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**From Childhood to Manhood: the Magic,
Pleasure and Pain of Words
in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) and
The Adventures of Harry Richmond (1871) by
George Meredith**

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Even though children play an important part in quite a few novels by George Meredith, we are rarely given the chance to hear their voices directly. When they are very young, the children's voices are mediated through the narrator's voice and, with some very rare exceptions, the reader usually has access to direct speech once the young heroes become teenagers. This is why I would like to explore not only childhood but also the very process of ageing in relation to language and sensation.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (1859) and *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871)¹ are two novels of apprenticeship, in which the young heroes attempt to explore and understand the world, while building their own identity and learning to become gentlemen. The use of language by the young heroes tells us a lot about their capacity to become adults in a Victorian world.

I will focus on various instances of speech produced by Harry, Richard, and a few other children whom they meet (the examples I have chosen are taken from various moments in the narrative, as we see them growing up: the speakers are between four and thirteen approximately).

I will argue that children are devoid of – or free of – a certain distance in their use of language, a distance which they later acquire or accept – a distance between language and the body, or between words and reality. As they learn to master words, to make sense and use language in

¹ The two novels will be abbreviated as follows: *Richard*, *Harry* (followed by chapter and page numbers). They refer to: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, New York, Meridian, 1985; *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, London, Constable, 1924.

a rational way, this gap gradually appears. As if, in a way, children were one with language – as if becoming an adult consisted in gradually accepting the distance, if not the fault in words.

So how does this space slowly emerge and what do children's words tell us about the very experience of “growing up” in a Victorian society?

To begin with, we will see that words first seem to be tied to sensation, as if the body itself were speaking. Children or young teenagers also discover what we could call “metaphysical sensations”: the sensations of existence, presence or absence, which operate as forerunners of the sense of void inherent to speech. This, as suggested in my third and fourth sections, eventually leads to sensations of pleasure and pain experienced in language in its magic or violent aspects.

I. “I declare I'm starving”: the body speaking

In the two novels by George Meredith, the children's experience of language seems to be closely related to bodily sensations. Directly resulting from sensory perception, words are linked to the body. It is not fortuitous that children often mention hunger, as in this first excerpt:

“Where are you going to?” he inquired with a voice of the last time of asking, and halted resolutely.

Richard now broke his silence to reply, “Anywhere.”

“Anywhere!” Ripton took up the moody word. “But ain't you awfully hungry?” he gasped vehemently, in a way that showed the total emptiness of his stomach.

“No,” was Richard's brief response.

“Not hungry!” Ripton's amazement lent him increased vehemence. “Why, you haven't had anything to eat since breakfast! Not hungry? I declare I'm starving. I feel such a gnawing I could eat dry bread and cheese!”

Richard sneered: not for reasons that would have actuated a similar demonstration of the philosopher.
(*Richard*, 2, 23)

Words stem from Ripton's sensation of hunger, as the metalinguistic form underlines (“Not hungry? I declare I'm starving”), while the opening trochaic rhythm stresses the solemn use of language:

words are only made necessary and urgent, as it were, by virtue of the body. Evocations of hunger and eating are also all-pervasive in the first chapters of *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, which are devoted to the hero's childhood: "Toward sunset my frame was struck as with an arrow by the sensations of hunger on passing a cook's-shop", "'I am so hungry.' He nodded and said, 'It 's no use cross-examining an empty stomach. You'll do me the favour to dine with me'" (*Harry*, 2, 22-23).

In the first chapters of the novel, even though Harry's voice is filtered by the older narrator², the viewpoint is that of the young child and the emphasis is laid on sensations, which is not so much the case when the hero grows older, as children's use of speech is expected to gradually depart from such a bodily bond. This example is taken from chapter 1:

My father must have borne me miles along the road; he must have procured food for me; I have an idea of feeling a damp forehead and drinking new milk, and by-and-by hearing a roar of voices or vehicles, and seeing a dog that went alone through crowded streets without a master, doing as he pleased, and stopping every other dog he met. He took his turning, and my father and I took ours. We were in a house that, to my senses, had the smell of dark corners, in a street where all the house-doors were painted black, and shut with a bang. Italian organ-men and milkmen paraded the street regularly, and made it sound hollow to their music. Milk, and no cows anywhere; numbers of people, and no acquaintances among them; my thoughts were occupied by the singularity of such things. (*Harry*, 1, 15)

The body plays an important part in the narration, as the series of "-ing" verbs underlines: "feeling", "drinking", "hearing", "seeing"... All the senses are evoked: taste, hearing and sight, smell, even touch, if not somesthesia ("feeling a damp forehead"). The narration seems to hinge around the sensations experienced by the child, while the echoes in /i:/ ("feeling", "hearing", "seeing"...), the alliterations in /f/, /d/, /v/, /s/, /k/ ("food", "feeling", "forehead"; "damp forehead and drinking"; "voices or vehicles"; "house", "senses", "smell", "street"; "drinking new milk") and

² The device is reminiscent of the narrative voice in *Great Expectations*, and the novel by Meredith does indeed bear many resemblances to Dickens's novel.

the dactylic rhythm (“feeling a damp”, “hearing a roar”, “seeing a dog”) also suggest a sensual use of language by the narrator.

In chapter 4, when Harry is still very young³, words even seem to be triggered by sensations, that is to say (here) by the pleasure of music, and by Harry's feelings (his love for his father) as his auditory bliss is precisely the reason why he wants to speak to his father:

Though I had not previously seen a postillion in my life, I gazed on the pair bobbing regularly on their horses before me, without a thought upon the marvel of their sudden apparition and connection with my fortunes. I could not tire of hearing the pleasant music of the many feet at the trot, and tried to explain to my father that the men going up and down made it like a piano that played of itself. He laughed and kissed me; he remembered having once shown me the inside of a piano when the keys were knocked. My love for him as we drove into London had a recognized footing: I perceived that he was my best friend and only true companion, besides his being my hero. (*Harry*, 4, 35)

The numerous echoes (the play on [t], especially in “feet at the trot and tried to”, the alliteration in [p], “previously”/ “postilion”/ “pair”, “piano” / “played”, the echo “apparition and connection”), together with the rhythm (first, some iambic and trochaic moments: “without a thought upon the marvel”, “sudden apparition and connection with my fortunes”; then, an anapestic fragment: “like a piano that played of itself”), seem to mimic the music and its related pleasure. At this stage, the words, directly stemming from the auditory sensations experienced by Harry, are still akin to music. Their sensory aspect prevails over a rational use. Not only does the passage from the verb “not tire” to the verb “tried” lay the emphasis on the sensory pleasure of signifiers (and the fact that we can play with them), but the paronomasia also stresses the logical link: the coordination (“I could not tire of hearing the pleasant music [...] and tried to explain”) underlines the connection between the child's delight when hearing the sounds and his desire to speak about these sounds, as if trying

³ We gather that he is probably under ten, if not under five.

to speak naturally followed or resulted from the experience of music⁴. The reaction of Harry's father lastly sheds light on the relationship between father and child and once more underlines the role of love and feelings in the child's desire to speak. The sentence devoted to the child's words is indeed framed by pleasant feelings ("hearing the pleasant music", "My love for him") and the body still plays an important part in these moments, as the evocations of the feet, together with laughter and kisses demonstrate. The scene also hints at the very promise of growing old: oscillating between a lullaby and a military march, between the father's soft kisses and the postillions' inflexible trot on their horses, between the child's affection for his father and his desire to cease to be a child and become a man like him, the lines enact a dialectic between childhood and manhood, if not manliness. They stress manly virtues and values, as the last word "hero" claims. Laden with prepositions and verbs underlining movement ("up and down", "inside", "into", "bobbing", "going", "knocked", "drove"), the scene reads like a march towards manhood. The reader has access to interior focalization but not to the dialogue and the child's effort to communicate, so that s/he still can't hear the voice of the child, as if the latter were still an *infant*, in a way: at this stage, the body still plays an important part in the narrator's words, but it is soon to be forgotten when the child starts being articulate and is therefore granted the right to be the protagonist⁵.

My contention is that the body has to be forgotten when the child grows older: he must learn to make use of language in a more rational way, in a way that suits the Victorian norms and expectations. Therefore, sensations gradually disappear in language, as the presence of the body filtering through words eventually gives way to its absence. Or to put it differently, the body is bound to be replaced by the sensation of absence. To a certain extent, this is already what happened with the sensation of hunger. Let us go back to our first example: hunger is already the

4 It also indicates that the young child still finds it difficult to express something slightly elaborate (he "tries" to explain). We may therefore assume that it is an early experience of language.

5 In a sense, all through the novel, Harry Richmond struggles to be the hero, in spite of the eponymous title. He is constantly striving to master his own fate and act as a hero, always to be overshadowed by his own father's almighty presence and action. Interestingly enough, in the passage under study, the term "hero" precisely designates his father, in his own perception. The whole novel can be construed as a struggle to become the true hero of the story.

experience of emptiness, as the narrator underlines: “‘But ain't you awfully hungry?’ he gasped vehemently, in a way that showed the total emptiness of his stomach” (*Richard*, 2, 23).

In these lines, words are used as weapons. The two boys have just had a fight and their conversation is an appendix to the battle: the numerous echoes (“where” – “anywhere” – “anywhere”, “not awfully hungry” – “not hungry” – “not hungry”) point to an agonistic use of words, which are now used as shuttlecocks or even bullets. From the boys' perspective, there is no difference between the verbal and the physical combat: speech is a mere extension of their bodies. But Ripton, who is usually rather taciturn, starts speaking *because* he is hungry, as if his words were filling a gap, the emptiness of his stomach: “Why, you haven't had anything to eat since breakfast! Not hungry? I declare I'm starving.” Again, speech is simply triggered by sensations, but Ripton's words are also a means of asserting his existence, as the repetition of the pronoun “I” suggests. The numerous echoes and exclamations underscore the materiality of words, which contrast with “the emptiness” of Ripton's stomach. Two antagonistic poles are in contention, indeed: on the one hand, starvation, if not nothingness, is mirrored by Richard's silence; on the other hand, the materiality of food and bodies fills Ripton's voice. The struggle between the two characters reveals a more metaphysical dichotomy, between totality and void (as the expression “the total emptiness of his stomach” suggests), life and death (again, this may be implied between the lines: “with a voice of the last time of asking”). Survival is at stake, from a symbolic point of view, but also from a literal or sensational point of view: hidden away behind the sensation of hunger, death is looming, all the more so in a novel which claims many similarities with the adventure story. A duel for power, their dialogue can also be read as a struggle for survival, thus reminding us that George Meredith was often called “the poet of nature”⁶, and, even more accurately perhaps, “the poet of evolution”⁷. Undeniably, the boys' dialogue reads as a fight for existence.

6 Priestley, 67.

7 J.B. Priestley and Archibald Strong, amongst others, used the expression: “In one sense the poet of evolution, he is always reminding that it is from Earth that we are sprung, and that though the Race is ever going on from strength to strength, and from height to height, such progress can only be realized by forwarding Nature, and never by thwarting her” (Strong, 162). A. Strong also underlines the “struggle for survival” (Strong, 185). Darwin's influence on the works of Meredith has often been mentioned, by Joseph Warren Beach, Alain Clerval, Richard C. Stevenson and Ian Fletcher,

II. “As if I had lost my father with the word”: the sensation of absence and existence

Language acquisition seems to coincide with sensations of presence, existence, or absence. In a sense, language originates in absence since learning to speak implies accepting the distance between the signifier and the signified, and possibly the absence of the signified (and attempting to use words to compensate for that absence).

This is what Harry soon understands. His father’s absence, but also his mother’s death are thus evoked and the very sensation of words parallels the sensation of absence:

‘My darling Harry will come back to his own nice little room, and see his grandpapa soon, won't you, my pet? All is ready for him there as it used to be, except poor mama. [...]’ Much more sweet talk of the same current that made my face cloudy and bright, and filled me with desire for Riversley, to see my mother's grave and my friends.

Aunt Dorothy looked at me. ‘Come now,’ she said; ‘come with me, Harry.’ Her trembling seized on me like a fire. I said, ‘Yes,’ though my heart sank as if I had lost my father with the word. She caught me in her arms tight, murmuring, ‘And dry our tears and make our house laugh. Oh! since the night that Harry went... And I am now Harry's mama, he has me.’

I looked on her forehead for the wreath of white flowers my mother used to wear, and thought of my father's letter with the prayer written on the black-bordered page. I said I would go, but my joy in going was gone. [...]

The door closed on them and I thought it was a vision that had passed. But now my father set my heart panting with questions as to the terrible possibility of us two ever being separated. In some way he painted my grandfather so black that I declared earnestly I would rather die than go to Riversley; I would never utter the name of the place where there was evil speaking of the one I loved dearest. ‘Do not, my son,’ he said solemnly, ‘or it parts us two.’ I

amongst others: “This is evolution, the survival of the fittest, the way the world progresses” (Fletcher, 199).

repeated after him, 'I am a Roy and not a Beltham.' It was enough to hear that insult and shame had been cast on him at Riversley for me to hate the name of the place. (*Harry*, 4, 44-45)

In these lines, Harry experiences the materiality of words and uses them as some kind of matter filling in a gap. When he pronounces the tiny "yes", he realizes the weight of words, and their consequences: by accepting to come to his aunt Dorothy's, by saying yes to her, he may be taken away from his father forever. Uttering the word "yes" triggers the feeling of absence, as the narrator underlines: "I said, 'Yes,' though my heart sank as if I had lost my father with the word." Of course, a symbolic or a psychoanalytical reading of this sentence would underline the fact that the father disappears behind the word, by speaking: Harry loses his father when he says "yes", as if growing up and learning to speak necessarily implied taking some distance from one's father. In some way, the signifier "yes" replaces his father: it makes his father vanish. And indeed, the term "word" is rejected at the end of the sentence, as if to mimic this process, as if the word gained more materiality than the body of Harry's father, which disappears behind the very small textual body of the "yes". The emphasis on loss and absence is lastly evidenced by the echoes and the polyptoton, the play on the verb "go": "I said I would go, but my joy in going was gone."

As a result, words are now a means of asserting one's own self, one's identity, as if to defy absence. This is obvious in the repetition of the name of the father, which becomes a "solid mass of existence", to use Maurice Blanchot's words⁸: "I repeated after him, 'I am a Roy and not a Beltham.'" – Beltham being his mother's name (and his grandfather's and his aunt's, who are taking care of him after his mother's death) whereas Roy is his father's name. The child – and his father too! – clearly make use of language in a performative way: words are repeated, as in a magic formula. This belief in the magic power of language, is fuelled by Harry's own father: "I would never utter the name of the place where there was

8 This is reminiscent of Maurice Blanchot's reflections on the powers of naming: "A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of non-existence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape [...]" (Blanchot, 46).

evil speaking of the one I loved dearest. 'Do not, my son,' he said solemnly, 'or it parts us two.'

And such a belief results in the confusion between signifier and signified, as the last sentence suggests: "It was enough [...] for me to hate the name of the place." Words themselves can be hated: the feeling of hatred is therefore bestowed upon the signifier "Riversley" itself (which is the name of his aunt's and grandfather's house), instead of the place. In this childlike use of language, words are endowed with as much flesh or matter as the thing or the person they represent. Here, Harry's father is simply trying to maintain his son in a childish state: Harry is made to believe that there is no distance between signifier and signified, so that signifiers come to embody the signified. They are even taken for the signified and this is why the words themselves can be subjected to feelings.

The last sentences develop along a regular rhythm, iambic at times ("Do not, my son, [...] it parts us two", "repeated after him, 'I am a Roy and not a Beltham'", "It was enough to hear", "for me to hate the name"...), as if to stress the solemnity and materiality of the words but also their magical power, while the repetition of the proper noun acts as a remedy against death or absence: the name of the father is used as a magical tool to prevent him from disappearing, while the point is also for the young child to construct his own identity and assert his existence. Just as speech was a remedy against Ripton's hunger, a counter-attack against emptiness, words are used as a way to avert absence, even though the sense of void is inevitable and the confusion between signifier and signified a mere snare. Such a childlike use of language simply postpones the moment when the essential distance in language becomes unavoidable, when the sense of void can no longer be evaded, as we will later analyse. But such a childlike belief in the magic power of words and such a lack of distance between signifier and signified entails, in return, a pleasurable use of speech.

III. “Names beginning with ‘Cl’ I prefer”: the pleasure and magic of words

The pleasure of words takes precedence over their meaning, as the boys sometimes indulge in the sensation of power – the power of words, which are sometimes akin to music⁹. Children's fascination with language also implies some irrational use of words (whereas language becomes very rational for adults when they start mastering and controlling it). In a way, children refuse to dissociate sensation and meaning. The signified and the signifier are united and the signifier may even prevail over the signified. Sounds precede meaning. Here is an example of the pleasure that Richard finds in playing with words and sonorities:

After all, the country would be dull if we hadn't a rip here and there to treat us to a little conflagration.”

“A rip!” laughed Richard, to his friend's disgust and alarm at his daring. “You don't mean this Rip, do you?”

“Mr. Thompson fire a rick? I should as soon suspect you, my dear boy. —You are aware, young gentlemen, that it is rather a serious thing eh?” (*Richard*, 5, 39)

Richard echoes the word “rip” with the name “Ripton” (his friend Ripton is nicknamed “Rip”), which itself echoes the word “rick”. To him, this is a game; he is only playing with words, disregarding meaning. In the novels of Meredith, indeed, children usually do not seek to control language, they often simply take pleasure in words, and it is even more the case with names, in a very Proustian way, as this passage shows:

“I say, what woman's name do you like best?”

“I don't know any,” quoth Richard, indifferently. “Why are you out so early?”

In answer to this, Ralph suggested that the name of Mary might be considered a pretty name.

Richard agreed that it might be; the housekeeper at Raynham, half the women cooks, and all the housemaids

⁹ As remarked by Julia Kristeva, “children learning a language first learn the intonations indicating a syntax structure – that is, melody or music – before they assimilate the rules of syntactic formation” (Kristeva, 172).

enjoyed that name; the name of Mary was equivalent for women at home.

“Yes, I know,” said Ralph. “We have lots of Marys. It's so common. Oh! I don't like Mary best. What do you think of Lucy?”

Richard thought it just like another.

“Do you know,” Ralph continued, throwing off the mask and plunging into the subject, “I'd do anything on earth for some names – one or two. It's not Mary, nor Lucy. Clarinda's pretty, but it's like a novel. Claribel, I like. Names beginning with ‘Cl’ I prefer. The ‘Cl's’ are always gentle and lovely girls you would die for! Don't you think so?” (*Richard, 15, 98-99*)

In this dialogue between Richard and Ralph, who are now young teenagers, there seems to be no distance between the ladies' names and the ladies themselves, as Ralph suggests: “Names beginning with ‘Cl’ I prefer. The ‘Cl's’ are always gentle and lovely girls you would die for! Don't you think so?” Feelings are transferred onto the words themselves as if the name embodied the loved one, in a very naive, if not Cratylan, belief in the coincidence between the beauty of names and the virtues of their owners: again, there is a confusion between sign and referent. The text stresses the musicality of names – and words are used as a musical instrument, as the narrator underlines: Richard is “playing on the musical strings they [are] to him.” The role of sonorities (“Cl”) is reinforced by the regular rhythm and the rhyming effect (“It's not Mary, nor Lucy. Clarinda's pretty”). The anapestic rhythm (“Names beginning with 'Cl' I prefer”) is followed by an iambic fragment (“The ‘Cl's’ are always gentle”), while the verbs “I like” and “I prefer”, which are rejected at the end of the sentences, lay the emphasis on the pleasure taken in the musicality of the names. A few lines down, Ralph's question (““Don't you really prefer the ‘Cl's’?” said Ralph, persuasively”), half trochaic and half iambic – its iambic flow being immediately taken up by the narrator – echoes the beginning of their dialogue, thus sounding like a refrain:

Gradually, too, Richard apprehended that Ralph likewise was on the frontiers of the Realm of Mystery, perhaps further toward it than he himself was; and then, as by a sympathetic stroke, was revealed to him the wonderful beauty and depth of meaning in feminine

names. The theme appeared novel and delicious, fitted to the season and the hour. But the hardship was, that Richard could choose none from the number; all were the same to him; he loved them all.

“Don't you really prefer the ‘Cl's’?” said Ralph, persuasively. (*Richard*, 15, 99)

Again, the confusion between sounds and meaning is stressed by the narrator thanks to the humorous distance, the inversion of predicate and subject, as well as the coordination: “was revealed to him the wonderful beauty and depth of meaning in feminine names.” The signifier “meaning” itself seems to be disseminated in the text, through assonances in /i:/ (“frontiers”, “revealed”, “meaning”, “theme”, “appeared”, “season”, “really”) and alliterations in /m/ and /n/ (“Realm of Mystery”, “theme”, “novel”, “none”, “number”, “same”, and of course “meaning in feminine names”, with its dactylic rhythm), while the musical quality of the text is further reinforced by numerous alliterative echoes (“likewise was”, “frontiers of”, “he himself”, “sympathetic stroke”, “meaning in feminine names”, “none from the number”...¹⁰), as if the textual weaving indulged in sensual pleasure as much as meaning. Verging on the epiphany, the scene combines a sense of revelation and magic (stressed by a bombastic style, especially in the expression “on the frontiers of the Realm of Mystery”, with its capital letters) with sensory, if not gustatory pleasure (as the central adjective “delicious” indicates). The final epanadiplosis (“all were the same to him; he loved them all”) further underlines the all-pervasive sense of delight: the aesthetic pleasure of names takes precedence over meaning or even acts as meaning. The magic atmosphere and the natural setting establish a quasi-utopian “music of meaning”, “a vast auditory fabric”, reminiscent of Roland Barthes's “rustle of language”¹¹.

The young teenagers, who are innocently enjoying an early morning near the river and the forest, are obviously under a spell: spelling names on an envelope, reading them, chanting them, is here akin

10 Italics are mine.

11 “The rustle of language forms a utopia. Which utopia? That of a music of meaning; in its utopic state, language would be enlarged, I should even say *denatured* to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric, in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuousity, without a sign ever becoming detached from it [...]” (Barthes, 77).

to sorcery. At the end of the excerpt, the series of names (“Emmeline Clementina Matilda Laura, Countess Blandish”) is repeated by Richard just like a “formula” or like a music score, as the narrator underlines:

“My aunt's name is not Clare,” said Richard, perusing what was composed of the exterior formula. “You've addressed it to Clare herself.”

That was plain to see.

“Emmeline Clementina Matilda Laura, Countess Blandish,” Richard continued in a low tone, transferring the names, and playing on the musical strings they were to him. Then he said: “Names of ladies! How they sweeten their names!” (*Richard*, 15, 100)

As the young teenagers discover love, their use of language is even more magic or musical: words act as a musical bewitchment. When “composing” and playing with language, they seem to enter the realm of fairy tales, thus departing from the rational use of words prescribed by Victorian norms, which is replaced by a musical, poetic, literary use: “Clarinda's pretty, but it's like a novel”, says Ralph at the beginning of the excerpt. In all likelihood a reference to Richardson's *Clarissa*, which is itself a sort of *mise en abyme* of the pleasure we can find in playing with names (Clarinda / Clarissa), it suggests, as it were, that the musical, sensual pleasure of words prevails, indeed, just as it may often be the case in literature, especially in poetry: the boys seem to be using language in a particularly *poetic* way – in both senses of the word, as they play, compose and create, just as much as they take pleasure in the poetry of names and even seem to be hinting at the literary creation at work here.

A similar fascination with the power of speech is demonstrated by Carola – this time a little girl:

“I say! are you afraid of girls?”

He stared at her and did his salute laughing, upon which she said –

“No, I see you're not. My sisters all say you are. I should think you were not afraid of anything. A man afraid of girls! I never heard the like!”

“Well!” said Richard, “at all events I'm not afraid of you. Are you a girl?”

Carola immediately became pensive.

“Yes,” she sighed, striping her pony's ears with her whip, “I'm afraid I am! I used to keep hoping once that I wasn't. I'm afraid it's no use.” She seriously shook her curls, and looked up at him. Richard shouted with laughter.

“But what do you want to be?” he asked, scrutinizing the comical young person.

“A boy, to be sure!” said Carola, and pouted proudly, as if the wish had raised her out of her sex. At this Richard laughed again, and took to the young woman. They trotted on in company. Within five minutes he had all the secrets of the family.

“When I like anybody,” said Carola, “I always speak out everything I know.”

“And you like me?”

“Yes, I do. What do you think they call your father? – The Griffin! That's what they call him. I don't know why. I like him. Do you know who gave me this pony? He did, to be sure! He bought it the day after my birthday. He's fonder of me than you are. – I like fathers better than mothers. My pa and ma don't agree. I say! what may I call you?”

Richard gave her permission to call him what she pleased. [...]

If I call you Richard, you'll call me Carl, won't you? That's the German for Charles. [...]

“Do you call me good-looking?”

Richard complimented her by saying he thought she would grow to be a very handsome chap.

Carola assured him she could not think it. “My nose turns up, and my cheeks are so red. Pa calls them cabbage-roses. – I don't mind the ‘roses’ but I can't bear the ‘cabbage!’ – Why is it you laugh so?”

“Because you're such a funny fellow, Carl.”

“Am I? Do you like funny fellows?”

“Of course I do. The funny fellows are always my best friends.” (*Richard, 23, 166-167*)

The text is structured around repetitions, following three successive phases: “afraid of” (six occurrences), “call” (seven occurrences) and “funny fellow” (three occurrences). Carola (who is younger than Richard) makes use of language in an incantatory way and obviously takes pleasure in echoes and alliterations (“*funny fellow*”, “A boy, to be sure!”¹²). It is even more obvious as her repetitions are often metalinguistic: we can find three instances of the verb “say”, in just a few lines (“I say” or “all say”), and seven instances of the verb “call” (“call me”, “they call”, “call you”). The very fact that she insists on being called Carl, a boy's name (“If I call you Richard, you'll call me Carl, won't you?”), is quite enlightening: she *wants* to be a boy and believes in the performative power of language. Far from relying on the normative power of language, as adults do, she chooses to use words precisely to open up reality instead of fixing it, possibly in order to resist a certain violence – possibly the violence she feels submitted to as a girl in a Victorian world.

Indeed, children's use of language may be the complete opposite of adults': the point is not to fix meaning, but to open it and depart from any ontological determining, especially as regards gender. In a way, this is a very innocent belief in the magic power of words, in the possibility to find pleasure in language, as if to compensate for the pain or violence of reality.

It may be significant that this example should come from a young girl. As a girl – but a girl who would like to be a boy! – she may use words in a subversive way, thus possibly taking even more distance from the use of language prescribed by Victorian norms. Carola's belief in the performative power of language and, more generally speaking, her use of language, as naive as it seems, is in keeping with the performativity of gender propounded by Judith Butler: “the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself” (Butler, XV). Precisely, Carola's performative use of language may be construed as a subversion of the performativity of gender itself. Her own metalepsis consists in using words in the hope of creating (a new) reality. In children's discourse indeed, words often seem to precede or act upon reality. A similar belief in the performative (or magic) power of words can be found in the case of Lucy, another female character, who, in spite of being a young adult, still represents purity and innocence (so, to a

12 Italics are mine.

certain extent, we may consider that her use of language is still very childish). For various reasons, Lucy has to borrow Mrs Berry's ring during her own wedding ceremony (therefore, she has to use someone else's ring to get married) and she then refuses to part with the ring and to give it back to Mrs Berry, on the grounds that the words pronounced by her husband designated “this” ring: “‘With this ring I thee wed.’ It was with *this* ring.” Lucy's understanding of words is literal and she refuses to distance herself from language – she refuses the very space that adults usually accept: “‘Mrs. Berry,’ Lucy said again, ‘it was this ring. It cannot – it never can be another. It was this. What it brings me I must bear. I shall wear it till I die!’” In her view, the deictic must necessarily be tied to the object it indicates and there can be no distance between the word and the object it refers to. This may seem a very naive view of language, but it reveals that accepting this distance is possibly the main step in the difficult process of “growing up” and learning to speak. My contention is that this very distance is precisely what causes pain in language acquisition, especially in the social uses of language.

IV. “The more he said the less he felt his words”: the pain of becoming an adult

This is what I would like to call “the pain of becoming an adult”: in other words, the pain – or even the pains – of accepting distance in language. In chapter 8 of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Richard, who is now a young teenager, is faced with an adult and has to behave as such himself as he comes to give himself up and apologize for having set fire to a rick. In addition to that, he is expected to behave as a gentleman towards a farmer, so that social classes and norms can be felt in the words: this social component is part and parcel of language, and this is what makes the learning process even more difficult:

“Mr. Blaize! I have come to tell you that I am the person who set fire to your rick the other night.”

An odd contraction formed about the farmer's mouth. He changed his posture, and said, “Ay? that's what ye're come to tell me, sir?”

“Yes!” said Richard, firmly.

“And that be all?”

“Yes!” Richard reiterated.

The farmer again changed his posture. "Then, my lad, ye've come to tell me a lie!"

Farmer Blaize looked straight at the boy, undismayed by the dark flush of ire he had kindled.

"You dare to call me a liar!" cried Richard, starting up.

"I say," the farmer renewed his first emphasis, and smacked his thigh thereto, "that's a lie!"

Richard held out his clenched fist. "You have twice insulted me. You have struck me: you have dared to call me a liar. I would have apologized – I would have asked your pardon, to have got off that fellow in prison. Yes! I would have degraded myself that another man should not suffer for my deed" –

"Quite proper!" interposed the farmer.

"And you take this opportunity of insulting me afresh. You're a coward, sir! nobody but a coward would have insulted me in his own house." (*Richard*, 8, 56)

Ostensibly, learning to become a man, a gentleman, and to use language accordingly entails a feeling of pain. Richard's first words are very spontaneous, and as the novel often recalls Rousseau¹³, we may insist on the "natural" use of language by Richard, which seems to characterize the beginning of the passage: Richard makes use of insults ("You're a coward, sir! nobody but a coward would have insulted me in his own house"), exclamation marks and short sentences, suggesting, as it were, spontaneity and childhood. This passionate use of language is also suggested by the evocation of his body gestures: "Richard held out his clenched fist." The body still prevails and Richard fails to use language in a rational way, and even more obviously in a gentlemanly way... But precisely, as the conversation progresses, Richard learns to tame his words and use language in a more sensible way, which inevitably produces the distance I have been mentioning. A few lines down, the narrative technique is absolutely striking in this respect:

[...] a sense of the dishonesty of what he was saying caused him to cringe and simulate humility to deceive the farmer, and the more he said the less he felt his words,

13 One of Meredith's *Bildungsromane*, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is often compared with Rousseau's *Emile*, as Neil Roberts pointed out (Roberts, 100).

and, feeling them less, he inflated them more. “So kind,” he stammered, “so kind” (fancy a Feverel asking this big brute to be so kind!) “as to do me the favour” (*me* the favour!) “to exert yourself” (it’s all to please Austin) “to endeavour to – hem! to” (there’s no saying it!)

The cup was full as ever. Richard dashed at it again.

“What I came to ask is, whether you would have the kindness to try what you could do” (what an infamous shame to have to beg like this!) “do to save – do to ensure – whether you would have the kindness” – It seemed out of all human power to gulp it down. The draught grew more and more abhorrent. To proclaim one’s iniquity, to apologize for one’s wrongdoing; thus much could be done; but to beg a favour of the offended party – that was beyond the self-abasement any Feverel could consent to. Pride, however, whose inevitable battle is against itself, drew aside the curtains of poor Tom’s prison, crying a second time, “Behold your Benefactor!” and, with the words burning in his ears, Richard swallowed the dose:

“Well, then, I want you, Mr. Blaize, – if you don’t mind – will you help me to get this man Bakewell off his punishment?” (*Richard*, 8, 57-58)

The narrative voice is literally split as the brackets, in addition to the dashes, interrupt the dialogue, so that we can hear Richard’s internal comments upon his own speech: “‘What I came to ask is, whether you would have the kindness to try what you could do’ (what an infamous shame to have to beg like this!)”. An internal dialogue within the self is superimposed on the initial dialogue. Internal focalisation, thanks to the brackets, introduces a break, which strikingly illustrates the gap, the crack inherent to language. Again, what is at stake is identity, as the internal comments demonstrate: “‘So kind,’ he stammered, ‘so kind’ (fancy a Feverel asking this big brute to be so kind!) ‘as to do me the favour’ (*me* the favour!)”. The italics on the pronoun “me” and the use of the proper noun “Feverel”, which is his family name, lay the emphasis on self-awareness and of course class-consciousness. The boy would like to use words to define his identity – at least in a way that suits his identity –, but his desire to make words match his feelings, to make language correspond to his own reality ends in disappointment and pain, which are caused by some sort of ontological failure. And this distance between

words and feelings is stressed by the narrator in the heart of the paragraph: “the more he said the less he felt his words, and, feeling them less, he inflated them more.” The sentence, starting with an iambic rhythm, describes this process, the failure to feel the words: here comes the distance which impedes the very sensation of words, as they become too distant to be really sensed, to correspond to one's feelings. The second part of the sentence becomes dactylic, as if the change in rhythm paralleled the change in the use of language, as Richard accepts the crack and even widens it.

Richard is feeling the pain caused by the words of politeness – or rather hypocrisy, which originates in the discrepancy between words and reality. As a young teenager, and as an extremely proud child, he may be more sensitive to the gap between the words he has to use and the reality of his feelings and perception. The pain of language is even more visible in the last bracket of the first paragraph (“There is no saying it!”) as it underlines the very impossibility for him to pronounce words whose meaning is so remote from reality. As he expects to feel what he says, he is disappointed when he discovers that words cannot always correspond to real feelings: the gap created by the dishonesty (if not the vacuity) of language is painful to him.

The metaphor of drinking (“Here was the bitter cup once drained brimming at Richard's lips again!”, “these evil drinks”, “Still another cupful!”, “but his stomach was turned; he could but sip and sip, and gather a distaste”, “The cup was full as ever”, “Richard swallowed the dose”) again reminds us of the presence of the body in language and stresses the materiality of words:

Here was the same bitter cup he had already once drained brimming at Richard's lips again! Alas, poor human nature! that empties to the dregs a dozen of these evil drinks, [...]

“I came to say that I regretted the revenge I had taken on you for your striking me.”

Farmer Blaize nodded.

“And now ye've done, young gentleman?”

Still another cupful!

“I should be very much obliged,” Richard formally began, but his stomach was turned; he could but sip and sip, and gather a distaste which threatened to make the penitential act impossible. [...] the more he said the less he

felt his words, and, feeling them less, he inflated them more. “So kind,” he stammered, “so kind” (fancy a Feverel asking this big brute to be so kind!) “as to do me the favour” (*me* the favour!) “to exert yourself” (it’s all to please Austin) “to endeavour to—hem! To” (there’s no saying it!)

The cup was full as ever. [...]

Richard swallowed the dose [...] (*Richard*, 8, 57-58)

We may notice a striking reversal in this metaphor: instead of words being poured and flowing from one’s lips, the metaphor is that of drinking and even force-feeding, which increases the sense of pain. A more “natural” way (still in a perspective which echoes Rousseau¹⁴) would instead be to let words flow, which would result in a feeling of pleasure; here, the opposite happens, as if to suggest that according to the young boy, this contrived conversation with the farmer, this gentlemanly use of language, which is forced upon him in this Victorian society, is unnatural and absurd.

In contrast to the social mastery of language, children’s use of words in a more “natural” way suggests that the speaker seeks contact rather than distance in language¹⁵. It is quite obvious in the quarrel between Richard and Ripton:

By-and-by he communicated his sentiments to Ripton, who said they were those of a girl: an offensive remark, remembering which, Richard, after they had borrowed a couple of guns at the bailiff’s farm, and Ripton had fired badly, called his friend a fool.

Feeling that circumstances were making him look wonderfully like one, Ripton lifted his head and retorted defiantly, “I’m not!”

This angry contradiction, so very uncalled for, annoyed Richard, who was still smarting at the loss of the birds,

14 Mona E. Mackay (*Mackay*, 44, 229) and Archibald Strong (*Strong*, 149) underline the influence of Rousseau, amongst many French writers, on Meredith’s works, even though Meredith probably had mixed feelings about Rousseau’s philosophy.

15 Such a “problematic nature of the relationship between language and its referent” has been studied by Richard C. Stevenson. Meredithian characters often “[speak and act] impulsively” (Stevenson, 175) and such is even more the case with children.

owing to Ripton's bad shot, and was really the injured party. He therefore bestowed the abusive epithet on Ripton anew, and with increase of emphasis.

"You shan't call me so, then, whether I am or not," says Ripton, and sucks his lips.

This was becoming personal. Richard sent up his brows, and stared at his defier an instant. He then informed him that he certainly should call him so, and would not object to call him so twenty times.

"Do it, and see!" returns Ripton, rocking on his feet, and breathing quick.

With a gravity of which only boys and other barbarians are capable, Richard went through the entire number, stressing the epithet to increase the defiance and avoid monotony, as he progressed, while Ripton bobbed his head every time in assent, as it were, to his comrade's accuracy, and as a record for his profound humiliation. The dog they had with them gazed at the extraordinary performance with interrogating wags of the tail.

Twenty times, duly and deliberately, Richard repeated the obnoxious word. (*Richard, 2, 17*)

The repetition of the word "epithet" by the narrator suggests that the adjective really sticks to the noun, as if to underline this adhesion between words and reality: "[he] called his friend a fool [...] he bestowed the abusive epithet on Ripton anew, and with increase of emphasis." Words are used as weapons and each occurrence is described as a blow, thus hammering the importance of the body in the children's use of language. Indeed, insults are associated to a physical reaction ("Ripton lifted his head and retorted"), the most striking one being Ripton's gesture: "Ripton bobbed his head every time in assent". But the pain of insults is also accompanied by pleasure in pronouncing the words, as is shown by the repetitions and by the pun ("called" – "uncalled for"), which suggests pleasure in the narration itself. The setting seems to endow language with a primitive quality¹⁶. Children are humorously

16 The *Ordeal of Richard Feverel* may be considered as Meredith's best attempt to probe into "primitive nature", as Walter Wright remarked: "His own perception of nature allowed him to recognize the ruthlessness in animal and plant struggle for survival [...]" (Wright, 3). The main point of the novel may be to denounce Sir Austin's

called “barbarians”, which is also emphasized by the evocation of “the skirts of the wood”, a few lines down, and the presence of an animal, even though the dog actually seems to be more civilized than the children: “The dog they had with them gazed at the extraordinary performance with interrogating wags of the tail.” This humorous distance taken by the narrator underlines the primal use of language, which is closely linked to the body: the dialogue is interspersed with gestures and physical descriptions (“Ripton lifted his head”, “Richard sent up his brows”, “Ripton, rocking on his feet, and breathing quick”), as a sign of the fight to come. The body is now inescapable, and insults, directly issued from the lips, inevitably lead to a fight implying contact between the two bodies:

At the twentieth solemn iteration of Ripton's capital shortcoming, Ripton delivered a smart back-hander on Richard's mouth, and squared precipitately; perhaps sorry when the deed was done, for he was a kind-hearted lad, and as Richard simply bowed in acknowledgment of the blow, he thought he had gone too far. He did not know the young gentleman he was dealing with. Richard was extremely cool.

“Shall we fight here?” he said.

“Anywhere you like,” replied Ripton.

“A little more into the wood, I think. We may be interrupted.” And Richard led the way with a courteous reserve that somewhat chilled Ripton's ardour for the contest. On the skirts of the wood, Richard threw off his jacket and waistcoat, and, quite collected, waited for Ripton to do the same. (*Richard*, 2, 17-18)

Ripton's symbolic gesture marks the beginning of the physical altercation. Just as the mouth is obviously pivotal in the passage from a verbal to a bodily development, the numerous evocations of space (“he had gone too far”, “here”, “anywhere you like”, “A little more into the wood”, “On the skirts of the wood”) stress the physicality of the scene and the gradual progress towards closer connection, if not intimacy, as the scene might bear some homoerotic hints. The rhythm, first trochaic

rigid principles and austere education, which deny that man is “a being of instinct and physical impulse” (Wright, 8).

("At the twentieth solemn iteration"), becomes chaotic precisely when the body finally comes into play. Lastly, in addition to the evocations of the woods, Richard's undressing, by removing the last hindrance to more primeval contact, conjures up a return to nature, while his naked skin also reads as an invitation to even more corporeality and closeness.

Such a desire for contact rather than distance, as the collision of the two bodies later underlines, is also symbolized by the final gesture of shaking hands, which presides over words:

"Well, look here," said Richard, appealing to common sense, "I'm tired of knocking you down. I'll say you're not a fool, if you'll give me your hand."

Ripton demurred an instant to consult with honour, who bade him catch at his chance.

He held out his hand. "There!" and the boys grasped hands and were fast friends. (*Richard*, 2, 19)

This symbolic link between the two bodies, but also between bodies and words (as the dependent clause demonstrates: "I'll say you're not a fool, if you'll give me your hand.") is quite significant of the boys' use of language, which is miles away from the social use of our previous example: even though the two scenes started with insults, words then develop in two completely different ways. Paradoxically enough, the experience of language seems much more painful in the encounter between Richard and the farmer than in his fight with his friend Ripton, as if learning to use language in an appropriate way according to the standards of Victorian manhood were much more violent than children's insults and fights. Still, it may be argued that the quarrel between Richard and Ripton also sheds light on their hierarchical relationship and on class division, as the young heroes are discovering the social uses of language. By calling his friend a fool, Richard also makes use of language in a symbolic way¹⁷ and asserts his power. By ultimately accepting not to call

17 It is symbolic not only because his words materialize his ascendancy over Ripton, while heralding his physical superiority and marking his social domination, but also because the sensual pleasure taken in the insults (which is also suggested by the role of the boys' bodies in the scene) makes it symbolic as such: as Françoise Escal argues, promoting sounds in language bestows a symbolic quality on words ("Cette priorité donnée à l'aspect sonore du texte confère alors à la langue le même fonctionnement symbolique (le symbolique, c'est ce qui résiste à la dégradation en signes ou en images)

him a fool, by adopting a more genteel language, he consents to the distance I have been mentioning. The evocations of “common sense” and “honour” underline this gradual acceptance of social control and reason, while the personification of honour (through the relative pronoun “who”) adds to the humorous tone of the narrative voice, thus increasing the distance we can feel as the characters seem to be leaving childhood. The end of the excerpt, marking the end of the fight, can be construed as a threshold into manhood, as Richard (who received an extremely puritanical, upper-class education) finally accepts to dismiss physical concerns and use words in a more mannerly way.

The Meredithian heroes gradually learn to depart from a pristine use of language, therefore abandoning dreams of a strict adhesion, a direct correspondence between signifier and signified, between words and bodies. As the breach in language widens, the children slowly accept the fault in words.

To sum up, on the one hand, children's language tends to be rooted in reality: it is still closely linked to the body and is often used in a magic or poetic way which entails pleasure. On the other hand, language is a social tool which inevitably reveals a gap; its rational use seeks to distance the speaker from the body and from reality, which may result in pain(s). As Julia Kristeva puts it, children move from an “instinctual, maternal, musical” use of words to a “logical, naming, castrating one”.¹⁸ The boys' words may also reveal the violence which is imposed on them as they are expected to behave as gentlemen and to make use of language accordingly.

The two novels by George Meredith shed light on the fault inherent in language. They may also be a criticism of the uses of language in a Victorian society (the two heroes were raised in upper-class families, Richard received a very puritanical education and the world depicted is undeniably an extremely gendered, class society) where learning to become an adult not only means accepting the normative function of

que la musique: son sens, in formulable, *est sa forme.*”), as the shapes and sonorities of words replace or coincide with their meaning (Escal, 339).

18 “Who says *hello?* – hello, Yeshayâhû, Isaiah. It is ‘I’, present to signify the process that exceeds it, and only for that. It is neither One, paranoid, set in his mastery. Nor is it an Other, prophesying because he is cutting a dangerous *after* (logical, naming, castrating) away from an inaccessible *before* (instinctual, maternal, musical)” (Kristeva, 189).

language but also requires abandoning its sensual aspects. In a sense, growing up leads to demythologizing language and abandoning a sensory or poetic use of speech. It is a farewell to the body in language and a farewell to the magic of words.

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