

How to Write a Modern Comedy: Theory and Practice by George Meredith

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The Theory: *An Essay on Comedy*

The Formularization of Social Consciousness in Comedy

George Meredith's *An Essay on Comedy* occupies a unique position in the evolution of the idea of comedy in English literature. This is partly because Meredith tried to describe a new form of comedy, a social comedy played as a game in modern and cultured society; also partly because he, either consciously or unconsciously, neglected the fact that comedy is, and has been since its birth, a social form of art, much more so when compared with tragedy. While heroes in a tragedy die in solitude physically or mentally, heroes in a comedy live on in their society, however ironical the conclusion is. As Northrop Frye points out in *Anatomy of Criticism*, "The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it".⁽¹⁾

It seems, the very fact that Meredith felt the need to define comedy freshly as a social genre ironically implies that Meredith's view of society in relation to comedy is unusual in the tradition of the idea of comedy in English literature. "A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current, and the perceptions quick, that he may be supplied with matter and an audience" (3),⁽²⁾ Meredith declares at the opening of the *Essay*. In this passage, there is a seed of contradiction, or more accurately a circular reasoning, which Meredith seems to have been unaware of: comedy needs a perceptive and civilized society, but as we will later see in detail, "Sensitiveness to the comic laugh is a step in civilization. To shrink from it is a step in civilization" (50). Comedy is a thing which teaches people how to behave in a civilized society, in other words a thing which civilizes an uncivilized society;

although its lesson is powerless for an uncivilized, imperceptive society.

Therefore, what is really necessary for Meredithian edifying comedy is an "uncivilized" society which is civilized enough to be aware and ashamed of its incivility, and is looking for a discipline — in a word, a modern society in which each individual knows that the era of festive communion in society has ended. But wasn't comedy originally a thing for the communal pleasure of a society? Even when we limit our vision to English literature since the renaissance (let us roughly regard it as the era of the birth of modern consciousness in the history of mankind), there is the great example of Shakespeare, which Meredith seems to be keeping at a distance: "...they [Shakespearean comedies] are of this world, but they are of the world enlarged to our embrace by imagination, and by great poetic imagination. They are, as it were, ...creatures of the woods and wilds, not in walled towns, not grouped and toned to pursue a comic exhibition of the narrower world of society" (11). Meredith seems to intentionally keep away from the thought that Shakespearean comedies may have been written for the communal pleasure of a society, when in fact "creatures of the woods and wilds" were enjoyed by the people in "walled" towns, not by animals or trees in the woods; in their ways, Shakespearean comedies were as society-conscious as any in English literary history.

This theme is thoroughly explored in another critical classic on comedy, C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, quite properly subtitled *A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom*. After surveying the relationship between saturnalian holiday festivals and festive comedy in pageant entertainment, he proceeds to argue that "festivities were occasions for communicating across class lines and realizing the

common humanity of every level" (111) and that Shakespearean lines, especially songs inserted in the scene say "where people are in the cycle of the year, the people of farm, manor or village who live entirely in the turning seasons" (117) and evoke "the daily enjoyments and the daily community out of which special festive occasions were shaped up" (118).⁽³⁾

Such an image of Shakespeare is excluded from Meredith's *Essay*. The writer who appears instead is Molière as a poet of the responsible middle class, of "cultivated men and women who do not skim the cream of life, and are attached to the duties" (13). *They* can perceive, he says, the folly of the newly-risen bourgeois class who thronged to the Court of Louis XIV. But, in the first place, the Court as a place of comedy is necessary: "A simply bourgeois circle will not furnish it, for the middle class must have the brilliant, flippant, independent upper for a spur and a pattern; otherwise it is likely to be inwardly dull, as well as outwardly correct". The Court is a place where people are stripped of their bourgeois complacency and are revealed as individuals uncertain how to behave. Here is no festive confusion of social classes; Meredith's arguments are aimed at the middle-class individuals who are struggling to settle their social identity after a pattern, in a society which is new to them. Comedy provides them with a more desirable behavior pattern than imitating the "flippant" pattern of the Court; that is, with an idea as to how to behave responsibly as members of a Middle Class, which is newly formed as a social category. Taking that into consideration, it seems natural that for Meredith "The life of the comedy [*The Misanthrope*] is in the idea [rather than on the plot] ... you must be receptive of the idea of comedy" (23-4).

It is worth noting that Meredith here identifies the idea *in* comedy with the idea *of* comedy; for him, ideas that must be expressed in a comedy are equal to the role and the structure of comedy. Here, we need to look more closely at his idea of comedy, especially its role.

The Role of Comedy- "Humanity" Education

One of the main reasons why Meredith pays homage to French comic playwrights, especially Molière, is that "they know men and women more

accurately than we do". Comedies that have no model in life, and are exaggerations of people's humours (for example Ben Johnson's) do not fit in his context. That sounds quite reasonable, but when we read the passage above again, we cannot but feel that the word "accurately" should rather be "properly": while the Rabelais-Johnson tradition of comedy depends (according to Meredith's argument) on human types and its exaggeration by the dexterous hand of the author, the Molière-Meredith tradition depends on types and its adaptation to the comical structure of the play; "accurate" depiction of the characters, is not equal to "raw realism". "He [Molière] seized his characters firmly for the central purpose of the play, stamped them in the idea, and, by slightly raising and softening the object of study ... generalized upon it so as to make it permanently human" (10). Meredith's ideal comedy, like Johnson's, presumes the invariability of the central (that is, comic) character in the plot; it may "raise or soften" the characters to fit them to the purpose of comedy, but once the characters are established, they are always the static object of generalization for the sake of the purpose (or as we have seen in the last section, the idea) of comedy. Categorization is in the basis of Meredithian comedy; carnivalesque confusion of values and morals must be strictly excluded from it.

In this sense, it would be interesting to contrast what Northrop Frye seems to take for quite granted in *Anatomy of Criticism*, the argument, "At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment the crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery",⁽⁴⁾ with the fact the "comic revelation" happens quite early in *The Egoist* (in which novel Meredith put his formula of comedy in practice), when Clara realizes that Sir Willoughby is an egoist through one of his casual remarks. The tradition of society freshened after a licentious suspension of itself is the basic cycle of social movement in comedy Barber formularized for Shakespearean comedy, but in Meredith's comedy social structure or its ideal form is settled from the first. It is revealed in an early phase that the ideal social structure has been suppressed in the place where there is

comedy, and that that is an extraordinary situation; in the former part of *The Egoist* the readers' interest centers on how Clara can escape from Patterne Hall, the place for comedy in this novel. Outside Patterne Hall, at least in the landscape of the Alps, there must be a moral system working properly. But Clara cannot escape from the Hall because of Vernon Whitford's persuasion that she must not escape from the situation leaving behind a person she can protect from suppression by the wrong, namely young Crossjay. Thus, in the latter part, the interest of the plot focuses on the rectification of Patterne Hall: how a proper moral system can be implanted in it. The structure of the novel identifies itself with the moral system, which must be maintained by the clear consciousness of the characters, not freshened by being made a fool of by a carnivalesque chaos. Such a clarity of consciousness sustained by the clarity of conscience (see, for example, Clara's dilemma over whether to leave Crossjay to Vernon's care) is the Comic Spirit. But it must be noted that the problem of conscience does not appear in the form of explicit preaching and persuasion from the author; it identifies itself with the structure of comedy. "His [Comic Spirit's] moral does not hang like a tail, or preach from one character incessantly cocking an eye at the audience, as in recent realistic French plays, but is in the heart of his work, throbbing with every pulsation of an organic structure" (17-18). Organic or autonomous maintenance of moral structure is the life of Meredithian comedy. Then, it is quite natural that cynicism also must be excluded from the comedy Meredith idealizes: "it is uninstructional, rather tending to do disservice" (17). Comedy is an instrument of the edification of the readers; it tells the readers what a "permanently human" form of life should be, with a static moral system installed in its structure.

It is the most conspicuous feature of Meredithian idea of comedy that morality is constructed in the contrast between "folly" or "dulness" and clarity of mind. "Comedy, or the comic element, is the specific for the poison of delusion while Folly is passing from the state of vapor to substantial form" (34). We should note that, while folly is caught in passing from the "vapor" to a concrete form of a person's behaviour,

Comic Spirit remains, as its name signifies, an idea, an impalpable thing by its nature. "Dulness, insensible to the comic, has the privilege of arousing it [the comic idea]; and the laying of a dull finger on matters of human life is the surest method of establishing electrical communications with a battery of laughter—where the comic idea is prevalent" (36). The Comic Spirit is a system for the classification of concrete things, namely each individual human being; but it is an impalpable system without a concrete substance, a criterion or more frankly an ideological system. Meredithian comedy doesn't have the homeopathy or curing "folly by folly", which Wylie Cypher attributes to the irrelevance of carnival in his commentary on Meredith's *Essay*. Meredith's idea of comedy is the opposite of Shakespearean festival of life; its autonomy does not take in foolish acts of human beings as an invigorant, but classifies them as dulness and puts them under surveillance.

That is because folly is "equivalent to a cement forming a concrete of dense cohesion, very desirable in the estimation of the statesman" (37), or more explicitly a chain for human beings. So far so good; but we mustn't mistake comedy's role for the liberation of the people. If he intended to liberate people including all the social strata, why didn't Meredith choose to write plays, not novels to be consumed by each reader in the privacy of his or her room? As Meredith himself eagerly admits, his idea of comedy is "the idea of good citizenship" (38). Meredithian comedy is not the festival of communal life; it is the instrument of self-recognition of each member of the middle class as an *homme citoyen*, a responsible member of the new ruling class. We should look now, at how this self-recognition proceeds to the formation of a static moral system under the guidance of Comic Spirit.

Comedy as an Instrument of Surveillance and Rectification

In Meredith's *Essay*, the comic is separated from humour: "You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes,

and accepting the correction their image of you proposes" (42). On the surface, this may seem a paraphrase of what Fielding wrote about a century before, "For indeed good breeding is little more than the art of rooting out all those seeds of humour which Nature had originally implanted in our minds",⁶⁵ but the drastic difference is that, while Fielding saw humour as an implacable tendency in our minds and tried to educate people about the way in which people of different humours can live happily together, Meredith tried to unify each individual's nature under the name of common sound sense. "Now comedy is the fountain of sound sense; not the less perfectly sound on account of the sparkle"(14). And the point is that Meredith's comedy is particularly concerned with the *self*-education of the individual; it does not educate people in an explicit way, but tells each individual that he is watched by others' eyes and makes the individual educate himself or herself by self-consciousness. Thus comedy of humours is transformed into a comedy of the gaze, in which the scenes are constructed by the reciprocal watching of one another. Each individual cannot but educate himself or herself to be a responsible member of the middle class, by his or her own individuality; he or she is solitary in the world of Meredithian comedy, and the solitude leads one to seek for others' gazes as the guiding force in one's self-education in the privacy of the room in which novels are read.

There is no need of a compulsive, oppressive education in the modern prison; the consciousness of being watched will thoroughly serve the purpose. That was Jeremy Bentham's basic idea when he conceived of panoptic prison about half a century before Meredith: and Meredith's idea of comedy expanded its application to society. "The comic Spirit eyes, but does not touch, it [the object of laughter]. Put into action, it would be farcical. It is too gross for comedy" (47). The point is that we are made aware that Comic Spirit is watching us, and that is enough for the purpose of comedy; the Comic Spirit will "look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light ... followed by volleys of silvery laughter" whenever people are "at variance with their professions, and violate the *unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another*" (48, italic mine).

The Comic Spirit becomes the spirit of surveillance: not a visible watchtower or written laws in the prison, but a perceptible atmosphere in which everyone is being watched. The watchtower is invisible, but everyone knows that there is a system of surveillance guarding the unwritten law which provides everyone with a proper place in the semiotic system of the world.

Thus "the discipline of the Comic Spirit" (54) is completed; and at the same time, the meaning of "civilized society" Meredith thought necessary for comedy is made fully clear: comedy is a procedure, not a festive ceremony, of the maintenance of the identity of each individual as a being who belongs to the semiotic system of middle class society.

Country House as a Place of Comedy

Comedy is a literary form particularly concerned with places, and Meredithian comedy is no exception to the rule. It is all the more so for its concern with a static meaning system; as Wylie Cypher concisely explains in his explanatory notes for Meredith's *Essay*, "The deepest meanings of art ... arise wherever there is an interplay between the patterns of surface-perception [Gestalt] and the pressures of depth-perception [non-Gestalt]" (200). It is significant that Meredith attributes "a very distinct knowledge that she belongs to the world, and most at home in it" (21) to Célimène, whom he regards as the "active spirit" or the representative of the Comic Spirit in Molière's *Misanthrope*, a model for Meredith's social comedy; the place, circumscribed as a Gestalt, where Comic Spirit is in the atmosphere as a non-Gestalt watching system, is comedy, which Meredith equates to civilization. Of course Meredith identifies such a place with the world itself in which we live; we, not being Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, have no way but live in the civilized world, conscious of being watched by the Comic Spirit. The world of comedy has no outside for us; to borrow a passage by Michel Foucault, "The carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside".⁶⁶ Meredith chose Patterne Hall as a model of such a world: "Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and

women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world" (*The Egoist*, p. 33,⁷⁾ the opening page of the novel). Now, we shall see how Meredith put his theory in practice by writing *The Egoist*, walking around Patterne Hall as a place of comedy in the form of a novel.

The Practice: *The Egoist*

Patterne Hall and the Inner Life of the Egoist

Patterne Hall is not merely a country house used as the stage of a comedy, where each character of the novel resides, loves or is loved, and together weaves the pattern of a comedy; it is also a signifier for the structure of human egoism itself. In other words, Patterne Hall is not there as merely a building; it represents the intertwined inner lives (and the struggle with one's/ others' egoisms) of the people residing there that constructs Patterne Hall.

Aforetime, a grand old Egoism built the House. It would appear that ever finer essences of it are demanded to sustain the structure; but especially would it appear that a reversion to the gross original, beneath a mask and in a vein of fineness, is an earthquake at the foundation of the House. Better that it should not have consented to motion, and have held stubbornly to all ancestral ways, than have bred that anachronistic spectre. (37)

It is this enigmatic, or more precisely self-contradictory, passage that tells us that 'the comic drama of the suicide' of Sir Willoughby Patterne has hereby been opened. To sustain the House of Egoism, it declares, it is necessary to ever increase the 'finer essences' of it; but isn't such an 'improvement' the death of Egoism? To be socialized a step, for Egoism, is always to move a step toward death; for society entails the coexistence of egos with lower case "e"s. "Modern Egoism" in this context is nothing but an oxymoron. Thus from the first, the outcome of the battle is obvious; the House of Egoism cannot but be battered down in the democratic system of modern society.

In fact, it is this self-contradiction that drives the plot of the novel. To live on in this society, the Egoism must rid itself of its old, gross elements, heading for a kind of 'pure' Egoism which will rule the small realm of one's inner life. Society is no longer a hot battlefield of opposed Egoisms of people who are desperate to devour others for their survival; Egoism cannot but take refuge in a smaller dimension, namely a family, a house, or a character. Egoism has no way of survival other than this, but the problem is that it is not a survival but an extenuation; tamed egoism has none of the vitality which raging old Egoism had to rule the whole society. Patterne Hall is the front line of such a self-contradictory struggle for survival by Egoism.

And this 'purification' is explicitly the strategy Meredith has adopted for the description of Egoism in modern society; he chose as the battlefield not the actual field of war or the most gross and rapidly changing sphere of crooks and sham gentlemen (as Thackeray chose both in *Vanity Fair*) but the simple setting of a country house. Here, we must not overlook Meredith's strategy working beneath its apparent simplicity; 'simple' can also mean 'restricted' or 'closed'. And Meredith himself is ready to make his strategy explicit from the first.

Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing.(33)

The drawing room, or the Patterne Hall it symbolizes, is a pure space for comedy, structured carefully so as not either to draw elements from the outer world which will interrupt the progress of Sir Willoughby's mock 'suicide', or to let Sir Willoughby, the little prince of Patterne Hall, enjoy his egoism in too wide a realm, namely the world. At the same time, it must be noted that Meredith does not allow such a space to contract completely into Sir Willoughby's inner life (if so, it would be a real death of an egoist; we are no longer egoists when our egoisms cannot influence the

world at all); in the balance between the total collapse of egoism and the brutal influence it tries to effect upon the world, stands the whole structure of Patterne Hall and the novel *The Egoist* itself. The narrator of a drawing-room comedy is not merely an observer of the comic scenes; he is also an architect, upon whose adroitness in cutting out just the right mount of the outer world from the scene, rests the sustenance of the House.

Here, it becomes clear that there is a clear parallel between the narrator Meredith and Sir Willoughby, master of Patterne Hall, who must guard it against attacks from the outside. As an author who aspires to the form of a comic novel, Meredith must cut out the surplus of worldly elements; as the keeper of a microcosmic House, Sir Willoughby must have an "hereditary aptitude in the use of knife" (38).

Put in the opening, the cutting of Captain Patterne works as the definition or the manifesto of Sir Willoughby's egoism, and at the same time, of Meredith's technical ambition in writing this novel; to write a comedy is to put a frame of meaning onto the chaotic world, and the minor incident of the cutting of the Captain is a frame put to the whole world of *The Egoist*, an example which exemplifies a theory. Then, is it not symbolic that Sir Willoughby, stricken with the elopement of Constantia Durham, had "ridden back at night, not caring how he used his horse in order to get swiftly home" (55), "taken to the pursuit of science, and spoke of little else" (56)? Sir Willoughby's effort to keep Patterne Hall in order, and Meredith's concentration on the theme of 'the comedy of egoism' in writing *The Egoist*, have both something of the feel of a scientist in his laboratory, a scientist who experiments to prove his theory, but at the same time is afraid something will happen that will ruin everything.

Closed Places

This fear of collapse is one of the most evident characters of Sir Willoughby; Laetitia Dale, who is on her way to a clearer view of human egoism, replies, "You explain yourself clearly", when Sir Willoughby tells her "I dread changes" in spite of himself, recommending her to marry Vernon Whitford (181-2).

The reader might ask here, isn't he trying to cause a change in the human relationships around him? and in a sense he is right. But it mustn't be overlooked that Willoughby's plot of letting Laetitia marry Vernon is a part of his grand plan of sustaining Patterne Hall and the human lives in it by his marriage to Clara Middleton; he is willing to bear a minor change for the sake of a greater permanence, the permanence of the arrangement of the personnel in and around Patterne Hall (he is plotting to let Laetitia and Vernon live in a cottage near the Hall).

Marriage to Clara is the prime move in his grand plan; but still it is nothing more than a move. His final goal is to keep Patterne Hall in order, and by that to rest in a microcosmos arranged by his own hand. "He wished for her to have come out of an egg-shell, ... as completely enclosed before he tapped the shell, and seeing him with her sex's eyes first of all men." (51) and "... she did not sufficiently think of making herself a nest to him. Steely points were opposed to him when he, figuratively, bared his bosom to be taken to the softest and fairest." (128) To conquer a virgin and to rest in her nest, these apparently opposite goals are made one in Sir Willoughby's mind. We should note that, in the first passage, Clara's virginity is compared to an eggshell, a closed but complete bed for the chicken before she is hatched (the word *enclosed* is well chosen here; in the peaceful eggshell, the chicken does not need to feel the tremor of an ego about to be born). Sir Willoughby is trying to complete the microcosmos of the Hall by adding to it the lost prime piece of a sub-microcosmos. Microcosmos it should be, because Clara must not feel that she is also an ego; if so, he will have to fight not to be devoured by her ego instead of making her a place of refuge and rest for his ego, tired from the day's battle with the outside world. Then, it is no wonder that, as the plot of the novel comes near to its completion, Willoughby's mind resembles more and more a rural seat in danger of being shattered as the estate is nibbled to pieces; Patterne Hall is Sir Willoughby's ego.

Within the shadow of his presence he compressed opinion, as a strong frost binds the springs of earth,

but beyond it is his shivering sensitiveness ran about in dread of a stripping in a wintry atmosphere. This was the ground of his naked eidolon, the tender infant Self swaddled in his name before the world, for which he felt as the most highly civilized man alone can feel, and which it was impossible for him to stretch out hands to protect. (346)

As a matter of fact, Sir Willoughby has nothing to protect his ego other than his inner megalomania; like a snake trying to swallow its own tail, he has no other way to live than repeated self-assertion and self-affirmation. But the Hall gives a form to his groundless self-affirmation. Patterne Hall has reigned over the county for centuries by the repetition of self-assertion of successive masters; it goes without saying that their self-assertion has also been groundless, but the repetition gives the Hall its symbolic centrality. What is important is that it has been sustained; the most important factor of Sir Willoughby's marriage is that it keeps the Hall going. Whom he marries is second to the prime goal of the sustenance of the microcosmos. If not so, how can he "revolve" such a thing as this "as a chant", when he decides to change tracks to Laetitia Dale? "It would be a marriage with an intellect, with a fine understanding; *to make his home a fountain of repeatable wit*: to make his dear old Patterne Hall the luminary of the county" (456, italics mine). The Hall's centrality and firm structure is only a mock one built up by repetition, so it can give only half-protection to Sir Willoughby's ego; the Hall can fall down in a moment like a house of cards.

Mrs. Mountstuart's epigram attached to Clara, "dainty rogue in porcelain" touches this sore spot of Willoughby's egocentrality, and the sting remains, making Willoughby repeatedly go back to the interpretation of the epigram; for, as Mrs. Mountstuart says, he hasn't secured Clara yet. The porcelain image he threw over her can be broken at any moment, leaving there a living rogue of a girl. "The door of a hollow chamber of horrible reverberation was opened within him by this [Mrs. Mountstuart's] remark" (209). This door, like the doors of the shrine of Janus, fully opens

with the beginning of Willoughby's battle with the outside world, making the way to the chamber of his inner mind.

It is noteworthy that Mrs. Mountstuart plays a similar role to Clara. When Clara implores her for release, she replies, "A change like this, <...> occurs through the heart, not because there is none" (429). She is asking for a convincing reason, convincing enough to silence the world she is representing; she is stripping bare their conscience, but people's "conscience" in this novel is nothing but the code of behaviour socially requested. Thus, the relationship with the outer world builds two-fold walls for both Willoughby and Clara: one is the physical wall of Patterne Hall, the other is the mental wall of consciousness/ conscience. Here, I would like first to consider the outer wall, which works as an instrument of possession and confinement.

Patterne Hall as the Place of Possession

At the beginning of Chapter 14, there is a quotation from the Book of Egoism: *Possession without obligation to the object possessed approaches felicity*. All other possession, for example that of land or a wife, is surcharged with obligation. And ironically, Sir Willoughby is a land-owner who is trying to obtain a wife: as a land owner and the administrator of a happy rural seat, he must obtain a wife who will serve as a loyal servant and a beautiful adornment to it. Thus, for him, a wife is an obligatory possession; "wife" is "a gentle term for enslavement" for the possessor. To possess a slave is to be possessed in some sense by the slave.

We can suspect here that, as a land owner, Sir Willoughby is trying to perform fully his duty to such slaves as he possesses. "At least I have you for my tenant, and wherever I am, I see your light at the end of my park." These words of his to Laetitia indicate clearly that to have a tenant is to enclose them in Patterne Hall, and that that enclosure in turn means the placement of the tenants as a necessary feature of the self-contained microcosmos of Patterne Hall. In this sense, Patterne Hall is a parodic nightmare foreshadowing of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, for Sir Willoughby has an appalling wish to "only connect". "I

strongly object to separations. And therefore, you will say, I prepare the ground for unions? Put your influence to good service, my love" (131). He is a possessor fully conscious of his obligations, and is ready to perform them if the things possessed will only be content in their place in the happy rural seat.

Ladies Eleanor and Isabel are most content in their place; ex-driver Flitch longs to be restored to the system; they are the happy ones (or the unhappy one who mourns over lost happiness) that are/used to be in the harmony of the world before the birth of the ego. For Clara, Willoughby's strong attempt at detaining others establishes Patterne Hall as nothing but a prison: "So frigid was she, that a ridiculous dread of calling Mr Whitford Mr Oxford was her only present anxiety when Sir Willoughby had closed the window on them" (174). Being caught in a prison, she becomes conscious of the prison-owner's desire to possess her as a slave-woman worth of care as a rare possession,⁶⁹ and that causes sexual repulsion in her.

But, as Robert M. Polhemus points out, "Clara has a great talent for making alliances and undermining the egoist's reign".⁶⁹ To make an alliance is to bring someone under one's influence, or to hide under someone's influence. She isn't just frantically trying to escape from the Hall; she isn't just an overawed innocent girl who doesn't know the existence of her ego yet. It will be of some help for our argument to remember her conversation with Sir Willoughby just at the period when her doubts begin:

"<...> Two that love must have their sustenance in isolation."

"No: they will be eating themselves up."

"The purer the beauty, the more it will be out of the world." (101)

She does know she must exert her egoism or let someone do it vicariously in order to survive the 'purity' of Patterne Hall. Hence, the problem of egoism and freedom arises.

Modern Egoism

None of them saw the man in the word, none noticed the word; yet this was her medical herb, her illuminating lamp, the key of him (and, alas, but she thought it by feeling her need of one, the advocate pleading in apology for her. Egoist! (137)

Thus defining Willoughby, by his own word, as an Egoist is for Clara the birth of a conscious detestation for Willoughby; by this definition, she has obtained a clear conscience as to her efforts to escape from the marriage to him. This word is her consciousness and conscience; to put it another way, this little word gives her her inner life: it builds up a wall around her mind and gives her a chamber of refuge and at the same time a reference point for her subjectivity.

However, it must not be forgotten that Sir Willoughby is a "modern" Egoist. He is an Egoist who lives in the midst of a network of human relationships, not one who lived in the period when all human beings tried to devour one another for their survival; he is living in an era of secure individuals, beings provided with a place in society.

And the narrator himself admits: "<...> Sir Willoughby was a social Egoist, fiercely imaginative in whatsoever concerned him. He had discovered a greater realm than that of the sensual appetites, and he rushed across and around it in his conquering period with an Alexander's pride" (467). In other words, the Egoist went out from the chamber of sensuality into society; his House had to have a drawing-room, the front line of social battle. "Our original male in giant form" (284) or the erect "I" was tamed into a form of "i" or an individual in a society always watched over and kept in order by an authority, the stage of social comedy.¹⁰⁰ Thus Sir Willoughby becomes a being to be categorized (in his case as an "Egoist") and punished with laughter. In this novel, what arouses laughter is the fixation of human character by society's eyes.

However, Sir Willoughby throws away his small "i" on the night of his final plea to Laetitia: "He cried, 'Darling!' both to her and to solitude. <...> He stooped so far as to kneel, and not gracefully. Nay, it is in the chronicles of the invisible host around him, that in a fit

of supplication, upon a cry of 'Laetitia!' twice repeated, he whimpered" (590). He returns to the attitude of primitive Egoism which has no consciousness of his ego's dignity; and that is exactly what arouses out loudest laughter in this novel. Sir Willoughby's Egoism becomes an object of punishment by laughter because it goes beyond the boundary and therefore is "unnatural". This constitutes the irony of modern egoism: it is not before the polite "Society" has shattered our dignity that we can establish our dignity in the society which actually surrounds and watches us. In order to have our personalities bound in social dignity,⁽¹¹⁾ we must first surrender ourselves to the symbolic order of social egoism. To be conscious of that fact is necessary for us to obtain the power of modern egoism; modern egoism is the power of consciousness, and at the same time it is an imprisonment in the chamber of consciousness.

"Egoist agony wrung the outcry from him that dupery is a more blessed condition. He desired to be deceived" (345). The agony of Egoism of the agony of consciousness; to be conscious of the structure of the whole things that are happening to him is, for Sir Willoughby, to be agonized by it. Then, isn't there an analogy between Egoism and Comic Spirit, which "condenses whole sections of the book [The Book of Egoism] in a sentence, volumes in a character" (35), in other words, casts the whole structure of society over a character? Modern Egoism consists in the knowledge of the structure of society, where tamed egoisms must live together.

Knowledge and power

In *The Art of Satire*, David Worcester defines irony as something created by an advance understanding between the author and the watcher: "The little audience (Horace's *pauci lectores*) is quick-witted enough to see the trap in advance; the "many-headed vulgar" rush blindly to meet their fate" (77). The point is that the object of irony doesn't know that there is such code of understanding. The Egoist, we might say, knows that there are the eyes of polite society, but he doesn't know of the existence of the Comic Spirit confidently watching him. "So confident that their grip of an English gentleman, in whom they have spied their

game, never relaxes until he begins insensibly to frolic and antic, unknown to himself, and comes out in the native steam which is their scent of the chase" (37). Here is the double-bottomed structure of the work of Comic Spirit in *The Egoist*: Mrs. Mountstuart is clearly given the role of Comic Spirit, but she is also a representative of society. To be a victor of the battle fought in this novel, characters must know when she turns into the Comic Spirit, and they must secretly conspire with her; they have to know who is the secret watcher. Thus, this novel is established as a comedy of gazes; all the characters are watching one another, knowing that there are occasions when a person suddenly turns into the Comic Spirit and begins to preside over the game of odd-man-out.

Then, what about Vernon Whitford, who isn't as obviously a representative of society as she is? Traditional criticism against him has been that his characterization is not strong enough to make it plausible that he will win Clara's love in the end; but perhaps he is the cleverest watcher and the most secret agent of the society and operator of laughter in the novel. Vernon, who is scorned by Sir Willoughby as an absent-minded scholar who knows nothing of the world, can play the role of a secret watcher to Sir Willoughby thanks to his position, and at the same time act as an obvious watchman over Clara; thus he can be the final victor who has the last polite laugh at Sir Willoughby, and at the same time a serious and decent educator for Clara. Clara should never be laughed at in the end of the novel: an important point of Meredithian comedy is that only the villain suffers the last laugh of the reader and the other characters; the educated person will never be laughed at.

Clara will have to behave herself under his eyes, not conscious that they represent the polite Society, but painfully conscious that his sharp eyes urges her to have her own will. "She would have thought of Vernon, as her instinct of safety prompted, had not his exactions been excessive. He proposed to help her with advice only. She was to do everything for herself, do and dare everything, decide upon everything" (253). To put his 'advice' in a few words, it is "Have your own way, but consider the result well". He does not force her to act in

a certain way, as Sir Willoughby does; on the contrary, he even seems to guarantee her the right to subjective actions in the battlefield. But he never takes Clara's side: he contrasts her right with *Sir Willoughby's* right to fight. "He has the right to think you deluded; and to think you may come to a better mood if you remain - a mood more agreeable to him, I mean. He has that right absolutely" (260). On the face of it he seems to be a non-combatant, but really he commits himself in the battle more deeply than Clara and Sir Willoughby; he is the stage manager of this social mock-war. He pretends to guarantee subjectivity to the combatants, but he is actually supervising the condition of their subjectivity. Clara must be educated so as to be able to laugh at Sir Willoughby as an aberrant Egoist; her Egoism, originally as wild as Sir Willoughby's, must be transformed into a polite laugher's small ego, given a "subjectivity" or the symbol of legitimate and responsible being in society.

A great chance for Vernon to form Clara's "subjectivity" comes when she tries to take flight in the rainstorm. When Vernon, catching up with her, suggests that she should dry herself before the train comes, in an inn nearby, "... depressed as she was by the dampness, she was disposed to yield to reason if he continued to respect her independence" (324). And indeed he continues to "respect her independence", although in a special way. Here, let us look at the passage which shows the essence of Vernon's dexterity in steering conversation to a direction convenient for him.

'... You are unalterable, of course, but circumstances are not, and as it happens, women are more subject to them than we are.'

'But I will not be!'

'Your command of them is shown at the present moment.'

'Because I determine to be free?'

'No: because you do the contrary; you don't determine: you run away from the difficulty, and leave it to your father and friends to bear. As for Crossjay, you see you destroy one of his chances' (328-9)

He is guaranteeing her a right to act "subjectively" in Patterne Hall: she should stay in the "circumstances" and fulfill her responsibility; that would prove that she has a free will, that she was an independent individual whom even Sir Willoughby could not interfere with. The transformation of freedom is complete; it is changed into something that must be proven in reference to others, something that must incessantly undergo the inspection of others.⁽²⁾ To banish those who do not obey that social structure, with laughter, as "unnatural" is the quality of laughter in *The Egoist*; laughter is supervisory there.

Around Love and Femininity

Here appears the ambiguity of obedience: Clara submits herself to Vernon in the end, but she does not need to suppress her 'nature' in her obedience to Vernon. This is the deception needed for the happy ending of a Meredithian comedy, that is, the banishment, with laughter, of those who don't obey the regulation by those who does; if the word "deception" is too harsh, then we may call it the manipulation of the characters' inner life by the narrator. In chapter 21 with the suggestive title of "Clara's meditations", Clara thinks that "she who had not known her mind must learn to conquer her nature, and submit" (250), like Vernon who had lived in this detestable Hall for the sake of his study; but a "physical thought" checks her: "Can a woman have an inner life apart from him she is yoked to?" Matters cannot change in her spontaneous union with Vernon; the logical consequence should be that she can't have an inner life apart from Vernon, only she isn't "yoked" to him. Laughter at an unnatural thing, in this case a yoke, is quite natural, but there isn't any seed of laughter in the pure Nature itself; this is the main theme of supervisory laughter.

Why is Sir Willoughby's desperate love-making to Clara laughable? Because the way he tries to suppress her will is too candid, with no decent gesture of guaranteeing her subjectivity in submitting herself. From the viewpoint of the roundness of characterization, Vernon is a failure; he is too ordinarily decent for a hero in a novel. But isn't it the flat decency itself that makes him the victor in the battle around

Clara? He does not rob Clara; he absorbs her in his natural flatness. Sir Willoughby's Egoism meant subjecting other's subjectivity for the maintenance of his brittle self; Vernon's taking Clara under his protection is selfless because Vernon has no self worth to be spoken of. For Clara, both are certainly the subjectification of her subjectivity – only the degree of apparent harshness and the quality of Clara's self-relief is different; but can one of them be called love?

"What is love?" is an indecent question one should not ask in this novel, like the question of the ambiguity of the purity of feminine sex. But the suppressed question revives in the form of the central contradiction in this novel, and it is this contradiction that drives the battle in this sex-war comedy.

That is exactly the case with Clara's love. She wants to love, but whom? For her, love is essentially an idea which should rule the reality; first of all she must prove that she can love, and then she will be free to choose her mate in her leisure. "Her war with Willoughby sprang of a desire to love repelled by distaste. Her cry for freedom was a cry to be free to love" (254). Love equals freedom, but here too is a disregard for the quality of love; what is there is only the dynamics of confinement and liberation. Not a page after the last passage, Clara thinks, "The thought of personal love was encouraged, she chose to think, for the sake of the strength it lent her to carve her way to freedom". We must not overlook the change in the dynamics. "A cry to be free to love" is here transformed into a "strength to carve her way to freedom"; love, which was no more than a branch of freedom (freedom to do something) is pushed up on the throne of sublime law, which guarantees the negative freedom which Clara needs most urgently at the moment (freedom *from* Patterne Hall). We never can laugh at love or the Nature; it is only after we have accepted the ideology of natural love and confined ourselves in the prison cell of small ego, that we are given the right to laugh at Sir Willoughby's big Ego and let it be shattered down by the laughter from our society.

"And it was true that freedom was not so indistinct in her fancy as the idea of love" (254); the idea of love has to be indistinct for her liberation – she must, *at any*

cost, find a man she can 'love', who will take her out of Patterne Hall. Like money in modern capitalism (255), love is no longer the ruler in the static hierarchy of symbols and value; it is the power without any static meaning, that causes the various movements of the characters in this novel. Egoism, which was up till then the visible and shining centre of Patterne Hall, will be covered by the invisible and ubiquitous centre(s) of love, the imperialism of indistinct ideology of love. By committing ourselves to that transition, we, as subjects (in both senses) of indefinite "love", can laugh at Sir Willoughby who cannot "love" at all. The essence of education is not its content, but the fact that it has a systematic educational structure. Nothing but this structure of irresponsible self-preservation is the egoism of educational comedy, the egoism of the structure of the system which engulfs the egoism of the characters.

Educational Imperialism

What have I been in this house? I have a sense of whirling through it like a madwoman. And to be loved, after it all! – No! we must be hearing a tale of an antiquary prizing a battered relic of the battle-field that no one else look at. (584)

This is Clara's confession just before she is finally united to Vernon. After all, she couldn't escape from Patterne Hall; she stayed there, and fought her battle. Or more accurately, she didn't stay there; she understood that Patterne Hall was not a closed house but an open battlefield, where people do not stay but fight the incessant battle for winning the position of the holder of the legitimate interpretation of love; to lose the battle is to be laughed at by the majority. But there is no such thing as static legitimacy in love; once an apparently ultimate interpretation of love is attained, it cannot but be taken over by a re-interpretation. The battle is never over, people cannot escape from the battlefield. Even if people escape from Patterne Hall they cannot escape from the field, for there is no difference between the inside and the outside of Patterne Hall; Patterne Hall is nothing but a division of the flat battlefield without any transcendental principle of ethics. Vernon's persuasion

to stay in Patterne Hall was an warning against desertion; Clara had to fulfill her duty as a soldier.

In that sense, it is significant that the strongest reason in Vernon's persuasion is that she was deserting her duty of protecting Crossjay. Sir Willoughby is ready to pay for his education, provided that he is educated to be a gentleman; to borrow a phrase from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Sir Willoughby wants to educate him "to give him a conviction that he is absolutely superior to others", to put him in the position of superiority in the static system of social hierarchy. But Clara and Vernon are together educating Crossjay to make him a naval officer following in the steps of his father, who has not enough money for his education but achieved 'an act of heroism' somewhere about the coast of China; they are educating Crossjay in the context of literal imperialism, in the logic of the expansion of territory. Sir Willoughby wants to defend Patterne Hall towering vertically above the county, but Clara and Vernon are educating Crossjay to make him a soldier in the battle of horizontal conquests. In this novel, there is no reference to the vertical relationship of conquest and submission in the imperialistic system; the territory is expanded by the brave deeds of the soldiers, that's all. People don't even refer to the education of the conquered savages, they refer only to the education of the British as conquerors: "We English beat the world because we take a licking well" says Dr Middleton, and Clara thinks about the comic scene of young Willoughby grasped by his master sighing at the thought that Ladies Isabel and Eleanor, who are deprived of their comic sense, will be horrified at the scene. Here we see the union of Comic Spirit and educational imperialism; we all are punished and educated by the Comic Spirit, and made soldiers in the horizontal battlefield of the expansion of territory without any static hierarchy of ethics. The Comic Spirit is the invisible watchtower in the field, with an invisible loudspeaker incessantly broadcasting the message: "These are educational manoeuvres, but anyone will be shot with laughter and be thrown out of the field into the outside desert, who doesn't act as he would in a real battle". We must be educated in the battle, educated that there is no sublime law in the field of comedy, with

Love as an imitation of it, sustained by the make-believe of the educated soldiers.

Even Sir Willoughby is not banished from the field of comedy: Vernon's short remark, "Teach him to forgive!" appoints Laetitia educator of Sir Willoughby, and that a public one by marriage. Laetitia's condition for her marriage to Sir Willoughby is that he should forgive Crossjay and Fritch generously, so that they can stay in, and return to, Patterne Hall. Thus they are taken into Patterne Hall; not the Hall as towering centre, but as flat territory that keeps on expanding, with education producing a make-believe order over the battlefield. And such a provisional "order" is the law of the comedy Meredith tried to formularize for the responsible middle-class in *An Essay on Comedy*.

The Egoist can be regarded as a *Bildungsroman*; Patterne Hall is a social battlefield, but at the same time it is a school. What is different from an ordinary *Bildungsroman* is that the author himself is the educator.

V. S. Pritchett says, "<...> it is the essence of Egoism to deny that control has ever left one's hands";⁽¹⁾ and so it is with the act of writing a comedy. Patterne Hall is a microcosmos of education; Meredith made it a stage of comedy for the education of his characters. Here is the greatest contradiction of this novel: to be educated as soldiers in the flat battlefield, we readers need to be made to believe in the autonomy of comedy; therefore the watchtower of Comic Spirit has to be invisible. But Meredith needed to exercise his control explicitly to make Patterne Hall a place for pure comedy; the House must be built and kept as a microcosmos by the author of comedy. And this problem of control over the microcosmos of comedy was to be taken over by the authors of comedy-in-novel in the era of modernism, when the confinement of people in their consciousness was made an obvious problematic.

Notes

- (1) Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four*

- Essays* (Princeton up, 1957) p. 43.
- (2) All later quotations from *An Essay on Comedy* are taken from *Comedy* (Meredith's *Essay* and Bergson's *Laughter* introduced and appendixd by Wylie Sypher, 1956, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980).
 - (3) C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Realization to Social Custom* (Princetn UP, 1959)
 - (4) *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 163.
 - (5) A Passage from an article Fielding wrote for *The Covent-Garden Journal* under the pseudonym of Sir Alexander Drawcansir. W. K. Wimsatt (ed), *The Idea of Comedy: Essays in Prose and Verse, Ben Jonson to George Meredith* (Prentice- Hall,1969) p.168.
 - (6) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975, Penguin, 1977) p.301.
 - (7) All later quotations from *The Egoist* are taken from the Penguin edition, 1968.
 - (8) see the parable of the king and the cat in P. 176. Sir Willoughby regards a wife as an obligatory possession that must be taken care of, while Laetitia is reserved as the 'cat', with no obligation implicated. But here we need to suspect if she isn't taken into the hierarchie of possession; Sir willoughby is ready to protect her as a tenent, and that is a great concern for Laetitia, whose father is gravely ill.
 - (9) Robert M. Polhemus, *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (U of Chicago P, 1980) p. 227.
 - (10) in this respect, Michel Foucault's argumant about the birth of "the novelistic" is quite adequate. See *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 193 - 194.
 - (11) see *The Egoist*, p. 416. "<...> had he not loved himself most heartily he would have been divided to the extent of repudiating that urgent and excited half of his being, whose motions appeared as those of a body of insects perpetually erecting and repairng a structure of extraordinary pettyness". Self-love binds our personality, and Clara knows how to decunstrust
- it. See p. 391, "But now she admired him piecemeal. When it came to the putting of him together, she did it coldly".
- (12) Here, Michel Foucault's argument about knowledge and power will be of great help: "The carcenal network constituted one of the armatures of this power-knowledge that has made the human sciences historically possible. Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct,whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination-observation". *Discipline and Punish*, p. 305.
 - (13) V. S. Pritchett, *George Meredith and English Comedy* (Chatto and Windus, 1970) p.117.