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“HOW SILENCE BEST CAN SPEAK”: THE DISTRUST OF SPEECH IN GEORGE
MEREDITH’S *MODERN LOVE*

by

ELLEN JUSTINE MURRAY

Under the Direction of Paul H. Schmidt

ABSTRACT

The scarcity of speech in George Meredith’s *Modern Love* creates a deeply psychological narrative, reflecting a distrust of speech and the effectiveness of language in general. The narrator of the poem exists in a space of ambiguity, both blaming and yearning for speech; in his confusion, he remains largely silent. His silence does not only emphasize the distance between husband and wife but also between language and meaning. Furthermore, the narrator’s distrust of language ultimately exposes a breakdown in his certainty of self and truth.

INDEX WORDS: George Meredith, *Modern Love*, Language, Silence, Victorian poetry

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ELLEN JUSTINE MURRAY

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2010

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MEREDITH’S *MODERN LOVE*

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DEDICATION

For Drew, and our life together.

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I INTRODUCTION

George Meredith's *Modern Love* is a text of shifting voices, ideas, language, and power. Although the husband narrates the majority of the sonnets, he does not always seem to be in control of the narrative. Power in the sequence shifts and various characters, ideas, and uncertainties question the narrator's control. Richard L. Kowalczyk describes the conflict in the sequence as "the incompatibility of a romantic system with the modern experience of sexual frustration, hypocrisy, and infidelity" (39). Meredith's sequence, however, also exposes linguistic incompatibilities within the romantic system, namely the narrator's distrust of language. The husband questions the capacity of language to express what he feels, and the absence of sufficient language mandates his silence. His disuse of speech, like images of emptiness, isolation, and division in the sonnets, reveals his spiritual isolation. As Isobel Armstrong points out, Meredith "ruthlessly manipul[es] terms to expose the gap between words and experience. Language becomes a mask which is always slipping to disclose the non-correspondence between words and the non-linguistic world" (441). The gap Meredith exposes creates a disjointed narrative—one some critics have chosen to see as a sign of poetic weakness, ignoring the possible implications of these linguistic disconnects: that Meredith seeks to emphasize the gaps between Victorian ideals and reality, restrictive language and human experience, and that these gaps also reflect a perceived distance from the default explanation of human experience by Victorian Christians.

Many critics have attempted to "solve" the narrative disconnects in *Modern Love* through psychoanalytic evaluation or by examining the poem's shifts in point of view. Meredith's language, however, like the love of his characters, is "a thing of moods," and the narrative of *Modern Love* is "both promoted and resisted in order to focus the inner rather than the external

action” (Meredith 10.6, Ball 109-10). This inward focus pushed many critics, especially in the 1970s, to read Meredith’s sequence as “psychological probing” and “psychological realism” (Bogner 120, Mermin 100). David Kwinn and Delmar Bogner examine scenes of sexual rejection and gratification in the sonnet sequence, while Willie D. Reader and Phillip E. Wilson focus on narration shifts, to comment on the husband’s hyperconsciousness and declare the poem a narration of mental state rather than action. While their critiques are valuable, they attempt to solve the point-of-view shifts in the text rather than question the husband’s retreat into himself. Kowalczyk, however, notes that the “inconsistent” point of view is a “technique displac[ing] the reader’s focus from plot highlights to the dilemma in the marriage” (43).

Kowalczyk, Cynthia Grant Tucker, Arline Golden, and William T. Going have examined marital dilemma of *Modern Love* in terms of the sonnet sequence and the tradition Meredith both utilizes and subverts; their work is valuable when considering how Meredith accentuates the disconnect between expectation and reality because they highlight the historical expectations of sonnets and sonnet sequences. Considering *Modern Love* in relation to the sequences of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Kowalczyk believes Meredith “directly attacks idealized concepts of love” and blames these concepts for the couple’s “destruction” in the poem (42). Tucker notes Meredith’s “radical modification” of the sonnet sequence, but also claims he was aware of the varied “treatment” of “diverse materials” by Renaissance sonneteers and felt free to “use the tradition as his basic metaphor” (353). Or, as Golden puts it, “What better way to convey the disintegration of the romantic ideal than in the form which had always epitomized it, and in which Mrs. Browning had reaffirmed it for her generation?” (268). The psychological drama Meredith places in and beyond the sonnet form, with two extra lines, mirrors the mental state of a husband trying to express complex emotions within a structured

society. John Lucas describes this as “the husband’s inner posturings, comically contained...by casual domesticity” (25). The tension between expression and repression thus exists in both the form and content of *Modern Love*.

This dichotomy is evident in the first sonnet of the sequence as the wife becomes aware that her husband has heard her crying and suppresses her sobs. Her dramatic shift from sound to silence suggests fear and deceit, and, although her muted state is “dreadfully venomous to him,” the husband does not verbally respond—he too lies in silence (Meredith 1.6). The husband becomes a “shuddering heap of pain,” internalizing his struggles, frustrations, and regrets (Meredith 2.16). Henry Kozicki views the conflict in *Modern Love* as “warfare,” but acknowledges that “[w]hat they war over is as deeply buried as the war itself, for they never ‘fight’ or even talk about what each wants the other to do or be” (142). Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life” deals with a similar communication stalemate as the narrator asks, “Are even lovers powerless to reveal / To one another what indeed they feel?” (14-5). Meredith suggests his lovers are powerless to do so as they are “reed-pipes, coarsely stopped” (8.8). Although “used” and muted, the husband, at times, still aches for verbal communication; he exists in a space of ambiguity, both blaming and yearning for speech (8.11).

Most of the husband’s blaming and yearning, however, is internal; he does not share it with anyone but the reader. This internalization again results in silence and a “gulf between” him and his wife, in addition to muddling his own notion of identity as he ceases to “know” himself (Meredith 22.14, 8.13).¹ Michael Lund connects the husband’s isolation with J. Hillis Miller’s claims about spatial images reflecting a “doubt about God’s relationship to [the] world” in nineteenth-century poetry (377). Lund believes the images of “spatial separation or

¹ Please note I am using “silence” to refer to non-verbal response.

disconnectedness” in *Modern Love* not only emphasizes the distance between husband and wife, but also is “part of a larger pattern”—one of “spiritual crisis” (377, 378, 376). Focusing mainly on descriptions of isolation, Lund does not examine disconnections between formerly “analogical” symbolic language as Miller does in his work (“Theme” 209).

Analyzing the linguistic disconnects in *Modern Love*, we can examine Meredith’s poem in a new light: the struggle with language and verbal communication is a sign of not only modernity but also spiritual crisis. Creation, according to Miller, directly reflected its creator, and poetic language “incarnated” the metaphysical (“Disappearance” 3). Language, therefore, had implicit, spiritual associations, and Miller believes that many nineteenth and twentieth-century writers no longer experienced these associations; instead, writers like Matthew Arnold and Gerard Manley Hopkins experienced language as a series of disconnections. Meredith, whom Robert Peel calls a “Victorian pagan,” surely had a similar encounter with language (46). Cathy Comstock describes *Modern Love* as “a frenetic attempt on the part of the narrator either to locate, or cover the lack of, a reliable ground of meaning” (140). The husband searches for reliability in his relationships, nature, time, and language but finds them temporary and shifting, only reliable in their ephemerality. In one of the most painful descriptions of fleeting life, he feels mocked by the state of creation: “ ‘I play for Seasons; not Eternities!’ / Says Nature, laughing on her way. ‘So must / All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!’ ” (Meredith 8.1-3). Even the past, which one would assume to be stable in its history, mocks him: “Methinks with all this loss I were content, / If the mad Past, on which my foot is based, / Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole / Of life is mixed” (Meredith 12.11-14). Not finding “reliable ground” in nature or the past, the husband is further crushed by an inability to find the language with which to speak of his despondency: “O bitter barren woman! what’s the name? /

The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?" (Meredith 6.11-12). His wife needs a "new name" not only because her transgression is recent, but also because he does not have a name he can give her—he experiences a disconnect between the language he knows and the language he needs to "name" or identify her. His wife's previous name is now void; the relationship between her identity and the word that accompanied it is broken. He can only reference her at a distance as "woman" or "madam," in what Miller calls "modern poetic symbolism," because his words no longer "participat[e] in the things...named" ("Theme" 209). The husband of *Modern Love* is not able to "name" his wife or himself. Meredith does not provide names or concrete identities for his characters either; their anonymity only further emphasizes their relational and linguistic distance from each other. Miller claims this kind of referential distance is a symptom of spiritual depravity because it reflects the broken "communion" between God, humanity, and language ("Disappearance" 3).

In this thesis, I will explore this broken communion in the silences and brief moments of sound in Meredith's sonnet sequence to assess the implications of the narrator's distrust of language and fear of vocalization. I hope to establish *Modern Love* as a text of linguistic frustration and isolation. In the next chapter I will examine the terminology of silence Meredith employs throughout the sequence, tracing his usage of "mute," "quiet," "silence," and "used," to show how this language suggests the couple's muteness is innate, unavoidable, and punishing. I will also explore specific instances in the poem when the husband confronts silence and remains quiet. These moments usually include a reflection on language by the husband and reveal his ambivalence towards the effectiveness of language. I will discuss the silences of the wife and mistress in *Modern Love*, as their responses to the narrator often seem muted, ignored, or un-included. Meredith also mutes various moments of speech throughout the sequence; times when

the characters communicate, but their words are not shared with the reader. This detachment, I hope to show, further displays the increasing distance between language and meaning Miller discusses at length. In addition to analyzing these silences, in chapter three, I will examine the brief moments of speech Meredith provides in the sequence. In many ways, these vocalizations show as much about the husband's fear of speech as the silences throughout the sonnets. I will focus on the longest speech in the sequence, in sonnet 33, and the way the husband discusses God, Satan, good, and evil. While I will analyze other instances of speech in *Modern Love*, this sonnet contains many of the communication issues pervasive in the sequence. Finally, in my last chapter, I will discuss the possible implications of the silences, both spiritual and linguistic, in *Modern Love* and will incorporate poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold to emphasize the prevalence of this motif in Victorian poetry—poetry with isolated narrators and hollowed language.

II SILENT IMAGES AND (RE)ACTIONS

...up they rose
 As from unrest, and each the other viewing,
 Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds
 How darkened...they destitute and bare
 Of all their virtue: silent, and in face
 Confounded long they sat, as stricken mute.
 —John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

...but it is well known to all experienced minds that our
 firmest convictions are often dependent on subtle
 impressions for which words are quite too coarse a
 medium.
 —George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

Silence and muted language pervade Meredith's sonnet sequence. Amy Christine Billone, relying on the work of Paul Oppenheimer, notes, “[s]ince its very origin, the sonnet has been associated with silence” not only in its history but also in its name meaning “little song” or “little sound” (3). Oppenheimer suggests the sonnet, originally, “may have been intended less for public displays (in the sense of performance) than for private encounters between reader and poem” and “that the birth of the sonnet heralds a departure from the tradition of lyrics as performed poems and introduces a new, introspective, quieter mode, a mode that is to dominate the history of Western poetry for at least the next seven centuries (187). Still dominant in the nineteenth century, William T. Going calls the Victorians’ production of sonnet sequences “the most prolific” (15). Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* “inaugurated a mid-century revival” and “helped to shape a major Victorian poetic innovation, the long poem telling a story through a lyrical sequence in a modern setting” (Adams 128). These sequences, or “assembled continuities,” stand as “the Victorian solution to the problems of referential framework and poetic form. The gaps, the uncertain silences, the temporal lapses or changes implicit in the spaces in between the individual poems create a tacit, inferable, and extended

context in time” (Davis 498). *Modern Love* certainly is a text of “gaps” and “uncertain silences,” but Meredith’s sequence is more narratively connected and reliant than Barrett Browning’s or Rossetti’s; it is a novel in verse that not only exposes the deterioration of a marriage, but also questions the ability of language to convey “mixed,” modern life and love (Meredith 12.14). Meredith appropriately fashions this examination in the traditionally “quieter mode” of the sonnet, as silence and muted language are prevalent throughout the sequence.

Meredith opens *Modern Love* with silence, not only in the wife’s cries “strangled mute,” but also with the distancing of sound as the narrator references an unknown catalyst to the husband’s realization: “By *this* he knew she wept with waking eyes” (1.1, emphasis added). These lines are “dislocated” and “anonymous,” emphasizing “how much is *not* known” at this point (Comstock 134). Three lines later, we discover it is the wife’s hurried self-silencing that informs him and initiates the painful narrative to follow. Her suppression transforms the couple and their surroundings into “effigies” (1.14). The wife lies “Stone-still,” and together “they might be seen / Upon their marriage-tomb” (1.7-8, 14-5). Their bedroom and the night become as silent and dampened as they are, losing animation just as they do:

Then, as midnight makes
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
Sleep’s heavy measure, they from head to feet
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall. (1.8-13)

The narrator presents a numb, stifled setting in this first sonnet, with the couple’s dead love represented by their “moveless” silence. The sonnet’s images and personifications emphasize

the muted nature of this moment. “Memory,” “Tears,” “sleep,” “black years,” “blank wall,” “effigies,” and tombs are soundless things characterizing the state of this marriage. Their actions too are silent; she *lies*, they *look*, and, in line sixteen, the husband and wife do not *ask* for a “sword that severs all”; they *wish*—a silent, secret act. They retreat further into passivity, and by the end of the sonnet, they are no longer “looking,” but are “be[ing] seen” (1.14).

The next sonnet includes similar, silent images as the narrator highlights the face’s silent communicators. The wife’s eyes are “guilty gates,” and “if their smiles encountered, he went mad / And raged deep inward” (2.2, 8-9). The husband interprets these corporeal signals and retreats into himself. As in the first sonnet, Meredith grounds these lines in silent illustrations; secrets, “taste,” “vision,” “breath,” “smiles,” and forgetting create another muted setting. The wife is a “star” that causes him to faint “on his vengefulness,” and the husband condemns himself “a shuddering heap of pain” by the end of the sonnet (2.12, 14, 16). Silence is not only the confrontation and catalyst of this narrative but linguistic leitmotif as well, with similarly quiet images present throughout the sonnets. The sequence’s psychological focus certainly necessitates this kind of language, as the husband internalizes his frustrations, but the quiet settings also frame the husband’s inner dialogue, emphasizing his isolation.

Another “love” poem by Meredith depicts this type of painful internalization, published in his first collection in 1851:

Should thy love die;

O dissemble it! smile! Let the rose hide the thorn!

While the lark sings on high,

And no thing looks forlorn,

Bury it, bury it, bury it where it was born. (*Song: Should thy love die* 16-20)

The speaker encourages the other to “fake it,” to act as if everything is normal and hide the painful thorn within oneself. We could replace “bury” with “silence,” and the poem would have essentially the same message as *Modern Love*. The husband of *Modern Love* consistently describes his wife’s ability to “smile” and bury any marital unpleasantness. At times, he is also able to participate in this burial of trouble, most notably in sonnet 17 when the married couple plays “HIDING THE SKELETON” (7). As they host a dinner party, their guests “see no ghost” while the hosts perform their love as “true hypocrites” (4, 11). Their acting is “the story of a marriage continuing amidst marital infidelities, with a romantic language which fits ill, indeed surreally, with the horrors it describes. But it is precisely that sense of ill-fittingness...which Meredith is after” (Davis 476). Even Meredith’s narrative not fitting within the prescribed fourteen lines of a sonnet produces tension, a bursting at the seams, another body packed with buried words and emotions. Husband and wife, playing out their parts, bury their true feelings within themselves; they do not discuss the “ghost” that their love has become.

The question that remains, however, is whether they have the ability to discuss their love’s death. How can the husband respond when his “hour has struck” and he “heard not the bell”? (3.16). Sonnet 8 suggests he cannot respond, and neither can his wife:

My breast will open for thee at a sign!
 But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
 The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
 And they were music till he flung them down,
 Used! used! (8-11)

While the husband wants to “open” up for his wife, they have no agency in regards to their ability to communicate; they are broken instruments. Like John Milton’s Adam and Eve, they

are “strucken mute” (9.1064). This passage also suggests that their speech, once “music,” came from God, but I will return to that in a later chapter. Now the couple is “flung” and “used,” powerless to regain what has been lost.

A “true” fourteen-line sonnet by Meredith, “The Promise in Disturbance,” contains similar images of God, music, and fallen humanity, and the poem prefaced the reprint of *Modern Love* in 1892:

How low when angels fall their black descent,
 Our primal thunder tells: known is the pain
 Of music, that nigh throning wisdom went,
 And one false note cast wailful to the insane.
 Now seems the language heard of Love as rain
 To make a mire where fruitfulness was meant.
 The golden harp gives out a jangled strain,
 Too like revolt from heaven’s Omnipotent.
 But listen in the thought; so may there come
 Conception of a newly-added chord,
 Commanding space beyond where ear has home.
 In labour of the trouble at its fount,
 Leads Life to an intelligible Lord
 The rebel discords up the sacred mount. (1-14)

Written explicitly to precede Meredith’s sequence, this “Promise” prepares the reader for the new or, more precisely, modern love discussion to come; Norman Friedman calls it a “sonnet-

prelude” (20).² It also, like sonnet 8, features an instrument of language becoming “jangled,” but this discordant state produces insurgent, not victim. “The Promise in Disturbance” introduces Meredith as the “rebel” who “discords up the sacred mount” with a new “chord” in *Modern Love*, and the poem addresses the same “unholy battle” as sonnet 8 (14). Unlike the sonnets to follow, this “Promise” references sound, not silence; the speaker asks us to “listen in the thought.” The thoughts we “listen” to in *Modern Love* are those of a man who cannot be the rebel. The husband of the sequence has no power as a muted, “used,” “coarsely stopped” voice, and the married couple’s state is unchangeable as “no morning can restore / What [they] have forfeited” (43.12-3). I do not mean to say that the husband ceases to act, but he repeatedly returns to feelings of helplessness after lashing out against his wife. Once again, silent objects illustrate these feelings; in sonnet 10, the husband blames his dreams of “loyal life” for making him a “puppet” (8, 11). As a puppet, his actions are controlled and manipulated by someone else. Although he is in a passive state, it is still possible for him to move—his own arms and legs respond to prompting. It is not possible, however, for him to speak with his own voice. A puppet can have no voice. A puppeteer does not manipulate a puppet’s voice; he or she must provide it with one. The husband no longer has this provision, because “with the serpent” he is “cursed” (26.11).

Sonnet 22 contains a similar expression of irrevocable silence between husband and wife.

In its opening lines, the husband wonders if his wife has something to tell him:

² “The Promise in Disturbance” is both a fitting and ironic title considering *Modern Love* questions and, ultimately, blames the desire for and belief in certainty, or promises, for destroying the couple’s relationship. In her critical edition of Meredith’s poetry, Phyllis B. Bartlett notes that this sonnet replaced an epigraph, also a cautionary introduction, of the first, 1862 edition of *Modern Love*:

This is not meat
For little people or for fools.
Book of the Sages

What may the woman labour to confess?

There is about her mouth a nervous twitch.

'Tis something to be told, or hidden:—which?

I get a glimpse of hell in this mild guess. (1-4)

Recognizing a need for expression in his wife, the husband believes there are two options for her: utterance or burial. His curiosity shows a desire to understand her, but even contemplating what she may have to communicate gives him “a glimpse of hell.” What might this “something” be? The husband’s hell is also in his awareness that even if she reveals herself to him in speech, her intentions still might not be communicated—her “something” may still be masked under insufficient or unfitting language. As Paul H. Schmidt points out, “[o]ne gets the momentary impression here that if the two could only speak, they might be able to connect with one another again. But a closer look makes it clear that to speak here threatens only to make matters worse, because the two cannot possibly understand each other in the first place” (95). The husband is afraid because “he cannot tell if her words will reveal or conceal,” and how can he trust language that is ambiguous or duplicitous (95)? Aware that he cannot trust language or thinking that an attempt to interpret intended meaning is “hell,” he and his wife do not converse: “She will not speak. I will not ask. We are / League-sundered by the silent gulf between” (22.13-4). Examining sonnet 8, I suggested that the husband and wife, as damaged “reed-pipes,” are incapable of communicating effectively through speech—that they have been stripped of that ability. Sonnet 22 implies it is their awareness that they cannot understand each other’s language that silences them. I do not think these are conflicting expressions but that the latter sonnet further expounds on the source of the couple’s punishing muteness.

As the husband confesses in sonnet 26, he sees speech as “the side-lie of a truth” (13). One could ask if the husband believes in any ultimate truth, but his vexations at the instability of relationships, memory, and language show that he, at least, longs for one. Even his search for a new name for his wife in sonnet 6 is a pursuit of truth—a search for the word that will truthfully represent who she is now (11-2). He cannot, however, locate the center of meaning; even the “Past” is not “firm,” and, in the present, he cannot “see...plain” (12.12,13, 19.10). Attempts to contain or control his precarious existence, including an affair with another woman, ultimately fail and remind him that he is “[h]elplessly afloat” in a life that is inevitably inconsistent (40.13). His experience of modern love “is a ceaseless discovery of fluctuations; change is its only constant” (Lucas 26). He confesses that

If any state be enviable on earth,
 ’Tis yon born idiot’s, who, as days go by,
 Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
 In a queer sort of meditative mirth. (19.13-6)

An idiot is free of “ordinary acts of reasoning or rational conduct,” can exist outside the strict structures and “procedures” of language, and, for the husband, is an escapist fantasy (“idiot, *n*,” Foucault 216). If only he were born an idiot, immune to the idea of love and the desire for fidelity, then the husband could have escaped the state he is in now. Not able to quiet his mind, his desires, and the troubling contradictions he tries to understand, he can, at least, quiet his speech and exist partially as an idiot. The husband wants to understand and be understood, but he cannot trust language to accurately relay his “disordered brain” (46.6). He is like Michel Foucault’s “Inclination” that “speaks out: ‘I don’t want to have to enter this risky world of discourse; I want nothing to do with it insofar as it is decisive and final; I would like to feel it all

around me, calm and transparent, profound, infinitely open, with others responding to my expectations, and truth emerging, one by one” (215-6). The husband of *Modern Love* avoids entering this “risky world” by avoiding speech, often painfully. Even though he desires “infinitely open” discourse, the “others” of the sequence do not always respond to his expectations.

In sonnet 28, he details his expectations of the Lady, his mistress. The delivery of this sonnet is ambiguous. Because it directly addresses his mistress, it seems spoken, but it is not punctuated with quotation marks as other speeches are in the sequence. As such, they seem to be unspoken expectations of his mistress to distract and flatter him, but he finds he “cannot take the woman at her worth!” (29.8). While, at times, he desperately longs to hear his wife speak, the husband does not express this desire towards his mistress, and her speech is never included in the sonnets. We assume she speaks in sonnet 36, as the Lady and Madam meet, but the narrator does not provide us with her words—she is a completely muted character. Her forced silence by the narrator strips her of agency and further emphasizes that he views her as something to be used and controlled.

The husband of *Modern Love*, however, is unable to control his wife, with her infidelity and later suicide as the starkest examples. In contrast to the mistress of the sequence who seems to have no power, the wife has some agency, evident in her husband’s inability to control her, and she has a voice in the sonnets. At times we get her words second-hand from her husband, but even so, she has more of a vocal presence in the text than the mistress and, one could say, her husband. She often provokes or initiates what little speech exists in the sequence. That said, she is not immune to struggles with language. She does not enter the “risky world of discourse” in sonnet 22; husband and wife are both victims of “the silent gulf” (14). Right before her death,

we discover her trepidation towards speaking: “She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh, / And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed. / She dared not say, ‘This is my breast: look in.’” (49.7-9). It seems she is afraid that words will reveal what she has buried inside her breast, to herself and to her husband. It is also possible, however, that she fears misunderstanding. She might think that her husband will interpret her words incorrectly or that they will not fully convey her feelings—we do not know. Whatever the source of her fears, the result is silence; she does not open up to her husband. Instead, “he learned how silence best can speak / The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin” (49.11-2). These lines are even more difficult to interpret, as it is not clear how silence is “best” in this situation. Does he comprehend her fears as she remains mute? What does he understand exactly? Does he understand that she will kill herself? It seems almost cruel that he describes their interaction this way before her suicide, his conclusion more numb than understanding. His confidence echoes the egomaniacal declaration of Porphyria’s lover, who, after strangling Porphyria, explains, “No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain” (Browning 41-2). Then again, perhaps the husband is acknowledging language’s inability to convey complex emotions and accepts their inability to understand each other. The last line of sonnet 49 suggests he does not fully understand her state of mind and intentions until poison “had passed those lips, and he knew all” (16).

Confusion aside, husband and wife again remain silent in the face of conflict. Patricia Ball calls “the prevailing state” of the poem “one of severed communication which none the less allows mute recriminations and encourages the art of wounds dumbly administered” (117). Existing in cursed, “dumb harmony,” the husband’s reflections are “mute recriminations” and are perfect for the little sound that is the sonnet (39.8). The husband’s distrust of language is not only represented by his avoidance of speech, but by the conversations he has with his wife and

the brief utterances he makes to his mistress as well. In the next chapter, I will focus on these moments and what they reveal about the characters' attitudes towards the "risky world of discourse" (Foucault 215).

III MOMENTS OF SPEECH AND DISTANT COMMUNICATIONS

And long we try in vain to speak and act
 Our hidden self, and what we say and do
 Is eloquent, is well—but 'tis not true!
 —Matthew Arnold, “The Buried Life”

As I discussed in the previous chapters, a struggle with silence is prevalent throughout *Modern Love*. The narrator often fears to speak, acknowledging language's limits in conveying human experience, and describes himself and his wife as muted instruments. There are, however, moments of speech in these sonnets. Eleven of the fifty sonnets include vocalizations, and they further reveal the narrator's distrust of language. The delivery of these utterances varies by speaker and time period—nearly half are imagined speakers or are conversations that take place in the past. For example, the first instance of speech occurs in sonnet 5 when “Love's inmost sacredness” asks the husband to “Come!” (12, 13). While this exclamation is not literal, we should not ignore the facility of speech “used” by abstract characters in the sequence. The abstractions that speak in *Modern Love* speak confidently—unlike the husband. Consequently, they mock him, his situation and his muteness.

The primary, mocking character in the sequence is Nature. Sonnet 13 opens, “‘I play for Seasons; not Eternities!’ / Says Nature, laughing on her way. ‘So must / All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!’” (1-3). Traditionally feminine, the “she” of Nature laughs at the husband's state, humbling and embarrassing him like his wife. This voice represents those who punish the husband or, more precisely, those whom the husband feels punished by: nature, the natural world or human nature, and women, his wife and even the mistress who does not cure his pain. The lines following Nature's declaration underscore the husband's perception of her confidence: “And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies / She is full sure!” (13.4-5). Few ideas, opinions, or characters in *Modern Love*, are “full sure”; the sequence is a record of inconsistent

emotions and expressions. Nature, though, manages to exist beyond shifting realities and remains a stable force, or adversary, in the sonnets. She speaks again in sonnet 30:

‘My children most they seem
When they least know me: therefore I decree
That they shall suffer.’ Swift doth young Love flee,
And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.
Then if we study Nature we are wise. (9-13)

The narrator, still a punishing agent, describes Nature as an adversary of Love that makes “Love flee.” Sonnet 30 is a discussion of humanity’s finiteness, and the speaker aligns Nature with the finite, in opposition to the idea of immortal Love, an idea the narrator struggles with throughout the sequence. Here, the husband concludes that Love is a dream and that Nature is what humanity should study. The narrator’s difficulty in reconciling his desire for love with the acknowledgement that “[l]ove dies” parallels his experience with the linguistic conflict between signifier and signified (16.11).

In a different sense, Nature is the voice of science and rational thinking in the sequence. Philip Davis believes that underneath “all the human twittering,” in Meredith’s fiction, “it is Darwinian sexual selection that holds sway....Yet in Meredith [*The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*] even Cold Blood’s externalizing language of science all too often comes from within—the words of cool reason a mask for heated fear, a distancing defence against pain” (534). I think we could similarly describe the use of Nature in *Modern Love*. Nature’s expressions are an externalization of scientific thinking that the narrator wants to believe; he wants to be as cold, punishing, and wise as Nature, but he cannot fully escape the “dread that [his] old love may be alive” (40.15). The emotional connection he still has to his unfaithful wife keeps him from being as confident

and indifferent as Nature. Darwin, Davis continues, “led Meredith—to something terrifyingly simple (unconscious pride, vanity, fear, sexual need, power, ‘our animal’) still left silently at the heart of a mentally evolved complexity” (535). The “simple” conclusion of Nature’s rule, while admirable to him, often terrifies the husband into silence, as his emotions toward his wife remain complex. His narration “is not a language of belief, directly summoning primary realities; through its powers of skeptical disbelief, it evokes instead a renewed sense of the inner twisted slipperiness of meaning, miming the delusive fictions and obfuscatory games played out in the human world, in evasion of the will-to-truth” (Davis 535). Like the moments when the husband feels muted by the inconsistencies of meaning, Nature’s confident outbursts bring about a similar conclusion. Still struggling with his marriage’s deterioration and his failed attempt to move on with another woman, he cannot believe in the callous, sexually driven Nature anymore than he can believe in immortal Love. When he lies somewhere between these two poles, confused and unable to take a side, the husband’s “skeptical disbelief” keeps him in a “silent gulf,” quietly trying to understand his situation (*Modern* 22.14). Kerry McSweeney describes these extremities in different terms, and believes many “Victorian love poems record...the painful passage” from one to the other, from a “sacred” understanding of love to one that is “profane” (8). The husband of *Modern Love* certainly experiences a painful transition, but his progression is not a straight succession from one pole to another; he vacillates back and forth, unsure of himself.

When the husband does swing to a side, he is able to speak out—sometimes violently. In sonnet 9, the husband feels “the wild beast in him betweenwhiles / So masterfully rude,” and he wants to show his wife his “teeth” and “hunger” (1-2, 5). Here, the husband embraces his “animal,” the bestial and unemotional side of his humanity (30.1). He wants to become like

unfeeling Nature, confident and driven only by appetite. In this emboldened state, he speaks for the first time in the sequence:

Once: 'Have you no fear?'

He said: 'twas dusk; she in his grasp; none near.

She laughed: 'No, surely; am I not with you?'

And uttering that soft starry 'you,' she leaned

Her gentle body near him, looking up;

And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,

He drank until the fluttering eyelids screened. (6-12)

He speaks four words before his wife is able to strip him of the beastly power he had felt only moments before. The setting seems perfect for him to take advantage of her: he holds her in "his grasp" and there is no one else around to complicate their interaction. However, she, like Nature, laughs, and reveals her fearlessness, in contrast to his questioning of himself in line 5. He no longer controls her in his grasp; instead, she closes in on him, and he loses his animalistic self in her eyes. While this is a scene of "thwarted sexuality," Lucas suggests that sonnet 9 "is also about the impotence of the husband's own desires, which he partly, and perhaps unconsciously, conceals from himself by rhetorically violent language and the indirections of the third-person narrative. It is as though he sees himself as another person" (26). When his wife laughs, the husband's self-certainty breaks down in the face of her confident composure. To be confident like Nature, and his wife, primitively driven, the husband cannot "partly" do anything; he must act without emotional reservations. Furthermore, as Lucas points out, he must be sure of his own identity, undivided and direct. The husband tries to be exacting, but he asks his wife a question. This not only invites her response, it is the result of his own self-questioning—he asks

her the same question he asks himself. The wife shows no division, answering his question directly. Her confident utterance trumps his attempt at verbal confrontation. As in sonnet 30, Love is the adversary of Nature. The husband's persisting love for his wife hinders his attempt to overpower her with his speech. He again becomes stuck between two extremes as he calls her both a "[d]evilish malignant witch" and a "young beam / Of heaven's circle-glory" (13). Back in the silent gulf between competing emotions, he cannot "squeeze" his wife "like an intoxicating grape;" she is free to leave "safe" and "supreme" (15, 16).

The husband's next speech in sonnet 15 serves as an interesting sequel to sonnet 9. Again, an animalistic boldness brings him to vocalization, but this time, he manages to be more direct and unquestioning in his address. He approaches his wife with the experience gained in sonnet 9. He knows she has not been afraid of him: "Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe. / The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love, / Frights not our modern dames:—well if he did!" (4-6). The return to first person narration and the husband's awareness of his position as the trusted spouse displays an understanding of self that allows him to speak more directly than before. His words are confident; they even mock his wife with biting sarcasm as he wakes her saying, "'Sweet dove, / Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb. / I do not? good! (8-10). Here he has adopted Nature's taunting tone, but while these words mock her, his speech is not what causes her to "tremble" with fear (14). Ironically, her own words produce this reaction as he shows her two love letters, one written to him and one written to her lover. In one sense, we could view the husband's confrontation with her as a success in that he approaches her honestly and confidently. He finally controls an interaction between them; he uses language to his advantage, teasing her and then using her words against her. In another sense, however, his presentation of the letters again links Love with broken promises expressed through language.

That is to say, the sonnet still contains a disturbing conclusion: she once put feelings of passion into words for him, the letter still exists, but her love for him does not.

I think we can interpret the wife's trembling in two ways. First, she might be frightened by her husband's discovery of the letter to her lover. Until this point, it is not clear whether she is aware that her husband knows about her illicit relationship. The disclosure of the letter, however, settles it, and fear would certainly be a natural reaction for a woman discovered cheating at this time. She could lose everything. It is also possible that she experiences a fear similar to her husband's in sonnet 9 when he cannot locate himself in an existence of contradictions. Perhaps she experiences a breakdown of self-certainty as she sees evidence of Love's finiteness in her letters. Because she professed love with "words...very like" those later written to another man, she is reminded that her new relationship could also end, change, or diminish (15.16). Her feelings changed once—how can she be certain they will not change again?

The next sonnet reveals a disturbing memory for the husband and wife of *Modern Love*. Back in their "old shipwrecked days," they discussed the nature of Love: "Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay / With us, and of it was our talk" (16.9-10). While open dialogue is rare in the sequence, we should still note that this conversation stands at a distance, in the past, and is, in a sense, a silenced dialogue because it exists in memory and not in the present. Their exchange emphasizes the misconstructions and misunderstandings that talking can yield:

‘Ah, yes!

Love dies!’ I said: I never thought it less.

She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.

Then when the fire domed blackening, I found

Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift

Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:—

Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound! (10-6)

Line 11 is a perfect example of the disconnections between language and emotion that we have been examining Meredith's sequence. The husband says something that he does not mean at all, and he suffers the consequences. We do not know his intention or expectation in making the statement that "Love dies," but because of his sarcastic tone in the previous sonnet followed by this flashback scene, I am tempted to think he was teasing his wife here as well. He could have just been flirting with her, making an agitating proclamation, as lovers sometimes do, in order to rile her up and then comfort her, playfully denying he ever thought such a thing. If that was the case, his plan did not work. She did not feel teased or flirted with—she felt hurt. The husband is "haunted" by this memory, his words, the inability to "unsay" them, her reaction, and how his words seem to have come true. The "sound" he curses in line 16 refers not only to the sound of his wife crying, but also to the sound of his offending words.

The inability to "unsay" helps further frighten the husband into silence. Speech becomes a fearsome thing when a person cannot trust that words convey intended meanings and when one knows the irrevocability of utterance. In sonnet 16, the wife does not ask him to say something different or explain himself more fully; instead, "[s]he yearned to me that sentence to unsay" (12). She asks for something impossible, suggesting that he can never make up for what he has done. While the husband presents the letters to prove her infidelity, his action is also one of requital. She cannot "unwrite" her letter, and he wants her to feel the same kind of helplessness he did in regards to regrettable words expressed. He wants to instill a fear of speech in her like

he has, and he succeeds. Before her suicide in sonnet 49, the wife has “one terror” and she “dared not say” (9).

The next instances of speech occur in three consecutive sonnets, 33, 34, and 35, and each provides further reflection on the connections and disconnections between God, humanity, Nature, and language in the sequence. Sonnet 33 contains the longest speech by any character in *Modern Love*; nearly the entire sonnet consists of the husband speaking to his mistress. For the first and only time in the sequence, speech is the primary source of narration. The husband speaks of a painting by Raphael housed at The Louvre, and it could be one of two works by the Italian artist. Raphael painted two scenes of Michael defeating Satan: *Saint Michael Overwhelming the Demon* (1505) and *St. Michael Slaying the Devil* (1518). They are also known as “The Small Saint Michael” and the “The Large Saint Michael,” and both were part of the museum’s Italian Renaissance collection in Meredith’s time (Scaillièrez). Each painting features Michael pinning down the devil with one foot (see fig. 1, 2). The ease with which Michael seems to hold the devil down frustrates the husband; to him, the angel looks “[t]oo serene” to be fighting God’s adversary:

‘Oh, Raphael! When men the Fiend do fight,
They conquer not upon such easy terms.
Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.
And does he grow half human, all is right.’(33.4, 9-12)

The husband cannot think about the painting without noting how unrealistic it is in relation to human experience. People cannot easily conquer evil like Saint Michael. More than that, they cannot fight without becoming “[h]alf serpent in the struggle.” That description might suggest that the painting he references is Raphael’s later work because the devil in that painting looks



Fig. 1. Raffaello Santi, *Saint Michael Overwhelming the Demon*, The Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 2. Raffaello Santi, *St. Michael Slaying the Devil*, The Louvre, Paris.

half man and half serpent, unlike the dragon in the other, and could have inspired the husband's interpretation of the painting (see fig. 2). Both paintings, however, display the ease of the devil's defeat, and the "easy terms" of the fight are what bothers the husband so much.

We learn more about the setting and inspiration for this speech after its delivery: "This to my Lady in a distant spot, / Upon the theme: *While mind is mastering clay, / Gross clay invades it* (13-5). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "clay" has had a long association with death and the human body, as it can be "the earth covering or enclosing a dead body when buried" or "the material of the human body...(living or dead) as distinguished from the soul" ("clay, *n*"). In this sense, the "theme" is about conquering death, finite existence, and, in the Christian thinking represented by Raphael's painting, Satan. We do not know who or what presented this theme for conversation, but the statement speaks to the husband's frustrations and experiences with Love. He longs for an immortal Love, a victor over all that is finite, but the betrayal of his wife and the confusion caused by it "invade" his belief in victorious Love. For him, "the whole / Of life is mixed" with clean and dirty clay (12.13-4).

The husband's speech, while pertinent, is problematic because of the last two lines of the sonnet: "If the spy you play, / My wife, read this! Strange love talk, is it not?" (15-6). Suddenly this speech transforms into a diary entry—and a calculating one. Like the conversations that occur in the past, this shift of focus to the wife and her reading distances the husband's speech in that it is not clear that it ever occurred. It also calls into question his purpose in "delivering" these words. After encountering the final lines of the sonnet, we look at what came before it slightly differently. Cathy Comstock believes that "the self-conscious manner of the presentation suggests manipulative performance rather than eternal insight" and that the husband's spoken words in the rest of the sequence become "increasingly distanced and ironic"

(133). The “image” of this speech “deconstructs itself...the stance of language as a medium for universal truth is overshadowed by the awareness of language as rhetorical tool” (133).

Indeed, the husband’s next two utterances mock his wife and their relationship. In sonnet 34, it seems like there will finally be a conversation between the two of them; the wife approaches him and wants to discuss their happiness, but the husband’s narration and verbal responses distance himself further:

Madam would speak with me. So, now it comes:

The Deluge or else Fire! She’s well; she thanks

My husbandship. Our chain on silence clanks.

Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs.

Am I quite well? Most excellent in health!

The journals, too, I diligently peruse.

Vesuvius is expected to give news:

Niagra is no noisier. (1-8)

The connection between speech and flood or fire, illustrate the husband’s expectation that his wife will “let loose” on him, that she will verbally bombard him with her frustrations and pain. But what follows is awkward and painfully slow, and the narrator mutes the conversation between them—we only get a retelling of their interaction. The silence between them is so congested that it “clanks,” but the husband continues to ignore her by reading the news until line 11 when he cruelly mocks her unhappiness suggesting that she “[t]ake ship! / For happiness is somewhere to be had” (11-2). Like his sarcastic tone in sonnet 15, he is able to be like Nature here, rational, without “pretence,” and he successfully disarms her, “Niagra or Vesuvius is deferred” (14, 16). His sarcasm is speech and therefore it sticks out in the text, but he does not

speak honestly. Furthermore, he has turned speech into a defense mechanism where he uses sarcasm to deflect genuine communication and pain.

The husband only describes one conversation with his wife in the sequence as genuine or “honest,” but he does not record the dialogue—it remains distant in retelling. In sonnet 48, he describes their “inmost hearts” opening and that they “drank the pure daylight of honest speech” (6, 7). At first this seems like a beautiful occurrence; they are finally bridging the “silent gulf” between them, making an effort to engage in honest dialogue with one another, but then he calls the conversation “the fatal draught” (8). Even though they speak honestly to each other, it does not mean they will accept or react positively to what the other says. His words cannot keep her from feeling jealous. Earlier in the sequence, he feared language’s ability to express his emotions and experiences, but now even perfectly aligned, honest speech does not contain what they need to mend this relationship. To return to Davis’s description, the language “fits ill,” and what Meredith brings out in this sequence is that all language fits ill, not just the romantic language of love sonnets with a more modern subject—all language fails (476).

IV THE IMPLICATIONS OF SILENCE

Swept into limbo is the host
 Of heavenly angels, row on row;
 The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
 Pale and defeated, rise and go.
 The great Jehovah is laid low,
 Vanished his burning bush and rod—
 Say, are we doomed to deeper woe?
 Shall marriage go the way of God?
 —Amy Levy, “A Ballad of Religion and Marriage”

As though they perfectly knew
 The old lost road through the woods....
 But there is no road through the woods.
 —Rudyard Kipling, “The Way Through the Woods”

Having examined the prevalence of silence throughout *Modern Love* and its repercussions in the text, we should now discuss its larger implications. The narrator’s distrust of language, particularly the spoken word, points to a breakdown in certainty of self as well as certainty of truth. *Modern Love*, after all, is not just a love poem, not merely something to dismiss as broken-hearted ramblings. We can take the “hyperbolic descriptions of love...seriously as an attempt to express insatiable desire and aspiration, especially when no higher ideal than human love is to be found” (*Matthew* 163). As many critics have noted, Meredith’s sonnet sequence is a poem of destroyed ideals or, perhaps more precisely, damaged ones. The husband fluctuates between rejecting Love entirely, embracing Nature, and still desiring “[s]omething more than earth” in regards to Love (*Modern* 29.6). The question to ask here is what is “otherworldly” about Love? Kerry McSweeney and David G. Riede identify a connection between Victorian love poetry and the “religious and intellectual climate of the period. As is well known, the subsidence of traditional foundations of Christian belief in God and the immortality of the soul created great anxiety during the period. Many...were led to seek the grounds for supernatural belief in personal experience” (McSweeney 4-5). Love, for

many, “provided the strongest evidence” of the supernatural or “replace[d] religious faith as the primary source of value and meaning in life” (McSweeney 5, *Matthew* 163). Although we should be careful assigning certain characteristics or beliefs to a whole generation of people and artists, the tension between finite, human experience and a desire for the eternal is present throughout *Modern Love*, and it is worth considering this poem in the light of other texts and critics who have explored this subject in order to discover new layers of meaning in Meredith’s sequence.

As I discussed in chapter 2, Meredith both utilizes and subverts the expectations of love poetry by fashioning his exploration of marital difficulty in a sonnet sequence. Similarly, his poem both explores and rejects the idea of immortal love. When the husband is unable to take a side this debate, Nature versus Love, finite versus infinite, he exists in a “silent gulf” (*Modern* 12.14). Thus, one manifestation of his uncertainties is in the words he does and does not express. From the first sonnet of *Modern Love*, the husband abandons logocentrism—he no longer trusts a bond between presence and language. Language’s disconnect from the real world is “vain regret scrawled over the blank wall” (1.13). The “scrawled” expression of regret exists on something that is blank; it is fused with nothing. He also acknowledges the inconsistencies of language, interpretation, and meaning in sonnet 19: “I see not plain:— / My meaning is, it must not be again” (10-1). This expression of his confusion, the dashed pause, and the ambiguity of line 11 show his struggle to define or describe experience. More times than not in the sequence, the husband’s confusion and frustration with verbal expression result in his silence, finding that “silence best can speak / The awful things” (49.11-2). Like the speaker of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, he knows that “words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul

within” (5.3-4). In Tennyson’s poem, the narrator wants to use this deficiency to his advantage; he hopes to hide behind language that he knows will help disguise him:

In words, like weeds, I’ll wrap me o’er,
 Like coarsest clothes against the cold:
 But that large grief which these enfold
 Is given in outline and no more. (5.9-12)

Here, the speaker feels there is something to be gained through the distorting lens of language. Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott, however, feels more abused by this distortion, as she is “half sick of shadows” (71).

The idea that weaving, writing, or speaking is a “shadow” or “outline” of some truth, assumes that there is an underlying, authentic self to express. The husband of *Modern Love*, however, cannot locate his center, his authentic being. He, like language, shifts. Having “dreamt of loyal Life,” his wife’s betrayal initiates a confusion of identity as he is unsure of who he is without her (*Modern* 10.8). He had been defined by his marriage to her and upon its dissolution, he is now lost, a floating signifier: “I do not know myself without thee more: / In this unholy battle I grow base” (8.13-4). Patricia M. Ball believes that “[t]o Love is to become more vulnerable. To be denied or torn away from love is to suffer a crisis of identity” (122). The husband’s identity crisis silences him as he loses the ability to interpret his experiences and to understand his feelings and motivations. In sonnet 32 he confesses that

when her mouth
 (Can it kiss sweetly? sweetly!) would address
 The inner me that thirsts for her no less,
 And has so long been languishing in drouth,

I feel that I am matched; that I am man!
 One restless corner of my heart or head,
 That holds a dying something never dead,
 Still frets, though Nature giveth all she can. (5-12)

At first, it seems he has located his center, “the inner me” of sexual desire and natural instinct pushing him to be a “man” with his mistress, but a certain restlessness muddles this center. He can no longer tell where his motivation comes from, unsure if its roots are in his “heart or head,” emotion or reasoning. Furthermore, the imagery of “a dying something never dead” again exposes a tension between the infinite and the finite, as his feelings toward his wife should be gone but have not died. The husband longs for the fixedness of death, wishing he could erase the emotional attachment to his wife because it disturbs and confuses his sense of self. Without a unified or stable understanding of self, the husband, like his language, is in the “absence” of “presence” (Derrida 50).

We can interpret this absence in different ways. First, we can examine *Modern Love* in terms of J. Hillis Miller’s hypotheses about nineteenth-century authors’ “sense of inner nothingness” in *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Miller 8). Miller claims that the writer who has experienced God’s disappearance exists in “disconnection: disconnection between man and nature, between man and man, even between man and himself” (2). These disconnections arose from the “splitting” of a communion between God, humanity, nature, and language evident in the Mass and in poetry. According to Miller,

Poetry in turn was, in one way or another, modeled on sacramental or scriptural language. The words of the poem incarnated the things they named, just as the words of the Mass shared in the transformation they evoked. The symbols and

metaphors of poetry were no mere inventions of the poets. They were borrowed from the divine analogies of nature. Poetry was meaningful in the same way as nature itself—by the communion of the verbal symbols with the reality they named. (3)

For the most part, Miller avoids discussing what caused the split of these divine analogies, instead focusing on the disconnections between them and the spiritual implications of feelings, understandings, and languages of absence in the works of Tomas De Quincey, Robert Browning, Emily Brontë, Matthew Arnold, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Although these writers' lives, philosophies, and work differ greatly from one another, Miller claims they share a spiritual loneliness symptomatic of the "subjective consciousness" and "modern historical sense" in their writing (7). He describes this sense as a historicism "which begins as an interest in the past" and "ends by transforming man's sense of the present" (11). We could call this a kind of nostalgia, where one longs for a perceived goodness of the past and thus becomes disillusioned with the present state of things and interprets the present as lacking.³ The husband of *Modern Love*, at times, longs for the past, for a time of happy marriage with his wife. Sonnet 8 best represents this way of thinking in the sequence as the husband reflects on a past where "God once filled them with his mellow breath; / and they were music till he flung them down, / Used! used!" (9-11). Here the husband sees a past when God blessed them, but in the present this blessing has

³ See David G. Riede's book *Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry* for a lengthier discussion of this kind of nostalgia in literature and its broader implications. Riede describes Victorian nostalgia as Freudian melancholy: "a pathology involving an impoverished sense of self, a lost sense of wholeness of being" (6). He connects Freud's theory with Thomas Carlyle's "diagnosis of his age's disease as the division of wholeness of mind into self-contemplation in which conscience first emerges as one part of the mind to chastise the other" (6).

turned into a curse “worse than death” (12). Believing his wife has the ability to recover what they have lost, he asks her to “[s]peak, and a taste of that old time restore!” (16).

The husband comes to realize, however, that he has perceived the past poorly; it is not as innocent or stable as he previously thought. The “mocking” and “mad Past” is not “firm,” making it impossible for him to definitively blame his current struggle on a specific change from the past to the present (12.14, 12, 13). Just as the husband both desires and rejects the infinite throughout the sequence, he also desires and rejects belief in a former happiness or contentment. His view of history is almost the opposite of what Miller describes because the husband’s present now informs the way he perceives the past. If there was a happy marriage in the past, he can no longer see it. He even has trouble telling the past and the present apart:

Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee
Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,
And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing,
Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.
Or is it now? or was it then? (11.1-5).

The time he spends with his wife now is just as it was before. They host parties, go on holiday, and take moonlit walks. He feels a change in their relationship, suffers under its weight, but he cannot tell if things were ever any different.

While Miller’s concept of historicism does not mesh with *Modern Love*, his readings of Arnold’s poetry are particularly helpful in relation to Meredith’s sonnet sequence. Miller argues that Arnold’s poetry displays an incompatibility between God and human language because Arnold “does not believe that God can be spoken about as we speak of things in this world” (248). Furthermore, “Arnold’s thought, both in its imagery and in its conceptual axes, is

dominated by the theme of irreconcilable opposites, and the constant appearance of this theme is evidence of his inability to experience the world as other than broken and disintegrated” (257). “Dover Beach,” for example, provides two irreconcilable opposites: “The Sea of faith” of the past versus the “Retreating” faith of the present, and love versus the world (21, 26, 29-34). The speaker imagines these dichotomies in the ebb and flow of the sea where only one or the other can happen. The sea cannot ebb and flow at the same time; the tide must come and then go. Similarly, in the poem, a person has faith or has lost it—there is no in-between. The husband of *Modern Love* also encounters the seemingly incompatible aspects of modern life, but he consistently finds himself in that gap between. Using similar sea imagery to Arnold, Richard D. McGhee describes Meredith’s sequence as one that “works itself out in terms of this mental geography: marriage is a ship upon an ocean of desire, and duty is divided between the guiding star of one ideal and the bewitching moon of another” (163). In one sense, *Modern Love* is lengthier study of the “confusion” the speaker of “Dover Beach” expresses in the last stanza of the poem; Meredith begins his study of modernity where Arnold ends. In *Modern Love*, Meredith dwells in the gaps between “infinite inwardness and finite actuality” and works to emphasize them; after all, this is how the poem achieves its modernity (*Allegories* 8). Miller believes that Arnold desires a divine mediator between “himself and God,” someone to bridge that gap between the irreconcilable opposites in the world, but that Arnold does not find such a mediator because he does not find “peace” (258, 257).

We could certainly take Miller’s hypothesis and interpret *Modern Love* and the husband’s frustrations with the contradicting Love versus Nature, infinite versus finite, as a result of God’s absence as mediator between the self and heaven, the temporal and the transcendent. This would place Meredith’s sequence with other “crisis of faith” poems of the nineteenth century and would

emphasize Meredith's awareness of and engagement in "[o]ne of the major facets of the Victorian age" (Richards 182). While this would be a worthwhile endeavor, taking Miller's theory is to make the same assumptions that he did. Miller outlines these assumptions himself in his preface to the most recent edition of *The Disappearance of God*. The two most relevant for our purposes are his assumption of a "unified selfhood or 'consciousness'" and "the hypothesis of such a universal spooky Zeitgeist" (ix, xi). Writing in 2000, he questions both of these assumptions, but maintains that he "was really on to something about the ideology of the Victorians" and that his hypotheses are "unprovable but productive" (xi, ix).

Miller's study is productive, as would be a continued examination of his hypotheses in the works of other writers, but if we only consider the spiritual or religious implications of the linguistic struggle in *Modern Love*, we ignore another possible reading of the poem—that the gaps prevalent throughout the sequence are a result of insufficient language that never had an innate, symbolic meaning or connection to God. Miller's book, after all, is a study of loss, the disappearance of something that was once present, but we can also read *Modern Love* as a "mark of the absence of presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Spivak xvii).

Meredith and Arnold share an exploration of language's deficiencies and the difficulties of self-understanding in a modern world. Riede claims that Arnold experiences a "betrayal" by language that brings him "into something very like modern deconstruction" (*Matthew* 14). According to Riede, Arnold's "denial of the verifiable existence of anything beyond or above material nature, beyond or above the world of things, leads him to a distrust of all words that can not be referred back immediately to something 'concrete,' and ultimately to a distrust of a metaphysics of presence or being in language" (*Matthew* 15). In "The Buried Life" we see an

attempt to find authentic language similar to the husband's attempt in *Modern Love*. The first lines of Arnold's poem bring language to the center of this couple's difficulties: "Light flows our war of mocking words, and yet, / Behold, with tears mine eyes are wet! / I feel a nameless sadness o'er me roll" (1-3). The words of this war mock both deliverer and receiver as they defer intended meaning, and the speaker cannot find a word to describe his despair. This inability to locate a signifier for human emotion is much like the husband's vain search for his wife's "new name" in *Modern Love* that I discussed in chapter 1.

The husband of Meredith's sequence experiences a crisis of identity. In sonnet 40 he questions the self-understanding of his mistress and himself: "I bade my Lady think what she might mean. / Know I my meaning, I?" (1-2). The question carries multiple queries with it. Do I understand her meaning? Does she? Do I know myself? When I put something into words, how is my meaning conveyed and understood? *Modern Love* is a text without a center and so is its narrator. He tries to understand himself and his experiences in language because he has to—nothing is "outside-text" or outside the "snare" of language (Derrida 158, *Modern* 50.3). While he cannot entirely escape this snare, he seeks out silence, however painful, because he can at least avoid or limit the battles "of mocking words" ("Buried" 1).

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