social regeneration.” If, as Arnold tells us in “The Function of Criticism,” the free play of the mind on excellence and perfection allows the critic to produce not just rarified musings on the “great books” but a painfully succinct critique of society (“Wragg is in custody”), then may not that same critique be read in the epigrammatic moments in modernism that defy generic tradition and the reader’s complacency? When, for example, the mad girl, Nancy, interjects “shuttlecocks” at the end of Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier or when Marlow refuses to repeat Kurtz’s last words, “the Horror,” to the blindly sentimental Intended in Heart of Darkness, the text’s refusal of conventional resolution might be read as a commitment to the cultivation of readers. The phrase that I used to describe Meredith’s vision of reading, “eugenics by way of aesthetics,” alludes to the curious connections between aesthetic refinement and “racial” vigor in Victorian ideas of culture, but it also signifies, I would suggest, a phenomenon still current today: the critic’s fantasy of omnipotence—that is, the belief that solely or primarily through the intellectual transmission from critical author (cultural authority) to student/reader may civilization evolve, paradigms shift, social horrors be addressed, and oppressive power structures be resisted. It is, without a doubt, a compelling vision of the “study of Arts in Letters.” But as Diana of the Crossways demonstrates, this fantasy is no less susceptible to the pull of sentiment and sensation than the most romantic of love stories. And so the work of “Comedy” (or “Philosophy,” or, one might posit, critical theory) must be to see in our own critical endeavors that “we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab,” but we are “soul[s] born active, wind-beaten, but ascending” (Diana 13).