George Meredith's reputation as a poet rests almost entirely on one extraordinary poem: "Modern Love," a frank and excruciating portrayal of a collapsed marriage in sixteen-line sonnets, a form of Meredith's own making. Arthur Symons captured the power of this sequence best when he described it as "an astonishing feat in the vivisection of the heart" (qtd. xxii). But the boldness and brilliance of "Modern Love" have put the rest of Meredith's poetry into shade. A few of his other poems are remembered here and there: his sonnet "Lucifer in Starlight" remains an anthology piece; "The Lark Ascending" sings at a distance through the music of Vaughan Williams; and very occasionally a critic braves "The Woods of Westermain." But none of these poems has anything like the following or critical exposure of "Modern Love." This is not unfair in itself, for "Modern Love" is unique in its time, in Meredith's corpus, and in English poetry as a whole. But the richness and originality of his other poetry are very rarely noticed.

This new edition is a welcome attempt to redress this imbalance and paint a fuller picture of Meredith as a poet. Rather than just editing "Modern Love" itself, Rebecca Mitchell and Criscilla Benford have edited the whole volume in which it was first published in 1862. As shown by the cumbersome title Meredith gave to his volume, it contains a lot more than his one famous poem. The original book falls into three main sections -- Modern Love, Roadside Philosophers, and Poems and Ballads -- preceded by two individual poems which, for reasons of his own, Meredith decided to exclude from any of these sections. The editors preserve this layout. By placing "Grandfather Bridgeman" and "The Meeting" at the beginning of the collection, they suggest, Meredith was essentially subdividing Poems of the English Roadside into these two poems on the one hand and, on the other, the four poems spoken by Roadside Philosophers (xxvii). But it is equally possible that he meant these two poems to be further examples of modern love.

Like the better-known and longer poem, they are experiments in handling the complex domestic relationships that form a major theme of Victorian realist fiction in verse. In a highly economical narrative of only twenty lines, "The Meeting" records a passing encounter between a young man and a young woman carrying her illegitimate baby -- literally passing, in that all they do is pass one another. But Meredith powerfully suggests a deep history as well as a subtlety of character behind this uneventful event, which--as the editors observe--is "a scene perfectly at home in a Thomas Hardy novel" (xxxi). It is surely a strong analogy for, even an influence on, the kind of poetry Hardy himself was writing in the mid-1860s, which he began to publish over thirty years later in Wessex Poems. "Grandfather Bridgeman" too is Hardyesque before the fact, in its structure and theme if not in its manner. The premise of this grimy ironic narrative is that the eponymous old man is regaling his extended family with news from a letter sent home from the Crimean War battlefront by his grandson Tom. Though the letter describes Tom's martial heroism, we also learn that since it was written he has been crippled by a cannon shot. When Tom's affluent lover Mary Charlworth comes with this sorry news, she finds herself unable to deliver it through the hail of mockery flung at her by his relations for having once turned him down. Instead of Mary's news, Tom himself is wheeled into the scene at the end of the poem. Once again, Meredith deftly suggests the back-story to his short and fast-paced narrative and handles his characters with a remarkable degree of insight.

The four poems spoken by the so-called Roadside Philosophers -- "Juggling Jerry," "The Old Chartist," "The Beggar's Soliloquy" and "The Patriot Engineer" -- expand on the issues of class and national identity that Meredith introduces in "Grandfather Bridgeman." Because of what was taken to be their "wholesome" representation of country life (qtd. xxviii), original readers of the collection consistently liked its Roadside poems best. Today their sprightly verse implies an ironizing of received political and social opinions: an ironizing that Meredith's philosophical paupers themselves are well aware of. The final section of the collection is the most eclectic, as its loose title acknowledges. It ranges from incisive and poignant personal lyrics thrown off from the whirling progress and breakdown of his marriage to Mary Peacock Nicholls, through mythological and medieval narratives and playful fantasies shared with his friends, to the magnificently Romantic "Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn." Though each poem is distinct, each is also uniquely Meredithian in its manner and could not have been written by any other Victorian poet. Unlike the poetry of Swinburne, Arnold, or even Browning (for all his masterful impersonations), Meredith's poetry does not speak with a characteristic voice, at least not until the 1880s, which may be one reason why readers of "Modern Love" have often not progressed to the quite different poems that come after it. But if his poetry lacks a characteristic voice, it nonetheless speaks with an uncompromised roughness, an idiosyncratic knottiness of expression that is driven through furrows of irregular meter (though his metrics remain agile and precise) and
that can be felt across almost all of his poems. A taste for Meredith's poetry can be difficult to acquire. Rough on the palate, his poems take some struggling with. But they give us a kind of pleasure we cannot draw from anything else in the received canon of Victorian poetry, and the pleasure too of keeping company with one of the period's liveliest and most challenging artists and intellects.

It is excellent, then, that readers can now get to know one of Meredith's richest collections of poems afresh. This edition will give students and scholars a new perspective on "Modern Love" itself by restoring it to its original publication context and indeed its original text, which has been largely superseded by Meredith's revised edition of 1892 (thirty years after the original one). At the same time, this new edition will introduce many more of his poems to new readers. In reprinting the 1862 collection as a whole, rather than selecting poems written at various points in Meredith's career, the editors inevitably isolate one phase of his poetry, excluding many poems that also deserve more exposure, such as those he published in the 1880s. But this is a legitimate editorial choice that pays its own dividends. It lets us focus in depth on Meredith as a poet in the early 1860s and on this collection as a book in its own right, as it appeared to its original readers. There are other benefits too. For the first time since they were originally published, we can now read "By the Rosanna" and the "Ode" in their original forms, rather than in the cut-down versions Meredith prepared for subsequent editions. Whether or not this will please new readers is debatable, but for anyone interested in the original versions it certainly beats having to flip back and forth between the poems and the textual notes in the standard -- and excellent -- critical edition by Phyllis Bartlett.

In editing the poems themselves, Mitchell and Benford have scrupulously traced variations between the manuscripts and the printed text, and have also recorded Meredith's subsequent revisions. The introduction and chronology set up the collection very effectively. The explanatory notes are mostly helpful too, though they err on the side of the obvious, particularly in pointing out plot elements which readers should have the pleasure of picking up for themselves. On one hand, "Modern Love" is notoriously crabbed, and though we should have to struggle somehow to understand it, we also need some exegetical help. But since "Grandfather Bridgeman" is not a difficult poem, we don't need to be told, several stanzas after we could have deduced it for ourselves, that "Mary, it seems, rejected Tom as a suitor before he went off to war" (8). Besides such redunancies, the contexts sections of this edition -- the original illustrations and the early reviews -- are unproblematic and very welcome, as this material formed a part of the reception of Meredith's poems themselves. But moving beyond these two categories means sampling what George Eliot called "that tempting range of relevancies called the universe." (Middlemarch, Chapter 15). Under four headings (Advice Manuals and Social Commentary, On the Senses, Nineteenth-Century Poetics, and Other Poetry), Mitchell and Benford offer texts ranging from the unfamiliar and intriguing to the predictable, even hackneyed. One the one hand, John Paget's essay on "The English Law of Divorce" (1856) is a gem, as are the three extracts from books on the senses and Gerald Massey's essay on spasmodic poetry. On the other hand, while Mill's Subjection of Women is immensely important, it is also a standard point of reference that does not need to be excerpted here, especially as it was not published until long after Meredith's poem. Likewise, Ruskin's Sesame and Lilies and Patmore's Angel in the House are tiresomely ubiquitous as examples of Victorian domestic ideology.

Even if these texts were not overfamiliar, they would still emphasize particular poems--and particular aspects of those poems -- at the expense of others. Though this edition ostensibly aims to win a wider hearing for the less well-known poems it contains, the contextual material chiefly applies to "Modern Love." Even when the editors link their extracts to other poems, they do so to bring those poems into dialogue with "Modern Love" rather than to contextualize them in their own right. For "Grandfather Bridgeman," for instance, there is no material on the Crimean War, and to illuminate the Roadside poems there is nothing on mid-Victorian vagrancy. Other poems are treated little better. In their introduction, the editors rightly complain that Meredith's poems grounded in old legends -- including "Cassandra," "The Head of Bran," and "Shemselnihar," -- have been "woefully ignored in critical treatments of Meredith's verse" (xliii). But aside from reprinting these poems, the editors do nothing to help us re-examine them.

Furthermore, the poems chosen to exemplify "Other Poetry" in the contextual section consist entirely of sonnets and novelistic poems on modern relationships, and even within these categories the selection is odd. While including late Victorian poems that are analogous in different ways to "Modern Love" -- Christina Rossetti's "Monna Innamorata" and Hopkins's "Harry Ploughman" -- the editors exclude poems directly influenced by it, such as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's Love Sonnets of Proteus and Rosa Newmarch's Horae Amoris. Other omissions are equally curious. While the introduction strongly argues that "Modern Love" should be read in the context of spasmodic poetry, the contexts section includes no excerpts from spasmodic poems. While the editors briefly mention Meredith's connection to the Pre-Raphaelites, they include no Pre-Raphaelite poetry either, even though Swinburne was one of Meredith's champions (included here is Swinburne's defense of his volume against R.H. Hutton's critique of it), and Meredith himself acknowledges Gabriel Rossetti as his master in poetry. The "Other Poetry" of Meredith's time, then, could have revealed the similarities between "Modern Love" and Rossetti's "House of Life" sonnets, or shown Meredith's influence on Swinburne's own Poems and Ballads, or the affinities between Meredith's manner and Morris's in The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems, which, like Meredith's collection itself, was identified as a poetic analogue to the eccentricities of Pre-Raphaelite painting. The editors effectively link "Modern Love" to recent developments in the study of the senses within the new field of scientific psychology in the 1850s, but they nowhere note that critics have also extensively read Meredith's poetry, including both nature poems such as the "Ode" and "Modern Love" itself, in the light of his interest in evolutionary theory.
None of this is to deny that readers may gain from the contexts section perspectives on Meredith’s poetry that they might otherwise have missed. But a selection of contexts such as these will inevitably prejudice subsequent scholarship. As a test case in editing a scholarly edition of an important but neglected collection of poetry, this edition is very welcome in itself, strong for its edition of the text, and largely effective in its representation of the poems themselves. But it illustrates too the misdirections editors can give when they place contextual materials alongside texts in scholarly editions.

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