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### Theme and Metaphor in *Diana of The Crossways*

The novel, Lionel Stevenson has suggested, attained its maturity in 1859. With the publication in that year of *Adam Bede* and *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, George Eliot and Meredith “share the credit of endowing English fiction with artistic and intellectual self-respect.”<sup>1</sup> Whereas the popular novel had depicted a narrative in which characters pursued their somewhat pointless careers, haphazardly and largely for the sake of the story, the serious novel, in the hands of such authors as George Eliot, Meredith, and Henry James, became (in James’ phrase) “genuinely philosophic”. It attempted either to create a meaningful ordering of experience or to project a poetic vision of reality. Only with the publication of *Middlemarch* (1871-72), a work of vast philosophical and sociological intention, did the English novel perhaps attain fully deserved “self-respect”.

The case for George Meredith, as the first significantly poetic novelist who also endeavored to insert philosophy and social commentary into his works, is more precariously uncertain. One’s temptation with Meredith is to respect the philosophical intention and the poetic splendor of the language, but to come away from him with a sense that, for all the polish and brilliance of his wit and style, the actual substance is less than fully impressive. Meredith’s achievement is flawed, perhaps irretrievably, by a self-consciously pretentious pose of the controlling author artfully intervening in the action, telling us in his mannered way the meaning of a particular situation. He will not allow an action to speak for itself. In *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), his first novel to obtain popular success, Meredith describes, for example, an interview between Lady Dunstane and Lady Wathin, and concludes with this comment: “How sadly pale and worn poor Mr. Warwick appeared! The portrayal of his withered visage to Lady Dunstane had quite failed to gain a show of sympathy. And so it is ever with your book-worm women pretending to be philosophical! You sound them vainly for a

manifestation of the commonest human sensibilities. They turn over the leaves of a Latin book on their laps while you are supplicating them to assist in a work of charity!"<sup>2</sup>

Meredith's considerable achievements in the art of fiction are vitiated by equally considerable qualifications and limitations. The problem exemplified in the quoted passage reduces itself to a problem of style and tone, to the question of whether a personal mannerism and a specific technical strategy become so obtrusive as to overburden the plot with an unnecessary panoply of words, images, and philosophical comment. If style is indeed the man, then the possibility exists that we can become so insistently aware of George Meredith that our awareness of the dramatic action is obscured; the illusion is shattered and we are left with a narrative whose poetic texture and patterns of imagery constitute the dominant impression.

This paper will suggest, by using *Diana of the Crossways* as an example, that Meredith's chief quality is stylistic; that the intellectual content of the novel may be found in the metaphoric action depicting, and at the same time paralleling, the main theme. The texture of the prose—mannered, idiosyncratic, persistently eccentric in tone and structure—is composed of recurring images and metaphors, creating several consistent patterns of imagery by which the thematic intention is sustained and imaginatively transformed. The main theme enriched by metaphoric emphases concerns the problem of a spirited and intelligent woman whose attempt to live apart from her husband, a dull and wretched creature, places her in an equivocal and insupportable position. Diana Warwick cries aloud for her freedom from a "bitter marriage, joyless in all its chapters", a marriage which she sees as an "imprisonment" [114]. "And give me freedom! That was the secret in her heart. She had struck on the hope for the detested yoke to be broken at any cost" [111]. When Redworth replies that he "won't talk commonplaces about the world, . . . We can none of us afford to have it against us", he suggests the basic social conflict around which the thematic and metaphoric intensities gather, and which projects Meredith's primary dramatic intention.

Meredith displays a weakness for metaphors, for metaphorical language that proliferates and finally exists almost independently of the narrative. "Metaphors", he remarks, "were Diana's refuge. Metaphorically she could allow her mind to distinguish the struggle she was undergoing, sinking under it. The banished of Eden had to put on metaphors, and the common use of them has helped largely to civilize us. The sluggish in intellect detest them. . . ." [275]. Poetic language, in other words, allows the perceptive mind to grasp more intensely the reality of human experience, while at the same time removing the sting

from life's feverish struggle even as it exemplifies the imaginative transcendence by which the "banished of Eden" assert their necessary birthright. Metaphors are both refuge and commitment: refuge from the banality of unintellectual existence, and commitment especially to the ritual rather than to the actual battle which constitutes for Diana the essential experience of love. Poetic imagery also lends dignity and universal significance to Diana's protest against the "manacles" which bind her to her husband, and especially to her experience of physical revulsion, the "loathings roused by her marriage" [133] into which she had been precipitated, paradoxically, by the fear created in her by Sir Lukin Dunstane's advances. But the metaphors of battle and of the hunt, and the imagery of the ocean of passion into which Diana is tempted to fall, are obvious statements of the narrative situation that confronts Meredith's heroine; they lack the complexity and subtlety of compressed meaning that would expand the literary significance of Diana's experience. One often has the sense while reading *Diana of the Crossways* that the metaphorical structure obtrudes too conspicuously into the narrative, that Meredith has failed to combine perfectly theme and image into a meaningful whole. Yet the impression remains, I think, that the pattern of imagery conveys, not altogether unsuccessfully, an alternative statement of the thematic significance of Diana's endeavor to gain economic and spiritual independence. The double perspective, surely, cannot lessen the artistic, as opposed to the "literal" importance of that effort; it can only enhance the special emphasis that the formal organization of the novel inevitably places upon it.

Metaphorical language, then, is a consciously employed aspect of Meredith's technique, and confirms our sense that he intends to create a symbolic situation that deepens the tragic effect of Diana's struggle to be herself. The specific situation in which Diana finds herself, one which evokes the position of all women in a masculine society, is represented by the profusion of military images with which the narrative is filled: a profusion so conspicuous as to suggest that indeed Diana's struggle with the world is a battle to be won or lost. She is involved in a war of the sexes, a war, that on the male side, is "Ottoman war," seeming so to her because her experience has been confined to the social class that is "primitively venatorial still"[10]. Among the "valiant few" forming the "vanguard", Diana believes that women can escape from their "old prison-nest" of mental stagnation by breaking down [13-14] the walls that surround them. When Redworth finally finds Diana at The Crossways, seeking to prevent her flight from the hounding dogs in England, he remembers that Emma had once des-

cribed her nostrils as those of a "war-horse": as such he views her as one "now beset by battle" [105].

Images of battle and conflict continually reflect the nature of society, and of Diana's relationship to both Dacier and Redworth; they are part of her thoughts and conversations, adding an astringency that sharpens the reader's awareness of life's injustices. Isolated in a male-dominated society and determined to resist the impulses of the "reptile" tendencies in her nature, Diana defiantly declares, emphatically and repeatedly, that " 'Women have to fight' " [52]. She therefore commits herself to the fortunes of war, insisting that " 'It is a battle for women everywhere' " [231], especially amidst the gentlemanly class. In that society the unscrupulous male, by a "bully imposition of sheer physical ascendancy", achieves his triumphs by "assault or siege" and a woman, confronted by this particular brand of "heroes", is "cryingly a weak one". But Diana resists the temptation, though not with entire consistency, to rely conventionally on male support. When Dacier tries to protect her alone without her maid, urgently desiring to accompany her back to London after her all-night vigil beside Lord Dannisburgh's body, she rejects the chivalrous attentions that would restrict her sense of freedom and insists that he need not " 'wear armour and plumes to proclaim' " [231] his knightly attributes: an imagistic and ironic anticipation of Diana's (and Dacier's) later betrayal of the knightly ideal when he stirs the "reptile" in her.

At this point the main theme and the imagery that reinforces it merge into an integrated pattern that triumphantly expresses Diana's sexual frustration. Although she finds more unselfish chivalry among the lower classes than in the "knightly class", Diana still desires a knight who will imaginatively and spiritually liberate her from the prison-house of sexuality. She regards life with her husband as a "dungeon to her nature deeper than any imposed by [the] present conditions" of a year-long separation from Dacier, and tells her "poor dungeoned self" to "take up your burden for armour!" [316]: she requires the "living image" of a pure, spiritualized knight whose "radiant knightliness" [320] she can worship. But Dacier's effort to be a chastely perfect knight is never fully successful, and he finally degrades her self-respect by snatching a kiss from her. Declaring that he is after all "flesh and blood", he receives the reply, " 'You drive me to be ice and door-bolts!' " [363]: an antithesis between sacred and profane love that sets up the basic conflict within the character of Diana, a contrast that ultimately forces the catastrophe when Dacier again embraces her on that climactic night when he reveals a political secret to her. Diana then feels that she has all but become his "paramour". Angrily he cries out that she is the only woman he wants to



marry, but he can't have her; to which she replies that he has her in soul. But " 'Body and soul, it must be!' ", Dacier insists, and goes on to say that he believes her made without "fire". The catastrophe is inevitable, for Diana with her fear of sex and marriage seeks to live aloof from earth and blood. Too often she tries to remain in her "armour—triple brass!" [365], believing that the flesh can only live when infused with the spirit: " 'Our battle is ever between spirit and flesh' " [13]. The imagery of knights and combat, suggesting the conflict between the Galahad ideal and social necessity, also emphasizes the central importance of Diana's struggle to find the proper relationship between body and soul.

Unlike Dacier, who admires her character more than her soul, Redworth scarcely ever wavers in his devotion. He may be a man of "calculation", a man of railroads and industrial progress, not at all the romantic knight whom Diana can adore with spiritual exaltation; but he recognizes, as Dacier does not, that the "difference between appetite and love" is when a man can admit the possibility of blemish, and still continue to worship. Always a realist, never falsifying the reality of Diana's ambiguous and fearful situation, he recognizes the truth that Diana must finally accept, that we are all "begrimed and must be cleansed for presentation daily on our passage through the miry ways", a truth that the intolerant Dacier is incapable of perceiving. Redworth believes in the soul of Diana because its "flame" had come of "the agony of [her] flesh", and was beyond all baser accidents. Her soul "burned" with a celestial radiance, and whatever the errors she may have committed, he looks upon it as something sublime: a soul, in fact, that always possesses the possibility of "growth in purification" [420]. Blazing as the light of spiritual suns illuminating man's aspirations for purity and imaginative exaltation, fire suggests the burning away of the dross and mire of a hunted life amidst society's intolerant persecutions. Purification by washing away the dirt and the scandal in sulphur-flames, in the hell of a tortured conscience, and striving to achieve happiness, not by the senses, but " 'through the senses' ", is an important theme of *Diana of the Crossways*: that purificatory rite involves the death of the senses [429], an act in which the essence of happiness is gained through spiritual discipline. Through fire and suffering there is gain, for by the end of the novel Diana has equitably joined passion and imagination still in the warring world, her marriage to Redworth sanctified by "grey-toned reason" [487].

An important extension of the main theme concerns the education of Diana: her gradual increase of knowledge and experience in the social world, and her painfully slow growth of insight into the nature of reality. This theme is expressed by Diana herself, in conversation

with Emma; she no longer wants to be a " 'drawing-room exotic' " and exclaims: " 'Let me be independent! Besides, I begin to learn something of the bigger world outside the one I know . . . But I am taken with a passion for reality' " [139]. Too often she equates reality with imaginative and ecstatic experience, with the life of books and air and light, and the soul of man: her admiration for Lord Dannisburgh derives from her perception of his luminous soul. One aspect of the theme, therefore, depicts Diana's search for an ethereal radiancy of belief whereby she can undergo continual growth in spiritual freedom. By the end of the book, after her brutal rejection by Dacier, whom she associates with the glory and the spirituality she had experienced on the Lugano heights, Diana conceives of reality no longer in terms of that romantic sentimentalism which made her exalt the military profession, but as a world of practical, earthly feeling and emotion invariably associated with Redworth, the man of rigid principles. Redworth helps to destroy her ethereal mood, the destruction of which provides an essential thematic movement: she passes from the perusal of the eternal in nature to an understanding of the "dusty temporary of the world" [435], to a simple knowledge of the habits, tricks, and kinds of birds, and of the nature of trees, plants, and herbs.

Diana's attempt to attain full self-knowledge of her own reality puts her into conflict with the reality of the "bigger world", whose conventional pretenses and materialistic values are well represented by her dying husband. Various references to "the old monster world" [442] suggest one of the most important of the recurring images associated with the "world": that of the pack of hunting dogs in full cry after its defenseless quarry, the "hunted hare". Every woman has in her, as a result of her education, something of the hare when the hounds are in full cry, and even the bravest are compelled to run [89]. Early in the novel, when the rumors begin to circulate about Diana's marital difficulties and her connection with Lord Dannisburgh, Emma perceives in Sir Lukin that the "old Dog-world was preparing to yelp on a scent. He of his nature belonged to the hunting pack, and with a cordial feeling for the quarry, he was quite with his world in expecting to see her run, and readiness to join the chase" [75]. When Diana retires to The Crossways to nurse her Aunt for several months, "The world ceased barking"; but the "fork-tongued world" had not forgotten, and when she and Mr. Warwick return to London, "the cry revived. Stories of Lord D. and Mrs. W. whipped in hot pursuit" [76-77]. Even Redworth is distracted by the rumors, and questions the extent to which she had been indiscreet, for he understands that a "woman doubted by her husband, is always, and even to her champions in the first hours of the noxious rumour, ... a creature of the

wilds, marked for our ancient running . . . . The doubt casts her forth, the general yelp drags her down; she runs like the prey of the forest under spotting branches; . . . .” [106]. Symbolic of the howling dogs is Lady Wathin, the stalwart defender of middle-class virtue, whose attacks combine with the shock to Diana’s spiritual aspirations of her learning the nature of husbands (“ ‘How brutal men can be!’ ”, 51) to increase her self-knowledge of herself as “hare, serpent, tigress!” [115]. Thoughts of reconciliation with her husband make her “tigrish” [204], and she exhibits the “fangs and teeth, with the eyes burning over them [55] of her tigress-self as she suffers the “reptile” advances of Sir Lukin Dunstane. The pervasive animal imagery makes vividly complex her human nature that otherwise, on the narrative level, would appear simply one more Victorian stereotype of the pure woman, fearful of sexual entanglement.

Diana only reluctantly will admit that her womanly nature displays moral as well as physical weakness. She is both strong as a tiger and morally fragile as a butterfly, a conjunction of antithetical allusions that significantly appears in Diana’s letter to Emma announcing her intention of fleeing from England’s “dog-world”: some day, she writes, an old woman may return to hear of a “butterfly Diana, that had her day and disappeared” [86]. At the same moment, however, she fiercely and defiantly insists that the “tigress” part of her nature—“all fire and smoke”—wants to fly England’s shores with a lover. The confession thematically anticipates her later departure from England and her meeting with Dacier in Cairo, and even more significantly at Lugano and Caen: at the latter place especially her “butterfly” nature almost fails to resist the deepest urgings of her passion. Although her instinct is all for flight and freedom, she is held back by Redworth’s perfect confidence in her. She cries aloud, “ ‘My freedom!’ feeling as a butterfly flown out of a box to stretches of sunny earth beneath spacious heavens” [114]. The butterfly flies to earth, not to heaven, even as Diana will eventually forget her beloved Lugano heights by marrying the earth-bound Redworth. The butterfly is a symbol of freedom, a freedom so fragile and elusive that her marriage seems now more than ever an “imprisonment” from which she can hardly hope to escape. The butterfly image, therefore, further emphasizes that Diana as “butterfly” has but slight opportunity to attain either freedom or personal identity in opposition to the world’s opinion. The image rounds out the figurative description of Diana’s situation, its defenses and its weaknesses. The poetry almost supplants the literal narrative as the primary thematic statement.

The prominence of high cliffs and mountains as of the ocean itself emphasizes both the danger and the attraction which social isolation

involves. Cast by her husband into the "arena of the savage claws" [116], Diana must struggle not only against the watchdogs of social conformity, but especially with the impulses of her own heart; for she "was not passionless: the blood flowed warm" [255]. Temptation confronts her both at Caen and in London when she plans to elope with Dacier. In both incidents, either by the exercise of her own "butterfly" will or the unconscious agency of Redworth, she surmounts the momentary inclination to submit. This constant temptation to succumb is rendered poetically by the image of the precipice overhanging the sea, a symbol of her continual tendency to fall into the sea of passion. But self-recognition comes slowly to Diana. Shortly before her encounter with Dacier on the beach at Caen, she had visited Emma and they discussed *The Young Minister of State*, obviously modelled on the Hon. Percy Dacier. Emma ascertained that Diana's "heart plainly was free and undisturbed" [244]. Diana's apparent freedom from passion is poetically expressed in the image of the land and the sea: "She stood on land: she was not on the seas". But immediately Meredith metaphorically defines the dangers to which she is exposed, and the fact of her own self-deception: "She stood on land, it was true, but she stood on a cliff of the land, the seas below and about her; and she was enabled to hoodwink her friend because the assured sensation of her firm footing deceived her own soul, even while it took short flights to the troubled waters. Of her firm footing she was exultingly proud. She stood high, close to danger, without giddiness" [244]. This is a very exact image of Diana's situation, and suggests in poetic terms her pride and isolation, as well as her precarious moral and social position. The image of the sea of passion relates directly to the poetic description of Dacier's advances at Caen and emphasizes symbolically as well as dramatically Diana's dual nature: "A little outburst of frenzy to a reputedly handsome woman could be treated as the froth of a passing wave" [259], since she still has perfect assurance of her ability to resist danger.

After the encounter at Caen and the temptation which they both felt, Diana begins to suspect the dangers which her love for Dacier has made more imminent; for she is now like one who "has dropped from a precipice to the midway ledge over the abyss, where caution of the whole sensitive being is required for simple self-preservation" [258]. She is impelled towards the precipice by the internal passion of the "blood" and the external forces of the world's inhumanity. Frightened and tempted, she tries to get back to safe ground away from the deceptive seas of passion, wanting to embrace the hard earth, even as she eventually finds refuge in the arms of Redworth. But she still

deceives herself in supposing that she can escape from the reality of the sexual instinct by flying "in soul to her heights" [259].

Amidst Alpine heights, therefore, both theme and image achieve a rare success, for they become inseparably one: the mountain scenery near Lugano appropriately and naturally evokes the spiritual ecstasies that express one aspect of Diana's repressed nature. Paradoxically Diana is also a "foam-born Goddess" [311] of the leaping waters: not simply chaste or simply immoral, but a complex character mysterious in her changeable demeanor towards both Dacier and Redworth, Diana at Lugano seems to Dacier to possess "the secret of lake waters under rock, unfathomable in limpidness" [117]. She is both nymph and Goddess, finding her pleasure amidst the rocky heights near Lugano, standing thoughtfully beside the cool waters of a sheltered pool early in the morning when Dacier comes upon her: such a woman must be as clear as day. Her love of the cool waters of Lugano suggests the purity and innocence which contrast with the sea of sexual passion into which she almost falls. The sexual meanings attaching to the image of ocean waters gradually become more chastely ethereal as Diana casts her thoughts upward to her beloved Lugano. The sexual impulse is metaphorically spiritualized by the contrast, a contrast that emphasizes the close relationship between body and soul.

Diana seeks a spiritual transformation of her whole being in order to exist independently of the "horrid blood-emotions" [450], in pure and remote isolation from the material necessities of life. Even before her final compromise she tries to avoid even "short flights to the troubled waters" of sexual involvement by drawing on "her treasury of impressions of the mornings at Lugano—her loftiest, purest, dearest" [244]. Memories of Lugano always restore her fatigued or disillusioned spirits, and serve even to inspire her failing literary talent. After the heartache and weariness of her lawsuit, she had travelled with the Esquarts to Italy, and at Lake Lugano, facing "celestial" Monta Rosa, she is reawakened, "after the trance of a deadly draught, to the glory of the earth. . .". She identifies herself with nature, becoming bird, flower, and flowing river, the sense of oneness and wholeness engendering a "strange pure ecstasy" [171-72] of the senses. The experience is magical, for she even fancies herself risen from the dead; and mystical, for the sense of rapture comes in waves, flooding her being with the "Freedom to breathe, gaze, climb, grow with the grasses, fly with the clouds, to muse, to sing, to be an unclaimed self . . ." [173]. Diana is reborn to a sense of life's beauty, experiencing an ecstatic illumination of her whole being in which time and space are simultaneously present to her, and she can discover a transfigured self in the radiant beams reflected from the Salvatore. That rapturous mood becomes asso-

ciated with her creative work, still in its flourishing state, as she writes to Emma that her pen is the secret means by which she communicates with the "highest, grandest, holiest between earth and heaven" [204]. Meredith is therefore suggesting by the comparison that the creative act, like the walks under the dawn at Lugano, is a spiritually liberating force that transforms the whole personality, and is itself the result of a spiritual freedom uncorrupted by practical necessities. As Diana becomes more entangled in her financial difficulties, her creative powers rapidly diminish; and presumably, when she marries the practical Redworth, that writing inspired by the air and the heights of Lugano will also cease.

Diana is not without a suspicion, moreover, that her spiritual ecstasies at Lugano have largely a sensual origin. When, for example, she is almost ready to flee with Dacier to the Continent, she feels an "anguish of humiliation" that "smote her to a sense of drowning", causing her to wonder if the "poetic ecstasy on her Salvatore heights" had sprung, not from a divine origin but from the "reddened sources she was compelled to conceal" [276]. And in the crisis of self-knowledge that accompanies her act of betrayal, Diana finally understands that she has been "weak as the weakest", a "vile" weakness she had endeavored to conceal by her intellectual pretenses. Dacier's embrace has exposed "me to myself, as well as to him, the most ordinary of reptiles" [371]. There we have the real reason for Diana's betrayal of Dacier's political secret: he had made her aware of her woman's softness, which she can no longer idealize, and she calls herself "snake" as a "delicious run of fire" [383] courses through her veins. Diana has to emerge from the darkness of illusion and self-deception into the "healthy, open, practical, cheering life" [449] represented by Redworth, who thrives in the light of day, before her education is sufficiently advanced for her to accept the natural life encompassing both body and soul. The novel's structure derives from that contrast, figuratively conveyed by the contrasting imagery of animalistic impulses, the reptilian and reddened claws of the "dog-world", and the meaning associated with the Salvatore heights. Diana's head may be lost amidst the airy clouds of spiritual chastity and self-delusion, but around her feet crowd the reptiles of sensual reality.

Another pair of contrasting images, equally functional in developing the theme of duality concerns the differing effects of Copsley and London on Diana's growth. She always regains her composure at Copsley, the home of her friend and of "air, light, books" [53], and a symbolic contrast to the smokey environment of London, the world of "savage claws". It is an invigorating, life-giving place surrounded by "glorified woods" on so commanding a height that "So much of the

heavens and of earth is rarely granted to a dwelling" [45]. In London, Diana may be a "metropolitan hack!" [209], thrice harnessed when she thought herself free, but at Copsley with her beloved Emma she is as a radiant queen, a "spirit leaping and shining like a mountain water" [79].

Diana finally discovers, after the return of health, that the heights of Copsley are too conducive to an over-active imagination, preventing her from seeing realistically and accurately. Partly so that she may be free of unregulated fancy she takes lodging, significantly not in London but in the South valley below the heights, where her illusions can be dispelled by undecorated matter-of-fact. It is near her cottage in the valley, when walking with Redworth down from Copsley, that Diana symbolically and literally accepts him and all that he stands for. She surrenders the citadel she had tenaciously defended, and prepares to resume the "shackles" with equanimity and a clearer perception of the impossibility of existing as she had wished always on the heights. One cannot exist for long in the void of spiritual exaltation.

Diana, then, gradually comes to love Redworth: at which point the war of sexes seems "silly". Redworth, just before they are married, seizes her passionately, and a "big storm-wave caught her from shore and whirled her out to mid-sea", and she forgets all sensations but the "swimming one of her loss of self in the man" [483]. She becomes a whole woman, no longer at war with herself, with that "reptile" [48] of pleasure of which she had earlier been ashamed. She now represents the love that is a "finer shoot of the tree stoutly planted in good gross earth; the senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction". She has successfully passed between the "ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools" [420-21]. In other words, Diana discovers, in one of the educational themes of the novel, that she must avoid both the churning oceans of physical passion and the ethereal clouds of spiritual isolation; that she must accept both aspects of man's nature, the "blood" and the "reptile" side as well as the spiritual, and that, in Emma's words, her business is "to accept life as we have it" [478]. The experiences that Diana undergoes, however much they may depend on external circumstances of social convention, have therefore taught her that real transformations are internal: they involve self-recognition. She finally realizes that "she was not of the snows which do not melt", and thereby gains greater compassion and tenderness for women [437]; a concession that refers not only to her sexual nature but also to the weakness of her character, the betrayal of Dacier that grew out of her sense of degradation and friendlessness.



Diana's acceptance of Redworth can only be achieved after the cathartic experience of her betrayal of Dacier. This central episode, by puncturing her "bubble" of romantic illusion, imparts other meanings to the image of the "world". The " 'world . . . is a blundering machine upon its own affairs, but a cruel sleuth-hound to rouse in pursuit' " [349]: the two image-patterns are conjoined, suggesting further that the "world" is solely practical and coldly inanimate, indifferent to the Dianas who become its " 'lawful game' ". The helpless prey can be killed as well by the "blundering machine" as by the pursuing dogs. Society becomes impersonal, a "machine" supplying the animal world's appetite, and marriage, especially to a man who is a "blind wall" [157], can only be a part of civilization's "clumsy machinery" [162]. Diana, therefore, cannot accept Redworth's living reality until the world's "machinery" partly claims some of her allegiance: a complex allegiance, indeed, since Redworth's wealth derives from railroad investments.

As Diana contemplates the prospect of betraying Dacier, she sees the visionary figure of Mr. Tonans petrified by her great news; with the "rumble of his machinery about him" and situated amidst the "very furnace-hissing of Events" [369], he evokes a hint of her imminent damnation. In "Vulcan's smithy" the secret "boiling" [372] within her is betrayed, and Danvers, remaining in an outer room, loses the sense of her sex and becomes "an object—a disregarded object" [374]; presumably Diana too shares her maid's sense of being treated, not as a lady, but as a machine without feelings or aspirations. Her betrayal of Dacier makes her a part of the world. She no longer breathes the spiritual air of Lugano, and her attempt to live independently of conventional standards has indeed dashed her to fragments, the possibility of which she is but dimly aware during the act of betrayal. She learns, indeed, when Dacier icily rejects her, that she has fallen from the precipice, not into the sea of passion, but into the murky world of "mean material acts" [382]. That she does not at first understand her failure to restore her balance and the extent of her perfidy suggests the obvious conclusion: she must pass through the purgatorial fires of illness and spiritual revival before she can be sufficiently educated to the nature of the real world to be a worthy mate for Redworth. She experiences a rebirth at Copsley and in her cottage in the South Valley. At the latter place the "Salvatore high raptures" no longer seem preferable to Redworth's devotion; and "As for her superlunary sphere, it was in fragments" [486]. The Salvatore heights, and that which they represented imaginatively and spiritually, are no longer the ideal for which Diana had suffered the knowledge of how to live in the valleys of the world.

Meredith's novelistic method involves, therefore, the extensive use of imagery; it is integral to his "poetic" view of reality. Without recurring patterns of imagery, and the extra-dimensional sense of complexity they impart to the narrative, the texture of *Diana of the Crossways* would be considerably less dense with meanings; the absence of a double-vision would dull the otherwise sharp focus of the novel's intention, to portray the failure of an idealistic young woman to live on the heights of spiritual independence. By trying to live in the world and yet to avoid entangling herself in its "machinery", Diana learns the inevitable fact that the "hunted hare" must in the end come to terms with its pursuers. Were the imagery absent from the novel and the narrative level conspicuously the primary interest, the story would concern a young woman's efforts to live apart from a disagreeable husband and to earn her own living. It would be a "fictional" history of the Hon. Caroline Norton. But Meredith universalizes his themes and establishes a poetic statement about the nature of reality by evoking metaphoric equivalents of the novel's several themes. That poetic statement, running in counterpoint to the plot, provides the main literary and intellectual interest of *Diana of the Crossways*.

## NOTES

1. Lionel Stevenson, *The Ordeal of George Meredith* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), p. 60.
2. George Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways* (London: Constable, 1910), p. 241. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Gary Harrington

### The Con-Artist in *The Wild Palms*

Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* has generally been considered to be as puzzling as it is disturbing. Although recent commentary, notably Thomas McHaney's "*The Wild Palms*": *A Study*,<sup>1</sup> has helped eradicate that earlier misconception of the novel as a gratuitous fusion of two essentially autonomous stories, it remains true that on a first reading the radical juxtaposition of "Wild Palms" and "Old Man" is calculated to produce surprise, mystification, and even shock. The abruptness of the transitions between the two stories, the stark immediacy of the departure from traditional narrative, compel the reader to search for correspondences, for meanings, which elude immediate comprehension. In a sense, the reader is thereby obligated to embark upon an investigation resembling that in which the characters themselves are involved. Indeed, the reader's reaction as he begins the second chapter may well be similar to that of the tall convict as he is swept into the apparent chaos of the flood.

The convict himself is a reader, and a remarkably poor one: his deficiencies in this regard serve to highlight his generally flawed perspective and also alert the reader to the story's status as one of those cautionary fables in which Faulkner explores the meanings of art and the mutual responsibilities of writer and reader. The first sentence of "Old Man"—"Once (it was in Mississippi, in May, in the flood year 1927) there were two convicts"<sup>2</sup>—through its mixture of the fairy-tale and naturalistic modes announces both the fabular nature of the ensuing story and the kind of narrative detail by which that fable will unfold. As a reader, the convict is a literalist of the most extreme sort, as is evident in his use of dime-store detective stories as training manuals for the aspiring criminal mastermind:

he had saved the paper-backs for two years reading and rereading them, memorising them, comparing and weighing story and method against story and method, taking the good from each and discarding the dross as his workable plan emerged, keeping his mind open to make the subtle

last-minute changes, without haste and without impatience, as the newer pamphlets appeared. . . . (24)

Significantly enough, he continues to “consume the impossible pulp-printed fables” (149) throughout his incarceration, just as he faithfully writes to his unresponsive lady love—at least until she sends a postcard showing him where she and her husband, Vernon Waldrip, are “hon-nymonning at” (339).

The convict attributes the lack of success in his version of the great train robbery not to any flaw in himself but to his having been “lied” to by the writers of the cheap novels he had so assiduously studied:

an outrage directed not at the men who had foiled his crime, not even at the lawyers and judges who had sent him here, but at the writers, the uncorporeal names attached to the stories, the paper novels—the Diamond Dicks and Jesse Jameses and such—whom he believed had led him into his present predicament through their own ignorance and gullibility regarding the medium in which they dealt and took money for, in accepting information on which they placed the stamp of verisimilitude and authenticity . . . and retailed for money and which on actual application proved to be impractical and (to the convict) criminally false . . . . (23)

A self-proclaimed critic, he curses the writers for their imaginative and artistic shortcomings and lack of integrity, just as he later expresses outrage that the flood, a force “with all the wealth of cosmic violence and disaster to draw from,” should be “so barren of invention and imagination, so lacking in pride of artistry and craftsmanship, as to repeat itself twice” (264). In both instances the convict-critic mistakenly projects his own imaginative bankruptcy onto the primary sources. His singular determination to apply with absolute literalness the facts which he has garnered from the pulp books, to draw from his reading only those details which he considers pertinent to his own objectives, betrays him as a reader and critic. It also precipitates a profound distrust of language and a concomitant fear of experience after his absurd misapplication of his reading reveals to him that there exists no strict correspondence between the minutiae of circumstance in fiction and the results to be expected from a formulaic transferral of that minutiae to real life situations.

Such a transferral—as well as the letters the convict writes—nonetheless constitutes an oblique suggestion that the tall convict represents in some sense an artist-figure, and “Old Man” as a whole elucidates those deficiencies of perspective and imaginative expression which constrict his capacities in that role. Unlike Harry and Charlotte, those failed anarchists of “Wild Palms” who make an abortive attempt to dispense with order, convention, and structure, the convict is an

unwilling revolutionary, a man who believes in regimentation for its own sake and one who futilely tries to impose order on the flood—a force which by its very nature derides his puny attempts to secure stability. This opposition between the necessity for order and the imperative to rebel against the stagnating effects of a rigid regimentation corresponds to the conflict within the artist himself between the tendency toward inspired expression and the need to formulate that expression within a coherent framework. Indeed, the description of the immense power of the flood which sweeps away the convict bears a marked resemblance to certain of Faulkner's comments on the creative impulse: he often remarked on the writer's being "demon-driven" and "elected" to write, implying that the force of the impulse itself remains largely beyond the writer's control—what he produces after the first wave of inspiration recedes is, of course, another matter.<sup>3</sup>

The convict is both "demon-driven" by the flood and "elected" (in more ways than one) to accept responsibility for the pregnant woman and, eventually, her child: once the woman more or less drops into his lap, the convict assumes what is, in essence, the burden of creativity. In this regard, Faulkner's consistent association of motion with life and literature adds an extra dimension to the convict's feeling that the pregnant woman is a "millstone which the force and power of blind and risible Motion had fastened upon him . . ." (335). Although the convict accepts this burden for the moment, he desperately tries to rid himself of it or deny its existence—all to no avail. In many respects, his predicament resembles a writer's nightmare: seized by a force over which he has little control, enjoined to assume an obligation he neither sought nor enjoys, he nevertheless remains determined to perform his task as competently as possible in order to preserve both his good name (that, ironically, is one of the convict's chief concerns) and his self-esteem.

The convict's attitude toward the woman as unnecessary baggage which, although an impediment to his ultimate goal, must be honourably disposed of, may reflect Faulkner's feelings about the work he had so recently been doing in Hollywood. Yet although there are a number of other ways in which the convict seems to be an ironic self-portrait, Faulkner's narrative technique effectively distances him from any close association with the implicit artistic attitudes and practices of his character. Indeed, one might even suspect that the convict's typically terse, matter-of-fact statements constitute a parodic thrust at Hemingway—whose work in one way or another figures so prominently in "Wild Palms"—and relate the convict's fear of new experience to that refusal to experiment which Faulkner felt diminished Hemingway's capacities as a writer.<sup>4</sup> While the convict's very act of narration serves

to consolidate his characterization as an artist figure, at the same time the sharp distinction between his laconic manner of relating the story to his cell-mates and the flamboyant prose of "Old Man" in general indicates that the reader get not the convict's but Faulkner's version of the story. The resulting contrast emphasizes that the former's inexperience with language, his mistrust of verbal expression, obviates the possibility of his relating his experience with richness and vitality. For example, the convict initially condenses the entire episode with the Cajun into a single sentence: " 'After a while we come to a house and we stayed there eight or nine days then they blew up the levee with dynamite so we had to leave' " (252). Even though he is later prompted by the plump convict to elaborate upon the episode, he still neglects to mention the most crucial aspects of the encounter, his doggedly literal version of the episode (and of his journey as a whole) suggesting that although he relates the order, the sequence, of events he is unable to grasp the meaning—a meaning which, Faulkner implies, can be comprehended and transmitted only by verbal exploration and extrapolation. The tall convict's failings as an artist figure are symptomatic of his general refusal to come to terms with life: he disregards the meaning in new experience and retreats to the prison where he finds security in a rigidly structured regimentation.

The Mississippi allows the convict no opportunity to impose any sort of order, and the river itself, with its enormous potential for both destruction and revitalization, serves as an apt symbol for the surge of inspiration associated with the creative impulse. Faulkner on one occasion likened the writing of a novel to building a "hen house in a high wind"<sup>5</sup>—an analogy which in its reference to the attempt to create a structure in the face of a hostile element approximates the convict's situation. It is surely no coincidence that the river in "Old Man" should carry away hen houses (244), specifically, along with all the other flotsam. Given the associations between "Old Man" and *Huckleberry Finn* Faulkner's title may be related to his assessment of Mark Twain as the father of American literature;<sup>6</sup> it also seems an apt title for the "demon" of inspiration in general. In this context, the convict's incessant battling against the current in a frantic effort to return to prison corresponds to his adamant resistance to the creative impulse.

Despite his aversion to the entire process, however, he is forced by circumstances to be a participant in one of the central creative acts in the novel: the birth of the child on the island in the midst of the flood. Conditions on the island do not, of course, correspond to the convict's desire for regimentation, largely because his conception of order comprises a sterile, formulaic sequence which excludes the flexibility requisite to accommodating life. Faulkner's presentation of the island as a

sort of Peaceable Kingdom could serve well as a metaphor for the fructive harmony necessary to, and engendered by, artistic conception and production. The metal lid which the convict uses in assisting at the birth reinforces his presentation as an artist figure in light of Faulkner's repeated references to the writer's employing any "tool" at hand to facilitate the creative process; that the convict uses a real and somewhat crude implement to assist at an actual birth accords with his absurdly literal perspective. He also employs a variety of objects as replacements for the paddle and, although he never completes the shaping of any of these substitute paddles, the patient care with which he fashions them in some respects resembles that of an artist trying to perfect and polish his work:

the tree burned through and fell and burned  
through again at the proper length and he nursing  
little constant cunning flames along the flanks  
of the log to make it paddle-shaped, nursing them  
at night too while the woman and baby . . . slept in  
the skiff. (235)

The convict works most resolutely at shaping a paddle during those brief respites from the flood's intensity both while he is on the island and, later, in Cajun country. And there are hints that his experiences during the nine days that he hunts with the Cajun bear an ironic relation to Faulkner's own apprenticeship period in New Orleans, particularly in regard to his relationship with Sherwood Anderson. In these correspondences, Faulkner emphasizes the configuration of the convict as artist and, at the same time, distances himself from the latter's faulty perspective—in effect, from the aesthetic which informed his own early work.

In an essay published in 1953 Faulkner relates that while in New Orleans in the Twenties he observed Sherwood Anderson's daily schedule of working in the morning, talking in the afternoon, and drinking and talking in the evening, and thereupon decided: "If this is what it takes to be a novelist, then that's the life for me."<sup>7</sup> This response resembles the effect produced when the tall convict sees the hide nailed to the Cajun's wall: "*So that's it. That's what he does in order to eat and live . . .*" (255). The convict serves an apprenticeship under the Cajun much as Faulkner learned from Anderson, and their decision to go "halves" on the skins is suspiciously reminiscent of those Jackson stories—also dealing with alligators in the Louisiana swampland—on which Faulkner and Anderson collaborated and which at one time they may have intended to publish jointly.<sup>8</sup> The convict's attitude toward the Cajun also seems to approximate, on whatever reductive level, that which Faulkner presumably maintained toward Anderson;



the convict thinks: "*If that's it, then I can do it too and even if he cant tell me how I reckon I can watch him and find out*" (257). His remark, "*What? What? I not only dont know what I am looking for, I dont even know where to look for it*" (257), may even contain a covert allusion to Faulkner's attributing to Anderson much of the impetus for his discovery of his "own little postage stamp of native soil."<sup>9</sup>

The convict also thinks: "*Only if he could just tell me what to do it would save time*" (258). Quite literally, though, because the Cajun does not speak English he cannot tell the convict what to do: he can point the direction or teach by example, but ultimately the convict must make his own way. The differing techniques of the convict and the Cajun force them to explore different bayou channels which, significantly enough, are three times described as "inky" (251, 255, 258), as is the Cajun's mouth (265); and intrinsic to the Anderson-Faulkner analogue is the message that the Cajun somehow communicates to the convict: " 'You do not need me and the rifle; we will only hinder you, be in your way' " (261). These references seem to reflect Faulkner's admiration and appreciation of Anderson's work while nevertheless insisting on his own need to pursue a mode of fiction independent from that of his former mentor. In the 1953 essay, Faulkner mentions that by the time he met Anderson in New Orleans the older writer's best days had passed and all that remained to him was his style;<sup>10</sup> the Cajun's use of a rifle to garner the hides seems related to this assessment. The convict, on the other hand, employs a knife and a club, and the description of his tussles with the alligators implies an analogy with the artist's attempt to subdue recalcitrant material:

sitting still for an instant longer until the bow of the pirogue grounded lighter than the falling of a leaf and stepped out of it and paused just for one instant while the words *It does look big* stood for just a second, unemphatic and trivial, somewhere where some fragment of his attention could see them and vanished, and stooped straddling, the knife driving even as he grasped the near foreleg, this all in the same instant when the lashing tail struck him a terrific blow upon the back. But the knife was home, he knew that even on his back in the mud, the weight of the thrashing beast longwise upon him, its ridged back clutched to his stomach, his arm about its throat, the hissing head clamped against his jaw, the furious tail lashing and flailing, the knife in his other hand probing for the life and finding it, the hot fierce gush . . . (258-259).

Though such descriptions closely resemble those of the convict's struggles with the Mississippi, they differ in that during his stay in the swamp the convict becomes much more an active than a re-active agent, in line with the progress which he is making at the Cajun's camp.

He does not, of course, retain what he learns, eventually returning to Parchman with no greater understanding of the world than when he

left. Nevertheless, that eight-inch knife-blade functions for a time as if it were an implement suitable to the creation of art, and the convict's "probing for the life" sounds close to that purpose for which Faulkner employed his pen. In *Mosquitoes* the character named Faulkner describes himself as a liar by profession,<sup>11</sup> and that early tongue-in-cheek remark resonates in the description of the convict's attitude in "Old Man":

his hill-man's sober and jealous respect not for truth but for the power, the strength, of lying—not to be niggard with lying but rather to use it with respect and even care, delicate quick and strong, like a fine and fatal blade. (276)

The association of writing, lying, and the blade pertains to the ironic correspondence between Faulkner and the convict. More adventurous speculation might relate the lash across the latter's back to Faulkner's own "demon-driven" accident at the Algonquin Hotel in 1938 in which he burned his back, and see the unconventional "primitivism" of the tall convict's technique as a thrust by Faulkner at his own categorization as an inspired primitive by much of contemporary opinion. In the related episode involving the convict's reaction to whiskey aboard the steamboat, Faulkner could again be poking fun at the view of him as a bucolic misfit who had visions under the influence of alcohol:

he drank the whiskey and even in the second between the sweet full fire in his belly and when it began to happen he was trying to say, "I tried to tell you! I tried to!" But it was too late . . . it was himself and the mule, the little gobbling faces flying before them, the familiar hard skull-bones shocking against his fists, his voice shouting, "Come on, John Henry! Plow them down! Gobble them down, boy!" even as the bright hot red wave turned back, meeting it joyously, happily, lifted, poised, then hurling through space, triumphant and yelling, then again the old shocking blow at the back of his head . . . (241)

Like Faulkner himself in his early years, the convict in the course of his peregrinations travels from Mississippi to New Orleans and back again to Mississippi and, indeed, his Tom Sawyeresque escape from the armory may be read as a parody of Faulkner's own breaking away from a New Orleans' milieu which he found incompatible with his artistic inclinations. On the other hand, the convict's insistence on climbing out of a window rather than exploring possible avenues of escape behind doors "leading he did not know where" (276) once again underscores his fear of new experience and his paucity of imagination.<sup>12</sup>

It also indicates that beneath his unassuming aspect lies a penchant for self-dramatization, a suggestion reinforced by the many references to acting and stage machinery in "Old Man." Even the convict's apparent disdain for women is at least partially an act, although he

seems unaware of it. He is not celibate during his stay at Parchman, having had sexual relations with a "nameless and not young negress" (335) two years prior to being swept away by the flood. And inspired by those "impossible pulp-printed fables" he devours while in prison, he envisions an experience very different from the one actually encountered when rescuing the woman from the flood:

and who to say what Helen, what living Garbo, he had not dreamed of rescuing from what craggy pinnacle or dragoned keep when he and his companion embarked in the skiff. (149)

The convict fails to accommodate his perceptions to the difference between the fiction he creates and the reality it has attempted to capture; thus overwhelmed by the discrepancy he becomes obsessed with the need to dispose of the incongruity by getting rid of the woman. Being unable to do so immediately, he briefly contemplates seducing her but rejects the notion because of the nausea in him resulting from her recent demonstration of fertility—his ambivalence in this regard contributing further to the sense of his inability to reconcile imagination and reality. The convict's self-perpetuated cycle of frustration, especially with regard to his involvement with women, falls into a pattern of sorts, and it is indicative of his self-delusion that he who advocates order so stridently should fail to detect this pattern in his own behaviour. His avowed contempt for women clearly marks an aspect of this self-deception and his closing statement—"Women - - t"—constitutes an unwitting condemnation of himself, not an instance of Faulkner's own alleged misogyny.

With the possible exception of the brief interlude in the Louisiana swamp, the convict throughout "Old Man" remains shackled by his limitations, a condition stemming primarily from his mistrust and misuse of imaginative expression. His failure as man and artist results from the sterility of his imagination: he not only blinds himself to the inconsistencies between his behaviour and his averred beliefs, he also fails to conceive of the possibility of any kind of constructive order outside the confines of the prison. Parchman thus serves as a metaphor for the convict's restricted perspective. Unlike Harry Wilbourne in "Wild Palms," who learns while imprisoned the importance of imaginative expression and expansion based on memory and language, the convict's fear of experience on all levels, together with his obsessive desire for regimentation and his distrust of language, undercuts any possibility of his coming to terms with the world he so deliberately shuns.

The "Old Man" chapters in *The Wild Palms* testify in fictive form to the necessity for both the artist and the layman of remaining open to

experience, of venturing into—to paraphrase Hamlet—“undiscovered countries” of imaginative discourse. Such inclinations are, after all, partially responsible for Faulkner’s discovery and development of his own fictional county. The convict’s refusal to confront new experience and to re-present it through language means that in effect he has a return ticket to Parchman before he ever moves off its grounds. Faulkner himself, on the other hand, left Mississippi for New Orleans, eventually returning not only to Oxford in Lafayette County but also to Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha.

## NOTES

1. See McHaney, *“The Wild Palms”: A Study* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1975), and particularly the comments in his first chapter on the relationship of Anderson, Hemingway, and Faulkner.
2. *The Wild Palms* (New York: Random House, 1939), 23. Subsequent page references are to this edition and are noted parenthetically.
3. For one of a multitude of examples, see *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-58*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (New York: Vintage, 1959), 19.
4. For Faulkner’s remarks on Hemingway, see *Faulkner in the University*, 15, 143.
5. Oral tradition; there is, however, a similar remark in *Faulkner in the University*, 68.
6. For example, see *Faulkner in the University*, 281.
7. “A Note on Sherwood Anderson” in *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965), 10.
8. See Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 405.
9. *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), 255.
10. “A Note,” 5.
11. *Mosquitoes* (New York: Liveright, 1955), 145.
12. Indeed, in *Mosquitoes* Fairchild twice compares the artistic impulse to exploring dark rooms, once stating: “It’s a kind of dark thing. It’s kind of like somebody brings you to a dark door. Will you enter that room, or not?” See *Mosquitoes*, 248, 336.