

“I will if you will,’ or: Meredith and Ends”

Excerpted from my dissertation

Working Knowledge: Deliberation and the Novel

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Introductory remarks & caveats

What follows is an excerpt from my first chapter, “‘I will if you will,’ or Meredith and Ends.” I have given you the last thirty pages because they are the pages that will generate the best discussion, they are a good starting place for my revision of the chapter, and they are my least favorite. At present, the chapter is 110 pages long; the first third is about Meredith’s problematic critical reception and the stylistic quirks that make him so difficult to like, the second is a kind of literature review of recent theories of practical reason and intentionality, with an attention to the problems that Meredith and philosophers of intention share, and the third, from which this excerpt is taken, is a series of readings of Meredith’s novel *The Egoist* that unpack these shared problems. Since I see this last section as a kind of apex, the happy convergence of my thousand points of light, I think it’s a good place to start revising. I want to pare the second philosophy section down and run it through the first and third sections, so that all of the implications for Meredith’s unreadability and the unresolvable problems of intentionality emerge together. There is some of that in the section I give you, so I’m interested to see how clear or intuitive those connections are.

The clearest way to describe this excerpt’s dominant focus is to say that it cares about moments in the novel where “deciding what to do” takes on a charged and peculiarly complicated quality. Nodes of interaction between two or three emerging narrative movements—inevitably involving questions of formal structure and control in addition to characterological friction—make solutions irreducible to any particular source, and become about the novel’s own position toward its own movement. That would be an uninterestingly post-structural problem if it weren’t for the fact that discussions among philosophers of intention and practical reason take up ends in different ways—thinking of them as either a multitude of stops or a sublimation toward one broadly conceived end—but they don’t have a way of theorizing *non-desirous* action. Obedience is Meredith’s dominant interest, and he repeatedly gives us scenes of incomplete intentional action, or cyclical deliberation where a character chooses not to choose, or whose flimsy ends involve someone else whose own intentions are in doubt. By putting these two discourses together, I’m trying to come up with a new way of theorizing narrative movement in moments of seemingly suspended action; I use the term “emergence” to describe what I mean by that, but what I think I ultimately come up with in this chapter is motivated by something more like “enclosure.” As I write in the last few pages:

Action takes the longest route in *The Egoist*, first by refusing to begin, and then by hanging on to someone else’s intention. If we look to the grounds of deciding what to do, as Anscombe suggests, we can learn what “use” a particular action is; if we back up to see the more holistic view in a Davidsonian framework, we can have a comparative model that can be predictive and contain various levels of mesh. But when Meredith tries to do both by removing ends from the equation altogether and locating action in noncalculative practical reason that is perpetually interrupted, or subtended within narrative frameworks that keep it from getting anywhere at all, his plot turns to repeated efforts at substitution as a reinscription of the way the world works and people get by inside it.All that we can return to, and all he repeatedly lays out for us, are the grounds, the circumstances, the whys that are as inchoate and referential as the selves we are when we use them.

The readings that follow are intended to get us there. The first phase, “A space beyond plans,” marks out a territory of un-intentional action, using an example from Clara’s first indication that her engagement to Willoughby might be a mistake. The second phase, “Home from the hunt,” characterizes that territory as a doing and a thing done, a kind of perpetuation that is curiously

dependent on another's intentional stance, using an example from the argument Willoughby and Clara have most often, about their role as a couple in the world. The last phase, "I will if you will," theorizes Meredith's own peculiar understanding of intentional action in *The Egoist* through Clara's effective substitution of Laetitia for herself.

Dissertation Abstract

My dissertation, *Working Knowledge: Deliberation and the Novel*, consists of four chapters, each oscillating between an author who theorizes decision-making as a particular kind of process, necessarily informed by both the constraints of novel structure and an historicized understanding of action, and a particular conceptual tangle for philosophy that could be best engaged and resolved by the novel. A sense of the first chapter will make this methodology clearer; it takes the form of a thought experiment. If George Meredith's *The Egoist* is, formally speaking, an exemplary novel, with hundreds of pages detailing the subtle shifts of character deliberation, event and strategy that are supposed to make a story engrossing, why is it so difficult to like? And how is it that *The Egoist*, a novel readers tend not to like, can also and at the same time be a novel that critics like Northrop Frye consider especially exemplary? Can both be true at once? A look at recent attempts to break decision-making down into a series of tiny objectives or ends, and the prominent shift in recent philosophies of action from a theory of decision-making predicated on background information to a theory that is more immediate and interpersonally reactive shows us why Meredith's novel would *want* to atomize moments of deliberation, how that atomization responds in an innovative way to these theories, and finds an oddly satisfying narrative engine in an unexpected place.

In the second chapter I take up Stendhal's scribble in the margins of his draft of *Le rouge et le noir*, "One never goes as far as when one does not know where one is going," and read its faith in the *un*-intentional alongside the many frustrated accounts of the novel's implausible motivation. I find an ally in recent conceptualizations of vagueness, terms whose confounded meaning lies somewhere between language and its imperfect use. Suddenly, the vibrations that make words like "red" or phrases like "in his early thirties" so unclear start to look rather like those that allow the Napoleonic man of the *ancien régime* to occupy two positions at once, displacing the proper name around which different traits coalesce with the irresolvable distance between two contradictory terms. If Meredith distends moments of decision-making into a range of infinitesimally tiny commitments to act, Stendhal produces an anti-deliberation theory of decision-making based on an impression of events *just after* they've happened. We could see this as an ostensive form of what Grice calls "generalized conversational implicature," a sense of things that is unspoken and perhaps apposite, but which must be believed and simultaneously present in order to preserve semantic meaning. Recently revisited by contextualist philosophers of language trying to build pragmatically encoded content like "enrichment," "loose talk," and metaphor into discrete semantic categories, Grice's theory of implicatures gives us a site of anti-deliberative decision-making similar to that raised by Stendhal's vagueness.

A third chapter, on Thackeray's *Pendennis*, allows us to look at a theorization of decision-making detached from some of the Humean modes of causality that drive the plots of Meredith and Stendhal, specifically that of spatio-temporal contiguity. Critics have noted Thackeray's favoring of an open descriptive space in this novel, filled in by the reader's experiences at the suggestion of a series of prompts. This technique complicates a narrative causality based on temporal contiguity, which really only makes sense when applied to events, by implicating a spatialized

description that is best reserved for objects. For example, when Thackeray writes that Pen's own novel is "written under the influence of his youthful embarrassments" and thus he "imitated, as almost all clever lads do, his favourite poems and writers," the cause doesn't clearly entail the effect; our ability to make the contiguity work is dependent upon the superimposition of another, equally fictitious figure between ourselves and Pen. This supervening object—which replaces Pen's *bildung* with "almost all clever lads"—arguably makes the story more obscure, and oddly susceptible to the suggestion that, as the novel's hero lives into his future, its significance is doomed to become equally obsolete. And yet, nothing has been said about the *properties* of these events. Recent work on "Aspect Causation" allows us to parse out the relevant aspects, or "tropes," of events through an abstracted understanding of the beginning and end of a causal chain. This gives properties of events more causal "heft" than they've been given credit for, and allows them to subsume other properties entailed by them. If *Pendennis* is always ending, or completely over, then we can intuitively posit those counterfactuals without and far beyond those the narrative repeatedly invites.

The fourth and final chapter will act as a coda to the dissertation, using Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* as contemporary interpretations of the literariness of decision-making. The contrast of Murdoch's post-Jamesian architecture and her unexceptional, artlessly manipulative characters show us just how delicately the formal considerations of narrative rest on the process of deciding what to do. Her dispassionately intuitive *Guide* not only complicates the begetting, duplication, and symmetry constitutive of (particularly aesthetic) events described by philosophers like Elaine Scarry and Slavoj Žižek, but also grounds choices and causality in an almost unnarratable logic. Murdoch shows us at every point how the novel negotiates an interest in what she terms "unimportant happiness" with the comically grave pull of the Good, and how a middle way, not so unlike the pragmatic inclusion of the *meant* and *done* in semantics, could be found.

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Chapter 1 Draft Excerpt

“I will if you will”: or, Meredith and Ends

A space beyond plans

Chapter 13 of Meredith’s *The Egoist* is encouragingly titled “The First Effort After Freedom,” and promises something like the first real action of a novel in which nothing much happens. The young, lovely and wealthy Clara Middleton has engaged herself to Sir Willoughby Patterne and is spending an indeterminate amount of time living on his estate with her father before the wedding. She has become increasingly certain that her engagement is a mistake, and after a lively dinner with Laetitia Dale, the neighboring spinster who has pined for Willoughby for years and is a much better match—not least because her interest in him makes her susceptible to the suggestion—Clara decides to convince Willoughby that Laetitia’s is a truer love and free herself in the substitution. Thus the first effort *after* freedom does double, bidirectional work here: Clara’s confrontation is both a means to the end of freedom, and her first real push at Willoughby since their engagement.

Clara’s inspired recognition of this space between freedoms follows her introduction to Willoughby’s cousin Vernon Whitford, who will emerge as her love interest and escape clause at the novel’s close, and whose impression of stability, intelligence and vigor throws Willoughby’s “nonsensical,” “incomprehensible” “something illogical” in relief:

She resolved that she would one day, one distant day provoke it—upon what? The special point eluded her....That ‘something illogical’ had stirred her feelings more than her intellect to revolt. She could not constitute herself the advocate of Mr. Whitford. Still she marked the disputation for an event to come.

Meditating on it, she fell to picturing Sir Willoughby's face at the first accents of his bride's decided disagreement with him. The picture once conjured up would not be laid. He was handsome; so correctly handsome, that a slight unfriendly touch precipitated him into caricature. His habitual air of happy pride, of indignant contentment rather, could easily be overdone. Surprise, when he threw emphasis on it, stretched him with the tall eyebrows of a mask—limitless under the spell of caricature; and in time, whenever she was not pleased by her thoughts, she had that, and not his likeness, for the vision of him. (41)

The passage is worth quoting at length for the questions it raises and blatantly ducks; Clara has resolved to end things but doesn't know when or why, the thrill of the scene's to-be-announcedness invoking an unexpected but strangely understandable compulsion to see the look on Willoughby's face. As a mask with infinite eyebrows stretches him up and away, she lets the "something illogical" overtake him in the shared sense of that word "precipitate," a "slight unfriendly touch" that both hurries him into caricature, and leaves caricature remaining in deposit after all of its containment has burned off. There is a "hurry up and wait" paradox about Meredith's phrasing here, suggesting that caricature—already both surface and core—is the material dissolve of the similarly impacted "happy pride" and "indignant contentment." The "slight unfriendly touch" that destabilizes those two states—each already impacted as a paired end in itself—is destabilizing a space beyond plans and immune to suggestion. The state of being happy, proud, indignant, or content tends to be actionless, so the compounded pairing looks counterfactual and foreclosed. Indeed, one of G. E. M. Anscombe's key rejections of Donald Davidson's theory of intentionality is its dependence on the circumstances in place before an action begins in order to better connect that action to its motivating desires and pro-attitudes. This criticism argues that Davidson's more holistic view of intentional behavior, such that intentionally sitting down unintentionally moves molecules out of the way and depresses the cushion on which I sit, generates instances of specious causality. [In *Reasonably Vicious*, an analysis of the implications of Anscombe's rejection of useful-style desirability characterizations, theories of intentional action that lead toward and ultimately depend on "some further, future

end” (206)] Candace Vogler cites Davidson’s assertion that “not only did Oedipus want to kill his father, and actually kill him, but his desire caused him to kill his father,”¹ and argues that as Oedipus did not know he was killing his father, and continued to search for his father after killing Laius, there is no intentionally-wrought end to the action performed, and thus no answer to the question “Why did you kill your father?” The ends to which the action is put do not pair up with the system in place to execute them, and thus we can’t have described an intentional action. The repercussions for our “happy pride” and “indignant contentment” are that as ends in themselves given the emergence of the systems they enclose, they cannot be modified or disturbed from within but (like Laius’s murder) they *are* capable of being acted upon during some other system’s unfolding, and when that happens they cease to exist as they are. Thus, either as compounded ends in themselves (happy and proud) or from a point of interaction onward, they become corroborating, defensive impulses in a longer trajectory of becoming rather than something Willoughby will stop aiming for. This is a separation between plot and character engaged at the cellular level, where self-realizing states are co-opted by other evolving systems. It is also, however unsurprisingly, where Vogler’s insistence on the proximity of ends becomes untenable. For, while her argument “I *stop* cake-baking and *start* digging out of the rubble when the roof caves in”² seems a logical call for the entrenchment of ends in descriptions of intentional action, the self she describes is vulnerable to all kinds of voice-over narration. We could argue that this is particularly so in fiction, but Vogler’s example hinges on the vagaries of experience that pull us up short all the time. There would be no motivation for Willoughby to leave a place of “indignant contentment,” but because this place doubles as Clara’s motivation for some form of intentional action, it becomes temporary and vulnerable. Additionally, the narrative that

¹ Donald Davidson, “Psychology as Philosophy,” *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980): 232.

² Vogler, “Anscombe on Practical Inference,” *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge: MIT, 2001): 450.

encompasses these two agendas is a line of practical reasoning with no end in sight; Clara is “resolved” in a way that couldn’t be called calculative, given her unexpected (and temporarily satisfying) fixation on Willoughby’s face. There is an ethical argument in the precipitate, as pride and indignation are codified vices for Meredith and bring a sense of injustice to bear on Willoughby’s rounded ease, but when Clara amplifies his look, it’s clear that she doesn’t see its immorality so much as the fact of its disturbance.³

Clara’s catalyzing event to come is intended to unseat Willoughby, but his “something illogical” and various paradoxes characterize him as already unstable, a stacked abundance of imagery that leads to a oversimplification. Here the “stack that flattens” is also literal, not just in the impacted repetition of ends or the expansive mask that overtakes them, but in the entire action of the passage. Clara will “one day, one distant day” provoke Willoughby, and he is “handsome; so correctly handsome,” both modifiers making a point of adding nothing to the phrases that exist without them, but specifying a particular kind of vagueness. Clara “marked the disputation for an event to come,” what will be referred to as “his bride’s decided disagreement with him,” two descriptions that but passively implicate her—the first in “the disputation,” the second as “his bride’s disagreement,” an inflection that locates significance in the argument itself, but doesn’t locate its subjects in anything other than an abstraction. Here again we have the excesses of “decided” and “marked,” the first an emphasis that actually conflicts with “disagreement,” and the second a notation that is without significance, but which the predicate

³ This argument operates somewhat tangential to the discussions of progressive gender relations in Meredith’s fiction, but doesn’t land on either side of the question “Is Meredith a feminist?” For a fine exploration of this issue, including the feminization of the Comic Spirit, see Carolyn Williams, “Unbroken Patternes: Gender, Culture, and Voice in *The Egoist*” *Browning Institute Studies* 13 (1985): 45-70. A. Stewart and Elvira Casal, “Clara Middleton: Wit and Pattern in *The Egoist*” *Studies in the Novel* 12.3 (1980): 210-27. For more on gender in works contemporary to *The Egoist*, see Lynn E. Wolf, “A Bracing Corrective: Women and Comedy in George Meredith’s ‘Case of General Ople and Lady Camper,’” *Essays in Literature* 21.1 (1994): 68-81. Jenni Calder writes of Meredith’s challenge to conventional idea of marriage in *Diana of the Crossways* in “Cash and the Sex Nexus,” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 27 (1984): 40-53. For Meredith and masculinity, see “Richard Fernal and Willoughby Patternes: The Athlete as Egoist,” *Bucknell Review* 16.3 (1968): 107-25.

“an event to come” enacts. Lastly, Clara “fell to picturing” Willoughby’s face, the picture “once conjured up would not be laid,” and “in time...she had that, and not his likeness, for the vision of him,” three ways of describing a daydream as both a doing and a thing done and a raising and a falling down—actions that don’t contradict one another so much as reposition Clara as a victim of her own imagination.⁴ The movement into abstraction that we get with the dissociation of “his bride’s disagreement” is acting this out for us, as the supernatural tinge of the “conjured” “spell of caricature” that “would not be laid” suggests. The lines describe the mask seem to behave that image, as if the description itself becomes Willoughby’s “something illogical”: “And it was unjust, contrary to her deeper feelings; she rebuked herself, and as much as her naughty spirit permitted, she tried to look on him as the world did; an effort inducing reflections upon the blessings of ignorance. She seemed to herself beset by a circle of imps, hardly responsible for her thoughts” (41-42). Thus, those moments of noncalculative deliberation that reinscribe Willoughby’s and Clara’s positions within one another’s emerging systems also give us a sense of the novel’s conjuring agency, and show us just how arbitrary some of Clara’s grounds for acting might seem. This will complicate our reception of this moment, not simply because it underscores Clara’s lack of a calculative process, but because it shows her *trying* to have one; Clara is incapable of dismissing the caricature, and this reminds us of the elusive third term in narrative that philosophies of practical reason so far haven’t addressed: the presence of a system that emerges concurrent to but separate from those that lay on top of it.

This third term is described by Stanley Cavell as the *meaning* of a work of art, as opposed to its physical object-ness: “The artist is responsible for everything that happens in his work—and not

⁴ In her definitive study of Meredith’s novels, *Meredith: A Change of Masks*, Gillian Beer refers to Meredith’s “attempts to combine the free flow of experience with scenes which probe and epitomize personality under stress,” a disjunction that forms “the spring of comedy and tragedy.” Gillian Beer, *Meredith: A Change of Masks* (London: Athlone, 1970): 109. While this is usefully reminiscent of the gap between the capabilities and goals that form Hegel’s comic ideal, they compact a descriptive technique and an ideology in ways that obscure Meredith’s constant attempt to keep a bifocal, hovering-up system of narration in place.

just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is *meant*.”⁵ Like Anscombe’s assertion that one acts in pursuit of an end on the grounds of what is believed, Cavell argues that “Intention is no more an efficient cause of an object of art than it is of human action; in both cases it is a way of understanding the thing done, of describing what happens.”⁶ He continues in a similar vein, writing that in order for belief to impact any action, it has to be “active” inside the actor and not simply “known,”⁷ a state reminiscent of Anscombe’s stipulation that “not only must I have a reason, it must also ‘operate as my reason.’”⁸ But here Cavell takes an interesting departure that will help us untangle the separateness of the systems *The Egoist* seems to be juggling. He identifies two considerations: first, that while it isn’t necessary for an artist to be aware of every potential interpretation of her work, it is necessary that she can *become* aware of them, and second, that being an artist means that she knows how to do certain things well without knowing exactly how she does them. What these two statements of the mystery of artistic production account for, I think, is akin to that elusive third term that Clara encounters in her conjuring; it is also the thing that shifts Cavell from Anscombe’s side to Davidson’s:

To say that works of art are intentional objects is not to say that each bit of them, as it were, is separately intended; any more than to say a human action is intentional is to say that each physical concomitant of it is separately intended—the noise, that grass crushed where I have stood, that branch broken by the bullet, my sharp intake of breath before the shot, and the eye-blink after....But all these are things I have done, and any may become relevant....In art, our interest in intention, given the fact that we are confronted by someone’s work, is to locate ourselves in its shift of events....In all [cases of intentional action], I may use terms to describe what someone has done which he himself would not use, or may not know.⁹

This move from the artist’s “active” belief through the index of possible artistic gestures into a holistic account of all that could be relevant in an intentional action should tell us that, as a kind

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge, 2002): 236-37.

⁶ Cavell 230.

⁷ Cavell 234.

⁸ G. E. M. Anscombe, “Von Wright on Practical Inference,” *The Philosophy of Georg Henrik Von Wright*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (LaSalle: Open Court, 1989): 378.

⁹ Cavell 236.

of limit-case for Cavell's reading of intentionality, the artistic product relies on a tautology that goes something like this: "the work of art exists in all manner of possible interpretations, and any one interpretation will prove its existence as a particular work of art." This shifts the location of intention from a means-end articulation of grounds to a retrospective, causal articulation. Cavell's claim that intention *isn't* causal describes it instead as a "way of understanding the thing done," but that understanding is difficult to localize, especially as it is primarily interested in "locat[ing] ourselves" in the text. The example Cavell gives, of reading Fellini's *La Strada* as "a version of the story of Philomel"¹⁰ exemplifies the disjunction Cavell gets himself into by enlarging every aspect of the narrative to another, previous one, not as its grounds¹¹ but as its determining intention. Even the slight caveat of "a *version*" makes the previous narrative flexible enough to influence the film's variations from it and instantiate an explicitly causal structure on its interpretation. So, how is Cavell's trouble with intention in the work of art like Clara's problem with the caricature? Once Clara sees Willoughby's exaggerated flatness—his "character-ness"—the novel describes her awareness in terms that emphasize her own objectification and flatness—falling down and raising up, denying her "deeper feelings"—and though Clara herself doesn't account for the jostling experience of being a character, she has an experience that could be described as that of locating herself in a text. The difference is, Clara imagines a future confrontation that hasn't been, and Cavell sees a work he's read in another he's reading. Her conjured image works as a node of interaction between the novel's articulation of itself as a collection of characters and of Clara as a heroine becoming progressively aware, even fixated, with her fiancée's absurdity. Cavell's move from assuming an artist to be working with an "active" intention to locating that activity in the embodied history of her technique enacts the movement readers of *The Egoist* are encouraged to make at Clara's episode of nonpractical

¹⁰ Cavell 230.

¹¹ Anscombe considers "grounds" for acting the "practical inferences" at the base of our action, to show "what good, what use, the action is." "Von Wright": 380.

deliberation; we see the caricature “active” and present for Clara—and then *in* her, as a technique or novel-action.¹² The third terms of this equation, Philomel and Meredith, are never explicitly figured and thus keep their influence as a kind of hovering-up comparative force.

The “first effort after freedom” follows this moment of Clara’s wild disobedience, which emerges from a “slight unfriendly touch” that she can’t control; it is, in other words, a first moment of intentional action after an extended period spent setting up the parameters of the systems it expresses. Clara’s emergent awareness of Willoughby’s unfitness begins in, say, System 1’s impulse to simplify him into an exaggeration, but it takes a turn of its own and becomes increasingly persistent and oppressive. The novel abets the oppression of this image in System 2 by showing us Clara’s sense of herself as an experiencing object, thus encouraging a reader’s tendency to make all subjects of narrative equivalent products of an implied authorial device.¹³ System 1 and System 2 reach one another in the conjured mask and turn it into yet another of Meredith’s impacted images,¹⁴ but neither the objectification of Clara nor the persistence of Willoughby’s caricature foreclose or really even compromise the integrity of the particular system

¹² A previous section illustrates the tendency of Meredith’s critics to ascribe a kind of formal purity to Meredith’s novels; Northrup Frye flatly refers to *The Egoist* as a “typical novel” or “comic epic in prose.” Such a form would clearly rely on a perfect estimation of the parameters of its readers’ shared propositional content, and “fill in” its boundaries without stretching them. To be able to read a problematic novelist like Meredith as performing this fidelity to convention is to apply Anscombe’s site of intentional action to novel *form*—to argue that its lack of complicating counter-motives, subsequent ends, or miscegenating influences makes it what it is: a novel-action, a gesture for its own sake. But this isn’t Meredith, not completely. Every admission of his literary genius—Robert Louis Stevenson called him “my admired Meredith,”¹² “out and away the greatest force in English letters,”¹² George Gissing argued that “for the last thirty years he has been producing work unspeakably above the best of any living writer”¹² and for Virginia Woolf he’s a “master of language...splashing and diving in his element of words”¹²—brings us to the question of its ends.

¹³ For more on Clara’s scenes of deliberation, albeit in a somewhat estranged context, see J. Hillis Miller, “What is a Kiss? Isabel’s moments of decision,” *Critical Inquiry* 31.3 (2205): 722-55. Or, more to the point, J. Hillis Miller, “Herself Against Herself: The Clarification of Clara Middleton” *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, eds. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1983): 98-123.

¹⁴ The chapter begins with an analysis of Meredith’s abstracted images and the disproportionately tiny systems they site. Virginia Woolf uses the example of a tea party, full of “chairs, tables, cups, and the rest,” but impacted by Meredith into “a ring on a finger and a plume passing out the window.” Virginia Woolf, “On Re-reading Meredith,” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, vol. 2 (New York: Harvest, 1987): 274.

expressing it. Clara's lack of control is an experience of what we might call authorial intervention, but this happens only *after* she has initiated the image herself. This seems to me an exemplary scene of bifocal meaning-making, in which the pieces negotiating their way across a board that emerges around them hover but don't touch, each moment of interaction given just enough room to keep System 1 and System 2 in suspension. The triangulation that, in Davidson's formula, would help us decide which system to read and how¹⁵ gets lost in such moments, because there is no System 3 to oppose System 1 and System 2, no position whose lead we would follow in a reading, or that definitively draws our attention. Cavell calls the general form of System 3 *meaning*—or, *Philomel* in particular—the “way of understanding the thing done” that unites our interaction with the text and reveals its intention. But in order to locate System 3 in *La Strada*, he has to shift intention into a completely different artistic register, from an intention that operates within the artist to some embodied history of her technique. Meredith starts with a reader that resembles Cavell, and hypostasizes both intentional registers in the caricature, so the scene can “read” both ways. There is no uniting meaning-Philomel in Meredith's scene, so the only definitive way to interpret Clara's inability to repress the caricature

¹⁵ Triangulation is a step crucial for Davidson's understanding of the construction of beliefs:

The basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share; it is what I call *triangulation*. It is the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent. To put this in a slightly different way, each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts.¹⁵

There are two related, and rather crucial questions that this system raises, which form what we might call an *event horizon*: 1) how much of an intentional action can really be tied to the content of one's beliefs, and 2) how can we tell what particular stimulus kicked those beliefs into action? Davidson's answers are intriguingly incomplete. To the first, he claims that the amount and kind of content that produces *similar* intentional actions in others is the amount and kind we can safely attribute to *our* intentional action, and to the second, he says we need to look for the more *proximal* stimulus, when trying to figure out why we do the things we do. Neither of these is satisfying, obviously, because the world that Davidson's two interacting subjects are engaging with is full of unseen stimuli, as anyone who has ever distantly watched someone walking through a spiderweb would know—just because they crumple and swat at the air doesn't mean I can know what's happening to them. Donald Davidson, “The Emergence of Thought,” *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001): 126.

is to settle on two emerging interpretations in real time and take from them the expanding parameters of the systems they're expressing.

After dinner, Clara says something at last aloud. "Were you to come to tell me," she says to Willoughby,

"...how much better suited to you Miss Dale has appeared than I am—and I fear I am not; it should be spoken plainly; unsuited altogether, perhaps—I would, I beseech you to believe—you must believe me—give you...give you your freedom instantly; most truly; and engage to speak of you as I should think of you...And in that case I would undertake to declare that she would not admire you more than I: Miss Dale would not; she would not admire you more than I; not even Miss Dale!"

This, her first direct leap for liberty, set Clara panting, and so much had she to say that the nervous and the intellectual halves of her clashed like cymbals, dazing and stunning her with the appositeness of things to be said, and dividing her in indecision as to the cunningest to move him, of the many pressing. (105-06)

Clara doesn't seem to know which of her positions of weakness is strongest, and we can see a series of tries at a coherent posture operating in each of them, from the fear that "better suited" runs into "I am" too quickly and must be reemphasized with "I am not," followed by an excuse for the force of the sentiment in "it should be spoken plainly" and its softer revision, "unsuited altogether, perhaps" to the gearing up of "I would undertake to declare," which gives Clara a breath to form, emphasize and retool "she would not admire you more than I," which plays up a competition between herself and Laetitia to flatter Willoughby's vanity. That last phrase is strikingly repeated, so that the reference to Laetitia emerges at the end of two identical principal clauses as an inverted repetition, hovering Laetitia and Clara over one another syntactically, and playing to an understanding of the admiration that is projected onto Clara as a transferable, permeable quotient. One of the characteristics of Clara's rhetorical shifts in this passage can be located in what Erving Goffman refers to as a "change in footing," or "change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance."¹⁶ Clara's move from "I beseech you to believe" to "you must believe

¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1981): 128.

me”—the first a request that elevates Willoughby’s discursive posture, the second an imperative that lowers it—is one of many such changes in footing in the passage, which destabilize Clara’s alignment to her own language such that she becomes, in effect, more difficult to unequivocally reject. It also, as we have seen, speaks to her status as a character herself, an object negotiating her way across an uncontrollable field. The idea that not only must her rejection of Willoughby be gauged toward a set of possible responses, but must also come from a speaker whose very relationship to it is subject to change more clearly delineates the moves Clara is making with each additional revision, and creates a rhythm interrupted in several registers at once. Each phrase stands in vexed relation to the next, both co-referring and separate, and levels bifocality (or “appositeness”) at the structure of direct speech. The subsequent paragraph, which contains such back-channel cues as Clara’s “panting,” “dazing” and “stunning,” narrates the phenomenological half of the text, but with a third-person reference. Meredith gives us quoted self-expression in an unlocatable key, but narrates its experience, subverting the authority of the first person, and placing a grammatical gap between sense impression and expression. Without an account of Willoughby’s reception or the paralinguistic gestures that would close the gap between Clara’s spoken and experienced emotivity, our expectations shift; her point is simply “I am not what I am,” and it’s frankly all we can know. She continues:

“It is my wish—you must hear me, hear me out—my wish, my earnest wish, my burning prayer, my wish to make way for her. She appreciates you: I do not—to my shame, I do not. She worships you: I do not, I cannot. You are the rising sun to her. It has been so for years. No one can account for love: I daresay not for the impossibility of loving...loving where we should; all love bewilders me. I was not created to understand it. But she loves you, she has pined....You look so handsome together! She has unbounded devotion: as for me I cannot idolize. I see faults; I see them daily. They astonish and wound me. Your pride would not bear to hear them spoken of, least of all by your wife. You warned me to beware—that is, you said, you said something.”

Her busy brain missed the subterfuge to cover her slip of the tongue. (107)

In an earlier conversation, Willoughby tells a joke about a man who begs doctors to save his grievously ill wife, saying “she has accustomed me so to the little attentions of a wife, that in truth

I can't, I can't lose her!" (81). The punchline, "Beware of marrying an Egoist, my dear!" is internalized by Clara as a tacit warning not to marry him, and she imagines a miserable "told you so" scene as punishment for "a deed committed in spite of his express warning" (82). The joke itself is twenty pages old, so her "slip" in this passage isn't immediately legible; on a first read, Clara's "busy brain" seems to have led her into a forgetful corner, there being no discernible pattern in the preceding lines to guide us. She moves away from the kinds of changes in footing and repetitions of principal clauses we saw in the previous excerpts and gathers momentum towards an explicit rebuke of the perceived "faults" that "astonish and wound," and this is a new and more direct tack with which we have little experience.¹⁷ Held in suspense, at a moment of pure noncalculative deliberation, we have no sure context for "something." In fact, the dash that precedes the final clause and is clearly meant to invoke "marrying an egoist" (in short order, the plot of the entire novel), is the moment when our disintegrated ability to anticipate Clara's train of thought becomes most present to us.

Obviously there is no direct object reference to Willoughby in the more pointed lines that "astonish and wound," but the line after it, a return to "pride" and "wife," recalls the "happy pride" and "bride's decided disagreement" of Clara's earlier caricature. Read this way, the slide from caricature to Willoughby's joke shows us the comic as a narrative thread in *The Egoist*, not merely because the subject of both moments speaks to Willoughby's ridiculousness, but because they enact a shallow reinscription of Meredith's entire theory of comedy. Willoughby's

¹⁷ I am using "momentum" in a way similar to that of Fredric Jameson's "The End of Temporality," which allegorizes the vehicular thematics of Jan de Bont's film *Speed* (1994) as the body's "spatialized" inhabitation of time: "The bus has momentum but, as has already been said, that is not really time or temporality; on the contrary, it is the representation of temporality, threatened at every moment with some ultimate present of the bomb blast that can never take place....we will never reach the goal of this formal tendency, the reduction to the ultimate present of the body." While it would be irreverent to align Clara's stabs at an acceptable refusal of Willoughby with the asymptotic haze of a bus that hurtles toward an ultimate present it can never reach, I think I'll end with the observation that both are wholly motivated by a ticking clock that functions more or less like a speed limit. In the rest of the chapter I will be exploring to a greater degree the parameters that limit inscribes. Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29.4 (2003): 22.

personality is anterior to both scenes, and remains unruffled in the face of the disjunctions between his own capability and the capability necessary for the situation he finds himself in. Naturally, both scenes are *about* this disjunction—about exploring it, unpacking it, and living in it as Clara—but in a typical Meredithian twist, Clara’s own interpretations fluctuate around an object such as the mask or the joke that holds no inherent meaning for us. And a disjunction without details is really no more than the performance of a gap—in this case, the gap between Clara’s memory and our own. True to Meredith’s theory of comedy, we have a reduced number of characters involved in a definite situation without the “dust of the struggling outer world” to “make the correctness of the representation convincing” (3), and that representation is as lightly outlined and plotless as he could make it. But while we have this *structure* firmly in place, we are missing just enough of the system that motivates it to remain suspended, stranded with Clara on the edge of “You warned me to beware—” but without her reason for the dash. I want to look rather more closely into the reasons why Meredith would separate comic form from content, or more particularly, why he felt that the description of the egoist Willoughby jokes about could be used to make sense of a dash some twenty pages off.

Home from the hunt

Willoughby’s response to Clara’s assertion that Laetitia is a better match, “the entire concatenation is based on an erroneous observation of facts, and an erroneous deduction from that erroneous observation!” (107) reminds us to think of the comic as a problem of ends. If Clara’s reading of Laetitia’s “fitness” constitutes an erroneous deduction, the end of a wandering or deviated observation, a “straying from the proper course” (OED), I think it’s fair to suggest that Willoughby’s objection is grounded in a methodology of shared aims and means. He says as much throughout the novel as he tries to convince Clara of the particular sacredness of their marriage bond as a special kind of path, forcing Clara to swear at their engagement, “I am wholly

yours, I am yours for ever, I swear it, *I will never swerve from it*, I am your wife in heart, yours utterly” (34, italics mine). Or again, when he asks her to swear fidelity beyond death, “[T]ry to enter into my mind; think with me, feel with me” (44). And again: “I am, we will say, riding home from the hunt: I see you awaiting me: I read your heart as though you were beside me. And I know I am coming to the one who reads mine!” (53). “Home from the hunt” is a peculiar kind of image here, as an end beyond an end *and* a destination that Willoughby carries with him, “as though you were beside me.” The ideal is a sustaining place of meaning, a reason for doing that describes action while it emerges as an accompaniment to and a place beyond ends; were we to do a little characterological arithmetic, we could see the simultaneity of these two sustaining places “adding up” to a single intention, and could read Clara as Willoughby does, as an introjected never-swerving “wife in heart”—or as he will put it later and somewhat elliptically: “being to one another that between which the world can never interpose!” (53).

The “world” that threatens Willoughby and Clara is “the principal topic of dissension between these lovers,” and the novel’s clearest articulation of the reasons why the structure of comedy and its content can be so separate:

He explained to his darling that lovers of necessity do loathe the world. They live in the world, they accept its benefits, and assist it as well as they can. In their hearts they must despise it, shut it out, that their love for one another may pour in a clear channel, and with all the force they have.....

She shook her head; she could not see it. She would admit none of the notorious errors of the world; its back-biting, selfishness, coarseness, intrusiveness, infectiousness....She spoilt the secret bower-song he delighted to tell over to her. And how, Powers of Love! is love-making to be pursued if we may not kick the world out of our bower and wash our hands of it? Love that does not spurn the world when lovers curtain themselves is a love—is it not so?—that seems to the unwhipped scoffing world to go slinking into basiation’s obscurity, instead of on a glorious march behind the screen. (40)

The first thing we might notice is the narrated monologue form of this description, Willoughby’s subjectivity emerging through Clara’s disagreement, on the order of his earlier need for introjection but broken—that is, without the reciprocal understanding of his own position that

would make the knowledge a “thinking with” Clara rather than, say, a “thinking about” her.¹⁸ This disjunction, which echoes both their disagreement and the liminal position of lovers in the world is configured here as a matter of tone; the screen that separates lovers from the world can shield “basiation’s obscurity” or project their “glorious march” outward, depending on delivery. The way that lovers leave the world to pursue the rituals of coupledness leaves on the screen that separates them from that world the residue of whatever intention they take behind it. In other words, the system of reciprocal knowledge “between which the world can never interpose” that constitutes Clara and Willoughby as a couple is subject to directions of fit—Clara’s position in the relationship as a subset of her relationship with the “world,” for example—and those ends are most legible at the moment she and Willoughby “become” alone. At the same time, this transference from public to private merely enacts whatever intention Clara holds separately from Willoughby, making the screen (like the caricature, or the joke about the egoist) into a node of interaction between two hovering narratives, the cyclical and emergent unfolding of Clara’s deciding what to do, and the novel’s understanding of private and public as different kinds or “channels” of representation. The screen that advertises what it’s hiding is a kind of Searlean “know-how,” a way of understanding how the world works so that a presence on either side can be seen, its parameters delineated, so that the crossing over can’t be done without a deliberate intention to do it. How strange, then, that Meredith writes this dialogue of the screen as a disagreement, as two different and incompatible kinds of “know-how,” but emphasizes in the complications of its narrated monologue form that—at least for Willoughby—this understanding of how the world works is intuitive and somewhat foreclosed. His excuse, that

¹⁸ Dorrit Cohn’s demarcation of narrated monologue from quoted monologue on the one hand and psycho-narration on the other allows our reading of Willoughby’s abstraction of his relationship to Clara to taken on a grammatical form. “Imitating the language the language a character uses when he talks to himself, it casts that language into the grammar a narrator uses in talking about him, thus superimposing two voices that are kept distinct in other forms.” Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds* (Princeton: Princeton, 1978): 105. As we will see, Clara learns to manipulate attributive tags in much the same way, if to similar (that is to say, *no*) effect.

Clara “could not see it,” speaks to the self-evident permanence of the structure, and lets any potential transgression (here, “obscurity”) look unintentional. For Willoughby, there may be those who leave a foul residue on the screen that affords them their privacy, but that’s only because they don’t see it as they pass through.

The problem is, one of a pair is enough to taint appearances. He “knew it to be the world which must furnish the dry sticks for the bonfire of a woman’s worship,” and thus needed it somewhere in his equation, but Clara “would not burn the world for him...[would not] reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence, in honour of him, and so, by love’s transmutation, literally be the man she was to marry” (41). The disagreement here is really a misunderstanding of the screen between public and private; Clara envisions an inferno burning everything at the altar of Willoughby’s ego, while he sees the world hovering up in front of them as she rejects it in his favor, its fine opinion of him lingering as a testament to her choice. In constituting Willoughby as the screen, Clara aligns him with the arrangement he’s presented to her, his ideal couple written as a path or “glorified march” into one another, not understanding that in order to be permeable to him and capable of reification, some distinction must be made between Clara and the rest of the world. Meredith accords Willoughby’s version a certain amount of pathos here, by presenting their disagreement as his own frustrated attempt to “live in the world, accept its benefits,” but kick it “out of our bower.” The way he continues to take up Clara’s objections, worrying that she “could not see” what he is making for her, paints a sympathetic portrait of system-building as a way of describing discrete elements of one’s experience to another as a separate, self-motivating object. “I built this for you,” says the egoist, “why won’t you use it?”

The sad state of systems here, but one-third of our way through the novel, makes an argument about structure and our experience of it as wholly separate, even antithetical things. Perhaps more interestingly for our purposes, the success or failure of Clara and Willoughby’s relationship seems to hang on whether or not an intention can be shared, and whether being together is the

same end for two people whose positions toward that togetherness differ. *The Egoist* is placing a premium on an idea of ends as cooperative methodologies, or in Willoughby's terms, a path on which Clara is both the journey and the destination. This is an interesting problem for philosophies of action, which tend to see intention as an individual psychological process. John Searle's *Intentionality* offers a version of this view:

Where the Intentional content is satisfied, that is, where I actually succeed in raising my arm, the experience of acting causes the arm to go up. If it didn't cause the arm to go up, but something else did, I didn't raise my arm: it just went up for some other reason. And just as the visual experience is not a representation of its conditions of satisfaction but a presentation of those conditions, so I want to say, the experience of acting is a presentation of its conditions of satisfaction.¹⁹

Intention, for Searle and others, is the representation of a causal relationship between action and thought; I raised my arm because I experienced an arm raise that I represented to myself as an action I caused. If I change this representation in any way, I have ceased to act intentionally. An obvious analogue here would be Willoughby's presentation of himself as causing the building of a screen-system that he gives to Clara to understand as his view of their relationship to each other and the world. Both agree that a system is now "out there" that wasn't before, and that Willoughby made it, but it doesn't constitute the "end" of his intention, because Clara can't accept it for herself. From an intentional action standpoint, the question this discrepancy raises is whether a successful intentional action is judged by its action or the intention that gave rise to it, and what the boundaries of each of those elements might be.²⁰

¹⁹ John Searle, *Intentionality* (New York: Cambridge, 1983): 88.

²⁰ My thinking on the problem of deliberation without ends has been influenced by Thomas Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1960), particularly his answer to the question, "If the zero-sum game is the limiting case of pure conflict, what is the other extreme?":

It must be the "pure-collaboration" game in which the players win or lose together, having identical preferences regarding the outcome....

What is there about pure collaboration that relates it to game theory or to bargaining? A partial answer, just to establish that this game is not trivial, is that it may contain problems of perception and communication of a kind that quite generally occur in nonzero-sum games. Whenever the communication structure does not permit players to divide the task ahead of time according to an explicit plan, it may not be easy to coordinate behavior in the course of the game. Players have to understand each other, to discover patterns of individual behavior that make each

David Velleman gives us a rather stark example of this problem—two people trying to move a sofa: “Of course, each of us can exercise discretion over a part of the sofa-moving operation, I deciding whether to lift my end of the sofa, and you deciding whether to lift yours. But in that case, we wouldn’t really be sharing an intention; we would be holding different intentions that yielded a single result.”²¹ Similarly, Elijah Millgram argues that a class of non-instrumental reasons for acting, which he terms *end-intrinsic*, are reasons that become intelligible only when the end’s in sight—and generally speaking, only when we’ve been introduced to that end by someone else. One example of an end-intrinsic reason for acting would be playing a certain kind of game whose point emerges as the game is played and I come to adopt its goals as my own. In order to do this, I have to be introduced to the game, and “It is often our friends who introduce us to new pursuits, pursuits whose point can only be appreciated from the inside.”²² Like Velleman’s sofa movers, the friends who play a game together are coordinating intentions in pursuit of a common goal; what Millgram adds to this formula is the role that friends play in adopting another’s goals *as one’s own*. This gives another’s hunches about how the game is played an equal status as our own, and as we play it and evaluate those reasons for acting, “one can then consider whether they are in fact *good* reasons; and if they are, one can then adopt the end in a full-fledged way, as entirely one’s own.”²³ And yet, within this cooperative framework of play, competition ensures that intention will never be completely shared; if anything, one player will try to beat the other, to employ “better” reasons for acting, and to pursue a strategy that is

player’s actions predictable to the other; they have to test each other for a shared sense of pattern or regularity and to exploit clichés, conventions, and impromptu codes for signaling their intentions and responding to each other’s signals. They must communicate by hint and by suggestive behavior. (85)

The value of a game-theoretic context for questions of sociability is that strategies tend to be more dynamic and integrated with the game being played by my partner or opponent than geared toward any particular end or any one strategy. That said, the shortcomings of such an approach are that strategies are built in the shadow of their objectives; the objectives may be vague (to lose as little face as possible), and the strategies may be many, but the structure is retrospective.

²¹ J. David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford, 2000): 206.

²² Elijah Millgram, *Practical Induction* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1997): 157.

²³ Millgram 158.

anything but transparent. I might just as tacitly try to get the lighter end of the sofa, or move mine such that your end is consequently (if not intentionally) harder to move. Michael Bratman calls these subplans “levels of mesh” in shared intentional action, and in so doing creates a more flexible sense of the possible circumstances that could bring it about. For Bratman,

We intend to *J* if and only if

1. (a) I intend that we *J* and (b) you intend that we *J*.
2. I intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of 1a, 1b, and meshing subplans of 1a and 1b; you intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of 1a, 1b, and meshing subplans of 1a and 1b.
3. 1 and 2 are common knowledge between us.²⁴

The subplans of 1 (a) and 1 (b) do not necessarily have to mesh all the way down; some separation between my job and your job is often the reason why such intentions need to be shared in the first place. In fact, most of the subplans that will help us *J* are probably not yet formulated at the time we intend to *J*, or they are formulated and don't yet mesh but we are so committed to *J*-ing that we will revise them. I have only to stipulate that such subplans are “in accordance with” yours to qualify our intention as shared, and this creates a potential background for bargaining and negotiation. Via Bratman's thesis, “What is required is that each of us *intends* that we *J* by way of meshing subplans.”²⁵

One of the things that should be clear from this brief survey of the work done by philosophers of action on shared intention is that its tense is somewhat different from the other forms of intentional action we've been reading—it situates its theory somewhere between 10 seconds and 10 years from now. And this brings up two interacting but somewhat independent observations; first, contrary to Anscombe's theory of action, which stipulates that certain knowledge “operate as my reason” for acting, or “must be done in pursuit of the end and on grounds of the belief,”²⁶ shared intentional action theory cares more about our “plans” than the pursuit itself, or as Vogler

²⁴ Michael E. Bratman, *Faces of Intention* (New York: Cambridge, 1999): 121.

²⁵ Bratman 121.

²⁶ Anscombe, “Von Wright” 378.

puts it, it makes a crucial distinction between “predictions and expressions of intention;”²⁷ second, and somewhat thusly, despite its fascination with futurity, shared intentional action theory is not interested in ends. The commitment to act that our intentions secure for us, when shared with another person whose subplans could differ from mine at various levels, and whose understanding of my commitment that we *J* might be contingent on negotiation and other uncertainties, is a commitment to something if and only if you commit, too.²⁸ The story that this kind of intention tells involves an exploration of the “grounds” of intention as a hovering up of possible moves, rather than the successful completion of an intentional action. Moreover, those grounds are the “ends” of this piece of intention, because they are quite literally beyond plans: they have nowhere else to go. Unlike Oedipus, who continues to search for his father after he kills Laius, the partners in a shared intention recognize that they must stop at “I will if you will,” and go no further.

“I will if you will”

So, what is “I will if you will” a commitment to do, exactly? Again, I think Meredith offers an example that brings both the novel and philosophies of action together in interesting ways. There are two conspicuous moments of “I will if you will” in *The Egoist*. The first occurs just after Clara has appealed to Willoughby and been refused. She and Laetitia Dale take a walk through the hills and Clara lets the long-pining Laetitia in on her attempt to quit the match. After a brief discussion of Willoughby’s first jilt (the ironically named Constantia Durham, who left him for an army officer), Laetitia sighs, “So noble a gentleman!” ““And it is,’ added Clara, as if

²⁷ Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002): 279.

²⁸ A more thorough unpacking of the limitations and advantages of this model of shared intentional action (albeit in an artificial intelligence frame) can be found in Philip R. Cohen and Hector J. Levesque, “Teamwork,” *Nous* 25.4 (1991): 487-512. “Commitment” in the sense presented in my chapter aligns with theirs as “a goal that persists over time,” but I obviously take issue with their definition of shared intention, “a joint commitment to perform a collective action while in a shared mental state” (489) as a problematic condition for the novel .

to support what she had said, ‘a withering rebuke to me; I know him less, at least have not had so long an experience of him’” (129). Laetitia detects a note of jealousy in Clara’s self-flagellating agreement, recalls Willoughby’s explanation of Clara’s coldness toward him as “A little feminine ailment, a want of comprehension of a perfect friendship,” and resolves not to praise him too highly in her presence (127). Clara seems to sense this reticence and throws herself “heaving” forward, compensating for Laetitia’s lack of engagement with an “overflow” of tears:

“Oh! Laetitia, my friend, I should have kissed you, and not made this exhibition of myself...if that idea of jealousy had not been in your head. You had it from him.”

“I have not alluded to it in any word that I can recollect.”

He can imagine no other cause for my wish to be released. I have noticed, it is his instinct to reckon on women as constant by their nature. They are the needles, and he the magnet. Jealousy of you, Miss Dale! Laetitia, may I speak?”

“Say everything you please.”

“I could wish:—Do you know my baptismal name?”

“Clara.”

“At last! I could wish...that is, if it were your wish. Yes, I could wish that. Next to independence, my wish would be that. I risk offending you. Do not let your delicacy take arms against me. I wish him happy in the only way that he can be made happy. There is my jealousy.” (131-32)

The “reddened hand” egoism²⁹ of this particular exchange isn’t wholly lost on Laetitia, who marvels, “Miss Middleton, you have a dreadful power” (133), or critics of the novel, who write of “ruthlessly sacrific[ing] Laetitia on the altar of Clara’s own freedom.”³⁰ After a rather snide description of Willoughby as a “magnet”, Clara offers him up for the only “happy” situation imaginable, but only if Laetitia wishes it, too. “I will if you will” takes on much more “grounds” than Bratman might have imagined here, since Clara is negotiating as though Laetitia had

²⁹ In a previous section of this chapter I discuss Meredith’s uncredited essay in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the “Cynic of Society” and its implications for Meredith’s theory of comedy. He writes, “Criticism reddens the hand off the executioner. There is no sign of slaughter on you if you sneer correctly.” I argue that this image of the reddened hand is an articulation of the kind of teleological grounds for action but not its causes that links Meredith (however loosely) to Anscombe’s interest in grounds. The reddened hand is an *effort-in-suspension*, an explicit contract to engage that articulates the conditions that held before, and by which action was made possible, but without being sufficient or directly responsible for it. It is, in more ways than one, hovering up—deciding what to do. Meredith’s idea of comedy, for reasons I explain in another part off this chapter, involves a similar suspension, in outline, of abstracted potentialities. George Meredith, “The Cynic of Society,” *Pall Mall Gazette* (28 March, 1868): 11.

³⁰ Gary J. Handwerk, “Linguistic Blindness and Ironic Vision in *The Egoist*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 39.2 (1984): 176.

incomplete information when she does not, and Laetitia is being asked to agree to take on Willoughby and his flaws, but only for reasons that she is supposed to disavow. Her “wish” is a favor for Clara disguised as a plea to her own negated desire, and the result is a strange blend of desperation and blackmail that Meredith swears is wholly “unconscious” in Clara, who is merely thinking out loud in what we are supposed to read as an episode of noncalculative deliberation (133). “I will if you will” suspends all of these features of the exchange indefinitely; indeed, it’s not until the final pages of the novel that the question is resolved.

This narratological deep freeze poses a real challenge to the theories of shared intention that we’ve reviewed, because the commitment to *J* is conditional upon the other agent’s commitment, not her action. Velleman writes, “I suggest that the statement ‘I will if you will’ should be understood in this sense. It means, ‘I hereby frame an effective intention that’s conditional on your framing an effective intention as well’—that is, ‘I hereby *will* it, conditional on your willing likewise.”³¹ This kind of speech-act enforces willing as a particular way of telling the story, or as Bratman writes, it coordinates our intentional actions, our planning and our bargaining, and “does all this in ways that track the goal.”³² No one need make a “first” move, because the commitment isn’t a commitment to act, but a commitment to commit—once that’s done, theories of shared intention have said all they can. Velleman goes further than most when he writes “When you say ‘I will,’ you not only do as I stipulated when I said ‘if you will’; you also say that you’re doing it; and so your statement licenses the detachment of my stipulation.”³³ Clara’s move from the subjunctive “My wish would be that” to the present “I wish him happy” would perform half the substitution of Laetitia for herself whether or not Laetitia agrees, and yet “I wish him happy” is hypothetical and “unconscious,” even though it’s structured like a performative utterance. Laetitia is supposed to be able to tell the difference between infelicitous and felicitous

³¹ Velleman 215.

³² Bratman 112.

³³ Velleman 217.

speech, but her reply, “You have a dreadful power,” takes “I will if you will” far more seriously than Clara seems to have intended. Meredith ends the chapter “Clara walked on, unconscious of her possession of power of any kind” (133), suggesting in the position of “unconscious” that she isn’t now and never was levying control against Laetitia, but also speaks to a reader struck by the possibility that Clara has at last become what she beheld in Willoughby. Clearly, Meredith is exploring an intensity attached to “I will if you will” in this exchange—Laetitia is said to be “fervently impressed” by this power of Clara’s, and “in kissing her she marveled at her gentleness and girliness” (133)—but whatever that intensity is doesn’t seem to be located in the statement itself.

Bratman’s inclusion of meshing subplans into a theory of shared intention means that saying “I will” is necessary but not sufficient to get action started: “My intention...is an element of a partial plan. As time goes by I need to fill in this plan appropriately; otherwise it will suffer from means-end incoherence.”³⁴ By “filling the plan in,” one assumes he means allowing it to dictate his choices and behavior in—it should be said—much the same way Willoughby assumes Clara would accompany him on journeys “home from the hunt,” acting as both the destination and the reason for traveling along a particular means-end path: “I am, we will say, riding home from the hunt: I see you awaiting me: I read your heart as though you were beside me. And I know I am coming to the one who reads mine!” (53). Willoughby couches this image as a story that “will” be told, going so far as to place himself in a present tense to enact it. But there is a conspicuous lack of investment in this moment itself—the moment when Willoughby and Clara have found their perfect readers—and a greater emphasis on the sustaining possibility that it could happen. “We will say,” like Clara’s “I wish him happy,” is an “I will if you will” form, but it conjures something vaporous and context-dependent, “grounds” for acting subject to an improbable connection, and thus it fails to “fill in” the subplans, choices, and behavior that make a shared

³⁴ Bratman 113.

intention happen. What Willoughby's story does is constructs an analogical image for shared intention, and by unpacking it piece by piece (first your heart, then mine) attempts to make that hypostasized image shareable in itself. Like Meredith's other "activating" images, so full of dislocated facets that the mind is charged with bringing them alive, "home from the hunt" evokes the sensation of an "I will if you will" pact as an intimate exchange of trust, and counts on Clara's ability to share that propositional content. In other words, just as philosophies of shared intentional action stop at action's door, taking up "I will" or other, to-be-announced bits of planning as "ends," Meredith's interest in the "I will if you will" form, like his interest in impacted, hypostasized images, stops at an evocation of shared intention that packages all means-end elements as emergence. Willoughby's "home from the hunt" metaphor is the evocation of an "I will if you will" structure, without the "I will" that discharges it in practice.

Like the slow unfolding of Willoughby's metaphor, the implications for Clara's proposal to Laetitia and the "filling in" of Bratman's shared intentional subplans will teleologically reveal themselves as they emerge in grounds. The second "I will if you will" scene in *The Egoist* does some of this work by repeating Clara's offer of a substitution with a more complete sense of the parameters of the grounds of the request. It does this in two ways, the first by situating the narrative as third-person reportage from a hidden and uninvolved source—a proxy for our omniscient narrator but wholly concerned with the said and done, rather than the endless deliberation we've previously examined—and the second by overly investing in the direct object of the "I will if you will"—making it the concrete "end" (or version) of the proposal. After a series of tempests with Clara, including a barely concealed escape attempt in the middle of a thunderstorm that brings her back to Patterne Hall and subjects them both to vibrant rumors, Willoughby decides to propose to Laetitia in secret, prepared to break with Clara in the morning. He arranges a midnight meeting with Laetitia, and although unknown to them both, Willoughby's ward Crossjay overhears the entire conversation from under a coverlet. The brief

paragraph before the reportage situates Crossjay on an ottoman, waking from a dream as he hears his name spoken “until, as at a blow, his heart knocked, he tightened himself, thought of bolting, and lay dead-still to throb and hearken” (329). The tags of his narrative are nondescript (“a voice had said,” “was the answer”) and the pauses between lines of dialogue are filled with paralinguistic characterizations (“The accents were sharp with alarm,” “in a voice between supplication and menace”); Crossjay’s record is by far the least “crafted” bit of prose in the novel, and yet takes pains to be thoroughly, *differently* accurate about utterances. He is so accurate, in fact, that a sustained joke at his expense goes unnoticed in the opening lines, which begin with Laetitia’s entrance:

“I came to speak of Crossjay.”

“Will you sit here, on the ottoman?”

“No, I cannot wait. I hoped I had heard Crossjay return. I would rather not sit down. May I entreat you to pardon him when he comes home?”

“You, and you only, may do so. I permit none else. Of Crossjay to-morrow.”

“He may be lying in the fields. We are anxious.”

“The rascal can take pretty good care of himself.”

“Crossjay is perpetually meeting accidents.”

“He shall be indemnified if he has had excess of punishment.”

“I think I will say good night, Sir Willoughby.”

“When freely and unreservedly you have given me your hand.” (329)

Here is the novel’s second and far more direct “I will if you will,” although the actual form of the bargain is more “You will if you will,” which implies Willoughby’s side in its manipulative abruptness and its leveling an awkward tax on Laetitia’s decision to go to bed. The joke, of course, is that Crossjay is hiding on the ottoman that Willoughby invites Laetitia to sit on—“Will you sit *here*” places us neatly above it just before the ottoman is mentioned, causing a sympathetic cringe in those of us who are paying attention. The respite of “No, I cannot wait” and its anxiety about Crossjay continues the humor, as the bulk of the conversation consists of Willoughby’s repeated dismissal of the subject of Crossjay’s whereabouts, even when Laetitia mentions the prospect that he could be harmed. Willoughby’s magnanimous “He shall be indemnified” prompts her exit, and although his proposal seems gauged to be charming, he

doesn't acknowledge the effect of his previous disinterestedness, and can't seem to understand her hesitation. After some coercive reminiscing, in which Willoughby reminds Laetitia of her abiding crush on him, recites lines of poetry she wrote years before, regrets that he had not been more attentive to the woman who is "my home and my temple," and repeats the proposal:

"We are all older, I trust wiser. I am, I will own; much wiser. Wise at last! I offer you my hand."

She did not reply.

"I offer you my hand and name, Laetitia!"

No response.

"You think me bound in honor to another?"

She was mute.

"I am free. Thank heaven! I am free to choose my mate—the woman I have always loved! Freely and unreservedly, as I ask you to give your hand, I offer mine. You are the mistress of Patterne Hall; my wife!"

She had not a word. (330)

Our relationship to these excerpts is purely receptive given their dispassionate pitch and description; we are not Crossjay, whose experience is elided once the dialogue begins, a dialogue in which he has the highest stake, but we are also not *not* Crossjay, since the omniscience we've become accustomed to in the rest of the novel gives us an hermeneutics we clearly don't have here. Willoughby's investment in Laetitia's accepting him is transparent, an airtight episode of intentional action. Like Anscombe's ideal intentional form, his coercive tactics enact their own ends: Willoughby opens the window in order to open the window, and for once, Meredith's style corresponds by doing exactly what it says it is. But it is conspicuous that what all of this transparency amounts to in the novel is a naked glut of description. Willoughby anatomizes Laetitia's desire in a way that neither she nor anyone else has previously revealed to us, forcing her into a deeper and more stubborn silence than she has maintained, even in the face of the women Willoughby chose instead (she has been described as "patiently starving...having the opportunity for pathos and declining to use it" [22]), and forcing on the single position of Willoughby's wife two separate and oppositional characters, neither of whom particularly want to be there. The disequilibrium is palpable in the anomalistic structure of this chapter, the repeated

descriptions of Laetitia's silence, Willoughby's increasingly desperate proposals, and the nervy mentioning of his promise to Clara, which evokes far more liabilities than Willoughby seems to understand. For a character just previously described as "a social Egoist, fiercely imaginative in whatsoever concerned him," (325) this shows a striking lack of insight and an important stage in his characterological emergence. And yet, while this represents a complete stylistic affront to the same proposal offered by Clara—where the position created for Willoughby's wife became a gap rather than a heap of contenders—the answer is the same. Laetitia refuses the place, and for similar reasons.

Meredith has given us two kinds of shared intentional action, one directly descended from a Davidsonian holism and the other an Anscombian practicalism. Neither of them result in a successful episode of intentional action, and yet the novel repeatedly asserts its comedy, formed in the vein of the Comic Spirit and preoccupied with the swift and comprehensible repair of our modern maladies. In the terms offered by Meredith's Prelude to the novel, "She it is who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us," and, we remember, she does it by enlarging characters to unfamiliar types, encouraging readers to socialize among them, and leaving them changed for the better (5). There is a premium placed on this mechanism, and we can be sure that nothing will disrupt it, no insurgence beyond the lines of a classically derived comic system.³⁵ Like the episodes of nonpractical deliberation that turn over scenarios and methodologies without engaging them, or have as their ends the cooperative or shared intention whose discharge is predicated on another's composite willing, the novel has to end in a way that refines without alteration, and behaves within bounds. There is something of Bourdieu's paradoxical foundation

³⁵ For a further reading of the relation between the Prelude, the Comic Spirit, and *The Egoist*, see Neal Bowers, "Prelude as Theory and Scenario in *The Egoist*," *Ball State University Forum* 24.2 (1983): 3-8. Gillian Beer, "Meredith's Idea of Comedy; 1876-80" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 20.2 (1965): 165-76. E. Arthur Robinson, "Meredith's Literary Theory and Science: Realism versus the Comic Spirit," *PMLA* 53.3 (1938): 857-68.

of ethics in this arrangement, a strategy taken by the novel “to conform to a universal rule, even when [its] practice is at variance with perfect obedience to the rule, or when it does not have perfect obedience to the rule as its principle.”³⁶ Clearly, Meredith’s way of negotiating a social practice or attitude that he wants to correct is to situate the form of comedy as the producer of this practice and work within its arrangement to his satisfaction. The all’s well that blows us out of the novel can thus be a capitulation to the form of comedy while being a manipulation of its social content. Bourdieu calls these strategies “recognition of the rule even in transgression,” or “deceptions that deceive no one;”³⁷ what Meredith substitutes for the white lie, which lay on the same plane or continuum as the behavior that it negates, is the perfect systemic form, a polishing of everything from the harmonious arrangement of narrative forces to the overstuffed level of the sentence, and within and separate from those perfect forms, an emergent, activating character and image, heaps of fiancées and gaps of fiancées, caricatures and jokes, and tying these two levels together an extensive form game of incomplete intentional action, cyclical deliberation where a character chooses not to choose, or whose flimsy ends involve someone whose own intentions are in doubt. He substitutes obedience for desire at every level, and “moves” his narrative along with the effort-in-suspension so clearly defined in the *Essay on Comedy* as the “reddened hand.” I will close this chapter with its clearest instance.

Willoughby’s proposal to Laetitia in a midnight exchange near the ottoman is straddled by two other efforts to clear the way for her, a chapter called “In the Heart of the Egoist,” a reported inner dialogue that Willoughby has with himself about his engagement, and “The Lovers,” a scene between Clara and Laetitia after the former leaves the position that the latter has yet to take up. They function as one completed action, the idea to release Clara followed by her effective substitution. In a characterization that fits both his own inner conflict and, as we have seen, his

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford: Stanford, 1998): 141.

³⁷ Bourdieu 141.

own imaginative economy, Willoughby views Clara as a liability similar to her simultaneous position as both the object and companion of his path “home from the hunt”: “his pride was his misery.... But he was too proud to submit to misery” (323). When Meredith unpack this uneasy doubling in this scene, he borrows an image from his earlier misquotation of Pascal in the *Essay on Comedy*.³⁸ That quotation, describing the role of the Comic Spirit, “When all is equally agitated, nothing appears to be agitated, as in a ship. When all tend to debauchery, none appears to do so. He who stops draws attention to the excess of others, like a fixed point” appears here in a striking subject shift from Willoughby’s narrated monologue to an image direct from narration: “We are on board the labouring vessel of humanity in a storm, when cries and countercries ring out, disorderliness mixes the crew, and the fury of self-preservation divides: this one is for the ship, that one for his life. Clara was the former to him, Laetitia the latter” (323). In one image, Meredith demonstrates the paradoxical foundation of ethics—your money, or your life—and yet distinguishes them as divided figures, interdependent in their disorderliness but separate in intention, and in such a situation a fixed point becomes an untenable position within or without narration. The problem becomes clearer as the narration moves from a statement of Willoughby’s problem to his emerging strategy. “Clara must be given up,” he decides,

...but not to one whose touch of her would be darts in the blood of the yielder, snakes in his bed: she must be given up to an extinguisher; to be the second wife of an old-fashioned semi-recluse, disgraced in his first. And were it publicly known that she had been cast off, and had fallen on old Vernon for a refuge, and part in spite, part in shame, part in desperation, part in a fit of good sense under the circumstances, espoused him, her beauty would not influence the world in its judgment. The world would know what to think. (323)

The double reading of the phrase “espoused him,” which is both a tag of attribution to Willoughby that stylizes the lines as quoted monologue in a past tense and an action Clara takes in Willoughby’s imagination, marrying Vernon in future disgrace, drives a kind of cut through

³⁸ The actual line of *Pensées* 382, discussed at length elsewhere in this chapter, allows the point to make opposition possible without queuing it as such: “Quand tout se remue également, rien ne se remue en apparence, comme en un vaisseau. Quand tous vont vers le débordement, nul n’y semble aller. Celui qui s’arrête fait remarquer l’emportement des autres, comme un point fixe.”

the text that, in its irreducibility as anything other than a fixed point, a just okay, comes as near as possible to embodying the Comic Spirit. What's more, that simultaneity figures "him" as Vernon *and* Willoughby, and makes "espousing" a saying *and* a doing—swallowing up all of those differences that theories of intentional action try so hard to maintain. Meredith is presenting to us, and in the depths of a highly personal series of strategies, the primacy of exchangeable substitutions in the harmonics of formal coherence. What the fixed point does for Meredith, in other words, is not to particularize and dissociate, but to combine and universalize.

Of course, there are parameters to this substitutionality, on the order of the "purely referential position" specified by W. V. Quine. "When a singular term is used in a sentence purely to specify its object, and the sentence is true of the object, then certainly the sentence will stay true when any other singular term is substituted that designates the same object."³⁹ The position "Clara" in "Clara is Willoughby's fiancée" is sometimes coextensive of "Laetitia" but not of "Vernon." The criteria that make identity substitutive are thus wholly referential in the terms stipulated by their predication, a structure shared by the "grounds" of intentional action. Thus, when Clara visits Laetitia after she has been released from her engagement, and tries to persuade the reluctant substitute to take her place, she qualifies the "purity" of her referential position with, "Can it be that you have any doubt of the strength of this attachment? I have none. I have never had a doubt that it was the strongest of his feelings" (408). Laetitia's taking up the position will be a capitulation to Clara's characterization of the strength of Willoughby's attachment to her, but not a verification of it, or indeed, a verification of her attachment to him. "Laetitia said quietly: 'Do you remember a walk we had one day together to the cottage?'" in reference to Clara's first proposal, a reply that acts as a substitution of all of Clara's own reasons for rejecting Willoughby

³⁹ W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*. (Cambridge: MIT, 1960): 142. There is some discussion about whether or not proper names can occupy substitutivity positions, since referents can be slippery and codesignative. See on this point Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1980): 10-14; and Lecture III.

for her own (408). Clara's response is the crystallization we've been looking for, the thing that keeps all substitutions from being equal:

“Help me to forget it—that day, and those days, and all those days! I should be glad to think I passed a time beneath the earth, and have risen again. I was the Egoist. I am sure, if I had been buried, I should not have stood up seeing myself more vilely stained, soiled, disfigured—oh! Help me to forget my conduct, Laetitia. He and I were unsuited—and I remember I blamed myself then. You and he are not: and now I can perceive the pride that can be felt in him. The worst that can be said is, that he schemes too much.” (409)

The state of being unsuited or positioned incorrectly is characterized here as a kind of disfigurement through death, a self-separation that opposes one's self in such a way that one becomes an egoist, valuing one's fragments in place of a whole. A corrective substitution enables a forgetting or erasure of that displacement and a clearer perception of others; an incorrect position builds an obstruction such that all one can see is oneself, saturated into a false coherence. What rims these positions into their fortification seems to be the abstraction with hard outlines that Meredith uses to describe his method of characterization; too much “plot”—here, “schemes”—causes one to “lose the lines” of one's features and substitute for them a reification of the fragmented self.⁴⁰ One way of describing Clara's response would involve a journey of emergent characterization, a creature dying in its own teleological fashion, but that description doesn't account for the substitutivity of identity that solves her problem. Why engineer Laetitia and equilibrium over leaving Willoughby alone with the one the egoist loves most?

I think we have a clue in Clara's self-deprecating joke, “if I had been buried, I should not have stood up seeing myself more vilely stained,” and it hinges on the care she takes to literalize her

⁴⁰ Elsewhere in this chapter I cite Meredith's defense of his prose to the Boston *Christian Union*, “If my characters, as I have them at heart before I begin on them, were boxed in a plot, they would soon lose the lines of their features.” The characters' outlines are dependent on a lack of external organization; they become less clear—we could even say less abstract—as the plot carries them off. But what Meredith is also saying here is that having them “at heart” means having them as types, and “beginning on them” involves somehow strengthening those outlines. Plots break them down, allowing character forms to soften and fade. George Meredith, *The Letters of George Meredith*, ed. C. L. Cline, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970): 888.

analogy instead of merely metaphorizing it. If Clara had been buried, she couldn't have gotten more vilely stained than she was when she behaved so badly to Laetitia that afternoon, and the proof would be plain if she "stood up" and saw herself rotting. The separation between selves that we've pulled from her response is meaningfully closed for a moment; Clara will have to stand up out of her coffin to make the comparison she needs to make, and of course it won't have any meaning for her unless the counterfactual is also true, that she's not been buried and acted badly instead. The significance of both actions—an impossible pair—lay in the same grounds.

Action takes the longest route in *The Egoist*, first by refusing to begin, and then by hanging on to someone else's intention. If we look to the grounds of deciding what to do, as Anscombe suggests, we can learn what "use" a particular action is; if we back up to see the more holistic view in a Davidsonian framework, we can have a comparative model that can be predictive and contain various levels of mesh. But when Meredith tries to do both by removing ends from the equation altogether and locating action in noncalculative practical reason that is perpetually interrupted, or subtended within narrative frameworks that keep it from getting anywhere at all, his plot turns to repeated efforts at substitution as a reinscription of the way the world works and people get by inside it. He does this because, as the burial paradox suggests, there is no fixed point, for comedy or anything else. All that we can return to, and all he repeatedly lays out for us, are the grounds, the circumstances, the whys that are as inchoate and referential as the selves we are when we use them. If there is something wrong with, say, *The Egoist*, it's the something wrong in Clara's joke; the impossible pair that she enacts, which can never actually happen, is wholly dependent on her own contextualized understanding to be funny. But once we share that understanding, the ground and all it signifies is ours. That's an uninhabitable position for readers, who meet none of the predicative qualities that constituted its grounds the first place. We are left holding our end of the sofa, intending to *J* without exactly meaning it.