

## MOVEMENT AS METAPHOR IN MEREDITH'S "MODERN LOVE"

Since its publication in 1862 George Meredith's sonnet sequence has invited readers to probe the odd mixtures of passion and intellect, self-pity and objective analysis which lie at the heart of the poem. Aware of Meredith's close emotional ties to the situation of "Modern Love," readers have "mined almost to exhaustion the vein of parallels, similarities, and differences"<sup>1</sup> between "Modern Love" and the poet's first marriage. In what may be the most detailed study of this poem, Norman Friedman examines the "relationship between action and image," the tie between symbolic image "clusters" and narrative symbolic action.<sup>2</sup> He calls attention to the "heavy atmosphere of sultry immobility, of frozen will and suspended desire" that characterizes the poem.<sup>3</sup> Those "sculptured effigies" within the close "marriage tomb" are indeed fixed in spiritual and emotional stasis.<sup>4</sup>

However, Friedman and others have ignored a pattern accompanying Meredith's metaphors and image clusters, one which properly belongs to the narrative pattern of the poem: the actual physical movement of his characters, their "signal shakings of the leg," becomes a vehicle for the narrator's (and Meredith's) speculations about human possibility within the natural system. The juxtaposition of fitful human motion to smoothly reiterative cycles of nature or to ordered and peaceful settings reinforces the narrator's initially ambiguous attitudes toward self-determination and responsibility; as he questions the autonomy of the characters in his narrative, he questions the ultimate autonomy of all intelligent beings. Despite the narrator's inability to move to a "more profound insight into the cause of disintegrated love,"<sup>5</sup> he finally reaches a level of insight into the universal human plight, the relationship between Nature and the unwilling subject of its vagaries. Thus the narrator comes to a tragic recognition -- the recognition of the disparity between a harmonious natural system and man's inability to surrender to it.<sup>6</sup>

Sonnet XI is the first poem in which the narrator and his wife wander through a natural setting, here a quintessentially idyllic scene. The setting and mood of the first eight lines differ radically from those of the previous sonnets; this sonnet falls almost in the middle of what Friedman designates as the first section of "Modern Love" (the first twenty-six sonnets), in which the husband gives free expression to his ambivalence toward his wife and marriage.<sup>7</sup> Against the background of confusion, of vacillation between moods of self-deprecation and hostility, the poet places a scene of idyllic natural harmony. The characters who enter, however, seem lost and out of place; in fact, the sudden