

THE UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT

THE EARTH PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE MEREDITH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of the Thesis	
II. MEREDITH'S NINETEENTH CENTURY BACKGROUND . .	3
Darwin	
Spencer	
Huxley	
Evolution versus Christianity	
Goethe	
Arnold	
III. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON LIFE OF MEREDITH . .	11
School at Neuwied-on-the Rhine	
Study of Goethe	
Friendship with Rosetti and Swinburne	
IV. EARTH PHILOSOPHIES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT .	14
Primitive Agricultural Communities	
Greece	
Anglo-Saxons	
Mexicans (Faltecs)	
Aztecs	
Africans	
Australians	
V. THE TRANSITION TO AN EARTH PHILOSOPHY	16
Early Poetry	
Early Doubts	
Traditional Religion	
VI. THE EARTH PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE MEREDITH . . .	22
Introduction	
God	
Earth	
The Creation of Man	
The Knowledge of Good and Evil	
The Punishment of Sin	
The Reward of Merit	
Death	
Immortality	
VII. CONCLUSIONS	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY	41

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The scientific question of how and the accompanying philosophic why an individual reacts to his environment has always been an object of interest. Yet there are but few techniques available to investigate why an individual responds as he does to his age and locality and, concerning most men, there is little information available regarding their response to the specific or general problems that life has presented. The man of letters, however, in his writings often records, sometimes directly and sometimes furnishing materials from which inferences can be drawn, his response to the static and dynamic influences that surround him. Among the most important literary figures of the nineteenth century is George Meredith and it is the object of this paper to investigate one of his responses as reflected in his poetry, to the rapid change in philosophical background which was induced by the scientific attainments of his century.

The response to be considered here is Meredith's formulation of an Earth philosophy, which was obviously an effort on his part to adjust a religious outlook to the new matter being furnished by advancing science.

In order to make clear his special development, his nineteenth century background will be indicated, the relevant items in Meredith's biography will be noted, the

earth philosophies of the past will be briefly reviewed and, thereafter, the Earth philosophy of George Meredith will be presented. The details of Meredith's philosophic position will be gathered from a study of his poetry. In this study his novels and his various prose writings will not be considered because they have little to offer in explaining this angle of Meredith's thought. Finally the paper will conclude with a critical evaluation of his Earth creed.

CHAPTER II

MEREDITH'S NINETEENTH CENTURY BACKGROUND

Meredith was born into an age of turmoil, an age when scientific information and analysis began to conflict with traditional ideology. Darwin is usually credited with starting the intellectual avalanche that precipitated this conflict, but dim and persistent forebodings were present from the time that Cuvier in 1821 laid the foundations of paleontology and Wöhler in 1824 made the first laboratory synthesis of an organic compound from inorganic matter.¹ The nineteenth century was preeminently a century of scientific development.² Important new vistas were opened up in the biological sciences. Particularly the development of histology and embryology and the extension of anthropology yielded information which required a readjustment of philosophical thought.

As stated previously Darwin is the usually accepted idol to whom a place of the greatest importance is given in the conflict that developed between religion and science, even as today Einstein is the idol of amateur or non-mathematicians. But deeper than the replacement of the divine origin of man by a possible simian ancestry, either

¹Hans Zinsser, Rats, Lice and History, 53.

²E. C. Wingfield-Stratford, The History of British Civilization, 1139.

4

concept being capable of ready visualization in the untrained mind, were other physico-chemical and biological generalizations.¹ Thus there was the discovery of the mammalian ovum by von Baer and the demonstration of the cell structure of plants by Schlerden and of the cell structure of animals by Schwann.² To many Victorians the recognition of a fundamental similarity in origin, a single cell, for all animals and plants and a similarity in the common destiny of animals and plants to be many-celled organisms seemed to require a reorganization of even the most liberal philosophies and certainly seemed to require a deep and fundamental reorganization in the case of these philosophies dominated by the divine goodness of God and the divine right of kings.

Further, while little stress is laid upon certain physico-chemical generalizations in discussions involving the nineteenth century conflict between science and religion in the lay press of the nineteenth or even of the twentieth century, the recognition of these relationships is at the basis of the fundamental argument which makes the divine creation of man an illogical scientific concept. One of these generalizations affecting nineteenth century attitude was the law of the indestructability of matter and another was the law of the conservation of energy. Matter could not be created or destroyed and the same was true of energy.

¹Hugh Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, 211.

²Hans Zinsser, op. cit., 53.

5

This concept was enunciated by von Hemholtz in 1847.¹

Now the nineteenth century concluded that one could not accept the general validity of the laws concerning the indestructibility of matter and the conservation of energy and at the same time accept the divine creation of man because such a creation would interrupt the continuity of these laws and automatically deny their validity.

The list of items could be extended but those given are sufficient to show that nineteenth century thinkers were brought face to face with what seemed to be a conflict between science and religion. Moreover the conscientious nineteenth century thinker felt impelled to make an effort to adjust his religious and scientific notions in such a way that the conflict would be resolved.

George Meredith was such a conscientious thinker. His effort at adjustment took the form of what may be called an Earth philosophy.

It was the theory of evolution as expressed in Origin of the Species (1859) that brought together a mass of evidence which made its way into public thought and there could not be reconciled with the Biblical account of creation and with traditional views on man's place in the universe.

It is an easy transition from Darwin to Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who furthered the reactionary

¹Hans Zinsser, op. cit., 53.

movement¹ with his development of the theory of nebular origin of the universe, which extended the idea of evolution to include not only the anatomy of animal species but, also, in one direction, the world of inorganic material, and, in another direction, the world of thought. He presented a comprehensive history of the universe from a nebular mass, through the formation of solar systems, the development of an Urschleim from the inorganic forces of our own solar system, and the progression of this Urschleim through a series of anatomical changes until man was attained, the fortuitous occurrence of a nervous system, possibly of some vague nerve net and the steady development of this nervous system through various species of animals until the human mind was achieved. Further he enunciated clearly the principal that the development of the human mind from embryo to adult recapitulated the evolutionary development of the mind. The idea of evolution of the mind included not only the anatomical structure of the organs involved but also the functional expressions of mind such as ethics and religion.²

In an effort to partially reconcile evolution and Genesis, Huxley (1823-1893) suggested that there was no progression from lower to higher types of animals but merely a more or less complete evolution within broad

¹E. C. Wingfield-Stratford, op. cit., 1007.

²Ibid.,

classes of animals. Huxley did not accept Darwin's principle in its entirety but only used it as a working basis.

When the idea of evolution with its attendant implications was absorbed into the thought of the laity and even into the minds of the religious savants, there came the realization that the foundations of the prevalent religious philosophies had been shaken. In 1864 eleven thousand clergy signed a declaration that "all questions of physical science should be referred to the written words of the Holy Scripture."¹ Jowett, a clergyman, after visiting Germany where he studied Kant and Hegel said, "We shall never return to ~~the~~ belief in facts which are disproved e. g. miracles, the narratives of creation, of Mount Sinai."² The rise of the Oxford movement, stimulated by the dread of rationalism, made the problem more acute.

Now it seems as though each individual is so constructed that mental peace cannot be obtained unless all his personal and vicarious experience can be welded into a harmonious whole. Previous to the development of disturbing scientific information the Christian religion had been the chief welding force to produce a philosophic outlook which bound together the loose ends of life. But when the foundations of religion were rocked by the scientific earthquake it could only happen that the more disturbed intellects would

¹Hugh Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, 82.

²Ibid., 105.

seek other peace-giving philosophies. What philosophic conceptions were there in this age of rationalization from which one could receive inspiration? What offered an explanation of the universe in terms of religious orthodoxy and the new scientific outlook? The issue was a religion profound and true, a religion "known for certain" yet absolutely divorced from all creeds and independent of all churches.¹ Goethe, a German literary artist, had faced this problem and offered a solution,¹ consequently he was among the more forceful individuals who suggested new interpretations of life. Goethe was a realist who based his concepts on nature and experience and to whom church creeds and dogma seemed unnecessary. In fact nature worship seemed such a satisfactory explanation of life that Goethe predicted the decay and doom of the orthodox religions of his time, a most revolutionary and heretic suggestion.²

This prediction of Goethe's was reflected most strikingly in literature in the next generation. Matthew Arnold is one who in his Literature and Dogma and God and the Bible rejected the current religion but failed to find a substitute. He examined Goethe, whose creed satisfied many, but failed to find that which completely fulfilled his desire. Nevertheless he was a distinct influence in stimulating originality of thought. He constantly objected to customary

¹Hugh Walker, op. cit., 48.

²Ibid.,

9

viewpoints and developed in his books many new and thought provoking ideas. He aroused the antipathies of the public by suggesting that the study of the formularies of the English church be eliminated from the schools. Thus, though he failed to accept Goethe completely, yet he was an agent in the attempt to bring to pass Goethe's prediction.

Goethe was the spiritual salvation of Thomas Carlyle who introduced a knowledge of Goethe into England and brought his influence to bear on English literature. Carlyle absorbed the ideas of Goethe and transmitted them to England to prove that there was an alternative to what he called the garb of Hebrew old clothes.¹ Carlyle's influence was great and with it he spread Goethe's philosophy, an unalterable belief in the Law of the Universe.

It appears from the writings of men like Matthew Arnold that many in the nineteenth century conceived that some of the old orthodoxies had been weakened and they turned to seers of the time, to Hegel, Comte, Spencer, Lamarck, Lyell and Darwin, to supply substitutes. Many people were discarding their formal religion and it was a most apt time to develop and to express original concepts. Upset by Arnold's works and influenced by Carlyle who spread Goethe's ideas, many found refuge in a Nature philosophy. The swing of the age was away from the realm of the spiritual to the realm of the material. Meredith was in step with the

¹Hugh Walker, op. cit., 49.

movement.¹ Alert, of keen mind, and a great lover of Nature he appears to have substituted for Christianity, in some degree at least, his own version of Naturalism, his Earth philosophy.

¹G. M. Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, 17.

CHAPTER III

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON LIFE OF MEREDITH

What were the elements that may have contributed to Meredith's Earth philosophy. An individual's ideas cannot be cut adrift from his education, his environment and his associates.

At fourteen Meredith was sent to a Moravian school at Neuwied-on-the Rhine. Here, for two years he imbibed much of the German scientific spirit and influence.¹ Here, he first contacted and developed a great admiration for Goethe.² Meredith, inherently sensitive to nature, living in a scenically located village where he could delight in the Rhineland pageantry and in the exquisite music of the birds, bees and winds was swept away by the nature philosophy of Goethe. Undoubtedly the admiration of Meredith for Goethe was further increased by the daring with which Goethe advocated policies and thought which were contrary to traditional public opinion.

Furthermore Neuwied was a relatively cosmopolitan village peopled by various sects: Catholics, Jews, Calvinists and Lutherans. Consequently religious prejudice was at a minimum and the townspeople were very tolerant. This was an ideal environment in which to develop novel ideas in religious matters.

¹C. Photiades, George Meredith, His Life, Genius and Teaching, 22.

²Ibid., 204.

All through his life Meredith sought scenic environment. In 1859 we read he was living among the pines and near a river. Later he moves to a breezy common near a lake.¹ In 1867 he moved to Flint cottage, a home on the hills, surrounded by many pretty walks. Being devoted to outdoor life he acquired a detailed and intimate knowledge of the natural history of the countryside. At the top of the sloping garden, about four minutes walk from Flint cottage he put up a Norwegian chalet² in which he did much of his writing.

Many were the literary friends of Meredith: Tennyson, Browning, Fitzgerald, Rossetti and Swinburne. In 1861-62 Meredith lived in London with Rossetti and Swinburne. Rossetti, one of the leaders of the Pre-Raphaelite movement which sponsored a new return to nature and proclaimed as its principle true fidelity to her, imparted his love of the beauty in Nature to Meredith. Between Meredith and Swinburne a great friendship developed. Swinburne like Rossetti was a profound lover of nature but had more pagan notions in his philosophic views as is expressed in his "The Garden of Proserpine."

"From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be

¹Sir Sidney Lee, Dictionary of National Biography.
Second Supplement, Vol. 2, 608-610.

²Ibid., 610.

That no life lives forever
 That dead men rise up never;
 That even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere safe to sea.¹

One can easily picture Swinburne and Meredith, ardent lovers of Nature discussing man's destiny.

Naturally everyone Meredith met in book or in person left some imprint on his thought, though, of course, it was often negligible. In addition to the few individuals mentioned there should be added the Spanish philosopher Spinoza, the German poet Heine, and his own countryman, Wordsworth. The writing of these men contained at least a germ and sometimes a fully developed symbolism of a transference of theistic powers from a distinct God to a more closely felt Nature.²

¹T. P. Cross and C. T. Goode, Heath Reading in the Literature of England, "The Garden of Proserpine," 1009.

²A. T. Strong, Three Studies in Shelley and An Essay on Nature in Wordsworth and Meredith.

CHAPTER IV

EARTH PHILOSOPHIES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Those to whom it seemed that the traditional religions were on a tottering pedestal were ready to receive a substitute and some chose a Nature philosophy, an explanation of the universe not based on Genesis. While many thinkers and writers, as previously illustrated with Goethe, were partial to an Earth philosophy as opposed to the doctrines of the Christian church, Earth philosophy can in no wise be considered as a development or characteristic of only the nineteenth century. The importance of Nature or Earth to man can be traced back to primitive agricultural communities where Mother Earth was propitiated with orgiastic rites.

Various peoples have worshipped Earth. Her name in Greece was Gaea and from Gaea, by only partially anthropomorphic methods, come the anthropomorphic deities that peopled Olympus. The Anglo Saxons brought the worship of Earth with them to England. The Nordic nations gave honor to the component elements of Nature such as thunder, spring and the moon. We still pay homage to these elements through the names we retain to designate the days of the week. The ancient Mexicans acclaimed earth as "Mother of All," and invoked her at oath-taking by eating sacramental clay. The Aztecs depicted Earth as a many breasted woman whom they called Mother. Various peoples of North and South America, the Zulus, the Eskimos, the aboriginal Indians and the

Peruvians have many myths which tell how the first men came out of the earth. Among many tribes in Africa Earth is still today the deity of an extensive cult and is invoked as "the good Mother from whom all things come."¹

Among the aborigines of Australia, Mother Earth was worshipped mainly in connection with the agricultural seasons. Sacrifices are offered and with elaborate rituals Mother Earth is begged to be propitious.

Thus we see that the worship of Earth is involved in numerous primitive religions. Glancing through succeeding ages we discover individuals who have revolted against their age and who have refused to accept the traditional Christianity or other existing ideologies. These individuals, sometimes by choice and sometimes by necessity, have felt themselves impelled to revert in one fashion or another to this primitive expression of religion; such have been Goethe, Darwin, Wallace, Humboldt, Huxley, Carlyle and Meredith.

¹J. A. MacCulloch, "Earth, Earth Gods," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 127.

CHAPTER V

THE TRANSITION TO AN EARTH PHILOSOPHY

Meredith was a friend of Rosetti, one of the leaders of the PreRaphaelites, and of Swinburne who, in his early career had been much influenced by PreRaphaelite practice. The PreRaphaelites had announced as one of their principles careful delineation of minute detail and had applied this principle in their presentation of physical detail and this in turn had involved a careful observation of Nature which frequently brought in its train a great preoccupation with Nature.

In Meredith's early poetry we note that he interprets nature with the case of the PreRaphaelites and the fervor of this day.¹ He emphasizes her sweet loveliness. Notice the lyrical ecstasy expressed in Pictures of the Rhine.

"About a mile beyond the viny banks,
How sweet it was upon a sloping green,

Sunspread, and shaded with a branching
screen,
To lie in peace half-murmuring words of
thanks!
To see the mountains on each other climb,
With spaces for rich meadows flowery
bright;
The winding river freshening the sight
At intervals, the trees in leafy prime;

- - - - -

¹M. Hengelhaupt, Die Personifikation Bein George Meredith,
32.

To watch the changing clouds, like chime
in chime;
Oh! sweet to lie and bless the luxury of
time."¹

Again we see only a romantic lover of Nature reflected in The Wild Rose and the Snowdrop and Pastorals. The repetitious insistence upon Maternal Earth to be noted in his later poetry is completely absent:

" The Wild Rose blooms, all summer for
her dower
Nature's most beautiful and perfect
flower."²

" And he whose heart like valley warmth
Steams up with joy at scenes like this
Shall never be forlorn."³

In these poems Meredith is merely a lover of all forms of Nature interpreting her in ways similar to Shelley and Tennyson⁴ but in his later poetry he pushed on and developed an Earth creed. A first hint of question and doubt concerning the relations of God and man can be seen in Martin's Puzzle. Martin was contemplating the plight of a beautiful girl who had been permanently injured in two accidents. He thinks to himself:

"What I ask is, Why persecute such a
poor dear,
If there's Law above all? Answer that
if you can!

¹George Meredith, "Pictures of the Rhine," The Poetical Works of George Meredith edited by G. M. Trevelyan, 81. Hereafter reference to poems of George Meredith will be made by title and page number in the edition noted above.

²The Wild Rose and the Snowdrop, 8.

³Pastorals, 48.

⁴H. Waltz, George Meredith's jugenswerke und ihre bedeutung für die persönliche entwicklung des dicters, 67.

18

Irreligious I'm not; but I look in this sphere
As a place where a man should just think like
a man.
It isn't fair dealing! But, contrariwise,
Do bullets in battle the wicked select?
Why, then it's all chance-work! And yet,
in her eyes,
She holds a fixed something by which I am
checked.

"Yonder riband of sunshine aslope in the wall,
If you eye it a minute 'll have the same look:
So kind! and so merciful! God of us all!
It's the very same lesson we get from the Book.
Then, is Life but a trial? Is that what is meant?
Some must toil, and some perish, for others
below.
The injustice to each spreads a common content;
Ay! I've lost it again, for it can't be
quite so.

"She's the victim of fools: that seems nearer
the mark.
On earth there are engines and numerous fools.
Why the Lord can permit them, we're still in
the dark;
He does, and in some sort of way they're
His tools.
It's a roundabout way, with respect let me add,
If Molly goes crippled that we may be taught;
But, perhaps, it's the only way, though it's
so bad;
In that case we'll bow down our heads,--
as we ought.

"But the worst of me is, that when I bow my
head,
I perceive a thought wriggling away in the
dust,
And I follow its tracks, quite forgetful,
instead
Of humble acceptance: for, question I must!
Here's a creature made carefully - carefully
made!
Put together with craft, and then stamped
on, and why?
The answer seems nowhere: it's discord
that's played.
The sky's a blue dish! an implacable sky!"

However the doubts were momentarily allayed for Martin concludes;
 Stop a moment: I seize an idea from the pit.
 They tell us that discord, though discord alone,
 Can be harmony when the notes properly fit:
 Am I judging all things from a single false tone?
 Is the Universe one immense Organ, that roles
 from devils to angels? I'm blind with the sight.
 It pours such a splendor on heaps of poor souls!
 I might try at kneeling with Molly tonight."¹

Martin's Puzzle was written in 1865. Between 1865 and 1883 when the fully developed expression of his Earth philosophy appeared in Earth and Man, Meredith was not prolific with respect to his poetry. Yet there are occasional references to a changing faith. Thus In the Woods (1873) shows a disdain for future life:

"The lover of life knows his labour divine,
 And therein is at peace.
 The lust after life craves a touch and a sign
 That life shall increase.
 The lust after life in the chills of its lust
 Claims a passport of death.
 The lover of life sees the flame in our Dust
 And a gift in our breath."

While Meredith had more or less completely expressed his Earth philosophy in Earth and Man 1883 and a Faith on Trial 1888 it would be erroneous to state categorically that there was established a complete and permanent separation from the doctrines of the church. This is clearly indicated in the epitaphs that he wrote on the death of some of his friends. To a certain extent one perhaps ought to interpret any thought expressed in an epitaph as more likely being that of the deceased than of the poet. Because out of

¹Martin's Puzzle, 179.

feelings of kindness and propriety one would not attribute to a dead friend a thought the friend abhorred or even merely disliked. Thus the implication in the epitaph to Tom Taylor To a Friend Lost is that Tom Taylor exists among the spirits, that is, enjoys a future life,

For surely are you one with the white host,
 Spirits, whose memory is our vital air,
 Through the great love of Earth they had:
 lo these,
 Like beams that throw the paths on tossing seas,
 Can bid us feel we keep them in the ghost,
 Partakers of a strife they joyed to share."¹

may be taken to mean merely that Tom Taylor would have it so.

Likewise the epitaphs to Marie Meredith,

"Who call her Mother and who call her Wife
 Look on her grave and see not Death but Life."²

and that to Lady Caroline Maxse

"To them that knew her, there is vital flame
 In these the simple letters of her name
 To them that knew her not, be it but said,
 So strong a spirit is not of the dead."³

may also only mean that Meredith gave obeisance to their own expressed desires. And even the epitaph written at the funeral of Elizabeth may only be the homage due a Christian queen:

"Her sacred body bear: the tenement
 Of that strong soul now ranked with God's elect
 Her heart upon her people's heart she spent;
 Hence is she Royalty's lodestar to direct.
 The peace is here, of whom all hands have
 praised.

¹To a Friend Lost, 568.
²Marie Meredith, 569.
³Lady Caroline Maxse, 569.

Majestic virtues ere her day unseen.
 Aloft the name of Womanhood she raised,
 And gave new readings to the Title, Queen."

Again we have reflections of traditional Christianity
 in Meredith's epitaph to Robert Browning:

"We see a spirit on Earth's loftiest peak
 Shine and wing hence the way he makes
 more clear:
 See a great Tree of Life that never she
 Dropped leaf for aught that age or
 storms might wreak.
 Such ending is not Death: such living
 shows
 What wide illumination brightness sheds
 From one big heart, to conquer man's
 old foes."¹

From these various epitaphs we perceive that Meredith
 asserts orthodox Christian notions. Though he developed
 an Earth philosophy yet he never completely severed himself
 from Christianity.

¹On Hearing the News from Venice, 510.

CHAPTER VI

THE EARTH PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE MEREDITH

Thus it is clear that Meredith shifted from traditional ideology at some time subsequent to the appearance of Darwin's Origin of the Species in 1859. This shift may have been partly due to the influence of Goethe and possibly may have been due to Darwin and Wallace but a great part of it was perhaps merely the outgrowth of Meredith's love for life in the open. One cannot read Meredith's poetry written after 1883 without being impressed by the meanings he attaches to Nature. He was, then, not only stimulated by her outward loveliness but he was also deeply stirred by the inner significance she held for his life. He studied Nature and evolved meanings from her which are not always clearly expressed in his poetry, but which undoubtedly indicate that he held at least a rudimentary Earth Creed.

Broadly speaking there are two paths open in the discussion of a religious philosophy. One is to compare such a philosophy with one or more of the religious creeds that might be accepted as standards; the other is to derive a series of fundamental and generally occurring religious concepts as characteristic for a comparative study of all religions, and then see how these concepts and characteristics are applied in the philosophy under discussion. Since it may be assumed that a transition from traditional Christianity to one approaching an Earth philosophy

occurred during Meredith's middle age, the first method would seem to be more likely to yield a clear-cut interpretation. With this in mind a study will be made of the following items which are cardinal to Christian religion: God; the creation of man; the knowledge of good and evil; the punishment of sin; the reward of merit; death and immortality.

Meredith was not an atheist for he believed in a God, not an anthropomorphic God sitting on the throne of angels, but in a God acting through Nature. He believed in a power behind Nature but he failed to name it:

"O mountain bid from peak to base
And image of the awful power
With which the secret of all things
That stoops from heaven to garment Earth
Can speak to any human soul
When once the earthly limits lose
Their pointed heights and sharpened lines,
And measureless immensity
Is palpable to sense and sight."¹

But:

" - - - - - ever that old task
Of reading what he is and whence he came
Whither to go, finds wilder letters aflame
Across her mask."

Thus Earth fails to explain existence or life after death and Meredith implies the existence of a Great Power. However, Earth is the Divine for him because it is reality, and as did Spinoza, Schilling and Goethe, Meredith based his beliefs upon her.² Yet every item in Nature has for

¹Swathed Round in Mist, 60.

²A. T. Strong, Three Studies in Shelley and an Essay on Nature in Wordsworth and Meredith, 128.

Meredith a mystic glow, a reflection of a Great Power. In A Faith on Trial Earth whispers that she is but a handmaid to a Superior Power:

"The flag of the Master I serve!
 - - - - - , to behold
 High over Time-tumbled sea,
 The bliss of the headship of strife,
 Him through handmaiden me."¹

And in The Woods of Westermain Earth is:

"Spirit in her clods
 Footway to the God of Gods."²

But whatever we know of this Great Power had to be gleamed from Earth.³ Meredith insistently maintained that deductive reasoning would show us that the Earth, his term for Nature, was the only particle of the universe we could ever know and that therefore all our conceptions of life should be based on her. For how can we build on the unknown? Earth is reality and we can apprehend her.

"If we screw ourselves up to a certain pitch
 She meets -- that I know of her."⁴

Again

"And we feel deep to Earth at her heart
 We have her communion with man
 New ground, new skies for appeal."⁵

Meredith was one who, as expressed in these lines, felt deep to Earth and who constantly communed with her.⁶ He knew the exquisite joys of the woods, fields and flowers.

¹A Faith on Trial, 361.

²The Woods of Westermain, 201.

³J. H. E. Cress, A Study of His Works and Personality, 72.

⁴By the Rosanna, 111.

⁵The Empty Purse, 455.

⁶J. H. E. Cress, op. cit., 102.

He loved the wind with more ardor than some Romeo's their Juliet's. He would throw up an engagement in town when the Southwester, for which he had a special affection, blew. His home on the hilltops in Box Heights afforded him great pleasure. Lady Butcher, a friend of Meredith's says in her book that "Mr. Meredith used to advise us to go to our Mother Nature and learn of her and not to look upon trees, mountains, fields and lakes, as merely the background of our own little ephemeral lives. He told us that he walked to observe, not to feel."¹ He corroborates this in Outer and Inner."

"In thought while calmly bent
To read the lines dear Earth designs
Shall speak her life in ours.

- - - - -

I neighbor the invisible
So close that my consent
Is only asked for spirits masked
To leap from trees to flowers
And this because with them I dwell."²

In these lines Meredith informs us of his closeness to Nature with the purpose in view of deciphering her meaning for his life. From the passages quoted we deduce that Meredith goes one step further than the pure pantheist. Though he regarded Nature with an attitude of Divinity and tried to interpret her meaning for his life, yet he acknowledged a Power behind Nature though he fails to label that Power.

That Meredith had swung further away from traditional

¹Lady Butcher, Memoirs of Meredith, 4.

²Outer and Inner, 340.

Christianity than merely relocating the dwelling of the Most High is indicated by the fact that he sets forth man as an Earth-born creature, drawing his primary sustenance not from the heavens above but from the all-nourishing Mother Earth.¹ In A Faith on Trial he speaks of Earth as our mother and of her furnishing us the food upon which we live:

"The changeful visible face
Of our Mother I sought for my food
Crumbs by the way to sustain."²

No poet has ever emphasized our springing from Nature more emphatically. In Sense and Spirit he reminds us of our being born of Earth:

"Seeing she lives and of her joy of life
Creatively has given us blood and breath."³

All races of mankind have believed in some form or type of religion. The purpose, if not the result of this belief, has been to attain a better life. The better life, under the guidance of most religions is obtained by an improvement in conduct. To improve one's conduct implies the knowledge of right and wrong, of truth and untruth, of good and evil.

If Earth is our Mother does she teach us good conduct? Meredith responds to this by stating that Earth has given us brain and this brain, this intelligence, will tell man

¹J. W. Cunliffe, Modern Thought in Meredith's Poems, 8.

²A. Faith on Trial, 349.

³Sense and Spirit, 182.

that only through learning Earth's secret¹ and living according to her teaching can he be successful.

"Never is Earth misled by brain."²

Meredith also strongly infers that one who is intelligent will never make a mistake in interpreting.³

"Yet to me in this high-walled solitude
Of river and rock and forest rude
The roaring voice through the long white chain
Is the voice of the world of bubble and brain."⁴

It is this voice heard through Earth that gives man an insight and will enable him to bring harmony into his life. Through brain Nature's purposes are made articulate. Brain is intuition developed through a strong love of Nature and this intuition is synonymous with faith, a faith rooted in a healthy sympathy with Nature. To live in this faith is to live steadily and fully and to know good from evil. In A Faith on Trial he again emphasizes the importance of our intelligence, the brain, in ferreting out the good. What else could move or prompt the soul? He says we are

" - - - - - chords to the nature without
Orbs to the greater whole.
First then, not utterly then
Till our lord of sensations at war
The rebel, the heart, yields place
To brain, each prompting the soul.
Thus our dear Earth we embrace
For the milk, her strength to men."⁵

¹R. Peel, The Creed of a Victorian Pagan, 18.

²Hard Weather, 320.

³A. T. Strong, Three Studies in Shelley and an Essay on Nature in Wordsworth and Meredith, 164.

⁴By the Rosanna, 107.

⁵A Faith on Trial, 353.

We embrace Earth for that which prompts the soul, that which is good, which is the strength of humanity. Meredith advocated going to Nature with one dominating purpose, that of trying to fathom her laws in order to decipher that which is good and then pursuing it.

"To Nature only will he bend the knee."¹

and

"In the charge of the mother our fate,
Her law as the one common weal."²

Again and again he represents Earth as urging us to follow her laws:

"Accept, she says, it is not hard
In woods, but she in towns
Repeats, accept;"³

He urges us to accept and follow the law of Earth, the law of which men must abide. She can be conquered only by being obeyed. Yet we must be very selective in our obedience, carefully discriminating good from evil and, of course, pursuing only the good. That introduces the important query: how are we to distinguish good from evil. After careful perusal of Meredith's poetry we note that this is a veiled portion of his Earth creed.⁴ His only admonition is:

"But first, that the poisonous of thee be purged
Go into thyself, strike Earth
She is there, she is felt in a blow struck hard
Thou findest a pugilist countering quick

¹An Orson of the Muse, 187.

²A Faith on Trial, 355.

³Outer and Inner, 340.

⁴J. B. Priestley, George Meredith, 6.

Not, after the studied professional trick,
 Blue-sealing; she brightens the night,
 Strike Earth
 Anateus, young giant whom fortune trips
 And thou comst on a saving fact,
 To nourish thy planted worth."¹

We conclude therefore that it is Meredith's position that only through persistent effort in comprehending Earth that we can discriminate good from evil.

Among the qualities of good that humans may see reflected in Earth are fortitude, perseverance, love and the appreciation of beauty.

- - - "She who had shown
 Fortitude as quiet as Earth's
 At the shedding of the leaves."²

"And faith in Nature keeps the force
 We have in us for daily wear."³

"Love born of knowledge, love that gains
 Vitality as earth it mates."⁴

"And love is asked of love's wherefore
 'Tis Earth's, her gift, else ' have naught."⁵

" And O for any human soul
 The rapture of a wide survey
 A valley sweeping to the West
 With all its wealth of loveliness
 Is more than recompense for days
 That taught us to endure."⁶

This later passage in addition to pointing out the loveliness of nature definitely infers that she may be difficult to follow. Though Meredith was aware of the

¹The Empty Purse, 444.

²A Faith on Trial, 345.

³By the Rosanna, 111.

⁴The Thrush in February, 331.

⁵Meditation under the Stars, 365.

⁶Pastorals, 48.

cruelty in Nature and even insisted on her heartless aspects, yet, he felt that the loveliness of her beauty more than compensated for her cruelty.

Failure of proper conduct usually receives punishment. Meredith believed that Earth governed us completely, punishing or rewarding us for our actions. She is the God of laws from which there is no forgiveness:

"But the culprit when the law of man
has crossed
With Nature's dubiously is blamed;
Despite our cry at cutting of the whip."¹

Meredith pointed out that our laws must be based on the foundation of Earth or we suffered accordingly. Disobedience to them is death for the individual and a reversion to lower types of life for the race. A harsh philosophy!

While the major portion of Meredith's religious philosophy is contained in the word Earth, yet the qualities imputed to this Supreme Force are rather reminiscent of the Hebrew Jehovah "I, the lord they God am a jealous God" A jealous God punishes and Earth is pictured as scorning those who do not trust her in

"Man and woman on the thorn
Trust not Earth and have her scorn
They who in her lead confide
Wither me if they spread not wide."²

or

"Of Earth are we stripped or crowned."³

¹J. H. E. Cress, op. cit., 77.

²The Three Singers to Young Blood, 237.

³A Faith on Trial, 355.

or

"Have they but held her laws and nature dear
They mouth no sentence of inverted wit."¹

Thus Earth punishes us if we do not follow her commands.

"For this our nature rises rejuvenescent
from Earth
However responsive the blow and nigh on
infernial the path
The chastisement drawn down on us merited."²

But if man obeys the laws of Earth then:

"He builds the soaring spires
That sing his soul in store; of her he draws
Though blind to her, by spelling at her laws
Her purest fires
- - - - -
And order, high discourse
And decency, than which life is less dear
She has of him: the lyre of language clear
Love's tongue a source."³

Again he says that an understanding of Earth will allow us to aid all our fellowmen but if we cut the cord that binds us to Earth, if we are too impatient or cowardly or purely self-seeking, then we do not serve her purposes and she punishes us. This lesson we must learn from Earth:

"For love we Earth, then serve we all;
Her mystic secret then is ours;
We fall or view our treasures fall
Unclouded as beholds her flowers."⁴

Meredith continuously repeats this thought: that if we love Earth, she will inspire us to do all that is good in life,⁵ she will act as our moral instructor but should we fail to understand her and thus not follow her

¹Earth's Preference, 369.
²Alsace Loraine, 507.
³Earth and Man, 243.
⁴The Thrust in February, 331.
⁵J. B. Priestley, op. cit., 80.

admonitions, life will be an unsuccessful journey. To him the higher law was not represented in God as traditional religion taught but in Nature. Man is subjected to this law, and he must consider it if he would live a life of full meaning. He speaks of Shakespeare as having known Earth well and consequently as having experienced some of her joys:

" Thy greatest knew thee, Mother Earth;
 - - - - for he knew thee well - came
 the honeyed corner at his lips
 The conquering smile wherein his
 spirit sails
 Calm as the God who the white seawand
 whips."¹

Knowledge of Nature is indispensable in understanding man and the wise individual will follow her teaching.²

If we are wise enough to follow Mother Earth and to allow ourselves to be governed by her, then great will be our blessing:

"Imprisoned humanity open will throw
 Its fortress gates and the river of gold
 For the conjugate friendliness flow,
 Then the meaning of Earth in her children
 behold
 Glad eyes, frank hands, and a fellowship
 real
 And laughter on lips as the bird's outburst
 At the flooding of light."³

and

"I promise not more, save that feasting
 will come
 To a mind and a body no longer inversed:

¹The Spirit of Shakespeare, 184.

²J. H. E. Cress, op. cit., 105.

³The Empty Purse, 455.

The sense of large charity over the land
Earth's wheater of wisdom dispensed in
the rough."¹

What happy human beings we shall be if we but have a
comprehension of the fundamental realities of Nature. Do
the above lines not also portray Meredith's optimistic
nature? However, to be happy, he warns us we must be
united to Earth and we must follow her instructions.

"For every elemental power
Is kindred to our hearts and once
acknowledged wedded, once embraced
Once taken to the unfettered sense
Once claspt in the naked life
The union is eternal."²

While proper conduct is the gain from religion in our
present life, the fear of death and the hope of a future
life add force to the propriety of good conduct.

Death, Meredith considered as a stroke of Nature. In
writing to a friend who had suffered a bereavement he says,

"The mind must be prepared for these strokes of
Nature. Besides the life gone from sight and hearing is
not, if it was loved, a life lost."³

Death was the natural order in Earth and so with man.
He thought there was nothing better in life than a courageous
acceptance of death. Earth teaches this. Look at the rose.
Lovely as it is, yet with all its beauty it dies.

In "Requiem" he speaks of one who had died as

¹The Empty Purse, 455.

²South-West Wind in the Woodland, 26.

³Lady Butcher, Memoirs of George Meredith, 147.

"Fall'n like a snowflake to melt in
the earth."¹

Again

"We drop like the fruits of the tree
Even we
Even so."²

Meredith in his later years apparently did not believe in immortality as identified with the continuance of an individual's life in heaven. No promise of immortality must be sought in Earth, none, indeed, but the physically self-seeking would endeavor to find such a promise, those who look for personal life beyond the grave are those who are incapable of the supreme altruism of merging their own life in that of the race and serving it regardless of future reward. Thus he identifies us with the plants in Nature. We drop like fruits and die like the pine cones to live again only in our successors.³

As he expresses in "Song" the joy of nature continues.

"Oh! do not say that this will ever cease
This joy of woods and fields
This youth that nature yields
Will never speak to me in vain, tho
Soundly rapt in peace."⁴

Earth shows no cessation in her forms, and, as in Earth, there is no cessation of human life

"_ _ _ _ _ we hear
Earth with her Onward chime, with
Winter Spring."⁵

¹Requiem, 19.
²In the Woods, 342.
³Ibid., 34.
⁴Song, 77.
⁵Ibid., 409.

Observing his philosophy we discover that his creed exemplifies many of the fine principles of religion. His attitude towards love and peace, outstanding tenets in established religion, is expressed in "The Olive Branch"

"And like that fain propitious Dove
Bless future fleets about to launch
Make every freight a freight of love
And every ship an Olive Branch."¹

Meredith does not attempt to substitute his creed for religion for the people nor does he waste much of his time in deprecating the current religious beliefs. The extent to which he expressed his opinion of the religion of the day is in "Martin's Puzzle."

"The parson declares that her woes
weren't designed;
But then with the parson it's all
kingdom come.
Lose a leg, save a soul, a convenient text;
I call it Tea doctrine, not savoring
of God."²

Though rather strong feeling is herein sarcastically expressed yet Meredith does not advocate his creed. He presents his beliefs and the reader is allowed to make his own decision. In "Earth and the Wedded Woman" he does represent the people as not being acquainted with Earth.

"They have not struck the roots which
meet the fires
Beneath, and bind us fast to Earth, to
prove
The strength of her desires
The sternness of her woe."³

¹The Olive Branch, 6.

²Martin's Puzzle, 178.

³Earth and a Wedded Woman, 336.

In "Foresight and Patience" he latter expresses that individuals are paying greater attention to truth as he sees it which will bring them to an understanding of the Earth creed.

"Already have my people shown their worth
More love they light, which folds the
love of Earth."¹

He also expresses that in the future many more will listen to the creed of Earth than are paying attention to it now.

"Him, when he blows of Earth and Man
and Fate
The muse will hearken to with greater ear
Than many of her train can waken."²

Meredith does profoundly believe that the Earth creed is the true road to the soul.

"Yet we have but to see and hear
Crave we her medical herb
For the road to her soul is the Real."³

Again

"I say but that this love of Earth reveals
A soul beside our own to quicken, quell
Irradiate and through minious floods uplift."⁴

A creed of Earth will accomplish much in his estimation.

"Safe haven from the drowning slime
Of evil deeds and Deluge wrath
To plant again the foot of Time
Upon a purer, firmer path;
On strengthened wing forevermore
Let Science, swiftly as she can
Fly eastward on from shore to shore
And bind the links of man to man."⁵

¹Foresight and Patience, 418.

²An Orson of the Muse, 188.

³A Faith on Trial, 355.

⁴My Theme, 189.

⁵The Olive Branch, 6.

If the Earth creed accomplished the departure from evil, the return to the pure and the establishment of brotherhood amongst all nations as herein expressed, then indeed it would be attaining much for which religious leaders strive. It is a religion teaching noble principles but recognizing them as emerging from Nature whom we can see, rather than from a God who is invisible.

"It is to knit with loving lips
The interests of land to land
To join in far-seen fellowship
The tropic and the polar strand
It is to make the foaming strength
Whose rebel forces wrestle still
Thru all his boundaried breadth and length
Become a Vassal to our will."¹

¹The Olive Branch, 5.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Briefly the philosophic thought found in George Meredith's poetry shows that man is derived from Earth, is developed through Earth, is governed by the laws of Earth, receives her punishment or rewards, and attains the ultimate only through Earth, the Divine.

Thus we see Meredith made Earth the crucial factor in his creed, in his philosophy of living. Earth is the cause, the indispensable condition and the divine purpose of our existence. His obvious idea is that all morality and all science must be founded upon the conception of Earth. One should establish a faith in that which he knows and not grope in dimness for yonder shores. He said, "I love and cling to Earth as one piece of God's handwork which we possess." He believed in a life of the spirit but a spirit based on Earth's teaching. It is true that his principles are possibly too vague and general to be considered a religion in the sense of a completely organized set of dogmas. He urges that we follow the good in Nature, not the evil, but he gives us no discriminating guide except an individual's variable sense of feeling. He does not deny the existence of a Central Power but for him Earth is God. With Meredith we are the sons of Earth, derived aeons ago from Earth, deriving still all power and force from Earth. He believed we were one in a universal

brotherhood with all creatures that have life, one even with the inanimate, evolving slowly. Never does he specifically tell how he arrived at these beliefs, yet in all his poetry he continually tells us it is from Earth we are sprung. This evolutionary idea that from primal slime we have progressed to what we are, he develops throughout his verse.

Earth rewards those who understand and serve her. However there is no magic formula that he mentions that will bring her blessings showering down upon us. In the final effect her desires are ours. Consequently we must acknowledge ourselves bound to Earth. We must try to detect her teachings, accept them and observe them. We must be the employees of Earth, faithfully following all her instructions in order to attain the greatest joys from life.

It is difficult to give a satisfactory evaluation of this Earth philosophy of Meredith. In general he has added no new concepts of faith. There has been only a transfer of allegiance and power from God to Earth. This implies an emphasis in the material rather than the spiritual. Perhaps there is the gain that the development of the material world has much to offer even as does the development of the spiritual world. The proper enjoyment and knowledge of the material world at least does not impede a spiritual development and if it had existed in the cases of all individuals it is possible that the extensive attainments of Socrates, Shubert, Van Gogh and others may have been significantly enhanced. Undoubtedly there was a gain for Meredith in an

Earth philosophy for it allowed a reconciliation of biological facts that seemed at variance with a Christian religion. But the Earth philosophy can hardly be taken as adequate to fulfill the yearnings of every one for a consistent explanation of his situation in life. For in a detailed analysis there is as much that is inexplicable in an Earth religion as there is in any of the orthodoxies that have held in various ages. For example, in the Earth philosophy, how would one include our final dependence on the Sun as our source of energy? The transition is easily, if not adequately bridged in Christianity with the creation of the world by God. Further it is to be remembered that there is no essential difference between the Earth philosophy and the orthodox tenets of Christianity, save in the position and source of divine power.

Aside from its merits or demerits, Meredith's effort to orient himself in the religions and philosophic confusions in the nineteenth century is valuable and interesting. Faced with problems that all men must seek to solve, he attempts to formulate a creed and an outlook which will take into consideration the advances in knowledge of his time. Whether right or wrong his effort is a valiant human effort and this, surely is high praise.

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