

## MEREDITH'S COMIC TRAGEDY

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The object of this essay is to find out if George Meredith's novel *The Tragic Comedians* is a tragedy or not. I'll begin by studying different theories that deal with tragedy and the tragic hero, theories that I will take into account when analyzing *The Tragic Comedians*.

The first question is, can a novel be also a tragedy? When Aristotle defined tragedy, he specified that it had to be written «in the form of action, not of narrative» (Muller, 7), however Joseph Wood Krutch in «The Tragic Fallacy» thinks that tragedies «are no longer written in either the dramatic or any other form» (Corrigan, 272) and Northrop Frye that «tragedy is best and most easily studied in drama, but it is not confined to drama, not to actions that end in disaster» (Corrigan, 99). This leads to another important point in this discussion: the outcome of tragedy.

Aristotle considers that unhappy endings are the right endings as «pity and fear are most fully excited by a change in Fortune from good to bad» (Muller, 7). But in another occasion, Aristotle says that it is better if the hero learns «the truth just in time to avoid the tragic deed» (Muller, 8-9). So he grants the possibility of a tragedy with a happy ending. Krutch, however, has another idea of what constitutes a happy end. «All works of art which deserve their name have a happy end. This is indeed the thing which constitutes them art and through which they perform their function. Whatever the character of events ...we accept gladly the conclusion which they reach and would not have it otherwise» (Corrigan, 275). and continues,

Tragedy, the greatest and the most difficult of the arts ...must reach its own happy end in its own way ...we are glad that Juliet dies and glad that Lear is turned out into the storm.

Juliet died, but not before she had shown how great and resplendent a thing love could be; Othello plunged the dagger into his own breast, but not before he had revealed that greatness of soul which makes his death seem unimportant. (Corrigan, 275-76).

This is, I think, what Aristotle calls «catharsis or purging of emotion» (Muller, 6).

About the content of tragedy I especially like what Muller says,

Above all, tragedy is centered on the problem of his [the hero's] 'fate': not merely his failures in love, business, or war, nor his sufferings from political or social injustice but his relations to his total environment, his position in the universe, the ultimate meaning of his life. (14)

Robert B. Heiman, on the other hand, thinks that

Tragedy should be used only to describe the situation in which the divided human being faces basic conflicts, perhaps rationally insoluble, of obligations and passions; makes choices, for good or for evil; errs knowingly or involuntarily; accepts consequences; comes into a new larger awareness; suffers or dies, yet with a larger wisdom.» (Corrigan, 248).

While for Muller tragedy has to do with the ultimate meaning of life, for Heilman is a problem of choices, and a lesser tragedy if the hero is not conscious of his choosing.

Related to this idea of the serious subject matter is Muller's belief that the tragic spirit is pessimistic. There is no denial of God but «its characteristic irony itself implies that the ways of the Providence are paradoxical, mysterious, possibly inept» (18). It is because of this that Muller concludes that the tragic spirit is essentially humanistic. Richard B. Sewall agrees:

Tragedy is primarily humanistic. Its focus is an event in this world ...is non-religious in its attitude towards revelation. But it speaks, however vaguely or variously, of an order that transcends time, space and matter. («The Tragic Form»; in Michel, 121)

With respect to pessimism in tragedy, Sewall in «The Tragic Form» considers that in a tragedy you get both pessimism and optimism. He sees pessimism

in its view of the evil in the world as unremitting and irremediable ...in its view of the overwhelming proportion of evil to good ...But it is optimistic ...in its vitalism, which is in some sense mystical, not earth-bound; in its faith in a cosmic good; and in its vision, however fleeting, of a world in which all questions could be answered. (Michel, 122-23)



Where the tragic hero is concerned, Heilman says that Aristotle defined «the tragic hero as the good man who gets into trouble through some error or shortcoming» (Corrigan, 246). This error or shortcoming is known as «the tragic flaw.» For Frye, «The tragic hero is typically on top of the wheel of fortune, halfway between human society on ground and the something greater in the sky,» and continues,

The tragic hero usually belongs to the *alazon* group, an impostor in the sense that he is self-deceived or made dizzy by Hybris. In many tragedies he begins as a semi-divine figure, at least in his own eyes, and then an inexorable dialectic sets to work which separates the divine pretence from the human actuality. (Corrigan, 108)

Heilman, on the other hand, considers that «the tragic character is essentially a divided character» (Corrigan, 246). This division can have different causes. The cause could be two irreconcilable imperatives, or it could be an opposition «between ‘imperative’ and ‘impulse’ between the moral ordinance and the unruly passion» (Corrigan, 247), or between impulse and impulse. For Dorothea Krook the tragic hero «must not be the average man: nor ordinary, commonplace, undistinguished; not like the fellow next door or a girl like me»; but, «paradoxically, the hero in tragedy is representative of all humanity» (37).

These are the most interesting ideas about tragedy that I found in my sources. And with those in mind, I'll see if *The Tragic Comedians* answers to these definitions.

*The Tragic Comedians* appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* from October 1880 to February 1881 (Ormond, 232). In its introduction George Meredith says,

The bare railway-line of their story tells of a passion honest enough to entitle it to be related. Nor is there anything invented, because an addition of fictitious incidents could never tell us how she came to do this, he to do that; or how the comic in their nature led by interplay to the tragic issue. (2)

Due to its faithfulness to the facts this novel has been criticized as one of Meredith's weakest. However M. Sturge Henderson in *George Meredith* says: «It is among the best of his novels: the theme calls for that poetic treatment in which he is most himself» (176). Some of the dialogues, though, are translations from the original.<sup>1</sup>

The plot is a love story with a tragic ending, and like almost all love stories it is an enjoyable reading. The novel is, I believe, Meredith's shortest: 201 pages. The dialogues are brilliant, at times resembling Oscar Wilde's,<sup>2</sup> and the characters, especially Alvan's are drawn with real affection. Occasionally Meredith doesn't seem to be too fond of Clotilde,

«Years later she wrote her version of the story, not sparing herself so much as she supposed» (200-1), but in her weakness, inconstancy and bewilderment she is a very interesting character nonetheless.

Sigismund Alvan was in real life Ferdinand Lasalle, a Hungarian Jew (Moffat, 277), «acknowledged by historians as an important predecessor of Karl Marx ...the revolutionary leader of the Social Democrats, whom the proletariat worshipped as their Messiah» (Ormond, 230). And Clotilde von Rüdiger is modelled on Helene von Dönniges, a member of «the small aristocracy» (3). Alvan is the leader of the party that wants the privileges of Clotilde's class to be abolished.

When curious about the apparent resemblance in the way they both talk, Clotilde asks her family about Alvan's identity, not surprisingly she gets the following answer: «He is one of the basest of those wretched who are for upsetting the Throne and Society to gratify their own wicked passions: that is what he is» (10). Besides this class conflict, there is an age conflict; he is some twenty years older than she. Together with his being forty going into forty one and her only nineteen, he is a famous womanizer with—in the eyes of the Philistine society he is scourging—a not too clear relationship with a very old baroness. To these, one more fact has to be added: she is engaged to be married to a prince, an engagement especially pleasing to the von Rüdigers (17 and 56). All this makes me believe that even if Alvan hadn't been a Jew, he would have been rejected by the von Rüdigers anyway. That's why I don't agree with Joseph Moses's remark that «Antisemitism gets its most explicit treatment in *The Tragic Comedians* since the hero of the story, Dr. Sigismund Alvan, is a Jew» (91).

Clotilde's family is depicted as having a particular distaste for Jews,

The Jew was to Clotilde as flesh of swine to the Jew. Her parents had the same abhorrence of Jewry. One of the favourite similes of the family for whatever grunted in grossness, wriggled with meanness, was Jew:

but in the next two lines we have an example of Meredith's irony:

and it was noteworthy from the fact that a streak of the blood was in the veins of the latest generation and might have been traced on the maternal side. (11)

On the other hand, Clotilde's cousins don't mind visiting Jews. In fact they take her to the Jewish home where she meets Alvan (18).

Even in her general distaste for Jews, Clotilde can establish levels among them, as in chapter III when she is told Alvan is one of the three gentlemen conversing in an inner room:

...she could see that one of them was of good stature. One she knew; he was the master of the house, mildly Jewish. The third was distressingly branded with the slum and gutter signs of the Ahasuerus race. Three hats on his head could not have done it more effectively ...She sank on a sofa. That the man? Oh! Jew, and fifty times over Jew! nothing but Jew! (19)

But little by little she realizes the tall one is Alvan,

Then again, could that face be the face of a Jew? She feasted. It was a noble profile, an ivory skin, most lustruous eyes. Perchance a Jew of the Spanish branch of the exodus, not the Polish. (20)

and totally won by Alvan's physical appearance,

There is the noble Jew as well as the bestial Gentile. There is not in the sublimest of Gentiles a majesty comparable to that of the Jew elect. He may well think his race favoured of heaven though heaven chastise them still. The noble Jew is grave in age, but in his youth he is the arrow to the bow of his fiery eastern blood, and in his manhood he is ay, what you see there! a figure of easy and superb preponderance, whose fire has mounted to inspirit and be tempered by the intellect. (20-21)

All this, in my opinion, tilts the balance from antisemitism into a class conflict. We should remember Meredith's words in chapter I, «She belonged by birth to the small aristocracy of her native land» (3). The fact of being just *small* aristocracy together with the fact of having already a streak of Jewish blood, would make the von Rüdigers panic at the idea of anybody adding the slightest spot to the family. During the course of the story the von Rüdigers behave like snobs. So we have her sisters imploring Clotilde,

... —if she married Alvan, what could be their prospects as the sisters-in-law of such a man?— her betrothed sister Lotte could not hope to espouse Count Walburg ...for rightly or wrongly Alvan was abhorred, and his connection would be fatal to them all, perhaps to her father's military and diplomatic career principally: the head of their house would be ruined. (104)

and Clotilde's conviction that the baroness can help them, because of her higher position,

She was a lady of exalted birth, a lady of the upper aristocracy, who could, if she would, bring both a social and official pressure upon the general... (126)

Also the professor's letter to Clotilde advising her to obey her parents «alluded to Alvan's age and her better birth» (125).

Alvan is hated by his party enemies only. He is a lovable character, an «unresisted lady killer» (3), idolized by «that circle below her [Clotilde's] own, the literary and artistic» (5) and Meredith says in the introduction about the real character,

He was the leader of a host, the hope of a party, venerated by his followers, well hated by his enemies, respected by the intellectual chiefs of his time, in the pride of his manhood and his labours when he fell. (2)

Then we have a «leader,» «venerated by his followers,» «hated by his enemies» and «*respected by the intellectual chiefs of his time*» (my italics). With the exception of Clotilde who enjoys reading and making bold statements, «Her brothers and sisters were not of an age to contest her lead» (7); and her father acts like a brute,

she was treated as a refractory child, literally marched through the streets in the custody of her father, who clutched her by the hair ...and held her under terror of a huge forester's weapon, that he had seized at the first tidings of his daughter's flight to the Jew, (101)

and once in the house

With a frightful noise of hammering, he himself nailed up the window shutters of the room she was locked in hard and fast, and he left her there and roared across the household that any one holding communication with the prisoner should be shot like a dog. This was a manifestation of power in a form more convincing than the orator's. (102)

—ironic allusion to Alvan, who rejected elopement believing he could convince the von Rüdigers with his reasonings—. All this makes me believe that the intellectual chief of the times had no business with the von Rüdigers.

Thus, the conflict is social, political and racial; and we could even add intellectual. So we have two people in love who want to get married in spite of her family's opposition.

Seeing the impossibility of convincing her parents, Clotilde flies to him, who doesn't see things her way: «You shall be no runaway bride but honoured at the altar» (90), he says, and returns her to her parents, convinced that with his personal magnetism as orator and famous lawyer, he will win her as he has won so many legal cases: the law is in their hands, her parents don't have any legal right to hold her back.

All critics agree this is Alvan's mistake, his tragic flaw. But each of them sees Alvan's motivation from a different point of view. Ormond sees him as an enemy of social conventions who decides in that precise moment to follow them,

In bowing to the conventional social morality, Alvans is betraying himself. He is already the outsider, and must act in accordance with the dictates of his own spirit. (243)

For Moses he acts that way because he is a Jew,

...the focus on Alvan's Jewishness in *The Tragic Comedians* forces him to act the 'gentleman' at a crucial moment, when —were he not a Jew— he would evaluate the situation more rationally and act more decisively for his own advantage as a man. (91)

And Moffat thinks that Alvan doesn't want a runaway bride and he is also afraid «to hurt the socialist cause with any scandal» (282). Leaving aside Moffat's quotation, the other two agree with Meredith's description of Alvan, «a grand pretender, a self-deceiver» (199), and agree this is Alvan's tragic flaw: he doesn't know himself, he doesn't know that his power over the others is limited. Alvan fits Frye's definition of the tragic hero as

an impostor in the sense that he is self-deceived or made dizzy by hybris. In many tragedies he begins as a semi-divine figure, at least in his own eyes, and then an inexorable dialectic sets to work which separates the divine pretence from the human actuality. (108)

Alvan suffers from an excess of confidence: «The world voluntarily opens a path to those who step determinedly» (61), or «I am stronger than my temper» (81), common phrases in Alvan, that make him sound like a Carnegie course advertiser. But starting in chapter VIII the «inexorable dialectic sets to work.» He hasn't met Clotilde's parents yet. So he isn't surprised they don't like him. «'They have not met me yet!」» (89).

He meets Frau von Rüdiger first. She turns her back and even dares to insult him, but he doesn't lose his confidence,

...the worst was over; he had to deal no more with senseless women: now for Clotilde's father! Women were privileged to oppose their senselessness to the *divine fire*: men could not retreat behind such defenses; they must meet him on the common ground of men, where this constant battler *had never yet encountered a reverse*. (99) (my italics)

Here one can see very clearly the high opinion Alvan has of himself.

Back to his hotel, Alvan starts writing to General von Rüdiger, «repressing his heart's intimations that he had stepped out of the friendly path, and was on a strange and tangled one» (106). This is the first warning of his mistake. Alvan, like Heilman's tragic hero, made a choice, an unconscious one though, because he was too dizzy to see clearly the consequences.

General von Rüdiger isn't interested in meeting him on any ground, and instead of an answer to his letter, Alvan receives the visit of two gentlemen whose «words were directed to extract a promise from him that he would quit his pursuit of Clotilde» (17), and he begins to realize there is some part of the world that is out of his reach,

...he looked beyond the words at a new something of extraordinary and sinister aspect revealed to him in their manner of treating his pretensions to the hand of the lady.

He had not perfectly seen the view the world took of him, because of his armed opposition to the world ...He felt as if it were *a blow startling him from sleep.* (107) (my italics)

He is not going to win with General Rüdiger either and becomes conscious of his mistake: «...to have acted the idiot more than the loss of the woman was the cause of his anguish» (111). This besides showing his realization of his mistake, tells a lot about his character, his wounded pride and the quality of his love for her.

Now that he is beginning to lose confidence in his all-powerful self: he couldn't do anywhere with the von Rüdigers, but with Clotilde this is another case. And he likes to boast in front of his confidants that he can do whatever he wishes with her,

'Say your worst of her, and I say I will make of that girl the peerless woman in earth! in earnest! It's no dream. She can be made.' (115)

'She is plastic in my hands... I make of her what I will, and she knows it, and knows that she hangs on me to flourish worthily. I breath the very soul of the woman into her... At my request she went back to her mother. I have but to beckon.' (120)

So here is his last chance: an interview with her. He moves people and influences, he talks for six hours and General von Rüdiger allows an interview between Alvan and his daughter, provided that his daughter really wants that interview. Alvan is explaining all this to the baroness, and as he is telling her he is becoming more and more excited and finding it easier and easier,

'They have been hard at her, the whole family! and I shall want the two hours I stipulated for to the full. What do you say? —come, I wager I do it within an hour! ...I swear to strike to her heart in ten minutes! ...I am insane if I may not judge from antecedents that my voice, my touch, my face, will draw her to me at one signal— at a look! I am prepared to stake my reason on her running to me before I speak a word: —and I will not beckon. I promise to fold my arms and simply look.'

'Your task of two hours, then will be accomplished, I compute, in about half a minute— but it is on the assumption that she consents to see you alone, 'said the baroness. (152-3)

If she refuses the two hours interview everything will be lost: this interview is his last chance.

A blackness passing to lividness crossed his face. He fetched a big breath.

'Then finish my history, shut up the book; I am a phantom of a man, and everything written there is imposture'. (156)

Then he wouldn't be the all-powerful man he always thought himself to be. He would be just a «grand pretender,» a «self-deceiver,» a «comedian». The Alvan he believed himself to be, the Alvan of his followers or Clotilde had no existence. What we have here is not merely his failure «in love,... nor his sufferings from political or social injustice, but his relation to his total environment, his position in the universe, the ultimate meaning of his life» (Muller, 14): we have a tragedy.

James Moffat sees it in too simple terms in my opinion:

Like Sir Willoughby Patterne, Alvan is an egoist, who has a fear of being jilted, for jilting means ridicule; he also seeks to master for his own purposes the mind of a young lady whose heart he has captured. (286-87)

Alvan's egoism is different from Sir Willoughby's. With man in general he feels generous, magnanimous, he is fighting for the rights of the proletarians, as he says: «I am for the world, for man!» (78). With Clotilde and women in general he acts —using feministic terminology— as a male chauvinist; with the Baroness though, he doesn't dare to act the same way. In his usual ironic manner, Meredith describes her: «Lucie, Baroness von Crefeldt, was one of those persons who, after a probationary term in the character of woman, have become men...» (145), and, later, as «...a woman of breeding, but with a man's head, capable of inspiring manlike friendships, and of entertaining them» (146).

In his «Essay: On the idea of Comedy...», Meredith considers that the

Comic spirit cannot exist in «a state of marked social inequality of the sexes» (*Miscellaneous*, 3); applying this thinking of his to *The Tragic Comedians*, I reach the conclusion that had Alvan treated Clotilde like an equal partner, paying due attention to her warnings and fears, there wouldn't be any need for a tragic ending. Only after his defeat with Frau von Rüdiger and the double return of his unopened letters by General von Rüdiger, Alvan begins to realize his mistake, «Why had he done it? Surely women, weak women, must be at times divinely inspired. She warned him against the step. But he, proud of his armoury, went his way» (108).

By analyzing the climatic scene in the novel (I am referring to chapter VIII: where Clotilde sees elopement as the only solution and Alvan returns her to her parents.<sup>3</sup>), we can see that any step taken or idea expressed by Clotilde is immediately swept away by Alvan in a very manly, paternal, or bossy way. At no time is Clotilde treated as an equal. The mature, responsible woman who has taken the most important step in her life, who until yesterday was still an insecure girl,

‘...I fear I am three parts an actress, and the fourth feels itself a shivering morsel to face reality. No, I do not really feel ill, but press my hand, I shall be true —I am so utterly yours: and because I have such faith in you. You never yet have failed.’ (85)

In her day of maturity, of conscious choice (Heilman, 248): «they were united, her step was irrevocable, her having entered the hotel, her being in this room certified to that» (91), she will receive from the man she is risking everything for blow after blow. First, his *no-welcome*: «He started; his face was a shield's welcome to the bird-like applicant for admission. Clotilde stood hesitating» (88). Second, he rejects the idea of eloping,

Run? facing the enemy? ‘His countenance was the fiery laugh of a thirster for strife. ‘They have to be taught the stuff Alvan is made of!’  
Clotilde moaned to signify she was sure he nursed an illusion.  
(89)

She insists thinking he probably doesn't realize the need to act fast,

‘...I am pursued, I am sure. My father is powerful in this place; we shall barely have time to escape.’  
Alvan's resolution was taken. (90)

Not hers, but his. Instead of accepting her words at face value, and leave the city as soon as possible, he proposes to take her to some honest lady's house where she could stay, «and fondled her hastily, much as a gentle kind of drillmaster straightens a fair pupil's shoulders. ‘Yes, you have shown courage. Now it must be submission to me’» (90).



Once in that house, instead of keeping his bride's hiding place unknown to the world –why did he take her there if not?— as soon as Clotilde's mother knocks at the door, in spite of their hostess' proposal to say she doesn't know anything about them, and Clotilde's approval,

'No!' said Alvan, shocked in both pride and vanity. «Plain-dealing; no subterfuge! Begin with foul falsehood? No. I would not have you burdened, madame, with the shadow of a conventional untruth on our account ...We will go down to Madame von Rüdiger, and she shall make acquaintance with the man who claims her daughter's hand.'

Clotilde rocked in agony. Her friend was troubled. Both ladies knew what there would be to encounter better than he. (92)

In the course of the interview, Frau von Rüdiger accuses Alvan of stealing his daughter, Clotilde comes out in his defence,

'False! He did not. I went to him of my own will, to run from your heartlessness, mother... Yes, to him I fled, feeling that I belonged more to him than to you. And never will I return to you... Make black brows at your child for choosing the man, of all men alive, to worship and follow through the world.

Her gaze on Alvan said: 'Now! 'Was she not worthy of him now? And would they not go forth together now? Oh! now! (96-7)

But apparently Alvan isn't too happy with the idea of her making the decisions and letting the world know. Once, referring to his former relation with the Baroness and his future relation with Clotilde, he had told her:

'Shall I spoil you as she spoilt me? No, no! Obedience to a boy is the recognition of the heir-apparent, and I respect the Salique law as much as I love my love. I do not offer obedience to a girl, but succour, support. You will not rule me, but you will invigorate, and if you are petted, you shall not be spoilt.' (78)

For this reason, instead of the expected appreciation on his part,

Her gaze was met by nothing like the brilliant counterpart she merited. It was as if she had offered her beauty to a glass, and found a reflection in dull metal. He smiled calmly from her to her mother. He said: '...Clotilde, my Clotilde! may I count on you to do all and everything for me? Is there any sacrifice I could ask that would be too hard for you? Will you at one sign from me go or do as I request you?'

She replied in an anguish over the chilling riddle of his calmness: «I will, 'but sprang out of that obedient consent, fearful

of over-acting her part of slave to him before her mother, in a ghastly apprehension of the part he was for playing to the same audience. 'Yes, I will do all, all that you command. I am yours. I will go with you. Bid me do whatever you can think of, all except bid me go back to the people I have hitherto called mine: —not that!'

'And that is what I have to request of you,' said he, with his calm smile brightening and growing more foreign histrionic, unreadable to her...

She tried to decipher the mask he wore: it was proof against her imploring eyes. 'If you can ask me —if you can positively wish it— yes,' she said. 'But think of what you are doing. Oh! Alvan, not back to them; Think;'

He smiled insufferably. (97)

The scene ends with his handing Clotilde to her mother with the following words: «'She goes with you purely because it is my wish...» (98), and Clotilde's confusion towards his behaviour

'You that offered yourself in flight to him who once proposed it, he had the choice of you and he abjured you. He has cast you off!'

She phrased in speech to herself. It was incredible, but it was clear: he had gone. (99)

During all this to her eyes puzzling scene, she has been trying to prove to him she has the courage he asked for, but, to her surprise, he is acting a role she doesn't understand and has left her the worst part in the drama: to face alone her father's wrath. In this scene Clotilde is no less of a tragic figure than Ophelia or even Desdemona. She is as bewildered as they are.

Once broken, the understanding between the two lovers won't be established again. Forced to act according to her parents' wishes, Clotilde thinks that Alvan knows her well, but he takes all her refusals at face value. His last chance would be to have an interview with her, where he could exercise again his great ascendancy over her. But she has to refuse once more, and always expecting he realizes what is going on.

We are not told how she did it, but in spite of the facts that she is watched the whole time and that even her most trusted servant gives her wrong information about Alvan, she is capable to write the baroness a letter which reaches its destination. In her answer, instead of the demanded help, the baroness advises Clotilde to bring «her relations with Dr. Alvan to an end in the discreetest manner now possible to the circumstances» (133). Apparently, the baroness never tells Alvan about Clotilde's letter, but she talks about it with von Tresten, the intermediary chosen by Alvan, who doesn't inform him about it either. And he trusted them both! For whatever reason —jealousy, distrust («This girl will drain

him of all his nobler fire» (149), says the baroness to von Tresten), over-protection— it's not only her family who tries to create confusion among the lovers but his most intimate friends also. This makes the situation for the lovers more tragic than in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the circumstances prevent them from meeting, while in *The Tragic Comedians*, the cause is the plotting of family and friends.

I wouldn't call the ending tragic. Borrowing Heilman's terminology the love affair ends in disaster with the death of one of the lovers. In order for the ending to be «Tragic», Meredith needed to elaborate upon Alvan's motives, to show us his soul: Why did he choose to challenge Clotilde's father to a duel? How he who «is famous for his aim!», how he who «never misses» (190) dies from the shot of somebody who, in all his life, has only practised shooting for two hours? Was Prince Marko supposed to shoot first? Didn't Alvan have a chance to shoot?

There is a beautiful scene at the end of Knut Hamsun's *Pan* where the hero, disgusted with life, constrains his jealous rival to kill him, or when Hugo in *Les Mains Sales* realizes it is better to face death. Here, in *The Tragic Comedians* the reader cannot experience catharsis with this fatal ending. As Krutch says in the quotation given above,

Tragedy ...must reach its own happy end in its own way... we are glad that Juliet dies and glad that Lear is turned into the storm.

Alvan dies without showing the greatness of his soul, just the comic or ironic side of his nature.

Here Meredith limits himself to the facts. As he says' in the Introduction: «Nor is there anything invented, because an addition of fictitious incidents could never tell us how she came to do this, he to do that; or how the comic in their natures led by interplay to the tragic issue» (2). Thus, in Meredith's opinion the ending is tragic; and he seems to be interested in showing «how the comic in their natures led» to this tragic ending. Notice however that he doesn't say «their comic natures» but «the comic in their natures» because he considers them both tragic and comic. He says of Alvan: «The characters of the hosts of men are of the simple order of the comic; not many are of a stature and a complexity calling for the junction of the two Muses to name them» (200) and of Clotilde when she learns that Alvan is the wounded one,

Clotilde informs the world that she laughed on hearing this. She was unaware of her ground for laughing. It was the laugh of the tragic comedian. (195)

Also we have the novel's title: *The Tragic Comedians*.

What Meredith calls «the comic in their natures» is not «the tragic flaw.»<sup>4</sup> Alvan's «tragic flaw» is his belief that he is almost a god. «He is a Titan, not a god, though god-like he seems in comparison to men» (149), says the baroness —a statement anticipating his punishment by the gods—. Alvan's error is also not to have listened to Clotilde. But «the comic in his nature» is that he opposes duelling as an inhuman and senseless practice of the nobles. He claims to fight with his brain: «If we descend to poor brute strength or brutal-craft, it is from failing in the brain» (28); and then he is the one to provoke a duel. Then his brain has failed him.

Clotilde's «tragic flaw» is her quiescence. She yields to her father's punishments and pressures and returns her lover's letters, presents, his word, and rejects an interview, and still expects him to realize she is waiting for him to come and liberate her. Once in her life she showed courage and determination, and the man she was doing that for behaved in a very histrionic way, and rejected everything and ordered her to be submissive to him. And, in a way, she was.

At the end Clotilde shows an even more comic nature than Alvan's, who, opposed to duelling, challenges the general and dies at the hands of the novice. Clotilde marries the winner. And I cannot help wondering how different from other societies, the society Clotilde belongs to, behaves. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Natasha engaged to Prince Andrey is going to elope with Anatole. Her guardian, who finds out, impedes Natasha from leaving her home. Prince Andrey breaks the engagement, anyway. In *The Tragic Comedians*, Clotilde goes to Alvan's hotel room, where both lovers spend some time by themselves. Her father, instead of trying to hide this fact in order to save his daughter's reputation and his honour, drags his daughter by the hair through the streets, calls the police, and «chattered and shouted of the desperate lawlessness and larcenies of that Jew —the things that Jew would attempt» (101). And Prince Marko doesn't seem to mind anything. At the end, once all the obstacles have been removed, he marries Clotilde. For six months only though, because he dies, of Clotilde—?

Meredith doesn't seem too happy with Clotilde's last action, because he says, «Years later she wrote her version of the story, not sparing herself so much as she supposed (200-1). In spite of that, Meredith's drawing of Clotilde is sympathetic enough. In the chapter on the aborted elopement, Clotilde emerges as a very lovable heroine, and Alvan, though in his deference to Clotilde's mother appears as a great figure, his general attitude in this scene doesn't reach the height of Clotilde's.

In conclusion I don't think *The Tragic Comedians* is a comedy, because although it has some elements that belong to comedy like the integration of the family (Frye, in Corrigan, 109), the ending in wedding,

the former is not really achieved due to the fact that Clotilde accepts the latter to escape from her family.

Because of its serious subject matter, concern with man's fate, paradoxical Providence, unhappy ending, a tragic hero, and, up to a certain point, a tragic heroine, I believe that *The Tragic Comedians* is a tragedy. Not a great Shakespearean tragedy but an ironic tragedy as others Meredith wrote; or better yet, a comic tragedy as Meredith was interested in showing the comic side of tragedy. A comic tragedy where we cannot experience catharsis as the greatness of the hero's soul is not presented, but the comic side of his nature.

#### Notes

1. Meredith's source was Princess von Racowitza's book entitled *Meine Beziehungen zu Ferdinand Lasalle* (Ormond, 231).
2. 'Women who put on their dead husbands in public are not well-mannered women, though they may be excellent professional widows, excellent!' (76).
3. About this scene Joseph Warren Beach says, «This is the great comic scene of the book, though there is little laughter in it. Alvan was committing an act of magnanimous folly» (162), he thinks that this comic action and consequent tragic fate were caused because «Alvan represents a stage in the civilizing process» (167) and quotes Meredith (199),

The two men composing it, the untamed and the candidate for citizenship, in mutual dissension pulled it down ...A stormy blood made wreck of a splendid intelligence.

This combination of the tame and untamed man in Alvan is a constant in the novel.

4. If I understood what Beach says about the comic or folly in Alvan's nature, it would be Alvan's «tragic flaw».

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