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BOX HILL,

DORKING.

Use (1871) & Visits from Surrey  
Come to your breakfast by the way of the  
road.

A POSY OF VIOLETS:  
AN UNPUBLISHED POEM BY GEORGE MEREDITH

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*Musings from the Editor's Desk*

Finding an old manuscript of an unpublished poem by a Pre-Raphaelite author is always exciting, even when the poem is a mere couplet of verse, a couplet by George Meredith that reads more like a brief draft for a letter he may have sent in the post to a friend. The verse is written down the side of letterhead stationery hastily cut in half, the half measuring approximately 7 inches by 3 3/8 inches, as if Meredith had cut several leaves of stationery in half for just this kind of scribbled draft, composing a few lines of verse or a sentence or two of prose intended to be copied to a cleaner draft for reviewing the progress of his composition. Only in this case, the strip is a draft for a whole poem. The letterhead – in an upper-case red font – identifies his home address in Surrey – BOX HILL, DORKING. – where Meredith lived from 1868 until his death in 1909. The verse reads in full:

We little violets from Surrey banks:  
Come to your breast, & beg no word of thanks.

Perhaps it is the red letterhead that seduces me into reducing the poem to an autobiographical document, as I cannot help presuming this scribbled scrap reveals a gesture of intimacy by its author. I envision Meredith copying this scrap onto another strip of paper and tucking it with a posy of violets into an envelope addressed to a friend. And next I wonder what occasion may have motivated this verse. Did it serve as a token of appreciation for a friend or as a note of reassurance for a beloved or as the initial gesture of yet another courtship among the many flirtatious affairs Meredith pursued over the years

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after the death in 1884 of his second wife? Its tone suggests the latter, the posy and the poem complementing each other as an early gift in courtship, a cautious advance before he dares to wax rhapsodic. We can imagine the effect: the posy and the poem provide a symbolic trellising of the earthly reality of nature and the ethereal realm of art. Yet both insist on a child-like innocence. The posy is as modest as the couplet of verse is artless. The former is not a bouquet of cultivated roses but a posy of wild flowers – little violets picked from the local Surrey banks of the River Mole – a touch of beauty found near home; the poem is neither eloquent nor confessional, not a finely crafted lyric, but a rhyming couplet of clumsily scanned verse, self-defined as a simple gesture of sweet innocence intended to be taken lightly.

The verse has none of the mannered diction we associate with Meredith's art. As a poetic description of the natural posy, the artifice of the verse is deliberately undermined by both the simplicity of the diction and the clumsiness of the metre, ostensibly intended to temper the recipient's reaction to the gift. The poem is not the personal expression of a friend but a personified address from the friendly violets; nevertheless, the violets assume the role of little messengers. "We," "your," "breast," "beg": the message is a personal appeal humbly expressed.

Meredith's poetry generally scans with the ease of a polished performance. Not this poem. Though we are reading a draft (with the word "banks" added here as a revision written over an earlier word now reduced to an illegible blot), a draft that Meredith may have revised into a polished couplet, I am guessing that he retained the clumsiness as part of his deliberate effort to appear artless. In his other poems that mention "violets," he sometimes scans the word as a two-syllable trochee (see, for example, "The Lark Ascending," 79) and other times he scans it as a three-syllable dactyl. If he intended to avoid pairing a nine-syllable line with a ten by stretching the word "violets" here into a three-syllable dactyl, then the sequence of three unstressed syllables – "o lets from" – stumbles even more clumsily in contrast with the metre of the second line. The implication that this is not a fussed-over poem contributes to its sincerity.

By fusing the artifice of the *flos campi* biblical tradition<sup>1</sup> with the faerie-like flora of common folklore, Meredith continues to control the expression of sentiment, his typically measured balance arising from his preoccupation with documenting our various modes of repression. Compare our couplet of verse with the polished poetry of the following paragraph of prose from his novel, *The Egoist* (1879), whose wild-cherry blossoms displace the violets:

She asked the boy where Mr. Whitford was. Crossjay pointed very secretly in

the direction of the double-blossom wild-cherry. Coming within gaze of the stem, she beheld Vernon stretched at length, reading, she supposed; asleep, she discovered: his finger in the leaves of a book; and what book? She had a curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath these boughs, and grasping Crossjay's hand fast she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately, and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: "He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!" She would rather have clung to her first impression: wonder so divine, so unbounded, was like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space, sweeping through folded and on to folded white fountain-bow of wings, in innumerable columns; but the thought of it was no recovery of it; she might as well have striven to be a child. The sensation of happiness promised to be less short-lived in memory, and would have been had not her present disease of the longing for happiness ravaged every corner of it for the secret of its existence. The reflection took root. "He must be good..." That reflection vowed to endure. Poor by comparison with what it displaced, it presented itself to her as conferring something on him, and she would not have had it absent though it robbed her.

She looked down. Vernon was dreamily looking up. (ch. 11: 115-16)

The image of Vernon Whitford reading a book under the wild cherry boughs and blossoms rivets the attention of Clara Middleton. Engaged to Sir Willoughby Patterne, Clara believes she is drawn towards the figure under the wild cherry by her intellectual curiosity to learn the title of the book that interests this other man. Meredith reads aloud for us her swirl of emotions, disentangling them as belonging to three distinct stages: wonder, happiness, and reflection. Divine wonder is the spontaneous overflow of overwhelming passion that is all too fleeting. Sensitive happiness narrows the sublime passion into the warm and still-uplifting appreciation of beauty. Thoughtful reflection carries the weight of sensible and comprehensible boundaries, the calming security and rooted stability of this third stage contrasting so strikingly with the soaring ecstasy of the first stage now "robbed" from her forever. What Meredith reveals most insightfully is our own responsibility for the brevity of divine wonder: the heavenward flutter is all too fleeting because we are too quick to suppress our flight.

We foresee that Clara will suffer troubles with her engagement to Sir

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Willoughby, whose “mind could as little admit an angel in pottery as a rogue in porcelain” (111). Sir Willoughby fails to understand the aesthetics of the new Victorian sensibility originating from the Pre-Raphaelite grotesque, the jarring juxtaposition of incongruities which Walter Pater would define as central to the new renaissance of Pre-Raphaelite culture: “Everywhere there is an unbroken system of correspondences” (36), with “grotesque emblems” (45) that overcome the boundaries of “rigidly defined opposites” (20) through the “picturesque union of contrasts” (37), the “strange interfusion of sweetness and strength” (76), the “interfusion of the extremes of beauty and terror” (82). Each chapter of Pater’s *Renaissance* illustrates the importance of the grotesque, with his chapter on “Luca della Robbia” most relevant to Sir Willoughby’s blindness to the new sensibility. For Pater, Luca represents a respectable predecessor to Pre-Raphaelite artists like William De Morgan: those who aim “to realize the spirit and manner of grand sculpture in a humbler material, to write its science with the homely art of pottery, to introduce those high qualities into common things, to adorn and cultivate daily household life” (*Renaissance* 45). In the novel, Meredith depicts Clara as repressing her impulses before she is ready to fully embody “the rogue in porcelain”; in our poem, Meredith depicts the voice of “an angel in pottery,” the *vox flos campi* artifice of the local “Surrey banks.”

There is no known provenance for this scrap of verse but I suspect it is a draft that Meredith kept for himself, sending a fair copy with the posy of wild violets. For whom was it written? Flora Sharp, Louisa Lawrence, Hilda de Longuelle, and Anna Steele are among the number of women he flirted with after the death in 1884 of his second wife. But it is the wrong question to ask because the manuscript is not a letter but a poem, a dramatic couplet so alive that it begs to be read as a letter that invites us to envision a heartfelt moment of intimacy.

### Note

1. The Latin Vulgate translates the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys from *Song of Songs* 2.1 as *flos campi*, the flowers of the fields, because those two flowers served to represent commonplace flowers. Hence, Ralph Vaughan Williams felt the need to clarify that his own *Flos Campi* was not about “buttercups and daisies” (12).

### Works Cited

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