

Diseases of City Life and *One of our Conquerors*

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George Meredith's famously baffling novel of 1891, *One of Our Conquerors*, is a work which explores what the medical campaigner Benjamin Ward Richardson had defined as the "Diseases of Modern Life".¹ By this term he had meant not the obvious physical diseases of cholera and tuberculosis, but rather the mental diseases of strain and exhaustion, and other health problems generated by the pressures of modern city living. During the last three decades of the century, newspapers and periodicals were full of discussions of this phenomenon, discussions which were also played out in America in the work of George Beard, and that of Meredith's friend, Silas Weir Mitchell, most notably in *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked*.² In Meredith's hands, such discussions become the starting point for meditations on the state of England, and an analysis, refracted through the disintegrating psychological health of his protagonist, the financier Victor Radnor, of the social and psychological problems of England and her empire. The linguistic and stylistic complexity of the work gives expression to the cacophony of voices on the city streets and print media, and the jostlings and pushings accompanying the struggle for survival, and dominance, in this divided land.³

One of Our Conquerors is a Condition of England novel, forty years on, but one in which the poor, although ever-present in subliminal form, make very few direct appearances and, even more surprisingly, the central financier figure is not, on the model of a Merdle or Melmotte, a rapacious worshipper of Mammon, but rather a cultured, charismatic man, who nurtures dreams of philanthropy. As the interpellated fictional texts, 'A Rajah in London' and 'The Rival Tongues' suggest, this is a novel about empire, yet interpreted on a broad scale: financial, colonial and psychological. Moving between the intricate processes of subconscious thought at one level, to reflections on colonial rule at another, it explores the breakdown of control, from personal to political, and the loss of dominion over self or Other. The doubts, delusions and self-deceptions of the ironically named Victor, and his gradual loss of self-command, express in intimate detail the fragmentation of a once-confident society and empire.

In a letter to his close friend Augustus Jessopp, whilst writing *One of Our Conquerors*, Meredith noted, 'I am finishing a novel and am a bit strained – as I have condemned myself both to a broad and a close observation of the modern world in it, -- throwing beams upon its rat-tides and its upper streamers'.⁴ The expressions capture the dichotomy between the lower, base levels of both the city and the body, with the rats that creep out at low tide, and the flaunting upper levels of self and of social display.⁵ As the Rajah remarks of the streets of London at night:

Monogamic Societies present

*A decent visage and a hideous rear.*⁶

Sexual politics, and the constraining marriage bond which precipitates the tragedy of the novel, also form part of the explorations in the novel of the intersections of higher and lower, of both psyche and society. Such intersections are wonderfully brought together in the symbolism of the opening scene when Victor, jauntily crossing London Bridge, resplendent in his white waistcoat, slips and falls, and is helped up by a working-class man who leaves the black imprint of his fingers on the 'maiden waistcoat'. The image is replete with both class and sexual connotations, as the lower life of the city, and its associated forms of body and mind, leave their outward, visible print, sully the waistcoat which is both a marker of Victor's social class, and his self-deluded belief in his own purity. The location also inevitably brings to mind the nursery rhyme line of 'London bridge is falling down' reinforcing an ominous sense of social collapse.

As critics have noted, Victor's ensuing good-humoured, but condescending exchange with the workman, which concludes with the latter's unexpected retort, 'And none of your damn punctilio', sets up a refrain that runs through the text, capturing the moment at which his social and psychological certitudes start to unravel.⁷ It is the strangeness of the word, its seemingly inappropriate usage in this context, which unsettles Victor. He ponders, 'And was it a cockney crow-word of the day, or a word that had stuck in the fellow's head from the perusal of his pothouse newspaper?' The very framing of the question, with its condescending 'crow-word' and 'pothouse' suggests the incomprehension that separates these two, even while they inhabit the same Babel of tongues, a Babel intensified, Meredith suggests, by the rapid growth of newspapers and periodicals (of which his own writing, of course, forms a part).⁸

For Victor, the term ‘punctilio’ is ‘like the clapper of a disorderly bell, striking through him, with reverberations in the form of interrogations’ (4). In an interesting anticipation of Freud’s theories of displacement, the seemingly innocuous term becomes a condensed linguistic expression, or outward marker, like those unwanted fingerprints, of unacknowledged anxieties. It precipitates an ‘Idea’, of some form of generation of class harmony which Victor is never able to grasp, but also a continuous stream of reflections, often registered in the voices of Victor’s friends, on England’s lost greatness, the threats of foreign competition, and finally, the hidden secret of his life – his unfortunate youthful marriage to ‘Mrs Burman’, and the fact that he and his beloved Nataly are not wed.

In the frenzied jumble of Victor’s inner mind, where ideas tumble over one another in looping patterns of connection, the black sooty fingers of the working-class man become the ‘small band of black dissentients in a corner’ of his inner parliament and law court, where he conducts his own defence:

Naturally he was among the happiest of human creatures; he willed it so, with consent of circumstances; a boisterous consent, as when votes are reckoned for a favourite candidate: excepting on the part of a small band of black dissentients in a corner, a minute opaque body, devilish in their irreconcilability, who maintain their struggle to provoke discord, with a cry disclosing the one error of his youth, the sole bad step chargeable upon his antecedents. But do we listen to them? Shall we not have them turned out? He gives the sign for it; and he leaves his buoying constituents to out roar them. (12)

As the novel progressively makes clear, he is unable to command the ejection of these dissentients, who are at once figures of his own self-doubt, and the disruptive working classes he has attempted to rule. Class rebellion and the secrets of his sexual past are indelibly linked.

The passage anticipates one of the final scenes in the book when Victor, about to make the speech which should confirm his election to parliament, is summoned home by news of Nataly’s collapse. Parliaments, both internal and external, increasingly give the lie to Victor’s romantic self-justificatory claim to himself, which concludes the above passage, that his actions were motivated by ‘Love. Deep true love, proved by years, is the advocate’ (p. 12). Indeed, the bump which he has sustained from his fall, the ‘pain to his head near the spot where the haunting word punctilio caught at any excuse for clamouring’, (10) is later

identified by Meredith and Victor himself, in a semi-comic nod to theories of phrenology, with his organ of ‘philo-progenitiveness’ (or love for children). Growing ashamed of his ‘morbid indulgence in reflection: a disease never afflicting him anterior to the stupid fall on London Bridge’, Victor ‘rubbed instinctively for the punctilio-bump’ cheating himself with the fancy that it was on the spot where a phrenologist ‘had marked philo-progenitiveness on his capacious and enviable cerebrum’ (191). As in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Meredith mocks the idea that the complexity of human psychology, and all its disorders, could be captured by the measurement and localisation of organs in the brain, yet the ‘punctilio-bump’ provides a symbolic, structural link in the narrative, between the fall, working-class dissidence, and Victor’s repressed anxieties around his role as husband and father.⁹ Like the panel with its horrifying image of ‘an upturned dead face’ in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a novel which also explored the disintegration of a psyche amidst the pressures of modern life, the punctilio ‘bump’ serves as a predictive motif, although for Meredith the connections function less through graphic image, than through verbal play.¹⁰

When *One of Our Conquerors* was first published it garnered various disappointed, and frequently hostile reviews, in addition to a few loyal, ecstatic voices.¹¹ By this stage in his career, after the success of *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), Meredith had confirmed his status as the leading writer of the age. As the reviewer in the *Graphic* snidely remarked, however, the novel would most likely ‘obtain its chief praise from those who think it a note of superiority to admire most what they least understand’.¹² There was a barrage of complaint about the difficulty of the language, and the impenetrable first sentence.¹³ Even the *Pall Mall Gazette*, with which Meredith had a long standing association, complained that he ‘seems to be flogging his intellect – making it curvet and caracole even more fantastically than usual’.¹⁴ Meredith for his part complained, with perhaps justifiable exaggeration, ‘All England has yelled at me for my last work’.¹⁵ He also noted that ‘What they call digressions, is a presentation of the atmosphere of the present time, of which the story issues’.¹⁶ One of the most laudatory, but also insightful analyses of Meredith’s work up to this point had been that of J. M. Barrie who had argued in the *Contemporary Review* (1888), that:

It is the law of the land that novels should be an easy gallop, but Mr Meredith’s readers have to pant uphill. He reaches his thoughts by means of ladders which he kicks away, letting his readers follow as best they can, a way of playing the game that leaves him comparatively free from pursuit. Too sluggish to climb, the public sit in

the rear, flinging his jargon at his head, yet aware, if they have heads themselves, that one of the great intellects of the age is on in front.¹⁷

That image of kicking the ladders away is one that could also be applied to the techniques of modernism; Meredith's 'difficulty', is perhaps best understood as that of a modernist, writing for a Victorian age.¹⁸ As Meredith himself notes, however, his 'digressions' are designed to present 'the atmosphere of the present time'.

One of Our Conquerors was first published in serial form in the *Fortnightly Review*, and if we look back at the context in which the public first encountered the work, it is clear that it is indeed responding to what were felt to be the pressing issues of the age.¹⁹ In the years preceding the serialisation, there are numerous articles on the modern city and conditions of the poor, on the woman question (including an article by Millicent Garrett Fawcett on female suffrage), on the colonies, and the instabilities of finance.²⁰ Such concerns continued during the serialisation period: the third instalment, for example, shared the pages with two articles on banking failures and the city, and the fifth with Oscar Wilde's 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'.²¹ The emphasis in *One of Our Conquerors* on England's lack of competitiveness, and unpreparedness for foreign invasion (voiced largely through the clerk Skepsey's pugilistic enthusiasms), also speaks to the new focus in the *Fortnightly Review*, under the editorship of Frank Harris, on military matters. Harris, who took over in 1886, commissioned a whole series of articles from military and naval men including 'Can we Hold our Own?', by Sir John Frederick Maurice; a series on 'What our Navy should be'; and 'The Armed Strength of Germany in 1889'.²² Without touching the morbid excesses of degeneration theory, there is nonetheless a sense of a nation in decline and under threat, with preparations of war already underway. In *One of Our Conquerors* Meredith addresses this sense of threat, and impending dissolution at multiple levels, from trade and finance through to individual psychology.

In an entry in one of the notebooks he kept for *One of Our Conquerors*, Meredith observed, 'Most of the world are walking astride the border-line of Sanity'.²³ It was a perception very much of its time. In 1880, the eminent psychiatrist, James Crichton-Browne, had delivered his annual presidential address for the psychology section of the British Medical Association, on 'Circles of Mental Disorder – Modern Nervous Diseases'. Drawing imagery from Dante's *Inferno*, he envisaged three concentric circles of disease, from the certified lunatics and idiots in the centre, to the 'crazy circle' of incipient insanity and 'the

hosts of eccentric, half-mad [...] who move about in every grade of society'. Their numbers are huge, he suggests, with 'unfathomed depths of mental unhealthiness in our community'. Many such sufferers are 'figuring as useful members of society, and [...] unsuspected, save by their nearest relatives, of any mental taint' – a situation which aptly describes that of Victor Radnor.²⁴ Finally there is the 'neurotic' outer circle with forms of nervous disease which are common in the population, from epilepsy, paralysis and locomotor ataxia (from which Meredith suffered), to neuralgia, hysteria and chorea.²⁵ Between these circles there was constant interchange and circulation. Drawing on George Beard, Crichton-Browne argues that the increasing levels of nervous disorders were due to the 'conditions of modern life', with increased levels of competition, and burdens of mental worry and anxiety, particularly for town dwellers.²⁶ Interestingly, in light of the central role of music in *One of Our Conquerors*, Crichton-Browne calls instead for more art and music, to bring a greater balance between body and mind, in the fight against mental disorders and the 'moral contagia which float about in such abundance in our social atmosphere'. As with Meredith, Crichton-Browne moves seamlessly between moral and social disease, and mental and bodily disorders. Drawing on a poem of Edgar Allan Poe, in language that also resonates in Meredith's novel, Crichton-Browne suggests that selfishness 'must ever be the soul of the plot in that tragedy "The Struggle for Life", with its hero "The Conquering Worm."'²⁷ From the opening moments of the fall, with all its biblical connotations, death is an equally ominous presence in Meredith's novel, although 'Our Conqueror' has to suffer the ignominy of mental disintegration before being granted peace. Crichton-Browne ends his address with an eloquent peroration calling for action,

to resist the inroads of nervous and mental disease, and of every foe that may assail us from without or within, and to secure to our country what is stronger than fleets of ironclads, more inviolate than the streak of silver sea,

'A virtuous populace who rise the while

And stand a wall of fire around their much-loved Isle.'

With its ready yoking of the ironclads for naval defence with the threats of encroachment of mental disease, and its patriotic echoes of Shakespeare, Tennyson and Burns, this call to arms captures the anxieties of the era, and the intermingling of registers exploited by Meredith in his novel.²⁸

The language of disease permeates *One of Our Conquerors*. For the ‘Muse of Reason’, London is ‘a thing for hospital operations rather than poetic rhapsody’, mired in ‘a conservatism of diseases’ (40). The novel’s resident pessimist, Colney Durance, echoes these sentiments in his observation that for England ‘her remainder of life is in the activity of her diseases’, with her ‘recent history’ little more than ‘a provincial apothecary’s exhibition of the battle of bane and antidote’ (104-5). Those bewildered external observers, the Rajah and his Minister, who are seeking enlightenment as to the source of their ‘conqueror’s’ ‘power to vanquish’, make their anthropological investigations of the ‘hatted sect’ as they stream into the city by morning and back at night. As they leave England we find them eagerly perusing a medical pamphlet full of statistics and sketches ‘of the various maladies caused by the prolonged prosecution of that form of worship’ (of commerce) (37-41). Such pamphlets, as with Crichton-Browne’s address, were part of the growing discourse of the ‘diseases of modern life’. At the heart of this web of imagery, however, is the dark symbolic presence of Mrs Burman, who spends her days, not in her own drawing room, but rather in a chemist’s shop.

The chemist’s shop, aptly named ‘Boyle and Luckwort’, is first introduced obliquely when Victor, following his ‘punctilio bump’, finds himself ‘arrested’, by a rap on the elbow by an unseen hand as he attempts to enter a shop to get a prescription made up ‘for his Nataly’s doctoring of her domestics’ (43). Only later does he learn that Mrs Burman can be found there most days, sampling ‘tinctures or powders’ as they are ordered by other customers (134). The subliminal ‘arrest’ reinforces Mrs Burman as the repressed, disturbing presence in Victor’s sub-conscious, preventing the more healthy ‘doctoring’ of his Nataly. She is linked to the fall, to sexuality, and also to the diseases of the City, the embodiment of its ailments, as she sits there, futilely imbibing pills and potions in the hope of prolonging life. She is situated symbolically, in the heart of London, ‘and sees all Charing in the shop looking-glass at the back’ (130). Looking inwards, as well as outwards through that mirror, tracking the flow of London life in all its diseases, she is both a reflection and a condensed expression of London’s maladies.

The symbolism is carefully chosen: chemist’s shops were increasing rapidly at this period, and were part of the advertising boom at the end of the century, marketing their wares, and associated patent medicines, with great assiduity. They not only sold drugs, as prescribed by doctors, but also offered their own consultations, and their own remedies for ailments. Shops frequently offered a huge range of services in addition, including the sale of

tea, with anxieties arising at that period, that their sale of medicated wines could lead to ‘tippling over the counter’, a safe space, in other words, for women to sit drinking in public.²⁹ Mrs Burman, however, seems to indulge only in drugs, feeding, to Victor’s mind, ‘a ghastly imagination’: “Diseases – drugs!” Those were the corresponding two strokes of the pendulum which kept the woman going’ (134). Mrs Burman becomes a veritable image of the death-in-life of contemporary England, maintaining vitality only by a continuous stream of drugs, which marginally prolong life, but do not effect a cure.

The thought of Mrs Burman’s possible proximity, as he passes every day, inspires in Victor ‘spasms of physical revulsion, loathings’, but also terror of exposure: ‘She might have seen his figure in the shop-mirror! And *she* there! The wonder of it all seemed to be, that his private history was not walking the streets’. As Allon White has argued so powerfully, ‘No one has written more extensively nor more feelingly about shame than George Meredith’. His obscurities, metaphors and ellipses, he suggests, are all part of his attempt to pit language against shame, and to uncover that which wishes to remain hidden and outside articulation.³⁰ For Victor, the image of Mrs Burman and the mirror creates a terrified sense of inversion, whereby the hidden, inner secrets of the self become figures who walk the streets (with another slip back to the accusations of ‘punctilio’ from unexpected quarters).

Meredith grants to his protagonist flickering moments of understanding. Mrs Burman becomes for him ‘the phantom of the offended collective woman’, and his ‘novel exercises in reflection were bringing him by hard degrees to conceive it to be the impalpable which has prevailing weight’. But he is unable to progress further, stopping, ‘in a fever of sensibility, to contemplate the powerful formless vapour rolling from a source that was nothing other than yonder weak lonely woman’ (135-6). Victor’s struggles to grasp the impalpable are also those of the reader. For us too, ideas surface only to be submerged again. Vanessa Ryan has rightly argued that *One of Our Conquerors* draws on the language and assumptions of Victorian physiological psychology in its representation of unconscious thought processes, but it also does much more than that.³¹ The entire plot and structure of the novel, from the level of the sentence to the narrative form of the whole, are attempts to give form to the complexity of the mind’s processes.

Such complexity which goes well beyond G. H. Lewes’ image of the mind as a lake with different intermingling streams, or a multi-layered palimpsest (an image subsequently adopted both by Meredith’s friend, James Sully, and Freud).³² It is as if Meredith has taken

Gwendolen's halting, tortured speech patterns after the death of Grandcourt, and turned them into the linguistic form and framework of his novel. As I suggested earlier, there are strong parallels between *Daniel Deronda* and *One of Our Conquerors*: the opening panel which anticipates the scene of Grandcourt's death functions similarly to the imagery of the fall in Meredith's novel, but there are similarities also in the murderous desires of both protagonists. Like Gwendolen, Victor desires the death of his spouse: he envies Dartrey Fenellan, adventurer, supposed feminist, and his daughter Nesta's future husband, who has had the luck to bury 'the wife whose behaviour vexed and dishonoured him' and is now free, 'relieved of the murderous drama incessantly in the mind of shackled men' (34). Nataly too is plagued by murderous thoughts which, more than Victor, she struggles to disavow: 'A constant, almost visible image of the dark thing she desired, and was bound not to desire, and was remorseful for desiring, oppressed her' (224). Like Gwendolen, she is torn apart by the conflict between her desires and her attempts to overcome them, driving her to the point of madness. The novel charts two forms of psychological fall: that of the ebullient, over-achiever, and of his quiet, oppressed wife.

A further parallel between the two novels lies in the imagery of agoraphobia, a condition first described by Carl Westphal in 1871 which, as David Trotter has argued, Eliot probably draws upon in her depiction of Gwendolen's experiences of 'fits of spiritual dread' and fear of solitude in open space.³³ The diagnosis was quickly followed in medical circles by those of numerous other phobias and anxieties, forming part of the growing concerns about the impact of modern life on the mind and body. As with Silas Weir Mitchell's *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked*, (also first published in 1871), the focus of Westphal's original diagnosis was on professional men. All three of the initial case studies were men, who were otherwise very successful and efficient in their professional lives, but found themselves overcome with inexplicable terror and unable to cross a street or square. Westphal's second case of a merchant, 'with superb mental and emotional characteristics, diligent and conscientious at his job, and good company, who is always extraordinarily cheerful and happy', who nonetheless finds himself unable to cross a street, unless accompanied by a friend, is remarkably similar to the portrayal of Victor, 'this brightly-constituted gentleman' (16).³⁴ After his fall, Victor finds a 'singular fit of timidity enchain[ing] him' so that he stands 'unwilling to trust himself to the roadway he had often traversed', prey to his nerves which 'clutched him, like a troop of household women'. Such emasculation is quickly overcome, however, by the arrival of his friend Fenellan: 'He

straightened his back immediately to cross the road, dismissing nervousness as a vapour, asking, between a cab and a van: “Anything doing in the City?” (15). As with Westphal’s case, terror is surmounted, and a demeanour of professional competence resumed, once the sufferer is no longer alone.

Although Westphal did not make the connection himself to the problems of modern life, inexplicable terrors and breakdowns quickly became central to both medical and popular cultural diagnoses of the problems of modernity. As Weir Mitchell noted of Chicago in *Wear and Tear*, ‘The industry and energy which have built this great city on a morass, and made it a vast centre of insatiate commerce, are now at work to undermine the nervous systems of its restless and eager people’.³⁵ Victor as a symbolic representative of the great capitalist centre of the world, is similarly experiences an undermining of his nervous energies. Significantly, the language of capitalism enters directly into the medical discourse of the time: Mitchell argues that men who live in harmony with Nature ‘store up a capital of vitality’ for use by their descendants, which accounts for the energy of the era. But, he asks, ‘Are we not merely using the interest on these accumulations of power, but also wastefully spending the capital?’³⁶ Victor, with his tremendous energy and drive, would appear to be such a spendthrift, unaware of the dangers he was running. When Victor sends Dr Themison to see Nataly she adroitly turns the situation around, claiming that she is ‘anxious about her husband’s condition, he being certainly over-worked’ (142), thus directly mobilising within the text the contemporary discourse of over-work and over-pressure.

In medical and popular texts, financiers were singled out as particular victims of the problems of over work, and the spectacular mental collapses it could create. Andrew Wynter, a doctor who wrote for popular audiences, speaks in ‘Early Warnings’ of ‘stock brokers’ disease’, a wearing down of the brain which could proceed relatively unobserved, until utter breakdown, often at the very height of prosperity.³⁷ Tell-tale signs included purchasing inferior art, by a man usually of good taste, and also the taking on of ever more grandiose schemes, both of which indicators are captured in the vulgarity, and over-weening ambition embodied in Victor’s impossibly extravagant project of Lakelands.³⁸ Frederic McCabe, in his essay ‘On Mental Strain and Overwork’ speaks of lawyers at the Bar being struck by vertigo and ‘the sudden occurrence of a feeling of inexplicable dread’, while those in the commercial world, with their constant speculations are ever prey to mental exhaustion and nervous collapse.³⁹ Benjamin Ward Richardson, for his part, warns of the ‘vulgar romance’ with which the speculator surrounds himself, and the ‘overweening self-confidence’ and

enthusiasm which ‘might well be devoted to a better cause’ but leads him at last to break down ‘hopelessly and completely’. He also suggests that high achievers, proud of their ‘constitution wealth’, overdraw on the ‘bank of life’ and then attempt to enter parliament and rule the nation – a pattern followed, of course, by Victor, whose final collapse occurs, symbolically, at the climax of his electoral campaign.⁴⁰

With all his vitality, Victor Radnor might seem to be the very reverse of the depleted figure often associated with Victorian energy fatigue, but as all these descriptions highlight, what Louis King terms ‘unnatural energy’ can itself be a sign of pathology.⁴¹ In a popular article for *Longman’s Magazine*, on ‘The Health of the Mind’, Richardson warned of the dangers that could arise from ‘mental overcharge’ when the three lives of man - the animal, emotional and intellectual - were out of balance:

Our pressures of business, our struggles for wealth and notoriety, with health and true fame at a discount, our flying visits hither and thither over the whole surface of the earth without exploring it, our cravings for mental stimulations of every kind and quality...these overcharges of mind are momentous in the present crisis of the civilised world. If some of the grosser appetites are reduced, the emotions are more wildly aflame and the reason more at bay. The passions are rising in mighty waves, and the brain is becoming like a troubled sea.⁴²

Meredith’s portrayal of Victor Radnor similarly adopts the vocabulary of force, vitality and overcharge. Within the free indirect discourse of the opening scenes, Victor pictures himself as a man of electrical vitality, one in fifty thousand, who has no need of doctors, and whose body, mind and feelings operate at swifter speeds than those of ordinary men:

And so quick was he, through this fine animation, to feel, think, act, that the three successive tributaries of conduct appeared as an irreflective flash and a gamester’s daring in the vein to men who had no deep knowledge of him and his lightning arithmetic for measuring, sounding and deciding. (12)

Such hubris inevitably leads to his final fall, but as we see from the start, his ‘grosser appetites’, in Richardson’s phraseology, are not thoroughly subdued, while his emotions, expressed in his desperate desire for social status, lead his reasoning astray, in the catastrophic decision to create Lakelands, an outer symbol writ large of his inner turmoil, and the disorders of the age.

It is clear that Meredith is fascinated by his charismatic financier who is not merely a creature of the city but ‘gloriously animal’ (284), a lover of music, food and wine. He is variously portrayed as a ‘cataract’ (470), ‘Vesuvius’ (his own self-projection) (474), a ‘hurricane’ (222); the language is all of overbearing force. In 1891, in response to a query from a reader, Meredith’s daughter Marie wrote: My father asks me to write in answer to your letter, and say that *One of Our Conquerors* is a man of rapid circulation, a prompt assimilation, a benevolent nature, and a loose morality. Such men are sure to conquer and come to naught’.⁴³ It is a succinct summary, which lays emphasis on the physiological circulation of energy. Often in the novel the voices of narrator and Victor merge, as we enter into his flow of feelings and self-justifications:

Although this man was a presentation to mankind of the force in Nature which drives to unresting speed, which is the vitality of the heart seen at its beating after a plucking of it from the body, he knew himself for the reverse of lawless; he inclined altogether to good citizenship. So social a man could not otherwise incline. But when it came to the examination of accounts between Mrs Burman and himself, spasms of physical revulsion, loathings, his excessive human nature, put her out of Court. To men, it was impossible for him to speak the torments of those days of the monstrous alliance.
(137)

Again the language is of force, of ‘unresting speed’, yet as represented by the naked heart plucked from the body, it links to his dread of shame, of public exposure, and to the irrepressible physical loathing associated with ‘Mrs Burman’ and called forth by the ‘punctilio’ exchange. Victor is an embodiment of force, but always tottering on the edge of dissolution, his social success and preeminence linked irrevocably to his ‘rat tides’.

In a passage added for the book version, Victor’s daughter Nesta acknowledges that her father is looked down upon because of his speculations, but absolves him in her mind, because he had been,

without the taint of gambling, a beneficent speculator. The Montgomery colony in South Africa, and his dealings with the natives in India, and his Railways in South America, his establishment of Insurance Offices, which were Savings Banks, and the Stores for the dispensing of sound goods to the poor, attested it. (73).

The musings, which establish the extraordinary global reach of Victor's empire, are clearly deeply partial, yet the text does little to challenge them; although the novel is critical of capitalism, there is no investment in portraying Victor as rapacious or mean spirited. Instead he is given humanity through his love for Nataly and Nesta (although its forms are radically misplaced), and for music. The latter, however, also becomes a mode for public display. Conducting his orchestra amidst the grand audience gathered together at Lakelands (and in modern fashion, conveyed there by 'Express trains every half hour from London' commandeered by Victor (231), he is admired not simply as 'a leader of musicians' but also as, 'a leader of men': 'The halo of the millionaire behind, assures us of a development in the character of England's merchant princes. The homage we pay him flatters us' (237). The cynical commentary on the symbiotic nature of flattery no doubt carries a self-reflexive edge, since Meredith himself was at this time being repeatedly hailed as a genius, a man of extraordinary powers, by his admirers and disciples.⁴⁴ Meredith's depiction of Victor's exceptionalism enters into the debates around genius at the time, starting with Galton's discussions in the 1860s, but intensifying in the 1880s, with Meredith's friends James Sully and Grant Allen both contributing to the discussions on the nature and formation of genius.⁴⁵ In the novel, the German Dr Schliesen adds a nationalist element to the debates, wondering on his visit to Lakelands, whether 'Genius, occasionally developed in a surprising superior manner by these haphazard English, may not sometimes wrest the prize from Method' (87). Victor's seeming genius is best displayed in his music where he is given the power to create both aesthetic and social harmony, but it also becomes a ready symbol of the fragility of such unity: with just one instrument out of tune, the entire performance collapses. Early on in the novel this image emerges, in relation to his bitter responses to punctilio/Mrs Burman: 'These short glimpses at reflection in Victor were like the verberant twang of a musical instrument that has had a smart blow and wails away independent of the player's cunning hand' (138). Such wails, and independence of the instruments which should be there to command, presage Victor's psychological, social and financial collapse.

Interestingly there appear to be no creditors at the end, nor trail of misery for investors; Meredith's interest lies almost entirely in the psychological dimension, and the internal implosion of his 'conqueror'. Victor's guilt is registered rather in the harm he does both to his daughter, who he attempts to force into an unsuitable aristocratic marriage, and to his long suffering wife, Nataly, who gradually comes to see through the man she has worshipped. It is a form of clarity, however, which is accompanied by a descent into

madness. Meredith offers a wonderful portrait of Nataly, yearning for quiet retirement, to hide their anomalous status, and yet trying to understand her husband's compulsion to 'mix and be foremost with the world' (267), and to 'defensively compel the world to serve his ends' (118). Early on we learn that 'living at an intenser strain upon her nature than she or anyone around her knew, her strength snapped' (117). The language, as with that for Victor, is of force and strain, with her gradual sinking mapped onto her struggles under his 'electrical vitality'. Recurring to the theme of Babel, and 'Rival Tongues', Meredith notes that her problem lies in 'her want of language', a 'tongue to speak and contend' (183). Faced with the torrent of Victor's energy, her intelligence 'had grown dull in slavery under him' (292). Although she comes to see that she has 'reduced her mind to propitiate a simulacrum' (308), the conventional dictates of 'Society' which she has internalised, she becomes increasingly unable to respond to her daughter, who bravely challenges sexual conventions, in her championing of a 'fallen' woman. Instead we see her responding to Nesta's views, and her own fantasies, as abominations, carrying out her own forms of self-imposed torture as a mode of expiation, 'producing a mad pattern in the mind, affrighting to reason' (449). Although the language is, as ever, obfuscatory, and mediated through Nataly's disturbed consciousness, it would appear that Meredith, in his depiction of her belief that the 'divine scourge' had fixed itself to her breast as a form of chastisement, is suggesting that she has breast cancer, which she construes as a form of deserved punishment (449).⁴⁶ Her death, which occurs symbolically both before that of Mrs Burman, and on the night of Victor's planned election speech, is presaged by her statement, 'I shall be at peace when the night is over' (496) which suggests the possibility of suicide, or willed extinction.

Meredith is ruthless in his construction of the novel's conclusion. While Nataly is granted the peace of a desired death, Victor is unceremoniously toppled, moving almost in an instant from a global financier, in charge of all he surveyed, and about to enter into government of the country, to an insane wreck, whose grand Idea, of 'a new epoch abjuring materialism' (504), and other such visions, is never finally grasped or articulated. Dudley Sowerby (the potential aristocratic suitor for Nesta), envisages the ending as a form of classical tragedy, 'brightest of the elect of Fortune, felled to the ground within an hour, he and all of his house!' (509). Meredith, however, withdraws such glamour from his protagonist, who is never seen directly again, but only in reports of his ravings. While Nataly's dead body 'was her advocate [...] Victor had more need of a covering shroud to keep calamity respected' (510). Death is preferable to an existence where all control has

gone, and the gibberings of the inner self are finally exposed for all to see. His humiliation is complete: Lakelands is exchanged for an insane asylum which, pathetically, he is reported to have said to be ‘on the whole, superior to Lakelands’ (512). He is to die without ever seeing his daughter again. Colney Durance, the novel’s official Pessimist, is given the novel’s final words:

He let Victor’s end be his expiation, and did not phrase blame of him. He considered the shallowness of the abstract Optimist exposed enough in Victor’s history. He was reconciled to it when, looking on their child, he discerned, that for a cancelling of the errors chargeable to them, the father and mother had kept faith with Nature. (514)

It is tempting to trust this voice, lifted out of the Babel, and surmounting Colney’s usual negativity: the errors of the past it suggests can be absolved and transcended, with Nesta leading the dawn of a new era. Yet, we have already been warned about ‘men invoking Nature [...] Men call on her for their defence, as a favourable witness: she is a note of their rhetoric’ (139). Schooled in scepticism by the novel, and trained to look beneath surface rhetoric to the clashing inconsistencies that might riot below, the reader is unlikely to accept such a pat conclusion which is possibly designed to raise as many questions as it answers. *Nature*, as Meredith brilliantly showed in *The Egoist*, is a term appropriated for multiple ends. In all its meanderings, condensations, and sharp psychological dissections, *One of Our Conquerors* captures in vivid terms the anxieties, neuroses, and concerns of a culture which saw itself in decline. What it does not do is offer a drug to remedy the disease.

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¹ Benjamin Ward Richardson, *Diseases of Modern Life* (London: Macmillan, 1876).

² Meredith had got to know Silas Weir Mitchell during his visit to England in 1885 and corresponded with him thereafter. Weir Mitchell was an novelist and poet as well as a leading physician, and Meredith was enthusiastic about his early works, describing his first novel, *In War Time*, for example, as 'a piece of psychology wrought into a production of art'. C. L. Cline, ed. *The Letters of George Meredith* 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), II, 765. Letter to S. Weir Mitchell, April 2, 1885. *Wear and Tear* was first published in 1871, and was frequently revised and reprinted, reaching its 8th edition by 1897.

³ On Meredith's style, see Anne C. Henry, 'Explorations in Dot-and-Dashland: George Eliot's Aphasia', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61 (2006), 311-342.

⁴ *Letters* II, 999. To Augusts Jessopp, May 30, 1890.

⁵ See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 125-48, for an exploration of the ways in which the rat shifted in the Victorian cultural imaginary, to become a figure that 'transgressed the boundaries that separated the city from the sewer', and the upper levels of the body and spirit from its more despised lower forms.

⁶ George Meredith, *One of Our Conquerors*, ed. Margaret Harris (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1975), p. 40. This excellent edition, now sadly out of print, is the only edited version of the novel. It reproduces in facsimile the text of the 1910 Memorial edition (London: Constable and Co), so all page references are also those of the Memorial edition text. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. There was by this time an established genre of visiting Rajahs recording their impressions of their visits to England, see for example, E W. West, ed., *Diary of the late Rajah of Kolhapoor during his visit to Europe in 1870* (London: Smith, Elder, 1872) (which is deeply uncritical, unlike Meredith's text). Rudyard Kipling had published in the *Fortnightly Review* (Feb 1890) 164-76, 'One View of the Question', which purported to come from an Indian based in London, 'in the honoured service of His Highness the Rao Sahib of Jagesur' which like *One of Our Conquerors* gave a shocked picture of night-time London: 'At nightfall it is the custom of countless thousands of women to descend into the streets and sweep them, roaring, making jests, and demanding liquor', p. 165.

⁷ See, for example, Gayla S. McGlamery, "'The Malady Afflicting England: *One of Our Conquerors* as a Cautionary Tale', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 46:3 (Dec. 91), 327-50, which also reads the novel as a reflection on the position of England, although largely in political terms; Judith Wilt, *The Readable People of George Meredith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), ch. 6; Vanessa Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2012, ch. 6, and Neil Roberts, *Meredith and the Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), which offers a Bakhtinian reading of Meredith's work. Gillian Beer, in her wonderful reading of the novel, suggests that it is self-consciously about the limitations of language, and of fallen man: 'Victor's fall on London Bridge starts his journey towards self-knowledge and

death', 'One of Our Conquerors: Language and Music', in *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 263-80 (pp. 266, 279).

⁸ Roberts, p. 230.

⁹ See Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel: A History of Father and Son*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 113, where Richard's father brings in a phrenologist to examine his son.

¹⁰ See George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1876), Bk I, Ch. 3, p. 34. The image anticipates Grandcourt's drowning, and Gwendolen's jump into the water which she describes as 'leaping from my crime, and there it was – close to me as I fell – there was the dead face – dead, dead' Bk III, Ch. 56, 231-32.

¹¹ For the enthusiastic, see Lionel Johnson's review in the *Academy* 13 June, 1891, reprinted in Ioan Williams, *Meredith: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 360-63. Although an excellent selection, the choice, in balancing the positive with the negative reviews, does not quite capture the extent of the hostility aroused.

¹² 'New Novels', *The Graphic*, May 16, 1891.

¹³ See, for example, 'Mr Meredith's New Story', *Daily News* May 2, 1891. Meredith comments to Clement Shorter (*Letters*, May 17, 1891), 'It seems, from the general attack on the first sentence of my last novel, that literary playfulness in description is antipathetic to our present taste' (II, 1028-29).

¹⁴ 'Mr George Meredith's New Novel', *Pall Mall Gazette*, April 21, 1898. Meredith had written for the *Pall Mall Gazette* early on his career and had contributed 'A Pause in the Strife' on 9 July 1886. By this time, however, his friend W. T. Stead, who had been the editor of the *Gazette*, had moved on, and Meredith was advising him on his new journal, the *Review of Reviews*.

¹⁵ *Letters*, II, 1035-36. To Louisa Lawrence, July 6, 1891.

¹⁶ *Letters*, II, 1033-34. To George Stevenson, June 16, 1891.

¹⁷ J. M. Barrie, 'Mr George Meredith's Novels', *Contemporary Review*, 54 (1888), 575-86, p. 575.

¹⁸ Both Joyce and Woolf were strongly influenced in their writing by Meredith. [detail to be added]

¹⁹ Meredith had a long standing relationship with the *Fortnightly Review* which had previously published *Vittoria* (Jan-Dec 1866); *Beauchamp's Career* (Aug 1874-Dec 1875); *The Tragic Comedians* (Oct. 1880-Feb 1881); *Diana of the Crossways* (June 1884-Dec 84). *One of Our Conquerors* was serialised between October 1890, and May 1891. Chapman and Hall published the three volume edition on 15 April 1891, so before the conclusion of the serialisation (which was shorter than the novel form). For details on the differences between the texts, see Margaret Harris 'Textual Note' in her edition of *One of Our Conquerors*.

²⁰ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'The Woman's Suffrage Bill', *Fortnightly Review*, 51 (April 1889).

²¹ W. R. Lawson, 'An Averted Crash in the City', *Fortnightly Review*, 54 ((Dec 1890), 932-45; A. J. Wilson, 'English Bankers and the Bank of England Reserve', 946-58; Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', 55 (Feb. 1891), 292-319.

²² Sir John Frederick Maurice, 'Can we Hold Our Own?' *Fortnightly Review*, 49 ((June 1888), 733-44; 'What our Navy Should Be', Frank Harris writes a short piece of his own, introducing three articles by three navy admirals: Sir Thomas Symonds, G. Phipps Hornby, and Frederick Beauchamp Paget Seymour, Baron Alcester: (Nov 1888), 557-80.

²³ Gillian Beer and Margaret Harris, eds, *The Notebooks of George Meredith* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1983), 70. The note is from the Black Notebook which he kept from the mid 1880s to early 1890s.

²⁴ James Crichton-Browne, 'Circles of Mental Disorder – Modern Nervous Diseases. An Address delivered at the opening of the Section of Psychology at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association', *British Medical Journal*, August 14, 1880, 262-67, p. 263.

²⁵ Locomotor ataxia, which was identified as the disease that was crippling Meredith in the late 80s, was also associated with syphilis at this period (with detailed research ongoing at the West Riding Lunatic Asylum which Crichton Browne had headed), and there has therefore been speculation that Meredith himself was suffering from this condition. However, there is nothing in the letters or other documents to suggest that he, or others around him, made that association.

²⁶ Crichton-Browne, 265.

²⁷ Poe's poem, 'The Conqueror Worm' was first published in 1843, but in 1845 was absorbed into his popular tale 'Ligeia'.

²⁸ Crichton-Browne, 267. The concluding couplet is from Burns' 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', while 'more inviolate than the streak of silver sea' manages to combine John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*, reworked by Gladstone in 1870 to 'that streak of silver sea', with Tennyson's 1851 laureate poem 'To The Queen' celebrating her democratic reign, 'Broad-based upon her people's will/ And Compass'd by the inviolate sea'

(which was in turn the title of a famous painting in 1861 by James Clarke Hooke). For the role of art at this period in responding to anxieties about invasion, see Christiana Payne, 'Our English Coasts: Defence and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in, *Art and Identity at the Water's Edge*, ed. by Tricia Cusack (London: Routledge, 2017).

²⁹ For details on the growth of chemist shops at this period see Hilary Marland, 'The Medical Activities of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Chemists and Druggists, with special reference to Wakefield and Huddersfield', *Medical History*, 31 (1987), 415-39, and Roy Church, 'The British Market for Medicine in the late Nineteenth Century: The Innovative Impact of S. M. Burroughs and Co', *Medical History*, 49 (2005), 281-98. The journal, *Chemist and Druggist*, which has run continuously from 1859, is full of details concerning the likely stock and practices of the chemist shops. In an article on 'Tippling at the Chemist's Counter', in 1890 the *British Medical Journal* warned of the dangers of medicated wine (May 10, p. 1085). For similar anxieties regarding secret tippling by women in grocers' shops of the period see, 'The Woman Secret Drinker in the Late Nineteenth-Century Press', in *Anxious Times: Medicine and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Amelia Bonea et al (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2019).

³⁰ Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 1, 106. White tracks Meredith's obsession with shame back to the period when his wife Mary Ellen left him for the painter Henry Wallis, and Wallis' image of Meredith in his 'The Death of Chatterton', became a public and visible symbol of his cuckolding.

³¹ Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking* ch. 6.

³² For a discussion of these images in relation to George Eliot's work, see Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 192, 231.

³³ David Trotter, 'The Invention of Agoraphobia', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32:2 (2004), 463-74.

³⁴ Terry J. Knapp and Michael T. Schumacher, eds., *Westphal's "Die Agoraphobie", with commentary* (Lanham, MD: United Press of America, 1988), p. 66.

³⁵ Silas Weir Mitchell, *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked* 4th edn (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co, 1882), 26.

³⁶ Mitchell, p. 6.

³⁷ Andrew Wynter, 'Early Warnings', in *Subtle Brains and Lissom Fingers: Being some of the Chisel-Marks of our Industrial and Scientific Progress*, 3rd edn (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1869), 410.

³⁸ Wynter, 403, 415.

³⁹ Frederic McCabe, 'On Mental Strain and Overwork', *Journal of Mental Science*, 21 (Oct 1875), 388-402, pp. 397-402.

⁴⁰ Richardson, *Diseases*, pp. 230, 76.

⁴¹ Louis King, *Work of Body, Work of Brain* (Bath: C. Hallett, 1885), p. 35.

⁴² Benjamin Ward Richardson, 'The Health of the Mind', *Longman's Magazine*, 14:80 (June 1889), 145-63, pp. 162-63. The article was in the same issue as an article by Meredith's close friend, Augustus Jessopp, 'A Chant of Arcady', pp. 187-93, so might well have engaged Meredith's attention. It is unclear whether Meredith and Richardson knew each other. He was physician to the Royal Literary Fund, and mixed in literary circles, spending a weekend, for example at Edward Clodd's house with other guests, including Meredith's close friend and neighbour, Grant Allen. Meredith had many close friends and dining companions amidst the medical fraternity, and through Silas Weir Mitchell, Grant Allen, and James Sully he had contact with key figures in the development of the psychological thought of the time. [supply references]

⁴³ *Letters* II, p. 1039. August 9 (1891 or later), to an unidentified correspondent.

⁴⁴ Eg Wilde [supply details]

⁴⁵ James Sully, 'Genius and Precocity', *Nineteenth Century* 19 (1886), 897-948; Grant Allen, 'Genius and Talent', *Fortnightly Review* 44 (August 1888), 240-255. Attempting to cut out the 'hysterical and inflated verbiage' which surrounded the idea of genius, Allen suggested there was little distinction between talent and genius, expressing his belief in 'the wider democracy of Talent as against the exclusive oligarchy of Genius' (254). He does, however, take the trouble to stress his admiration for the genius of such men as Arnold, Morris, Spencer and Meredith, an interesting grouping which prioritises Meredith's role as a social thinker.

⁴⁶ Beer notes that 'we discover or infer that she is dying from cancer of the breast' although she also suggests that 'Neither Victor nor Nesta know' (p. 272).