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MODERN LOVE

MODERN LOVE

BY

GEORGE MEREDITH



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
C. DAY LEWIS

LONDON
RUPERT HART-DAVIS
1948

Modern Love was first published in 1862

In 1892 Meredith published a new and slightly revised edition,
from which the text of this edition is taken

INTRODUCTION

BY C. DAY LEWIS

INTRODUCTION

I

A reader of *Modern Love* will, according to his taste, temperament and private experience, be inclined to adopt one of three attitudes towards it. He may see it chiefly in the light of the surface plot, as a tragedy of marital infidelity and its nemesis: if so, his judgment of the poem will be predominantly a moral judgment; the poem will stand or fall for him, as it did for most of its contemporary critics, by its message, since tragedy, however little impersonal, involves moral values. Or the reader, familiar with the story of Meredith's unhappy first marriage, may relate the poem closely to this, interpreting it as a study in morbid psychology, more or less thinly veiled by the dramatic fictions of the plot. A third reader, carried away by the magnificence of its images, the variety of its poetic accomplishment, will feel himself transported into a region where psychological revelation and ethical meaning operate only as ministers to transcendent imaginative truth.

The ideal reader would, no doubt, give equal attention to all three aspects of *Modern Love*. And indeed they may not, except for critical analysis, be separated. Whichever happens to be uppermost in our mind, the

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poem itself is unified by a theme that draws equally on moral, psychological and poetic truth—the theme of

In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

II

Modern Love was first published in 1862. It was Meredith's second volume of verse: his *Poems*, which included 'Love in the Valley' in its first version, had appeared eleven years before: he was not to publish his third book of poems till 1883. Meredith had had little success as a novelist at this stage, although *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1851), *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), and *Evan Harrington* (1861) had already come out. It was not till the publication of *The Egoist* (1879) that his reputation began to be assured and his novels to be widely read.

In dramatic outline, *Modern Love* is the story, told in fifty 16-line sonnets, of a marriage which has failed, of the two partners' failure to find emotional release from one another, from the mortmain of their former love, in illicit relationships, and of their final reconciliation which also fails because it is but 'a lifeless vow To rob a living passion.' The situation is seen primarily through the eyes of the husband. But, through his sensibility and long experience of her, he is able at times to enter into his wife's feelings and thus to suffer a double agony. After

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the first sonnet, which gives the picture and measure of their estrangement, 'each wishing for the sword that severs all,' we get a section (Sonnets 2-19) where the husband introspectively tortures himself with jealousy, with hypersensitive response not only to the false artifice but also to the genuine appeal of a wife in whom there is still some 'salt of righteous feeling', with memories of the happy past, with the broodings of one who sits at the death-bed of a love that will not die. His anguish is intensified by his efforts to be both magnanimous and intellectually honest, and by the realisation that nevertheless he is degenerating, disintegrating.

This deterioration takes shape in Sonnets 20-39. The husband now has a mistress (she is referred to as 'Lady' or 'My Lady': the wife is called 'Madam' here: the husband is spoken of sometimes in the first person, sometimes the third). He finds excitement, temporary happiness, though the new relationship is haunted for him by the shade of the old—'A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.' His new love releases him a little from the emotional tie of the marriage: but it also releases a rush of cynicism about the relationship between man and woman, and spurts of cruelty towards his wife. As he had earlier anticipated, 'In this unholy battle I grow base.' The episode ends when, making love to 'My Lady', he sees his wife and her lover join hands. Jealousy floods back. He seeks a reconciliation. Husband and wife forgive each other, and try to resume their old life together.

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For a while there is peace, pity, affection, spiritual beauty even, in their relationship—‘Our spirits grew as we went side by side. The hour became her husband and my bride.’ But it is a sterile peace. Love cannot be renewed by an act of will or an aspiration of conscience. He perceives that

If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
I never could have made it half so sure,
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!

The wife, too, realises their attempt is a failure. They have thrashed it out, perhaps, all very rationally, for they are a modern couple—‘Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each. We drank the pure daylight of honest speech. Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear.’ So, mistakenly thinking he still hankers after ‘My Lady’, the wife takes poison.

III

Such a summary gives little idea of the poem’s dramatic movement, its skilful alternations of crisis with calm, tragic necessity with lyrical illusion, cynicism or despair with faith and tenderness; nor of Meredith’s quite extraordinary psychological insight; nor of the technical mastery which enabled him both to transmute psychology into poetry and to make the meditative sonnet form appear a perfectly apt vehicle for a passionate monodrama. But at least, on the face of it, we should suppose it quite

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clear, from this summary, that *Modern Love* must satisfy the most exigent moralists. Does it not tell us that the marriage bond may not be broken with impunity, and that the wages of sin is death?

The critics, however, when the poem first appeared in 1862, did not take this view. The *Athenæum* was 'not sure that, after great labour, we have arrived at Mr. Meredith's drift; but we are quite sure that, if we have, we do not care for it. . . . *Modern Love* contains passages of true beauty and feeling; but they are like the casual glimpses of a fair landscape in some noxious clime,' etc. The *Saturday Review*, after a year of stunned silence—its notice did not appear till October 1863—found its voice and declared the poem to be 'an elaborate analysis of a loathsome series of phenomena which he is pleased to call "modern love".' This critic conceded that 'the mere composition is sometimes very graceful, and always exceedingly ingenious.' But the choice of subject, he continued, was 'a grave moral mistake. . . . So far from a condition of doubt and uncertainty on the general tone of matrimony being in any sense an interesting or attractive thing, it is one of the most disastrous calamities that can befall a nation. . . . With the great literary error of *Don Juan* before his eyes, it was scarcely worth his while to commit the sickly little peccadillo of *Modern Love*.' The *Spectator* also dragged in *Don Juan*. But its reviewer allowed Meredith no poetic talent at all—'a clever man, without literary genius, taste, or judgment . . . the form of the versification makes the smartness look still more

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vulgar . . . clever, meretricious, turbid pictures.' This reviewer offered some sound technical criticisms, particularly of Meredith's 'trick of false ornamentation.' But moral indignation remains the keynote of the review. 'The chief composition in the book, absurdly called *Modern Love*, [is] without any vestige of original thought or purpose which could excuse so unpleasant a subject.' And again, 'so far as we understand the intended drift of his *Modern Love*, we can accuse it of nothing worse than meddling causelessly, and somewhat pruriently, with a deep and painful subject, on which he has no convictions to express.' The *Spectator* specially censured Meredith's 'flippancy', 'cynicism', 'levity'; and indeed, in so many words, hinted that he was rather French.

Opposed to these anonymous panjandra were Swinburne, whose fervent championship of Meredith's poetry was printed in the *Spectator* shortly afterwards, Rossetti, and Browning, who told its author that 'he was astounded at the originality, delighted with the naturalness and beauty' of *Modern Love*. In spite of such supporters, and such lurid detractions, the poem remained virtually unknown for many years. What most delayed its recognition was perhaps not its poetic originality, nor even its 'drift', which, if we rightly understand the drift of the reviewers quoted above, was taken to be towards licentiousness and immorality: but, quite simply, its choice of subject. If mid-Victorian English society was intolerant of sexual irregularity, it had even less tolerance for the

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open discussion of it. Meredith offended against the strongest tabu of his time; and he heightened the offence by the provocative title he gave to his poem.

We should not too readily dismiss, as pure bigotry or laughable prudishness, the views held by those critics in the *Spectator*, the *Athenæum* and the *Saturday Review*. Wherever art and conduct have a common frontier, and at any period when art is taken seriously by large or influential sections of the people—when, therefore, it is likely to affect morality—the critic has a right to discuss the social implications as well as the æsthetic values of a work of art under judgment. For the Victorians, the family was the keystone of society, the marriage bond sacrosanct accordingly. A poem revealing the strength of the forces which may corrode this bond, exposing the love-hate element in sexual relationship, was a poem tending towards decadence: and the more so when its author had apparently ‘no convictions to express’, when, that is, he seemed content to dramatise the ‘deep and painful subject’ without taking sides. ‘I see no sin,’ says the husband: ‘the wrong is mixed.’ But Mr. Meredith should have seen the sin, thought the critics, however mixed the wrong may have been. And to-day, when we ask ourselves if any noticeable increase of happiness, responsibility or usefulness has accrued to individual men and women from the loosening of the marriage tie, we see their point. What these critics failed to realise was that *Modern Love* is not an a-moral poem. It is instinct with a moral ideal they could not grasp because it was in ad-

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vance of its time—the ideal of equality between the sexes. And, just as the poem was for long a victim of its own modernity, so the difficult ideal of a new relationship between man and woman, based on equal emotional rights, may be thought to have contributed to the disaster of the marriage which produced this poem.

IV

In 1849, at the age of 21, George Meredith married Mary Nicolls. She was a widow, six and a half years older than he, the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. Mary was beautiful, witty, high-spirited, accomplished, captivating: 'a dashing horse-woman who attracted much notice from the "bloods" of the day,' Holman Hunt recorded. She wrote poetry herself. Indeed, she was very like a heroine in a Meredith novel. She was also, Meredith's latest biographer* tells us, 'sentimental and sarcastic by turns . . . argumentative and unacquiescent'. That compendious word 'neurotic', which we use to cover or forgive so much destructive behaviour, was not in currency at her time. But, from the scanty evidence we can glean about Mary Meredith, there is no doubt she was a neurotic or near-neurotic: years after her death, Meredith said, 'Peacock's wife became mad, and so there was a family taint.' He himself was never an easy man to live with. He too had a most vulnerable sensibility and a

* Siegfried Sassoon. I am indebted to Messrs. Constable for allowing me to see his *Meredith* in proof.

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bitterly wounding tongue; was moody, proud, intransigent, one in whom the barbs of criticism and mockery, whether from a reviewer or a wife, must rankle intolerably.

The menage of this highly-strung young couple was the worst possible for such temperaments: a 'dreary sequence of duns, lodgings, dead babies, and baffled literary ambition' is Mr. J. B. Priestley's account of it.* They were extremely poor: Meredith's books were unsuccessful: and there was a curious rootlessness about their life together which suggests the present age rather than the 1850's. The moody, difficult changefulness of their dispositions, the ignoble hand-to-mouth existence they were compelled to lead, are surely reflected in the last sonnet:—

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
The union of this ever-diverse pair!
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.

For nine years the poet of 'Love in the Valley', and the woman who had inspired the first version of the poem, lived together under the increasing stress of the ordeal which is created by intense physical passion combined with mental and nervous exasperation. There can be no doubt that she was, at her worst, violent, derisive, exacting; or that he, impelled to protect his imaginative talent against the encroachments of her personality, became cold, brittle, pitiless, and abnormally reticent. By 1858,

* *George Meredith*. English Men of Letters Series (Macmillan).

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the estrangement was obvious. Later that year, leaving their one surviving child, Arthur, with her husband, she ran away to Capri with Henry Wallis, a painter. The following year, deserted by Wallis, she returned to England. She was sick, wretched, finished. It is said that she wrote to Meredith in her extremity imploring him to come and see her, and that he refused. In October 1861 this luckless woman died. Meredith's sole recorded comment on her death is of a reticence so chill that it may be taken as evidence either of a heart gone quite numb towards her or of a mind stricken by unutterable remorse. Having just returned from abroad, he wrote to his friend William Hardman, 'When I entered the world again, I found that one had quitted it who bore my name: and this filled my mind with melancholy recollections which I rarely give way to.'

V

It is extremely difficult to get the story of this marriage in focus with the story of *Modern Love*. That we should feel impelled to do so at all is a tribute to the breathing truth of the husband and wife in the poem—a vivacity and vitality all the more remarkable because Meredith, guided by the poet's saving instinct, took such pains to depersonalise his own experience through the use of a fictional framework. But, until we understand where and how deeply this experience entered into the poem, we shall not arrive at the poem's heart.

According to Mr. Sassoon, *Modern Love* was begun

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immediately after Mary's death, and written very quickly in a few months. It may be so, though I do not think the evidence he brings at all conclusive. In a letter to Janet Ross (Nov. 19, 1861) Meredith speaks of 'The Love Match'—the then title of the poem—as 'among my later pieces'; and as early as January of the following year he was able to send Maxse proofs of all but thirteen of the sonnets. Could the poem have been so far advanced if he had only started it in October? The bulk of it was certainly written from October on; and it seems reasonable to suppose that its dramatic outline was given to the poem after Mary Meredith's death: but my own conjecture is that its basic theme had been contemplated, many of its key images formed, and perhaps a few detached sonnets written, before this. 'His wife's death had come as a relief,' Mr. Sassoon says, 'causing him no disintegrating emotion.' If he is right, it is difficult to account for the extreme rawness of certain passages describing manifestations of the husband's jealousy, except on the theory that they had taken shape in Meredith's mind while he still had a direct incentive to feel jealousy.

The point is something more than academic in so far as it bears on the question, What is *Modern Love* really about? Is it primarily a work of detachment, a novel in verse, and only secondarily a presentation of the poet's own experience? Or is it an intensely personal poem in which real experience has, for the sake of art and decorum, been given a fictional disguise? I myself must choose the latter interpretation. I cannot, for instance,

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agree with Mr. Sassoon that 'In *Modern Love* there is no revelation of the disharmony which caused this miserable break-up.' The image we are given in the first sonnet, of the wife's sobs 'like little gaping snakes, Dreadfully venomous to him'—an image echoed in 'the ponderous breakers plunge and *strike*, And *dart their hissing tongues* high up the sand' of Sonnet 43, and to my ear in Sonnet 44's 'Poor soul! if in those early days unkind, Thy power to *sting* had been but power to grieve'—this recurrent metaphor is surely drawn from early experience, an image of a neurotic wife's reproaches and their effect upon her husband's wincing nerves. Again, could there be a plainer definition of the intelligent, neurotic woman than 'She sees through simulation to the bone: What's best in her impels her to the worst'? Scattered about the poem we find passages where the acrid smell of misery is unmistakeable—not the misery of the jealous, but that which comes from such a woman's instability and insensate demands. And in the final sonnet, does not Meredith sum up the prime cause of the disharmony?—

But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.

This brings us close to the heart of the poem. On the face of it, *Modern Love* is a dramatic study of infidelity as it might work out in the lives of two sensitive and civilised human beings. But this generalised subject rests, I believe, on certain personal themes—themes derived

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from Meredith's experience in his disastrous marriage. First, the incompatibility that may open up between too similar temperaments, especially when one of them is retarding the spiritual growth of the other. Second, the danger of refusing to recognise that a human relationship cannot remain static, of craving for the buried day. Third, in contradistinction to this, the danger when the partners in such a relationship must be analysing it intellectually, constantly holding up to the light the fabric of their marriage, unpicking or patching it. Fourth, the demoralising, paralysing effect of a bond created, and then abandoned, by love: this, the basic theme of the poem, is frequently stressed; it is the deepest cause of the agony. That it was, for Meredith, a directly personal theme is surely proved by his having written at least the bulk of *Modern Love* so immediately after his wife's death: only her death, not her infidelity or her elopement, was able to release him from that 'dying something never dead', and thus to release the whole poem in him.

The dramatic shape of the poem, no less than its emotional sources, has a profound psychological interest. It is created by the straight conflict between instinct and intelligence, without the mediation of any accepted moral code. In the second sonnet we find these very significant lines:—

A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown
The pit of infamy: and then again
He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
To ape the magnanimity of love,
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

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The husband, racked by jealousy, still has moments when he strives to be magnanimous. Although love is dead, he must do his best to counter instinctual vindictiveness with at least a show of magnanimity. The effort recoils upon himself, in self-disgust and self-torture. But at least it is made—the effort to ‘behave well’, to be civilised, to deal with the situation not in prejudice or censoriousness or by exercising the traditional rights of an outraged husband, but through intelligence and sympathy. This is the moral ideal I mentioned earlier, the ideal which made *Modern Love* a revolutionary work because it adumbrated our present-day attitude towards the sexual relationship, our belief that marriage imposes obligations but does not confer rights.

Meredith, however, saw very clearly the weakness of this attitude. ‘Their sense is with their senses all mixed in, Destroyed by subtleties these women are: More brain, O Lord, more brain!’ the husband cries. It is an irony to which the poem does full justice, that the exercise of intelligence upon which this new, equal relationship must depend is also the force most calculated to wreck it: partly, as we have seen, because self-conscious analysis, ‘that fatal knife, Deep questioning’, cuts both ways and is a terribly risky instrument to use upon the living tissue of a relationship so rooted in instinct; partly because women are in fact different from men, their reason still more subject to their emotions and likelier, therefore, to be frittered away in perverse subtlety. Moreover, the moral and psychological implications of

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the poem are drawn together in one final, apparently unresolvable, knot. If we reject a specific code of morals imposed upon sexual behaviour, seeking to replace it with some less rigid ideal fairer to the individual, we are in practice thrown back each of us upon his own heart and mind. Strength of feeling is made the supreme sanction for a state of affairs it has already caused, and by which it is therefore compromised: the warring mind becomes sole judge over the conflict that divides it: the victim is required to be also his own inquisitor, adviser and support.

This dilemma gives the keenest edge of irony to *Modern Love*. As we read the poem, we are increasingly aware that the deep predicament it dramatises, no less than the surface play of its moods and scenes, is full of meaning for us. The best praise we can give *Modern Love* is to say that its audacious title, after nearly a hundred years, still holds good.

VI

Yet the poem is by no means widely read nowadays. Are we still frightened of its implications? Or is it, apart from a few famous and much-anthologised sections, poetically a failure? I fancy that what may alienate some readers, at least, is the poem's 'rhetorical' cast. We are suspicious to-day both of the grand manner and of full-blooded statement as opposed to fine obliquity in verse, and of poems which tell a story. All these offences *Modern Love* commits: and perhaps the very contempo-

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raneity of its thought and subject-matter throws its idiom into unfavourable relief.

Let us allow the adverse critic his say. Like nearly all long poems, *Modern Love* is uneven. It has its great moments, and its troughs of banality, slackness, prosiness. Again, it could be argued that the form does not stand the strain to which it is subjected: a dramatic theme, cast in the meditative mould of the sonnet form, comes out brittle; we get hysterical outcries rather than passionate utterance, shrill sarcasm instead of irony, melodrama where there should be tragedy. Well, yes, sometimes we do. And thirdly, the critic may point out a strain of verbal garishness in the poem. It is, of course, the danger in applying the grand manner to a highly personal theme, that, if the poet's balance and impetus fail for a moment, the poem will drop into vulgarity. Meredith, we have seen, was at pains to depersonalise his theme. How far it was the poet's right instinct, how far the novelist's touch, that he should have made the husband in the poem unfaithful as well as the wife (a fiction not based on any fact in Meredith's own life, I believe)—to what extent perhaps it was also a self-punitive gesture, directed by and symbolising his remorse for the neglect of his dying wife and his share of guilt for the whole estrangement—this we cannot judge. But certainly Meredith strove to render his personal tragedy in an impersonal way: and as certainly there are points where he failed to do so.

I myself cannot much regret these failures. If,

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through them, the poem badly loses height at times, it does gain in variety and humanity. At certain points, it is true, we feel that the lyric texture is too severely strained by the imposing upon it of scenes better suited to the medium of poetic drama, even though they derive a special intensity from being mirrored in one man's mind and presented through passionate soliloquy. The sonnets in which the husband gives rein to his jealousy, or to a cheap despairing cynicism, contain passages which come perilously near to vulgarity (Sonnets 7, 9 and 25, for example). But then, cynicism and jealousy are vulgar states of mind: and, what is more important, taking the poem as a whole, the passages where Meredith has exposed his heart for daws to peck at, showing up the reverse, humiliating side of love in all its meanness, baseness and pusillanimity, do positively heighten by contrast the poem's peaks.

These are well distributed over the range of *Modern Love*. I take them to be Sonnets 1, 2, 4, 8, 11, 16, 19, 26, 29, 31, 40, 43, 47, 49 and 50. The emotional gamut offered by these sonnets is truly remarkable. I know no poems in the English language of a pathos more heart-rending than 'By this he knew she wept' (1), 'In our old shipwrecked days' (16), or 'He found her by the ocean's moaning verge' (49). Then, in complete contrast, there is the mordant, Byronesque wit of 20 and 31: or the unearthly calm of 'We saw the swallows gathering' (47): or the intellectual grandeur of 4, 43, and 50, in which an image is found whereby the personal theme is elevated

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to a great poetic generalisation. Again, we may turn to 8 or 19, and see how within a single sonnet the poet has veered from tenderness to indignation, from pity to self-pity, from generosity to an annihilating bitterness, faithfully reproducing the mental chaos of a man bewildered by love's feints and blows and withdrawals, yet preserving throughout a homogeneity of texture.

What makes *Modern Love* so versatile, and indeed unique in 19th-century poetry, is its combination of emotional honesty, intellectual power and passionate speech. Nothing is shirked, nothing glossed over. The reticent, proud poet, for the first and last time in his life, in what may seem to us one of literature's noblest gestures of expiation, laid bare the worst of himself and thereby also revealed the best. There is the clever petulance of

Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

the morbidity of

I know not how, but shuddering as I slept,
I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:
My feet were nourished on her breasts all night.

the terrible demoralisation of

But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
And eat our pot of honey on the grave.

Had he not so honourably confessed these states of mind,

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had he not plied imagination so relentlessly to open wider the old wounds, he would never have come through to the impersonal glory of his finest images, images such as this—

. . . we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
And they were music till he flung them down,
Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!

Poetry like this is, it seems to me, final. It stirs and assuages, hurts and heals. It is quite merciless: yet it has the power, breathing as it were into the mouth of one's own puny experience, to reanimate, to enlarge, to make it less mortal.

Several critics have said that Meredith, in the emotional richness and intellectual sweep of his imagery at its best, comes nearer than any other English poet to Shakespeare. Certainly there are images in *Modern Love* which fasten upon the memory as Shakespeare's do, and lines which strike the ear with the same majestic resonance. Meredith is also comparable with Shakespeare in his power to transubstantiate the commonplace. Although his later poetry is full of brainwork—too full, we may think; his intelligence, somewhat impatient of poetry's slow-maturing rhythms, was apt to overreach itself and become dispersed in thickets of metaphor—*Modern Love* strikes us as the poem in which heart and mind are most at one. Here passion is leavened with intelligence, intelligence steeped in the blood of a full-

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grown experience. And the result is a poetry of true wisdom, wisdom that speaks out, as Shakespeare's did, in great, flashing, transfigured platitudes.

Not till the fire is dying in the grate,
Look we for any kinship with the stars.
Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
And the great price we pay for it full worth:
We have it only when we are half earth.
Little avails that coinage to the old!

It is not originality, still less idiosyncrasy of thought, which renders this passage memorable. It is a commonplace, whose force we are at last made to feel, through and through, by the inner conviction and the expressive grandeur of its utterance. Herein lies, I think, Meredith's chief lesson for poets to-day. In *Modern Love*, although his material is as complex, as raw, as stubborn and subjective as theirs, he proved that it can be reduced to simplicity without diminishing it, generalised into eloquent clear statement without any gross inflation of the common speech or deflation of the poetic.

C. DAY LEWIS

July, 1948

MODERN LOVE
BY
GEORGE MEREDITH

I

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
 That, at his hand's light quiver by her head, *tremble, shai*
 The strange low sobs that shook their common bed,
 Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
 And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
 Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
 Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away
 With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
 Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
 Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
 Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
 By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
 Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

It ended, and the morrow brought the task.
Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in
By shutting all too zealous for their sin:
Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.
But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!
He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers:
A languid humour stole among the hours,
And if their smiles encountered, he went mad,
And raged deep inward, till the light was brown
Before his vision, and the world forgot,
Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot.
A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown
The pit of infamy: and then again
He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
To ape the magnanimity of love,
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

This was the woman; what now of the man?
But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,
He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,
Or, being callous, haply till he can.
But he is nothing:—nothing? Only mark
The rich light striking out from her on him!
Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim
Across the man she singles, leaving dark
All else! Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,
See that I am drawn to her even now!
It cannot be such harm on her cool brow
To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!
But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well
I claim a star whose light is overcast:
I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.
The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!

All other joys of life he strove to warm,
And magnify, and catch them to his lip:
But they had suffered shipwreck with the ship,
And gazed upon him sallow from the storm.
Or if Delusion came, 'twas but to show
The coming minute mock the one that went.
Cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent,
Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe:
Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison-bars,
Is always watching with a wondering hate.
Not till the fire is dying in the grate,
Look we for any kinship with the stars.
Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
And the great price we pay for it full worth:
We have it only when we are half earth.
Little avails that coinage to the old!

A message from her set his brain aflame.
A world of household matters filled her mind,
Wherein he saw hypocrisy designed:
She treated him as something that is tame,
And but at other provocation bites.
Familiar was her shoulder in the glass,
Through that dark rain: yet it may come to pass
That a changed eye finds such familiar sights
More keenly tempting than new loveliness.
The 'What has been' a moment seemed his own:
The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,
Nor less divine: Love's inmost sacredness,
Called to him, 'Come!'—In his restraining start,
Eyes nurtured to be looked at, scarce could see
A wave of the great waves of Destiny
Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart.

It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.
She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.
Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:
And most she punishes the tender fool
Who will believe what honours her the most!
Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow
Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,
For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost,
Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.
The love is here; it has but changed its aim.
O bitter barren woman! what's the name?
The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?
Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!
That will I not do, though the sting is dire.
—Beneath the surface this, while by the fire
They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.

She issues radiant from her dressing-room,
Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:
—By stirring up a lower, much I fear!
How deftly that oiled barber lays his bloom!
That long-shanked dapper Cupid with frisked curls,
Can make known women torturingly fair;
The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair,
Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.
His art can take the eyes from out my head,
Until I see with eyes of other men;
While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,
And sends a spark up:—is it true we are wed?
Yea! filthiness of body is most vile,
But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse.
The former, it were not so great a curse
To read on the steel-mirror of her smile.

Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt
Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.
Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!
Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?
My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped
As balm for any bitter wound of mine:
My breast will open for thee at a sign!
But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
And they were music till he flung them down,
Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!
I do not know myself without thee more:
In this unholy battle I grow base:
If the same soul be under the same face,
Speak, and a taste of that old time restore!

He felt the wild beast in him between whiles
So masterfully rude, that he would grieve
To see the helpless delicate thing receive
His guardianship through certain dark defiles.
Had he not teeth to rend, and hunger too?
But still he spared her. Once: 'Have you no fear?'
He said: 'twas dusk; she in his grasp; none near.
She laughed: 'No, surely; am I not with you?'
And uttering that soft starry 'you,' she leaned
Her gentle body near him, looking up;
And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,
He drank until the fluttering eyelids screened.
Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam
Of heaven's circle-glory! Here thy shape
To squeeze like an intoxicating grape—
I might, and yet thou goest safe, supreme.

But where began the change; and what's my crime?
The wretch condemned, who has not been arraigned,
Chafes at his sentence. Shall I, unsustained,
Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?
I must have slept, since now I wake. Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:
Not like hard life, of laws. In Love's deep woods,
I dreamt of loyal Life:—the offence is there!
Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.—
My crime is that, the puppet of a dream,
I plotted to be worthy of the world.
Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee
 Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,
 And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing,
 Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.
 Or is it now? or was it then? for now,
 As then, the larks from running rings send showers:
 The golden foot of May is on the flowers,
 And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.
 What 's this, when Nature swears there is no change
 To challenge eyesight? Now, as then, the grace
 Of heaven seems holding earth in its embrace.
 Nor eyes, nor heart, has she to feel it strange?
 Look, woman, in the West. There wilt thou see
 An amber cradle near the sun's decline:
 Within it, featured even in death divine,
 Is lying a dead infant, slain by thee.

Not solely that the Future she destroys,
And the fair life which in the distance lies
For all men, beckoning out from dim rich skies:
Nor that the passing hour's supporting joys
Have lost the keen-edged flavour, which begat
Distinction in old times, and still should breed
Sweet Memory, and Hope,—earth's modest seed,
And heaven's high-prompting: not that the world is flat
Since that soft-luring creature I embraced,
Among the children of Illusion went:
Methinks with all this loss I were content,
If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,
Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole
Of life is mixed: the mocking Past will stay:
And if I drink oblivion of a day,
So shorten I the stature of my soul.

'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'

Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!
And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies
She is full sure! Upon her dying rose,
She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,
Scarce any retrospection in her eye;
For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag—there, an urn.
Pledged she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!
This lesson of our only visible friend,
Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
Yes! yes!—but, oh, our human rose is fair
Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
When the renewed for ever of a kiss
Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!

What soul would bargain for a cure that brings
Contempt the nobler agony to kill?
Rather let me bear on the bitter ill,
And strike this rusty bosom with new stings!
It seems there is another veering fit,
Since on a gold-haired lady's eyeballs pure,
I looked with little prospect of a cure,
The while her mouth's red bow loosed shafts of wit.
Just heaven! can it be true that jealousy
Has decked the woman thus? and does her head
Swim somewhat for possessions forfeited?
Madam, you teach me many things that be.
I open an old book, and there I find,
That 'Women still may love whom they deceive.'
Such love I prize not, madam: by your leave,
The game you play at is not to my mind.

I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low
 Hangs that abandoned arm toward the floor;
 The face turned with it. Now make fast the door.
 Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe!
 The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love,
 Frights not our modern dames:—well if he did!
 Now will I pour new light upon that lid,
 Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. 'Sweet dove,
 Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.
 I do not? good!' Her waking infant-stare
 Grows woman to the burden my hands bear:
 Her own handwriting to me when no curb
 Was left on Passion's tongue. She trembles through;
 A woman's tremble—the whole instrument:—
 I show another letter lately sent.
 The words are very like: the name is new.

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,
When in the firelight steadily aglow,
Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow
Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower
That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat
As lovers to whom Time is whispering.
From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:
The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.
Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
With us, and of it was our talk. 'Ah, yes!
Love dies!' I said: I never thought it less.
She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.
Then when the fire domed blackening, I found
Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:—
Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
 Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
 The Topic over intellectual deeps
 In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
 With sparkling surface-eyes we play the ball:
 It is in truth a most contagious game:
 HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.
 Such play as this, the devils might appal!
 But here 's the greater wonder; in that we
 Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,
 Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;
 Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemerioe,
 Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.
 We waken envy of our happy lot.
 Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
 Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine.

Here Jack and Tom are paired with Moll and Meg.
Curved open to the river-reach is seen
A country merry-making on the green.
Fair space for signal shakings of the leg.
That little screwy fiddler from his booth,
Whence flows one nut-brown stream, commands the joints
Of all who caper here at various points.
I have known rustic revels in my youth:
The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease.
An early goddess was a county lass:
A charmed Amphion-oak she tripped the grass.
What life was that I lived? The life of these?
Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near.
They must, I think, be wiser than I am;
They have the secret of the bull and lamb.
'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer.

No state is enviable. To the luck alone
Of some few favoured men I would put claim.
I bleed, but her who wounds I will not blame.
Have I not felt her heart as 'twere my own
Beat thro' me? could I hurt her? heaven and hell!
But I could hurt her cruelly! Can I let
My Love's old time-piece to another set,
Swear it can't stop, and must for ever swell?
Sure, that's one way Love drifts into the mart
Where goat-legged buyers throng. I see not plain:—
My meaning is, it must not be again.
Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart.
If any state be enviable on earth,
'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,
Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
In a queer sort of meditative mirth.

I am not of those miserable males
Who sniff at vice and, daring not to snap,
Do therefore hope for heaven. I take the hap
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails,
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,
I know the devil has sufficient weight
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.
Besides, he 's damned. That man I do suspect
A coward, who would burden the poor deuce
With what ensues from his own slipperiness.
I have just found a wanton-scented tress
In an old desk, dusty for lack of use.
Of days and nights it is demonstrative,
That, like some aged star, gleam luridly
If for those times I must ask charity,
Have I not any charity to give?

We three are on the cedar-shadowed lawn;
My friend being third. He who at love once laughed
Is in the weak rib by a fatal shaft
Struck through, and tells his passion's bashful dawn
And radiant culmination, glorious crown,
When 'this' she said: went 'thus': most wondrous she!
Our eyes grow white, encountering: that we are three,
Forgetful; then together we look down.
But he demands our blessing; is convinced
That words of wedded lovers must bring good.
We question; if we dare! or if we should!
And pat him, with light laugh. We have not winced.
Next, she has fallen. Fainting points the sign
To happy things in wedlock. When she wakes,
She looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes:
Her lost moist hand clings mortally to mine.

What may the woman labour to confess?
There is about her mouth a nervous twitch.
'Tis something to be told, or hidden:—which?
I get a glimpse of hell in this mild guess.
She has desires of touch, as if to feel
That all the household things are things she knew.
She stops before the glass. What sight in view?
A face that seems the latest to reveal!
For she turns from it hastily, and tossed
Irresolute, steals shadow-like to where
I stand; and wavering pale before me there,
Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.
She will not speak. I will not ask. We are
League-sundered by the silent gulf between.
You burly lovers on the village green,
Yours is a lower, and a happier star!

'Tis Christmas weather, and a country house
Receives us: rooms are full: we can but get
An attic-crib. Such lovers will not fret
At that, it is half-said. The great carouse
Knocks hard upon the midnight's hollow door,
But when I knock at hers, I see the pit.
Why did I come here in that dullard fit?
I enter, and lie couched upon the floor.
Passing, I caught the coverlet's quick beat:—
Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain—
Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!
Out in the freezing darkness the lambs bleat.
The small bird stiffens in the low starlight.
I know not how, but shuddering as I slept,
I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:
My feet were nourished on her breasts all night.

The misery is greater, as I live!
To know her flesh so pure, so keen her sense,
That she does penance now for no offence,
Save against Love. The less can I forgive!
The less can I forgive, though I adore
That cruel lovely pallor which surrounds
Her footsteps; and the low vibrating sounds
That come on me, as from a magic shore.
Low are they, but most subtle to find out
The shrinking soul. Madam, 'tis understood
When women play upon their womanhood,
It means, a Season gone. And yet I doubt
But I am duped. That nun-like look waylays
My fancy. Oh! I do but wait a sign!
Pluck out the eyes of pride! thy mouth to mine!
Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.
 You think it quite unnatural. Let us see.
 The actors are, it seems, the usual three:
 Husband, and wife, and lover. She—but fie!
 In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,
 The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;
 Blanc-mange and absinthe are his penitent fare,
 Till his pale aspect makes her over-fond:
 So, to preclude fresh sin, he tries rosbif.
 Meantime the husband is no more abused:
 Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.
 Then hangeth all on one tremendous IF:—
If she will choose between them! She does choose;
 And takes her husband, like a proper wife.
 Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:
 And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve
He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
The fatal web below while far he flies.
But when the arrow strikes him, there 's a change.
He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,
Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.
A subtle serpent then has Love become.
I had the eagle in my bosom erst:
Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.
I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.
Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.
Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:
But be no coward:—you that made Love bleed,
You must bear all the venom of his tooth!

Distraction is the panacea, Sir!
 I hear my oracle of Medicine say.
 Doctor! that same specific yesterday
 I tried, and the result will not deter
 A second trial. Is the devil's line
 Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?
 And does a cheek, like any sea-shell rosed,
 Or clear as widowed sky, seem most divine?
 No matter, so I taste forgetfulness.
 And if the devil snare me, body and mind,
 Here gratefully I score:—he seem'd kind,
 When not a soul would comfort my distress!
 O sweet new world, in which I rise new made!
 O Lady, once I gave love: now I take!
 Lady, I must be flattered. Shouldst thou wake
 The passion of a demon, be not afraid.

I must be flattered. The imperious
Desire speaks out. Lady, I am content
To play with you the game of Sentiment,
And with you enter on paths perilous;
But if across your beauty I throw light,
To make it threefold, it must be all mine.
First secret; then avowed. For I must shine
Envied,—I, lessened in my proper sight!
Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!
How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell.
Most earnestly I pray you, tend it well:
And men shall see me as a burning sphere;
And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan
To be the God of such a grand sunflower!
I feel the promptings of Satanic power,
While you do homage unto me alone.

Am I failing? For no longer can I cast
A glory round about this head of gold.
Glory she wears, but springing from the mould
Not like the consecration of the Past!
Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth
I cry for still: I cannot be at peace
In having Love upon a mortal lease.
I cannot take the woman at her worth!
Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
Our human nakedness, and could endow
With spiritual splendour a white brow
That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?
A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
And eat our pot of honey on the grave.

What are we first? First, animals; and next
 Intelligences at a leap; on whom
 Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
 And all that draweth on the tomb for text,
 Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:
 Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
 We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
 Intelligence and instinct now are one.
 But nature says: 'My children most they seem
 When they least know me: therefore I decree
 That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young Love flee,
 And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.
 Then if we study Nature we are wise.
 Thus do the few who live but with the day:
 The scientific animals are they.—
 Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes.

This golden head has wit in it. I live
Again, and a far higher life, near her.
Some women like a young philosopher;
Perchance because he is diminutive.
For woman's manly god must not exceed
Proportions of the natural nursing size.
Great poets and great sages draw no prize
With women: but the little lap-dog breed,
Who can be hugged, or on a mantel-piece
Perched up for adoration, these obtain
Her homage. And of this we men are vain?
Of this! 'Tis ordered for the world's increase!
Small flattery! Yet she has that rare gift
To beauty, Common Sense. I am approved.
It is not half so nice as being loved,
And yet I do prefer it. What's my drift?

Full faith I have she holds that rarest gift
 To beauty, Common Sense. To see her lie
 With her fair visage an inverted sky
 Bloom-covered, while the underlids uplift,
 Would almost wreck the faith; but when her mouth
 (Can it kiss sweetly? sweetly!) would address
 The inner me that thirsts for her no less,
 And has so long been languishing in drouth,
 I feel that I am matched; that I am man!
 One restless corner of my heart or head,
 That holds a dying something never dead,
 Still frets, though Nature giveth all she can.
 It means, that woman is not, I opine,
 Her sex's antidote. Who seeks the asp
 For serpent's bites? 'Twould calm me could I clasp
 Shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine!

'In Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen
 The sumptuously-feathered angel pierce
 Prone Lucifer, descending. Looked he fierce,
 Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
 The young Pharsalians did not disarray
 Less willingly their locks of floating silk:
 That suckling mouth of his, upon the milk
 Of heaven might still be feasting through the fray.
 Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,
 They conquer not upon such easy terms.
 Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.
 And does he grow half human, all is right.'
 This to my Lady in a distant spot,
 Upon the theme: *While mind is mastering clay,*
Gross clay invades it. If the spy you play,
 My wife, read this! Strange love talk, is it not?

Madam would speak with me. So, now it comes :
The Deluge or else Fire! She's well; she thanks
My husbandship. Our chain on silence clanks.
Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs.
Am I quite well? Most excellent in health!
The journals, too, I diligently peruse.
Vesuvius is expected to give news:
Niagara is no noisier. By stealth
Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes. She's glad
I'm happy, says her quivering under-lip.
'And are not you?' 'How can I be?' 'Take ship!
For happiness is somewhere to be had.'
'Nowhere for me!' Her voice is barely heard.
I am not melted, and make no pretence.
With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense.
Niagara, or Vesuvius, is deferred.

It is no vulgar nature I have wived,
Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound
Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swooned,
And not a thought of vengeance had survived.
No confidences has she: but relief
Must come to one whose suffering is acute.
O have a care of natures that are mute!
They punish you in acts: their steps are brief.
What is she doing? What does she demand
From Providence, or me? She is not one
Long to endure this torpidly, and shun
The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand.
At Forfeits during snow we played, and I
Must kiss her. 'Well performed!' I said: then she:
'Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?'
Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!

My Lady unto Madam makes her bow.
The charm of women is, that even while
You 're probed by them for tears, you yet may smile,
Nay, laugh outright, as I have done just now.
The interview was gracious: they anoint
(To me aside) each other with fine praise:
Discriminating compliments they raise,
That hit with wondrous aim on the weak point:
My Lady's nose of Nature might complain.
It is not fashioned aptly to express
Her character of large-browed steadfastness.
But Madam says: Thereof she may be vain!
Now, Madam's faulty feature is a glazed
And inaccessible eye, that has soft fires,
Wide gates, at love-time only. This admires
My Lady. At the two I stand amazed.

Along the garden terrace, under which
A purple valley (lighted at its edge
By smoky torch-flame on the long cloud-ledge
Whereunder dropped the chariot), glimmers rich,
A quiet company we pace, and wait
The dinner-bell in prae-digestive calm.
So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm
Breathes round, we care not if the bell be late:
Though here and there grey seniors question Time
In irritable coughings. With slow foot
The low rosed moon, the face of Music mute,
Begins among her silent bars to climb.
As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread,
I hear the laugh of Madam, and discern
My Lady's heel before me at each turn.
Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?

Give to imagination some pure light
In human form to fix it, or you shame
The devils with that hideous human game:—
Imagination urging appetite!
Thus fallen have earth's greatest Gogmagogs,
Who dazzle us, whom we can not revere:
Imagination is the charioteer
That, in default of better, drives the hogs.
So, therefore, my dear Lady, let me love!
My soul is arrowy to the light in you.
You know me that I never can renew
The bond that woman broke: what would you have?
'Tis Love, or Vileness! not a choice between,
Save petrification! What does Pity here?
She killed a thing, and now it 's dead, 'tis dear.
Oh, when you counsel me, think what you mean!

She yields: my Lady in her noblest mood
Has yielded: she, my golden-crown'd rose!
The bride of every sense! more sweet than those
Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood.
O visage of still music in the sky!
Soft moon! I feel thy song, my fairest friend!
True harmony within can apprehend
Dumb harmony without. And hark! 'tis nigh!
Belief has struck the note of sound: a gleam
Of living silver shows me where she shook
Her long white fingers down the shadowy brook,
That sings her song, half waking, half in dream.
What two come here to mar this heavenly tune?
A man is one: the woman bears my name,
And honour. Their hands touch! Am I still tame?
God, what a dancing spectre seems the moon!

I bade my Lady think what she might mean.
 Know I my meaning, I? Can I love one,
 And yet be jealous of another? None
 Commits such folly. Terrible Love, I ween,
 Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave
 The lightless seas of selfishness amain:
 Seas that in a man's heart have no rain
 To fall and still them. Peace can I achieve,
 By turning to this fountain-source of woe,
 This woman, who 's to Love as fire to wood?
 She breathed the violet breath of maidenhood
 Against my kisses once! but I say, No!
 The thing is mocked at! Helplessly afloat,
 I know not what I do, whereto I strive,
 The dread that my old love may be alive,
 Has seized my nursling new love by the throat.

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
When others pick it up becomes a gem!
We grasp at all the wealth it is to them;
And by reflected light its worth is found.
Yet for us still 'tis nothing! and that zeal
Of false appreciation quickly fades.
This truth is little known to human shades,
How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel!
They waste the soul with spurious desire,
That is not the ripe flame upon the bough:
We two have taken up a lifeless vow
To rob a living passion: dust for fire!
Madam is grave, and eyes the clock that tells
Approaching midnight. We have struck despair
Into two hearts. O, look we like a pair
Who for fresh nuptials joyfully yield all else?

I am to follow her. There is much grace
 In woman when thus bent on martyrdom.
 They think that dignity of soul may come,
 Perchance, with dignity of body. Base!
 But I was taken by that air of cold
 And statuesque sedateness, when she said
 'I'm going'; lit a taper, bowed her head,
 And went, as with the stride of Pallas bold.
 Fleshly indifference horrible! The hands
 Of Time now signal: O, she's safe from me!
 Within those secret walls what do I see?
 Where first she set the taper down she stands:
 Not Pallas: Hebe shamed! Thoughts black as death,
 Like a stirred pool in sunshine break. Her wrists
 I catch: she faltering, as she half resists,

Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like,
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!
Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;
Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,
And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:
In hearing of the ocean, and in sight
Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.
If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
I never could have made it half so sure,
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!
'Tis morning: but no morning can restore
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

They say, that Pity in Love's service dwells,
A porter at the rosy temple's gate.
I missed him going: but it is my fate
To come upon him now beside his wells;
Whereby I know that I Love's temple leave,
And that the purple doors have closed behind.
Poor soul! if in those early days unkind,
Thy power to sting had been but power to grieve,
We now might with an equal spirit meet,
And not be matched like innocence and vice.
She for the Temple's worship has paid price,
And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat.
She sees through simulation to the bone:
What 's best in her impels her to the worst:
Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,
Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone!

It is the season of the sweet wild rose,
My Lady's emblem in the heart of me!
So golden-crown'd shines she gloriously,
And with that softest dream of blood she glows:
Mild as an evening heaven round Hesper bright!
I pluck the flower, and smell it, and revive
The time when in her eyes I stood alive.
I seem to look upon it out of Night.
Here's Madam, stepping hastily. Her whims
Bid her demand the flower, which I let drop.
As I proceed, I feel her sharply stop,
And crush it under heel with trembling limbs.
She joins me in a cat-like way, and talks
Of company, and even condescends
To utter laughing scandal of old friends.
These are the summer days, and these our walks.

At last we parley: we so strangely dumb
In such a close communion! It befell
About the sounding of the Matin-bell,
And lo! her place was vacant, and the hum
Of loneliness was round me. Then I rose,
And my disordered brain did guide my foot
To that old wood where our first love-salute
Was interchanged: the source of many throes!
There did I see her, not alone. I moved
Toward her, and made proffer of my arm.
She took it simply, with no rude alarm;
And that disturbing shadow passed reproved.
I felt the pained speech coming, and declared
My firm belief in her, ere she could speak.
A ghastly morning came into her cheek,
While with a widening soul on me she stared.

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
And in the osier-isle we heard their noise.
We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye:
But in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband and my bride.
Love that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!
The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.
Love that had robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave
Where I have seen across the twilight wave,
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,
Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
Utterly this fair garden we might win.
Behold! I looked for peace, and thought it near.
Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each.
We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.
Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear.
For when of my lost Lady came the word,
This woman, O this agony of flesh!
Jealous devotion bade her break the mesh,
That I might seek that other like a bird.
I do adore the nobleness! despise
The act! She has gone forth, I know not where.
Will the hard world my sentience of her share?
I feel the truth; so let the world surmise.

He found her by the ocean's moaning verge,
Nor any wicked change in her discerned;
And she believed his old love had returned,
Which was her exultation, and her scourge.
She took his hand, and walked with him, and seemed
The wife he sought, though shadow-like and dry.
She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh,
And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed.
She dared not say, 'This is my breast: look in.'
But there 's a strength to help the desperate weak.
That night he learned how silence best can speak
The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin.
About the middle of the night her call
Was heard, and he came wondering to the bed.
'Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!' she said.
Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all.

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
The union of this ever-diverse pair!
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life!—
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

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