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George Meredith (and Margaret Oliphant) among the Pre-Raphaelites

Rebecca N. Mitchell



Fig 1: Henry Wallis, *Chatterton (The Death of Chatterton)* (1855-56), oil on mahogany panel. Creative commons image courtesy Birmingham Museums Trust, Accession #1918P43.

In 1856, there was George Meredith: depicted in oil on canvas by Henry Wallis in what would become of the most iconic Pre-Raphaelite paintings (fig. 1). Meredith modelled dashingly supine on a bed, eyes closed, wavy auburn hair flashing, rich purple breeches, in the guise of Thomas Chatterton, the young, doomed poet.

In 1862, there was George Meredith: living with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne, and William Michael at No. 16 Cheyne Walk in Chelsea. According an oft-repeated story, Meredith left this extraordinary bohemian enclave when his disgust with Rossetti's breakfast habits became too much to bear. "It was past noon," Meredith is said to have moaned.

‘Rossetti had not yet risen, though it was an exquisite day. On the breakfast-table, on a huge dish, rested five thick slabs of bacon, upon which five rigid effs had slowly bled to death! Presently Rossetti appeared in a dressing-gown, with slippers down at heel, and devoured the dainty repast like an ogre’.¹ With this decisive strike against the living arrangements, Meredith decamped to Mayfair, but the blue plaque adorning the building’s façade lists Meredith among the other poets who lived there, noting his affiliation with the property in perpetuity.

In 1904, there was George Meredith: lolling in Max Beerbohm’s lively caricature in *The Poet’s Corner* (fig. 2), he stands gazing upward in profile in Rossetti’s ‘back garden’, surrounded by Pre-Raphaelite luminaries including Algernon Swinburne, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, William Michael Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and William Bell Scott, along with Whistler and Theodore Watts-Dunton. Over a decade later, Meredith again appeared in another of Beerbohm’s imaginings of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Clad in a white suit, arms raised in frustration or joy, Meredith stands in sharp contrast to the rotund, black-clad Rossetti, who sits at an easel. Beerbohm’s caption captures the difference in their aesthetic and physical bearings: ‘Rossetti Insistently Exhorted by George Meredith to Come Forth into the Glorious Sun and Wind for a Walk to Hendon and Beyond’ (fig. 3).²

¹ [Anon.] ‘Musical, Literary, and Dramatic Notes’, *Guardian* (Norwich), 28 November 1899, p. 7. This is the earliest example of the anecdote I have located. The following year, it was reprinted in Reginald Blunt’s *An Illustrated Handbook to Chelsea* (London: Privately Printed, 1900), and then excerpted in a prominent review of Blunt’s book in *The Academy* (‘Up and Down the World’, *Academy*, 23 June 1900, p. 529-30). It was later repeated in biographies of Meredith (e.g. J. A. Hammerton, *George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism*, (London: Mitchell Kennerley), p. 98) and Ruskin (e.g. E. T. Cook, ‘Introduction’, *The Letters of John Ruskin 1827-1869*, vol. 1, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1909), p. xlvii).

² The drawing was first exhibited in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1917 before being collected with 22 others in book form: Max Beerbohm, *Rossetti and His Circle* (London: Heinemann, 1922).



Figs 2 and 3: Top: Max Beerbohm, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti in His Back-Garden’ (c1903-4) as published in *The Poet’s Corner* (Heinemann, 1904). Bottom: Max Beerbohm, ‘Rossetti Insistently Exhorted by George Meredith to Come Forth into the Glorious Sun and Wind for a Walk to Hendon and Beyond’ (1916), as published in *Rossetti and His Circle* (Heinemann, 1922). © Estate of Max Beerbohm. Used with permission.

George Meredith (1828-1909) was, in other words, routinely and famously positioned among the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle, from the first decade of his literary fame through the last, and well after his death. This affinity with the group has secured his place in long lists of their names, but generally as a peripheral figure and for reasons related to his biography rather than to this work. Within Meredith scholarship, Wallis's portrait of Chatterton most prominently features as a signifier of the end of his marriage to Mary Ellen Nicholls, who left the poet for the painter in the months following the canvas's composition. As the series of events that led to the composition of his masterpiece, the 50-sonnet sequence 'Modern Love' (1862), the episode is essential in Meredith's literary biography. Far less considered, though, are the circumstances that brought Meredith into Wallis's circle, or what it means for author to have a starring role in a Pre-Raphaelite masterwork while being considered merely a peripheral Pre-Raphaelite himself. This article reconsiders Meredith's relationship to the Pre-Raphaelites by focussing on two often overlooked parts of his varied and extensive oeuvre: his earliest collection of verse, *Poems* (1851), and his art criticism for the *Westminster Review* (1857-58). If the first poetry volume attests to his early shared influences with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), the nascent aesthetic philosophy that he articulated in the *Westminster* 'Belles Lettres' informs the more ambivalent relationship to the proto-Aestheticism that developed from it. To demonstrate the relative distinctiveness of Meredith's critical engagement, I will turn to the art criticism of Margaret Oliphant, a contemporary counterpoint that demonstrates the progressiveness of Meredith's position and its adaptability to the later fin-de-siècle context.

Meredith's Early Pre-Raphaelite Encounters

In an article exploring Meredith's connection to the Pre-Raphaelites, S. M. Ellis traces the earliest encounter to his interactions with PRB founding artist John Everett Millais and

PRB-affiliate Frederick Sandys when they created illustrations to accompany his poems in *Once a Week* beginning in 1859.³ The correspondence reveals an earlier connection. In May 1851, Meredith called on Millais at his home, depositing a copy of his recently published volume of poems: ‘I have left at your residence a book of my own just published, if you will oblige me by accepting it as a testimony of the admiration in which I hold your genius. In “Mariana” you have, as I understand, greatly conceived a great poem; in the “Woodman’s daughter” wonderfully embellished a small one. Both are exquisite’.⁴ Both of the paintings Meredith mentions had appeared in the 1851 Royal Academy exhibition. *The Woodman’s Daughter*, was based on a poem by Coventry Patmore; *Mariana* drew on Tennyson’s poem of the same title (1830), which in turn took its inspiration from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. Meredith’s correspondence from the period is unfortunately scarce, but this letter demonstrates that he was, at the time of the publication of his first volume, keenly aware and admiring of Millais’s project. The broader Pre-Raphaelite aim of joining together poetry and the visual arts seems also to have met with Meredith’s approbation, judging from these brief comments on Millais’s textually-inspired canvases.⁵

That enthusiasm in his early career has not ensured his inclusion in the circle, blue-plaques at Cheyne Walk notwithstanding. Meredith’s presence in anthologies of Pre-Raphaelite verse—past and recent—is spotty, and predicated largely on ‘Modern Love’ alone. The earliest of the anthologies is Jerome Kinton Parkes’s *The Painter-Poets* (1890), which does not mention Meredith’s name. Around seventy-five years later, Jerome Buckley’s *The Pre-Raphaelites* (1968) lists Meredith as the final ‘Major Pre-Raphaelite Poet’ and

³ S. M. Ellis, ‘George Meredith: His Association with the Pre-Raphaelites’, *The Bookman* 73 (1928) 253-57. See also Rebecca N. Mitchell, ‘Picturing the “English Roadside”: George Meredith’s Poetry and *Once a Week*’, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 47 (2014), pp. 234-54.

⁴ *Letters of George Meredith*, edited by C. L. Cline, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), I, 15. The letter is reproduced from William James, *The Order of Release* (London: John Murray, 1948), p. 174, where it first appeared.

⁵ Millais’s biographer, son John Guille Millais, lists Meredith amongst his father’s closest literary friends. John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1899) I, 422.

includes all of the ‘Modern Love’ sequence, prefaced with brief commentary that attests to the prose-like difficulty of Meredith’s verse. Buckley does allow that the poem features ‘a probing analysis of the inner life, a concentration on specific moments of insight and crisis, a precise use of graphic detail, a mingling of archaic and colloquial diction, and a highly allusive imagery’, qualities that it shares with ‘the work of the literary Pre-Raphaelites’. That it describes the personal pain of the dissolution of a marriage while ‘transcending its personal original to achieve a self-subsistent drama’ also qualifies the work, in Buckley’s view, as being Pre-Raphaelite at heart.⁶ Carolyn Hares-Stryker’s *An Anthology of Pre-Raphaelite Poetry* (1997) and Paul Negri’s *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry: An Anthology* (2003) each offer a few poems in addition to selections from ‘Modern Love’.⁷ In Dinah Roe’s *The Pre-Raphaelites: From Rossetti to Ruskin* (2010), only selections from *Modern Love* appear, and Derek Stanford’s *Pre-Raphaelite Writing* (1973) excludes Meredith altogether.⁸ Cecil Lang’s *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (1975) is the most comprehensive of the collections, and unsurprisingly offers the most expansive selection of Meredith’s verse, including all of ‘Modern Love’ as well as ‘The Woods of Westermains’, ‘Love in the Valley’ (the expanded version, as it appeared in the 1883 *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*, not the version appearing in the 1851 *Poems*), ‘Phoebus with Admetus’, ‘Earth and Man’, and ‘The Lark Ascending’. Yet Lang’s justification for Meredith’s inclusion in the anthology is ambivalent. ‘Only the over-zealous’, he writes, ‘would call [Meredith’s] poetry Pre-Raphaelite, since the whole tendency and final impression of the two modes are diametrically opposed, but it would not be unreasonable to perceive something of Rossetti either in its sharp pictorial detail or in its occasional sense of brooding mystery’.⁹

⁶ Jerome Buckley, ed. *The Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 347.

⁷ Paul Negri, ed., *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry: An Anthology* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift, 2003).

⁸ Derek Stanford, ed., *Pre-Raphaelite Writing* (London: Dent, 1973, 1984).

⁹ Cecil Lang, ‘Introduction’, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. xxi.

Meredith's first volume of verse, far from being 'diametrically opposed' to the PRB mode, shows him to be deeply invested in the thematic and psychological aims of much PRB poetry as well as its formal qualities. *Poems* of 1851 generally dismissed as the work of youth. George Trevelyan, who wrote one of the earliest and still most important treatments of Meredith's verse, is especially dismissive, referring to the volume as 'boyish', its poems 'commonplace effusions of imaginative youth' and 'juvenilia'.¹⁰ Contemporary critical reaction was kinder, and rather than assigning the work to the 'effusions' of youth, attests to its resonance with Pre-Raphaelite occupations, namely through the myriad literary influences that Meredith shared with the PRB. One review describes Meredith's 'delicate perception of sensuous beauty', naming him 'the most Keatsian writer in that respect since the days of Keats. He appears to have no great wish to administer a moral lesson to anybody'.¹¹ Meredith's debt to Tennyson is also noted by the critic, who comments that he might 'have sung through a long afternoon to the lotos-eaters' without boring them, and without resorting to 'trick, glitter, or the merely artificial employment of wit and fancy'.¹² William Michael Rossetti's review of *Poems* is more measured, even as he too establishes a similar set of connections. Writing in the *Critic* when he was just twenty-one, Rossetti describes Meredith as a 'kind of limited Keats. He is scarcely a perceptive, but rather a seeing or sensuous poet. He does not love nature in a wide sense as Keats did; but nature delights and appeals closely to him'.¹³ Rossetti found the poet's 'clear voice of nature' to be 'as spontaneous and intelligible as the wooing of a bird', assigning him to 'the Keatsian school, believing that he

¹⁰ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith* (London: Constable, 1906), p. 51.

¹¹ [Anon.] 'Meredith's Poems', *Morning Chronicle*, 27 September 1851, p. 3. Notably, this review does not appear in Ioan William's *George Meredith: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ William Michael Rossetti, 'Poetry and the Drama', *Critic* 15 November 1851, pp. 539-540 (p. 539).

pertains to it in virtue of the more intrinsic qualities of his mind, and of a simple enjoying nature'.¹⁴

It is not as if Meredith had kept his affiliations secret. A series of stanzas on other poets in 1851 vividly attests to the literary affections he shared with the PRB, as his choice of subjects hews very closely to their 'list of Immortals' collected and reprinted by Holman Hunt in his history of the Brotherhood. *Poems* includes quatrains to Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Keats, all poets included in the PRB list.¹⁵ It is the Romantic poets' embrace of nature, in particular, that he highlights in the verses: Coleridge's 'brook glancing under green leaves, self-delighting, exalting', or Wordsworth's 'breath of the mountains, fresh born in the regions majestic'.¹⁶ John Holmes, in his recent *Pre-Raphaelites and Science*, considers Meredith's 'sensitivity to ecology' among the qualities that secure his place among the Pre-Raphaelites, in addition to their shared 'commitment to the minute examination of embodied psychology, a similar refusal to be hamstrung by prudery, and the love of the ballad as an intense form of poetic narrative'.¹⁷

W. M. Rossetti might have agreed with Holmes's characterisation, as he also linked Meredith's style (as opposed to his Keatsian enjoyment of nature) to Tennyson and Herrick. Tennyson might not have been addressed by name in *Poems*, but he was equally prominent in Meredith's conception of his verse. To James Vizetelly, who would ultimately print *Poems* on behalf of the publisher John W. Parker, Meredith wrote that he was 'desirous' to publish the volume 'in the style of Tennyson'.¹⁸ He later cited Tennyson when assuring Parker that he

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), I, 159.

¹⁶ George Meredith, 'The Poetry of Coleridge', l.1, and 'The Poetry of Wordsworth', l.1, *Poems* (London: John W. Parker, 1851), pp. 23, 24.

¹⁷ John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (London: Yale UP, 2018), p. 185. These aspects become more pronounced in Meredith's later verse, along with greater attention to 'developments in science, particularly evolutionary theory' that further link Meredith to his PRB, scrutinising its implications in his poetry'.

¹⁸ Meredith, letter to James Vizetelly, 15 January 1850, in *Letters*, ed. Cline, I, 8.

realised his first collection will likely make little noise and no money: the newly-named Poet Laureate also had ‘a doleful beginning’, Meredith insisted.¹⁹ When Tennyson responded to the volume with praise, Meredith replied that obtaining Tennyson’s approval was his ‘chief ambition in publishing the little volume of poems’.²⁰

As for Herrick, Rossetti was not alone in making the comparison. Another uncollected review noted that Meredith’s volume featured ‘some songs’ that are ‘as rich and melodious as any of Herrick’s, and far more imaginative’.²¹ As I have shown elsewhere, Herrick was a frequent point of comparison for Meredith and, interestingly, Christina Rossetti.²² The mutual affinity with Herrick’s poetry offers one route for comparative consideration of the two: there are particular chimes between Meredith’s and Christina Rossetti’s verse that are likely a product shared antecedents rather than any lines of direct connection between the poets. Consider the tumbling dimeter and irregular rhyme and rhythm of Meredith’s ‘Sunrise’, for example, which anticipates the Christina Rossetti’s greater achievement with similar form, ‘Goblin Market’ (1859, pub. 1862). Though dealing with a more conventional topic and eschewing any moral sentiment, Meredith’s poem achieves some of the signal aspects of Rossetti’s poem: anaphoretic lists (‘And wakening wealds, | And rising lark, | And idle rills, | And labouring mills, | And far-distant hills | of the fawn and the doe’. ll.18-24); heaping catalogues of colour and texture (‘Autumn flushes, | Roseate blushes, | Vermeil tinges, | Violet fringes’ ll.64-68); and lilting, verb-driven forward action (‘As plunging, eyes flashing, | Dripping, and dashing, | His steeds triple grown, | Rear up to his throne’ ll.87-90).²³ As in

¹⁹ Meredith, letter to John W. Parker, 17 December 1850, in *Letters*, ed. Cline, I, 9.

²⁰ Cited in *Tennyson and His Friends*, ed. By Hallam, Lord Tennyson (London: Macmillans, 1911), p. 131.

²¹ [Anon.] ‘Literature: Our May Garland’, *Star of Freedom*, 8 May 1852, p. 3.

²² Rebecca N. Mitchell, ‘Robert Herrick, Victorian Poet: Christina Rossetti, George Meredith, and the Victorian Recovery of *Hesperides*’, *Modern Philology* 113, (August 2015), 88-115.

²³ George Meredith, ‘Sunrise’ in *Poems* (London: John W. Parker, 1851), pp. 150-154.

‘Goblin Market’, Meredith’s lines are rhyme-y, but lack any stable pattern, with series of couplets interrupted or undercut.

In short, Meredith’s 1851 *Poems* demonstrates his burgeoning connections to the Pre-Raphaelites, as evidenced through the influences that informed the verse. The book also served as a kind of talisman, allowing him to make contact with the poets and artists that inspired him. In later years he would see the dividends of those early investments of attention and affection, as when Millais went on to illustrate Meredith’s verse in *Once a Week*. If the poems provided means of establishing affiliations, the criticism he began writing some five years later would expand the range of his interlocutors, putting him in conversation not only with the small group of Pre-Raphaelite artists and their literary antecedents, but also with the broader public discourse around art, illustrated verse, and Pre-Raphaelite painting in particular. In non-fiction prose, his allegiances are made clear in a different register, and he establishes a critical vocabulary that he will continue to deploy across his oeuvre, even as it solidified his position within the PRB circle.

Here, a brief turn Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897), a turn occasioned by the joint focus of this volume, will provide instructive context. Solveig Robinson recently paired Margaret Oliphant with Henry James in an article exploring the shared anti-Decedent stance evident in their criticism.²⁴ The pairing, she admitted, ‘may seem anomalous’, but setting them in relation casts into relief the more ‘fruitful’ response to aestheticism offered by James (‘rejecting only its Decadence’), as opposed to Oliphant’s complete rejection of artificiality (‘a rejection that not only harmed her reputation but probably harmed her own work’).²⁵ Oliphant’s art criticism provides a similar counterpoint to Meredith’s, as it represents one

²⁴ Solveig C. Robinson, “‘At All Time Conspicuous as Art’: Henry James, Margaret Oliphant, and Resistance to Decadence”, in *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement: Essays on the Middle and Late Fiction* (New York: McFarland, 2006), p. 97-108.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 106, 105.

alternate mode of treating the PRB; George Eliot, whose criticism I also explore in relation to Meredith's below, represents another. If later, often pictorial, accounts of Meredith among the PRB sealed his affiliation with them, later accounts of Oliphant that have emphasized her self-effacing, limited and limiting engagement with the artistic world have ensured her position on the sidelines of this major movement. A contemporary of both Meredith and Rossetti, Oliphant rarely figures in considerations of the mid-century Pre-Raphaelites despite the fact that her work shows deep familiarity with the movement and its aesthetic philosophy.

‘A Second Poem’: Oliphant's Pre-Raphaelite Engagements

In 1855, there was Margaret Oliphant: married to her cousin, Frank Wilson Oliphant, a stained-glass designer and later painter, when his *Plea for Painted Glass* was published. A call to arms for the reinvigoration of stained glass design by artists of feeling, the brief study ends with the swelling claim that painted glass expresses ‘the highest idea of the art in its legitimate scope, as capable of the greatest sweetness, power, and beauty, and with singular advantages for telling a story to the eye and the imagination’ that would warrant ‘the due and worthy reputation, not of a trade or manufacture, but of an art’.²⁶ The sentiment—the elevation of the stained glass designer from mere tradesman to artist through the revaluation of an artform thought to be below painting—would have resonated with the philosophies of the PRB or the later articulations of groups such as the Century Guild Hobby Horse or the William Morris-affiliated Arts and Crafts Society.

But Mrs. Oliphant's awareness of these ideas was not solely a consequence of her marriage. Her own writing from this period evinces a first-hand knowledge of the visual arts as well as of the major trends in art criticism. In her 1855 ‘Modern Light Literature – Art’, she takes extended aim at Ruskin, attesting to his significance as the leading critic of the day

²⁶ Francis W. Oliphant, *A Plea for Painted Glass* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1855), pp. 71-2.

but charging him with a negativity that taints his perception of the works he considers. Calling his *Notes on the Last Exhibition of the Royal Academy* the ‘sourest morsel of criticism we have ever looked into’, she claims Ruskin ‘utters his censures with a shrewish pertinacity in which there is no enjoyment’.²⁷ It is this enjoyment, even an unstudied or ill-informed enjoyment, that Oliphant advocates, often at the expense of other critics’ views. Standing ‘on the threshold of a grand Gothic cathedral’, she writes, one is arrested not with the fine-grained details of its architectural ornament (as Ruskin would suggest) but rather the entirety of the cathedral itself—‘the wonderful thing stretching its glorious arches over us—lifting its lofty shafts, so strong, and firm, and delicate, far above our heads, which takes our heart by storm’.²⁸ As for her preferences that define those subjective, emotional responses, she seems in 1855 to be sympathetic to the PRB preference for primitive work, something she would encounter on her Continental travels. ‘These old, stern, unlovely pictures of the very early schools of art’, she writes, ‘what a reality and force one sometimes feels in the severe lines and formal arrangements of works which seem wrung and extorted out of the reluctant materials, compelled to express the primitive artist’s strong conviction or fervent faith!’.²⁹

What one feels when faced with the visual arts seems to be her primary concern, evident when she is countering Ruskin’s sour pronouncements or, as in her review of illustrated volumes of poetry from the same period, where her approbation or disappointment is based in feeling. Oliphant prefaces the review with the caveat that she will ‘not undertake to answer’ the question as to ‘whether it will ever be possible to make verses and pictures “to match” without sacrificing one of the united arts’.³⁰ To some she is complimentary. About one of Birket Foster’s decidedly traditional illustrations of Grahame’s *Sabbath*, she

²⁷ Margaret Oliphant, ‘Modern Light Literature-Art’, *Blackwood’s* December 1855, p. 702-17 (p. 704).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 715.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 710.

³⁰ Margaret Oliphant, ‘Picture-Books’, *Blackwood’s*, March 1857, pp. 309-318 (p. 309).

‘acknowledges that the vignette ‘has nothing at all in the way of subject’, and ‘yet, somehow, one feels the fresh breeze, the hush of the rural air, the far-away country hum’, and she ‘owns at once how these few lines of the pencil outmaster all eloquence of description’.³¹

Elsewhere, her preferences are proudly idiosyncratic, often stated in opposition to learned insight about art. The Pre-Raphaelite contributions to Routledge’s *The Poets of the Nineteenth Century* are handled through this contrast. Oliphant comments that she does ‘not like’ the illustration of Byron’s ‘The Dream’ by Millais (‘the art-hero of the day’), with its ‘two long-limbed and thick-clad figures’, though ‘the sketch [...] will charm that reader most who has an eye best trained and educated for the excellent art’.³² Millais’s strength is in ‘the expression of *extreme* emotion’ and he is, in her view, unable to match the subtlety of the moment of parting recounted in the poem. Nor does she hide her disdain for Ford Maddox Brown (‘a lesser member of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood’), and his illustration of Byron’s ‘The Prisoner of Chillon’, which also fails to capture the nuance of suffering in the poem.

Barbara Onslow is one of the few scholars to address Margaret Oliphant’s art criticism directly,³³ and her essential account foregrounds Oliphant’s interest in the emotional and ethical qualities of art, as opposed its form: ‘Fundamentally’, Onslow writes, ‘her criticism of art had a moral rather than an aesthetic basis’ and she ‘touches only rarely’ upon ‘technical execution’.³⁴ Onslow writes that Oliphant ‘sought to dispel her readers’ sense of inadequacy in the face of experts’, primarily through her calls for access and her self-

³¹ Ibid., p. 313.

³² Ibid., p. 316. Emphasis in the original.

³³ Barbara Onslow, “‘Humble Comments for the Ignorant’: Margaret Oliphant’s Criticism of Art and Society”, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 31 (1998), pp. 55-74. See also Isabel Seidel, “‘Like an old Flemish interior brought into action’: Victorian Reviews of the Realist Novel and the Appropriations of Visual Arts Vocabulary”, *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 19 (2014), 20-31. Seidel argues that Oliphant’s use of visual and painterly vocabulary—like that of George Eliot and Geraldine Jewsbury—‘received and transformed the visual arts in their literary criticism...They convey what their minds saw and what emotions the novels triggered in them, thereby describing how these novels as works of art relate to life and human nature’. p. 29. As suggested by the phrase ‘relate to life and human nature’, the examples Seidel traces are almost entirely connected to realist representation.

³⁴ Onslow, pp. 56, 58. For Onslow, the relevant comparative touchstone for Oliphant is the trained art historian Lady Dilke.

deprecation, as seen above in her deferral to the reader with an ‘eye best trained and educated’. In the case of the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations, her objections are not motivated by a lack of obvious moral content, but an objection based on personal preference: she does ‘not *like*’ them. She prefers the subject-less Foster illustrations that call up the pleasant feelings of nature as opposed to the more directly illustrative works of Millais and Madox Brown.

That is not to say that Oliphant did not appreciate the fashion of the PRB or their tenuous position between critical acceptance and rejection. Her faith that her fiction-reading audience would be aware of the Pre-Raphaelites is evinced by the references sprinkled through her fiction in the 1860s. Aspiring artist Rose Lake in *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) is, for example, described as a ‘young Pre-raphaelite’.³⁵ And in *The Minister’s Wife* (1869) Isabel goes to her sister Margaret’s grave to cry: ‘After she had wept out all of her tears, she still retained her position, her soft arms wound about the stone, clinging to it as she might have clung to her sister. [...] Isabella, embracing her pot of basil with that ineffable softness of exhausted passion out of which Holman Hunt has made a second poem—was not more touching than this gentler creature’.³⁶ The positive notice of Hunt’s recently-exhibited *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1869), its status as ‘a second poem’, elevates the painting into the sort of ‘match’ that she doubted was possible in her 1857 review of ‘Picture-books’.

If in her art criticism of the 1850s Oliphant routinely shirks a position of authority and displaces approval in the mouths of those who know better than her (or her readers), by the 1860s she trusts her readers to recognize the significance of PRB markers. Her early position of ostensible ignorance is further belied in a later piece, her 1876 review of the Royal Academy exhibition. She is pointed in her critique of Millais and Holman Hunt, and through the sharpness of her comments, the review notably corrects a relative silence in her

³⁵ Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Majoribanks* 3 vols (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1866) I, 61

³⁶ Margaret Oliphant, *The Minister’s Wife* 3 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1869), II, 252.

earlier output. In the 1850s she spared little praise for the PRB; some twenty years later she writes that 1856 ‘was the day of Pre-Raphaelites’, a group determined ‘to be at the throats of the old fogies to shake and startle them out of old fogeyism’.³⁷ Her tone is often mocking (‘Where is that brotherhood that hopeful band of young crusaders, that school of the Future?’³⁸), yet in mourning the loss of promise, she clearly articulates the qualities of their art or ideology that appealed in the first place. ‘Once’, she writes, ‘it seemed Mr. Millais’s special gift to express what was intensest in human feeling, the struggle of love with a great purpose, the half madness of anguish and terror suddenly turned into relief and calm’. The sentiment returns us to her comments about his illustration of Byron’s ‘The Dream’, which failed because the poem did demand a depiction of the ‘*extreme* emotion’ that he was best suited to draw). Pointing to Millais’s *Order of Release* (1853) as an example of his past greatness, she remembers that ‘Once he could show us how hearts work, how they struggle, and by what means they get the mastery’.³⁹

Oliphant’s work reflects an increasing willingness to engage and to trust her audience’s familiarity with the PRB, but the 1870s, she came to regard the group as the purveyors of ‘a reformation in art which came to nothing’, to borrow Onslow’s phrase.⁴⁰ Despite deflecting her early comments with the views of other critics, her later disappointment seems personally felt. In contrast, George Meredith’s art criticism of the 1850s is prefaced by his own creative encounter with the group. His poetry is deeply personal in terms of its pre-Raphaelite inspiration, but for his art criticism he adopts a more detached stance. This shift allows him to leverage his early personal commitment into

³⁷ Oliphant ‘The Royal Academy’, p. 757.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 757

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Onslow, p. 67.

increasing abstraction, and he, unlike Oliphant, ultimately sees the PRB project not as a failed revolution but as the basis for an integrated theory of art.

‘Belles Lettres and Art’: Pre-Raphaelites in the *Westminster Review*

In the years after *Poems* was published, Meredith’s literary output was consistent only in its inconsistency. His 1856 Arabian fantasy, *The Shaving of Shagpat*, did make an impression, with Holman Hunt later using lines from the novel as an epigraph in his *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*: ‘Persist if thou wouldst reach thine ends, | For failures oft are but advising friends. | Every failure is a step advanced | To him who will consider how it chanced’.⁴¹ One particularly quiet period occurred during 1857-8. When biographers and scholars address this time in Meredith’s career, it is often with marked qualification, as if the tumultuous events of his personal life—the dramatic breakup of his marriage—should excuse an apparent (and unfortunate) hiatus in his developing authorial command. Lionel Stevenson’s biography summarily dismisses in just three pages this period between the publication of the novel *Farina* in August 1857 and the 1859 release of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*.⁴² Granted, Stevenson would not have known for certain that Meredith took on the role of writing the ‘Belles Lettres and Art’ column of the *Westminster Review*, the leading liberal quarterly journal of the era, from April 1857 through January 1858. This revelation appeared in print only in 1958, when Gordon Haight published an account of the evidence: namely, receipts for monies paid by editor John Chapman to Meredith for the composition of two of the pieces.⁴³ Without such evidence, it is unclear if

⁴¹ Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, II, 98.

⁴² Lionel Stevenson, *The Ordeal of George Meredith* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), pp. 57-59. Meredith’s correspondence offers the scantest insight into this period, with only four letters, three of them to Eyre Crowe, covering April 1857 to January 1858. George Meredith, *The Letters of George Meredith*, ed. C. L. Cline, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), I, 29-33. Michael Collie’s bibliography lists no publications during the intervening years: *George Meredith: A Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

⁴³ Gordon S. Haight, ‘George Meredith and the ‘Westminster Review’’, *Modern Language Review* 53 (January 1958), 1-16. C.L. Cline notes that ‘the twelve guineas which [Meredith] earned during this period for each of

Meredith's authorship would have come to light, as he himself hesitated to claim the work, replying when his bibliographer inquired about any anonymous periodical publications, that he should simply 'let them lie'.⁴⁴ Little other documentation or contemporary discussion of his authorship exists. Haight's foundational study offers in addition to details of the 'Belles Lettres' provenance, a brief summary of the four contributions and extended excerpts from each, focusing primarily on Meredith's literary criticism.

Haight's article set another precedent: he opens the second paragraph of his study with a condemnatory remark: '[Meredith's] predecessor in the "Belles Lettres" section was George Eliot, who wrote the column from July 1855 to January 1857'. Eliot's reviews, Haight opines, 'are better balanced than Meredith's, more intellectual in tone, and written more carefully. Meredith seems intent on being amusing, obviously enjoying his brilliant ridicule of inferior books'.⁴⁵ Haight echoes his assessment of Meredith's ill-suitedness to the role at the article's end, remarking that his 'heart had never been in the work, and the flashes of style and idiosyncrasies of opinion that distinguish it were scarcely suited to the sober pages of the *Westminster*'.⁴⁶ Supporting Haight's assessment was Eliot's own. He cites her well-known injurious assessment of Meredith's tenure on the beat, when she complained in a letter to editor John Chapman that, 'It is so difficult to get a satisfactory writer!' She partly attempts to console Chapman: 'You had good reason to believe that the Belles Lettres would

these articles comprise his only known literary earnings during this period'. George Meredith, *The Letters of George Meredith*, ed. C. L. Cline, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), I, 29n.

⁴⁴ While preparing a bibliography of Meredith's works to be included in Le Gallienne's study (*George Meredith, Some Characteristics*, 1890), John Lane wrote to Meredith, 'It would be interesting to know if you are responsible for any anonymous or pseudonymous volume or contributions to periodical literature that you would care to disclose'; Meredith replied 'Nothing anonymous, except political leaders & short essays, chiefly to the *Pall Mall Gazette* under F. Greenwood. Let them lie'. When asked by Lane, 'Can you from memory state what magazines that you have contributed to besides *Once a Week*, *Macmillan*, *Cornhill*, *Fraser*, *English Illustrated*, *New Quarterly*, & *Fortnightly*?', Meredith responded, '*The Universal*, edited by H. Quilter October last, I think'. Bertha Coolidge, *A Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of George Meredith in the Yale University Library* (Privately printed, 1931), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Haight, 'George Meredith and the Westminster Review', p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16.

be well done by the present writer (Meredith, is it not?); yet he turns out to be unfit for that sort of work'.⁴⁷ Haight adds as a final word only the mildest of defences: that Meredith's successor 'proved to be far worse'.⁴⁸

It is worth pausing over this faint praise because Haight's cautious dismissal of the *Westminster* pieces has inestimably shaped their later reception. Like Oliphant's art criticism, Meredith's *Westminster* reviews are all but neglected in the critical literature; I have located scant scholarly treatment of these works. Returning to these review articles shows the degree to which they reflect Meredith's developing conceptions of taste and the aims of artistic production and, more specifically, how those developing connections intersect with the then-ascendant Pre-Raphaelite movement. In his treatment of art criticism in the 'Belles Lettres', Meredith positions himself in overt relation to the Pre-Raphaelite school to define an aesthetic philosophy based on Pre-Raphaelitism that contrasts markedly with the vision that Eliot articulated in the same journal and with that Oliphant forwarded in *Blackwood's*. Further, he begins, with an impressive economy, to establish a PRB-inflected vocabulary that considers literature in terms of the visual arts and vice versa, a vocabulary he deploys throughout his later fiction as well as his prose writing, including his influential 'Essay on Comedy' (1877).

The delicate and deliberate imbrication of text and image that characterizes Meredith's encounter with Pre-Raphaelite visual arts in the *Westminster* is often eclipsed by or reduced to his affiliation with a single painting: Wallis's astonishing 1856 canvas depicting Thomas Chatterton that opened this essay. The relationship between Meredith and Wallis had begun earlier. Wallis's *Fireside Reverie*, which was exhibited at the 1855 Royal

⁴⁷ George Eliot to John Chapman, editor of the *Westminster Review*, 26 January 1858. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-55), II, 427. She had earlier written that Meredith's tone in the reviews seemed 'so flippant and journalistic'. Haight, II, 421.

⁴⁸ Haight, 'George Meredith and the Westminster Review', p. 16. The successor remains unidentified.

Academy, featured a four-line inscription, the opening stanza of Meredith's poem of the same name ('Is she the star of one that is away? | She that by the fire so gravely dreams, | In Evening's lulling stillness, while the ray | Tints her soft cheek like Sunset on fair streams.'⁴⁹), and Mary Ellen Meredith served as model. Both poem and image cannot help to recall lines from J. L. Tupper's unsigned essay on the proper subjects for art from the third issue of *The Germ*: challenging the refusal to find the artistry in contemporary scenes, Tupper queried 'Why to love a *Ladie in bower*, and not a wife's fire-side?'.⁵⁰ But it is 'Chatterton' that fixed the relationship between Meredith and Wallis.

The poet defended the canvas in his first 'Belles Lettres' piece. Ruskin had praised the painting as 'faultless and wonderful', suggesting that it accomplished 'the entire placing before your eyes of an actual fact—and that a solemn one'.⁵¹ Edward Young, whose early study of the Pre-Raphaelites Meredith was reviewing, dissented from Ruskin, describing the painting as 'an image—not of a dead man in silk breeches, but of silk breeches with a dead man in them' and charged Wallis with abandoning meaning in favour of surface, something Young characterized as 'no mere offence against Art; it *strikes* deeper'.⁵² Dismissing Young as being 'betrayed by his eye for colour, or by his antagonism to Mr. Ruskin', Meredith praises the painting's rich palette and concludes that its 'chief merit' is 'its subordination of parts to expression of the sentiment. It is a picture that requires no defence'.⁵³

Haight writes, 'This warm tribute to Wallis, whose liaison with Mrs. Meredith was soon to bring their marriage to a tragic end, is of great biographical interest. No trace of

⁴⁹ 'Fireside Reverie', in *The Poems of George Meredith*, ed. By Phyllis Bartlett, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) II, 760.

⁵⁰ [J. L. Tupper] 'Subject in Art, No. II', *The Germ* vol. 1 (1850), p. 121.

⁵¹ John Ruskin, *Notes on Some of the Principal Pictures Exhibition in the Rooms of the Royal Academy* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1855), p. 26.

⁵² Edward Young, *Pre-Raffaellitism; or, a Popular Enquiry into some Newly-asserted Principles connected with the Philosophy, Poetry, Religion, and Revolution of Art* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), p. 241. Emphasis in the original.

⁵³ George Meredith, 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review* 67 (April 1857), p. 608.

resentment towards Wallis is visible even so late as July 1857, when in reviewing Ruskin's notes on the Royal Academy Meredith goes out of his way' to praise Wallis's head of Montaigne.⁵⁴ 'When this number of the *Westminster* appeared', Haight continues, 'Mrs. Meredith was off in Wales, probably with Wallis, by whom she had a son born 18 April 1858'.⁵⁵ The implication, of course, is that in July 1857, when Meredith was commending Wallis's work, Mary Ellen was, or was soon to be, pregnant with Wallis's child. While Haight seems nonplussed by Meredith's willingness to refer to Wallis in print without revulsion, Meredith's comments show—more than dispassion for Wallis or his wife—his thoroughgoing investment in the artwork itself. That is to say, it is not a 'warm tribute' to Wallis, but to Wallis's paintings, that Meredith offers. And this might be one of the more interesting aspects of Meredith's discussion of the visual arts in the *Westminster Review* that becomes clear if we abandon the idea that all Meredithian roads lead to his marital discord: he resists the role of art critic as interpreter and—when he does recourse to the paintings themselves as opposed to published art criticism—he tends to rest in a descriptive rather than an interpretive register.

In July 1857, for example, he takes on Ruskin's insistence on privileging the symbolism of a work's subject choices (in this case Millais's *Sir Isumbras at the Ford*). Ruskin intimated that Millais's painting, if better executed, might have expressed a deeper meaning, that the knight was 'the great Christian Angel of Death [...] bearing the two children within him across the calm river'.⁵⁶ Meredith writes, 'setting aside the symbolism, for which Mr. Ruskin has always such strong predilection, and which was certainly not the artist's leading idea when he painted it, however deeply the spell of his imagination has made

⁵⁴ Haight, 'George Meredith and the Westminster Review', pp. 4-5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁶ John Ruskin, *Notes on some of the Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy, and the Society of Painters in Water Colours* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1857), p.26.

it suggestive, there is, we are inclined to think, more poetry in the head of the old knight than in anything Millais has hitherto done'.⁵⁷ Oliphant worked against Ruskin's 'sourness', but Meredith objects to Ruskin's interpretive gestures, which he 'sets aside'. Rather than offering a totalising story or moral for the image, Meredith dwells in a description of the knight's head and suggests it already functions *as* a narrative:

That hard, grizzled head, rough with many a fight, getting grey with a full harvest of chivalrous labours, and its quick, far-glancing blue eye, that can be so terrible in battle, so tender to childhood—a rough, weather-beaten head, not possessing great qualities, perhaps but high knightly ones, ready for all enterprize in honour's behalf,—it is in itself a chapter of romance, and proves reaches in the artist's soul immeasurably surpassing anything else in the Academy.⁵⁸

There is 'more poetry in the head of the old knight'; his face is 'a chapter of romance'.

Though Meredith consistently resisted narrativizing images, he routinely employs such literary analogues to discuss the graphic arts, an interrelationship that is pushed to the fore in his discussion of illustrated poems.

On Moxon's seminal illustrated edition of Tennyson (1857), he grants the fundamental difference between the two media as a consequence of his prejudice:

'[Tennyson's] spell is on us, and it is in vain for Art to attempt to rival these vivid impressions. The wonder is that Messrs Millais, Hunt, and Rosetti (*sic*) have not failed more

⁵⁷ George Meredith, 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review* 68 (July 1857), p. 304.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Meredith retained this gleeful independence of sentiment. In a later, 1861 letter to Janet Ross, he writes of the year's exhibition at the Royal Academy, taking pride in the confidence of his dissenting sentiments: 'Leighton has a 'Paolo and Francesca', painted just as the book has dropped and they are in no state to read more. You would scorn it; but our friendship never rested on common sentiments in art. I greatly admire it. I think it the sole English picture exhibiting passion, that I have seen. I have the delight to stand alone in my judgment of this, as of most things, and I shall see the world coming round to my opinion, and thinking it its own?' Letter to Janet Ross, 17 May 1861. George Meredith, *The Letters of George Meredith*, ed. C. L. Cline, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), i.79. Meredith was actually not alone at all in this view. W. Michael Rossetti referred to the 'passionate poetry of Mr. Leighton' as represented by *Paolo e Francesca*. 'Style, Subject-Matter, and Successes in Art' [1861], in *Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1867), pp. 1-2.

signally and shocked our prejudiced views altogether'.⁵⁹ A few months before, Oliphant ventured that it might never be possible 'to make verses and pictures "to match" without sacrificing one of the united arts'.⁶⁰ Meredith, admitting his own biases, nevertheless works toward the independent sovereignty of poem and of image even as he uses visual language to describe literary works. Rossetti might '[improve] on Tennyson too much', but Meredith argues that 'if we forget the poetry his drawings affect to illustrate, and take them for what they are, we shall find that each one is a poem in itself, and despite the quaintness and excessive richness, a poem that we may cherish and enjoy, or we are beneath the artist's level'.⁶¹

Describing illustrations as 'poems' is one way that Meredith anticipates the Paterian approach to the arts that would be more fully developed by other, later writers, thinkers, and artists; another is his negotiation of the relationship between the arts and their depiction of contemporary life. Here he enters into a more direct dialogue with the writing of his predecessor, George Eliot, casting a different shade on the work that Realism can and should do (and, perhaps, casting a different shade on her criticism of his 'Belles Lettres' columns). In the first three of his four 'Belles Lettres' pieces, Meredith offers explicit praise for the work of William Holman Hunt. The most relevant counterpoint here is not Eliot's 'Belles Lettres', but rather her *cri de cœur* on 'The Natural History of German Life,' published in the *Westminster* less than a year before Meredith's first outing in the journal. Eliot famously turns German anthropological studies into an exemplar of the power of realist representation of the rural and the quotidian, yoking realist artistic conventions to her broadly conceived (and often cited) ethical imperative: 'a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves,

⁵⁹ George Meredith, 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review* 68 (October 1857), pp. 585-604 (p. 591).

⁶⁰ Oliphant, 'Picture Books', p. 309.

⁶¹ Meredith, 'Belles Lettres' (October 1857), p. 592.

which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment'.⁶² Those artworks that 'profess to represent people as they are' and fail to meet their goal pose a 'grave evil' through the 'unreality of their representations'.⁶³ The first artist Eliot takes to task is Hunt, whose *Hireling Shepherd* presents 'a landscape of marvellous truthfulness,' but which features a 'pair of peasants in the foreground who [are] not much more real than the idyllic swains and damsels of our chimney ornaments'.⁶⁴ Under Eliot's schema, Hunt's shepherd and shepherdess enjoying their verdant idyll threaten the important, serious work that art can and must do.

In his first *Belles Lettres* column—the same in which he defended Wallis's Chatterton against Edward Young's critique—Meredith pleads for the value of Holman Hunt's work. Whereas Eliot impugned Hunt's content choices as laughably *unrealistic*, Young found them too life-like, and wished instead that Hunt's *Scapegoat* should have a less realistic, more idealized background. Meredith argues contra Young that the painting's 'grandeur of desolation', the 'sense of having before you the actual scene', is 'infinitely more impressive than any idealism could convey'.⁶⁵ Ultimately, Meredith forwards an argument in strong favour of the blended naturalistic and imagistic representation that he felt was central to the Pre-Raphaelite project, which he endorsed wholeheartedly: 'We believe', he writes, 'that Pre-Raphaellitism (*sic*) will lead to a good and great English School of Art, and that it is our sole chance'.⁶⁶ While endorsing Realism à la Ruskin, Meredith nevertheless insists that it must be tempered with taste and cannot be wholly separated from idealism of subject, which need have no explicit connection to the banalities of the contemporary, but which must in turn be

⁶² George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review* 66 (July 1856), pp. 51-79 (p. 54).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ George Meredith, 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review* 67 (April 1857), 608.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

tempered with mastery of craft. The ethical drive or ameliorative return of these aesthetic choices simply does not arise in Meredith's review, an omission that says a great deal.

Continuing to refine these ideas, in his July 1857 'Belles Lettres' piece, Meredith chooses to review the rather unlikely *Handbook of the Gallery of British Paintings in the Art Treasures Exhibition*, which collected reviews originally published in the Manchester *Guardian*.⁶⁷ This guide is compelling because, Meredith opines, 'We have never seen the Pre-Raphaelites more justly dealt with'.⁶⁸ Earning particular notice is the volume's criticism on Holman Hunt's canvases, an assessment which is 'eulogistic without exaggeration and, brief though it may be, comprehensive'.⁶⁹ The guide's explication of Hunt's *Hireling Shepherd* stands in contrast to Eliot's assessment from the previous year, arguing that the painting rejects the very conventionality that Eliot admonished Hunt for embracing. Says the Manchester critic: 'The figures here may be too clownish for many tastes; but such rusticity is surely a thousand times better than the Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy prettiness of the rustic figures which most of our painters put into their pictures of country life. Here, too, in defiance of conventionality, the painter has represented healthy ruddy skin under sunlight, and will be charged with exaggeration for doing so'.⁷⁰ Meredith's endorsement these gallery notes pushes back against Eliot's critique of the same painting. Moreover, just as Meredith argues for a balance of naturalistic representation with the ideal, he praises the Manchester critic for retaining balance, neither 'belabouring' the Pre-Raphaelites with scornful abuse (as Meredith charges their critics) or heaping unwarranted praise upon them (as he charges their champions).

⁶⁷ [Anon.,] *A Handbook of the Gallery of British Paintings in the Art Treasures Exhibition: Being a Reprint of Notices Originally Published in the Manchester Guardian* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1857). Though now attributed to T. (likely Tom) Taylor, the book was uncredited upon publication and is uncredited in Meredith's review. For attribution see [Anon.,] 'Literature', *Morning Post* [London] 16 September 1857, 2. Meredith had known Taylor personally since years by this point. See *Letters*, ed. Cline, I, 29 n.1.

⁶⁸ Meredith, 'Belles Lettres', (July 1857), p.304.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

⁷⁰ [Anon.,] *A Handbook of the Gallery of British Paintings in the Art Treasures Exhibition: Being a Reprint of Notices Originally Published in the Manchester Guardian* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1857), p. 98.

In his October discussion of Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing*, a text designed to educate aspiring artists, Meredith extends this construction that links artistry to refined vision. The reader of Ruskin's manual 'will have his eye imperceptibly educated in nature. Learning to see things as they are, he is by gradual slow degrees taught to render them as they are to be rendered'.⁷¹ There is a distinction, then, made between seeing things 'as they are' and the technique used to render those things artistically. As for Meredith, he continues to render visual aesthetic discernment in literary terms, writing that Ruskin's reader 'is instructed [...] to read and to speak the language of Art, the language of earth and sky, and of the greatest who have breathed our breath'.⁷² Creation and appreciation of the visual arts thus requires a special, learned literacy.

Along with the ideas explored in his *Westminster* articles, this account, in which the literary signifies for the visual and vice versa, can be found in countless of Meredith's later works. To turn to one such example, the 'Essay on Comedy', Meredith's his greatest sustained work of literary criticism that was delivered first as a lecture in January of 1877 and published the following month. In the 'Essay', Meredith argues that too firm a grip on realist representation impinges upon, rather than facilitates, the bettering potential of comedy: the English middle class 'have a sentimental objection to face the study of the actual world. They take up disdain of it, when its truths appear humiliating: when the facts are not immediately forced upon them, they take up the pride of incredulity'.⁷³ Perhaps more to the point, throughout the 'Essay on Comedy', Meredith relies on metaphors of painting and the visual arts to describe the work of the literary arts; he campaigns for a highly mediated verisimilitude in the service of the Comedic impulse in terms that depend on both the

⁷¹ George Meredith, 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review* 68 (October 1857), pp. 585-604 (pp. 593-4).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 594.

⁷³ Meredith, 'The Idea of Comedy, and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit', *New Quarterly Magazine* 8 (January 1877), 1-40 (p. 9). Subsequent citations given in brackets in the text.

pictorial and the textual. Molière, whom Meredith credits with the greatest comic facility, ‘observed the manners of his age’ and gave ‘his characters the colour befitting them at the time’, ‘But he did not paint in raw realism’ (p. 6). The painterly is repeatedly invoked: Falstaff, Benedict, and Malvolio are ‘subjects of a special study in the Comic’, Shakespeare ‘might have turned to the painting of manners as well as humanity’ (p. 7). It is a metaphor he continues throughout the ‘Essay’, where dramatists ‘paint’ characters: ‘Millamant side by side with Célimène is an example of how far the realistic painting of a character can be carried to win our favour; and of where it falls short’ (p. 15); on Menander and Molière: ‘the foundation of their types is real and in the quick, but they painted with spiritual strength, which is the solid in Art’ (p. 19); ‘Priestly arrogance and unctuousness, and trickeries and casuistries, cannot be painted without our discovering a likeness in the long Italian gallery. Goldini sketched the Venetian manners of the decadence of the Republic with a French pencil, and was an Italian Scribe in style’ (p. 20); a modern French dramatist ‘has but painted form the life; he leaves his audience to the reflections of unphilosophic minds upon life, from the specimen he has presented in the bright and narrow circle of a spy-glass’ (pp. 39-40).

Oliphant and Eliot also invoke painterly metaphors in their literary criticism, but almost solely to note realist attributes.⁷⁴ Meredith adopts them to recapitulate the argument that an unfettered or unfiltered realism is insufficient to the aims of Comedy, and reaffirms the application of the vocabulary of the visual arts to literature and vice versa. It is an understanding of aesthetic engagement that amplifies the universal quality of making and apperceiving art across media. Attending to the painterly vocabulary in the ‘Essay’ foregrounds its connections to the aesthetic principles outlined in those prescient *Westminster* pieces: connections that alone justify greater study of the ‘Belles Lettres’. But that language also connects Meredith’s work—often considered so idiosyncratic as to be an outlier in its

⁷⁴ See Seidel, ‘Lady Art’.

time—to that of his contemporaries toiling in similar fields. It distinguishes his work from that of Oliphant and Eliot, and it links his philosophies of art to those of his Pre-Raphaelite compatriots and anticipates the fin-de-siècle artists who would look to Meredith as their own forebear.