"A Reading of Life": A Semiotic Study of
The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Diana of the Crossways

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ABSTRACT:

The Victorian novelist George Meredith extends the meaning of "reading" and "text" as modern semioticians do: reading means understanding and interpreting, while non-verbal signs like people and the world in general are "texts" for reading. In The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Diana of the Crossways, in both of which the dominant characters are writers of books, Meredith exploits this large metaphor of reading and text fully. In both novels not only are the main characters themselves "texts" read by other characters, but they write books the contents of which are read and discussed extensively. These fictitious texts take on a pervasive influence on the novels they appear. Through references to them Meredith is able to suggest a dramatic tension between imaginary books and fictional characters' lives: sometimes the ideas in a book are faithfully applied to life; sometimes a character's experience of life is used by writer-characters in their books.

KEY WORDS:

reading, books, life, letters, diaries,
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One of the contributions modern semiotics makes to the study of literature is to extend the notion of reading objects from verbal signs to non-verbal signs. Roland Barthes in *The Semiotic Challenge* argues that modern men spend their lives reading virtually everything under the sun--images, gestures, behaviors, often without realizing it (157). Robert Scholes in *Semiotics and Interpretation* defines "text" as "a set of signals transmitted through some medium from a sender to a receiver in a particular code or set of codes" (149); the medium presumably includes both verbal and non-verbal signs. These ideas are by no means new to modern thinkers of literature. Long before the twentieth century, George Meredith's titles for two volumes of his poems--*A Reading of Earth* and *A Reading of Life*--show that he understands the extended meaning of reading and text as good as modern semioticians. In *A Reading of Earth*, "he acknowledges man's evolutionary descent and the Darwinian struggles for survival. His name for these natural conditions is 'earth,' and he tries to invent ways of 'reading' her that can give meaning to the experiences of human life" (Hanley 8). In a poem entitled "Outer and Inner," for example, the speaker says that he "calmly bent / To read the lines dear Earth designs / Shall speak her life on ours" (ll. 30-32). In *A Reading of Life*, Meredith presents life's "Vital Choice" between chastity and sensuality, represented by Artemis and Aphrodite respectively. In the second poem "With the Persuader"--the persuader being Aphrodite herself--Meredith depicts our fascination with the sensuous goddess, who is

"Life's flowering, Life's root:  
Unread, divined; unseen, behold;  
The evanescent, ever-present she,  
Great Nature's stern necessity  
In radiance clothed, to softness quelled . . ."

So Meredith's speaker urges us to "read" the sensuous aspects of life embodied in Aphrodite. The large assumption for Meredith, then, is that life and people, like printed words, are legible. In *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Diana of the Crossways*, in both of which the dominant characters are writers of books, Meredith exploits this large metaphor of reading and text fully. In both novels not only are the main characters themselves "texts" read by other characters, but they write books the contents of which are read and discussed extensively. These fictitious texts take on a pervasive influence on the novels they appear. Through references to them Meredith is able to suggest a dramatic tension between imaginary books and fictional characters' lives: sometimes the ideas in a book are
faithfully applied to life; sometimes a character's experience of life is used by writer-characters in their books.

At the very start of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* the reader encounters a book written by a philosopher and "Modern Aphorist," Sir Austin Feverel: "Some years ago was printed, and published anonymously, dedicated to the author's enemies, a small book of original Aphorisms, under the heading, THE PILGRIM'S SCRIP" (I, 1). *The Ordeal*, then, begins with a book, the first sentence being followed by an expository paragraph about the superiority of this particular book over other books of wisdom by other "Modern Aphorists." The rest of the first chapter, which runs to ten pages, describes how men and women receive the book differently. "Men read, and tossed it aside, amused, or weary," while women, who are perversely looked on as "domesticated Wild Cats" by Sir Austin, welcome the book and all beg "the favour of a Copy of his Beautiful Book" (I, 2-3). The women-worshipers of the book form a court about Sir Austin, "introduced themselves, and claimed admittance, on the strength of their admiration of THE PILGRIM'S SCRIP" (I, 5).

Such a long exposition about a fictitious book and its readers is unique in fiction, and it implants the impression that henceforward *The Pilgrim's Scrip* will be the book in *The Ordeal*, the book demanding to be read, understood, interpreted and revered by the novel's characters. Indeed, Sir Austin creates for his son Richard an educational system based upon the book, and aphorisms from that book form the Note-book, the curriculum for Richard's education. Whatever the wisdom of the "scrip" may be, it is artistically important as an object, a book to be consulted and discussed by Sir Austin and other reader-characters in the course of the ordeal of Richard Feverel.

A significant religious meaning is suggested by the title of Sir Austin's book, which alludes to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Sir Austin writes the book to project his son's pilgrimage through life. In his Note-Book, for example,

... the youth's progressionary phases were mapped out in sections, from Simple Boyhood to the Blossoming Season, The Magnetic Age, The Period of Probation, from Which successfully passed through, he was to emerge into a Manhood worthy of Paradise. (IV, 26)

Etymologically, "scrip" is a pilgrim's knapsack; hence a small bag or wallet. If Richard is the pilgrim, Sir Austin's book becomes a burden that Richard has to carry throughout his life. Furthermore, "Scrip" suggests "Scripture," and *The Pilgrim's Scrip* is a veritable Bible for Sir Austin and for many of its readers.
The Bible is the word of God; *The Pilgrim's Scrip* is the word of Sir Austin, who plays God to his beloved son Richard. The narrator points out Sir Austin's intention to play God in Richard's first trial, the rick-burning incident when he is fourteen. Sir Austin, like an all-seeing god, knows that Richard is the guilty party in the arson of Farmer Blaize's ricks, but he does not try to force his son to confess. His possession of his son's secret "allowed him to act, and in a measure to feel, like Providence; enabled him to observe and provide for the movement of creatures in the dark" (VIII, 53). Sir Austin, moreover, expects his readers to regard the scrip as a sacred book. It is so regarded by Lady Blandish, a neighboring widow secretly in love with Sir Austin; she keeps a copy of the scrip "bound in purple-velvet, gilt-edged, as decorative ladies like to have holier books, and she carried it about with her, and quoted it, and . . . hunted a noble quarry . . ." (XV, 92).

As Sir Austin's sacred book, *The Pilgrim's Scrip* is not conceived in abstract terms; its wisdom is derived from Sir Austin's bitter experiences with women and the people around him. In a sense it is Sir Austin's "reading of life." On the subject of women, for instance, Sir Austin declares in the scrip: "I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilized by Man" (I, 2), and in his System he excludes females from the boy's life until he was twenty-five. The woman-hating aphorisms in the scrip are records of Sir Austin's reflections after Lady Feverel deserts him for the family poet Diaper Sandoe. Adrian Harley, Richard's tutor and an excellent reader and interpreter of the scrip, remarks on the relevance of the scrip to the people around Sir Austin:

"Your Aunt Helen, I was going to say, my dear boy, is an extraordinary woman. It was from her originally that the Pilgrim first learned to call the female the practical animal. He studies us all, you know. THE PILGRIM'S SCRIP is the abstract portraiture of his surrounding relative" (XXXVIII, 298).

As a result of this interplay between the Book and life, "the characters within the novel created by Meredith are yet in search of an author who will describe their salient features in abstract" (Mitchell 75).

A constant interrelationship between the scrip and the novel is thus established and maintained throughout *The Ordeal*. The scrip serves not only as a commentary, but as a directive. Like the Bible, it is quoted and interpreted throughout the major episodes of the novel. On Richard's seventh birthday, Sir Austin takes the occasion to examine the working of the System. Sir Austin has
the child examined medically from head to foot--to the great embarrassment of the child. Lady Blandish quotes an aphorism from the script to comfort him: "On the Popularity of the Forbidden Fruit, and the preference we have for it, provided an Innocent offer it us" (III, 19). Sir Austin himself, of course, makes good use of the book to instruct his son. After the arson trial, the narrator says ironically that "Richard passes through his preliminary ordeal, and is the occasion of an aphorism" (Meredith's heading for Chapter XIII). By accident or design, the book of Sir Austin's aphorisms is found open on Richard's dressing table:

... Hastily combing his hair, Richard glanced down, and read:
"The Dog returneth to his Vomit: the Liar must eat his Lie."
Underneath was interjected in pencil: "The Devil's mouthful!"
Young Richard ran downstairs feeling that his father has struck him in the face. (XIII, 78)

It is as if Sir Austin does not have to instruct in person; his book will do the talking and admonition for him. When all is over, the "occasion" enriches the content of Sir Austin's Note-Book, which grows as Richard grows and endures more ordeals. A new aphorism appropriately concludes the chapter:

In the dark, the dead leaves beating on his face, he drew forth the Note-Book, and with groping fingers traced out: "There is for the mind but one grasp of Happiness: from that uppermost pinnacle of Wisdom, when we see that this world is well-designed." (XIII, 84)

When Richard enters "The Blossoming Season," that between Boyhood and Adolescence," Sir Austin again consults his Note-Book and decides that Richard should be instructed to cherish an ambition for statesmanship. They read together history and the speeches of British orators to this purpose.

Sir Austin has succeeded in bringing up Richard as a healthy and noble young man, but his System is bound to founder because of the discrepancy between books and life. The narrator makes this clear in an aphoristic saying: "There is nothing like a Theory for binding the Wise. Sir Austin, despite his rigid watch and ward, knew less of his son than the servant of his household" (XV, 96). Sir Austin's ignorance is due, of course, to his excessive trust in the Book of Aphorism. His sophisticated theories are "purely hypothetical conformations originating in books rather than life" (Korg 259). Sir Austin fails to see that there is "an essential disjunction between the world of reality and the world of language" (Robey 47). As is now well known, in Saussure's theory of
the signs there is no natural or necessary relationship between the sign as a whole and the reality to which it refers. As David Robey says, "Works articulate our experience of things, they do not just express or reflect it; they give form to what, without language and other sign-systems, would merely be a chaotic and undifferentiated jumble of ideas" (47). Sir Austin's writing of the script is such an attempt to put things in order. But reality is infinitely chaotic. Therein lies Sir Austin's trouble.

The inapplicability of books to life is especially apparent in the matter of love and marriage. Sir Austin is wise enough to see that he should develop and strengthen the boy's mind and body so that the boy will be well prepared to meet the inevitable coming of passions. But the trouble with Sir Austin is that he wants things to happen in a prescribed way; he wants Richard to be brought up "by the book," so to speak. Richard is now eighteen, "The Magnetic Age, the Age of Violent attractions" (XVI, 97), and Sir Austin is concerned with Richard's marriage. He prescribes that his son should marry at the age of five-and-twenty, so he sets out to London to find an ideal girl, equally well brought up, to match his son's unspoiled nature. He secretly preserves on an open leaf of the Note-Book names of families with whom an alliance "would not degrade his blood" (XIX, 118). He has even written a guide book for Richard's marriage:

He read to her [Lady Blandish] the secret book in his own handwriting, composed for Richard's marriage Guide: containing Advice and Directions to a Young Husband, full of the most tender wisdom, and delicacy: so she thought: nay, not wanting in poetry, though neither rhymed nor measured. (XXVIII, 197)

But nature fails to cooperate with Sir Austin's prescribed program. Just at the moment when Sir Austin is looking up a fair paragon among the British aristocracy, Richard meets Lucy Desborough, quite by accident. The father, as John Erskine has pointed out, "will be disappointed in the boy, not because the girl isn't all that the fondest love could desire for the son, but because she has been provided in this casual way, as though the system were not necessary" (146-147). The father withholds his approval of Richard's hasty marriage, and this reluctance to welcome Lucy wrecks their happiness and his. Meredith's message is clear: it is dangerous to try to force life to conform to a book. As Adrian shrewdly observes, Lucy is "too good for a farmer. Such a spark would explode any Systems" (XXIV, 151). The final irony, however, is that Lucy is in
fact the kind of ideal, innocent girl whom Sir Austin was diligently searching for in London.

The contrast between the prescribed program in a book and what Meredith calls "nature" is made clear in several important moments of realization in Richard's life. Unlike his father, the youth does not rely on the authority of the scrip for the basis of his action. He does not read his father's book as enthusiastically as Lady Blandish and other inmates at Raynham Abbey. He is sensible enough to see certain of his father's biases with regard to women and the world:

"What nonsense it is what my father writes about women!" thought Richard. "He says they can't laugh, and don't understand humour. It comes," he reflected, "of his shutting himself from the world." And the idea that he was seeing the world, and feeling wiser, flattered him. (XL, 328)

Richard learns about love and sex not through reading books, but in an accidental way. In a scene of great comedy, Sir Austin confides to Lady Blandish his intention of seeking a mate for Richard, and asks her to be the mother to the boy in his absence. Richard happens to pass by and sees his father bend above her hand and raise it to his lips. In "surveying the scene aghast" Richard has taken a hint and found "the key" to love and sex. A farcical comedy of mistakes is involved in this scene: "The baronet's reverent kiss is intended as mere courtly homage, but Richard, who has heard nothing of the conversation and catches merely a glimpse of this attitude, is fired by it to imagine a whole world of romance" (Erskine 253). Love and sex are left to nature. The scene is immediately followed by Richard's meeting of Lucy, and natural attraction guides Richard to exactly the right choice of mate.

Even Sir Austin is forced to admit his mistake in trusting his scrip too much. When Richard, stung by remorse at his infidelity to Lucy, wanders abroad and turns a deaf ear to his father's repeated request to return home, Sir Austin's heart is softened--partly by the sight of Lucy's maternal cares; again nature and accident take over:

"Here my plan with Richard was false," he reflected, "in presuming that anything save blind fortuity would bring him such a mate as he should have." He came to add: "And has got!" (XLVII, 408)

Nature, moreover, heals the guilt-ridden Richard when he wanders in a German
forest. For the chapter entitled "Nature speaks," in which Richard receives a revelation, Meredith concludes with a passage describing the "breathing" nature:

When he looked out from his trance on the breathing world, the small birds hopped and chirped; warm fresh sunlight was over all the hills. He was on the edge of the forest, entering a plain clothed with corn under a spacious morning sky. (XLVI, 407)

Our last glimpse of Sir Austin's book occurs at the time when every Raynham inmate concerned is waiting for the return of the self-exiled son. Lady Blandish spots a little book in a half-opened parcel:

It was nothing other than the old Note-Book. Lady Blandish turned over the leaves, and came upon the later jottings.

She read: "A maker of Proverbs--what is he but a narrow mind the mouthpiece of narrower?" (XLVIII, 417)

Lady Blandish protests against the embittered tone of the new aphorism, but Sir Austin's "later jottings" show how far he has realized his mistake in depending too much on his book for Richard's education and how he has tried to correct himself, although his mistakes are irreparable. As John Erskine says, "It is a mean kind of morality which tries to make human nature tidy and logical in books, knowing perfectly well how different it is in life" (258).

Sir Austin's Pilgrim's Scrip is allowed to exercise full power at Raynham Abbey because its inmates and people associated with them are struck with a mania for printed matter. Jacob Korg has rightly observed that "the monomaniacs of The Ordeal share a tendency to base their ideas on literature rather than life. Much of their folly can be traced to a quixotic infatuation with verbal manifestations" (258). It is perhaps more accurate to call these people "bibliomanics"--not in the sense of collecting books, but of their excessive enthusiasm for printed matter (and not just in literature) and in making other people read print. Bibliomania is a rampant disease that affects both the higher and lower orders of the house.

Lady Feverel is an early victim of this print-madness. She is as poor judge of men as she is of literature. When "her little fretful refinements of taste and sentiment are not instinctively responded to," she turns to the family laureate Diaper Sandoe and falls in love with the poet and his second-rate poetry. Meredith quotes two lines of Sandoe's poetry to illustrate Lady Feverel's literary taste:
"For I am not the first who found
the name of Mary fatal!"

Says a subsequent sentimental alliterative love-poem of Diaper's.
(II, 14)

Lady Feverel's desertion of Sir Austin is, it appears, partly a consequence of reading bad poetry. Equally misguided by the same poet is Richard, who enjoys reading and quoting Sandoe's sentimental poems. He quotes "that little poem of Sandoe's" to describe his ride in the park with Carola, Mrs. Grandison's youngest daughter, endorsed by Sir Austin as a mate for Richard:

"She rides in the park on a prancing bay,
She and her squires together:
Her dark locks gleam from a bonnet of gray,
And toss with the tossing feather

(XXIX, 210)

These verses by Diaper Sandoe that Richard had memorized are altogether inapplicable to the little girl Carola with whom he rides in the park (See Bartlett 339). The degree of Richard's seriousness or playfulness is difficult to fix. In quoting Sandoe, Richard may be pretending an interest in the girl to hide his passion for Lucy; he may even be mocking her; but his taste for the sentimental verses (he memorizes them) may suggest why he falls easy prey to the "erring, beautiful" Mrs. Mount. The seduction of Richard by Mrs. Mount, of course, destroys Richard's hope for an innocent reunion with Lucy. Richard has earlier shown this inclination to apply books to life when he was a boy. In their desperation to rescue Tom Bakewell from prison, Richard and Ripton Thompson look for practical ways of escape in books. Adrian finds the boys studying Latude's Escape and a book by Jonathan Wild, both famous Eighteenth century criminals (IX, 60).

Other residents of Raynham Abbey read books of diverse natures. Tom Blaize, the farmer's son and a lout who loses his heart to Lucy, gives evidence of his passion by reading outdated fashion-books which had belonged to his mother. Young Ripton Thompson, while serving as a student in his father's law office, is found reading pornographic literature (XIX, 125). Mrs. Berry's bridal gift for Lucy is Dr. Kichener's The Cook's Oracle, a rather unromantic book used for the occasion of romance. But Lucy is more interested in serious books than in cookery. In her separation from Richard, waiting patiently at the Isle of Wight for a reunion with him, she is almost seduced by Lord Mountfalcon. The evil
lord, however, does not seduce Lucy; on the contrary, he becomes domesticated by Her and tamely reads history books to her and her unborn child (XLIII, 369).

The ultimate infatuation with books belongs to Mrs. Caroline Grandison, whom Sir Austin visits in his search for a mate for Richard. She is "said to be a legitimate descendant of the Great Sir Charles (XXII, 134) from Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*. Meredith is here following a parodic twist originated by Lawrence Sterne. As C. L. Cline says,

As Sterne claims that the Yorick of *Tristram Shandy* is a descendant of the jester in the court of Hamlet's father and as Trollope suggests that the Rev. Mr. Slope of *Barchester Towers* is a descendant of the obnoxious Dr. Slop of *Tristram Shandy*, Meredith is here attributing Mrs. Grandison's patrilineal descent to a fictional ancestor. (134)

A devotee of Sir Charles' morality and manners, Mrs. Grandison marries a man who will take her name, and then unsuccessfully tries to produce a son who will carry on that name. After eight daughters are born, she "appeared to lose heart" (XXII, 135). In Mrs. Grandison's case, then, books and life are completely intermingled and the line between fiction and reality blurred. Sir Austin himself could have been seriously affected by Mrs. Grandison's family name in his choice for a perfect mate for Richard. He prefers a person made "by the book" (Carola Grandison) to a person whose name (Lucy Desborough) is too familiar to him.

The bibliomaniacs of Raynham Abbey naturally are addicted to reading, and their reading goes far beyond books. They are fascinated by the signifiers with a fond disregard of their signifieds. Thus they read the names of people on envelopes and study scraps of paper. Richard, for example, is fascinated with Lady Blandish's full name--"Emmeline Clementina Matilda Laura, Countess Blandish" (XVII, 108). Ralph Morton, an early rival of Richard, is even more obsessed with names than Richard; he loves Clare's name before he loves her as a person. He tells Richard that he likes to write the name of Clare. Richard "reperused the address" on a letter Ralph asks him to send to Clare, and "read the words again and again, Clare Doria Forey," wondering what business Ralph has to write to her. Even Richard is affected by Ralph's infatuation with Clare's name and feels that "Clare Doria Forey" is "perfect melody" (XVII, 109). Lucy's love for Richard dates back to the day when she got hold of "a bit of paper once with the young gentleman's handwriting" from a housemaid (XXIV, 149). At their first meeting on the weir Richard is surprised to find Lucy
possesses that scrap of paper, which is "a page of the sacrificed Poems." The narrator comments on the "wonderment immense" that his little piece of writing works for Lucy and Richard:

Who would have said, have thought, that, where all else perished, Odes, fluttering bits of broad-winged Epic, Idylls, Lines, Stanzas, this one sonnet to the Stars should be miraculously reserved for such a starry fate! passing Beatitude! (XCIII, 113)

More substantial but still private pieces of writing--such as reports, diaries, and letters--appear in *The Ordeal* and are read with intensity. Heavy Benson writes a formal report on the conduct of the two boys in the arson, and has it "read out before the two boys, who listened demurely, as to an ordinary newspaper incident" (VIII, 52). The most pathetic piece of writing for Richard--and for the reader of *The Ordeal* too--is Clare's diary. Pathos is the keynote in Clare's story, and it is brought to a full measure in Richard's reading of her diary. Feeling that Richard despises her for marrying an older man, Clare kills herself. She leaves a diary which reveals to Richard her love for him and her choice of suicide as a result of his saying that death was preferable to a marriage like hers. In the passage that describes Richard's reading of the diary, quotations from the diary are interspersed with Richard's act of reading. First, Clare's mother chokingly tells Richard, "Read this, and thrust a leather bound pocket-book trembling in his hand" (XLIV, 387). Richard starts reading, and the past becomes horribly clear to him:

He read on.

He read one of his old forgotten compositions penned when he had that ambition [of writing poetry].

He could not read for tears.

Painfully, with blinded eyes, he looked over the breathless pages. She spoke of his marriage, her finding the Ring.

But now as he read his eyes were fixed, and the delicate feminine handwriting like a black thread drew on his soul to one terrible conclusion.
He wrapped the thoughts in shrouds, but he was again reading. (XLIV, 387-9)

In the process of Richard's reading, Richard has the chance to check the reality in the past. Meredith could have told Clare's story with the voice of an omniscient narrator, but had he done so, the powerful reaction of Richard to the intimate revelations of the diary would be less moving to the reader. This way, Richard's discovery is our discovery, and we can understand that Richard feels that he has killed her. In marrying Lucy he feels he is guilty of intensely and unwittingly wounding the devoted Clare. Subsequently, and as a direct result of reading the diary, he estranges himself from Lucy and his father in his extreme feeling of degradation.

The Ordeal makes traditional use of letters (which are slightly more public than a diary) exchanged by characters. This epistolary convention, originated by Samuel Richardson and used by many Victorian novelists, provides another variation of the narrative voice. When Meredith includes a letter in a novel, he shows us the recipient of the letter in the act of reading it. Both the content of the letter and the interpretation of it are essential to the novel. The rick-burning is explained and resolved in Richard's letter to Ripton, given to us in Chapter XIV ("In which the last act of the Bakewell comedy is closed in a letter"). When Richard's surreptitious wedding with Lucy is being arranged in London, Sir Austin sits at home reading Richard's daily, dull letters, which serve as Richard's camouflage. Parts of these letters are quoted in the text. Richard himself in his wretchedness has to wait anxiously for his father's response when news of his marriage is divulged; he writes his father, "I have written to you three letters, and you do not reply to them. I desire and pray that you will come or permit me to come to you and throw myself at your feet, and beg your forgiveness, and hers..." (XL, 322). In his self-exile Richard refuses to read letters from Raynham Abbey, though we are given parts of these letters. On his return to London, he reads Mrs. Mount's letter, written "in a sloping feminine hand, and flourished with lights all over" (XLVII, 411); it reveals Lord Mountfalcon's plot to seduce Lucy. Finally, Richard's duel with Mountfalcon is reported in the long letter from Lady Blandish to Austin Wentworth, given in the last chapter of the novel. As Jacob Korg says, "The shock of Lucy's death at the end of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is intensified by the fact that it is passed on to us in a letter" (253). Meredith was to use letters and the reading of them even more extensively in Diana of the Crossways.
In a world characterized by abundant print and bibliomaniacs, it is easy for characters to transfer their objects of reading from printed matter to people and things. In this way reading takes on a new semiotic meaning: "to read" means "to interpret," "to understand," or "to comprehend." When the lady admirers of The Pilgrim's Scrip swarm down to form a court at Raynham, Heavy Benson can "read their object" (II, 25); meeting Lucy on the weir, Richard "drew close to her to read the nearest features of the vision" (XVIII, 115); in pleading Adrian to be kind to Lucy, the housemaid Molly "had to read his consent in relaxation of his austerity" (XXIV, 149); Mrs. Doria has discovered something of the strange impassive nature of Clare "from signs a mother can read when her eyes are not resolutely shut" (XXXIX, 310); Sir Austin tells Lady Blandish that if Richard loves him "he will read my wishes" (XL, 323).

More frequent than such reading of single intentions is the overall "reading" of people. Thus Sir Miles Papworth, the Feverels' principal political opponent, is contrasted with Sir Austin because "his way of reading [women] was decidedly straightforward" (I, 11). The Pilgrim's Scrip contains an aphorism about using "reading" to understand people:

"The reason why men and women are mysterious to us, and prove disappointing," we learn from THE PILGRIM'S SCRIP, "is, that we will read them from our own book: just as we are perplexed by reading ourselves from theirs." (XXXIII, 250)

The aphorism becomes ironic when applied to the aphorist himself: Sir Austin's inclination to read people from his book (the scrip) causes disasters. In this respect, women characters in The Ordeal are much better readers than men. Mrs. Doria is a woman "who pierced into the recesses of everybody's mind, and had always been in the habit of reading off her brother from infancy . . ." (XL, 323); she can also "read her daughter from her book" (XXXIII, 250); Mrs. Mount is a dangerous "enchantress" to Richard, because "she could read men with one quiver of her half-closed eyelashes . . . and catch the coming mood in a man, and fit herself to it" (XLII, 353). The ability to "read" people accurately is clearly an important personal asset. But Sir Austin wants more than that for Richard; he has trained his son to "read God's handwriting on the earth" (XV, 95).

Among the characters who read both books and people, Lady Blandish appears to be the most sensible reader of all. Erskine believes that she possesses "the comic spirit"--"a generous recognition of our own mistakes and
shortcomings" (256). She exemplifies this in a letter to Sir Austin telling what she has been able to accomplish in her interviews with Lucy. She wishes that he would drop his antagonism to the innocent girl. Characteristically, she refers to her readings to do the persuading:

"I cannot get on with Gibbon, so wait your return to recommence the readings. I dislike the sneering essence of his writings. I keep referring to his face, until the dislike seems to become personal. How different is it with Wordsworth! And yet I cannot escape from the thought that he is always solemnly thinking of himself (but I do reverence him). But his is curious: Byron was a great egoist, and yet I do not feel the same with him. He reminds me of a beast of the desert, savage and beautiful: and the former is what one would imagine a superior donkey reclaimed from the heathen, to be—a very superior donkey, I mean, with great power of speech and great natural complacency, and whose stubbornness you must admire as part of his mission. (XXVI, 274)

In comparing Wordsworth and Byron, Lady Blandish offers a correct reading of Sir Austin's character: the "great power of speech," "great complacency" and "stubbornness" are all Sir Austin's. Moreover, she implies that a sense of humor would do him some good. Sir Austin, indeed, looks at himself in the mirror when he has read this extraordinary statement. Looking at the outer self, he is taking an inventory of something inside of him which perhaps that sensible reader was classing with the superior donkey (see Erskine 256). As an ardent reader of The Pilgrim's Scrip, Lady Blandish displays more sense than others in turning, as Judith Wilt says, from "a sentimental lover of it" to "a real reader of the Book."² Parallel to this improvement in reading Sir Austin's book, Lady Blandish's reading of Sir Austin as a person gets better and better: "Lady Blandish, a most civilized reader of a most complex man, is no longer happy parsing the Book. Having rashly staked her character on the philosophy it contains, she has matured to insist on its bearing good fruit in human happiness" (Wilt, The Readable People 102).

Adrian Harley, on the other hand, is the subtlest reader of books and people. In the first place, he is an avid reader of books. He goes to bed with Horace after reporting Richard's behavior to Sir Austin: "The Wise Youth saw that his Chief was mollified behind his moveless mask, and went to bed and Horace, leaving Sir Austin in his study" (VII, 47). He habitually has a book in
his hand; after an evening discussion with Austin Wentworth about how Richard should repair his rick-burning, "The Wise Youth yawned, and stretched out a hand for any book that might be within his reach" (IX, 62). As an executor of Sir Austin's System, he is of course a great reader of The Pilgrim's Scrip. He can quote the scrip offhandedly and comfortably. In the arson case, Adrian is the only one who has not been down to Blaize's house to plead with the offended farmer. Sir Austin quotes his own aphorism to Adrian to defend his act of expediency:

"Expediency is man's wisdom, Adrian Harley. Doing right is God's."

Adrian curbed his desire to ask Sir Austin whether an attempt to counteract the just working of the Law, was Doing Right. The direct application of an Aphorism was unpopular at Raynham. (XIII, 80)

Adrian's restraint shows that he is a good reader of both the Book of Aphorisms and its author. It is Adrian who sees that Sir Austin wishes to be Providence to his son (VI, 51). Indeed, Adrian comes close to reading minds. He can read on a face the words being stifled in the heart (VII, 47).

But it is his detached attitude toward the objects of his reading—both books and people—that makes Adrian an unusual reader in The Ordeal. Judith Wilt has noted that Adrian seems essentially a looker-on, who "sees the life around him as a story, a play, and people around him as characters, and he reports what he sees to himself, sometimes to the other characters, always to the fictional reader, who is also viewing the action of the story" (The Readable People 89). In his refusal to get involved in and to be responsible for action, he resembles Mr. Lockwood, the famous civilized reader in Wuthering Heights, who listens to the story of his landlord as if Heathcliff were a hero from a book. This detached attitude Adrian probably has learned from reading philosophical authors: "To satisfy his appetites without rashly staking his character was the Wise Youth's problem for life. He had no intimates save Gibbon and Horace, and the society of these fine aristocrats of literature helped him to accept humanity as it had been, and was..." (II, 24). In reporting Adrian's reaction to the news of Richard's hasty wedding with Lucy, the narrator gives a penetrating sardonic analysis of Adrian's mind. Adrian is stoically calm:

Adrian really bore the news he had heard with creditable disinterestedness. When one has attained that felicitous point of
wisdom from which one sees all mankind to be fools, the diminutive objects may make that new moves they please, one does not marvel at them: their sedateness is as comical as their frolic, and their frenzies more comical still. On this intellectual eminence the Wise Youth had built his Castle, and he had lived in it from early period. . . . (XXXVI, 269)

The narrator has here assumed the cynical tone that Adrian might have used for this occasion. This, in addition to the jarring reiteration of Adrian's capitalized nickname "Wise Youth," suggests that Adrian's reading of life--his essentially detached, objective attitude--is rejected by Meredith.

The subject matter of Diana of the Crossways, Meredith's portrait of the artist as a young society woman, inherently leads to a still deeper and more extensive use of imaginary books and of books and reading as metaphors. Diana Merion Warwick, a woman of wit and beauty, is driven to write novels for a living after making the serious mistake of entering a loveless marriage. Because the main characters in her novels are modeled on the people she--and the reader of Diana--knows, the tension between books and life becomes more dramatic than in The Ordeal. Diana's novels are read and discussed by her circle of friends and enemies. To read Diana the novelist is to read Diana the woman and her social life.

As in The Ordeal, Meredith in Diana again employs several kinds of reading material in addition to full-length books to characterize his fictional world. Diaries and letters again frequently take the place of an omniscient narrative voice; the act of reading them and the responses of their readers are again emphasized. For example, the reader of Diana is first introduced to the heroine through the mediation "of diaries and diarists touching the heroine" (Meredith's heading for Chapter I). Diana, the favorite subject of town gossips, figures largely in their diaries and memoirs. The picture of a splendid woman gradually emerges from the pages of these fictitious diaries. Meredith includes Leaves from the Diary of Henry Wilmers, which deals exclusively with the wit and charm of the woman and preserves excerpts of her aphoristic remarks (which are worthy of a Sir Austin); Perry Wilkinson "describes her in his 'Recollections' as a splendid brune, eclipsing all the blondes coming near her" (I, 4). Diana's past is doled out to us by these diarists. Lady Pennon mentions how Diana "broke loose from her husband for good" (I, 4) while Dorset Wilmers, Henry Wilmers' cousin, refers to the most famous scandal of the period, "that
"A Reading of Life": A Semiotic Study of

_The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Diana of the Crossways_

Warwick-Dannisburgh affair" (I, 5). In Perry Wilkinson, who records Mr. Warwick's displeasure at Diana's silvery laugh at the whist-table, "We read that he burst out at last, with bitter mimicry, 'Yang, yang, yang!' and killed the bright laugh--shot it dead" (I, 6). Thus early in the novel this use of diaries reinforces the narrator's role as Diana's biographer. The use of diaries, furthermore, objectifies Diana as the focal point of social attention in a small world of gossip and rumors.³

No more diaries or diarists are referred to after the opening chapter, and correspondences between characters, especially that between Diana and her truest friend Lady Emma Dunstable, become main substitutes for the omniscient narrator. The narrator we have in Diana is her biographer, who edits her correspondences related to her life and who prints and includes a vast amount of letters in his biography. The crucial importance of letters and of the way they can be read is shown in a conversation between Diana and Emma. They talk about Warwick's suspicions of Diana's behavior with Lord Dannisburgh; Diana explains how Warwick searches for proofs of Diana's "infidelity":

"He broke open my desk and took my letters."
"Horrible! But the letters?" Emma shook with a nervous revulsion.
"Basetest of men! That is the unpardonable cowardice!" exclaimed Emma.
"The world will read them, dear," said Diana, and struck herself to ice.

Warwick's unwarranted reading of Diana's letters constitutes a serious invasion of privacy. Though the letters never are read by the world, Diana feels threatened by her husband. Later, Warwick brings suit for divorce, but he cannot prove his case; though they are not legally divorced, Diana separated from him permanently.

In a long letter from Diana to Emma, the closing paragraphs of which are quoted by the narrator, Emma reads of "the possibility of a classic friendship between women, the alliance of mutual devotedness men choose to doubt of" (VII, 78). Meredith stresses Emma's passionate reading of the letter:

She reperused it, perused and meditated... She read the letter backwards, and by snatches here and there; many perusals and hours passed before the scattered creature exhibited in its pages came to her out of the flying threads of the web as her living Tony, whom
she loved and prized and was ready to defend against the world. (VII, 78-79)

Meredith here makes a traditional use of the epistolary convention. If letters can ensure friendship, they are of course used by lovers for communication. Diana's letters are "really running well-waters" for a lover like Percy Dacier, whose "reading of them hurried him in pursuit of her from house to house during the autumn" (XXVIII, 300). But when their relationship is soured by Diana's divulging of his party's secret, Percy undergoes a revulsion to Diana's letters. When "a bulky letter" arrives at night from "that betraying woman," Percy tosses it unopened into the fire:

Diana's letter died hard. The corners were burnt to black tissue, with an edge or two of discoloured paper. A small frayed central heap still resisted, and, in kindness to the necessity for privacy, he impressed the fire-tongs to complete the execution. (XXXV, 362)

Percy here clearly "reads" much into Diana's letter--it is an object heavily signifying Diana's character for him. The burning of Diana's letter is Percy's way of scorching the memory of that "treacherous" woman out of his mind. Further correspondence--epistolary or otherwise--will be impossible between them, as the "death" of Diana's letter explicitly suggests.

More public but equally capable of being read in various ways are the journals and periodicals of the time, the principal carriers of gossip and rumors. In a journal Sir Lukin Dunstane reads of the quarrel between Diana and Warwick: "He read it enraged, feeling for his wife; and, again indignant, feeling for Diana. His third reading found him out; he felt for both..." (VII, 75). The most devastating reading of the journals, however, is Percy's learning, through reading a morning paper, of Diana's betrayal of a state secret. The narrator dwells for some time on Percy's leisurely perusal until he comes to the fatal passage in Mr. Tonan's paper:

He read, and his eyes grew hungry. He jerked back at each sentence, electrified, staring. The article was shorter than usual. Total Repeal was named; the precise date when the Minister intended calling Parliament together to propose it. (XXXIII, 343)

Percy cannot believe that "the thing was in the air as soon as uttered: and off to the printing press!" (XXXIII, 344). The portentousness of the matter gains emphasis when Percy reads it on the paper. In this case Percy's reading is both public and private--the news appears in the paper, and at the same time Percy
reads with an intensely personal response.

Although the world of Diana is not peopled with bibliomaniacs like those who fill Sir Austin's household, it does present several of its main characters as avid readers of books. Henry Wilmers' diary records that Diana's topics of conversation are of a wide range, "those of a woman who mixed hearing with reading, and observation with her musings;" Diana tells Wilmers that "she read rapidly, 'a great deal at one gulp,' and thought in flashes--a way with the makers of phrases" (I, 10). Diana's is therefore a quick mind nourished with much reading. An evidence of this can be seen in Diana's quickness in making "bookish" association in the midst of a social chat:

And remembering her readings of a certain wonderful old quarto book in her father's library, by an eccentric old Scottish nobleman, wherein the wearing of garments and sleeping in houses is accused as the cause of human degeneracy, she took a forced merry stand on her return to the primitive healthful state of man and woman, and affected scorn of our modern ways of dressing and thinking; whence it came that she had some of her wildest seizures of iridescent humour. (XI, 109)

This may be a glancing, distorted reference to Sartor Resartus and its "clothes-philosophy," but it is characteristic of Meredith in Diana not to offer a title or name a real book.

Diana's friend Lady Dunstane, Sir Lukin's semi-invalid wife, is an even more enthusiastic reader than Diana. The two women's friendship is partly secured by their shared interest in reading: "They were readers of all sorts--political, philosophical, economic, romantic; and they mixed the diverse readings in thought, after the fashion of the ardently youthful. Romance affected politics, transformed economy, irradiated philosophy" (IV, 42). They look for solutions to some political problems "by dint of reading solid writers, [and] using the brains they possessed" (IV, 43). Emma manifests the broad interest in science in the nineteenth century; on the library table at Copsley, Sir Lukin's estate, are found botanical and geological books (XXXIX, 392). Sir Lukin understands little of his wife, who "occupied herself with books and notions and subjects foreign to his taste" (IV, 45). On one occasion in which he is associated with his wife's books he makes a pathetic sight. When Emma is undergoing a critical operation, Diana and Sir Lukin "entered the house, and sat in the drawing room, where Sir Lukin took up from the table one of his wife's
Latin books, a Persius, bearing the marginal notes. He dropped his head on it, with sobs" (XXVI, 270). The chastened Sir Lukin sobbing on his wife's book as he waits for the outcome of the operation is a vivid picture of remorse. The book is the talisman of Emma, and it calls forth his deep remorse over his absences from his home and his past neglect of his wife.

But Diana's and Emma's capacity as readers of books is not so important as their capacity as readers of people and life. Meredith in Diana places more emphasis on metaphorical books and reading than on literal ones. The main reason for this emphasis is that Diana the novelist loves metaphors:

Metaphors were her 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 civilise us. The sluggish in intellect detest them, but our civilization is not much indebted to that major faction. Especially are they needed by the pedestaled woman in her conflict with the natural. (XXIV, 248)

The love of metaphors is the love of complicated signifiers. After the Fall, mankind has to rely on signifiers; besides, we owe our civilization to the universal love of signifiers. This is Meredith's comment on Meredith the novelist, whose style is itself highly metaphorical. Given Meredith's assumption that the use of metaphors is a sign of intelligence and civilization, we are expected to be sophisticated readers if we are to understand his novelist-heroine.

Diana's love of metaphor even affects the practical politician Percy Dacier. In a homeward walk from Diana's house, Percy basked in Diana's splendid light, thinking himself lucky to meet such a "beloved woman." He imagines that he addresses Diana with Lady Dunstane's pet name for her—Tony:

You see, Tony, you cannot be less than Tony to me now, he addressed the gentle phantom of her. Let me have your word, and I am your servant till the Session ends. Tony blushes her swarthy crimson: Diana fluttering rebukes her—but Diana is the appeasable goddess: Tony is the woman, and she loves him. The glorious goddess need not cut them adrift; they can show her a book of honest pages. (XXXIII, 341)

Sensing that metaphorical book, Dacier imagines that his relation with "Tony" will be pure and innocent; but this is an illusion, for in loving Diana he is
dishonest to his fiancee. Ironically, Percy's fond reflection is followed immediately by his reading in Mr. Tonans' paper of the divulged party's secret. He has been mistaken in his "reading" of the woman and their relationship. Sullivan Smith, a self-appointed Irish champion of Diana, offers perhaps a better "reading" of Diana, and in bookish terms:

"... She's the Arabian Nights in person, that's sure; and Shakespeare's plays, tragic and comic; and the Book of Celtic History; and Erin incarnate--down with a cold, no matter where; but we know where it was caught. So there's a pretty library for who's to own her now--she's enfranchised by circumstances;--and a poetical figure too!" (XXXVII, 377)

By this swift succession of comparisons between Diana and books, Sullivan Smith calls up the enigmatic and contradictory nature of Diana's psychological make-up. Such book-metaphors are frequent in the novel. Diana laments her loss of freedom in her marriage with Warwick in terms of books: "Her bitter marriage,--joyless in all its chapters, indefensible where the man was right as well as where insensately wrong,--had been imprisonment" (X, 103). Fortunately, her marriage with the mean Warwick is only an unhappy "chapter" she has to get through in her "book" of life. In "The Penultimate" chapter (Meredith's heading for chapter XLII) of her life, she wins the patient and faithful Thomas Redworth. She tells Emma that she is grateful for Redworth's proposal of marriage; she believes that he is "condescending to implore the widow to wed him"; she asks, "But, tell me, does he know everything of his widow--everything? I shall not have to go through the frightful chapter?" (XLII, 432). Though Diana has the same fear of losing her freedom that she had in her first marriage, the reader of Diana has no fear for her; the reader has come to the penultimate chapter of Diana's life, and the logic of fictional form promises that Diana will be awarded a last "Nuptial Chapter" (Meredith's heading for Chapter XLII), a happy ending for the long-misunderstood heroine.

The reader of Diana is induced to apply a knowledge of how books operate to the "lives" of the characters; this shift from literal reading to metaphorical reading is illustrated within the novel too. In a gathering at Diana's London salon, Diana's guests argue about men's perception of women in books:

"We are two different species!" thumped Lady Pennon, swimming on the theme. "I am sure I read what they write of women! And their heroines!"
Lady Esquart acquiesced: "We are utter fools or horrid knaves."
"Nature's original hieroglyphs--which have that appearance to the peruser," Westlake assented.
"And when they would decipher us, and they hit on one of our 'arts,' the literary pirouette they perform is memorable." Diana looked invitingly at Dacier. (XXVIII, 295)

Both Lady Pennon and Lady Esquart are still talking about what men write of women in books; Westlake follows with a metaphor drawn from reading--women are "nature's original hieroglyphs" to be interpreted by men--and Diana joins him in his metaphor with "decipher." As in The Ordeal, "to read" can mean "to understand people and life." Hence we have this from Lady Dunstane: "The weather and women have some resemblance, they say. Is it true that he who reads the one can read the other?" (II, 23); we see Percy and Diana "read in one another's faces a different meaning from the empty words of excuse and welcome" (XXV, 249); we hear Whitmonby, a member of Diana's social circle, observe that "Poor Mountford Wilts boasted of knowing women; and he married. To jump into the mouth of the enigma is not to read it" (XXVIII, 294). For Thomas Redworth, "Men and women crossing the high seas of life he had found most readable under that illuminating inquiry--as to their means" (XXIX, 302); Diana is not to show herself to advantage, because "Only those who read her woman's blood and character with the head will care for Diana of the Crossways, now that the knot of her history has been unravelled" (XXXIX, 399); finally, even the ladies' incomprehension of watching men playing cricket on the field is compared to reading: "The dispersal of the alphabet over a printed page is not less perplexing to the illiterate" (XL, 403).

The numerous references to reading the character of women stand for our attempt at reaching a reading of the woman who commands most attention in her circle, Diana Warwick. She can be read in her witty remarks and conversation at her salon and at parties; more importantly, she is to be read in the books she publishes, in which she offers a reading of herself and her world. We shall examine Diana's books in the light of this intricate interplay between books and life.

Little is said of Diana's first unnamed book, except that Diana herself gives a disparaging reading of it: "... her style is affected, her characters nullities, her cleverness forced, &c. &c. As it is, I have much the same contempt for poor Antonia's performance... She has a sister who can do better" (XV, 151). The
third-person pronoun Diana uses in this comment shows the intellectual detachment of this self-reading. Moreover, "a kind of doubleness begins to inhabit Diana's art as well as her life here" (Wilt, "Meredith's Diana," 47). "Antonia" is her pen-name while Diana is the name by which her social world acknowledges her.

The content of Diana's second book, The Princess Egeria, is again not specified; the important thing is that she has published a book which stirs the public interest. The book's composition and publication are connected to the two most important men in Diana's life—Percy Dacier and Thomas Redworth. When she is composing the book, she is "thick" with Percy Dacier. Diana writes Emma about how her conception of the book changes:

"THE PRINCESS EGERIA originally ... was conceived as a sketch; by gradations she grew into a sort of semi-Scudery romancer, and swelled into her present portliness. This was done by a great deal of piecing, not to say puffing, of her frame. She would be healthier and have a chance of living longer if she were reduced by a reversal of the processes. But how would the judicious clippings and prickings affect our 'pensive public'?..." (XVIII, 182)

The passage, as Judith Wilt observes, contains a prophecy of Diana's affair with Percy Dacier ("Meredith's Diana" 48). In a letter to Emma, Diana does attempt a sketch of Dacier in their first meeting, although, as she tells Emma, "Living men and women are too various in the mixture fashioning them—even the 'eternal presentment'—to be livingly rendered in a formal sketch" (XV, 154). After his "portly" romance with the complex Diana, Dacier is engaged to Constance Asper, with whom he shares a certain dullness.

Thomas Redworth serves as the literary agent of Antonia's new piece of composition. He edits her manuscript sheets, corrects the proofs for the press ("he read them critically, he thought" [XVII, 174]), and recommends the book to his friends and reviewers. Emma later describes Redworth as "a tolerant reader of life and women" (XL, 413); with regard to Diana, Redworth, who has been in love with her in spite of her marriage to Warwick, is understandably a biased reader: as the very first reader of The Princess Egeria, "... Redworth's highly critical perusal led him flatly to admire. This was like her, and that was like her, and here and there a phrase gave him the very play of her mouth, the flash of her eyes" (XVII, 174). He sees in the book the woman he loves and cherishes. In spite of that, Redworth's reading is definitely saner than that of the
slavish admirer of Diana, Mr. Sullivan Smith, "who knew not a sentence of the work save what he gathered of it from Redworth, at their chance meeting on Piccadilly pavement," but nevertheless tells people that it is "a most enthralling work, beautifully composed" (XVII, 179-180).

Diana's third book, *The Young Minister of State*, creates more public excitement than *The Princess Egeria*, because her hero is easily identified as young Percy Dacier, who is now at all her parties and is always meeting her. The public's reading of this new novel is predictably unfavorable to Diana: "What effrontery of the authoress, to placard herself with him in a book! The likeness of the hero to Percy Dacier once established became striking to glaringness; a proof . . . of her intention to flatter him up to his perdition" (XXI, 213). Several women readers of this public, whom the narrator characterizes as "these bookworm women pretending to be philosophical," attempt to "undertake the release of sweet Constance Asper's knight from the toils of his enchantress" (XXI, 219). In this novel Diana has again given an accurate reading of Dacier; Emma considers the portrait "an artist's, free, open, and not discoloured by the personal tincture" (XXI, 219). Dacier himself would take the portrait as accurate, since he reads the book with rapture, searching eagerly for sentences out of the book which seem fitting to what he feels. As a result of this egotistical reading,

Diana had impressed him powerfully when she set him swallowing and assimilating a sentence ethereally thin in substance, of mere sentimental significance, that he would antecedently have read aloud in a drawing-room, picking up the book by hazard, as your modern specimen of romantic vapouring. (XXII, 231)

Misreading Diana's novel and thus her attitude toward him, Dacier sets himself up to feel all the more intensely his anger at Diana's later betrayal of his party's secret. His misreading is understandable, because Diana's books and Diana's life are completely intertwined, if not interchangeable. In the second crucial meeting at the shore, they address each other with the fictional names from Diana's books:

"Does the Princess Egeria propose to dismiss the individual she inspires, when he is growing more sensible of her wisdom?"

"A young Minister of State should be gleaning at large when holiday is granted him." (XXII, 227)

When Percy asks permission to speak Diana's Christian name, she withdraws herself with the joking, "I see I shall have to revise the next edition of THE
YOUNG MINISTER, and make an emotional curate of him" (XXII, 228). This is again prophetic of the later relationship between them. Diana does "rewrite" her relationship with Dacier, and Dacier does behave like an emotional curate in his response to the leaking of the party's secret.

For her next book, Diana again draws freely from her acquaintances. The story of The Cantatrice is modeled on a prima donna she had met at the parties of Henry Wilmers; she has heard Redworth tell of one Charles Rainer's passion for the woman. Redworth, who will ultimately be Diana's worthy mate, becomes the model of the English hero, Mr. Cuthbert Dering. Diana's presentation of Redworth as Dering is accurate: "... his clear-eyed heartiness, manliness, wholesomeness—a word of Lady Dunstane's regarding him—and his handsome braced figure, were well painted"; even such details as "a certain bluntness of the nose" and "the light on his temples" (XXIV, 243) are transferred from Redworth to the (doubly) fictional Dering. But Diana "encountered obstacles to imaginative composition" (XXIII, 236). Redworth is the obstacle; he is so intimately known to Diana that she cannot maintain the proper distance that she knows she needs as a writer. Diana may be accurate in the surface portrait of her model, but she does not see Redworth's restrained passion for her, or "that the subtlety and intensity of his feeling contradicts her fictional portrait of him as an unimaginative Briton" (Beer 143).

Diana's clear-eyed understanding of the need for intellectual control over the elements of her life that she uses in her novels is something Meredith shares with his heroine. As Gillian Beer says, "Meredith as an artist and commentator is aligned with her. Diana, in her third novel, The Cantatrice, writes in a style which parallels Meredith's method in the book" (Beer 157). Diana deliberately avoids courting the public taste:

No clever transcripts of the dialogue of the day occurred; no hair-breadth 'scapes, peril by sea and land, heroisms of the hero, fine shrieks of the heroine; no set scenes of catching pathos and humour; no distinguishable points of social satire—equivalent to a smacking of the public on the chaps, which excites it to grin with keen discernment of the author's intention. (XXIII, 236)

Through this fictitious book Meredith insists that in Diana he is writing neither a sensational novel nor a sophisticated satire; he indirectly proclaims the seriousness of his fictional art. The Cantatrice's position in Diana is similar to the convention of a play-within-a-play in drama: it is a book-within-a-book by
which the novelist can voice his feelings about and comments on his own book.

As far as public taste is concerned, Diana, in her last novel, *The Man of Two Minds*, is as uncompromising as she was in *The Cantatrice*. "[She] could have flewed away at once on the stuff that Danvers [her servant] delighted to read!--wicked princes, rogue noblemen, titled wantons, daisy and lily innocents, traitorous marriages, murders..." (XXX, 324), but she shies away from these romantic trappings. Redworth is again the model for her hero, and this time she has correctly "read" his mind. Redworth is, in retrospect, indeed a man of two minds. Judith Wilt sees the cause of this ambivalence as Redworth's loss of Diana. When he learns that she has become engaged to Warwick, his shock turns him into "The Man of Two Minds." The narrator subtly traces Redworth's mind:

He bore it well. He was a big-chested fellow, and that excruciating twist within of the revolution of the wheels of the brain snapping their course to grind to the contrary to that of the heart was revealed in one short lift and gasp, a compression of the tremendous change he underwent. (V, 58)

Another analysis of Redworth's character by the narrator rounds off Diana's picture of the man of two minds:

Men of Redworth's nature go through sharp contests, though the duration of them is short, and the tussle of his worship of this woman with the materialistic turn of his mind was closed by the complete shutting up of the latter under lock and bar; so that a man, very little an idealist, was able to sustain her in the pure imagination—where she did almost belong to him. (XXIX, 303)

So in Redworth one mind yearns for the pure, unconditional worship of his noon goddess, to whom he offers services at her earliest bidding; his other mind makes "the materialistic turn" which produces a railway tycoon. But the conflict between his two minds is brief, and he does not suffer a permanently divided self. The final integrity of his character eventually wins him Diana's hand in marriage.

Diana is of course a woman of two minds. She "reads" herself well: "I remember I was writing a story, named THE MAN OF TWO MINDS. I shall sign it, *By the Woman of Two Natures*, if ever it is finished" (XXXVIII, 388). Diana's title for her book echoes Meredith's title for the novel. Diana's
mythological namesake has a two-sided nature which encompasses both the goddess of chastity and the assistant spirit who assists at childbirth in Greek mythology; in addition, the house from which she is never far distant stands at a symbolic crossing of two roads. Appropriately, she finally marries the man who rescues her twice by his timely appearance when she stands at the crossroads of her life: once when she is about to run to Europe from the unpleasantness attendant upon her divorce trial, and the second time when she is prepared to elope with her young minister of state.

So Meredith's poetic and prose writings are all of one piece: he has achieved his "reading of the earth" and "reading of life" through the two novels *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Diana of the Crossways*. A writer of books himself, Meredith has endowed most of his characters with bookish inclinations and used writers of books as main characters. All the important books in the two novels--books of consequence for plot and theme--are mostly fictitious ones written by his fictional characters, and the reading of these fictitious books by other characters constitutes an essential part of Meredith's novels. Meredith seems to be aware of the danger of reading and rearing people by the book. Ironically, however, Meredith ends both novels logically and tidily--as it is in a book: Lucy, being a victim of Sir Austin's System, must meet her pathetic end, while Diana, after a failed marriage and a possible scandal, is rewarded with a happy union with a solid and patient man who really loves her. Life goes on, but a book must have a closure. After all, Meredith is governed by the logic of a narrative and must bring his stories to satisfactory endings.

**Notes**

1. Lionel Stevenson in his Meredith biography *The Ordeal of George Meredith* records how Meredith was fond of "reading" of this kind: "In later years he flattered himself that he had possessed a sort of telepathic insight into the minds of his schoolmates which enabled him to read their characters consummately" (12).
2. Judith Wilt, *The Readable People of George Meredith*, 101. This is one of the several occasions on which Wilt refers to the readers in the novel. But Wilt's study focuses on the implied readers of Meredith's novels, rather than on characters as readers. My discussion is concerned with the dramatization of readers and reading while Wilt's is with rhetoric and narrative method.

3. Judith Wilt points out that the reader of Meredith must learn to interpret these diaries. See her "Meredith's Diana: Freedom, Fiction, and the Female," 61.

Works Cited


