

Imagery as Countercurrent in "The Egoist"

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'Well, then, to follow you, supposing the fish or the fisherman, for I don't know which is which . . . Oh! no, no,: this is too serious for imagery. . . .'

Baffled and sighing, Laetitia kept silence for a space.

The simile chafed her wits with a suspicion of a meaning hidden it in.¹

ONE OF THE WAYS of reading *The Egoist* is as if it were a play like *Heartbreak House* or a screenplay like *The Rules of the Game* — not that Patterne Hall is not closer to Horseback Hall than to Heartbreak House, but that George Meredith's comedy of manners is at once a story about a few people and a critique of a certain English social class at a certain time in history. The players are doubly exposed as characters and caricatures, sometimes within the same scene. Meredith's abstract diagnoses are worked into rather than out of the turmoils they precede, which creates cases of *déjà vu* as early as chapter one. Like the "Comedy in Chapters" that is played out according to roles and rules of decorum, the world of *The Egoist* is formally stylized, and full of expectations. For one thing, it is expected that an honourable young lady will keep herself dry:

The ladies . . . exclaimed against Clara, even apostrophized her, so dark are trivial errors when circumstances frown. She must be mad to tempt such weather: she was very giddy; she was never at rest. Clara! Clara! how could you be so wild! (II, p. 311)

In a downpour that is otherwise "universal," Willoughby assumes that his Hall and his England are solid, organized, and water-

tight — and he takes precautions (fishing-boots and waterproofs) to assure that he will be too. Vernon Whitford, on the other hand, is soaked to the skin, but in the process he “had the pleasure of a gull wheeling among foam-streaks of the wave” (II, p. 315). Of course afterwards he will feel like a gull in a different sense; but it is undeniably because he “behaved like a man of honour, taking no personal advantage of [Clara’s] situation,” that Vernon is later entitled to pun, rather bitterly, on the “astonishing dryness” of his person and British personality (II, p. 330).

Clara and Willoughby disagree about “the world” to such an extent that, for conversational purposes, it is unrecognizable except as the rock upon which their engagement founders. Willoughby’s notion that he can bodily detach himself seems paradoxical until his machinations make it clear that by “the world” he generally means the population of his county and specifically its response to him. In truth, he much prefers to have the ground underfoot and his praises in his ears; it is most notably his contact with women that sends him scurrying from “the world of waters of rival men” (II, p. 546). Clara resists his invitations to flee with him, and not only finds the world beautiful and benevolent, but insists that it is the better part of religion to think so. Although she initially denies it, her declaration of love is more for the world of nature than of men, and will become increasingly so as she confronts the malevolent motives of Sir Willoughby and the murky ones of her father. Troubled by her own responses, Clara slowly returns to the Hall from an outing in the park, singing “to herself above her darker-flowing thoughts, like the reed-warbler on the branch beside the night-stream . . . independent of the shifting black and grey of the flood underneath” (I, p. 83). She turns to Vernon, who seems to appear, as usual, for that purpose, and tremulously inquires what he thinks of the world. The pertinence of her question might seem doubtful, since only “London’s the field” where he would join “in the fray,” but in fact Vernon’s judgment is good both for Patterne and her beloved Alps: “One might as well have an evil opinion of a river: here it’s muddy, there it’s clear; one day troubled, another at rest. We have to treat it with common sense” (I, p. 85). Like the heroes of Meredith’s poem “Hard Weather,” Vernon is exhilarated by

the idea of contention, which is reducible — or exaltable, depending on one's point of view — to the experience of splashing through a storm. Although at times she seems in danger of exhaustion, Clara too is ultimately invigorated by her struggles. It is Willoughby over whose head "the world of waters" most nearly closes; in his paranoia, he resembles the wanderer in "The Woods of Westermain," who has fatally lost sight of the fact that "Nothing harms beneath the leaves / More than waves a swimmer cleaves" (II. 3-4).² Even his own massive Patterne Hall, deeply fixed in his own English soil, seems to wobble and blur before his incredulous eyes: standing on the main staircase facing his fiancée, he "declined to know more than that he was on a volcanic hillside where a thin crust quaked over lava" (II, p. 346).

As far as this essay is concerned, the storm and other natural phenomena are not primarily remarkable as trials of character or exercises in the pathetic fallacy, still less as examples of Meredith's celebrated Romanticism. Granting a more rudimentary and, as Vernon would say, scientific approach, the prevailing element in most of the natural ordeals seems to be water, or some fluid approximation of it. That it should also be a very persistent referent in *The Egoist's* imagery and diction might not seem surprising: waves and boats predictably appear in a book where the characters swim, row, and, with the exception of Sir Willoughby (whose views on this subject might be compared, with good reason, to those of Sir Walter in *Persuasion*), conspire to get their protégé into the navy.³ But even considering all this, as well as the myriad rhetorical commonplaces about ships of state and of life, there remains the curious incongruity of this much water in a novel whose manners are so stable and patterned and dry.

There are more than a hundred references to marine life, which at times seems like an all-purpose reserve into which Meredith dips when he is at a loss for ideas — or worse, when he goes on fishing simply out of enthusiasm for the plenty he has already got. Hence, after two dazzling pages of elaboration on the fact that Willoughby "has a leg," Meredith somewhat lamely remarks that "It is a leg of ebb and flow and high-tide ripples" (I, p. 13). But if this seems merely gratuitous, *The Egoist* is also full of capricious allusions that are complexly meaningful: "the rope was in the

form of a knot . . . for the conclusive close haul" of an engagement, partly to remind the reader of a hangman's noose (I, p. 18); Clara envisages the "nobly" aloof Vernon as "a far-seen solitary iceberg in Southern waters," partly to chastise him for frigidity and partly to console herself that he will soon be melted (I, p. 87); Dr. Corney likens men to ships' figure-heads partly because he finds Willoughby statuesque and wooden, if not worn (II, p. 518). In coping with this watery "undisciplined world," the language sometimes seems to aspire to symbolism, as in chapter twenty-five where a pirate captains the ship, passions man it, and conscience, an unwilling guest, is forced to walk the plank (II, p. 296). But such drawn-out analogies are rarely maintained, and Meredith delights in dashing a model, like the one in which pathos appears as ships' ballast,⁴ and reformulating it so that pathos becomes the tide (II, p. 383). "Defer the simile," Mrs. Mountstuart warns Clara; "If you hit on a clever one, you will never get the better of it" (II, p. 435). Different characters play private variations on the same imagery, so that if the equivalents are as unstable as water, it is also water which somehow connects people's thoughts. The effect never becomes occult, as it does, for example, in *The Golden Bowl*, where it is as if everyone were wrapped up in the same gauzy medium, or were floating free through the same unmoving pool. In spite of their pretensions, no one in *The Egoist* is clairvoyant; it is just that Meredith's script sometimes makes them sound that way. Still, as the allusions build up and the analogies break down, the reader is left with a sense of water as less than a conductor but more than common filler. The imagery moves in on spaces that talk leaves obscure, as if, metaphorically speaking, it were filling out Meredith's elegant outlines and sometimes inanimate caricatures, glossing them, over the long stretch, with the flash of vital movement.

In sampling only the most typical versions of this imagery, one might first distinguish between those waters that a character identifies with things and persons by which he feels challenged, and the waters that are variously associated with a character's own temperament. For instance, Clara watches Willoughby in horror as "The gulf of a caress hove in view like an enormous billow hollowing under the curled ridge" (I, p. 153). After she under-

goes his embrace, "She came out of it with the sensations of the frightened child that has had its dip in sea-water, sharpened to think that after all it was not so severe a trial" (I, p. 68). Willoughby, on the other hand, is alarmed because "The passion in her was like a place of waves evaporated to a crust of salt" (II, p. 353). When threatened by more than temporary inundation, the different individuals assume more or less predictable forms and postures. Except for those moments during which Willoughby strains to invest Laetitia with the graces of his "bride," Clara is the only one who is regularly described as "swimming" instead of walking or running across the lawn. In her more languid and defeatist moods, she struggles to content herself with the prospect of merely floating, either as a fisherman's bobbin or discarded weed. Her fiancé and Laetitia indulge in this sensation too, but neither of them endures the gruesome passivity which Willoughby wishes on Clara: "The fact that she was a healthy young woman, returned to the surface of his thoughts like the murdered body pitched into the river, which will not drown and calls upon the elements of dissolution to float it" (I, p. 278). Some of Clara's own visions are scarcely less dire, as when she pictures herself and her father as castaways from the wreck of her marriage. Whereas she must escape, if at all, by her own native energy, "It was on the full river of love that Sir Willoughby supposed the whole floating bulk of his personality to be securely sustained . . ." (I, p. 129). The disadvantage of being both grandiose and artificially powered is that a sudden recollection of "the breathing Clara" can rush "up from vacancy like a wind summoned to wreck a stately vessel" (I, p. 272). Left far behind by Constantia Durham, the "racing cutter full sail on a winning breeze" (I, p. 20), Sir Willoughby's labouring steamship barely keeps up with the sophisticated Mrs. Mountstuart, "like a royal barge in festival trim" (II, p. 544). Lady Culmer is completely "at sea" about what to give him as a wedding gift, until he "casts anchor by" Laetitia Dale, whose elderly father "loses his moorings" upon leaving his chair. Of course several people are also likened to the common breeds of "queer fish," not to mention Vernon's being a pike behind glass, Willoughby an eel and a

whale, Constantia a severely nibbled catch, and de Craye a leaper for bait.

The second general category of references — those in which water or some sort of current is described as belonging to or emanating from a person — ranges from casual allusions to streams of thought or conversation, and “tides” or “floods” of feeling, to extended comparisons like the one of “the forceful but adaptable heart” to a mountain rillet:

Behold the mountain rillet, become a brook, become a torrent, how it inarms a handsome boulder: yet if the stone will not go with it, on it hurries, pursuing self in extension, down to where perchance a dam has been raised of a sufficient depth to enfold and keep it from inordinate restlessness. Laetitia represented this peaceful restraining space in prospect. (II, pp. 466-67)

Only Clara, who “shone for him like the sunny breeze on water” (I, p. 269), is bodily and spiritually identified with fluctuation, and it is on her that Meredith lavishes his most persistently reflexive imagery. If she is a pretty puzzle for the reader while “swimming on the wave in her [own] bosom,” Clara will herself learn to puzzle out the difference between spontaneity and self-indulgence: presumably Vernon will have something to say about the way she often “swam . . . on tears, and yielded to the overflow” (I, p. 188). Meanwhile, it is clear that Meredith is presenting his characters in language that is at times utterly unlike that of classic comedy, in passages of sustained impressionism that are not only analogous to his characters’ states of feeling or even hysteria, but which expose the reader to a floodlit sense of the depths of a painful and private experience. These passages are often excessive or ironic or both; but even in their archness they can be as surreal as the submarine imagery of Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead,” as if Meredith too had his face to the glass, and were pointing out the bright and dark things that move before his eyes:

Poor troubled bodies waking up in the night to behold visually the spectre cast forth from the perplexed machinery inside them, stare at it for a space, till touching consciousness they dive down under the sheets with fish-like alacrity. Clara looked at her thought, and suddenly headed downward in a crimson gulf.

(I, p. 241)

The imagery of *The Egoist* might easily be related to changes that Lyell and Darwin worked in literate English sensibilities, and Meredith drops references to "survival," "fitness," "selection," and "extinction" that are there for the picking up.⁵ He is clearly infatuated with the graceful shiftiness of Clara Middleton and sympathetic with her need to master the flux of her life. In rejecting Patterne Hall she rejects Willoughby's "poetry of the enclosed and fortified bower" (I, p. 54), interestingly reminiscent of Tennyson's early verse. Although her first daydreams of liberty in "a narrow Tyrolean valley, where a shallow river ran" (I, p. 146) are distressingly inhibited, by the end of the book she is pictured in the mountains "over the Lake of Constance," unlike the heroine of "Love in the Valley" whom she in some ways recalls. Her claustrophobia might be considered alongside Meredith's assertion that comedy takes place only in the safely muffled "drawing-room of civilized men and woman" (I, p. 1) — which is not to imply an analogy between manners at Patterne and the exuberant artifice of the novel; besides, sometimes Clara's experience of change is anything but natural, either in origin or description. Nevertheless, the water imagery, among other things, extends the self-imposed confines of the comedy — and extends them in a way that Meredith surely intended. The technique which this paper describes seems at times to be tossed off by Meredith and at others to be profoundly premeditated; but its results generally work against the surface symmetries of *The Egoist* and make a serious, subversive point about the demerits of stability and sterility in social life. It is not simply that there is a world elsewhere, like London, the Continent, the Alps, but that the world here, which seems so orderly and landlocked, is slipperier, subtler, more treacherous and more rewarding than it may seem. And its undertow is at least equal to its need for overhaul.

NOTES

¹ *The Egoist*, II, 604. All references given parenthetically in the text are to *The Works of George Meredith: Memorial Edition*, 27 vols. (London: Constable, 1910). Volumes I and II of *The Egoist* are volumes XIII and XIV of this edition.

² *The Works of George Meredith*, XXV, 33.

- ³ For focussed discussions of imagery in *The Egoist*, see Robert D. Mayo, "The Egoist and the Willow Pattern," *ELH*, 9 (1942), 71-78; Charles J. Hill, "Theme and Image in *The Egoist*," *The University of Kansas City Review*, 20 (1954), 281-85; Roger B. Wilkenfeld, "Hands Around: Image and Theme in *The Egoist*," *ELH*, 34 (1967), 367-79; Daniel Smirlock, "Rough Truth: Synecdoche and Interpretation in *The Egoist*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 31 (1976), 313-28. For a comprehensive survey of various kinds of imagery in the book see Donald R. Swanson, *Three Conquerors: Character and Method in the Mature Works of George Meredith* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), pp. 65-91. Swanson briefly considers the extensive water imagery in *The Egoist*, which he primarily relates to his argument that the book "deal[s] with the idea of 'man the conqueror'" (p. 14): "All nature, to Willoughby, is either subservient to him, or against him" (p. 91).
- ⁴ "Concerning pathos, no ship can now set sail without pathos . . . which is, I do not accurately know what, if not the ballast, reducible to moisture by patent process, on board our modern vessel; for it can hardly be the cargo, and the general water-supply has other uses; and ships well charged with it seem to sail the stiffest . . ." (I, pp. 4-5).
- ⁵ In defining the "nineteenth-century absorption in the troublous time-element," Jerome Hamilton Buckley remarks that "The notion of public time, or history, as the medium of organic growth and fundamental change, rather than simply additive succession, was essentially new. Objects hitherto apparently stable had begun to lose their old solidity. Drawing on Lyell's geology, Tennyson saw in nature tangible evidence of a fluidity about which ancient philosophy had only speculated:

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

The Victorians were entering a modern world, where, according to the angry Wyndham Lewis, 'chairs and tables, mountains and stars, are animated into a magnetic restlessness, and exist on the same vital terms as man. . . . All is alive; and, in that sense, all is mental'" (*The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966, p. 5). But nowhere do allusions to water relate more suggestively to nineteenth-century developments in geology and evolution than in the works of John Ruskin — who publically identified his own character with the curse of Reuben: "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel" (*The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12, XXVIII, 275). Forty years earlier, and fifteen before Tennyson published *In Memoriam*, Ruskin's verse "Journal of a Tour through France to Chamouni" described the "dreams of the geologist! / . . . Before [whom] solid mountains wave and twist" (*Works*, II, 407, st. 29). See also A. Dwight Culler, "The Darwinian Revolution and Literary Form," in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. George Levine and William Madden (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 224-46.