

interpretative intelligence"—"the better the actor, the greater the intelligence"—and, much more questionably, "an essentially bisexual quality". It is one thing to observe, acutely, of Olivier that "no one makes more positive and creative use of his femininity"; another to declare "one of the pleasures of watching acting lies in seeing a man—or woman—embodying the kind of sexual conflict that psychiatrists say resides in all of us"; that we, as audiences, are "exactly like voyeurs" (*exactly?*); that "Sending away an audience happy is exactly akin to sending a lover away satisfied," as Ken Dodd does (*exactly, again?*) Apart from Mr Dodd, Mr Billington's choice of

top performers includes Olivier (Shylock), McKellen (Richard II), Nicol Williamson (Hamlet), Leonard Rossiter (Arturo Ui), and Paul Scofield (the Captain of Kopenick); he praises Frankie Howerd as "arguably the most Brechtian actor in Britain"; and Danny La Rue as "a perfect example of the alienation technique at work."

When Mr La Rue comes on stage, he helps us to fulfil our dreams; and that is as much as one can ever ask of any entertainer.

About that, as about a good deal more in *The Modern Actor*—and the obsession it describes—there is plenty of room for continuing argument.

No Villain Need Be

The First Mrs Meredith—By ANTHONY THWAITE

GREAT ARTISTS are often insufferable, and the fact has frequently been exploited by artists who have been less than great. To behave badly is to be a genius: on such a syllogism many a distraught wife and injured friend has been skewered. Whether George Meredith was an artist of the front rank is still matter for debate, and so is the question whether he treated his first wife shabbily. Much of the evidence not only of what he felt but of the "truth" of that marital situation is sought in Meredith's own work—in those novels which seem to be most heavily autobiographical, and in the extraordinary sequence of 16-line poems, *Modern Love*. The rest of the evidence is tucked away in a few cryptic references here and there.

That the marriage between Meredith and Mary Ellen Peacock was a disaster is not matter for debate. It lasted eight years, and all who knew them were aware that for at least half that time they were miserable with each other. In 1857, Mary eloped with Henry Wallis, the painter who earlier on had used Meredith as the model for his portrait of "The Death of Chatterton." Four years later, she died. Meredith hardly spoke of her again. In all his 2,600 collected letters, she is scarcely referred to. The early biographers and editors of Meredith were embarrassed by the whole business—naturally so, since most of them had some family connection with the man. Later biographers, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Lionel Stevenson, weren't inhibited by such pieties but

were short of material. There has been the suspicion that Meredith himself, and perhaps those early biographers, destroyed papers that might have been painfully revealing.

Now Diane Johnson, an American novelist, enters the lists as Mary's declared champion. Instead of being an obscure figure, a "lesser life"¹ subsumed in the creative lives of her father (Thomas Love Peacock) and Meredith, Mary is propelled with considerable energy and warmth to the front of the stage as "a new—a modern—Victorian heroine", a liberated woman, a tragedienne born before (or after) her due time. "Mrs Meredith's life", writes Miss Johnson, "can be looked upon, of course, as an episode in the lives of Meredith or Peacock, but it cannot have seemed that way to her."

Biographers are frequently devoted to their subjects, but there are few as fiercely committed as Miss Johnson. She refuses to be other than partisan. Because she is so zealous to see justice done to her heroine, Meredith must be twisted into being a standard Victorian moralist, and worse—proud, selfish, pompous, hypocritical, devious, a monster of cold insensitivity. Similarly, all his earlier biographers must be characterised as if they were all members of the same jealous clique, desperate to conceal the truth, of which Miss Johnson is the sole custodian.

But one of the chief troubles is that very little is known about Mary's precise movements (or anything approaching precision about her states of mind) during certain crucial periods; so Diane Johnson has to shore up her defence with a reiteration of "perhaps" and "maybe" and "possibly." Gossip and speculation are elements

¹ *The True History of the First Mrs Meredith and Other Lesser Lives*. By DIANE JOHNSON. Heinemann, £3; Knopf, \$7.95.

in biography, indeed, but they don't in themselves constitute biography. This seems to escape Miss Johnson, who is so eager to break the dominance of the conventional "Life" that she becomes arch, careless, and sometimes downright silly. Inspired by imaginative indignation, *Lesser Lives* is made up of disjunctive and discrete sections, almost like a commonplace book; perhaps justifiably so, for Miss Johnson makes great play with Mary's own commonplace book, now in the Beinecke Library at Yale. This is obviously an extremely interesting document, but Miss Johnson is far too heavily committed to treating it as a series of exhibits in the Case Against George Meredith and attaches to it a weight it won't bear.

In her determination to see justice done to Mary, she becomes absurd. Meredith's most trivial shortcomings are held up to withering contempt. Let him spell the word "dulness" (a perfectly acceptable 19th-century spelling, and still permissible) and she follows it with a scornful *sic*; whereas Henry Wallis gets away unrebuked with "measels" twice. Again, Meredith's later quitting of his lodging with Rossetti and Swinburne is attributed to the fact that "he was really so delicate that he couldn't bear to see Rossetti eat eggs in the morning"—a cheaply unfair twisting of a typically grotesque and self-mocking anecdote on Meredith's part. Such minor matters may seem hardly worth comment; but they are rather too typical of Miss Johnson's strategies.

MARY WAS AN UNUSUALLY gifted, courageous and beautiful woman: this much we already know. We also know that the years she spent with Meredith were marked by his early struggles to make a living as a writer, and we can infer that he was a grimly difficult companion. But he was in no sense a "typical Victorian" in his attitudes to women and marriage: his marriage failed, as others have done before and since, because two mismatched people found it impossible to live together without endless pain and recrimination, not because he was a self-righteous ogre:

I see no sin:

*The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.*

In general, Miss Johnson seems to have little sense of period, and is eager to diminish Victorian attitudes with all Lytton Strachey's campaigning zest but without Strachey's knowledge and skill. She surveys what happened "then", "in those days" (naïvely insistent phrases, like "long, long ago"), with a briskly unfeeling incomprehension and condescension. And incomprehension slides

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into facetiousness and fatuity: "She was . . . the daughter of a parson (like everyone else then, it seems)"; "Everyone had headache, and lay about on sofas"; ". . . the spring of 1861 was no doubt beautiful, like all English springs."

It is all a great pity. Miss Johnson has had access to some fascinating unpublished material, and her heart is in (approximately) the right place: that much one can say without reserve. But the

first Mrs Meredith is hardly less elusive than ever, while still as tragic as one knew she was before the appearance of *Lesser Lives*. As for Meredith himself, he has been slandered and quite wrongly made to seem contemptible. That Diane Johnson provokes such indignation on my part is perhaps some measure of the passion her "lives" can still arouse—though that is small justification for her methods.

Transparent Likenesses

New Novels—By Jonathan Raban

THE DEEPEST FEELING in Nabokov's novels—often their only feeling—is pathos; an autumnal sentimental sadness at the loneliness and transitoriness of things. He is the Busby Berkeley of *weltschmerz* (or *weltschmaltz*): a great choreographer and prestidigitator whose most ambitious and brilliant set-pieces are mounted around a single tear-jerking tableau. The halitotic Kinbote peers miserably through his window at the lavish party being thrown by the Shades next door; Humbert sees his masterpiece, his *Lolita*, transformed into a suburban slut called Mrs Richard F. Schiller. Unwrap a Nabokov novel from its packaging of games, tricks with mirrors and tough ironical philosophising, and one is left with an exquisite weepie. *Lolita* began, so he has said, with the image of a luckless ape whose hard-luck story Nabokov chanced upon in a newspaper. This creature, when it was equipped by its keepers with paints and paper, was only able to draw the bars of its cage. Nabokov himself has gone on to ever more delicately shaded aquatints of the interior of the prison, but at the heart of each new novel there squats the same mangy, dishevelled ape, clutching its brush in a hairy paw and rolling huge appealing eyes in the direction of the RSPCA. Lately, the ape has begun to look uncannily like Nabokov: its furrowed brow and hanging jowls, its dyspeptic manner and heavy Russian accent, increasingly give it the appearance of a pantomime costume, in which the sweating novelist has thinly disguised himself.

*Transparent Things*¹ is a novel about the pathos of authorship, the lonely solipsism of the fiction writer busily peopling an illusory world. It is both the least admirable, and the most revealing, of all Nabokov's novels. The reader is invited to eavesdrop on the relationship between an author and his character—poor Hugh Person, summoned out

of the void and made to dance his shallow, evanescent life through the pages of the book. Hugh is pronounced "you", and Person is used in its primary sense, as "mask" or "persona." Nabokov nets him like a butterfly in the first sentence, then pins him out in a sequence of twenty-six chapterlets, muttering asides to the reader about technical difficulties as he does so. For even a mask drips with gobbets of its own history; it is not a transparent thing. Transparency is a condition of living in the present, of moving through objects and events with a careless disregard for their natures and histories.

A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film.

In Nabokov's fiction, the only people who live comfortably with this transparency, who walk effortlessly on the water, are the girls, bright and insensate as lepidoptera. *Lolita*, content with her candy and pin-ups of film stars, was Nabokov's supreme skater on the surface tension of life; her inconsequential, butterfly-death in childbirth was an essential ingredient of her talent for remaining in the now. In the new novel, there is a descendant of hers, a bland, pretty, open-air girl called Armande, whose passion is for skiing down Swiss mountainsides. But the snow she slides over, hardly denting with her fibreglass skis, is a glacial crust which keeps the world of feeling at one remove from her feet. Like *Lolita*, she is heading for a casual demise, to be throttled by Person in his sleep.

Novelists, and persons too, are poor skiers. Person stumbles wheezily behind Armande, never able to keep up. He is burdened by his age, his past, his job as publisher's editor (he is in Switzerland to attend to the latest manuscript of R., a novel called *Tralatitons* written in a style of Nabokovian rococo). Unable to manage the trudge up the mountain, he sits on the hotel

¹ *Transparent Things*. By VLADIMIR NABOKOV. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £1.75.