

THE EXPOSURE OF LITERARY CONVENTIONS IN THE EGOIST
BY GEORGE MEREDITH

MARIA JĘDRZEJKIEWICZ

University of Warsaw

One of the best known books by George Meredith *The egoist* is usually considered to be a satirical novel in which the author's interest is concentrated on psychological and moral problems. According to David Daiches:

The egoist sets in motion a vast deal of machinery for probing and presenting the vanity and self-delusion of the hero, Sir Willoughby Patterne, especially in his relations with women; the comedy [...] is deliberate and as it were, conspiratorial, with author, reader and selected intelligent characters looking down on the workings of the hero's egotism with ironic omniscience (Daiches 1963 : 1037).

Albert Baugh in *A literary history of England* writes that:

A most complex example of the corrective power of thoughtful laughter is supplied in *The egoist*... (Baugh 1967 : 1459).

Louis Cazamian stresses the psychological aspect of the novel:

The egoist is indeed the most typical of Meredith's novels. No other is more definitely the study, through its depth and in all its minute shades of a psychological problem. The study is of extreme penetration (Cazamian 1933 : 1239).

Walter F. Wright in his work *Art and substance in George Meredith* calls *The egoist* —

an ironic comedy which holds to Terentin intrigue, Congreavean battle of wits and Molière hypocrisy (Wright 1953).

Such critical views seem to be justified. Talks and thoughts of the characters constitute almost the whole body of the novel: the moral problems of the main heroes are the spring of the events which make up its plot; the whole story is told from the point of view of an ironic narrator.

These interpretations however, do not exhaust the meaning of the novel. In fact, they seem to leave out many important questions. The analytical categories which have not been taken into account in these views are those of the convention,

the narrator, the implied author. The implied author is understood here according to Booth's concept as the core of norms and the sum of choices which may be inferred from a book, as a version of the writer, his image enclosed in his work (Booth 1961).

The position of the narrator, the relationship of the narrator and the implied author and their attitude towards the current ways of writing — the socially accepted literary devices, are treated as decisive for the total sense of a piece of writing in the works of M. Bachtin, W. C. Booth, A. Sławińska, W. N. Wołoszynow.

Consequently, although the characters, the plot, the moralizing undertone are considered as important in a novel, their place in the hierarchy of meaning is seen as determined by the relation of the narrator and the implied author to them, to the conventions through which they are expressed.

While examined from the point of view of these categories *The egoist* proves to be a novel in which there is one more important problem and organizing principle. It is the search for some new ways of writing what is worked out through the explicit and implicit polemics of the implied author with the current conventions.

This search for the best means of expression springs out from the writer's attempt to show and analyse the mechanisms of human psychology and some problems of morality. The author's views are conveyed both as direct statements scattered throughout the fictitious story and — what is more notable — through the shape of the fictitious material.

Although one may distinguish many different conventions the novel is aimed at, they may be gathered into two groups, as the main force of the author's attacks is really directed against what is common in each group, what Meredith believes to be the two main kinds of abuse done in literature. Naming them brings about many problems. In *The egoist* Meredith hardly uses any terms and if so, he attributes to them a meaning which is different from the one in current usage. In his other works e.g. *Diana of the crossways*, *The ordeal of Richard Fernal* he spoke about these questions explicitly but again, the terminology he applied, is now used to indicate something else and the phenomena he talked about are now called differently. These two disapproved ways of writing Meredith calls "realistic" and "sentimental". His descriptions and characterization of the two tendencies, his examples point out that by the former — "realistic" he understands what is now called the naturalistic mode of writing and by the latter — "sentimental" — the bunch of features inferred not only from the sentimental novel but also from melodrama and romance: sensational action, extraordinary situations, simplified characters, suspension of the ethical and intellectual judgement, indulgence in unwarranted, unjustified emotionalism. The protest against these two tendencies in *The egoist* is accomplished in various manners.

"The realistic" — that is naturalistic, is rejected through the shape of the story in which Meredith never tries to build up the feeling of watching reality and even stresses its fictitious character; but above all the writer's dislike is expressed directly.

The egoist deals with human nature in the drawing room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes to make the correctness of the representation convincing. Credulity is not wooed through the impressionable scenes, nor have we recourse to the small circular glow of the watchmaker's eye to raise in bright relief minutest grains of evidence for routing of incredulity (Meredith 1961 : 1).

Much more interesting, thanks to the way in which it is carried out, is the discussion with "the sentimental". The first signs of the writer's interest in this question are enclosed in the titles of the chapters. According to the kind of information they give, most of the titles may be placed into one of the three types. Besides the first type of titles which introduce the names of one or more characters e.g. *The young Sir Willoughby*, *Constance Durham*, *Laetitia Dale*, *Clara Middleton* and so on there are two other types: the ones which name the main events of the plot: *His courtship*, *The betrothed*, *The first effort after freedom*, *The petition for a release*, *The flight, midnight: Sir Willoughby and Laetitia*, *The Lovers* and the third type in which the titles include abstract notions pertaining to the thoughts and feelings of the main characters: *generosity*, *sensitiveness*, *pathos*, *spiritual change*, *heart*.

Both the second and the third type of titles, with the first one being neutral refer the reader to the conventions of the sentimental romance and melodrama — their delight in strong emotion-bound situations, delicate and noble feelings, to the one of the typical ways of ending — unexpected union of the lovers. And really the plot and the moralizing undertone seem to confirm such-like expectations of the readers: Sir Willoughby Patterne whose great position and brilliancy was admired by the elegant society, proves to be a dangerous, ruthless egoist. He is unmasked by his two successive fiancées who jilt him. Although at first the girls: Constance Durham and Clara Middleton are strongly criticized by their families and the county and Clara is even forced to the marriage, finally they both join worthier partners. One of them — Vernon Whitford — the noblest male hero in the novel, so far effaced by the egoist, is to be rewarded with the friendship and love of the most charming heroine of the story — Clara Middleton. Sir Willoughby — the egoist of the novel is humiliated once more when he must ask poor and faded Laetitia to be the lady of Paterne Hall.

The idyllic setting of the novel — a big, old house and a carefully "neglected" English garden of Sir Willoughby's estate also allude to romance and the sentimental novel.

Another device, typical for the sentimental drama and novel, of which

Meredith makes use, is the introduction of an innocent, good child, who lives close to nature and though not polished he is neither spoiled by civilization. The attitude towards this twelve years old cousin of Sir Willoughby becomes a test of moral values of the main characters.

The intensity of the characters' most prominent traits: magnificence of Sir Willoughby Patterne and Horace de Craye, generosity and goodness of Vernon Whitford, Constance's beauty, Clara's charm, Laetitia's gentleness remind the sharply outlined, stock characters of romances and melodramas. The interplay of contrasts of wealth and poverty, egoism and disinterestedness, of the positive and negative characters and the motif of an honest, poor girl — Laetitia, who after many humiliations marries a rich, handsome man also contribute to the same effect.

The main theme of the novel — the story of Clara's liberation may be associated with the standard melodrama situation of a damsel in distress.

All the above mentioned devices which could be and usually are the signs of a sentimental novel, romance or melodrama can not be treated in *The egoist* in the same straightforward way. Here the implied author uses them ironically and this gives them quite a different meaning. As the total sense of the novel shows the conventions are put to work to be laid bare and to be overcome. The exposure of the conventions, showing them at work, is executed in various ways. In general, the author adapts his scenes, situations and characters to the patterns of the conventions to some extent and then he reveals their stereotyped, timeworn quality by disclosing unexpected facets of situations, exhibiting a new meaning of facts, proving that the assumptions concerning the characters are false or simply laughing at cliché scenes. The constant confronting of the sentimental — melodramatic appearances with reality may leave an impression that the contents and meaning of the novel do not harmonize with the plot, particularly with its "summary" in the titles of the chapters, that e.g. the author does not take advantage of the dramatic situations in which he puts his characters or that he names his chapters in an exaggerated way.

One of the examples of such handling of the material may be the story of Clara's escape. The chapters that deal with it: *The first effort after freedom*, *The petition for a release*, *The flight in wild weather*, *Vernon in pursuit*, *The return*, promise conflicts and dramatic situations.

In fact Clara's escape is not carried out. Although while leaving Willoughby Hall Clara is determined to escape from Willoughby to her friend Lucy Dartle, later on she changes her mind and comes back. Out of the two men who pursue her: Horace de Craye and Vernon Whitford, Clara does not choose to go back home with Vernon whom she loves and who has really persuaded her to give up the escape, as (loving Clara) he wants her to act honestly. Clara chooses Horace de Craye to accompany

her back home and the situation is particularly deflated and funny if one remembers that Clara is completely indifferent towards Horace, who unlike Vernon, would be ready to help her to run away and even more ready to elope with her. Clara is not chased by Willoughby — the only man she would like to escape from and who would do everything to stop her. But Willoughby does not know anything about her escape and though he looks for Clara at the time and wants to bring her home it is only because of the bad storm during which his fiancée might catch a cold.

A very evident instance of satirizing the convention of ending in a sentimental romance is furnished by the last fragments of *The egoist*. On page 529 of the novel which has 547 pages altogether, in the chapter called *The Lovers* — which "should" bring the union of the lovers, Clara allows herself a thought and says for the first time that perhaps she is loved by Vernon Whitford whom she has loved for long without admitting it to herself. In this chapter, the last one in which the reader watches these two characters, there is no wedding or even declaration of love; the title is "justified" by allusions to their future meeting in the Alps.

The last but one chapter shows the second pair of heroes — Laetitia and Willoughby. They come to an agreement finally and the last sentences of the novel give the record of their wedding. But the splendid ceremony does not crown deep feelings of love or even friendship. For Willoughby the marriage with Laetitia is the last chance of escape from the malicious opinion of the county, the only possible in his situation of a twice jilted lover — make believe to be successful. Laetitia's consent is only seemingly the realization of her dreams. Actually it is an act of resignation as she neither loves nor respects Willoughby any more and marries him to please her father and his aunts.

The scenery in which the story takes place is also ambiguous as Patterne Hall is not thought idyllic by all the characters. Though for Willoughby and Laetitia it is the ideal of beauty, it soon stops to be for Laetitia — the ideal, happy Arcadia. Clara treats Patterne Hall as a luxurious prison and she is aware that the beauty of the natural English garden is a result of the gardener's careful arrangement.

The second type of the chapter titles are the ones which include some expressions typical for the sentimental vocabulary. They also surprise with their substance because their author does not brood on lofty feelings and noble affections and instead of it, he hunts what he thinks to be various embodiments and manifestations of egoism; vanity, pathos, self-complacence, mental sterility.

The exquisite qualities of the main characters, though not questioned in the course of the novel, lose their importance if they are seen as linked with their other features: Willoughby's egoism, Clara's vanity and courage,

Horace's futility, Vernon's reservation, which turns out to be decisive for the plot.

The protest against the characterization in a sentimental novel, romance and particularly in melodrama is exercised in the novel through the four main characters and their relationship. Although they are contrasted: goodness — evil, poverty — riches, they do not realize the pattern of melodramatic oppositions. The only fully negative character is Sir Willoughby Patterne but even he does not remind of a typical villain. The main heroines: Clara and Laetitia are not rivals but friends, in spite of the fact that Clara is Willoughby's fiancée and Laetitia has loved him for long.

Through the story of Clara's liberation Meredith ridicules the standard melodrama situation of "a damsel in distress". Although Clara is really a positive heroine and she is imprisoned by "a tyrant" — Willoughby, yet she is much better characterized by Mrs Mountstuart's saying "a dainty rogue in porcelain" than by calling her "a damsel in distress". The author clearly likes Clara but he never conceals from his readers that her troubles do not come unexpectedly and without any fault or mistake on her side — as it is with the heroine in melodrama. He admits that Clara has provoked her misfortune to a great extent herself when flattered by Willoughby's elegant courtship she has inconsiderately promised to marry him. As her situation of a pledged fiancée grows more and more dangerous Clara is scared and at first she looks for a man who would rescue her. But soon she begins to control the situation and acts herself.

The other example of overcoming the concept of a melodramatic heroine is Laetitia Dale. As a girl who loves Willoughby and who has been encouraged and deceived by him many times, she has many occasions to play broadly her great scene. But Laetitia is already a reader of romances and not their heroine and she is able to look at her own emotions soberly, thus disappointing the neighbours waiting for the county drama. Also in case of Vernon Whitford some of his features do not allow us to imagine him as an ideal lover. He is very kind-hearted and generous but at the same time he is often hard on his beloved Clara, he dares to analyse and criticize her behaviour. He has also got his idiosyncrasies: he is absent-minded, crazy about his long walks, dances very poorly, — traits which a real positive male-character in a serious melodrama or romance can not possibly have.

The outer features of a pseudo-sentimental hero are embodied in Sir Willoughby Patterne. His pathetic speeches about love, duties of lovers, of their "natural" loathing the other people and the world are not the outcome of his passion but a cover with which he hides his emotional aggressiveness and his demand for complete submission on the part of his partner.

Real, emotional contact of Clara and Vernon, on the other hand, is presented as born without lofty declarations of love and brooding on their feelings.

In his protest against the conventions of the sentimental novel, romance and melodrama Meredith disapproves then, first of all, of the thematic stereotypes, patterns of plot, and simplified characterization in which the sphere of feeling is cut out from the mental activity and the presentation of aesthetic susceptibility and morality is superficial and schematic. Because of that, the picture of man as a feeling creature offered by "the sentimental" is rejected by the author of *The egoist*. He demonstrates that what the romance, the sentimental novel, the melodrama have purported about the man is shallow and false, something that while using the expression of Todorov may be called the sphere of "seeming to be" and not "to be" (Todorov 1968).

That satirical, parodistic treatment of various aspects of "the sentimental" is a part of the writer's intention and plan which he formulates explicitly and in which he declares his aim — searching for some new ways of presenting the inner life of the man as the old ones are not sufficient any longer. *The egoist* then is not only a study of various forms of egoism, different feelings, kinds of humour but also of some literary devices. Meaning that, probably, Diana Neill wrote the following sentence which she unfortunately did not develop:

Although there is everything to delight the most exacting fiction reader — constancy, inconstancy, elopement, secret passion, loyalty and devotion — *The egoist* was written for the author, not for the reader (Neill 1967: 251).

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