

ALICE MEYNELL

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ACCORDING to Matthew Arnold, criticism is "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world"; and though the definition is not exhaustive, unless some such view commends itself, criticism is almost sure to drift towards impertinence and futility. The critic may be an inadequately equipped judge who fails to see certain fine points in the case before him. But he must at least desire to see them, and to make others see them, or else the keenest eye for real or imagined blemishes will not enable him to discharge the duties of an office which, when exercised aright, needs no apology.

At a comparatively early period of Mrs. Meynell's literary career, she was conceded a high place by some whose words carry weight. Coventry Patmore strongly advocated her claims to succeed Tennyson as Laureate. George Meredith described her poetry as "an exquisite play upon our finer chords, not to be heard from another," and said of her prose that "it presents to me the image of one accustomed to walk in holy places, and to keep the eye of a fresh mind upon our tangled world, happier in observing than in speaking." Rossetti said that *Renouncement* was one of the three finest sonnets ever written by women; Ruskin, in reference to certain other poems, that "they are the finest things I have yet seen or felt in modern verse"; Francis Thompson, that "the footfalls of her Muse awake, not sounds, but silences."

Two, at least, of these verdicts, from Patmore and Thompson, are doubtless influenced by close personal friendship; and in any case it might be urged that a select group should not be allowed to settle the question of merit, especially if votes are to be counted, not weighed. Mrs. Meynell was fortunate in her surroundings. Trained in youth by a cultured father, and enjoying the advantage of prolonged intercourse with some of the peoples of the European continent, after marriage, her husband and those who frequented their home united to do her honour. But while she thus escaped the stern discipline of indifference or hostility, she was not at all spoiled by the recognition so cheerfully accorded. "She has her soul to keep," and she keeps it sane and strong and self-critical.

Though she is not likely to become popular unless a great change takes place in the taste of the majority, it would be a mistake to suppose that the nature of her themes or her mode of treating them renders any widespread interest impossible. It is true that she cannot help writing with a noble distinction which is, in itself, a test of the reader's quality. Yet she writes also with a limpid clearness, a gracious wisdom, a sympathetic insight which ought to make her work welcome to the lover of good things. Though she chooses her subjects, they are all vital. Though she believes in the intensive and orderly culture of the mind's garden, she will not disdain its untouched riot. Though she is the sworn foe of intellectual vulgarity and spiritual opacity, to any honest student of the art of living her words have a strangely haunting loveliness. Never making a noise, never indulging in cheap mannerisms for the sake of arresting attention, she charms by her delicacy, her sincerity, her idealism, her exquisite aesthetic sense, and still more by something behind all,—herself.

Journalism and literature have been sometimes placed in derisive contrast, as though the one had to do only with ephemeral matters casually and superficially treated for the sake of immediate effect, while the other must needs be *sub specie aeternitatis*. Certain kinds of writing, no doubt, are "current" with a vengeance, and run away even faster than the sands in the hour-glass of life. But may not this transiency arise more from the writer than from the subject, or the circumstances under which he writes? At all events, Mrs. Meynell did most of her prose work as a journalist. She shared with her husband the conduct of *Merry England* and *The Weekly Register*. *The National Observer*, under Henley's leonine guidance, waited upon her Una-like offerings. The column in which she wrote for the *Pall Mall Gazette* had the general heading, "The Wares of Autolycus." But if she was "a snapper up of unconsidered trifles," they ceased to be trifles after she had snapped them up. She was happy in finding editors, or rather in being found by editors, who allowed her to write how and when she pleased, and almost from the start she had a circle of keenly appreciative readers. The present vogue inclines to favour other forms of expression, but the end of the nineteenth century had not lost esteem for the essayist. And though Mrs. Meynell did not choose to reprint more than a fraction of her writing in daily and weekly papers, and then not without changes and omissions, the fact remains that what is thus put together first appeared in that way.

These collected essays are short, and their number comparatively small in view of the many years they cover. With some

writers, a wind of gusty feeling seems to sweep thought off its feet, as it were, and expression thus becomes poor in almost direct ratio to its volubility. But Mrs. Meynell is indisposed to be overheard unless she has something to say which she regards as worth saying, and which she has studied to say as well as she can. And so, for long intervals, she is "quiet as a nun breathless with adoration." Those slender volumes, *The Rhythm of Life*, *The Colour of Life*, *Ceres' Runaway*, *The Spirit of Place*, *Hearts of Controversy*, and *The Second Person Singular*, give an impression of wealth restrained, instead of being flung about with careless promiscuity. Indeed, her idea of the artist-spirit includes belief in the significance of fruitful silence. In one of her essays she says, "We want the poise and the pause that imply vitality at times better than headstrong movement expresses it." If we did not know that her home was always a centre of vital comradeship, she might even seem detached and unapproachable. But no one can thus regard the loving wife and devoted mother, the patient rescuer of Francis Thompson from an abyss of despair, the friend of little children, the ardent champion of the oppressed and desolate, the generous ally of every struggling, aspiring soul.

If, then, we say that she is fastidious—the adjective which first suggests itself as we characterize her work—we must be careful not to use this adjective in a wrong way. For while she treats her themes daintily, they are not dainty themes in the sense of being remote from the routine of life, nor does she struggle after embroidered phrases in unfolding them. She gives us a fabric, not raw material; but it is a fabric woven throughout of sound stuff, and unblemished by bizarre colouring. Her distinction lies in being able to see with rare clarity the bigness of the little, the romance of the familiar, the inner appeal of much which a less profoundly thoughtful vision would pass by. Almost any one could write about *Rain*, or *The Tow Path*, or *Laughter*, or *Solitude*, or *The Flower*, or *Cloud*, but not as she does. Take a single sentence from each of her essays on these subjects:

The visible world is etched and engraved with the signs and records of our halting apprehension; and the pause between the distant woodman's stroke with the axe and its sound upon our ears is repeated in the impressions of our clinging sight.

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To walk unbound is to walk in prose, without the friction of the wings of metre, without the sweet and encouraging tug upon the spirit and the line.

Assuredly it would be a pity if laughter should ever become, like rhetoric and the arts, a habit. And it is in some sort a habit when it is not inevitable.

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If there is a look in human eyes that tells of perpetual loneliness, so there is also the familiar look that is the sign of perpetual crowds.

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A condition for using justly and gaily any decoration would seem to be a measure of reluctance.

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The cloud has a name suggesting darkness; nevertheless, it is not merely the guardian of the sun's rays and their director. It is the sun's treasurer; it holds the light that the world has lost.

Fragments of quotation do Mrs. Meynell scant justice. It is not her way to alternate bare spots with purple patches. No one could imagine her saying, as she sits down to write, "Let me try to express myself startlingly." We are brought into contact with a mind which, by its very nature, reflects the more recondite aspects of things, pushing the reader with gentle compulsion into a higher class, training him to disrelish the slipshod and the superficial, and to judge of values with competent discrimination.

By far the larger part of Mrs. Meynell's literary and artistic criticism would have to be searched for in old numbers of various periodicals, and only what she thought best worth preserving is found in her published books, chiefly in *Hearts of Controversy* and *The Second Person Singular*. Like all other critics, she has her limitations. Personal preferences and antipathies markedly affect her verdict. Swinburne, for example, is not explained when one says that he is "indigent in thought, affluent in words," and that he "took the treasure of the language and put it in his pocket" for the fatal purpose of sound, not sense. On the other hand, distinguished as is Patmore's too much neglected work, praise seems a little forced which declares that "the mental apprehension of poetry can be put to the test by Patmore's odes—and indeed by not a few passages in the contemned *Angel in the House*—much oftener than by honoured classical poems from which we gather these testing lines by precious twos and threes," whereas in Patmore's odes "we gather them with both hands, exalted, subdued, and greatly moved by our riches." Yet, as a rule, she is sound in

her enunciation of the essential principles of literary worth. If Jane Austen is removed from too lofty a pedestal, she is seen to better advantage near at hand. We recover Tennyson as he is, neither the demi-god of his earlier worshippers, nor the discredited *poseur* of anti-Victorian prejudice. Repelled at first by a writer so different from herself as Dickens, she reaches afterwards a broader view of his genius, growing into him instead of growing out of him. She shows a fine comprehension of Emily Brontë's "great and lonely intellect," and of Charlotte's "wonderful pages." Her brief essay on George Meredith is packed with just thinking: "The incompleteness which so many readers charged against his work is perhaps that it lacked the great and high repose of art which is unconscious of appearance. Meredith feared commonplace. Strange fear for so distinguished a mind." Mrs. Meynell is a convinced admirer of the seventeenth century as "a memorable vintage of our literature and speech," and her essay on Beddoes, an Elizabethan born too late, begins with this piece of penetrating comment: "There are some writers whom the judicious reader forgets by name, with the express intention of clearing them away. For oblivion is not always a slovenly thing. It is sometimes directed with no slight care, and has regard to all the distinctive characteristics of the one to be forgotten, effacing him with every possible precision, good aim, and attention."

If Coleridge was right in saying that a great mind must be androgynous, Mrs. Meynell falls short, for she is prevailingly feminine. Yet granting that, despite her disciplined intellect, she finds it hard to understand what she does not love, one finds compensation in her discernment of some shapes of beauty in Nature and human life which masculinity might pass by. Instead of vaguely stretching out her arms to embrace the world—a most unsatisfactory performance—she so broods over some object near that others see it in a fresh light. If she seldom takes up the cudgels for her sex as a whole, or indulges in panegyric over confessedly challenging members of it, she dwells tenderly on a less appreciated sisterhood—Lucy Hutchinson, Lady Arabella Stewart, Mrs. Dingley, Prue, the wife of Steele. Of Mrs. Johnson, whom she will not call "Tetty," she says, "When Samuel Johnson, at twenty-six, married his wife, he gave the dull an advantage over himself which only the dullest will take"; and again, in reference to a sneering critic, "neither to him nor to any other writer has it yet occurred that if England loves her great Englishman's memory, she owes not only courtesy but gratitude to the only woman who loved him while there was yet time." This is a fair protest, not

without a touch of the militant spirit in it. Indeed, Mrs. Meynell goes beyond the suffragettes, and shows how women may best merit and obtain the fullest, truest liberty. She has a passion for righting those who have been wronged, and bringing to the forefront neglected facts whose presence is needed for a just estimate of character. She dares to espouse seemingly lost causes; she stands beside every Mother of Sorrows; she sees Christ crucified afresh in every trampled flower, in every ostracized ideal, in every broken heart.

Her studies of child-life are most sympathetic and comprehending. In a remarkable essay called *The Unready*, she says, "It is too often required of children that they should adjust themselves to the world, practised and alert. But it would be more to the purpose that the world should adjust itself to children in all its dealings with them." She controverts the idea that the senses of children are quick, as their movements certainly are, and points out how the suddenness of adults often puzzles their conservatism: "Their poor little slowness is so distinctively their own that of all childishnesses it is the one that the world should have the intelligence to understand, the patience to attend upon, and the humanity to foster." Childhood, therefore, is not an irksome prelude, to be abridged as much as possible since it cannot well be abolished. The birth of a child must be matched by the birth of a mother who rightly interprets its significance: "For if there were no child, there would be nothing old. With the sense of time and the sense of mystery is connected for ever the hearing of a lullaby." These are not mere academic deliverances prettily turned. Herself the mother of eight children whom she nurtured with assiduous care, Mrs. Meynell did not confine her affections to her own family. To the end of her days she loved children, and was loved by them. She found in a child that strange mixture of attributes which stirred both protection and reverence:

O youngling! how is this?
 Your poems are not wearied yet, not dead.
 Must I bow low? Or, with an envious kiss,
 Put you to bed?

Walter Pater said of Steele that "he abounds in felicities of impulse." Mrs. Meynell abounds in felicities of measured thinking; and when she says things differently from others, it is because she cannot help it. Quite free from conscious effort to be clever, she puts into her work the essence of her personality, and that creates the just word, the happy phrase, the distinctive point of view.

Impatient of the unreal and the superficial, she is most patient with the many-sidedness of life. Avoiding alike the Scylla of an exclusive intellectualism and the Charybdis of sentimental ebullience, she can stand the test of slow and careful reading. She encourages a wholesome horror of vulgarity, not by disdain what seems ordinary, but by showing how extraordinary the whole of life may be, and how rich and varied its treasure for those who have eyes to see it.

Such a nature, vigilant, imaginative, mystical, elusive, lofty in tone and scrupulous in utterance, when it turns to poetry—as it is almost bound to do—will present no disenchanting contrast between letters and life. How far and in what ways the quality of a poem is affected by the poet's character, is too large a question to examine incidentally; but there can be no doubt that Mrs. Meynell's verse gains much by the fact that there is a rare soul behind it. This does not mean that it must be judged tolerantly on that account. It means rather that here is the open secret of a merit which will bear the most exacting scrutiny. Not many more than a hundred poems are contained in the whole collection—a meagre output unless they all counted. But if the summits of Parnassus are unscaled, a touch of greatness is never wanting in this voice from lower altitudes. While most poets would be the better for having some of their work deliberately cleared out of the way, her poetry is like a landscape from which incongruous features do not need to be removed, because it is obvious that they do not belong to it. Sargent's portrait of the balanced grace of her slender figure accords with Francis Thompson's lines concerning her:

And in the contemplation of those eyes,
Passionless passion, wild tranquillities.

At times the woman seems almost to strive with the poet, as though she were on the point of saying more than she does say. An ascetic strain which runs through some of her verse has its complement in the shy warmth of healthy human feeling. She is "sued by earth's embassies"; and if she renounces, it is in order that in a finer way she may attain.

Many of her religious poems reflect that view which a great Church has impressed upon its devotees, but her interpretation is catholic without the limiting capital letter. *The Young Neophyte* crowds into a few wonderful lines an image of time transcended by an eternal consecration. *The Unknown God* is revealed in the sacrament of life. *A General Communion* embraces each separate human soul in the same ineffable ministry. The vastness of Divine

love shines forth in *Christ in the Universe*. Mrs. Meynell requires no creedal landmarks to keep her in the path of light, for she possesses that spiritual insight without which the most rigid belief is an unproductive formalism and often a mocking irony. It is the poet whom we hear, not the theologian, and the poet has a more winsome voice and a more expansive vision.

This vision, too, throughout all her work, is distinctively her own. For example, who else would have thought of *A Letter from a Girl to her own Old Age*; or the strange reason given for contentment in *Why wilt thou chide*; or *The Two Questions* in which the suffering of the bad, not of the good, is made the real mystery; or *Length of Days* as the special inheritance of the young who have died in battle; or *Easter Night*, where the solitude of triumph is put over against the publicity of pain? In none of these poems is she trying to be eccentric. She is simply examining for herself, and records with absolute sincerity. Even subjects akin to those from other hands are treated in a different way. *An Unmarked Festival* contrasts with the futile sadness of Hardy's *We sat at the Window*. *To the Body* is as finely subtle a poem on that theme as can be found in English, not excepting Patmore's great ode, nor Donne's *The Ecstasy*. *A Thrush before Dawn* will bear comparison with Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. Many poets have written some kind of epilogue. This is hers, addressed to her husband:

Home, home from the horizon far and clear,
Hither the soft wings sweep;
Flocks of the memories of the day draw near
The dovecote hours of sleep.

Oh, which are they that come through sweetest light
Of all these homing birds?
Which with the straightest and the swiftest flight?
Your words to me, your words.

Mrs. Meynell humbly recognizes the inspiration of the kings of song. "Their greatness to this lowliness hath spoken," she says. She is taught by them, and scarcely less by her own instincts, the sacredness of words and the high responsibility to use them aright. Not in vain does she invoke the laws of verse:

Dear laws, be wings to me.
The feather merely floats. Oh, be it heard
Through weight of life—the skylark's gravity—
That I am not a feather, but a bird.

Thus she is delivered from aimless meandering, and soars with equal beats, and always soars even though she may not always sing.

There is the note of sadness in poems like *In Autumn* and *Parted*, but not of unrelieved sadness:

Although my life is left so dim,
The morning crowns the mountain-rim;
Joy is not gone from summer skies,
Nor innocence from children's eyes,
And all these things are part of him.

The memorable sonnet, *Renouncement*, with equal propriety might be called *Fulfilment*, for what is lost in the letter is more than gained in the spirit; and this is the kind of gain which she holds of highest value both in art and in life. Wholesomely interested in earth's affairs, she is not the sport of those spasmodic effervescences which, though they may splutter fiercely, often have a very meagre significance. Her gift is more profound and more enduring—the gift of enthusiasm.

O daisy mine, what will it be to look
From God's side even of such a simple thing?

It is only three years since Mrs. Meynell died, and any attempt to assign her a definite place, either among the mortals or among the immortals, would be premature. Her work is not of the sort which captures on the first hasty glance. As an essayist, she is compressed, temperate, aloof, almost solitary, not shouting in the popular ear, but softly whispering to the trained intelligence. And as concerns her poems, upon which her fame may ultimately rest, theirs is not the easy lilt of that emotional indulgence which is the besetting sin of many women's poetry, nor the jolting shock of verse which identifies freedom with lawlessness. She is not afraid of the frugal word in the right place; she thinks of novelty as springing from inner development rather than from outer stimulus; and if she is original, it is not because she has tried to cut loose from the past and hang suspended in a vacuum. Her shortest poems have a tone which includes an overtone. Behind the music of their special theme is heard a larger echo. Great faiths abide with her and master her. She would think it a grim irony to talk of "progress" if nothing really matters, if life has neither a right side nor a wrong side, and what have seemed, to some at least, desires and dreams worth cherishing, are only a mad hallucination destined to be buried in a forgotten tomb.

How far, then, Mrs. Meynell will be studied in years to come depends in part upon how far the modern world escapes a tendency to abandon profound beliefs of any kind, and to lay hold on fragments of life instead of life itself. Customs change in poetry as in every-

thing else. Some poets who once had a large following are now seldom read at all, and others have passed through a partial eclipse before they reached their clearest light. But that utter confusing of values which is the fashion with certain schools of criticism to-day does not add one cubit to poetic stature, nor subtract one cubit from it; and in the long run, those only will survive who have felt the joy of obedience to great cosmic laws, and are enamoured of a truth and beauty which undergird the universe. For genius is soon choked in an atmosphere of bafflement; and as nescience spreads, it brings nearer the peril of intellectual and moral disintegration.

Mrs. Meynell points in a directly opposite way, though in no spirit of dogmatic assertiveness. More keenly sensitive than shallower minds would be to a background of mystery, she has nevertheless worked out certain problems, and the glow of their solution is all about her, making her poetry synthetic rather than analytic, positive rather than negative, and preserving her hope for the continual emergence, in ever new forms, of truths that are eternal:

Singers to come, what thoughts will start
 To song? What words of yours be sent
 Through man's soul, and with earth be blent?
 These worlds of nature and the heart
 Await you like an instrument.

Who knows what musical flocks of words
 Upon these pine-tree tops will light,
 And crown these towers in circling flight,
 And cross these seas like summer birds,
 And give a voice to the day and night?

That voice should be stronger and more inspiring because she has done so much to reveal the dignity of the poet's office, and its ennobling influence upon the character of life. Like the shepherdess of her own lovely poem,

She roams maternal hills and bright,
 Dark valleys safe and deep.
 Into that tender breast at night
 The chastest stars may peep.
 She walks—the lady of my delight—
 A shepherdess of sheep.

And though she is an aristocratic shepherdess, selecting her charges with care, and leading them with an almost austere guardianship, she will not shut out from the fold any save those who are self-excluded.