

REVIEWS

Carol Bernstein. Precarious Enchantment: A Reading of Meredith's Poetry. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979. Pp. 202. \$15.00

This is "the first modern book-length treatment of George Meredith's poetry," the jacket claims. It is true that G. M. Trevelyan's The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith (1912) was essentially Victorian and that, although Paratap Singh's George Meredith the Poet appeared in 1973, his comparisons venture no further into our century than Shaw, Bergson, and Sassoon. Bernstein connects various aspects of Meredith's poetry to "a Freudian topography of the mind," Hart Crane's The Bridge, Robert Penn Warren's "Bearded Oaks," Wallace Stevens' poetry, and post-Impressionist painting. One of her most persistent arguments, moreover, is that Meredith's interruption of narrative expectations in his poems as well as his novels "becomes a widely used principle in twentieth century literature. The mystery in Iris Murdoch's The Unicorn is never really solved; the point of the open ending is thematic. Ultimately, the use of mystery relates to a far greater theme, the inability of the human mind to make sense of its own history -- or to make a history of events that ought to be related to it. It appears in such characteristically modern poems as 'Geron-tion' and The Wasteland."

Thus, while it has been customary to praise the "enchantment" of Meredith's representation of nature, Bernstein reveals that his link between man and nature is "precarious": "the glories of unity are always threatened by the forces of severance." She focuses on how "signs are missed" and "love thwarted" not only in Modern Love but also in Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life. Bernstein argues that the "perspective of modern poetry may enable us to discover a theme latent in 'The Nuptials of Attila'," for instance, "that of blocked consciousness." The poem is read as "a narrative emptied of narrative" which conveys the "horror at what the mind cannot know . . . the apparent irreducibility of external events to a pattern which gives them human meaning . . . areas where the mind is blocked, severed from that knowledge of the external world which allows the completion of the mind itself." Hence she argues that "to say that Meredith wrote nature poetry is to miss his most essential theme."

Though Carol Bernstein received her Ph.D. from Yale some time ago, this argument has obvious affinities with the deconstructionism fashionable there now, and a review of her more modernist arguments becomes a review of this approach to Victorian literature. The fundamental bias of deconstructionism toward static, visual paradigms of language