

ALICE MEYNELL -- CRITIC

by

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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

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THE PLAN OF THE THESIS

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- II. Alice Meynell -- Critic of Poetry
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INTRODUCTION

1.

It is the purpose of this thesis to prove that Alice Meynell was a critic of literature, painting and other human values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will be convenient first to discuss Criticism in general and to outline the qualities of a good critic, it will then be necessary to search her work for her critical theories of poetry, prose and painting. Any social or psychological data which appertains to criticism will be brought out as it occurs. In chapters devoted to the topics, poetry, prose and painting, Alice Meynell's critical ideas will be exposed. They will be examined for critical integrity and assessed by comparison with other critics. Since her fame as a poet has been well established, her criticism of poetry deserves particular attention. The judgment of her contemporaries as to her critical acumen will give conclusion and support to this work devoted to the examination of her contribution to criticism.

CHAPTER I

2.

CRITICISM IN GENERAL

Criticism, in its etymological meaning, is the ability to discuss. With reference to a work of art it is the expression of a reasoned judgment on its truth, beauty of technique and aesthetic effect. Criticism "must always", says T. S. Eliot, "profess an end in view which, roughly speaking, is the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste."¹ If this is true it presupposes, then, certain established standards of taste which have been developed through the centuries. And although criticism is the study of a work of art in its timeless essentials, because it exists in time and belongs to a certain century it must, of necessity, be influenced by historical factors. Criticism is primarily analytical and evaluating; the history of criticism is the recording of these evaluations. Since the critic needs points of comparison, history must be at hand for his use, and therefore, although criticism itself is not ultimately historical, the history of criticism and criticism will be interdependent.

1. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose (Criticism)*, p.18

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3.

It will be convenient to discuss in this chapter literary criticism only with the understanding that the tenets established for it will apply to the criticism of other works of art, and to prove from the deductions made that Alice Meynell has a place among the critics of the late nineteenth century. It must be emphasized, however, that no attempt is being made to make a dissertation on Criticism or the Schools of Criticism. The writer is merely setting the stage by outlining a few general traits and landmarks of criticism in order to better establish the place and rank of Alice Meynell.

If we apply a philosophic judgment to literature we may analyze it in its causes. A cause is a principle which influences the existence of something else; if criticism is the examination of a work of art, it should be necessary to begin with the cause.

The material cause is the body of experiences and ideas which the author has; the efficient cause is the man and his genius. The formal cause is the general type of literature he uses, the actual structure or design, the order, the new mode of being induced which makes it this and nothing else. The exemplary cause goes beyond that

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to give the unified, coherent pattern of design which existed in the artist's mind before any work was done. The final cause is the residual emotional influence achieved, the inevitable effect --- which is initially to give pleasure legitimately and rationally.

It may be the task of the critic, then, to examine the artist's mind and passions, his imagination, style, learning, ability, wit. He may study the content of a work which contains the author's observations of human experience, his social or philosophical reflections. The critic will be concerned, too, with the unified and coherent impact of a work of art, its pattern, structure and organization, and with the final effect communicated to the mind and heart of the reader. It is the business of the critic to decide whether the author has achieved the effect intended and whether his work is as good as, better or worse than that of others.

The critic, then, must be a man of great intelligence. He must be able to analyze and evaluate a literary production in accordance with the exigencies of literature, language, science, history, philosophy and theology. The ideal critic must not only be equipped with all kinds of learning, but he must also possess balanced judgment, keen

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sympathy and sincerity, patience and love of truth, and must be swayed by no prejudice, however slight. In a word, the ideal critic would be the ideal man.

The critic must strive to produce facts by comparison and analysis, and above all, to make his own original contribution. Says Eliot: "any book, any essay, any note --- which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious critical journalism."² And although the critical power is admittedly far below the creative, the critic may make his own contribution to literature if, in forming his judgment, he communicates fresh knowledge along with it. Matthew Arnold, in his essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", says: "to have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive; and it is not denied to criticism to have it, but then, criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge..."³

2. Ibid., p.18.

3. Matthew Arnold, Essays in Criticism, p. 30.

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There are as many critical approaches to literature as there are causes and effects. If a work is examined from the point of view of the efficient cause, the critic is interested in the author and thereby opens up the field of biographical criticism. If he studies the content of the work he is of the ideological school and may stress the social, moral, or psychological value. Formal criticism deals with technicalities, examines aesthetic purposes, emotional effect, and the means of obtaining the given effect...a type of criticism which began with Aristotle. If, on the other hand, the critic works from the point of view of the exemplary cause, he is reflecting Platonic idealism, and if he is interested in the psychological aspect, he is lining up with the New Criticism of the twentieth century.

It will be necessary to discuss here the formation of the different Schools of Criticism which were the result of this varying emphasis. Plato was theoretical; he believed the poet to be inspired and was inflamed with a high idealism. His followers in the Middle Ages were St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure and the neo-Platonists of later times. Aristotle dealt with ideas and with the formal study of structure. His theory of literature was

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interpreted by St. Thomas Aquinas and has influenced in large part the Christian literary tradition. Longinus, a Roman, was a practical critic who made definite rules and then applied them. Although little is known about him, his critical principles were important to the critics of the Renaissance period and also influenced the classical writers of later times. The classic spirit in criticism, begun with Dryden, was a disinterested search for perfection, a love of clearness, reasonableness and self-control, while the Romantic spirit of the nineteenth century placed emphasis on the man and his emotions. This latter movement led to the formation of the psychological school of criticism and inclined to the theory that literature is the expression of the whole man. About the middle of the twentieth century a new interest in criticism developed and gave rise to two main schools --- The New Humanism which was neo-Aristotelian, and The New Criticism which favoured the psychological approach. T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards have become leaders in these movements. Eliot has been associated with both, while Richards belongs to the New Criticism group and will be, perhaps, more famous in his disciples... Brooks, Warren, Empson, Ogden and others. I mention these twentieth century critics on

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purpose, because from their studies, expressed in varying ways, it is becoming more and more evident that all types of criticism are complementary, not contradictory.

Although various critical documents have influenced literary thought with regard to theory and practice, there are some general principles common to all by which the critic can begin his evaluation of literature. All theories agree that literature, to endure, must have wide human appeal in tone and intention, must be universal and comprehensive. It must be deeply personal, too, revealing through style the unique qualities of its author, whether he be a scholar like Bacon or a vagrant like Poe or a compound of both. The work must be fundamentally sane and sincere; its melancholy must not fall into pessimism nor its joy into clever flippancy. It must show thought, feeling, imagination and charm. Universality, Style, Root-Serenity -- in this trinity men have long felt that literature consists.

What, then, is the purpose of literature? And what is the relation between Art and Morality?

Aristotle taught that Art imitates life in a formal and universal sense; and differs from life in matters and particulars. Art, when serious, imitates men as they

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should be, or as they are, or as they are thought to be, and therefore although its primary purpose is to give pleasure, it must, at the same time, teach. "Aristotle conceived art to be an essentially moral activity; it is, in this sense, always obliquely didactic."⁴ ... it is this principle that has dominated the Christian literary tradition of the western world. Gardner says again: "Just as Cardinal Newman, in a famous passage, claims that the thinking man in the west will always be an Aristotelian, so it may be said that all Catholic literary people, whether creators or enjoyers, take their stand with Aristotle."⁵

If you are an Aristotelian you must conceive of art as a moral activity. Of course there may be immorality represented. A piece of art may be examined from the aesthetic as well as the moral point of view, but the two extrinsic ends of Art, pleasure and purgation by pity or fear must not be produced by the distortion of the moral order. T. S. Eliot says: "Literary Criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and moral

4. Harold C. Gardner, S.J., Tenets of Readers and Reviewers, p. 42

5. Ibid., p. 43

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standpoint" ... "The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined by literary standards."⁶ It was this neglect of the moral standpoint in literature that revealed itself in the Art for Art's Sake theory of the late nineteenth century. "For those who write and criticize in accord with the traditions of western culture, there can be no such thing as 'art for art's sake'!"⁷.

The great classical critics have always held this view. Matthew Arnold even believed that poetry might replace religion. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the rising tide of liberalism was threatening the bases of Anglican philosophy and, feeling this loss, Arnold urged men to use poetry to interpret life.

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us; without poetry our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy, will be replaced by poetry.

6. T. S. Eliot, op. cit., (Religion and Literature) p. 32

7. Harold Gardner, op. cit., (Essay on Poetry) p. 53

8. Matthew Arnold, op. cit., (Essay on Poetry) p. 280

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Beside this quotation I place Alice Meynell's criticism of Arnold's stand:

Failing the religious sanction, failing the fundamental law with its code, poetry, Arnold thought, might take its place, whether as temporary regent, or regent without a term. It would, he said, console and soothe mankind. As though a race in need of the spur and the curb, the example, the threat and the canon, were sufficiently to be served by those unmanly ministrations! As though to be soothed in an ill-temper and comforted in an ill-humour were the chief necessities of men, a race worthy of the dignities of chastisement! In raising poetry to what he thought this eminence, assuredly Matthew Arnold did it no honour.

The 'fundamental law' of which Mrs. Meynell speaks identifies her as an Aristotelian and gives us an idea that with all her veneration of poetry, she knew it could but imitate reality. There is little knowledge of philosophy expressed directly in Alice Meynell's writings, but the assurance with which she attacks Arnold on this important point in his critical stand, proves that she has no doubts about her religion and the relation literature bears to it. Her philosophy is rather a "continual consciousness" --- it is her own phrase --- than any voluble expression of beliefs, and therefore her criticism will be at every

-
9. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry
 (Coventry Patmore), p. 136

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point affected by her firm Catholic belief. "What I want," says Eliot, "is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian..." Alice Meynell would want the same, and her own literature is an outstanding example of this breadth of vision.

If Mrs. Meynell's philosophy is unexpressed, not so her knowledge of language, history, music, science, painting and literature. Every essay reveals this knowledge unostensibly and the essays on literary subjects always show her keen sense of literary tradition and history.

From her earliest years she had been trained in general knowledge. The father taught his two daughters as though they were sons. They were required to learn history; they studied poetry and the English classics; they were taught many languages. Their nomadic existence brought them to many countries of Europe where the characteristics of the country, its language and dialect became deeply impressed on the childish mind. The Mediterranean in moonlight or under the brilliant Italian sun, early spring in the showery streets and fields, the French 'verger' and the wheat-fields of Switzerland were pictures Alice loved to recall. She made six visits to Rome and the last one was still the surprise that each one had been, so inter-

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ested was she in all the beauties of the Eternal City.

Early in life, too, she became interested in Catholicism. Characteristically she moved according to reason rather than sentiment; when later she revealed her motives for entering the Church we learn that she made her decision only after coming to a sound understanding of her position.

My reason for entering the Church is my reason for remaining in it -- its administration of morals. Other Christian churches or sects (I except the Orthodox Greek and Russian) have the legislation of Christian morality, but they do not enforce the law. The Catholic Church administers it by means of her Sacraments, that of the Confessional especially.¹⁰

In her growing and impressionable years she was surrounded by literary and artistic people. Dickens writes a charming paragraph of his coming upon the family in an old Albaro-like palace in Italy:

Coming upon them unaware, I found Thompson (the father) with a pointed beard, smoking a German pipe, in a pair of slippers; the two little girls very pale and faint from the climate, in a singularly untidy state -- one (heaven knows why!) without stockings, and both with their little short hair cropped in a manner never before beheld, and a little bright bow stuck on the top of it. Christiana (the mother) said she had invented this head-gear as a picturesque thing, adding that perhaps it was -- and perhaps it was not. She

10. Viola Meynell, Alice Meynell: A Memoir, p. 42

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looked very well, and seems to be greatly liked here. We had disturbed her at her painting in oils and I have rather received the impression that, what with that, and what with music, the household affairs went a little to the wall. Thompson was teaching the two little girls the multiplication table in a disorderly old billiard-room, with all manner of maps in it.¹¹

Back in England the mother and daughter continued their interest in painting while Alice began to write poetry. She received encouragement from Tennyson, Patmore, Aubrey de Vere and Ruskin. De Vere advised publication, saying that "a young poet is somewhat the slave of what he has written so long as it remains in his desk."¹² Ruskin had scant praise for Alice's early poetry, but after the appearance of Preludes he made ample amends. "They have done me more good than I can well thank you for," he wrote her, and to her mother, "I really think the last verse of that song and the whole of San Lorenzo and the end of the saisy sonnet the finest things I've seen or felt in modern verse."¹³

After her marriage to Wilfrid Meynell, Alice was continually engaged in literary effort which demanded

11. Ibid., p. 17

12. Ibid., p. 50

13. Ibid., pp. 51-2

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critical attention. They published first The Weekly Register for which she read proofs, translated Papal encyclicals wrote leading articles and helped in many ways. Another periodical, Merry England soon took the place of The Weekly Register. It began by being a social organ in sympathy with the Young England Movement. It was Catholic, but its purpose was to treat the Catholic and Protestant writer alike and to remind the former that he belonged in the centre of the cultural heritage of the nation. Later on, Merry England became more literary than social and was the budding-place for Catholic talent -- the Meynells doing all they could to encourage a Catholic literary revival. Through this organ many young writers came to form a literary cénacle which met at Palace Court, the home of the Meynells, and here all the young writers of the time profited of Alice's friendship and criticism. It was through the Merry England that Francis Thompson was discovered and it was through the Meynells that he was patiently cared for and nurtured back to health. The volume of criticism written by Francis Thompson is in itself sufficient proof that critical ideas were freely discussed in the Meynell home.

During the busy years of literary work Mrs. Meynell had the homage of Coventry Patmore, the respect of George

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Meredith as well as the unstinted admiration of Francis Thompson. She contributed to The National Observer, The Scots Observer and The Pall Mall Gazette where she was admired by such writers as W. E. Henley, Max Beerbohm, Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. All recognized her as a talented writer, a woman of her age, and an able critic.

In later life, Alice Meynell became a lecturer, travelling to America to give a series. She was received with enthusiasm even as far west as California. On her return to England she was elected to the Royal Society and received the praise of Sir Henry Newbolt. Her name was given as candidate for the post of Poet Laureate, but this position she did not receive.

It is with the purpose of showing the variety of knowledge which Alice Meynell possessed that details of her background have been thus reviewed. She, in mature years, wrote essays on the literature of various ages; Six Mediaeval Women, An Elizabethan Lyrist, The Lady of the Lyrics, The Seventeenth Century, The Century of Moderation, Victorian Caricature. She has a group of essays on language and dialect -- Composure, The Little Language, A Counter-change. She has longer more definitely critical papers on most of the writers of her own century -- Dickens, Tennyson,

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17.

Browning, Swinburne, Meredith, The Brontës, Jane Austen. It can without doubt be shown that in each of these works critical facts are presented "never have we the feeling of getting an idea second-hand."¹⁴

Mrs. Meynell had served as art critic for the Pall Mall Gazette both in her own right and in the name of her son Everard. She was admirably fitted for this position. Her well-established place as a writer of prose, the renown achieved by her sister Elizabeth as painter of The Roll Call, and her own keen appreciation of painting all made the choice seem fortunate. Her son took charge of this work during her absence in America and acquitted himself so creditably that on her return his mother abandoned the lecture project, which she intended to continue in England, and devoted her time and talent to the training of her son. For the next five years, they visited art galleries and exhibitions in London; an illustrated art book, Children of the Old Masters appeared as their joint work in 1905. Mrs. Meynell, however, did not long continue her art criticism -- Journalism seemed to be her joy.

14. V. Sackville-West, in Introduction to Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 26.

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Alice Meynell's social theories stressed the sanctity of marriage, reverence for woman, love of children. Nor did she fear to descend to the commonplace in order to attack the abuses of Victorian society. Her period was important in the general history of custom; it was not only the end of a century, but the end of a culture-- the hectic sunrise of a modern one. Says Holbrook Jackson, ... "No family, were its record for solid British respectability on no matter how secure a basis, was immune from the new ideas ... life-testing was the fashion and the rising generation felt as though it were springing out of the cages of convention into a freedom full of tremendous possibilities."¹⁵ Anne Kimball Tuell says "She was chosen to cope with the concerns of women."¹⁶ A criticism of feminine achievement forms a large fraction of her strictly literary writing ... "sometimes not literary, but a feminine knowingness as enlightening as the most astute appraisal."¹⁷ In her anxiety to uphold the causes of women she becomes the woman suffragist.

Although Alice Meynell possessed the knowledge, the sincerity and the passion for truth necessary to a

15. Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, p. 30.

16. Ann Kimball Tuell, Mrs. Meynell and Her Literary Generation, p. 124

17. Ibid., p. 127

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19.

critic, she was often lacking in that broad-mindedness characteristic of a first-rate critic. There is not always lack of prejudice, not always sympathetic understanding; and her preoccupation with some side-stream of thought which did not merit the attention given to it prevented her from becoming great in the critical field. Nevertheless it may be affirmed that Alice Meynell was a critic of literature, society, painting and other human values. Her knowledge furnished her with the background needed to be able to compare works of art; her love of truth made her sincere in the examination of it. "It is possible," says Sackville-West, "that her reputation may grow increasingly as a critic, independent and fearless, incisive and acute, uninfluenced by fashion."¹⁸ The same author recognizes the limitations, however, ... "Not mighty, she frequented her own by-ways, and was not of those who by their vigour and indignation rank among the moulders of contemporary opinion. In her more random writings, it is usually by implication that she rebukes all that is gross, uncivilized and cruel."¹⁹ It may be that Alice Meynell will keep her reputation as a critic precisely because she keeps within her limitations.

18. V. Sackville-West, op. cit., p. 25

19. Ibid., p. 18

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"There is a philosophic borderline, which you must not transgress too far or too often, if you wish to preserve your standing as a critic, and are not prepared to present yourself as a philosopher, metaphysician, sociologist, or psychologist instead."²⁰

In the following chapters it is the purpose of this thesis to examine in detail her critical ideas; to prove that she has made a definite contribution to the body of critical literature in our language; and that she was recognized as a critic by outstanding men of her age.

It can also be shown that Mrs. Meynell belongs to one of the Schools of Criticism outlined above. In her love of tradition, literary history, restraint, reasonableness and self-control, she certainly belongs to the classical school. It is evident, however, that in her struggle to give expression to many-sided critical views, there was in her a deep interest in the psychological -- especially in her work on the women of literature. Like Francis Thompson she loved to take women who had great faults, or who had been under-rated by other writers and bring out their good qualities. There seems to be a

20. T. S. Eliot, op. cit. (Critic of Poetry), p. 52

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21.

genuine interest in complexity as distinguished from disorganization in human character. For that reason this writer believes that she was unconsciously subscribing to the psychological criticism of the twentieth century. This latter quality, however, is secondary and serves but to strengthen the contention that all types of criticism are complementary, not contradictory.

It must be stated again that Chapter One is not meant to be a complete and definitive account of the history of criticism, nor does it attempt to make a survey of the branches of criticism. It is meant to serve as a preparation for the study of Alice Meynell as a critic, and to pave the way to the evaluation of her critical theories.

CHAPTER II

22

ALICE MEYNELL -- CRITIC OF POETRY

- A. PRELIMINARY REMARKS
- B. CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF POETRY
 - a. General
 - b. With Particular Application to Alice Meynell
- UNDER THE HEADINGS
 - 1. THOUGHT CONTENT
 - 2. METRE AND DISCIPLINE
 - 3. SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM
 - 4. IMAGERY
- C. ALICE MEYNELL'S CRITICAL VIEWS OF PARTICULAR POETS
 - 1. SWINBURNE
 - 2. TENNYSON
 - 3. BROWNING
 - 4. MEREDITH
 - 5. PATMORE
- D. OTHER CRITICAL OPINIONS OF ALICE MEYNELL
- E. CONCLUSION

ALICE MEYNELL -- CRITIC OF POETRY

23.

A. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

To rank Alice Meynell among the critics of our poetry is to assign to her a place among the poets themselves. It is to find in her a rectitude of intellect and a definite code of literary law, as well as a mind trained to the measures and restraints of thought and verse. It is above all to recognize in her the power of expressing a single beautiful image in a manner conformable to the aspiration along with the ability to see and judge that power in other poetry.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay "The Function of Criticism" maintains that there is always an element of criticism in the creative:

Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative. I maintain, even, that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism.¹

Another writer, Herbert Read, makes the statement:

No good artist exists, who is not, at every point of his career, firstly a good critic.²

1. T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 30

2. Herbert Read, Collected Essays in Literary Criticism
p. 127

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24.

And Alice Meynell says of Christina Rossetti:

We are not surprised to hear that she generally did not work. Her poems show this when they lack friction and weight.³

Therefore, if it can be proved that Mrs. Meynell's poetry reveals the qualities which she demands of others and shows that austerity and self-control which a poet gains by application of his own theories to his art, it will be evident that she fulfils the requirements.

Ann Kimball Tuell takes it for granted that she is a literary critic when she says: "Her criticism is, in theory, a criticism of poetry ... her critical thoughts hovered naturally about the conditions of poetic vitality."⁴

And V. Sackville-West speaks of her conscious artistry: "From the technical point of view every poet has much to learn from her."⁵ "Poetry tests and is not tested"⁶ said Mrs. Meynell, signifying that she was not ready to lay down a set of rules for judging it. Nevertheless, in her

3. Alice Meynell Prose and Poetry. p. 147

4. Ann Kimball Tuell, Mrs. Meynell and Her Literary Generation. p. 175

5. V. Sackville-West in Introduction to Alice Meynell Prose and Poetry. p. 23

6. Alice Meynell op. cit. p. 131

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commentaries, her essays, and even in her own poems, there are recurrences sufficiently significant to show that she had a definite code of poetics, privately and distinctly her own which we shall discuss here in our effort to show that she was a critic of poetry.

Poetry was the great love of Alice Meynell's life; poetic experience was something to be waited for with reverence and its absence to be recognized by one only way, silence. She says:

The image of warm life is the general measure of poetry. Then is poetry proved classic and alive when a reader, struck to the heart, moved and shaken like Leontes looking on the figure of Hermione, having seen her colour, her height, her light, her age knows her indeed, and confesses her at last by another sign: 'Oh, she's warm'.⁷

and again:

There is a little anthology yet to be made -- that of wild poetry. It is magic beyond the magic of the most poetical poetry, and it is sometimes in imagery. It cannot be well defined, but it speaks for itself. If we could give it names it might be "Escape", "Flight", "Remoteness". But the student -- the matter is worth study -- will learn much from the fact that the way to Escape is not through vers libre. He will learn that wildness claims bonds, insists upon bonds, as temeness with fatuity clamours for liberty. The wild and violent virtues, the passion of the mystics, escape from the world

7. Ibid., p. 128

and from a day at their disposal into duties
 announced by a bell; they rise at midnight from
 their punctual dreams, and work and dine with all
 the hours assigned and all the tasks enforced.
 St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa escaped within
 that enclosure. It is because he has called St.
 Theresa "the undaunted daughter of desires" and
 adjured her by all her lives and deaths of love,
 that Crashaw recalls the obedience of her slumbers
 and her tears. By a like law, the wild lover in-
 sists upon marriage and so makes a tryst with him-
 self in his old age and his very hour of death.
 And so does the wild poet hug the chains of rhyme.
 Divorces are for the tame lover; lines without
 metre for the tame poet; liberty and the world,
 with a reasonable punctuality at meals for the
 tame Christian.⁸

In these quotations may be found her chief demands for
 poetry --- the use of the intellect, the joyful submission
 to the difficult fetter of metre, devotion to the lyricism
 of the Romantics, and an imagery wherein the fusion of
 thought and word gives vitality to the poem. It will be
 necessary to develop each of these points singly in order
 to establish her theories, and at the same time to emphasize
 her love of language and her reverence for the poetry of
 complete simplicity, which is beyond all symbols. It will
 be necessary, also, to speak of Mrs. Meynell's belief in the
 high office of the poet, the singular and lofty mission
 assigned to him and the periodicity of his poetic experience.

8. Alice Meynell, in The London Mercury, Vol. III,
 pp. 29-31

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B. CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF POETRY

In this chapter we shall study four aspects of the criticism of poetry:

1. THOUGHT CONTENT
2. METRE AND DISCIPLINE
3. THE SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM
4. IMAGERY

These four divisions are logical approaches to a study of many poets in general and to the work of Alice Meynell in particular.

1. THOUGHT CONTENT

(a) General Notions: Poetry or the appreciation of poetry requires in its fulness both intellect and emotion. Poetry is always the expression of some emotion or feeling; the intellect and the imagination express this emotion or feeling in terms of beauty. The thought-content of a poem will depend on the intellectual powers of the poet himself and on his love of the beautiful cultivated through consciousness of the past. It will depend also on his background, his education and training, his sense of the greatness of his art as well as on the age in which he lives with its philosophy, its interest, its problems, its religion.

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The universal thoughts of human nature will be expressed in any age, but the complexity of human living may give a wider range of interests to the poet. This is particularly true of the Victorian age. The poets of that era could hardly hope to explore more deeply the fundamental thoughts of human nature than did Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, or Wordsworth, but the actual subjects chosen by the Victorians for poetic treatment far exceeded in number the subjects chosen by any age before them. They wrote on themes of love, of nature, of religion as did the poets of every century; in going beyond these, however, to more specific and local interests they often became, as no group of masters before did, 'occasional' poets. Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Mrs. Browning, Christina Rossetti, all furnish us with examples of this type of poetry -- Tennyson's Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington, Browning's Italian in England, Mrs. Browning's Cry of the Children -- to mention only a few.

The 'nineties' was a renascent period when there was much mental activity and quickening of the imagination. A pride in material progress and a desire for social service made itself felt in art and literature. It was an age of life-testing, of destruction of old ideas, of aesthetic

propaganda, of journalism, of impressionism in art, of epigram and paradox.

The doctrine of Art for Art's sake, advanced by Oscar Wilde and the Decadents called for devotion to art without regard for morality. This aesthetic cult was a type of escapism which attempted to bring about a renaissance in art and letters. But as time went on and England advanced in prosperity even Wilde could see with Ruskin and Pater that art could be used to promote happiness and that there was an undeniable relation between happy workmen and a pleasant environment. Wilde's conversion to Catholicism in his later years showed that art and morality cannot be separated.

Religion, too, was important, especially to the Catholic poet of the time. Filled with the spirit of the Oxford Movement and the beginnings of the Liturgical Revival in the Church, the English convert would, of necessity, bring religion into his poetry. Having reasoned his way into the Church, and having found there a spiritual liberty far beyond his expectations, he would be compelled to give forth some of his most vital poetry on subjects of his Faith.

It is with these notions of thought-content in poetry that we propose to examine the poetry of Alice

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Meynell in an attempt to show that the use of the intellect in poetry was of great importance to her and to prove that she looked for the intellectual in the poetry of others.

1. THOUGHT CONTENT

(b) With Particular Application to Alice Meynell:

That Alice Meynell used her intellect in her poetry is attested by many of her contemporaries. G. K. Chesterton speaking of her verse in The Dublin Review said: "She never wrote a line, or even a word, without putting brains into it; or in the most exact sense meaning what she said".⁹

J. C. Squire, in an essay entitled Alice Meynell speaks of the Shakespeare Tercenterary which was celebrated at the time and makes this statement: "She writes, again, on the Shakespeare Tercenterary. Only two writers -- Mr. Thomas Hardy and Mrs. Meynell broke silence merely because they had something to say."¹⁰ Alfred Noyes inscribed his poem The Torch-Bearers to her with the following words: "For Mrs. Meynell with sincerest good wishes and deep gratitude to

9. G. K. Chesterton, The Dublin Review, Jan.-Feb.-Mar., 1923, p. 46

10. J. C. Squire, Alice Meynell, The London Mercury, Vol. VII, April 1923, p. 285.

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the greatest of our living poets".¹¹ V. Sackville-West, speaking of both her prose and verse said: "She never wrote unless she had something which very definitely demanded to be said".¹²

Because of this sincerity, all her poetry has a universal appeal. With abundant thoughts and with a zeal for the use of the intellect in poetry, it is not surprising that Mrs. Meynell in her verse acquired a gravity rarely found in a feminine writer. Francis Thompson says that her poetry is "feeling oozed through the pores of thought",¹³ and V. Sackville-West described it in a short verse thus:

Her Thought was stone: O frugal poet, hard
Cut the spare chisel on each separate gem --
Jasper and onyx, emerald and sard;
Craft and integrity have fashioned them.¹⁴

Said Alice Meynell of another feminine writer: "She used her intellect, and that action is the vitality of all poetry that is not song only, but poetry and song."¹⁵ In Mrs.

11. National Book League and the British Council, Alice Meynell, Centenary edition, p. 44.

12. V. Sackville-West, op. cit., p. 17

13. Rev. F. K. Connolly, S.J., Literary Criticisms of Francis Thompson, p. 188

14. V. Sackville-West, op. cit., p. 33

15. Alice Meynell, The Second Person Singular and Other Essays, p. 54

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Meynell's poetry we have to recognize the intellect -- not unfailing, or how could she have known that others had failed? -- not always proof against emotion nor would we wish it so -- but veritable intellect, capable of originality and power. Her knowledge of its limitations, far from diminishing the value of her poetry produces in it "the further simplicity which is beyond imagery."¹⁶ In To a Daisy, written early in her poetic career, she seems to realize the smallness of the human mind:

Slight as thou art, thou art enough to hide
Like all created things, secrets from me.¹⁷

She anticipates the unfolding of that intellect in another life:

O daisy mine, what will it be to look
From God's side, even of such a simple thing?¹⁷

She passes from the contemplation of a daisy to astral problems in the poem Christ in the Universe, which contains the acknowledgment of "our little day"¹⁸ and the anxious

16. Ibid., p. 131

17. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 150

18. Ibid., p. 63

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questioning of what shall be known in the eternities.

O, be prepared, my soul, to read the inconceivable . . .¹⁸ For beyond the hour of the "incalculable tryst" there will be found "a million forms of God."¹⁸ Orthodox in her acceptance of dogma, she is still poet in the interpretation of its significance.

By their freedom from personal absorption her poems are at best fine points of contemplation of the human spirit. In the quiet dignity of The Launch, despite its poetic subtlety, is reflected the elementary experience of all souls, the miracle of birth, of grief -- that common kinship of all nature -- and 'the incalculable tryst' of death.

Forth, to the alien gravity
Forth, to the laws of ocean, we,
Builders on earth by laws of land,
Entrust this creature of our hand
Upon the calculated sea.

Fast bound to shore we cling, we creep,
And make our ship ready to leap
Light to the flood, equipped to ride
The strange conditions of the tide --
New weight, new force, new world: the Deep.

Ah thus -- not thus -- the Dying, kissed,
Cherished, exhorted, shriven, dismissed;
By all the eager means we hold
We, warm, prepare him for the cold,
To keep the incalculable tryst.¹⁹

¹⁸. Ibid.; p. 63
¹⁹. Ibid.; p. 59

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Alive with universal wistfulness, quiet with universal patience, she has submitted past sorrow to universal mystery. Miss Tuell says: "Mrs. Meynell would claim for herself only what she claimed of late for another poet: 'Meditation never causes a relaxation of passion or of verse. She does not argue, but she convinces us that she thinks, that there is reason, not necessarily reasoning in her thought, and that the essence of her poems had its origin in the mind.'"²⁰

The short poetic thought which she believed was essentially lyrical and the single beautiful image are are beautifully expressed in Maternity, At Night, Cradle Song at Twilight, The Roaring Frost and many others. She loved this brief form; it was her best effort at the fusion of thought and word....

The Roaring Frost

A flock of birds came winging from the North
Strong birds with fighting pinions driving forth
With a resounding call: -

Where will they close their wings and cease their cries --
Between what warming seas and conquering skies --
And fold, and fall?²¹

20. A. K. Tuell, op. cit., p. 221

21. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 29

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Alice Meynell refused -- more strongly as the years went by -- to give in to the lure of emotional indulgence which she believed was the easy sin of women's poetry. Her reaction against the too facile intensity of Christina Rossetti and the hasty humility and uneasy strength of Mrs. Browning, gave Mrs. Meynell that masculine quality she herself admired in Chesterton. Patmore was fond of making a distinction between the masculine and feminine mind in literature. In an essay on Mrs. Meynell he wrote:

A strong and predominantly masculine mind has often much to say, but a very imperfect ability to say it, the predominantly feminine mind can say anything but has nothing to say, but with the double-sexed insight of genius, realities and expressions are wedded from their first conceptions, and even in their least imposing development are living powers, and of more practical importance than the results of the highest efforts of mind when either of its factors greatly predominate over the other.²²

Patmore went on to say that Mrs. Meynell was lacking in this ultimate womanhood . . . and that no feminine writer of the time had attained to true distinction in poetry. He later admitted that the war poem A Father of Women had falsified this assertion. In this poem she calls on the spirit of

22. Herbert Read, op. cit., Quoted in the essay on Patmore from the latter's essay on Mrs. Meynell. p. 324.

her father not to unsex her, but to grant her strength to endure. She begs him to quiet her "rash will" and to let his tenderness "pause and prevail over her. The complete woman who would be able to sustain the cruelties of life and reveal the heart of the poet, should remember herself to be a daughter of man. She calls on the fathers of the world to approve and accept these women now that their sons have to die in battle.

The crippled world! Come then,
Fathers of women with your honour in trust;
Approve, accept, know them daughters of men,
Now that your sons are dust.²³

Her other war poems, To Conscripts, In Honour of America 1917, Summer in England 1914 did not reach such a high plane. In defense of women she wrote The Girl on the Land, and in protest, The Sunderland Children. They all, however, have that same tone of intellectual strength.

But it is, above all, in her religious poetry that Mrs. Meynell uses her intellect. The poems of this group are the strongest exercise of her rejection of emotional indulgence. Speaking of her father, she had written in a memorial piece: "The things be abstained from were all exquisite"²⁴ . . . so with herself -- she rejected the

23. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 79.

24. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, (A Remembrance) p. 227

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exultations and agonies which prompted the great mystical lyrists to use her intellect in the praise of the Word made Flesh. Not that she was ungrateful for the divine passion of the mystics, but she was rather a watcher of the human spirit and of a God revealed therein.

The doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Redemption formed the central theme of her religious poetry. The realization of Christ's presence everywhere in the world, the adoration of Him in the consecrated Bread and Wine, the explanation of suffering through the death of a God on the Cross, the recognition of Christ as leader with all believers in Him part of His Mystical Body and therefore objects of supernatural charity, the belief in life everlasting and the longing to read the inconceivable were all treated somewhere in her poetry.

The mystery of the Incarnation, not only in its result but in its beginning, appears in Advent Meditation. The "Rorate Coli" of the Church's liturgy strikes the first note of expectation of a Redeemer. It calls upon the heavens to pour down dew from above so that the earth may open and bring forth a Saviour.

The earth, the rain received the trust
The sun and dews to frame the Just.²⁵

25. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 121

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Mrs. Meynell loved the simplicity and humility of the Lord's coming thus. He was the product of His own decrees and was brought forth according to "slow Nature's course".

Unto Us a Son is Given is a joyous Christmas carol. The strong word "Given" opens the poem; our poetess means this in its full significance, for "not lent" and "not withdrawn" confirm the statement. Each year it is a new certainty. Even as the cold winter returns and is followed by spring, even as childhood appears and reappears, so the Infant of Mankind, the Everlasting Man, comes to our hearts with a new appeal.

Christian fidelity to this "Child Divine" is shown in San Lorenzo's Mother. The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue, the more easily to express the intense emotion of this mother's heart. Fearing to break the rules of his Order, she asked not if the stranger were her son, and he revealed nothing. She was willing to make the sacrifice; in the place of her son she saw the Son of God:

And all I give is given to One,
I might mistake my dearest son
But never the Son who cannot change.²⁶

26. Ibid., p. 143

But it is when she kneels down before the consecrated Bread and Wine that we can best appreciate her faith. In The Unknown God she watches one of the crowd approach the altar to receive his God. Watcher of the human spirit in other loves than her own, she finds here the supreme opportunity of watching God in that spirit. Since she is unable to know the mind, the heart, the intellect, the destiny, the happiness and strife of this Unknown, there arises from her heart an act of faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

Christ in his numbered breath,
 Christ in his beating heart and in his death,
 Christ in his mystery! From that secret place
 And from that separate dwelling, give me grace.²⁷

In A General Communion not one only, but many were there for her observation.

I saw this people as a field of flowers,
 Each grown at such a price
 The sum of imaginable powers
 Did no more than suffice.²⁸

For each one of these souls God had suffered and for each
 He had given Himself on the altar.

27. Ibid., p. 49

28. Ibid., p. 50

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Yet the Redemption was worth while. Beyond Knowledge pictures one newly dead stepping into the region of rescued sinners. The vision dazzles him, and he exclaims:

What is that, sweeter than the summer
Was to my heart before I died?²⁹

Pressing the question, he approaches an angel, saying:

.....What is yonder
More bright than the remembered skies
A lovelier light, a softer splendour
Than when the moon was wont to rise?²⁹

It cannot be a rescued sinner, one who committed much evil in life, but the angel replies reassuringly:

O the success of His redeeming!
O child, it is a rescued sin!²⁹

The religious poetry of Mrs. Meynell forms a large part of her work.

The poetry of gravity turns inward for its essential content. It has been the purpose of this section to study the gravity of Mrs. Meynell's verse, revealing itself in thoughtful contemplation of this life and the next. To a greater extent than the other poets of her time, she is concerned with the universal thoughts of human nature and the relation of man to God. Unlike them, she is in the Victorian age, but not of it. Aware of all the complex

29. Ibid., p. 65

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tendencies in the life around her, critical of art, literature, and life, she is, nevertheless, in her own poetry, a watcher of the skies and of the human spirit. It is not surprising then that she looks for composure and fire concealed in literature and poetry.

To Mrs. Meynell the poet was a dedicated spirit. That he should be aware of his high calling and that he should express himself accordingly was part of her demand for the intellectual quality of poetry ... It seems fitting, therefore, to discuss here her high conception of the poet's mission.

Her Conception of the Poet's Mission:

In the poem The Poet to His Childhood, Alice Meynell speaks to her own childhood personified. The two of them seem to be standing beside two paths, deciding which to choose. In one direction is a flowering meadow, easy of access; in the other, hills looking up to the sun. The Child is urging the poet to take the upward path, difficult though it be, and in the words which are quoted from a beloved poet, Father Tabb, she puts into the child's mouth this plea:

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'If it prove a life of pain, greater have I
 With a singing soul for music's sake, I climb
 And I choose, whilst I am calm, my thought and
 Unconsoled by sympathy.'³⁰

Then she asks the Child why it has dared to point out this hard path, bringing her ripe years to the level of its whim. The latter marks not, but leads her on. Again she questions, .:

Do you know, who are so bold, how in sooth
Settled by a wayward child's ideal at some
---How the human hearts you slip from, thoughts and
Will not open to you more?³⁰

Still the Child climbs higher into the lonely solitude of
the poet's life. Still the poet fears and warns:

But your sunny silence there, solitude so
light to bear,
Will become a long dumb world, up in the colder
sadder air,
And the little mournful lonelineses in the
little hills
Wider wilderness fulfils.³⁰

And if e'er you should come down to the village
or the town
With the cold rain for your garland and the wind
for your renown,
You will stand upon the thresholds with a face
of dumb desire,
Nor be known by any fire. 30

30. Ibid., p. 165

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Gradually the Poet is being won over, saying that the Child is all too brave, but that in an older person the sacrifice will be harder to bear. Finally she joyfully embraces the high and lonely task, and adds Amen to all she has chosen in Childhood.

With a smile do I complain in the safety of the pain,
 Knowing that my feet can never quit their solitudes
 again;
 But regret may turn with longing to that one hour's
 choice you had
 When the silence broodeth sad.

I rebel not, child gone by, but obey you wonderingly,
 For you knew not, young rash speaker, all you spoke,
 and now will I
 With the life, and all the loneliness revealed that
 you thought fit,
 Sing the Amen, knowing it.³¹

Poetic thoughts, she believed, were handed down from one generation to another. Her original genius pays tribute to its ancestry in A Song of Derivations:

I come from nothing; but from where
 Come the undying thoughts I bear?
 Down through long links of death and birth,
 From the past poets of the earth
 My immortality is there.

I am like the blossom of an hour,
 But long, long vanished sun and shower
 Awoke my breath in the young world's air;
 I track the past back everywhere
 Through seed and flower and seed and flower.

31. Ibid., p. 165

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44.

Before this life began to be,
 The happy songs that wake in me
 Woke long ago and far apart,
 Heavily on this little heart
 Presses their immortality. 32

She believed herself the mere instrument for the expression of these universal thoughts; even if she gave up writing poetry, she felt that these precious treasures would be scattered through her indifferent words of every day. In the sestet of the sonnet Unlinked, she makes this clear:

For me, my art, thou canst not pass away;
 And I, a singer though I cease to sing,
 Shall own thee without joy in thee or woe.
 Through my indifferent words of every day,
 Scattered and all unlinked the rhymes shall ring,
 And make my poem; and I shall not know. 33

And not only do these thoughts come to her from far away, but they will be transmitted by her to future generations. This idea is contained in Singers to Come and The Poet and His Book. The latter poem follows:

Here are my thoughts, alive within this fold,
 My simple sheep. Their shepherd, I grow wise
 As dearly, gravely, deeply I behold
 Their different eyes.

O distant pastures in their blood! O streams
 From watersheds that fed them for this prison!
 Lights from aloft, midsummer suns in dreams,
 Set and arisen.

32. Ibid., p. 18

33. Ibid., p. 17

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45.

They wander out, but all return anew,
 The small one, to this heart to which they clung
 'And those that are with young,' the fruitful few
 That are with young. 34

She does not feel worthy of the great thoughts entrusted to her. In a delicate image she compares her thoughts to sheep, herself to the shepherd who grows wise in dealing with them.

In The Poet to the Birds she says that their song is hereditary, but always unchangeable; whereas hers has something of herself in it:

But single, local, lonely, mortal, new,
 Unlike, and thus like all my race, am I
 Preluding my adieu.

My human song must be
 My human thought. Be patient till 'tis done.
 I shall not hold my little peace; for me
 There is no peace but one. 35

We find the same thoughts as these expressed over and over in other poems, such as To Any Poet, The Spring to the Summer, The Day to the Night and many others.

The solitary nature of her poetry is explained in an essay Innocence and Experience.

Obviously Experience can be nothing if it is not personal and separate; and "Innocence of a singular quality is his who does not dip his hands into other men's

34. Ibid., p. 86

35. Ibid., p. 113

histories and does not give to his own word the common sanction of other men's summaries and conclusions. Therefore I bind Innocence and Experience in one and take them as the noble isolation of man from man -- of his uniqueness".³⁶ Here Mrs. Meynell is not trying to set up a different standard; she regarded it as a sacred duty to refrain from appropriating other men's ideas. In Renouncement, Day of Days and other poems we find this perfect personal experience. Universal, too, for that same reason are the appeals which give her poetry a delicate innocence. This is the same thought as she expresses in The Poet to the Birds.

From this view of her art as a precious treasure, she passes to the level of faith where she realizes that the poet is merely an instrument in the hands of God for the expression of His Truth. In another poem, entitled Pygmalion the poet speaks to his poetry. She says that with infinite care she has fashioned her masterpiece:

Thou art to live; I am watching thee.
I have laid my patient chisel away,
And watch thee somewhat wearily.
How do I know what the mouth will say?
How do I know what the eyes will be? ³⁷

36. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 86

37. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 154

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Like Shaw she has a firm belief in the success of the venture; unlike him, however, she knows that her power only goes so far. With submission to the Divine Will she realises that her work is lifeless; only God can give the song and the vitality.

I know not what the voice will sing.
I only made the quiet breast,
And white throat with much labouring.
I only wrought and thought my best,
And lo, a new voice shall out-ring.

God knows. I chiselled each cold limb
With loyal pain. He has given my mind
Less light than my true hand; but dim
Is life. I wait all I shall find,
And all that I shall know, in Him.³⁷

And after death it will not be necessary to raise a monument to any poet for his own work; the monument will be to Truth, the instrument of God.

Rather unto Truth than unto one
Who sleepeth here is raised this monument.
To her he yields his tomb and is content

One with his thoughts; his thoughts in truth
are furled.

There was no need of him; hush up his fame,
Now earth has laid her docile child to sleep.³⁸

There was no real need of the poet -- he spoke the thoughts conceived by his intellect and meant what he said; but

37. Alice Meynell, Op. cit., p. 154

38. Ibid., p. 163

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contained in those words were other meanings far beyond his power to express.

Into every type of essay filtered the conviction that her mission as a poet had to be built up -- without anxiety, without haste and without misgivings are all great things to be done and neither interruption in the doing nor ruin after they are done finds anything in them to betray."³⁹ It is only necessary to begin each day with a fresh resolve to transmit the great thoughts of life to posterity. In the essay At Monastery Gates s he tells that the poet could learn from the monks:

"Every midnight the sweet contralto bells call the community, who get up gaily to this difficult service. Of all the duties this one never grows easy or familiar, and therefore never habitual. It is something to have found but one art aloof from habit. ... It is not possible to get up at midnight without a will that is new each night. So should the writer's work be done, and, with an intention perpetually unique, the poet's."⁴⁰

Periodicity of Poetic Experience

"Few poets have fully recognized the metrical absence of their Muse, for full recognition is expressed in one only way -- silence."⁴¹ Thus did Alice Meynell give her theory that the poet should express nothing unless

39. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 15

40. Ibid., p. 124

41. Ibid., p. 80.

he had something vital to say, and that such poetic thoughts would not always be at his command. When such silences occurred in her life, she would turn to prose, though always with some sense of loss. "If life is not always poetical it is at least metrical,"⁴² and it was in this broader rhythm that her delicate refined essays found their place. Convinced that "the flux is equal to the reflux",⁴³ she gave her talent freely for the honours of mortality. In a poem To Silence she maintains that these periods are necessary, for only in silence is great music formed:

Not, Silence, for thine idleness I raise
My silence-bounded singing in thy praise,
But for thy moulding of my Mozart's tune,
Thy hold upon the bird that sings the moon,
Thy magisterial ways.

Man's lovely definite melody-shapes are thine,
Outlined, controlled, compressed, complete, divine,
Also thy fine intrusions do I trace,
Thy afterthoughts, thy wandering, thy grace,
Within the poet's line

Thy secret is the song that is to be.
Music had never stature but for thee,
Sculptor! strong as the sculptor Space whose hand
Urged the Discobolus and bade him stand.

Man, on his way to Silence, stops to hear and see.⁴⁴

42. Ibid., p. 78

43. Ibid., p. 79

44. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 102

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In To One Poem in a Silent Time she addresses a single little poem that has come to her and wonders if it is the harbinger of another summer of poetic inspiration or the last "smile of my sorrow".

"How, my December violet, shall I name thee?"⁴⁵

This section may be concluded with a quotation from V. Sackville-West, "The bulk of Alice Meynell's poetry is not large. The source of inspiration, like those streams which flow once or twice only in a decade, may not have been very strong or very constant. ... It seems that she herself was sometimes resigned to its disappearance. ... Whatever the reason for its rarity, the source when it founted, was always crystalline. ... The poetry of Alice Meynell is an integral expression of a complete personality."⁴⁶

2. METRE AND DISCIPLINE

(a) General Remarks: Poetry, which differs from prose, in form and in the appeal of subject matter, has always been expressed in rhythmical language. The

45. Ibid., p. 151

46. V. Sackville West, op cit., p. 25

appeal to the emotions, which is necessary to it and which makes it a more vital and universal medium than prose, demands an expression in a form that is equally universal. Its recurring throb stirs both the sensuous and the deeper feelings of the listener and attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose.

The metrical quality of poetry has an analogy with the wonderful rhythm of life. The seasons follow one another year after year, the moon waxes and wanes, the tide rises and falls, the sun's revolutions govern all these as well as the world of day and night. The joys and sorrows of human life follow one another in rhythmical sequence and man is hardly aware that this rhythm is part of his own very nature. Poetry, which springs from the emotions should therefore be expressed in musical language if it is to find response in the human heart.

The word 'metre' means measure and each metrical foot is the equivalent of a bar of music. The foot is the unit of poetic metre; different kinds of feet depend on variety of stress and accent. The line of verse is varied by pause, balance, flow of vowel and clash of consonant, but always with the aim of binding together the music and the thought. T. S. Eliot says: "I would remind you first, that

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the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning ... If we are not moved, then it is, as poetry, meaningless."⁴⁷

Having chosen his metrical line, the poet has at his command a vast technique of recognized verse forms with infinite variety of line length and stanza structure. These forms should not fetter the poet's expression; rather they should be a vehicle for every type of thought. The merit of his poetic skill in metre will depend on his choice of the right pattern of sound for the meaning and on the combination of music and thought.

The purpose of this section is to examine Alice Meynell's use of metre, to study her opinion of its value and to thereby appreciate her criticism of its use.

(b) Particular Application in Alice Meynell: The difficult fetter of metre was to our poetess not only the necessary instrument of lyric expression, but a challenge to her mental activity. An experience along a tow-path beside the Thames, where you "walk in your swinging harness and so take your friends upstream,"⁴⁸ recalls to her the thrill of poetic metre. An "elastic resistance", this pull

47. T. S. Eliot, op. cit., (The Music of Poetry), p. 56

48. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 15

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of the line, "only too slight. ... 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".⁴⁹

In another essay entitled The Foot after an informal talk about the human foot, shod and unshod, she connects her subject with poetry. "But we shall not praise the simple, sweet, earth-confiding feet enough without thanks for the rule of verse and the time of song." ... To the rule of the foot is ascribed the thought, the instruction and the dream that could not speak by prose."⁵⁰ There are thoughts and inspirations that cannot be expressed in ordinary language; they need metrical and rhythmical cadence to convey the idea. And then Mrs. Meynell continues to show the value of the restraint of metre. Just as in the monastery trivial rules restrain the inmates from trivial liberties, yet are guarantees against the restlessness of the heart, so does the rule of the foot in poetry restrain from the more trivial daily liberty of prose. And, as behind convent walls, the rules become wings rather than fetters, so metre is to poetry the condition of "an interior range immeasurable".⁵¹

49: Ibid.; p. 16
 50: Ibid.; p. 101
 51: Ibid.;

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So convinced is Alice Meynell of this interior liberty given by metre that she may be styled a religious among the poets. Her verse is regulated by rejection and restraint not merely negative, but sacrificial. The austerity of her poetry is the reflaction of a life of self-restraint. J. C. Squire, a Victorian critic, not of her Faith, spoke of this rejection thus:

It is not easy to conceive any alteration of circumstances which would have led her to write more profusely or less carefully; and it may be assumed that what we have from her is all that she was born, or felt inclined to give. By temperament and theory she was destined to do a few things as nearly perfectly as she could.⁵²

The "output"⁵³ of Catholic poetry was lessened by her restraint, as the intellectual output of the age is lessened when great minds withdraw to the cloister. But as Cathlocism is certainly advanced in this manner, so is its poetry advanced by one who rejected or controlled many of her dearest poetic images. And as "None the less hopes the stranger to pause and knock once again upon these Monastery gates",⁵⁴ so Catholics will continue to find fresh teaching

52. J. C. Squire, op. cit., p. 285

53. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 124

54. Ibid., p. 125

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and new courage in her few but finished lyrics. "When other thousands of years have gone by, these will still be treasured, for they embody a divine passion."⁵⁵

To support our statements about her austerity and purity of thought we quote her poem "The Shepherdess":

She walks -- the lady of my delight --
A shepherdess of sheep.
Her flocks are thoughts. She keeps them white;
She guards them from the steep;
She feeds them on the fragrant height,
And folds them in for sleep.

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

She holds her little thoughts in sight
Though gay they run and leap.
She is so circumspect and right;
She has her soul to keep.
She walks -- the lady of my delight --
A shepherdess of sheep. ⁵⁶

and to prove that metre gave wings to her verse, we choose the brief lyric Chimes and the stronger poem The Watershed:

Chimes
Brief, on a flying night,
From the shaken tower
A flock of bells take flight
And go with the hour.

55. Alfred Noyes, Some Aspects of Modern Poetry, p. 8

56. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 21

Like birds from the cote to the gales,
 Abrupt -- oh, hark!
 A fleet of bells set sails
 And go to the dark.

Sudden the cold airs swing,
 Alone aloud,
 A verse of bells takes wing
 And flies with the cloud.⁵⁷

The Watershed

Black mountains pricked with pointed pine
 A melancholy sky.
 Out-distanced was the German vine,
 The sterile fields lay high.
 From swarthy Alps I travelled forth
 Aloft; it was the north, the north;
 Bound for the Noon was I.

I seemed to breast the streams that day;
 I met, opposed, withstood
 The northward rivers on their way,
 My heart against the flood --
 My heart that pressed to rise and reach,
 And felt the love of altering speech,
 Of frontiers in its blood.

But oh, the unfolding South! the burst
 Of summer! Oh, to see
 Of all the southward brooks the first!
 The travelling heart went free
 With endless streams; that strife was stopped;
 And down a thousand vales I dropped,
 I flowed to Italy.⁵⁸

Certainly in this latter poem, strong as it is in its
 effort to mount the Alps, there is nothing but glorious

57. Ibid., p. 34

58. Ibid., p. 44

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freedom of the spirit.

It is to be expected that Mrs. Meynell would not like or use 'vers libre'. In her essay Escape quoted at the beginning of this chapter she warns the student of poetry that the way to 'escape' is not through 'vers libre'. T. S. Eliot is of the same opinion when he says of it: "It is a battle-cry of a freedom and there is no freedom in art."⁵⁹ We feel that she would agree with him when he says of Swinburne: "Swinburne mastered his technique, which is everything."⁶⁰ Elsewhere Eliot has much the same idea of rhyme as Mrs. Meynell. He says: "The rejection of rhyme is not a leap at facility; on the contrary it imposes a much severer strain upon the language."⁶¹ He does not go to the point of saying, as Mrs. Meynell does, however, that metre and rhyme are conditions of poetic liberty. That was her own peculiar secret.

As a vehicle for a single beautiful image she chose the sonnet, because it is both restrained and complete. Her aim was to re-create it -- so to unite the thought and verse that it would become something individual.

59. T. S. Eliot, op. cit., (Vers Libre), p. 88

60. Ibid

61. Ibid., p. 91

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As a candleflame swells and diminishes, so her sonnet is an image of warm life, expressing her thought, yet exactly faithful to the requirements of an Italian form.

"When a short poetic thought is transfigured by a single beautiful image, then the sonnet is satisfied, the sonnet is fulfilled.⁶² All her sonnets, about twelve in number, are fulfilled in this way. What more beautiful image than that of the guardian spirits of lovers meeting in Thoughts in Separation?

And though I fail of thy ideal of me
My angle falls not short ...
Who knows, they may exchange the kiss we give,
Thou to thy crucifix, I to my mother.⁶³

It is in the expression of feeling that she best uses the sonnet. Questions at first too fleeting to be formulated are brought to the surface by its challenge.

If I should quit thee, sacrifice, forswear,
To what, my art, shall I give thee in keeping?
To the long winds of heaven?

.....
No, I shall live a poet, waking,⁶⁴ sleeping,
And I shall die a poet, unaware.

The solution comes at the end of the octave, and once known, is confirmed in the sestet. Another example is her sonnet To a Daisy, when after looking at a daisy, she asks herself

62. Alice Meynell, The Second Person Singular and Other Essays, p. 100

63. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 139

64. Ibid., p. 17

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the question when will she be able to understand the
mystery of creation ...

When shall I penetrate all things and thee,
And then look back? For this I must abide,

But, says she, in the sestet:

O daisy mine, what will it be to look
From God's side even of such a simple thing?⁶⁵

While favouring the Italian sonnet, Mrs. Meynell tends
occasionally to break the octave, but exact fidelity to
the rhyme-scheme is always there. This is true of her
greatest sonnet Renouncement which may have reached the
level of the poetry of complete simplicity.

I must not think of thee; and tired yet strong
I shun the thought that lurks in all delight --
The thought of thee -- and in the blue Heaven's height,
And in the sweetest passage of a song.
Oh, just beyond the fairest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright;
But it must never, never come in sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.

But when sleep comes to close each difficult day
When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,
And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,
Must doff my will as raiment laid away --
With the first dream that comes with the first sleep
I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.⁶⁶

Apart from the sonnet various forms of lyric verse
appealed to her. "In all the best periods of English lyric

65. Ibid., p. 150

66. Ibid., p. 13

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writings", says Saintsbury, "the admixture of short lines has been the main secret of lyrical success, and in most cases, it has been hardly at all a matter of deliberate imitation, but due to an instinctive sense of beauty and convenience of the adjustment."⁶⁷ From what we know of Mrs. Meynell and her verse we do not expect her to imitate others, but we can find in almost all her lyrics the relieving value of short lines.

When stanzas with five-stress lines close with one of three-stress the short line seems to summarize and complete the thought. The First Snow and The Courts are examples:

And yet the open heavenward plot, with dew,
Ultimate poetry, enclosed, enskied,
(Albeit such ceremonies lead thereto)
Stands on the yonder side.⁶⁸

Here the trochee at the beginning of some of the lines, and the short words in the short last line adds emphasis to the thought.

The five-line stanza with two three-stress lines is more intricate. To the Body is one example. In such poems as The Unknown God and Christ in the Universe one

67. George Saintsbury, Historical Manual of English Prosody, p. 317

68. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 125

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short line at the beginning suggests pause and emphasis and the remaining long lines give unity and completeness. From the days of her earliest writing, Mrs. Meynell used the three and five-stress line in various combinations, but with greater skill in her later poetry. In Early Spring is the first example, but The Shepherdess which also has the alternate five and three-stress line, achieves much better rhythm and shows greater confidence. In the latter example there are four stanzas of six lines each and the thought of each stanza is self-contained.

In the earlier poems we find frequent use of a melodious three-line stanza; the falling of rain, the strewing of leaves, the flocking of birds are suggested in the lines which hold a subtle music. The three-line stanza obtains this melody by the use of feminine rhymes at the end of the line, soft vowels and consonants, and alliteration.

Listen: -- the mountain winds with rain were fretting,
And sudden gleams the mountain-tops besetting,
I cannot let thee fade to death, forgetting.⁶⁸

Where haste aids the imagination the stanza has a shorter line,

Whither shall I run
Till the set of sun,
Till the day be done?⁶⁹

⁶⁸. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 125

⁶⁹. Ibid., p. 149

The use of long vowels in the five-line stanzas often give the effect of deep water and tides:

As the inhastening tide doth roll,
Home from the deep, along the whole
Wide shining strand, ...⁷⁰

Hypermetric lines in the tidal poems suggest the lingering of the water on the shore, or the lap of the wave after the main motion has ceased:

But inland from the seaward spaces,
None knows, not even you, the places.⁷¹

and again, in Regrets:

As, when the seaward ebbing tide doth pour
Out by the low sand spaces,
The parting waves slip back to clasp the shore
With lingering embraces, ...⁷²

In contrast here, the word 'slip' suggests the little flap of a single wave.

The ballad measure is not frequent in her verse, although Regrets in the earlier and The Rainy Summer in the later poetry have the four-stress followed by the three-stress line. More often these line-lengths are combined in individual ways. They alternate in a five-line stanza in a poem In Autumn. Cradle-Song at Twilight is almost ballad measure, but the last line of each stanza

70. Ibid., p. 128

71. Ibid.,

72. Ibid., p. 25

contains only two stresses, and the movement of the cradle backward and forward can be heard in the intervals of the song. In November Blue two ballad stanzas are combined. But in The Watershed she makes her best adaptation of this form. The stanza contains the ordinary four lines of a ballad, but does not end there. She adds two four-stress lines and one three-stress. The simple ballad measure would not permit the strength and powers of endurance she seeks to convey; accordingly the next two lines give added gravity and the last line closes and completes the thought. It seems that this is proof of the interior liberty Mrs. Meynell felt when using the traditional measures of English poetry.

In all these stanza forms it is the simple iambic foot varied with an occasional trochee that she loves to use. She says of them: "Those two are enough for the infinite variety, the epic, the drama, the lyric, of our poetry."⁷³

Verbal music is also a marked characteristic of good lyric poetry. When long vowels and alliterations are used in the same poem, a soothing melody results. In Night this effect is admirably achieved:

73. Alice Meynell Prose and Poetry, p. 152

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Home, Home from the horizon far and clear,
 Hither the soft wings sweep
 Flocks of the memories of the day draw near
 The dovecote doors of sleep.⁷⁴

On the other hand, short vowels and hard consonants combined with alliteration may give the sense of darkness and struggle.

Black mountains pricked with pointed pine
 A melancholy sky.⁷⁵

or

A flock of birds came winging from the North
 Strong birds with fighting pinions, driving forth.⁷⁶

But in the last two poems quoted, the struggle is over before the end; and the soft vowels suggest rest after the combat.

Mrs. Meynell's verse suggests motion or hurry less by metre than by diction:

The winds hunt up the sun, hunt up the moon.⁷⁷

Another day wakes, And who --
 Changing the world -- is this?⁷⁸

Behold the time is now!
 Call in, oh call.

74. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p.30

75. Ibid., p. 44

76. Ibid., p. 29

77. Ibid., p. 46

78. Ibid., p. 32

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And when she would create an atmosphere, it is the word again that produces the effect.

Blue comes to earth, it walks the street.⁷⁹

Not less characteristic are her iterations, as if she would imprint the idea in question on the reader's mind.

And she who slays is she who bears, who bears.⁸⁰

Your words to me, your words!⁸¹

Imitative harmony appears in Chimes. The bells are flung out like a flock of birds and the clock strikes in its arbitrary way in the opening words of the stanzas. An American critic remarks: "Her own poetry is like Chimes, a brief infrequent sound of quite unmistakable quality, which serves to emphasize the darkness and to contrast sharply with the wind."⁸²

Although she does not want to follow the fashion of writing of one art in terms of another, Mrs. Meynell frequently thinks of poetry in terms of music. She says that Swinburne's poetry is popular and prized for his rhythm and rhyme, the time and accent, the pause, the balance, the flow of vowel and clash of consonant that is

79. Ibid., p. 33

80. Ibid., p. 26

81. Ibid., p. 30

82. Ray Edridge, The Poetry of Alice Meynell, The Catholic World, Vol. CXVI, p. 360

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such a marked feature of his verse.

She gives a description of the music-value of the poetry of each century;

Without following the fashion of using the terms of one art to describe another, we may permit ourselves this mere imagery: the single note of music to represent the sixteenth-century lyric, harmonics for the seventeenth counterpoint for the nineteenth.⁸³

The songs of Robert Greene, the Elizabethan lyricist, were sweet and single, like "tunes unharmonized". Even Alice Meynell could not believe that any poet would be so austere and sacrificial in his rejection.

It is not human to be single as the songs of Greene are single; the fading of pleasure, the cruelty of beauty, the inconstancy of love, the happy lot of the shepherd, and the cares of kings -- each thing, one at a time, is so unaccompanied that you wonder how a primitive poet should have had time to reject all checking, mingling, and qualifying thoughts together. For it is hardly youth, hardly inexperience that this simplicity suggests, but rather a mind made up, a mind bent on creating other conditions than those which govern an actual world of which the poet has somewhat grown tired.⁸⁴

This quotation gives evidence that she is aware of the critical faculty which is always at work when the poet is producing his finest poetry. Her own work is a proof

83. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 46

84. Ibid.,

that experience teaches the poet the habit of rejection and simplicity.

Mrs. Meynell's choice of words is always careful and delicate. Vigilance of expression is a necessary result of vigilance of thought. In her book on Ruskin she says that a great poet claims from his reader an intent study of words by his own weight of special purpose but she adds that, just as in painting, parts of it may be examined intensely, but anon the attention may be relaxed, so special passages in poetry are more charged with meaning than others. Her earlier verses allow this relaxed attention, but the later poems are often freighted with meaning. The Launch, To the Body, Christ in the Universe, are three poems that demand close examination. For this type of poem she uses strong words -- "the single stroke with the single intention". The use of the prefix "un" which in prose she described as having such power, achieves even more compressed meaning in her verse.

Do we possess anything more essentially ours (though we share it with our sister Germany) than our particle 'un'? Poor are those living languages that have not our use of so rich a negative. The French equivalent in adjective reaches no further than the adjective itself -- or hardly; it does not attain the participle; so that no French or Italian poet has the words 'unloved', 'unforgiven'. None such, therefore, has the opportunity of the gravest and most

majestic of all ironies. In our English, the words that are denied are still there -- 'loved', 'forgiven'; excluded angles, who stand erect, attesting what is not done, what is undone, what shall not be done.

No merely opposite words could have so much denial, or so much pain of loss, or so much outer darkness, or so much barred beatitude in sight. All-present, all-significant, all-remembering, all-foretelling is the word and it has a plenitude of knowledge.⁸⁵

The poem Messina, 1908 is a study in contrast of words with and without the 'un' prefix:

Lord, thou hast crushed thy tender ones, o'erthrown
Thy strong, thy fair; Thy man thou hast unmanned,
Thy elaborate works unwrought, thy deeds undone,
Thy lovely sentient human plan unplanned;
Destroyer, we have cowed beneath Thine own
Immediate unintelligible hand.

Lord Thou hast hastened to retrieve, to heal,
To feed, to bind, to clothe, to quench, the brand,
To prop the ruin, to bless and to anneal;
Hast sped thy ships by sea, thy trains by land,
Shed pity and tears: our shattered fingers feel
Thy mediate and intelligible hand.⁸⁶

The Justice of God is placed against His Mercy and a whole world of fear is called up only to be dispelled by the unmantling of the word. The gravest and most majestic of all ironies is scattered by Omnipotent Mercy.

In Unlinked she announces her devotion to poetry. The word that is denied is still there, just as the songs

85. Ibid., p. 162

86. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 48

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in her heart would remain, even if not given forth. Another example is from one of her religious poems on the subject of the Cross:

Unlifted for a blessing on yon sea
Unshrined on this highway,
O flesh, O grief, thou too shall have our knee
Thou rood of every day⁸⁷

"The single stroke with the single intention" we find in the heaping up of strong words, revealing the wealth of her ideas, her keen powers of observation and the intellectual character of her art. Following in quick succession come brilliant flashes of single words:

The terrible, shamefast, frightened, whispered, sweet,
Heart-shattering secret of His way with us.⁸⁸

and again:

. . . whose wide arms entreat,
Gather, clasp, welcome, bind,⁸⁹
Lack or remember; . . .

and yet again, when she speaks of an old crossing-sweeper, lately dead:

One-handed, twisted, dwarfed, scanted of breath,
And oh, his might, his sweet, his wine, his song
His stature since he died!⁹⁰

87. Ibid., p. 38

88. Ibid., p. 63

89. Ibid., p. 38

90. Ibid., p. 55

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For one who knew other languages well, Mrs. Meynell, in her poetry especially, shows a jealous attachment to English. Her words are of the bone and sinew of the language. Speaking of the Latin and Saxon elements in our language she says: "One of the most charming things that a master of English can achieve is the repayment of their united teaching by linking their results so exquisitely in his own practice."⁹¹ She had in mind such phrases as Shakespeare's "Superfluous Kings",⁹² when she wrote "incalculable tryst",⁹³ "unpurchasable word",⁹⁴ "sequestered floor, unreachd, untold".⁹⁵ We must "compose ourselves to literature",⁹⁶ she said, to emphasize the fact that only with great care could any great work of this kind be done. Why, more than she, exercised such care, such leisure, such reconciliation in her choice of the relentlessly right word? She has therefore every right and authority to speak

91. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, (Composure) p. 174

92. Ibid., p. 37

93. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 59 .

94. Ibid., p. 24

95. Ibid., p. 53

96. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 176

of Patmore's pure diction, Swinburne's vivid English, Browning's difficult phrases, Tennyson's power of transfiguring with language, Pope's perfect propriety of diction. It is the purpose of this work to show that Alice Meynell's theories of poetry, once established, were applied with relentless fidelity to the work of almost every great poet of our literature.

Her love for metre and rhythm was not something exaggerated. Rather verse forms and metre helped her to express with more feeling the deeper loves of Nature and of God. With this idea in mind we now pass to the discussion of her spirit of Romanticism.

3. THE SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM

(a) General Remarks: "There are two great impulses in man -- the impulse of acceptance of all the phenomena of the outer world as they are -- and the impulse to confront these phenomena with the eyes of wonder."⁹⁷

This quotation expresses what is meant by the difference between the Augustan age and the Romantic

97. Theodore Watts Dutton, Chambers Cyclopedia of English Literature (The Renaissance of Wonder).

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Revival in literature. The spirit of revolt, urged on by the French Revolution, reflected itself in the poetry of the early nineteenth century causing the poets to reject the Age of Reason with its exactitude, its caution, its rhetoric and emotional timidity for the expression of feeling and the Return to Nature theory put forward by Rousseau and his followers. Signs of this spirit had manifested themselves early in the eighteenth century and can be traced through much of the poetry of this century of Moderation.

It is necessary here merely to outline what elements in poetry are considered to express the spirit of Romanticism. Wordsworth in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads said that poetry was the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion couched in real and beautiful language. He urged the poet to sing of nature, to look at the simple things of everyday life and to express his feelings in language used in ordinary speech. Although Wordsworth sometimes did come close to prose in his lines of verse, he remains one of the great poets of our language because he was sincere in his idea of looking at everything, great and small, with the eyes of wonder, and he usually expressed himself in beautiful words.

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While Wordsworth stressed the poetry of nature and gave the charm of novelty to everyday objects, Coleridge dealt with the supernatural and the mysterious. Interest in the weird, the gothic, the strange, had been growing for some time and had manifested itself in the so-called 'gothic' novels, the mysticism of Blake, the 'Graveyard Poetry' of Gray, Cowper and others. Blake had invested the child with a mystical significance, while many poets, Wordsworth included, used the idea that the child was closer to the poet because "trailing clouds of glory" he had still not lost contact with the supernatural.

In its extreme form the spirit of revolt led Shelley to cry for social reform and Byron to fight with the Greeks for freedom.

It must be recognized, however, that the Romantic Revival was merely a revival, not something new. It was a return to the lyricism of the Elizabethan and seventeenth-century poetry -- it was in the best tradition of our literature as long as it did not go to extremes. Alice Meynell calls it "a long literary revolt (one of the recurrences of imperishable Romance)"⁹⁸ It was, indeed a

98. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 55

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revival of the sense of wonder, a spirit which could not long remain dormant for "the immortal child, tarrying all his lifetime in the heart of man",⁹⁹ could not cease to look upon the beauties of this world or to imagine those of the next with the eyes of wonder.

It is the purpose of this work to show that Alice Meynell had a love for the lyricism of the Romantics, that she manifested that love in her own poetry, and that she looked for signs of it in her criticism of the poetry of others.

3. THE SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM

(b) Particular Application to Alice Meynell: In her essay on Patmore Alice Meynell says:

We find that there are two master-emotions in modern poetry -- in that Romance literature which has been the complementary life of Europe now for many centuries; one dates from Dante's day, and one chiefly from the day of Henry Vaughan (Wordsworth's virtually immediate precursor). Love, and love of Nature, mystically passionate, are what they are with us, not because all men, but because two boys, conceived them. It needs the childish dream to raise these emotions into the regions of mystery, sweetness, tenderness, and terror which they have gained because Dante was a child in love with a girl, and Vaughan a child in love with Nature. Other lovers have loved in childhood, or have profited by the childhood of Wordsworth, of Vaughan, and of Traherne. The wilder and the more real, the more delirious and the more innocent these remoter experiences, the more has the lover's love the

99. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 142

quality of Romance, and the poet's imaginative verse the quality of the poetry of Nature. Men could never have done for mankind what these boys have done; literature owes her two ideal adult passions to the dreams of childhood.¹⁰⁰

The elements of Romanticism are all here, Love of Nature, interest in the mysterious, expression of deep feeling. The child spirit, which is synonymous with the sense of wonder, and of which Mrs. Meynell was always conscious, is closer to that of the poet than anything else -- and to her mind, great poetry can only be produced by an adult who possesses this spirit. This same theory is referred to over and over in both poetry and prose. We place beside the above quotation her poem The Two Boyhoods:

Luminous passions reign
High in the soul of man; and they are twain.
Of these he hath made the poetry of earth --
Hath made his nobler tears, his magic mirth.

Fair love is one of these,
The visiting vision of seven centuries;
And one is love of Nature -- love to tears.
The modern passion of this hundred years.

Oh, never to such height,
Oh, never to such spiritual light --
The light of lonely visions, and the gleam
Of secret splendid sombre suns in dream --

Oh, never to such long
Glory in life, supremacy in song,
Had either of these loves attained in joy
But for the ministrations of a boy.

100. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 135

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76.

Dante was one who bare
 Love in his deep heart; apprehended there
 When he was yet a child; and from that day
 The radiant love has never passed away.

And one was Wordsworth; he
 Conceived the love of Nature childishly
 As no adult heart might; old poets sing
 That exaltation by remembering.

For no divine
 Intelligence, or art, or fire, or wine,
 Is high-delirious as that rising lark --
 The child's soul and its daybreak in the dark.

And Letters keep these two
 Heavenly treasures safe the ages through,
 Safe from ignoble benison or ban --
 These two high childhoods in the heart of man.¹⁰¹

Often Mrs. Meynell expressed the same idea in prose and later in poetry. This fact alone is proof of her critical faculty. She attempted to express the thought first, and later worked on the verse form so as to put that same thought into poetry. Of necessity only a deep conviction would get such close attention.

It is to be remarked that she felt that the Romantic spirit was not something in literature; she takes us back to the Romance literature and to the works of Dante, linking him with Wordsworth because the common passion of Love reflected by both is essential to poetry. In her prose passage she gives Vaughan credit for being the immediate

101. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 39

precursor of Wordsworth -- we find that idea again in another essay:

Vaughan succeeded in hiding himself so well that makers of some of the best anthologies of English lyrical poetry in the later middle of the nineteenth century were hardly aware of him. Where did Wordsworth make that great spiritual acquaintance? For the 'Ode on the Intimation of Immortality' is the work of Vaughan as much as of Wordsworth, or more than of Wordsworth. Vaughan not only set the sun of dreams in the heavens, he also set the child in the midst of humankind.¹⁰²

Wordsworth conceived the love of Nature with the mind of a child -- Vaughan went further, giving the child spirit to the rest of us. Whether critics agree with this theory or not, is not important to Mrs. Meynell; the ardour and mystery of childhood is to her the greatest treasure of the poet.

Since she thus proclaims herself a follower of Dante and Wordsworth so often, we must prove that she shows these master-passions, Love and Love of Nature in her poetry, and later discusses them in the poetry of others. It will be convenient to do this under three headings: Lover of Nature, Lover of Childhood, Lover of God.

102. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 326

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78.

Lover of Nature: When Mrs. Meynell, recalling "the Mediterranean under the first perceptible touch of the moon, the calm southern seas in the full blossom of summer, the early spring everywhere in the showery streets, in the fields or at sea",¹⁰³ tried to evoke the impressions received in childhood, she felt that even Wordsworth could never say too much about the child's passion for Nature.

Although her own love of Nature is revealed with greater simplicity in her prose than in verse, there is, in the latter much to merit examination. In the early poems there is, at times, a sensuous strain; at other times a melancholy retrospection when Nature is the theme. The dead autumn leaves suggest the disappearance of mortal lives; the flow of the tide reminds her of the return of the thoughts of one departed to the beloved and leads her to question the permanence of human affections:

Shall I content thee, O thou broken heart,
As the tide comes again?¹⁰⁴

But we should not let the melancholy note predominate in the interpretation of these earlier poems; Alice Meynell's genuine love for wind and rain, autumn leaves and tides

103. Alice Meynell, Childhood, p. 61

104. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 140

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79.

forbids it. There restlessness was a refuge for the unappeasable sympathies of her heart; not always sorrowful but lonely, she could, without misgiving, find solace in the frettings and struggles of nature. There is a kinship with Shelley, the great Romantic, in this restlessness which finds relief in nature. In his Ode to the West Wind he calls upon the wind to make him its lyre, "even as the forest is" -- in her poem The Poet to Nature she considers nature the lyre and herself, like the wind, producing the melody:

I have no secrets from thee, lyre sublime,
 My lyre whereof I make my melody.
 I sing one way like the west wind through thee,
 With my whole heart, and hear thy sweet strings chime. ¹⁰⁵

A poet of one mood she is, loving skies of grey --

A poet of one mood in all my lays,
 Ranging all life to sing one only love,
 Like a west wind across the world I move,
 Sweeping my harp of floods my own wild ways.
 The countries change, but not the west-wind days
 Which are my songs. Most soft skies shine above,
 And on all seas the colours of a dove,
 And on all fields a flash of silver greys.

I make the whole world answer to my art
 And sweet monotonous meanings. In your ears
 I change not ever, bearing, for my part,
 One thought that is the treasure of my years --
 A small cloud full of rain upon my heart
 And in mine arms, clasped, like a child in tears. ¹⁰⁶

105. Ibid, p. 164

106. Ibid., p. 145

In later verse she loses the melancholy and treats of nature with beautiful imagery. A Thrush Before Dawn and The October Redbreast remind us of Thomas Hardy, but there is greater hope. The first of these also recalls Keats' Ode to a Nightingale in the stanza:

What Middle Ages passionate,
O passionate voice. What distant bells
Lodged in the hills, what palace state
Illyrian! For it speaks, it tells,
Without desire, without dismay,
Some morrow and some yesterday.¹⁰⁷

and Hardy's realistic note is heard in the second:

Autumn is weary, halt and old;
Ah, but she owns the song of joy!
Her colours fade, her woods are cold:
Her singing-bird's a boy, a boy.¹⁰⁸

The Voice of a Bird is a poem in which she recalls all the great poets who wrote of lark or nightingale, and to prove that the song of the bird has a universal appeal she says:

And not alone
The signal poets woke. In listening man,
Woman, and child a poet stirs unknown,
Throughout the Mays of birds since Mays began.¹⁰⁹

Prophetic of a new strength of spirit is The Watershed which reminds us of one breasting the storm, yet loving it for its violence. Never was scene at once darker and more hopeful. She triumphantly mounts to the north, and

107. Ibid., p. 66
108. Ibid., p. 110
109. Ibid., p. 113

having reached the summit, flows into Italy. So in life, having learned to endure, she learned also to enjoy the rewards of sacrifice.

Alice Meynell was a lover of landscape. Because of her exactness of observation she kept always the freshness of vision which the average person loses with childhood and she was able to appreciate the beauty, the poignancy of small things. If you have the leisure to watch the stars reflected in the water, or to compare the green of leaves in July, or to study the falling rain Mrs. Meynell will flash these details before you in photographic outline. Who but loves nature more penetratingly for having been told that the raindrop and its path are one; that Italian grass is a runaway putting itself on buttress and tile, a mosaic and pavement with a speed that outstrips our unready eyes; that mounting the hill is lifting the world and raising the horizon? Some of her best nature descriptions are found in the metrical rhythm of her prose; occasionally she put them into verse. Winter Trees on the Horizon is an example:

O delicate! Even in wooded lands
They show the margin of my world,
My own horizon, little bands of twigs
Unveil that edge impearled,

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And what is more mine own than this --
 My limit, level with mine eyes?
 For me precisely do they kiss --
 The rounded earth, the rounding skies.

It has my stature, that keen line
 (Let mathematics vouch for it).
 The lark's horizon is not mine,
 No, nor his nestlings' where they sit;

No, not the child's. And, when I gain
 The hills, I lift it as I rise
 Erect; anon, back to the plain
 I soothe it with mine equal eyes.¹¹⁰

There is much more ease in her essay The Horizon which expresses much the same thought -- "You lift the world, you raise the horizon; you give a signal for the distance to stand up. . . . You summon the sea, you bring the mountains, the distances unfold unlooked-for wings and take an even flight."¹¹¹

In her poetry Alice Meynell strove to such an extent to express the thought in as few words as possible that she was not able to let her imagination play with words in her nature descriptions as she did in prose. The poetic beauty of her familiar essays cannot be neglected in a study of her love of nature. The waving of tall flowers in a field where the blossoms toss many ways in the wind suggests "the many lovers of a poet who have a thousand reasons for their love",¹¹² but the stiff sedges are unanimous when they bend,

^{110.} Ibid., p. 91

^{111.} Alice Meyness, Essays, p. 176

^{112.} Ibid., p. 23

showing the silver of their sombre little tassels as fish
show the silver of their sides turning in the pathless
sea".¹¹³

Mrs. Meynell loved, above all, the sunshine. "Thus
is the dominant sun sufficient for his day. No incidents
save of his causing -- no delights save of his giving. And
the sun dominates by his absence, compelling the low
countries to sadness in the melancholy night."¹¹⁴ It is
only in the open air that the colour is seen in perfection
and when sunlight falls upon the water the brightness is
the whitest and most luminous thing possible. The Channel,
although its waters have less expanse than those of the
Mediterranean, has its own appeal, "the strong, short, curl
that catches the rushing shingle up with sudden curves,
white upon the white sea-wall, under random shadows of sea-
gulls and the light of a shining cloud."¹¹⁵

By a kind of paradox the luminous landscape is that
which is full of shadows. "Atoms of shadow, -- be the day
bright enough -- compose the very air through which you see
the light."¹¹⁶ Therefore shadow is an assurance of ever-

113. Ibid.,

114. Ibid., p. 20

115. Ibid., p. 132

116. Ibid., p. 189

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84.

present light and life. "The bird's shadow was a message from the sun", she wrote. G. K. Chesterton, years later, used the same figure to acknowledge his debt to Alice Meynell.

With such a love of nature we expect Mrs. Meynell to appreciate Swinburne's love of landscape, even when other qualities of his art confused her, to love Tennyson's splendour of nature description, to admire the sudden insight into nature that was Patmore's and to marvel at the mystical flights of Francis Thompson. We expect, also, to find that she will dislike the landscape of convention of the eighteenth century -- the carefully-planned gardens of Jane Austen. "The landscape, like our literature, is apt to grow and to get itself formed under too luxurious ideals"¹¹⁷ she says. Then will it lose its vitality; then will the nature descriptions lose the spirit of Romanticism.

It may be concluded that Alice Meynell was a Romanticist in her love of nature. Like Wordsworth, she gave the charm of novelty to everyday objects and she wrote in beautiful language of her deep love. Like Blake and Coleridge she sometimes invests her nature descriptions with a mystical simplicity. This aspect will be treated in the section Lover of God.

117. Alice Meynell, Prose & Poetry (Landscape), p. 266

Lover of Childhood: Known as "The Pencilling Mamma", Alice Meynell justifies that title by several essays on Childhood in general and by a few poems about children. She might have invested the child with innocence and mystery; the mother in her preferred to view him alive and human. Through her belief in the Incarnation wherein God was made man, "one of the children of the year,"¹¹⁸ and in the plain yet perfect truth of the "kings who found a Child"¹¹⁹ she had the power to elevate child life to the dignity of the sons of God.

To her childhood was the time of incomparable antiquity. Its far-off hours and remote origins were not merely to be remembered, but also carried on. Like Plato's ideas of truth, goodness and beauty, the heart of childhood should be eternal. For the Christian writer, the Son of God is the expression of the Divine attributes in childhood. She would have us learn that "the little welcome Son",¹²⁰ given, not lent, and not withdrawn is God's way of expressing His own essential eternal childhood. This is why childhood surrounds and encompasses history, stretches beyond and passes on the road to eternity. Men, then, especially the

118. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 35

119. Ibid., p. 58

120. Ibid., p. 35

poet and the saint, must not lose the ardour and the mystery of that long and mysterious moment.

Here is her word in prose on what we may learn from the child:

It is assuredly in the absence of resentment that consists the virtue of childhood. What other things are we to learn of them? Not simplicity, for they are intricate enough. Not gratitude . . . not obedience . . . and for humility the boast of a child is the frankest thing in the world. It is the sweet and entire forgiveness of children who ask pity for their sorrows from those who have caused them, who never dream that they are forgiving, and who have no bargain for apologies -- it is this that men and women are urged to learn of the child.¹²¹

This was the child-spirit which Mrs. Meynell thought necessary to the poet. The two great passions of Romantic poetry, she believed, had their origin in childhood. Speaking to those who would die early in battle, she tells them to be satisfied, because age will bring them no more great gifts:

What have you then forgotten
A history? This you had. Or memories?
These too you had of your far-distant dawn.
No further dawn seems his.

The old man who shares with you,
But has no more, no more. Time's mystery
Did once for him the most that it can do:
He has had infancy.

121. Alice Meynell, Childhood, p. 83

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87.

And all his dreams, and all
 His love for mighty Nature, sweet and few,
 Are but the dwindling past he can recall
 Of what his childhood knew.¹²²

This is the same doctrine as Wordsworth held in saying "the child is father of the man". Her own is the belief that childhood is a time of long moments:

He counts not any more,
 His brief, his present years. But oh, he knows
 How far apart the summers were of yore,
 How far apart the snows.¹²²

The love of mother for child was a subject precious to Mrs. Meynell. It was part of the rhythm of life, as necessary as the sun's revolutions. There was no solitude like that of the union between mother and child:

O filial light
 Strong in these childish eyes, these new, these bright
 Intelligible stars! Their rays
 Are near the constant earth, guides in the maze,
 Natural, true, keen in this dusk of days.¹²³

She spoke again of mother-love in Maternity. Rarely, however, did she bring her own children into her poetry. She preferred to speak of them in the daily rhythm of prose.

122. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 53

123. Ibid., p. 63

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88.

Lover of God: Alice Meynell's love of God was the love of a mystic if mysticism means the soul's aspiration after the Divine. In an essay on The Mystical Lyric, she explains that mysticism is a term used rather loosely. People speak of visions as something easy to come by, while the saints thought that fifty years of self-conquest was too small a price to pay for such. No one who speaks in this way seems to have entered upon "the indispensable beginnings, to have overcome anything within, to have shut his mouth upon a hasty word, to have dismissed a worldly thought, to have compelled his heart to a difficult act of pardon, to have foregone beloved sleep, cherished food, conversation, sharp thoughts, or darling pride. The Saints, on the other hand, gave themselves to that spade-work before permitting themselves so much as one credible dream".¹²⁴ This is the real mysticism and it sounds very much like the doctrine of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a product of the same age as Mrs. Meynell.

She goes on then to explain what is meant by poetic mysticism. The poet may be excused from such hard self-mastery, perhaps -- sometimes he becomes a mystic by his genius and by the divinity of his imagination -- having

124. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 323

been spared (not through any effort on his part) the sufferings of sanctitude. This type of poet is rare, however, who fingers "with spiritual senses those symbols and similitudes which are matters of daily life".¹²⁵ Perhaps she would place Francis Thompson in this group, 'the poet' whom she rarely criticized or quoted. Blake who lived and died in bliss reached this height of mysticism by the paths of poetry. Then there were her seventeenth century poets, Vaughan, Traherne, Crashaw.

Her own art, however, was more ordinary; such mystical paths were not for her. Her mysticism, having regarded the indispensable beginnings, is explicitly Christian in her apprehension of a God potential and revealed within the human capacity. She could have expressed her love in a lyric of desire such as Christina Rossetti's Advent, in the lyric of praise like those of Crashaw, in the note of thankfulness of Herrick, Traherne or Vaughan, or in the bolder spiritual rush of Thompson, but such flights were incompatible with a rule of life which did not look for visions and did not neglect the sufferings of sanctitude.

125. Ibid., p. 322

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She saw God in the human urgency for sacrifice, as in Renouncement and Why Wilt Thou Chide; she understood divinity in the sudden pressure of human pity, as in Maternity; she beheld God in the human gift for grief as in The Crucifixion. In the latter she compares man's capacity for sorrow with God's:

Oh, man's capacity
For spiritual sorrow, corporal pain;
Who has explored the deepmost of that sea
With heavy links of a far-fathoming chain?

That melancholy lead
Let down in guilty and in innocent hold,
Yea into childish delivered,
Leaves the sequestered floor, unreachd, untold.

One only has explored
The deepmost; but he did not die of it.
Not yet, not yet He died, Man's human Lord
Touched the extreme; it is not infinite.

But over the abyss
Of God's capacity for woe He stayed
One hesitating hour; what gulf was this?
Forsaken He went down, and was afraid.¹²⁶

The crucifixion of Christ, to her the extreme act of human suffering is interpreted by a fresh and daring symbol. The cry of the forsaken Christ is not the solitary lament of a mortal despair; it is the birth-cry of immortal understanding, the first recoil of dying man entering the knowledge

126. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 53

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of Divinity, seeing for the first time, and for a moment hesitating to accept, "God's infinite capacity for woe."

The ardour of her love does escape occasionally in a line or two of a poem: In Christ in the Universe she marvels at:

The terrible, shamefast, frightened, whispered, sweet,
Heart-shattering secret of His way with us.¹²⁷

and "shuddering through the paradox of prayer",¹²⁸ she stands in awe at the daring words of the Pater Noster in The Lord's Prayer. But it escapes rarely and serves merely to emphasize her reverential reticence.

Her way of life is beautifully expressed in another poem which, at the same time, tells of her complete trust in God:

Thou art the Way.
Hadst Thou been nothing but the goal,
I cannot say
If Thou hadst ever met my soul.

I cannot see --
I, child of process -- if there lies
An end for me,
Full of repose, full of replies.

I'll not reproach
The road that winds, my feet that err.
Access, Approach
Art Thou, Time, Way, and Wayfarer.¹²⁹

127. Ibid., p. 63

128. Ibid., p. 76

129. Ibid., p. 22

Nor can she forget, true Catholic that she is, devotion
to the Mother of God. Just as Mary shaped the eternal God
to present Him to us as "the little welcome Son",

. we, too,
We the unready, the perplexed, the cold,
Must shape the Eternal in our thoughts anew,
Cherish, possess, enfold.¹³⁰

but whereas Mary, the Immaculate One, was able to form Him
and to reflect Him perfectly to the world:

"He lingers in the breast
Of our humanity."¹³⁰

Imitation of Christ is therefore learned through imitation
of Mary:

None can be like Him, none!
In love? In grief? Nay, man's capacity
Rifled unto its depths, is reached, is done --
Christ's, an unfathomable sea.

None can be like Him, none;
Not she who bore Him. Yet I saw the whole
Eternal, infinite Christ within the one
Small mirror of her soul.¹³¹

What has all this to do with Romanticism or the
sense of wonder? Surely the Catholic, looking on Nature and
God with a spirit of reverent love, and living in the expect-
ation of the glory that shall be revealed in him, cannot

130. Ibid., p. 105

131. Ibid., p. 181

help but be a Romantic. Nor can the suffering and sacrifice he meets in the world dim the sense of wonder in the Christian. Rather it establishes a kinship with the great Romantic who is Christ. Oscar Wilde in De Profundis, his autobiographical account of a great tragedy, calls Christ the Great Romantic.

If the spirit of Romanticism comes naturally to the Christian, likewise imagery can hardly be neglected. Alice Meynell has much to say about imagery. It is the purpose of this next section to examine her ideas on this subject and to show that there is something of critical value in her statements.

4. IMAGERY

(a) General Remarks: Imagery is a great part of poetry; it is the poet's use of his imagination. He searches his experience for symbols which will fittingly convey his thoughts and invests these symbols with poetic charm and imaginative beauty. The poet gets his images from his reading, his experience, and from the whole of his sensitive life. "Why", says Eliot, "for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a

particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain-path..."¹³² There is no real answer. They are part of past experience and represent moments when we were passionately moved.

Poets use, to express their images, metaphors, similies, sustained allegories and various figures of speech. There is, however, the poetry of complete simplicity in which the thought comes too close and shakes too cruelly for imagery. Shakespeare, who had pictured in beautiful metaphor "multitudinous seas"¹³³ where the blood of Macbeth's hand would make "the green one red",¹³³ could go beyond to the heart-cry of Macduff when he heard of the murder of his wife and children:

All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? -- O hell-kite! all?"¹³⁴

The great poets can use both. It is our purpose next to study the imagery in the verse of Alice Meynell, and to note whether her poetry ever gained 'the yonder side',¹³⁵

132. T. S. Eliot, op. cit., (Poetic Imagery), p. 95

133. The Tragedies of Shakespeare, (Macbeth), p. 573

134. Ibid., p. 607

135. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 58

(b) Particular Application to Alice Meynell: Alice Meynell, in her early poetry writes of the tide, the winds, the waves, flocks of birds. In Regrets she compares the parting of a dear friend to the ebb of the tide. Just as the little waves slip back on their way seaward as if attempting to clasp the shore in a last embrace, so her thoughts and memories return to the loved one "with lingering farewells".¹³⁶ The figure continues with the wish that the beloved will soon return and fill up the spaces of her soul even as the tide fills in the shore as it comes back. But will there be the same eager affection as before, will the beloved respond to the return as does the shore to the tide? The same figure is used again in The Visiting Sea:

As the hastening tide doth roll,
Home from the deep, along the whole
Wide shining strand, and floods the caves,
-- Your love comes filling with happy waves
The open sea-shore of my soul.

But inland from the seaward spaces,
None knows, not even you, the places
Brimmed, at your coming, out of sight,
-- The little solitudes of delight
This tide constrains in dim embraces.

136. Ibid., p. 140

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96.

You see the happy shore, wave-rimmed,
 But know not of the quiet dimmed
 Rivers your coming floods and fills,
 The little pools 'mid happier hills,
 My silent rivulets, over-brimmed.

What! I have secrets from you? Yes.
 But, visiting, Sea, your love doth press
 And reach in further than you know,
 And fills all these; and, when you go,
 There's loneliness in loneliness.¹³⁷

The coming of a loved one fills up depths of feeling all unknown in the beloved. These are like little pools and rivulets far inland whose waters brim over at incoming of the tide. The restlessness of waves and winds was part of the young poet's nature. Her imagery conveys this longing and melancholy with delicate fidelity.

This figure returns again and again to invest her later poems with imagery. In a short poem written to her husband she compares the memories of the day to flocks of soft-winged birds. They come home softly in the eventide to the "dovecote doors of sleep".¹³⁸ Of all these homing birds, the remembrance of his words fly back with swiftest and surest flight. The whole poem is an image radiating softness and content, expressing her complete trust in and her utter dependence on a loyal 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 doors of sleep.

¹³⁷: Ibid., p. 128
¹³⁸: Ibid., p. 40

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97.

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! 139

The West Wind in Winter and The Wind is Blind have
 more rush and energy and are more vigorously sustained:

The wind is blind
 And the sail traps him, and the mill
 Captures; and he cannot save
 His swiftness and his desperate will
 From those blind uses of the slave. 140

Another striking image of her later verse is found in the poem In Manchester Square. Mrs. Meynell had made the acquaintance of an old crossing-sweeper, whose gnarled, twisted, crippled body she had learned to pity. While on a visit to France she heard of his death, and with a picture of the vineyards in her mind she wrote these lines in his memory. Just as the crippled black stems of the winter vine revive in spring and are covered with large, healthy leaves, which, like hands, hold forth clusters of rich grapes, -- so the old man, while alive is gnarled and twisted, but after death will be fruitful in the radiance of Eternity.

And oh! his might, his sweet, his wine, his song
 His stature, since he died! 141

139. Ibid.,

140. Ibid., p. 88

141. Ibid., p. 55

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98.

But it is the mystery of the Eucharist which furnishes her religious spirit with ever-fresh imagery. In Portugal treats of the persecution of religion, of the destruction of altar and chalice -- The unbidden Christ, however, does not leave His children. He lurks in the mill, in the wine-press, the corn-lands, the sun and the frost. He hides His unregarded head waiting for His people to recognize Him. Of the same type is The Fugitive,-- A General Communion.

With her love for the use of the intellect in poetry Alice Meynell often chose the paradox to make her image more striking. Indeed, we find elements of this device in all her later verse; her religious poetry is impregnated with its spirit because she had reached the stage of joyful acceptance of suffering. She loved Lady Poverty as truly as St. Francis of Assisi; she does not find it in the paths of modern men. Her humility and sincerity led her to see through the newer vainglory of the day where man would put himself above the Pharisee of the Gospel:

Two men went up to pray; and one gave thanks,
Not with himself -- aloud,
With proclamation, calling on the ranks
Of an attentive crowd.

'Thank God, I clap not my own humble breast,
But other ruffians' backs,
Imputing crime -- such is my tolerant haste --
To any man that lacks.

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99.

'For I am tolerant, generous, keep no rules,
 And the age honours me.
 Thank God, I am not as these rigid fools,
 Even as this Pharisee.' 142

The modern man must have attention for his prayer -- to impute the crime to someone else.

Sincerity and practical charity call forth the closely-compact little paradox Via, Veritas et Vita. It takes the form of a conversation between two people to show the meaning of union with Christ:

'You never attained to Him?' 'If to attain
 Be to abide, then that may be.'
 'Endless the way, followed with how much pain!'
 'The way was He.' 143

Not in religious verse only do we find paradox. There is a short poem Maternity which pictures a mother weeping for a young child who had died ten years before. When others try to comfort her she explains that a mother was born that day and still lives in woe although the child is in bliss. Why wilt Thou Chide is another example, showing her high spirit of renunciation:

Why wilt thou chide,
 who hast attained to be denied?
 O learn, above
 All price is my refusal, Love.
 My sacred Nay
 Was never cheapened by the way.
 Thy single sorrow crowns thee Lord
 Of an unpurchasable word.

142. Ibid., p. 54

143. Ibid., p. 23

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O strong, O pure!
 As Yea makes happier loves secure,
 I vow thee this
 Unique rejection of a kiss.
 I guard for thee
 This jealous sad monopoly.
 I seal this honour thine; none dare
 Hope for a part in thy despair.¹⁴⁴

Derek Patmore, in A Portrait of My Family, tells that the above poem was addressed secretly, yet in a sense publicly, to his father when Alice Meynell drew back from the latter's friendship -- Later, in an essay Patmore referred to the poem and acknowledged it to have been written for him.

Reconciling earthly friendship with purity of intention and loyalty to a family was one of the great paradoxes of Alice Meynell's life. Aloof, unattainable, she was the wife of one poet, the friend of many. Her aloofness was not as unattainable as it was a separate and private habit, acquired with difficulty, capable of default, but not to be laid aside. That her power of loving, thus curtailed, did not degenerate into selfishness is proved by her disinterested charity and the sacrifices made for those whom she professed to love. Renouncement, one of the greatest expressions of the paradox of human affections, is also, perhaps, her greatest piece of imagery.

144. Ibid., p. 24

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In an essay entitled The Brontës Mrs. Meynell writes of poetry:

The student passes delighted through the several courts of poetry, from the outer to the inner, from riches to more imaginative riches, and from decoration to more complex decoration; and prepares himself for the greater opulence of the innermost chamber. But when he crosses the last threshold he finds this midmost sanctuary to be a hypaethral temple, and in its custody and care a simple earth and a space of sky.¹⁴⁵

This is her theory of the poetry of complete simplicity.

Her own poem The Courts is the best illustration of what she means; of its very nature it represents what is being expressed:

The poet's imageries are noble ways,
Approaches to a plot, an open shrine,
Their splendours, colours, avenues, arrays,
Their courts that run with wine;

Beautiful similes, (fair and flagrant things)
Enriched, enamouring, -- raptures, metaphors
Enhancing life, are paths for pilgrim kings
Made free of golden doors.

And yet the open heavenward plot, with dew,
Ultimate poetry, enclosed, enskied,
(Albeit such ceremonies lead thereto)
Stands on the yonder side.

Plain, behind oracles, it is; and past
All symbols, simple; perfect, heavenly-wild,
The songs some loaded poets reach at last --
The kings that found a Child.¹⁴⁶

145. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 105

146. Ibid., p. 374

The great mystical poet is a maker of images; but in his greatest moments he does not do so. "He is a great mystic because he has a full vision of the mystery of realities, not because he has a clear invention of similitudes".¹⁴⁷

This theory of imagery and the poetry beyond imagery comes out again and again in Mrs. Meynell's work. Although there are some examples of each type in her own verse, she never reaches the heights of the great poets. What the masters do with such apparent ease, Alice Meynell does not attain. In her later verse there is sometimes too much ambiguity and striving after paradoxical effect. But she knows her limitations; she does not claim the greatness of a Shakespeare or a Milton, she does, however, marvel at the complete simplicity of their incomparable poetry.

Conclusion of the Critical Discussion of Poetry: Having examined Alice Meynell's poetry under the headings Thought-Content, Metre and Discipline, Spirit of Romanticism and Imagery, and having outlined her critical theories, we now pass to her criticism of individual poets. An attempt has been made to outline her ideas on Swinburne, Tennyson, Browning, Meredith, and Patmore. General critical opinions given by her at various times are then discussed. Finally

147. Ibid., p. 104

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we have tried to establish Alice Meynell as a critic of poetry and to appraise her critical integrity.

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ALICE MEYNELL'S CRITICAL VIEWS OF PARTICULAR POETS

Criticism of Swinburne: Perhaps because her critical judgment was aroused and confused, perhaps because Swinburne himself was a paradox to Alice Meynell, her study of this poet and his work is at once the most vital and uncomprehensive of all her critical efforts. In no other essay does she officially assign to herself the office of critic -- "Not in the heavens nor in the sub-celestial landscape does this minor art find its refutation, but in the puzzle between a man and his gift";¹⁴⁸ but this minor art is, she says, "useful", and must now serve to ask what "literary sincerity -- what value for art and letters -- lived in Swinburne, who hailed a certain old friend, in a dedication, as 'poet and painter' when he was pleased with him, and declared him 'poetaster and dauber' when something in that dead man's posthumous autobiography offended his own self-love"¹⁴⁹

From the opening paragraph of the essay, we may judge that she has been reading some of Swinburne's criticisms in prose and has been displeased with his assigning the quality of melancholy "without authority"¹⁵⁰ to some

148. Ibid., (Swinburne) p. 149

149. Ibid., p. 150

150. Ibid., p. 148

poet lately deceased. "General guesswork",¹⁵¹ she labels this criticism and blames him for changing his mind. Blake, on whom Swinburne had written at length and had praised for his poetic vision, was cited at random for his depression and despair -- and no poet seemed to her so undeserving of such an appraisal.

This changing of his mind, as well as a careless use of poetic terms, violated her high theories of the intellectual qualities of poetry and made her disclaim Swinburne as a poet more vehemently than any of her contemporaries had yet done. Moreover, "the later fashion of praise"¹⁵² for Swinburne irritated her not a little, and suggested perhaps to her that poetic thought was undergoing an unwelcome change.

That there was ground for such criticism is true from what other writers have written regarding the complexity of Swinburne's poetic art. In a book entitled Victorian Poetry, John Drinkwater makes the following statement:

Swinburne ... is the most perplexing as a poet. ... With a poetic scholarship as liberal as and more widely read than Arnold's, an ear as sensitive to the harmonics of words as Tennyson's, a gift of incantation as befumed as Rossetti's, a sense of romantic story as poignant and of English landscape as tender and sparkling as was Morris's, and a metrical virtuosity that was unknown to any

151. Ibid.,

152. Ibid., p. 151

of them, or, indeed to any other English poet, Swinburne was, technically, at once the most unoriginal and the most accomplished of the great men of his age.¹⁵³

Eliot in his essay Poetry and Philosophy makes another point:

We say, in a vague way, that Shakespeare, or Dante, or Lucretius, is a poet who thinks, and that Swinburne is a poet who does not think, ... The poet who 'thinks' is merely the poet who can express the emotional equivalent of thought. ... To express precise emotion requires as great intellectual power as to express precise thought.¹⁵⁴

but Mrs. Meynell is more drastic than either of these:

We predicate of a poet a great sincerity, a great imagination, a great passion, a great intellect; these are the master qualities, ... but I have ventured to affirm as to Swinburne's little intellect, paltry degree of sincerity and rachitic passion and tumid fancy.¹⁵⁵

Again:

"But other men had thoughts, other men had passions; political, sexual, natural, noble, vile, ideal, gross, rebellious, agonizing, imperial, republican, cruel, compassionate; and with these he fed his verses."¹⁵⁶

153. John Drinkwater, op. cit., p. 107

154. T. S. Eliot, op. cit., (Poetry and Philosophy) p. 53

155. Alice Meynell, op. cit., pp. 149-150.

156. Ibid., p. 155

And yet again:

Charged, then with other men's purposes -- this man's Italian patriotism, this man's love of sin, ... this man's despite against the Third Empire, this man's contempt for the Boers ... this man's -- nay, this boy's -- erotic sickness, or his cruelty -- charged with all these, Swinburne's poetry is primed.¹⁵⁷

The latter's repeated charge against Swinburne was that his poetry did not possess intellectual fire and energy, although he was, she believed, capable of emotional impulse and impetus. Rather, it was not that Swinburne lacked intellectual ability, but that his quality of thought was not the type she knew and admired. She had been instructed in her poetic theories by Patmore and Francis Thompson, whose genius in each case was more brilliantly intellectual and more religious in tone. Swinburne, on the other hand, accepted the tragic opposition of evil to man's desire, not as something to be endured and elevated by faith, but as a positive benefit which could satisfy certain demands of his nature. "Faith", says Drinkwater, "in the ordinary meaning of the word, was a thing outside his comprehension",¹⁵⁸ but he accepted life's difficulties, rejoicing in the physical resistance needed to

157. Ibid.,

158 John Drinkwater, Swinburne, an Estimate, p. 65

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to overcome them. Any spiritual energy, and in this he resembled Shelley, was, in each case, inseparable from a physical impulse. "The most insistent motive in Swinburne's art is the exultant acceptance of the tragic significance of life".

James Douglas, writing in the Chambers Cyclopedia of English Literature, speaks of Swinburne thus:

...His intellect is worked by his imagination so swiftly that it seems uncontrollable; but in reality he is a perfect master of his vehicle... Learning does not endow a man with the power of knowing poetry when he sees it.¹⁵⁹

and again:

It is with music that his poetry ought to be compared for it affects the intellectual feelings not merely through the logical faculty, but mainly through the aural imagination.¹⁵⁹

and yet again:

Bewildered by his manifold music they (the critics) charge him with masking his intellectual poverty under sonorous verbiage...The fact that his intellect expresses itself in so many metrical forms proves rather than disproves its strength.¹⁵⁹

But Mrs. Meynell is much more condemnatory. To her his imagination is 'perfervid fancy', his passions, intellect and emotions 'puny'. "I believe, she says, "that Swinburne's thoughts have their source, their home, their origin and

159. James Douglas in Chambers Cyclopedia of English Literature (Algernon Charles Swinburne

their mission in those two places -- his own vocabulary and the passions of other men."¹⁶⁰ All his impetuous nature is absorbed in one excited act of receptivity ... therefore what sincerity has he? Yet, says Mrs. Meynell, Swinburne is a poet ... "thrice a poet". herein lies the cause of her critical confusion.

Why did she consider him a poet? He was a writer of vivid English and a master of rhythm and rhyme. Of course his love of diction and music made him sacrifice meaning to melody, and his words often lost "lightness, breeze and breath,"¹⁶¹ but, says Douglas, "He doubtless deliberately accepts the loss in illusion for the sake of the gain in music. It is uncritical, therefore, to censure as insincerity what is evidently a deliberate means to a definite end. Uncritical Mrs. Meynell may be at this point, but she wisely recognizes her limitations and turns to the happier task of praise.

"I love to see English poetry move to many measures,"¹⁶² she says, but emphasizes that she likes particularly the iambic and trochaic measures. She

160. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 154

161. James Douglas, op. cit., p. 676

162. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 152

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considered that all poetry, epic, drama and lyric, could use these to advantage. "It is accordingly in these old, traditional and proved metres that Swinburne's music seems to me most worthy, most controlled and most lovely."¹⁶³ She acknowledges that her dislike of the anapaest may be one of the causes of her dislike of Swinburne's poetry. It is true that the anapaest lends itself least of all to verbal brevity; thought is often sacrificed to verbal music in its use. She says that this metre is not found in the verse of the Elizabethans or with the seventeenth-century poets... but it 'struts' throughout the light verse of the eighteenth century. "Swinburne's anapaests are far too delicate for swagger or strut; but for all their dance, all their flight, all their flutter, we are compelled to perceive that, as it were, they perform."¹⁶⁴ Saintsbury says that Swinburne is much more diffuse when using anapaests than when using the simple iambic or trochaic foot.

According to Mrs. Meynell's opinion, Swinburne gave new energies to blank verse. Milton had made this 'national line' obey his genius; later poets had made it rigid, but

163. Ibid., p. 152

164. Ibid., p. 153

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now she credits Swinburne with giving it a new freedom. Of course his use degenerates into tricks of stress and rhythm which strain the prosody and diction. But "with how masterly a hand is the straining accomplished!"¹⁶⁵

His words overcome not only his thought, but his imagery ... vocabulary always has the upper hand. The words are used with such skill that they seem to control the meaning instead of the meaning controlling the words. A critic must not separate the matter and manner of any of the greatest poets -- but Mrs. Meynell feels that she is compelled to do this in the case of Swinburne. He has talent -- a thousand times greater than the lesser poets -- but his is also an essential inferiority because his matter and manner can be separated.

She can make peace with him, however, for his love of landscape and the skies. Let him be admitted into fraternal union with the poets -- let him be placed among the great lovers of Nature, Shakespeare, Vaughan, Blake, Wordsworth, Patmore, Meredith. His laying waste of the language may be temporary, but he cannot spoil the literature of the past.

165. Ibid., p. 164

Let us see him in that company where he looks noble among the noble; let us not look upon him in the company of the ignoble, where he looks ignobler still, being servile to them; let us look upon him with the lyrical Shakespeare, with Vaughan, Blake, Wordsworth, Patmore, Meredith; not with Baudelaire, and Gautier; with the poets of the forest, of the sun, and not with those of the alcove. We can make peace with him for love of them.¹⁶⁶

Thus we see that critical opinion as revealed in Saintsbury, Squire, Eliot, Drinkwater, and others all agree that Swinburne was a master of metre and diction. The new combinations of metre and rhythm are so many and so fortunate in his verse, the effect he produces is so incisive, that his use of metre may be looked upon as an achievement of genius. On the thought-content, however, there is not such general agreement. James Douglas holds that the complexity of metre is a proof of the strength of Swinburne's intellect; Eliot, on the other hand, believes he is a poet who does not think. The reason why there is such diverse idea on this point is probably explained by Chesterton:

When we come to ethics and philosophy, doubtless we find Swinburne in full revolt, not only against the temperate idealism of Tennyson, but against the genuine piety and moral enthusiasm of people like Mrs. Browning. But, here again, Swinburne is very English, nay he is very Victorian, for his revolt is illogical. ... Unfortunately Swinburne

166. Ibid., p. 156

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rebelled against Nature first and then tried to rebel against religion for doing exactly the same thing that he had done.¹⁶⁷

A study of Mrs. Meynell's views of Swinburne brings to light her general agreement with other Victorian critics on the beauty of his metre and the felicity of his diction. However, her Catholic insistence upon the merit or demerit of the poetic matter dampened her enthusiasm and confused her critical mind even though she appreciated the virtuosity of Swinburne's manner.

Criticism of Tennyson: While Swinburne, of all poets, most defied the maxim that the great art is to conceal art, Tennyson made "somewhat too much show of the hiding of his art."¹⁶⁸ When the latter first published his poems, there was little to impress itself as remarkable originality of style; and "this was as it should be", says Drinkwater, "it is only the eccentric in art that arrests garrulous attention."¹⁶⁹ But the readers of later volumes became aware that here was a poet in the best traditions of English literature, a poet proud of his ancestry -- and

167. G. K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 181

168. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 82

169 John Drinkwater, op. cit., p. 66

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prepared to add to the great literary heritage of our language. Fifty years after his death Tennyson was hailed as a great poet; then a reaction, small and insidious, set in and began to corrupt literary opinion, changing esteem into disfavour. It was with the purpose of upholding Tennyson and of proving his inherent poetic genius that many Victorian critics wrote appreciations of the work of this great Englishman.

If Alice Meynell defended Tennyson against the contemporary reaction to his verse, one of the reasons was her dislike for too much modern French influence on English literature. She says:

Now, while we meet the effect of the French coat in our seventeenth century, of the French light verse in our earlier eighteenth century, and of French philosophy in our later, of the French Revolution in our Wordsworth, of French painting in our nineteenth-century studios, of French fiction -- and the drags are still running -- in our libraries, of French poetry in our Swinburne, of French criticism in our Arnold, Tennyson shows the effect of nothing French whatever.¹⁷⁰

She could not easily forgive Matthew Arnold for lauding the French precision and taste, and her attack on him glances with irony as she says that his knowledge of things French resembles his manner of speaking the language -- "it has a decidedly English accent."¹⁷¹ Not that she disliked

170. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 83

171. Ibid., p. 83

things French -- "From mediaeval Provence there is not an English poet who does not own inheritance";¹⁷² her quarrel was with the imitators and mimickers who were forgetting the English tradition in their attention to foreign influences. But to her, Tennyson was a great poet in his own right. He clother his poetic thought in rich imagery and equisitely modulated verse and he was the master poet of landscape. Indeed, she considered him one of the few fountain-head poets of the world and most critics agree, less inclusively, however, that Tennyson or Browning were the fountain stones of Victorian poetry:

There was a definitely Tennysonian school, a number of accomplished and genuine poets who would almost certainly have written differently if it had not been for the direct influence of the master, who, moreover, considerably affected the poetic expression of many, indeed, most of his celebrated contemporaries.¹⁷³

Nor was Tennyson, in Mrs. Meynell's eyes, entirely without fault. She recognized that the cause if the reaction against him was an occasional unwelcome mannerism in his work -- a certain foppishness or courtliness -- and an excessive ease, finish and neatness of verse, both of which obscured the extraordinary beauty of his lines.

172. Ibid., p. 82

173. John Drinkwater, Victorian Poetry, p. 81

What Alice Meynell admired in Tennyson was his intellectual power, illustrated most of all in his accurate and clear perception of nature. Never at any time did he alter Nature or its truths in his descriptions, as did Coleridge or even Wordsworth. In "The Ancient Mariner" Coleridge treats the sun, moon and stars as apparitions -- his senses are sometimes too spiritual for an accurate "holding of the mirror up to Nature".¹⁷⁴ Wordsworth, on the other hand, gets too artificial. In "Hartleap Well" he describes a blighted hollow where grass will no longer grow because "an innocent stag had broken his heart in a leap from the rocks above;"¹⁷⁵ she says Wordsworth is cruel to assign such sympathy to Nature especially because "the daily sight of the world blossoming over the agonies of beast and bird is made less tolerable to us by such a fiction."¹⁷⁶

Not so Tennyson. It was, she maintains, his intellect that kept him from such absurdities. He gave the reader a new apprehension of Nature and the poetry in it by the Tennysonian note of splendour. "He showed the perpetually

174. Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads

175. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 86

176. Ibid., p. 89

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transfigured landscape in transfiguring words."¹⁷⁷ Even in describing the conventional scenes, mountains, castles, elves and the like, all of which others have outworn, Tennyson invests them with a magic, a romance, a poetic vision that cannot but attract our hearts as well as our heads. In "A Splendour Falls" "what castle walls have stood in such a light of old romance, where in all poetry is there a sound wilder than that of those faint horns of elfland"?¹⁷⁸ Here is the flight, the remoteness that to Alice Meynell was supreme poetry.

Tennyson achieves, too, the yonder side of imagery which is the poetry of complete simplicity:

'On one side lay the ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.'
Here is no taint of manner, no pretty posture or
habit, but the simplicity of poetry and the
simplicity of Nature, something on the yonder
side of imagery.¹⁷⁹

To support her opinion she states that George Meredith considered that this passage had reached the high-water mark of English style. And John Drinkwater says:

177. Ibid., p. 84

178. Ibid., p. 89

179. Ibid., p. 81

The simplicity of ignorance is inevitably bald commonplace, but the simplicity slowly achieved out of a vast poetic experience may be 'Crossing the Bar'.¹⁸⁰

Unlike Saintsbury who thinks that Tennyson's blank verse is highly successful, Mrs. Meynell maintains that it is used generally in his weakest kind of work. Too much ease, no vitality, is her charge. Some poets of the day, she confesses, try to make literature too difficult (probably a judgment of Browning), but Tennyson shows us that ease of manner may be even more dangerous. From Coventry Patmore she quotes that 'poetry should confess but not suffer from its difficulties'.¹⁸¹ She does admit, however, that there are magnificent passages at the close of "The Vision of Sin" and in "Lucretius". Blank verse, Eliot believes is at its best in drama where the poet's idiom "must be comprehensive of all the voices, but present at a deeper level than is necessary when the poet speaks only for himself."¹⁸² ... and later he states "There is much, and varied, fine blank verse in the nineteenth century: the nearest to colloquial speech is that of Browning -- but significantly in his monologues rather than in his plays."¹⁸³

180. John Drinkwater, op. cit., p. 57

181. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 81

182. T. S. Eliot, op. cit., p. 61

183. Ibid., p. 62

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Drama in Tennyson is not great. According to Mrs. Meynell the action is vivacious rather than vital, and the sentiment is not universal. He needed a stronger stimulus than his times provided and he reached only occasionally the level of high tragedy or dramatic terror. Likewise did his blank verse rarely reach greatness.

If Tennyson is true to the accurate perception of Nature, he is also true to the experience of human anguish and intellect. "The religious question that arises upon the experience of death has never been asked with more sincerity and attention than by him."¹⁸⁴ It has been said of Tennyson that he wrote and thought according to an age that wavered, wandering between two worlds. Mrs. Meynell maintains that to this poem "In Memoriam" composed of 'dainty' stanzas, "no great struggle of reasoning was to be committed, nor would any such dispute be judiciously entrusted to the rhymes of a song of sorrow. Tennyson here proposes, rather than closes with the ultimate question of our destiny."¹⁸⁵ He proves himself strong enough elsewhere for the conflict, as in the poem "Lucretius", but so far "In Memoriam" considers, falters and confides. She maintains that Tennyson

184. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 86

185. Ibid., p. 86

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is sincere in his hesitation because he is living in a time of process and uncertainty. But she herself has no such uncertainty, but is secure in the possession of an eternal Faith. ... This is shown in her question: Are men so divided or "have they not rather already turned, in numbers, back to the parting, or meeting, of eternal roads?"¹⁸⁶

Tennyson's high ideals, of necessity, reflect in his poetry -- and our critic is ready to praise this purity of vision. "His are the exalted senses that sensual poets know nothing of. I think the sense of hearing as well as the sense of sight has never been more greatly exalted than by Tennyson."¹⁸⁷

It is true that unwelcome mannerisms are present in his verse, but they cannot take away the greatness. In "The Dream of Fair Women", Cleopatra is a ready-made heroine, but there are times when she leaves the pages of Tennyson's poorer style and "becomes one with Shakespeare's queen."¹⁸⁸ Drinkwater complains, too, that Tennyson is sometimes artificial or too assertively picturesque, but he says that most

186. Ibid.,

187. Ibid., p. 88

188. Ibid., p. 85

of his work "is not merely fine writing, it is style, and not to allow this is to be wanton about Tennyson altogether."¹⁸⁹ And, says Mrs. Meynell: "There is never a passage of manner but a great passage of style rebukes our dislike and recalls our heart again."¹⁹⁰ Let us choose a stanza from Tennyson's poem The Princess to illustrate this compelling statement:

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The firefly wakens: waken thou with me.¹⁹¹

The third line is just a shade too picturesque ... Then we have another one:

"Now lies the Earth all Danaë* to the stars," which stands out by itself as it would do in any context, by sheer imaginative power. Again in The Lady of Shalott compare:

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley sheaves.

with

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewelled shone the saddle leather.¹⁹²

189. John Drinkwater, op. cit., p. 68

190. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 80

191. The Poetical Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson
(The Princess) p. 213

192. Ibid., (The Lady of Shalott) pp. 28-29

She had too much confidence in the English love for poetry to believe that Tennyson would long remain unpopular:

How, valuing singleness of heart in the sixteenth century, splendour in the seventeenth, composure in the eighteenth; how with a spiritual ear for the note -- the wild wood note of the remoter song; how with the educated sense of style, the liberal sense of ease; how, in a word, fostering Letters and loving Nature, shall that choice nation within England long disregard these virtues in the nineteenth-century master?¹⁹³

Criticism of Browning: The criticism of Browning has the tone of an apology -- first for his obscurity and then for his contempt of form. The obscurity is explained away by the complexity of the Victorian age, which she says makes later demands of thought on the poet than did earlier times. The masterpieces of the Elizabethan poetry might contain the single notes of a song and yet remain masterpieces. When read in later times they bring their own age with them and tend to make the complex mind relax. In this modern period of our literature, however, the language has lost its freshness, the accumulated inheritance of the ages is handed on to us, and modern poetry must needs offer something new. Never is Mrs. Meynell more Victorian than when making this plea, she says: "Granted that modern poetry must be thoughtful or nothing, and that thought is difficult, we shall here have a sufficient apology for more than half of Browning's obscurity."¹⁹⁴ Elsewhere she accused Swinburne of having a puny

193. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 80

194. Ibid., p. 94

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intellect and being thrice a poet. Is there not eccentricity here?

How make apology for the other half of Browning's obscurity and for his so-called 'contempt' of form? -- Herein lies the value of her criticism. Mrs. Meynell sees in him the gay artist wanting to be shrewd rather than profound in his mental analysis; taking a keen delight in intricate paths of thought. He is curious in human things, interested, experimental, and he preserves a sane cheerfulness altogether characteristic of himself. She recognizes his robust optimism, but surely Browning loses something by this broad tolerance of his. "A mind less serene, whole, scientific, and independent might oftener be touched, or hurt or discouraged into seeking a lofty and lovely idea which is rare in his poetry."¹⁹⁵

Her discussion of the form of his poetry reveals her love for music and rhythm. At times he troubles the reader with grammatical obscurity or an over-tenseness of thought which to Mrs. Meynell are mannerisms, not Browning in his greatest moments. Other Victorian critics believe that Browning, far from being hampered by the grammatical, was developing a poetic style necessary to himself. Drinkwater says: "Browning . . . was deliberately carrying out some

195. Ibid., p. 96

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technical purpose, and directed by some instinct or other, was shaping his material as he wished, and not being beaten by it."¹⁹⁶ Chesterton, too, although he did not think much of the obscurity of Browning, upheld him for his style and form; "You may not happen to like his style, but he did. To say that he had not enough mastery over form to express himself perfectly like Tennyson or Swinburne is like criticizing the griffin of a mediaeval gargoyle without even knowing that it is a griffin; treating it as an infantile and unsuccessful attempt at a classical angel."¹⁹⁷ Mrs. Meynell seems to miss altogether Browning's love of the grotesque. Her criticism is curiously narrow when, in giving the reason for the other half of Browning's obscurity, she says: "The rest must, as usual, be ascribed to the mere construction of his phrases; he has his own way of dropping out articles and other little words, which leads to grammatical ambiguities never, perhaps, suspected by the author himself, and greatly to be lamented; grammatical obscurity is, perhaps, the one obscurity of which the reader has a right to complain."¹⁹⁸

Her love of musical cadence is, however, satisfied in many lines of his beautiful Pippa Passes, which, she

196. John Drinkwater, op. cit., p. 75

197. G. K. Chesterton, op. cit., p. 170

198. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 94

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hastens to add, is not therefore the most intellectual of all Browning's works. At rare moments his poetry becomes real melody, when a higher, fresher thought brings with it "its own inevitable music".¹⁹⁹ "No poet has written fuller, more important, and more significant music than Browning at these rare moments".¹⁹⁹ Quoting from The Return of the Druses she shows how at times exquisite music sweeps out indeliberately:

Dost thou snow-swathe thee kinglier, Lebanon,
Than in my dreams?¹⁹⁹

It is evident from this criticism that music and rhythm are essential, in Mrs. Meynell's eyes to the beauty of poetry. To her Swinburne was thrice a poet only because of his 'sublime virtuosity'; to her, Browning, the poet of difficult thoughts would hardly have been a poet if she could not have traced in his lines, often the notes of a fugue, sometimes the rhythm of a tune, and rarely something comparable to "Schumann's significant sentence of notes".²⁰⁰

As it is, Mrs. Meynell confesses Browning to be one of "the most original personalities of contemporary literature".²⁰⁰

199. Ibid., p. 96

200. Ibid., p. 97

Criticism of George Meredith: Alice Meynell, in a criticism of the poetry of George Meredith, discusses his philosophy, his marvellous vocabulary and his metrical skill. There is a lack of enthusiasm about this essay, the reason for which may be only surmised. It is probably that she felt obliged to make a contribution to the criticism of his work in an age that rejected this loyal poet friend. It may be that she disagreed with his philosophy, and indeed such disagreement hampers her criticism noticeably. Another deciding factor in bringing her to discuss his poetry may have been that Francis Thompson attributed her favourite quality of 'wildness' to one of Mr. Meredith's odes. If 'the poet' as she called Thompson, was able to assign this distinction to even one of Meredith's poems, his work deserved his critical remarks. Thompson said: "To say it is not a perfect poem would be mild. It challenges all order; it has every fault within a poet's compass, except the tame faults, except lack of inspiration."²⁰¹

More than half the study is an examination of Meredith's conception of Nature. Chesterton says that no one except the Greeks ever took Nature "so naturally".²⁰²

201. Rev. F. K. Connolly, S.J., Literary criticisms of Francis Thompson, p. 186

202. G.K. Chesterton, op. cit., p. 146.

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In his Pantheistic view he made Nature all-important -- and Earth his one great love. With a touch of the epigrammatic Mrs. Meynell outlines George Meredith's creed -- "Thou shalt love thy mother Nature with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength. Thou shalt put thy whole trust in her. ... this is the first and great commandment; And the second is like unto it: 'Thou shalt not love thyself.'"²⁰²

She wonders how much of this Pantheism is really poetic matter to him, but answers her own question by saying that even in daily conversation he was wont to personify Nature in this way. She explains that she honours a Personality in Nature, a Lawgiver, to whose laws he willingly submits his intellect. Thus far Mrs. Meynell might follow him without too much objection. But then she says:

It is when he professes to draw from Nature the tables of the Moral Law that we question the poet who limits himself, who circumscribes himself, by the art of poetry, who takes refuge, as it were, in its imagery, who encloses himself within the boundaries of the art, and also gives himself the liberties of the fancy without which poetry is not poetry.²⁰⁴

203. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 343

204. Ibid., p. 344

After thus stating her stand, she maintains that Meredith is not consistent in his belief. He professes that Nature is supreme, but if he really believed this in all its implications, would he be able to love a child or a friend with a personal affection? Would he not rather love the species, the genus? never the single person; Nature cares nothing for the unit.

From Meredith's point of view all morality is drawn from conscience -- for him there is no greater sanction. Mrs. Meynell cannot agree and she says: "Morality is assuredly the greatest fact on earth; but as assuredly Earth does not suffice for it."²⁰⁵ Then she sketches a pathetic image to illustrate her point:

In our human kind we have all seen some foolish little mother looking with unintelligent wonder upon an illustrious son. If Earth is, as Meredith will have her, the mother of morality, then is morality such an alien son.²⁰⁶

It is the firm philosophical stand, revealed with plain though deadly courtesy that gives this criticism its merit.

Mrs. Meynell had her own purpose for discussing the philosophy before the poetic merit of Meredith's verse. "It is proper to put this philosophic matter first, before the

205. Ibid., p. 345

206. Ibid.

aesthetic appreciation of Meredith, because with Meredith a sort of passing bell has rung and the Victorian orthodoxy is certainly no longer safe.²⁰⁷ Since she has stressed the fact that Meredith, especially in his poetry, aimed at teaching explicitly and implicitly, it is necessary for her as a Catholic to give first her ideas on his philosophy.

She considers as his best, Meredith's poems of Nature. They express his tenderness, his rapture of heart, his incomparable alertness and sweetness of observation. J. B. Priestly makes the same judgment; "And it is the secret of the enduring appeal of his finest poetry that it does reveal Nature, the woods and flowers and birds and clouds all bathed in this clear golden light, as Nature has never been revealed before by any poetry."²⁰⁸ But from Mrs. Meynell we look in vain for illustrations of this beauty such as Priestly gives in a brief quotation from one of Meredith's poems where he became his own skylark:

For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging and up,
Our valley is his golden cup,
And he the wine which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes.²⁰⁹

207. G. K. Chesterton, op. cit., p.142.

208. J. B. Priestly, George Meredith, p. 111

209. Ibid., p. 112

Surely the appeal was there; she hurries on, however, to discuss very briefly the vitality of words in his drama and the peculiar metrical skill of his poetry.

Meredith was both a poet and a thinker; he had an unusually fine and vigorous intellect and a rich and teeming imagination. His mind worked with lightning-like rapidity; one thought swiftly followed another and these thoughts set fire to a train of images. Yet there is a curious rejection of all these qualities in Mrs. Meynell's critical study -- apparently because she recognized her limitations and knew that she was not capable of coping with his philosophy or with his swiftness of imagery. She is not prepared to present herself either as a metaphysician or as a philosopher and for this precise reason she is a type of critical integrity.

Criticism of Patmore: If Alice Meynell's criticism of Meredith's poetry confesses her own limitations, the study of Patmore represents her most constant and ambitious effort to extol a gift which she held superior. And if she blames Meredith for consciously making an effort to teach his pantheistic philosophy, the reader can accuse her of attempting to teach the meaning and beauty of

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Patmore's poetry. For Patmore, of all poets is the one who best fulfilled her peculiar tests; to her he is the poet of great sincerity, of high mysticism. She has found him strong in disciplines, free in delight, orderly and wild at once. He is also, in her analysis, possessed of tremendous mental powers; he is -- and here he comes closest to her understanding -- a "lonely watcher of the skies".²¹⁰ She has found him, also, the master of the fusion of thought and word, possessor of that classic quality, the sharpest and most severe word of criticism. Her ultimate praise, however, is reserved for his ultimate simplicity, the naked simplicity beyond imagery, achieved only rarely, but often enough to establish him as a major genius.

Mrs. Meynell wrote more than one criticism of Patmore. In the public press had appeared many charming articles of two people of genius advocating each other's talents. He had, several times, suggested the appointment of Mrs. Meynell as Poet Laureate; as the years denied to Patmore what she believed was his rightful place among the

210. Alice Meynell, op. cit., (Coventry Patmore) p. 129

poets, Alice Meynell became more and more insistent in the championship of his cause. She wrote essays in Merry England, The National Observer, The Weekly Register, The Athenaeum, The Outlook, The Catholic Encyclopedia. She wrote prefaces to her own selection of his verses, The Poetry of Pathos and Delight and to a reprint of Angel in the House, she made valuable by-comment in The Pall Mall Gazette and The Dublin Review. The ideas put forth in all these articles are summed up in one final and lasting memorial, an essay entitled Coventry Patmore. The whole tone of this piece of classic prose is one of high admiration; it gives the impression of a defense in which she would instruct the reader in a better understanding of Patmore and lead him to appreciate fully the great genius of The Unknown Eros.

All critics agree that there is a great difference between Patmore's earlier and later verse. Saintsbury says that the earlier poetry has less thought and flows in easy fluent measures, while in the later, "not only is the metre Pindaric, but the diction and the thought-ordnance are 'metaphysical' in the highest degree".²¹¹ Speaking of Angel in the House and The Unknown Eros, he adds: "and it

211. George Saintsbury, op. cit., p. 385

is quite certain that no "scholar" (with the quotes) of the thirtieth century will ever for one moment allow identity of authorship".²¹² Alice Meynell gives almost the same argument in a somewhat more favourable light: "To prophesy that the odes of Coventry Patmore shall be confessed, a hundred years hence, high classic poetry, is assuredly to promise the critics of a hundred years hence, high classic quality in their judgment."²¹³ She admits that the first poem is not great in the same way as the odes. She says again: "The mental apprehension of poetry can be put to the proof by Patmore's odes -- and indeed by not a few passages of the condemned Angel in the House."²¹⁴

The loneliness of The Unknown Eros is what makes the greatest appeal to Mrs. Meynell. Such solitude is not merely accidental . . . "Moreover, The Unknown Eros, although we may attempt images of sidereal distance to express its profound flight, has the more dreadful solitude of an experience, and goes far in an inverse flight, through the essentially single human heart --

212. Ibid., p. 386

213. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 126

214. Ibid., p. 131

intimately into time and space, remotely into the heart of hearts."²¹⁵

Hardly is she able to grasp this elusive quality -- but she undertakes to know and watch it -- the rapt and vigilant reader is the one to be tested by this poetry. Why, she wonders, do so few readers become acquainted with it? If the meaning of the verse is not clear, at least Patmore's pure diction is not to blame as is Browning's grammatical errors in some of his poems -- "Patmore's pure diction, uttered in the composure that gives high dignity to his most poignant poems, permits no such baffling of inquiry."²¹⁶

With a definite tone of championship, she then attempts to explain the meaning of some of the odes and is resolved to leave nothing undone to make Patmore intelligible -- to her he is all-intelligible. A note of sarcasm closes this section when she adds that the only ode really known to English readers is The Toys, one which contains less essential poetry than any of the others. "We should have expected something different from the literary liberty and

215. Ibid., p. 127

216. Ibid., p. 132

literary variety of England."²¹⁷

The fusion of thought and word in poetry may be compared to the fusing of metal into metal by fire or by pressure in the cold. It was a consideration of Patmore's genius in this respect that led Alice Meynell to follow out this concept and to say: "mind and body, where tidal thought and feeling are quick with the blood and various with the breath of life, give a juster, as well as a simpler, and a human image of a vital poem."²¹⁸ From this she goes on to establish her own definition: "The image of warm life is the general measure of poetry".²¹⁸ Patmore achieves ultimate pathos in his ode Eurydice, but with "profoundly conscious art",²¹⁹ she says. He is able to marry terror to joy in The Day after To-morrow, and to show the extremity of grief in Departure.

We should expect Mrs. Meynell to mention here that quality of 'wildness', that designed magnificence of excess which she looked for in the greatest poetry. She compares Patmore's mind to a beautiful garden, rigidly planned and

217. Ibid., p. 131

218. Ibid., p. 128

219. Ibid.,

ordered at the beginning, but later set free, given over to time and sun. "Comparable to such a garden is Coventry Patmore's mind, obedient to an ancient law, but wildly natural under an inspiration of visiting winds and a splendid sun of genius."²²⁰

The poetry of complete simplicity is Patmore's, too, she believes; lines of great simplicity may be gathered from the odes "with both hands". Less admiring critics might not have been so hasty in their praise. We should expect to find some examples, such as we choose at random from Amelia:

God makes as if He least knew how to guard
The treasure He loves best, simplicity. ²²¹

It was the child spirit in Patmore that she loved best of all; to it he owed the greatness of his poetry. For Patmore never lost the ardour and the mystery of that long and interminable moment -- "It remained the companion of his complete intellect, the rapture of his profoundly experienced heart, the strange and delicate witness of manly sorrows."²²²

220. Ibid.,

221. Collected Poems of Coventry Patmore, p. 35

222. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 135

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Mrs. Meynell does not close without giving us his high conception of the art of poetry and his belief in it as a power for good. "No poet ever had a greater value for poetry or attributed to it a greater dignity than consecrated it in Patmore's heart".²²³ As a power, it could not for him take the place of religion as it did for Matthew Arnold, but he valued a country chiefly for its poets. "So", says this critic, urgent with counsel to the last line, "must we learn to do, and to value her for him."²²³

C. OTHER CRITICAL OPINIONS OF ALICE MEYNELL

Shakespeare: Alice Meynell's appreciation of Shakespeare was a "continual consciousness"²²⁴ rather than any definite belief in his poetic theories. "We all know Shakespeare as it were, privately", is her remark, "and thus a demand for words about him touches our autobiography".²²⁵ She never wrote a line or made a judgment without submitting, knowingly or unknowingly, to the supreme authority of the master. Through the fibre of her verse, in the rhythm of her daily prose, we meet, almost

223. Ibid., p. 136

224. Ibid., p. 289

225. Ibid., p. 41

imperceptibly, words or expressions that have their origin in Shakespeare and are put to another use. Superfluous Kings is a title of an essay on the use of a single word to express irony; it gains its chief merit from the discussion of the royalty of Shakespeare's tragic characters. The Little Language, The Point of Honour, and Hearts of Controversy are other titles equally misleading.

"Thoughts about Shakespeare cannot pretend to be new",²²⁶ she says, but with her original genius, she loves to give them a novel turn. She would have you believe by the title Rhythm of Life that there is a tide in the affairs of men somewhat different from what Shakespeare meant. She would like to claim that with Mercutio, vanished from the English stage, the spirit of thoughtful laughter and the lightness of heart not found in Victorian literature. She invests Shakespeare's heroines with greatness by attributing to him a master passion for chastity. The lovely simplicity of Desdemona, the indomitable will of Helena, the modest devotion of Virgilia, and the integrity of Cordelia were all directed towards the constancy of a pure love. The absence of

226. Ibid., p. 40

purity is none the less felt in the beauty and brilliancy of his wanton characters. "Does this recognition of Shakespeare's master passion look like the claim to a discovery? Heaven forbid, for it should not."²²⁷

Never do we find direct reference to or comparison with Shakespeare in Mrs. Meynell's criticism of other poets. "Shakespeare always excepted"²²⁸ is her denial of any comparison. The absence of any attempt to use Shakespeare as a standard may again confess her limitations and be the best guarantee of her critical integrity.

A poem on the Tercentenary is her only address to the great Elizabethan and expresses, better than criticism could ever do, her deep feeling of inadequacy before his greatness.

Now that my life has shared
Thy dedicated date, O mortal, twice,
To what all-vain embrace shall be compared
My lean enclosure of thy paradise:

To ignorant arms that fold
A poet to a foolish breast? The Line
That is not, with the world within its hold?
So, days with days, my days encompass thine.

Child, Stripling, Man -- The sod.
Might I talk little language to thee, pore
On thy last silence? O thou city of God,
My waste lies after thee, and lies before. ²²⁹

227. Ibid., p. 42

228. Ibid., p. 346

229. Ibid., pp. 383-384

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REMARKS ON EIGHTEENTH POETRY

The Milton of the lyrics is a seventeenth-century poet albeit not a mystic; the Milton of the epics is, except in a few passages, prophetically an eighteenth-century poet; -- Dryden - it is difficult to realize -- lived only to see the new age appear, but he was of the new age. Addison, from head to foot, a representative of the eighteenth century, its own man, yet lived no more than nineteen years of it. 230

Mrs. Meynell loved Milton's poetry especially his lyric verse; the measure, moderation and shapeliness of the eighteenth century poetry does not appear in that part of his work.

It is with a touch of satire that she mentions Addison. He was wholly eighteenth century in his moderation and apparent perfect propriety. She seems to have inherited Dr. Johnson's distrust of this classical 'Atticus'.

It is a deeply significant fact -- it may seem at first glance disproportionate or even grotesque to say so, but it is said very gravely -- that Cowper was not saved from the passion of grief by the measured latinized diction, and was not rescued from despair by the heroic couplet. 231

Cowper seems to be an exception to her theory that the Latinized-English diction was not adequate to express emotion. In the case of the lines on his mother's picture

230. Ibid., p. 328

231. Ibid., p. 330

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his moderate and gentle phrase conveys the pang of the poem. Cowper's regret for his mother and the past speaks a tongue that no man can, at any time, misinterpret.

The world of Johnson and Gray was "flippant or reasonable, or rhetorical, the alien world 232

The literature of madness was "wholly English, whereas the English eighteenth century was not wholly English. 233

Truly the age of the 'Rape of the Lock' and 'The Elegy' was an age of great wit and great poetry. Yet it was untrue to itself. 234

In the Introduction to Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, V. Sackville-West refers to her opinion of Gray and his Elegy. ": it was a brave assessor that could dare to exclude Gray's 'Elegy' from her anthology compiled by a 'gatherer intent upon nothing except the quality of poetry.' The 'Elegy' failed to satisfy this gatherer's standard. 'It is', she writes, 'so near to the work of genius as to be most directly, closely and immediately rebuked by genius.' Mediocrity is the now expected word; and sure enough, a line or two later, she gently and logically uses it in the further disparagement of poor Gray." 235

232. Ibid., p. 329

233. Ibid., p. 55

234. Ibid., p. 59

235. V. Sackville-West, op. cit., p. 20

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Nineteenth-century poetry: As a Romantic Mrs. Meynell loved the great poets of the early nineteenth century. It has already been shown how she revered Wordsworth's love of nature, Coleridge's and Blake's love of the mysterious. Both Blake and Wordsworth were admired also for the child-spirit that they manifested. Mrs. Meynell often mentioned Shelley, too, as one in whose heart the spirit of immortal childhood tarried all his life-time.

And she writes of Keats thus:

Keats was a great poet of the imagination and would have been, with other examples and a riper life, an infinitely great poet of the imaginative and impassioned intellect. As it is he is praised as a poet of the senses, whereas the truth is that his senses were not rich, but sickly.²³⁶

In his life-time Keats had said that his greatest delight had been to watch the growth of flowers. Now that he is dead, she would like to produce some poetry that would show some small signs of the flowering of Keats' genius. In a poem On Keats' Grave she calls on Prosperine to inspire her:

Out of the small grave and the thoughts I love
Stir thou in me and move,
If haply a song of mine may seem a dim
Sweet flower grown over him.²³⁷

236. Alice Meynell, Children of the Old Masters, p. 82

237. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 190

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Remarks on Women Poets: Although Mrs. Meynell fought for the sexlessness of art, women poets did not altogether satisfy her critical demands. She recognized that Mrs. Browning and Christina Rossetti were poets of a high order -- but not among the greatest.

Of Mrs. Browning, she says:

Mrs. Browning is an intellectual poet . . .
It is by her gentleness that she speaks to
the judicious ear. And for love of that
lovely virtue we forgive its excess -- Mrs.
Browning's too much tolerance and generosity.²³⁸

She did not like the exaggerated attempt at strength that Mrs. Browning displayed. It detracted from the quality of her womanhood. But of a woman, nevertheless, she demands intellectual power. She did not find this quality too often in the poetry of Christina Rossetti. Of the latter poet she says: "Christina Rossetti is not often on the heights but all her access is by poetry".²³⁹ Mrs. Meynell compares this poetry to thin gold leaf, thin because it shows little evidence of critical effort. It is gold notwithstanding. Swinburne's praise of Christina Rossetti is much more lavish; perhaps Mrs. Meynell sees some affinity in the verse of these

238. Alice Meynell Prose and Poetry, pp. 355 and 353

239. Ibid., p. 146

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two poets.

Knowing Alice Meynell's high conception of the art of the poet and her keen understanding of the feminine mind, we can easily understand her dissatisfaction with the work of poets of her own sex. Much as she would like to champion women, her critical integrity keeps her sincere in her judgments.

E.

CONCLUSION

Therefore it may be concluded that Alice Meynell was a critic of poetry. We have studied the qualities of her own verse, traced out her theories of poetics, and examined her application of these theories to the poetry of others. We have found that there is a steady consistency in her ideas, both in what she wrote herself and in what she demanded from others. It is evident that Alice Meynell is a type of critical integrity and that she has made a contribution to the criticism of poetry.

CHAPTER III

148.

ALICE MEYNELL -- CRITIC OF PROSE

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- B. Criticism of Language
- C. Criticism of Character
 - 1. Characters of Literature
 - (a) Characters of Dickens
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 - 2. Women in Literature
 - (a) Women who influenced great writers
 - 1. Mrs. Johnson
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 - 1. Jane Austen
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 - (d) Other Remarks on Women Characters
- D. Conclusion

ALICE MEYNELL -- CRITIC OF PROSE

149.

A. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Alice Meynell's criticism of prose is largely a study of language and of character. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine, first, her search for purity in word and phrase and, secondly, her close analysis of character. Gifted with a love for her native tongue, with a knowledge of several European languages at her command, Mrs. Meynell was well prepared to act as a critic of language. And keen watcher of the human spirit, her interest in character extended not only to fictional creations but to the authors themselves with their inherent faults and qualities.

Not at all interested in the development of the novel as a literary type, making only rare references to plot, situation or narrative, she spent her critical energies on details of expression, style and motive. Miss Ann K. Tuell gives the explanation that the study of the novel may have required "more scholarship in its development than Mrs. Meynell pretended to in this special sphere".¹ The same critic goes on to state another reason equally probable: "We

1. Ann K. Tuell, Mrs. Meynell and Her Literary Generation,
p. 190

need for the full appraisal of fiction 'that modern heresy, the pride of life' and we should add - the lusts of the flesh".²

Mrs. Meynell kept her own ways and frequented her own by-paths. Her avoidance of the broader ways of criticism of prose, as well as her constant application to prose of theories of poetry give sometimes an alien and unusual turn to her remarks. But it must be confessed that in her campaign for right language, her demand for a vivid English style, and her knowledge of character, she has made a contribution to prose criticism. Her work will be discussed under the headings: (1) Criticism of Language, (2) Criticism of Character with sub-divisions (a) Characters in Literature, and (b) Women in Literature.

B. CRITICISM OF LANGUAGE

The most important heritage of the English writer is his language of dual derivation. The Latin heritage enables him to express outward composure and tranquillity; the Teutonic gives him words for close emotion and interior distress. Both elements are necessary to make the language complete;

2. Ibid., p. 191

the task of the master is to fuse the two exquisitely in his own practice that "words of the two schools are made to meet each other with a surprise and delight that shall prove them at once gayer strangers, and sweeter companions, than the world knew they were".³ Shakespeare does this with the most beautiful and the most sudden skill in such phrases as "Superfluous Kings", "A lass unparalleled", "multitudinous seas". But any tendency to emphasize one or other of the elements to the detriment of the other does harm to our incomparable language.

Mrs. Meynell does not ignore the necessary mingling of Saxon and Latin. She does complain, however, that some writers subject themselves too definitely to one or other influence. Addison was so affected by the Latin that his expression of emotion never seemed quite sincere or genuine:

Addison thus gave and took, until he was almost incapable of coming within arm's-length of a real or spiritual emotion.⁴

and again:

3. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 51

Addison had assuredly removed eternity far from the apprehension of the soul when his Cato hailed the "pleasing hope", the "fond desire"; and the touch of war was distant from him who conceived his "repulsed battalions" and "his doubtful battle".⁴

On the other hand, later writers than Addison become so interested in the language of common speech that the very simplicity of their work seemed less than literature:

What came afterwards, when simplicity and nearness were restored once more, was doubtless journeyman's work at times. Men were too eager to go into the workshop of language. There were unreasonable raptures over the mere making of common words.⁵

Mrs. Meynell believed that a language with all its construction visible was not fitted for the expression of deeper processes of thought whereas words of alien derivations had a spiritualizing effect.

In an essay A Corrupt Following she attacks the historian Gibbon for his slovenliness of grammar and his habit of a stilted style that he passed on to the writers of the nineteenth century. Although he himself is to be criticized for his bad grammar and his wrong use of Latin words, Mrs. Meynell praises his otherwise eminent elegance

4. Ibid., p. 52

5. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 174

of style and his stimulating narrative. She laments chiefly the influence of Gibbon on the language and style of later writers.

In grammar, he transgressed in several ways. He often made indirect and incomplete references: " 'a peasant and a soldier, his nerves yielded not easily to the impressions of sympathy' ".⁶ He used dangling infinitives and participles: " 'Instead of receiving with manly resolution the inevitable stroke, his unavailing cries and entreaties disgraced the last moments of his life' ".⁶ A singular subject may be found with a plural verb, the conjunctions 'either' and 'or' are used incorrectly and the persistent use of 'which' as a relative pronoun is annoying. Says Mrs. Meynell: "It was these laxities that took the public taste mightily, "⁶ and this 'corrupt following' had a damaging effect on English style.

Not only in grammar did Gibbon impose this "strut of style",⁶ but in the stilted use of words, as: " 'peruse', 'extensive', 'the mask of hypocrisy', 'the voice of flattery' "⁷ With such words and expressions was built up a

5. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 174

6. Ibid., p. 177

7. Ibid., p. 178

style proof against criticism and incapable of any power of vivid expression. Besides, the use of the shortened sentence for emphasis, the resort to balance and antithesis, and the too-frequent use of the passive voice may all be attributed to Gibbon. Macaulay imitated the short sentence as a device of historical surprise: " 'Suspicion was equivalent to proof. Trial to condemnation'. 'The strict economy of Vespasian was the source of his magnificence' ".⁸ In these examples we always find the balance and the passive voice as well.

Writers great and small were influenced by these mannerisms. Mrs. Meynell proves her point by quoting from Dickens, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and even Ruskin to show that no one escaped.

Ruskin, according to her, was the "first writer of pure prose"⁹ and yet he has one patch which is a "nether Gibbon"; 'A steep bank of earth that has been at all exposed to the weather, contains in it . . . features capable of giving high gratification to the observer'⁹."

"When Mr. Micawber confesses his 'gratifying emotions of no common description', he (Dickens) rallies a

8. Ibid.,

9. Ibid., p. 180

lofty and a distant Gibbon."⁹ But Dickens discarded these high-sounding words with a splendid laugh and charged them to Mr. Micawber's own character.

When the critic Lewes told Charlotte Bronte to study Jane Austen it was for the purpose of acquiring this "second-class English"¹⁰, maintains Mrs. Meynell. But Charlotte Bronte found this language inadequate for the expression of vital emotion. It was greatly to her credit that at times, at least, she was able to throw it aside. It must have been with rapture that she found this simplicity for herself. Says Mrs. Meynell again: "Encumbered by this drift and refuse of English, Charlotte Brontë yet achieved the miracle of her vocabulary".¹¹ The value of women to literature could not be denied when Miss Bronte was able to discover the need for a simple vivid style.

Mrs. Meynell herself tried to remedy the influence of Gibbon by making a plea for the use of the relentlessly right word. She did not deplore fewness of words, but inadequacy and imprecision of speech and she says in one of her essays: "For, doubtless, right language enlarges the

10. Ibid., p. 101

11. Ibid., p. 98

soul as no other power or influence may do".¹² It may happen that her vigilance of thought and expression may be among the lasting contribution of her work to the language. That it was recognized in her own day cannot be denied since she was honoured by membership on the Academic Committee of the Royal Society. Sir Henry Newbolt, in the address of welcome made to Alice Meynell on this occasion said:

She has already done much to further the one definite purpose for which our Committee exists -- the maintenance of some principle of law or order in the forming of our intuitions and in the verbal expression of them . . . it would be impossible to over-estimate the value of Mrs. Meynell's essays to the general public.¹³

It seems evident, therefore, that Mrs. Meynell is a critic of language.

C.

CRITICISM OF CHARACTER

1. CHARACTERS OF LITERATURE

One of the main points of criticism in the novel is the author's delineation of character. It wins for him his title to tragedy or comedy, to satire or humour. And, whereas the examination of it is by no means the only measure for judging prose narrative, no critical statement on a novel is

12. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 83

13. Sir Henry Newbolt, Address of Reception quoted in Centenary Edition Alice Meynell from the National Book League.

of any value which has not dealt with its characters.

Mrs. Meynell does not attempt to judge the novel from every angle. Perhaps she was hardly qualified to do so. But her deep love for, and interest in, human nature was so vital that we could not expect her to pass by this opportunity of expressing her views and giving her interesting criticism. Not that she examined character to the exclusion of everything else. Dickens, the very novelist who might seem beyond her ken and sympathy brings forth her most liberal justice. She has praise unqualified for the drive of the Dickens narrative, "the hammering blow"¹⁴ of its advance. She has, with delight, mentioned the Dickens "watchfulness over inanimate things and landscape".¹⁵ And we find in her criticism, also, a championship of the style of Dickens -- defended for its descriptive vitality, its accuracy and its elegance. But when she says: "If I may define my own devotion to Dickens, it may be stated as chiefly, though not wholly, admiration of his humour, his dramatic tragedy, and his watchfulness over inanimate things and landscape"¹⁵, it is quite plain that his humour

14. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, (Dickens), p. 115

15. Ibid., p. 110

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and his dramatic tragedy will be criticized from the point of view of his characters.

Mrs. Meynell begins her treatment by a comparison of Dickens and Thackeray. Thackeray, she believes, gives us men as they are, Dickens pictures them as they ought to be. "Nothing", she says, "places him (Dickens) so entirely out of date as his trust in human sanctity, his love of it, his leap at it".¹⁶ If Dickens has many scoundrels, Thackeray has no saints. Of Thackeray's characters Mrs. Meynell says:

Helen Pendennis is not holy, for she is unjust and cruel; Amelia is not holy, for she is an egoist in love; Lady Castlewood is not holy, for she is jealous; nor is Colonel Newcome holy, for he is haughty; nor Dobbin, for he turns with a taunt upon a plain sister; nor Esmond, for he squanders his best years in love for a material beauty; and these are the best of his good people.¹⁷

Perhaps it is hard to conceive of a girl going through life without harbouring a thought of self, but says Mrs. Meynell:

it is very good for all of us to know that such a girl was thought of by Dickens, that he loved his thought, and that she is ultimately to be traced, through Dickens, to God.¹⁸

It is evident from these quotations that the moral value of

16. Ibid., p. 108

17. Ibid., p. 109

18. Ibid., p. 110

fiction was of prime importance to Mrs. Meynell. She wants fiction to teach and to do so according to her ideas. The idea that Thackeray's characters might teach even by their very faults does not seem to occur to her.

But Mrs. Meynell cannot forgive Dickens for making savage sport of women. Indeed she says: "Such a company of envious dames and damsels cannot be found among the persons of the satirist Thackeray"¹⁹. Of Dickens she remarks:

He takes for granted that the women, old and young, who are not his heroines, wage this war within the sex, being disappointed by defect of nature and fortune.¹⁹

and to prove that his women are envious:

Kate Nickleby's beauty brings upon her at first sight the enmity of her workshop companions; in the innocent pages of *Pickwick* the aunt is jealous of the niece and the niece retorts by wounding the vanity of the aunt as keenly as she may; and so forth through early books and late.¹⁹

The attack on the feminine sex, even the suggestions of its weaknesses, seems to arouse Mrs. Meynell's ire. If fiction did not have these faults in its characters, it would fail in its purpose to reflect life.

In her discussion of Dickens we find skilled defence

19. Ibid., p. 111

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for the art of caricature, the honest game between man and nature, and a relish for the art of two dimensions. She says:

It is not necessary that you should seize Mr. Pecksniff from beyond, and grasp the whole man and his destinies. The hypocrite is a figure, dreadful and tragic, a shape of horror; and Mr. Pecksniff is a hypocrite, and a bright image of heart-easing comedy.¹⁹

But Mrs. Meynell does not agree that Dickens the moralist should spoil his caricatures:

It is strange -- it seems to me deplorable -- that Dickens himself was not content to leave his wonderful hypocrite -- one who should stand imperishable in comedy -- in the two dimensions of his own admirable art.²⁰

After Dickens himself has enjoyed his hypocrite, he grasps him in the third dimension, finds him wanting, and leaves him defeated and undone.

A still greater fault is Dickens' attempt to reform his sinners.

"Truly, the most unpardonable thing Dickens did in those deplorable last chapters of his, was the prosperity of Mr. Micawber."²⁰ We had so much enjoyed the Micawbers in their precarious existence and financial difficulties,

20. Ibid., p. 113

that to learn that these exist no longer turns perfect comedy into dullness. It turns, says our critic, "the joyous impossibility of a figure of immortal fun into cold improbability".²¹

It is, indeed, Dickens the humourist, who is foremost and most precious. We thank Dickens for showing us interesting people who are inmates of comedy homes. "We thank him because they are comedy homes, and could not be ours or any man's; that is, we thank him for his admirable art."²²

Of Meredith's skill as a novelist, Mrs. Meynell is not prepared to say much except that poetry stands unrevealed in all his novels. Speaking of The Amazing Marriage, she says:

Poetry is the conspicuous secret of the book.
Poetry is the simple and apparent Carinthia
. . . And there are mystics who aver that all
the now unrevealed secrets of this human life
are obvious things that we daily and ignorantly
use -- things that we know yet do not
recognize.²³

Meredith's Carinthia, like Shakespeare's Helena is the too-obvious poetry of the book. Meredith writes of a courageous

21. Ibid., p. 114

22. Ibid., p. 122

23. Ibid., p. 141

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soul with the courage of his imagination, and he creates a character who to the poetic heart of Mrs. Meynell is the incarnation of real poetry:

The vitality which is the value of virtue, and of which beauty is but a suggestion, is hers, as it were fifty-fold. When she is not speaking, all the story is significant with her silence. . . . It was a Shakespearean act to give her life.²⁴

Mrs. Meynell revels in the poetry of Meredith's characters; she is not prepared to discuss the philosophical implications of his work.

Apart from the study of characters in the novel, Mrs. Meynell rarely discusses men characters. It is the purpose of this work to devote the next section to her treatment of women in literature. Before closing this section it may be noticed, however, that the diarist John Evelyn is criticized for not being able to picture children with humane understanding: "Evelyn has nothing to say about his little ones that has a sign of a smile in it",²⁵ and again:

So does the hurrying and ignoring of little-girl-children somewhat hamper the delight with which readers of John Evelyn admire his most admirable Mrs. Godolphin.²⁶

24. Ibid., p. 144

25. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 255

26. Ibid., p. 256

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This same lack of truth in art will be noticed in Mrs. Meynell's criticism of painting.

And if we doubt of Mrs. Meynell's sense of humour, we should notice what she says of Mr. Pepys as seen in Evelyn's diary:

In Evelyn's Diary, by the way, we meet Mr. Pepys, about some Admirability business, with so much solemnity that we hardly know him again.²⁷

This chance remark shows that Mrs. Meynell always tended to analyze character. Her interest in women caused her to write many of her great critical essays. These will be discussed in the next section.

2. WOMEN IN LITERATURE

In her criticism of the characters of literature we find that Alice Meynell's preference is, by a wide margin, in favour of women. Her husband, in compiling a group of her papers on this subject, chose to include in the selection such essays as related to women who had created literature or were by literature created. "Her own words", he says, in his Introductory Note, "have been in the compiler's mind: 'The genus of Humanity is obviously larger than the species, Womanhood; but the

27. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 239

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species has its own value, keen and intense.' "28 Mrs. Meynell held, very insistently, the belief that in the practice of literature and the arts women were the equal of men. Neither group should ask any indulgence of each other on the score of sex. She was also a firm champion of Woman's rights in the social and political world.

In the later Victorian age Woman was emerging as an individual. The ability to express herself, to live as man's social equal, was becoming more and more the fashion and many of the Victorian writers reflected this attitude in their works. George Meredith, who was closely associated with Mrs. Meynell, stood as a special Champion of female dignity. Chesterton maintains, however, that Meredith did not mean all he said and that even while espousing the cause of the fairer sex, he was always calmly assuming that man was the master. Mrs. Meynell, as an active woman of Letters, was no doubt influenced by the thoughts and writings of the time. Meredith's interest in helping women to express themselves wittily must have aroused her attention, although love of the epigram did not blind her to

28. Alice Meynell, Essays of To-Day and Yesterday
(Introductory Note Wilfrid Meynell), p. 5

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the moral dignity of the female sex.

The whole atmosphere of the period lent itself to greater freedom and greater emancipation. It is not surprising, then, that woman was often the subject to discussion and even ridicule. Her purity of morals, her reputation, her subjection to man was talked about and derided. The whole outlook on the question of woman's place in society was changing. It was, therefore, a time for Mrs. Meynell, strict shepherdess of her own thoughts, to take a stand on the subject and to champion those of her sex who were brave enough to live by principle or intelligent enough to make a contribution to literature. Alice Meynell felt keenly the deriding of the feminine sex. Not only did she react against the everyday attack on woman in Art and in the Press, but she criticized writers of better literary standing for throwing aspersion on characters well known to literature. She was fond, too, of espousing lost causes; she chose to take women writers whose fame had not been great and to discover something of value and beauty in their lives and works. Even when she writes about famous women authors or poets, there is always evident in the criticism an inclination to examine their qualities as women and to show how their sex relates

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to the peculiar charm or defect of their work.

It is our purpose to study the three main classes of women discussed by Mrs. Meynell.

1. Women whose lives influenced great writers: Mrs. Johnson, Hester Thrale, Steele's wife Prue, Mrs. Dingley of Swift's Journals.

2. Women authors of lesser importance, whose cause should be upheld: Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Wollstonecraft.

3. Women of greater literary importance: Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Jane Austen.

In delightful and original papers she shows a keen insight into the feminine mind and, in the first group especially, talks about great literary men at the same time in a manner that is novel, sincere, and enlightening. It is the purpose of this work to expose the critical data contained in these essays, and thereby to prove that Alice Meynell is a critic of women, of literature, and of society.

(a) Women whose lives influenced great writers:

The essay Mrs. Johnson should be discussed first in this group because it reveals Mrs. Meynell's respect for that great eighteenth figure whose wife is the subject of the study. The criticism here is directed against biographers who ridiculed Mr. Johnson for marrying a wife so much

older than himself. Macaulay, instead of directly attacking the man belittles the woman, saying: " 'She accepted, with a readiness which did her little honour, the addresses of a suitor who might have been her son' "²⁹. Garrick is another who, in his school reminiscences, describes Mrs. Johnson as grotesque. "Garrick is welcome to his remembrances",²⁹ says Mrs. Meynell. Men, she remarks, will trust Dr. Johnson with everything else, but will not trust him with regard to his wife.

Mrs. Meynell is ready to champion Mrs. Johnson. She rejects the nickname given her by biographers and assigns to her what is hers by right, the name of her husband. It was a wonderful thing in Johnson's life for him to have someone who really cared for him; the fact that she was capable of keeping his affection gives her character more beauty than Macaulay would wish to ascribe. She "satisfied one of the saddest human hearts",³⁰ says Mrs. Meynell, but the world, "assiduous to admire him",³⁰ hardly accords her human dignity. "Her epitaph, that does not name her, is in the greatest of English prose."³⁰

29. Alice Meynell Prose and Poetry (Mrs. Johnson) p. 195

30. Ibid., p. 197

There is a plea here for recognition of the fact that pure love in marriage contributes to greatness. This essay is also important in criticism as an attack on the "unerring effectiveness of Macaulay",³¹ the unkind mimicry of Garrick. It is, at the same time, an appreciation of the great and solitary genius of Dr. Johnson.

"What wish would he have had but that the language in the making whereof he took no ignoble part should somewhere, at some time, treat his only friend with ordinary honour?"³²

As is often her way, Mrs. Meynell returns to this same theme in a poem. Speaking of the older wife, she consoles Johnson by saying that soon Time will play a greater trick on her when her own daughter will outlive her. But the whole poem is a mark of homage to Dr. Johnson. In spite of Time's conjuring she pledges her respect to the great man of Letters.

To his devoted heart
Who, young, had loved his ageing mate for life,
In late lone years Time gave the elder's part,
Time gave the bridegroom's boast. Time gave a
younger wife.

31. Ibid., p. 196

32. Ibid., p. 193

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A wilder prank and plot
 Time soon will promise, threaten, offering me
 Impossible things that Nature suffers not --
 A daughter's riper mind, a child's seniority.

Oh, by my filial tears
 Mourned all too young, Father! on this my head
 Time yet will force at last the longer years,
 Claiming some strange respect for me from you, the dead.

Nay, nay! Too new to know
 Time's conjuring is, too great to understand.
 Memory has not died; it leaves me so --
 Leaning a fading brow on your unfaded hand.³³

Mrs. Meynell would here like to acknowledge Dr. Johnson as her literary Father, and to tell him that his memory is ever fresh to her old age. T. S. Eliot, in his essay on Milton acknowledges a similar ancestry when he speaks as a critic.

I think it is useful, . . . to keep in mind some critic of the past, of one's own type, by whom to measure one's opinions: a critic sufficiently remote in time, for his local errors and prejudices to be not identical with one's own. That is why I began by quoting Dr. Johnson . . . Because he was a poet himself, and a good poet, what he wrote about poetry must be read with respect. And unless we know and appreciate Johnson's poetry we cannot judge either the merits or the limitations of his criticism.³⁴

Elsewhere Eliot says that Johnson is a type of critical integrity: "Within his limitations he is one of the great critics; and he is a critic partly because he keeps within

33. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 89

34. T. S. Eliot, Selected Prose, p. 133

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his limitations".³⁵ It has been the purpose of this work thus far to show that Alice Meynell is a critic for the same reason. We have also proved that because she was a good poet, what she wrote about poetry is worthy of respect. Therefore, she may with right claim literary descentance from Dr. Johnson.

Hester Thrale: The biographers criticized in this essay on Mrs. Thrale are Macaulay, Boswell, and Fanny Burney. A deep love for Dr. Johnson is present in undertone and Mrs. Thrale is given all the interest belonging of right to a woman of her time.

The topic which starts off the discussion is Hester's second marriage to the Italian Piozzi and her dismissal of Dr. Johnson from her home. Fanny Burney had to make her story symmetrical. She was the one who drove away from Mrs. Thrale's house with Dr. Johnson, supposedly forever. Her manner of telling the story necessitated cruelty, Mrs. Meynell believes; in reality, Dr. Johnson was often received back at Mrs. Thrale's for visits and dinners. Fanny Burney, also, criticized Hester for marrying an Italian, but she herself married a Frenchman, thereby treating herself less

35. Ibid., p. 52

severely and with equal insecurity.

The "hostile" Boswell reported conversations of Dr. Johnson wherein Mrs. Thrale was discussed "in talk that would have been better forgotten".³⁶ Why was Boswell hostile if not because he was jealous of her friendship with Dr. Johnson?

And of Macaulay Mrs. Meynell says: "And all the world knows by heart how Mrs. Thrale's story became Macaulay's opportunity".³⁷ Mrs. Meynell is here stating what critics were beginning to see in Macaulay's style: the ability to build up the reputation of a character and to tear it down almost at once with an emphasis on some apparently trivial flaw or fault which spoiled the high conception established. Elsewhere he had used Johnson's shortsightedness and scrophulous face to depreciate his worth. This unerring effectiveness does not escape our critic.

Mrs. Meynell is the champion of woman's rights when she upholds Mrs. Thrale for her second marriage. Society frowned upon it, biographers treated it with ridicule, and even Dr. Johnson forgot that he himself had married a widow. But for Mrs. Thrale there was no sacrifice of principle.

36. Alice Meynell Prose and Poetry (Hester) p. 198

37. Ibid.,

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Indeed, says Mrs. Meynell:

. . . accepted and inherited principle,
with all its secure dignities ruled her
soul better than the more intimate pressure
of conscience has ruled souls greater than
hers.³⁸

Mrs. Thrale was always loyal in her affections. From her letters our critic has been able to prove that each love affair was a separate tie, and each one perfectly legitimate . . . love of preference for Dr. Collier, venerating solicitude for Dr. Johnson, strong connubial duty towards Mr. Thrale and her fervid and attractive passion for Piozzi. Why should biographers make savage sport of something good and sincere? Why criticize a woman for failing to fulfil her destiny and then criticize her for being resolved to fulfil her destiny? Victorian society was certainly not in a position to ridicule a woman of principle.

As a literary figure, Mrs. Thrale deserves mention for her verses, her humour and her allegories. Her writings, however, attract attention chiefly because of the indirect light thrown on Dr. Johnson. She loved to translate

38. Ibid., p. 199

epigrams into eighteenth-century verse and "had the honour to teach Johnson something about pauses".³⁹ She wrote marginal notes to Boswell's life "with an established consciousness of wit"⁴⁰ which not only makes the reader smile, but brings emphasis to the truth of the apparently casual story. Of her wit we read:

This, for instance, is hers. 'Who would believe Goldy when he told of a ghost? A man whom one could not believe when he told of a brother. It is questionable now whether he had a brother or not!'.⁴⁰

Another quotation throws light on Boswell's lack of manners:

And when Johnson the all-candid Boswell,
'Have you no better manners? That is your want', Mrs. Thrale's not is underlined,
'So it was'.⁴¹

Of Mrs. Thrale's works only the allegories remain and they are somewhat insignificant. Mrs. Meynell pays her a tribute not given to any other; it should suffice to sum up all that has been said:

It is not for her authorship that we keep her memory fresh, but for her goodness, her dutifulness, and her invincible courage in life and love.⁴²

39. Ibid., p. 204

40. Ibid., p. 203

41. Ibid., p. 204

42. Ibid., p. 205

Steele's Prue: The essay on Steele's wife is again a championship and this time it is Thackeray who has robbed Prue of her grace. Having saved all Steele's letters, Prue is blamed for being thrifty as her name is made to suggest. Steele himself was a drinker of too much wine; his biographers would make his wife the cause of his faults. "It is painful to me to complain of Thackeray", says Mrs. Meynell, "but see what a figure he makes of Prue in 'Esmond'. It is, says the nineteenth humorist, in defence against the pursuit of a jealous, neglected, or evaded wife that poor Dick Steele sends those little notes of excuse:⁴³ "and then he proceeds to quote several notes of Steele to his wife to explain his absence from home, closing with one which tells her not to send after him for 'I shall be ridiculous', and which contains the suggestion that Thackeray would like to emphasize.

But, it is Mrs. Meynell's opinion that Steele must have loved his wife dearly; he wrote to her daily, and gave her compliments when she asked for them. He even wished that she had more of the feminine urge to dress and to appear so that he could take pride in her. This, says the

43. Ibid., (Steele's Prue), p. 190

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student of women, could not have been "a dull wife".⁴⁴ Nor, infers the critic, could this have been an ungentlemanly Steele, who, in spite of his faults, always treated his wife with respect. When she asks in a letter to him for a little flattery, how gladly he gives it . . . "How assiduously, and with what a civilized absence of uncouthness, of shamefacedness and of slang of the mind, with what simplicity, alertness and finish, does he step out at her invitation and perform!"⁴⁴ If this essay served no other purpose it would prove that Alice Meynell is a critic when, very indirectly, and with a single shaft, she contrasts the kindly recklessness of Steele with the "admirable"⁴⁵ serenity of Addison.

Mrs. Dingley: The essay Mrs. Dingley is an attack on the sentimentality of nineteenth-century biographers. Scott, Macaulay, and Thackeray are all very sorry for a pining Stella, but they neglect to pay any notice to her companion Mrs. Dingley. They would build up a romance between Swift and Stella, wherein Mrs. Dingley would be nothing if not a chaperone. They would make Stella the victim of a hope deferred -- waiting for recognition by her

44. Ibid., p. 191

45. Ibid., p. 190

lover. "Thackeray represents her wearing out her life in wait for Swift's 'cold heart'"⁴⁶.

But Mrs. Meynell does not agree. She believes that these two characters are so entirely Swiftian that they cannot be separated for the sake of sentiment. Moreover, they reflect a side of Swift's nature otherwise not revealed.

These two women to whom he wrote daily in his Journal, who were saucy in their replies, and who sometimes neglected to answer his letters, were not sentimentalists. As Swiftian characters they were important in giving Swift the outlet he needed in his literary work. If it were not for MD we would miss his charming exaggerations and playful, cheerful humour. Says Mrs. Meynell: "When Swift tells a woman in a letter that there he is 'writing in bed, like a tiger', she should go gay in the eyes of all generations".⁴⁷

Again:

'Better, thanks to MD's prayers', wrote the immortal man who loved her, in a private fragment of a journal . . . and the rogue Stella has for two centuries been made to steal all the credit of those prayers, and all the thanks of that pious benediction.⁴⁸

46. Ibid., (Mrs. Dingley), p. 187

47. Ibid., p. 188

48. Ibid., p. 189

In this paper, as in the others of this group, it is Mrs. Meynell's implications about the lives and works of great literary men that are so original, sincere and enlightening.

(b) Women of Lesser Fame:

Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters: It was her interest in the rights of women that led her to examine the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. While Mrs. Meynell could not agree with her theories of free love, she did admire Miss Wollstonecraft as a personal and intense woman, filled with charity toward the individual, philanthropy toward the race. In a study of the latter's Letters, wherein was revealed much of the background of this apparent rebel against society, Mrs. Meynell finds many reasons to admire her and much of the cause of her rebellion.

Born in poverty into a home laid waste by the misconduct of a father, Mary Wollstonecraft was forced at an early age to earn her own livelihood, and to take care of three sisters. In her experiences and her observation of life, she saw how much virtuous women suffered at the hands of dissolute men . . . "the claim which she afterwards made on behalf of her sex for equal intellectual

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and political rights is thus the more easily understood",⁴⁹ says Mrs. Meynell. Her book made her famous, but with the better fortune which gave her a chance for intellectual development she yielded to an unlawful union with Imlay. Her fault was, in part, an intellectual one . . . "she set aside the divine institution of marriage, presuming to think it unnecessary to a real and permanent tie".⁵⁰ And later, when Imlay deserted, "Clinging to her theories with a culpable infatuation", she married Godwin under similar conditions. Mrs. Meynell feels bound to uphold one who could not be entirely blamed for her faults and who had, nevertheless, contributed magnificently to the literature of social ethics.

With characteristic lack of prejudice in literary matters she admires the style, the sustained force of reasoning and the originality of thought in Miss Wollstonecraft's work. She makes the comment that the book was received with admiration by some, with suspicion and distrust by others, thus showing that the problem of the Rights of Woman was a pertinent one at the time. This critical study reveals Alice Meynell's Christian tolerance

49. Alice Meynell, Essays of To-Day and Yesterday, p. 40

50. Ibid., p. 43

and strict adherence to principles.

Elizabeth Inchbald: Mrs. Meynell's interest in Elizabeth Inchbald may have developed in various ways. As an actress, playwright, and novelist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Mrs. Inchbald found all her closest friends among the heralds of the new age. Her best novel, A Simple Story, is said to have inspired Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. Such Things Are, a remarkable play, introducing a definite social thesis, was a forerunner of drama in support of a social campaign. Both of these works, no doubt, drew Mrs. Meynell's attention. Moreover, Dickens had had something to do with forming Mrs. Meynell's literary tastes, and in his youth he had been very fond of reading Mrs. Inchbald's farces. He later confessed that he owed thereto "quite a deal of his vivid humour and appetite for character".⁵¹ Again, Mrs. Inchbald was one of the first woman critics of our literature. S. R. Littlewood, speaking of this aspect of her career says that, although she was not a great critic, she did introduce the love of truth and sincerity into her criticisms: "As to the candour of Mrs. Inchbald's prefaces, when she really had an opinion

51. R. S. Littlewood, Elizabeth Inchbald and Her Circle,
p. 118

of her own, it is worth remembering that she was honest enough to find some faults even in the efforts of gentlemen who were very much in a position to respond."⁵² In this thesis we are making somewhat the same claim for Alice Meynell.

For all these reasons Mrs. Meynell must have been interested in Elizabeth Inchbald. But whereas she championed Mary Wollstonecraft in spite of her faults against purity, she upheld Mrs. Inchbald for her purity of morals practised in the midst of many temptations. Littlewood says again: "Mrs. Inchbald never wrote, or so far as we know, spoke an immodest word, but had undoubtedly to listen constantly and at her peril without any sign of offence, to prurient insinuations and language of the foulest order"⁵³ And again: "Whatever her struggles, whatever her temptations, she was a good woman as well as a charming one".⁵⁴

Mrs. Meynell, in writing of Elizabeth Inchbald, criticizes the beautiful prudery of her novels. She would prefer that you read her merry memoirs if you would become acquainted with this charming womanly character, so open to

52. Ibid., p. 116

53. Ibid., p. 49

54. Ibid., p. 132

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flattery and little vanities, and yet so true to her Christian convictions. Speaking of a portrait of Mrs. Inchbald, lately done by Romney, Mrs. Meynell explains that the artist can never give the true portrait of a character. The written portrait is much more interesting. This is her manner of contrasting the two:

But the written portrait is not importunate. It is not motionless. It bids you hail and farewell, and eludes you and is away. It confesses its flatteries all the more gaily as it defies you to refute them; and happily persuades you, to make amends, that you can be trusted to imagine a charming person. In the painting, Elizabeth Inchbald, though slight and slender, has none of the quickness of life in her eyes.⁵⁵

The picture Mrs. Inchbald paints for us "written by her own delighted hand, is so full of spirit and sweetness that one might wish literature to be exclusively entrusted with all records of human beauty".⁵⁶

Why, asks the critic in Mrs. Meynell, could she not give some of this quickness of life, this gay, fresh beauty to the characters of her novels? In A Simple Story, which is her best, the characters are always too conventional. The heroine is an heiress, the women are "lovely", the hero

55. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry (Elizabeth Inchbald), p. 68

56. Ibid., p. 67

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a gentleman of high decorum. And yet, Miss Milner, the leading lady, so carefully chaperoned, is -- according to the convention -- finally disgraced. She is pictured with more exquisite propriety as her sins grow the graver. Her lover, Dorriforth, never loses his decorum; the reader never learns his first name. We are sorry to see him, whom we have admired at times for his fine sensibility, being made the object of "something like irony".⁵⁷

When he learns the death of his disgraced wife -- 'his once-adored Miss Milner' -- he leaves his chocolate untasted. If this were a little more clever it would be Miss Austenish. Mrs. Inchbald should have nothing to do with irony.⁵⁸

This single shaft aimed at Jane Austen reveals, probably better than her own essay on that writer, Mrs. Meynell's dislike for the eighteenth-century novel of society. Her plea here is for greater realism and more sincerity on the part of the writer. Elizabeth Inchbald possessed that life and that sincerity. Why should she be so enslaved to established literary conventions?

57. Ibid., p. 70

58. Ibid., pp. 70, 71

(c) Women Writers of Importance:

Jane Austen: That a knowledge of poetry does not always apply to criticism of the novel is proved by Mrs. Meynell's dislike for the works of Jane Austen. The eighteenth-century novelist, so highly praised by Scott and Macaulay, is branded as trivial and cynical by Alice Meynell who misses entirely Miss Austen's skill of investing the commonplace with the great art of narrative.

According to our critic's theory of poetics, the novelist is entirely lacking in the spirit of Romanticism. There is no sense of wonder in her observation of life, no overflow of powerful emotions. "That such close observation", she says, "can work on without tenderness must be a proof of this author's exceeding cynicism".⁵⁹ In a previous chapter we discussed Mrs. Meynell's Romanticism as being manifested by three great loves -- love of Nature, love of Childhood, and love of God. The passion for Nature and for mystery which Mrs. Meynell says we owe to the boyish hearts of Dante and Wordsworth is not understood by Miss Austen. Never do we find beautiful landscape descriptions in the novels. Her country-houses, -- the goal of all her heroines' hopes -- are dull and inexpressive; the words

59. Alice Meynell Essays of To-Day and Yesterday, p. 31

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in which they are described do "by their very lack of music, define mediocrity",⁶⁰ says Mrs. Meynell. The following description is quoted from one of the novels to prove the point:

Cleveland was a spacious, modern-built house, situated on a sloping lawn. The pleasure grounds were tolerably extensive; and like every other place of the same degree of importance, it had its open shrubbery and closer wood-walk. A road of smooth gravel, winding round a plantation, led to the front.⁶¹

This is an entirely correct picture for Miss Austen's purpose; it pictures the carefully-planned baroque gardens of eighteenth-century landscape. It may not have the play of light and shadow, or the beautiful colour vision of the Impressionist. But then Jane Austen was not an Impressionist; she was keeping within her limitations and was justified in so doing. It is not quite fair to judge her work from "the side of poetry".

Nor can Mrs. Meynell forgive her for her treatment of children or her lack of the child-spirit. She says:

The lack of tenderness and of spirit is manifest in Miss Austen's indifference to children. They hardly appear in her stories except to illustrate the folly of their mothers.

60. Ibid., p. 32

61. Ibid., p. 33

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They are not her subjects as children. They are her subjects as spoilt children, and as children through whom a mother may receive flattery from her designing acquaintance or inflict annoyance on her sensible friends.⁶²

Mrs. Meynell believes that the child-spirit should be present in all art. Dickens had it in his prose:

Dickens, of all the greater masters of our national Letters, has the most perfect memory of childhood. Not by his strangely overpraised 'little Nell' is this proved, nor by any but certain brief passages of Paul Dombey, but in his much less famous children, and in the little fists of these are toys.⁶³

And likewise Emily Brontë:

Let us place next to Dante's sacred love for a child the love of a man not sacred but profane -- a man in fiction as the great genius of Emily Brontë conceived him. Heathcliff's tempestuous love for Catherine remains throughout the horrible story of a child's fresh love, even though Heathcliff is worse than a man. And, albeit Catherine dies a woman, it is to her childish ghost that he cries out of that window on the heights before his own death; the ghost of a child, and she has been long a dead woman, and he is old.⁶⁴

But Jane Austen had time only for cynicism and irony.

The lack of spirituality, of flight, of remoteness, is another of Miss Austen's faults. Mrs. Meynell says:

62. Ibid.,

63. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 304

64. Ibid., p. 310

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"All the persons of her little drama confess one doctrine of religion and acknowledge one law of morals."⁶⁵ And again:

Never were novels more strictly novels of society than these records of narrow, easy, professional life -- these novels of the relative aspect of men one to another rather than their aspect to any work of God.⁶⁶

The great passions of human nature, those which relate man to God, such as love, vengeance, devotion, duty, maternity, sacrifice are, with Jane Austen, "infinitely trivial".⁶⁷

The young women gossip through the pages of these famous novels, and "The men gossip too; they are minutely occupied with the engagements, colds, arrowroot, and tea-parties of the women".⁶⁷ According to Mrs. Meynell, what makes life, art and work trivial is triviality of relations. Besides this smallness Miss Austen exercises a careful watchfulness and prudence so as to leave nothing to the reader's imagination; as a result he is never allowed to soar above her limited parochial sphere.

Mrs. Meynell's hatred of derision and irony come,

65. Alice Meynell, Essays of To-Day and Yesterday, p. 30

66. Ibid., p. 31

67. Ibid., p. 32

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too, from her adherence to poetry. She maintains that Jane Austen is a great master of derision and that the spinsterly manner in which the derision is effected prevents us from seeing the caricature behind it. She gives an illustration from a novel.

"Lady Middleton resigned herself to the idea with all the philosophy of a well-bred woman, contenting herself with merely giving her husband a gentle reprimand on the subject five or six times every day.⁶⁸

Her delicate persistence in reiteration also gives a fine effect of caricature. Every woman who has the good luck to marry out of Mr. Woodhouse's "tedious" house is a "poor dear".⁶⁸

The final proof that Mrs. Meynell has judged Jane Austen from the side of poetry is seen in a quotation she makes from a letter written by Charlotte Brontë: " 'What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her (Jane Austen) to study; but what throbs fast and full, what blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death -- that Miss Austen ignores.' "⁶⁹ This sounds very much like Alice Meynell's statement in her essay on Coventry Patmore: "The image of warm life is the

68. Ibid.,

69. Alice Meynell Pose and Poetry, p. 100

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general measure of poetry".⁷⁰

Mrs. Meynell was condemned for her criticism of Jane Austen; she was said to be naive, to be entirely lacking in a sense of humour. These condemnations were in some sense justified. Nevertheless, it can be maintained that Alice Meynell, as a critic, is still within her limitations and is therefore a type of critical integrity.

Charlotte and Emily Brontë: To say that Mrs. Meynell judges prose wholly from the side of poetry would be to neglect many telling phrases of her criticism. In her treatment of Jane Austen she emphasizes poetic standards to the detriment of the classic novelist. But in her essay on the Brontë sisters, although it is their imagery that enthralls her, she takes care to praise Charlotte's power of narrative, the wild purity of passion in Emily's characters, the masterly prose and beautiful landscape descriptions of both writers.

Elsewhere she has spoken briefly of narrative saying that much of the narrative of our literature has a "fatal languor and preoccupation".⁷¹ Dickens was able to rise above this:

70. Ibid., p. 128

71. Ibid., (Dickens), p. 114

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But Dickens, being simple and dramatic and capable of one thing at a time, and that thing whole, tells us what happened with a perfect speed which has neither hurry nor delays.⁷²

And so was Charlotte Brontë capable of narrative power:

There is, perhaps, no author who, simply telling what happened, tells it with so great a significance: 'Jane, did you hear that nightingale singing in the wood?' and 'She made haste to leave us'. But her characteristic calling is to images, those avenues and temple oracular, and to the vision of symbols.⁷³

Mrs. Meynell loved the Brontës above all for their imagery, Charlotte, for her use of symbols and Emily, for her prose of complete simplicity which is beyond imagery.

Whereas Charlotte Brontë walked, with exultation and enterprise, upon the road of symbols, under the guidance of her own visiting genius, Emily seldom went out upon those far avenues. She was one who practised imagery sparingly. Her style had the key of an inner prose which seems to leave imagery behind in the way of approaches -- . . . and so to go further and to be admitted among simple realities and antitypes.⁷⁴

These are the tests that she applied to the best poetry. It is interesting to note that the parallel between

72. Ibid., p. 115

73. Ibid., (The Brontës), p. 104

74. Ibid.,

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Charlotte Brontë's spiritual journey in search of the waiting dead and Patmore's record of a mourner's dreams in Eurydice is brought out. The resemblance to Patmore would inevitably bring her into favour with Mrs. Meynell; it proves also that the latter is usually judging from the side of poetry.

Most of her ideas on poetic imagery are to be found in this essay. They have already been discussed in the chapter on poetry. There is one point, however, that has not been emphasized. Mrs. Meynell, speaking of Patmore's and Charlotte Brontë's journey into the spiritual world, says that imagery is necessary to explain spiritual experiences; the poet of realities may not need symbols:

A great writer is both a major and a minor mystic, in the self-same poem; now suddenly close to his mystery (which is his greatest moment), and anon making it mysterious with imagery (which is the moment of his most beautiful lines).⁷⁵

The greatest lines are too great for symbol. In Emily Brontë's narrative may be found this perfect drama, this perfect art. Mrs. Meynell is ready with several examples:

' "Let me alone, let me alone," said Catherine. "If I've done wrong, I'm dying for it. You left me too . . . I forgive

75. Ibid., p. 105

you. Forgive me." . . . They were silent, their faces hid against each other, and washed by each other's tears.' 76

Heathcliff cries in the same scene:

'Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you -- Oh, God, would you like to love with your soul in the grave?' 76

The heart-cries are more drama than prose; they remind us of the agonized sobs of Shakespeare's King Lear when he recognized his child Cordelia. Mrs. Meynell seems justified in treating this work from the side of poetry.

Still speaking of Emily's work she says:

Another thing known to genius and beyond a reader's hope is the tempestuous purity of those passions. This wild quality of purity has a counterpart in the brief passages of nature that make the summers, the waters, the woods, and the windy heights of that murderous story seem so sweet. 77

The close connection between Nature and the expression of deep feeling can never be overlooked in the novel. The characters of Thomas Hardy are rooted in their environment; it is impossible to separate Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye, and Diggory Venn from the sombre Egdon Heath. In a lesser degree, Emily Brontë's characters, more simply natural, find a counterpart in the brief nature descriptions:

76. Ibid., pp. 105, 106

77. Ibid., p. 107

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The heath on the top of Wuthering Heights
 whereon, in her dream of Heaven, Catherine,
 flung out by angry angels, awoke sobbing
 for joy; the bird whose feathers she --
 delirious creature -- plucks from the pillow
 of her death-bed . . .⁷⁸

Again:

And among the signs of death, where is any
 fresher than the window seen from the garden
 to be swinging open in the morning, when
 Heathcliff lay within, dead and drenched with
 rain?⁷⁹

And the closing lines of the book:

'I lingered . . . under that benign sky;
 watched the moths fluttering among the heath
 and harebells, listened to the soft wind
 breathing through the grass, and wondered how
 anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for
 the sleepers in that quiet earth.'⁷⁹

Charlotte Brontë was also noted for beautiful landscape
 descriptions. She seemed to have the sudden insight into
 Nature that was Patmore's, the Impressionist love for
 colour and light. She was a lover of moon, sunset and
 wind, a painter of scenery. It was not surprising then
 that Mrs. Meynell liked this aspect of her work. Some of
 her brief passages of landscape are given:

78. Ibid.,

79. Ibid.,

The wild rains of the day are abated: the great single cloud disappears and rolls away from Heaven, not passing and leaving a sea all sapphire, but tossed buoyant before a continued, long-sounding, high-rushing, moonlight tempest . . . ! 80

But says another writer of the art of Charlotte Brontë:

Her first consideration was the portrayal of the radical elements of character, not the painting of scenery; and all the vivid beauty of her descriptive powers, and all the rare marvel of her rich poetic prose . . . she would have held as secondary and accidental.⁸¹

Charlotte Brontë was, first of all, a novelist; Mrs. Meynell misses her greatest art, and is concerned with the secondary and accidental.

Charlotte Brontë appealed to Mrs. Meynell for her championship of women and her vivid prose style. One of the first women to stand for the sexlessness of art, Miss Brontë held a message and a hope for the fiery hearts of young women in her own and a later century. Mrs. Meynell says of her:

To the unnumbered ranks of girls in the generation following her own, destined most unjustly, to one inevitable career of teaching, the fame of the governess, poor, born in mediocrity, perhaps ill-favoured, but with a fiery heart, was a single message of hope and a

80. Ibid., p. 102

81. Henry H. Bonnell Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Jane Austen: Studies in Their Works, p. 39

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suggestion of glory.⁸²

She was a great example to women born in obscurity who had the ambition, the day-dream, even the anger, to become great. Her history, her work, her sorrows appealed to Mrs. Meynell's imagination; the fact that she triumphed over her fate gave her a special title to honour.

She triumphed, too, as Mrs. Meynell is proud to show, over the Latinized English so prevalent in the prose style of the time. She is praised for having the courage to shake off the influence of Gibbon and to aim, in spite of criticism, at pure, vivid language. She wanted to describe her griefs, just as she suffered them, vitally and mortally; "the mouthful of thick words",⁸³ which Mrs. Meynell attributes to Jane Austen, was not suitable for the expression of such deep pathos. This was no language for sensitive interior solitude.

It is no small praise that Alice Meynell gives when she says that Charlotte is "mistress of some of the best prose of the century".⁸⁴ What is spoken eloquently is

82. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 97

83. Alice Meynell, Essays of To-Day and Yesterday, p. 31

84. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 100

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not her best; in these lines we miss the friction and buoyancy of her vital prose. Contrast one of her expressions about a small boy: " 'For the toys he possesses he seems to have contracted a partiality amounting to affection',"⁸⁵ which has a strange unfitness for childhood, with a vivid sentence taken at random:

'This daughter of Heaven remembered me to-night;
she saw me weep and she came with comfort;'⁸⁶

or with another, coming straight from the heart:

Do you know this place? no, you never saw it;
but you recognize the nature of these trees,
this foliage -- the cypress, the willow, the
yew. Stone crosses like these are not unfamiliar to you, nor are these dim garlands of
everlasting flowers!⁸⁷

Mrs. Meynell, if she did nothing else but show the value of simple, vivid English, would be making a contribution to criticism. Her treatment of the Brontës, however, has proved that she is capable of recognizing many qualities in the writers of prose fiction. And her interesting remarks on feminine writers produce a type of criticism which is delightfully original.

85. Ibid., p. 98

86. Ibid., p. 102

87. Ibid., p. 101, 102

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General Remarks on Women Characters: It has been shown in this section that Alice Meynell is a critic of women, of literature, and of society. The two poets, Mrs. Browning and Christina Rossetti have been omitted here as mention was made of them in the chapter on poetry. Besides the women discussed, there are many obscure figures whom Mrs. Meynell championed in the lost columns of the Pall Mall Gazette. Some of these papers have been reprinted in collections of essays, some have suffered "the honours of mortality".⁸⁸

There is, for example, the gentle Arabella Stuart, imprisoned by James I for her marriage of love to which he had at one time consented. Hers was a spirit, generous, worthy of liberty, forced into grief.

Then there is Henriette Renan, "The Sister of the Seminarist", who sacrificed everything for her brother. Her soul was singularly lovely, in Mrs. Meynell's eyes, for the completeness of its renunciation.

Among literary women there is Lucy Hutchinson, the Puritan, whose biography of her husband was written in

88. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 48

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"right seventeenth-century diction"⁸⁹; Mrs. Meynell has no higher praise.

Amusing is her half-confessed dislike for Madame Roland who is offensive in her excessive adequacy of expression: "We should be glad to admire that heroic figure, if that heroic figure would cease to talk".⁹⁰

The acting of Eleonora Duse, the Italian actress, was so well criticized by Mrs. Meynell that it drew words of praise from George Meredith: "Our English critic writes with a knowledge of the art of acting, with sensitive perception".⁹¹

There is also the Italian poetess, Ada Negri whose defiance of fortune was itself a happiness. Mrs. Meynell took the trouble to publish three translations of her poem *Misfortune* so careful was she to convey the exact meaning of this work and to champion the strong spirit of the writer.

With such a keen interest in women, we expect Mrs. Meynell to write about Mary, the Mother of God. In her book entitled Mary, the Mother of Jesus, she searches Scripture, Tradition and Painting to find what Mary meant

89. Ibid., p. 198

90. Ibid., p. 221

91. George Meredith, Letters to Alice Meynell, p. 93

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to Mankind as Virgin Mother and as Mother of God. Sanctity, modesty, honour, chastity were the glories of Mary's meek domination. Against such there is no law; and with delightful simplicity Mrs. Meynell finds fault with St. John the Evangelist for not telling us all he knew about Mary, our Mother, in whom is the perfection of Womanhood.

D.

CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this chapter to study Alice Meynell as a critic of prose. We have found her to be a keen evaluator of language and therefore a judge of vivid English style. We have also exposed her interest in character which led her to examine the novels of Dickens, Thackeray and Meredith. The full criticism of the novel, however, we have not found. Her insight into the feminine mind and the championship of her sex is the subject of much of her prose criticism which thereby emerges as criticism of society as well as of literature. It may be concluded, therefore, that Alice Meynell is a critic of prose from the point of view of language, and of character, and in so doing she is, at the same time, a critic of society.

CHAPTER IV

199.

ALICE MEYNELL -- CRITIC OF ART

- A. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
- B. IMPRESSIONISM IN ART
- C. CARICATURE IN ART
- D. THE CHILD IN ART
- E. CONCLUSION

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A. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In this chapter an attempt will be made to present Alice Meynell as a critic of Art. It will be convenient to discuss the topic under three headings:

1. Impressionism in Art
2. Caricature in Art
3. The Child in Art

The term Art will be used to cover the fields of Painting and Figure-Drawing.

Alice Meynell had experience in art criticism, although it was not her best field. Of Letters she had the creator's knowledge, of other arts she was guided by the sanction of a refined and intimate vision. She has, however, made sufficient contribution to criticism in the field of Painting and Figure-Drawing to merit close study.

B. IMPRESSIONISM IN ART

Impressionism may be defined as a theory in art and literature based upon the conception that objects should be represented, not in any great detail, but as, at the moment of observation, they have impressed the painter or writer. Impressionism in painting was introduced from France in the early Victorian age and was a reaction against the historical genre painting of earlier times. A picture became now the

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expression of an aspect of light seen in nature; colour, rather than lines, became important. "It would seem", says Holbrook Jackson, "as though the Impressionist painters had made the world more conscious of the effects of light, and inspired writers to seek out colour visions for themselves".¹ The members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Decadent poets, the writers of familiar essays, all revealed in a varying degree this love of whiteness and colour. Impressionist influence gave a decided tone to the art and literature of the time.

It is the purpose of this part of the chapter to show that Alice Meynell was a critic in the field of Impressionist painting. It will therefore be necessary to prove that she understood the theory, reflected its influence in her own writings, expressed critical ideas on the works of the painters and thereby made a contribution to criticism.

Mrs. Meynell shows the love of light and colour in several of her familiar essays -- The Colour of Life, The Cloud, The Horizon and Walls are all exquisite paintings in language. In walls, having described a storm on the Channel, she gives us a picture of the glittering water after the storm had subsided:

1. Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, p. 168

The next day it left the waters white with the thrilling whiteness of foam in sunshine. It was only the Channel; and in such narrow waters you do not see the distances, the wide levels of fleeting and floating foam, that lie light between long wave and long wave on a Mediterranean coast, regions of delicate and transitory brightness so far out that all the waves, near and far, seem to be breaking at the same moment, one beyond the other, and league beyond league, into foam. But the Channel has its own strong, short curl that catches the rushing shingle up with the freshest of all noises and runs up with sudden curves white upon the white sea-wall, under the random shadow of sea-gulls and the light of a shining cloud.²

The Impressionist love of whiteness is well shown in another passage of the same essay:

White are the walls that smoothly lock the broken hills; white was the 'peaceful citadel', white the little towns by river or seashore. White are such towns in their bays upon the profound Adriatic, white as shells; and whiter yet are the walls of the roofless East. The Norwich painters -- master of the great School of English landscape -- knew the value of walls, Crome, Cotman Wilson set them in the east of their evening landscapes, their dusty roads, and upraised them opposite to the light, like clouds.³

In another essay, having said that the true colour of life is the colour of the body, Mrs. Meynell again shows her Impressionistic love of colour and whiteness:

So bright, so light, so soft, so mingled, the gentle colour of life is outdone by all the colours of the

2. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, (Walls), p. 279

3. Ibid., p. 278

world. Its very beauty is that it is white, but less white than milk; brown, but less brown than earth; red, but less red than sunset or dawn. It is lucid, but less lucid than the colour of lilies. It has the hint of gold that is in all fine colour; but in our latitudes the hint is almost elusive. Under Sicilian skies, indeed, it is deeper than old ivory; but under the misty blue of the English Zenith, and the worm gray of the London horizon, it is as delicately flushed as the paler wild roses, out to their utmost, flat as stars, on the hedges of the end of June.⁴

The theory of light and shadow is revealed often in Mrs. Meynell's works. The new trend in art demanded that the artist should face the light and sketch in his picture by the aid of shadow. She believed that Venice had been responsible for giving this theory to the world. She loved the Venetian masters, Titian and Tintoretto whom she claimed to have introduced the idea. She says of this phase of Venetian art: "I think there never was a greater new act in the history of art than this facing of the sun, this contemplation of the shadow of things".⁵ And of Tintoretto she says:

Tintoretto did more than paint the sun, he implied it by the soft darkness of withdrawal or eclipse,

4. Alice Meynell, Essays, pp. 171-2

5. Alice Meynell, Children of the Old Masters,
(Italian School) p. 79

by the half-light and the half-darkness, by the tenderness of reflected lights within delicate shadows, or merely in colour by the Venetian presence of a latent gold.⁶

As is usual when Mrs. Meynell is possessed of an idea, she expresses it in poetry after having given it in prose. She pays tribute to Tintoretto in a poem, the foreword of which gives the Impressionist theory of light and shadow again.

To Tintoretto in Venice

The Art of Painting had in Primitive years looked with the light, not towards it. Before Tintoretto's date, however, many painters practised shadows and lights, and turned more or less sunwards; but he set the figure between himself and a full sun. His work is to be known in Venice by the splendid trick of a secluded sun and a shadow thrown straight at the spectator.

Master, thy enterprise,
Magnificent, magnanimous, was well done,
Which seized the head of Art, and turned her eyes --
The simpleton -- and made her front the sun.

Long had she sat content,
Her young unlessoned back to a morning gay,
To a solemn noon, to a cloudy firmament,
And looked upon the world in gentle day.

But thy imperial call
Bade her to stand with thee and breast the light,
And therefore face the shadows, mystical,
Sombre, translucent vestiges of night.

Yet glories of the day
Eagle! we know thee by thy undaunted eyes
Skyward, and by thy glooms; we know thy way
Ambiguous, and those halo-misted dyes.

6. Ibid., p. 80

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Thou Cloud, the bridegroom's friend
 (The bridegroom sun)! Master we know thy sign:
 A mystery of hues world-without-end;
 And hide-and-seek of gamesome and divine;

Shade of the noble head
 Cast hitherward upon the noble breast;
 Human solemnities, thrice hallowed;
 The haste to Calvary, the Cross at rest.

Look sunward, Angel, then!
 Carry the fortress-heavens by that hand;
 Still be the interpreter of suns to men;
 And shadow us, O thou Tower! for thou shalt stand.⁷

Valasquez, the great Spanish Impressionist, interests Mrs. Meynell because he studied Titian and Tintoretto, while the Dutch painter Rembrandt is another of her favourites because he took his lessons from the Venetian masters. The theory of light and shadow was one of the greatest of Mrs. Meynell's loves. George Meredith could not have paid her a better tribute than he did in praising her essay A Remembrance by calling it a Rembrandt canvas. Of this magnificent tribute to her father, Mr. Meredith says that the use of the undertone "surpasses vividness of impression."⁸ When she says that her father was a "man whose silence seems better worth remembering than the speech of many another."⁹ and when she tells us that his precepts were few, but his

7. The Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 81

8. George Meredith, Letters to Alice Meynell, p. 91

9. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, (A Remembrance), p. 226

personality made laws for her, she has given us the shadow side as perfectly as possible.

In an essay Shadows we hear her again discussing this facing of the light:

The shadow has all the intricacies of perspective simply translated into line and intersecting curve, and pictorially presented to the eyes, not to the mind. The shadow knows nothing except its flat designs, having no third dimension. It is single; it draws a decoration that was never seen before, and will never be seen again, and that, untouched, varies with the journey of the sun, shifts the inter-relation of a score of delicate lines at the mere passing of time, though all the room be motionless. Why will design insist upon its importunate immortality?¹⁰

Her understanding of Impressionism could hardly be doubted after this explanation.

Finally she invests light and shadow with a mystical significance. In speaking of the German villager who takes the part of Christ in the Passion Play, she says:

Not only in the symmetry of the Crucifixion, but in the accidents of every day, shouldering a burden, footing a rough journey in these hard hills, turning his lathe, or gathering a child upon one arm, he carries this perpetual likeness, and turns toward the world this aspect unaltered, until his years shall pass those of the Saviour, when another shall take his place . . . He lives down the image made by Rembrandt for Emmaus, and that made by Tintoretto for Calvary. The art is theirs, the more than actual beauty, and the genius speaks in them.¹¹

10. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 189

11. Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, pp. 288-9

It would seem that she would like to add that sanctity speaks in this figure who is such a perfect shadow of Christ.

Shadow and cloud signify to her, sacrifice and suffering. For the Christian the shadow of the Cross controls the light and hides from the lover the brightness of the beloved. Since the sun is behind the cloud, it is, therefore, an assurance of ever-present life.

Chesterton, in his beautiful tribute to Alice Meynell in his own Autobiography, reveals how closely this idea was woven into her spiritual life.

And though she passed through my own life fitfully and far more rarely than I could wish, and though per presence had something of the ghostly gravity of a shadow and her passing something of the fugitive accident of a bird, I know now that she was not fugitive and she was not shadowy. She was a message from the Sun.¹²

What a delicate gesture on the part of Chesterton to make use of Mrs. Meynell's favourite theory of light and shadow to describe the indefinable influence she had on others!

The Impressionist painter, besides loving light, colour, and shadow had to be able to observe a few details of the object very exactly. Mrs. Meynell had the keen power of observation necessary to appreciate this. She kept, all her life, the freshness of vision which the average person

12. G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, pp. 286-7

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loses with childhood and she was able to catch the poignancy and beauty of small things. In an essay entitled Rain, she reveals this keen power of observation:

The long stroke of the raindrop, which is the drop and its path at once, being our impression of a shower, shows us how certainly our impression is of the lagging, not the haste, of our senses.¹³

Then she relates this lagging of the senses, as she calls it, to Impressionism:

What we are apt to call our quick impression is rather our sensibly tardy, unprepared, surprised, outrun, lightly bewildered sense of things that flash and fall, wink, are overpast and are renewed, while the gentle eyes of man hesitate and mingle the beginning with the close.¹³

Again:

Everywhere the natural haste is impatient of these timid senses; and their perception, outrun by the shower, shaken by the light, eluded by the distance, makes the lingering picture that is all our art.¹⁴

With this power of honest vision, and this knowledge of Impressionism in art, Mrs. Meynell could not but fear that all painters might not be careful to record their impressions exactly. Velasquez, the Spaniard, who advanced the theory, had to give his own apprehensions and trust to the world that they were correct. "How", she writes, "can we be sure that the Impressionist is true to his impressions?"¹⁵ Speaking of Velasquez, and indeed of all Impressionists, she

13. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 12

14. Ibid., p. 13

says:

We are not excluded from his counsels, but we are asked to attribute a certain authority to him, master of the craft as he is, master of that art of seeing pictorially which is the beginning and not far from the end -- not far short of the whole -- of the art of painting.¹⁶

There is always the danger that painters will not be true to the artistic truth in recording their impressions. They may not have the sensitiveness, the candour, the vigilance of appreciation to keep to the point of honour. The very freedom of this type of art has brought about abuses:

A very mob of men have taken Impressionism upon themselves, in several forms and under a succession of names, in this our later day. It is against all probabilities that more than a few among these have within them the point of honour.¹⁷

Such a plea for fidelity to truth in art places Mrs. Meynell on the side of Ruskin, and identifies her with the Pre-Raphaelites.

It is therefore evident that Alice Meynell understood Impressionism, revealed its influence in her own work and expressed critical ideas on the subject. We now conclude this section by stating that she was a critic in the field of Impressionism in Art.

16. Ibid., p. 166

17. Ibid., pp. 166-7

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C. CARICATURE IN ART

Caricature is a pictorial or descriptive representation of a person or thing in which certain defects are exaggerated so as to produce a humorous or ludicrous effect. The Victorian age was a time of great interest in journalism and the familiar essay. Since life-testing was the fashion and since painters and writers often sought to shock the public, it is not surprising that the art of caricature developed rapidly. In the pages of the magazine "Punch", "The Yellow Book", and countless periodicals social abuses were ridiculed and daring vulgarities were presented through this medium.

Mrs. Meynell disliked caricature exceedingly. She believed that all distortion had about it a touch of ignominy. That is why she did not understand Japanese art, especially Japanese figure-drawing. It sought, she said, a perpetual slight deformity in its figures; and made use of perspective foreshortening to obtain its effect. Mrs. Meynell maintains that this striving after the grotesque is bad enough in ordinary art; it is far worse when it is used in caricature. She says:

And if this is the conviction gathered from ordinary drawings, no need to insist upon the ignoble character of those that are intentional caricatures.¹⁸

18. Ibid., p. 149

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Having thus levelled the art of caricature, she praises anew the value of symmetry, especially in the figure of man:

But whatever may be the phases of the arts, there is the abiding principle of symmetry in the body of man, that goes erect, like an upright soul.¹⁹

Man's outer appearance should never be distorted, no matter how unequal he be within. Contrasting Greek symmetry in art with Japanese distortion under an illustration of the human form she says: Man is Greek without and Japanese within".²⁰

With Greece she says: "abides the obvious law and the less obvious life; symmetry as apparent as the symmetry of the form of man, and life occult like his unequal heart."²¹ This seems to her to be the nobler and the more lasting type of art. With Ruskin she believes that art is evil if it does not represent a natural fact. Caricature is a distortion of the human figure, therefore it is not good.

In an essay entitled Victorian Caricature our critic attacks the two artists Leech and Keene for their vulgar drawings in "Punch". Leech made the husband weary of his wife, while Keene dwelt on physical vulgarities and stupid

19. Ibid., p. 150

20. Ibid., p.

21. Ibid., p. 151

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prosperity. Both were noted for the vulgarizing of the married woman. "It amuses him", says Mrs. Meynell of Leech, "that she (the married woman) should furtively spend money over her own dowdiness, to the annoyance of her husband, and that her husband should have no desire to adorn her, and that her mother should be intolerable".²²

And of Keene:

He saw little else than common forms of human ignominy -- indignities of civic physique, of stupid prosperity, of dress, of bearing. He transmits these things in greater proportion than he found them, or by a kind of inverted disgust that is as eager as delight -- one is not sure which is the impulse.²³

Keene does achieve real humour in the figure of his school-boys although "The hint of tenderness which in really fine work could never be absent from a man's thought of a child or from his touch of one, . . . is absolutely lacking in Keene's designs".²⁴

In spite of her theories of symmetry and incident, it is evident that Mrs. Meynell's treatment of caricature in art is largely social criticism. Having remarked her reverence for the ideas of Ruskin and her Pre-Raphaelite love for the moral value of art, we should expect some censure of vulgarity. It is surprising, however, to find her wrath

22. Ibid., p. 162

23. Ibid., p. 163

24. Ibid., p. 164

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so aroused and her language in places so commonplace. It is rather as the champion of woman's rights than as a critic of Art that Mrs. Meynell speaks in these essays. The injured feminine spirit flares up when she says of Keene:

Never for any grace gone astray is she bantered, never for social extravagances, for prattle, or for beloved dress; but always for her jealousy, and for the repulsive person of the man upon whom she spies and in whom she vindicates her ignoble rights.²⁵

Her knowledge of Greek and Japanese art, as well as her careful explanation of caricature do, however, identify her as a critic in this field.

D.

THE CHILD IN ART

It would be presuming too much to say that Alice Meynell is a critic of the child figure in Art. Her illustrated book Children of the Old Masters (Italian School), was put out largely to help her son Everard establish himself in the field of art criticism. Although this book does show her wide knowledge of Italian artists and their work, the criticism of art as such is limited. With motherly intuition and affection she examines the treatment of the child in painting from the second to the twentieth century, with the great desire of finding him alive and human. In her delicate and persistent search for the natural, however, she reveals great

25. Ibid.,

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familiarity with this field. And as her work progresses, it becomes very important for its revelation of the Pre-Raphaelite influence so prevalent both in art and literature during the Victorian age.

The book above mentioned is divided into chapters dealing with the different schools of Italian art -- The Child of Early Art, Tuscan Sculpture and Enamel, Portraits, Sienna and Umbria, Raphael and After, Venetians. In an Introductory Note Mrs. Meynell states her purpose: to trace "the change of sight and spirit in the contemplation and representation of childhood during five centuries of Italian art."²⁶ She very definitely acknowledges the limitations of this work as a critical attempt saying: "It is therefore an essay on a subject of the designs of certain painters and sculptors and not on their workmanship."²⁷ The subject of the child is, she believes, within her province; the workmanship of the great Italian artists she does not profess to judge.

It is evident, however, that this work must be treated as criticism. In the following section an attempt has been

26. Alice Meynell, Children of the Old Masters,
(Italian School), p. 10

27. Ibid.,

made to prove that Alice Meynell, within her limitations, has contributed to the art criticism of the later Victorian age. Her purpose in this criticism is entirely a moral one, and in this her judgment is made according to Pre-Raphaelite standards. In the Introduction Mrs. Meynell says that the Italian school immortalized the Madonna and Child, and thus gave civilization something to admire and love. "Our day would not allow that . . ."²⁸ Nowadays the artist's purpose is to make the child "an image in irony, to clothe it in burlesque, to carry it in the procession of insult".²⁸ Here she is referring to the art of caricature so prevalent at the time, and which has been already discussed. She would have none of caricature; she wanted the child erect, dignified and natural. "It makes for the dignity of art and for the little Son of Man that His likeness should be designed honestly and without fictitious graces."²⁹ Towards the end of her book Mrs. Meynell identifies herself with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the chapter "After Raphael".

It will be necessary here to explain the term Pre-Raphaelite. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a school of

28. Ibid., p. 1

29. Ibid., p. 55

painting founded in 1848 as a reaction against the sentimental art of the day. It had two main trends. The first aimed at reality of statement gained from close observation of life and was based on the theory of Impressionism. The second depended upon the re-capture of past tendencies in art and their association with the life of the day. Over and above both of these trends was the desire to realize truth, the principle and end of all morality. The name of the group came from the fact that its members wished to return to the art before Raphael, contending that Primitive and Mediaeval work was less sentimental and truer to life. The fact that Ruskin had defended the Pre-Raphaelite movement in its beginnings and reacted against it when it became involved in the Art for Art's sake propaganda is one reason why Mrs. Meynell would be interested. Besides, since the movement affected literature as well as painting, she could hardly have been free from its influence.

"The word 'after'", says Mrs. Meynell, "has doubtless more significance when it waits upon the name of Raphael than in any other of the conditions of the history of art. To follow Raphael is to follow that which, in certain aspects great, in certain qualities nobly ideal, in certain examples incorrupt, was yet in a greater number manifestly and explicitly corruptible." 30

30. Ibid., p. 70

That Mrs. Meynell was capable of dealing with the subject of the child may be proved from the fact of her daily observation as the mother of eight children and from her delightful essays on childhood. In one of these essays she says: "To attend a living child is to be baffled in your humour, disappointed of your pathos, and set free from all the preoccupations".³¹ And again: "He is numerous indeed, but not general, and to describe him you must take the unit, with all his incidents and his organic qualities as they are."³² She did not agree that childhood as an age of progress should be hastened and shortened; that as an age of imperfection it should be at once improved; or that, as an age of inability, it should be hidden from the world. She loved it for what it lacked, took care to explain its imperfections and inabilities and taught that in these weak things of the earth lay wonders to confound the strong. It is no surprise then that she expected art to show forth the inabilities and the uncovenanted ways of childhood.

The first child figure that interests Mrs. Meynell is to be seen in a half-effaced fresco in the Catacombs.

31. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 227

32. Ibid., p. 235

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Most of the designs in these frescoes are rigid; there is one figure, however, a singular, natural vivid, well-observed child with 'animated' falcon eyes, which attracts her. She loves this child for its look of wonder, and Romantic that she is, she ascribes to it the sign of true vitality. But most of the children of the early masters are criticised for being little adults rather than children. "The Child of all these first masters of Italy has the arbitrary proportions, the erect attitude of the time, the aspect of a strange small man, which was, let us remember, as far as we know, the fiction that Greece herself approved."³³

To Tuscan sculpture and enamel Italian masters owe something as regards the figure of children. The Sculptors recognized the form and proportion of the child and more of the incidental character of its movements, while the Painters kept, for some time, the small-headed child, the lack of proportion in the body. The children of the sculptors Luca and Andrea della Robbia had colour, gentleness, freshness and a sense of rhythm. "But for the plastic art -- for the exquisite art of Luca and Andrea della Robbia -- a collection of children of the Italian schools would have lacked much."³⁴

33. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 14

34. Ibid., p. 7

In the early Florentine school, Fra Filippo, Gozzoli and Botticelli all show the same weakness in the child figure, although they have advanced in dramatic presentation. In Fra Angelico's "Coronation of the Virgin" there are in the foreground two children with very little portraiture. They are merely little Tuscans on their knees. Fra Filippo Lippi, coming twenty-five years later, still did not paint the familiar way of a child -- but the ideal way. Speaking of one of his children Mrs. Meynell says: "the painter has disposed the little legs in the attitude of adult strength and adult idleness and leisure; no child stands so, in unstable equilibrium; a child uses both legs in repose and gets what grip of the ground he can. Gozzoli in his "Saint Sebastian" has smaller people who are a kind of children, while Sebastian himself is a singular child," free of all his arrows, clothed and combed with decorum."³⁵ Mrs. Meynell remarks: "That amid a dramatic people whose daily talk, whose voices, whose hands are dramatic, there should be painters so failing -- and there are many -- is hard to understand . . ."³⁶ But Gozzoli redeems himself in St. Augustine at School" with one little urchin "dramatically admirable, in a spotted cap and holding an inkhorn".³⁷

35. Ibid., p. 30

36. Ibid., p. 31

37. Ibid., p.

Botticelli, the best of this group, does at times achieve the right proportions. He would have been better if he had not been a slave to the fifteenth-century idea of a fine child -- "the champion child".³⁸ In a painting entitled "The Exodus", treating of the childhood of Moses, he gives a vivid picture of the weariness of children. Speaking of two children in the picture Mrs. Meynell says: "The elder carries his bundle, and with the bundle, a little lively dog; the younger uses both hands to cling to his mother's hands and arm".³⁹ But Botticelli is best remembered for his angels.

In the later Florentine school she mentions Ghirlandajo, Leonardo da Vinci and Verrocchio, Filippino Lippi, Lorenzo di Credi, Fra Bartolommeo, and Andrea del Sarto. All of these had the same weakness, but occasionally they caught the true expression of the child. When he (Ghirlandajo) painted the Nativity of Mary he crowned it with a frieze of nude children. "These equivocal children, infantile and yet not infantile, graceful as the adult would have them and corpulent as gossip would have them, so took the fancy of Italy as to make a rule and an

38. Ibid., p. 32

39. Ibid., p. 35

example for centuries."⁴⁰ To Ghirlandajo however we owe one of the most direct and sincere children in Tuscan art, the one who loves the bottle-nosed man in "Old Man and Child" -- "a charming child, exceedingly urgent and gentle, with the little childish upper lip out, and the lower lip soft".⁴¹ This is a record of a tenderness alive hundreds of years ago. As for the rest of his work, his angels are little Florentines, his children infantile, yet not infantile.

The angels of Leonardo da Vinci and Verrocchio are loving and intellectual. Sometimes the former shows keen observation of detail in his children, and he has one baby's head that is untouched by fifteenth-century prejudice. The boy in "Christ with the Doctors" is older than twelve years; there is something dramatically lacking in the hands. . . . "the fingers of the right upon fingers of the left"⁴² is too weak to represent argument.

Filippino Lippi shows the influence of Botticelli in his angel figures. He has one little St. John who is "quick and child-like, dark-haired and dark-eyed, and his locks are somewhat wilder than those of the angels, who are trimly combed".⁴³

⁴⁰. Ibid., p. 38

⁴¹. Ibid., p. 39

⁴². Ibid., p. 39

⁴³. Ibid., p. ⁴⁵

Fra Bartolommeo was a cold rigid Dominican, yet could he design a beautiful and natural minstrel child.

But these were the exceptions. None of the masters of that age wanted to picture the unconscious child. This is Mrs. Meynell's repeated charge against them. She says in closing this section: "they gave no attention to that simple and abundant beauty and direct gesture of innumerable children; and inasmuch as they did it not to the least of these, they did it not to the Child painted in a thousand pictures upon the Virgin's knee".⁴⁴

In the art of portraiture, the Florentine Bronzini stepped aside from saints and angels and gave us fellow-creatures. With him begins the painting of children erect and forthright; tricks of posture are left aside. Other portrait painters were chiefly among the Venetian school, but most of these did not excel in the field. Titian who achieved such wonders with light and shade made his children adult. One Roberto Strozzi at Berlin has an infant girl, not on courtly duty, her hair is short and undressed, her ornaments are simple and she has her dog.

Mrs. Meynell, in another essay, mentions the rare appearance of little girls in art. She says:

⁴⁴. Ibid., p. 47

It may be that there were in all ages -- certain few boys who insisted upon being children; whereas the girls were docile to the adult ideal. Art, for example has no little girls. There was always Cupid, and there were the prosperous urchin-angels of the painters; the one who is hauling up his little brother by the hand in the "Last Communion of St. Jerome" might be called Tommy. But there were no "little radiant girls". Now and then an "Education of the Virgin" is the exception, and then it is always a matter of sewing and reading. As for the little girl saints, even when they were so young that their hands, like those of St. Agnes, slipped through their fetters, they are always recorded as refusing importunate suitors, which seems necessary to make them interesting,⁴⁵ to the mediaeval mind, but mars them for ours.

The same trend prevailed in literature. Artists and writers wanted a mature child; they bore with childhood only for the sake of its promise of manhood. Mrs. Meynell believes that one significant lesson is being learned by the generation that produced the theory of evolution, namely to find the use and value of process. "With this," she says, "is a resignation to change, and something more than resignation -- a delight in those qualities that could not be but for their transitoriness".⁴⁶ At last, she hopes, the world will begin to admire childhood.

When Mrs. Meynell deals with the painting of the Umbrian and Siennese schools, she has come to the end of

45. Alice Meynell, Essays, p. 256

46. Ibid., p. 252

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the "Pre-Raphaelite" period. She says of Raphael who belongs to this group: "he rather continued and fulfilled than renewed the painting of childhood; he certainly did not invent the grace we call Raphaelesque."⁴⁷ Now and then he did get a grave childish glance and a huddled position. The Sistine Child has a look of power and intellect above its age, the angels make only a pretence of action. Those painters who came before Raphael and who are therefore directly Pre-Raphaelite seem to have gained an intent instant expression on the face of the child. Lorenzetti, Matteo da Sienna, Pinturicchio, master of Raphael and Perugino were all great. After these, however, Mrs. Meynell believes that corruptions crept into art with the artist's desire to express sentimentality. She is therefore interested only in that work which does not show the defects of the period "after Raphael".

It is the art of the Venetians that appeals most of all to Mrs. Meynell. Venice is not "after Raphael" according to her; it kept its own speed and its own time; it made wonderful discoveries with light and shadow. Mrs. Meynell pays her a tribute thus:

47. Alice Meynell, op. cit., p. 66

Venice thought a child to be a touching creature, thought natural action in a child to be not lower but higher than make-believe; and when to these new and imperial perceptions and convictions, she added the new perception of colour and tone, she proved herself indeed a great and solitary power in painting. The art of Venice, in the event, turned to the light, and set the darkened head of a man against the sun and against the cloud. I think there never was a greater new act in the history of art than this facing of the sun, this contemplation of the shadow side of things. Tone, with all its mystery, as well as light, with all its mystery, comes about by that change of the gazer's station.⁴⁸

Titian, Tintoretto and Bellini were the masters of Venetian art who interested Mrs. Meynell. Of these Bellini was the most original in the treatment of the child. He has a natural child without the modern appeal of expression. He never attempts to transcend nature or to force her. The child with him is less beautiful than pathetic. Says Mrs. Meynell: "Pathos had hardly entered into the Florentine idea of the infancy of Christ, but it is seldom absent from the Venetian."⁴⁹

Titian and Tintoretto were not so successful although Titian has one of the few little girls in art. In the "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple" there is the simplest little girl mounting the steps of the temple alone.

⁴⁸. Ibid., pp. 78-9

⁴⁹. Ibid., p. 84

Tintoretto deals with the same subject, but his figure of the Virgin is less simple, less great and less unconscious. His picture is more important for the splendour of the shadow-view as the maiden goes up directly against the sky and cloud.

Thus ends Mrs. Meynell's treatment of the child in art. Her great love for Titian and Tintoretto, discoverers of the Impressionistic theories of light and shadow, is evident here as elsewhere in her work. This is the core of her art criticism. And if she examines the figure of the child from the point of view of a mother, it is as an artist that she looks for the splendour of light or its implication in the soft darkness of withdrawal.

It may be concluded, therefore, that Alice Meynell has contributed to the art criticism of the Victorian age, and that in her ideas of art she belongs to the Pre-Raphaelite school.

E. CONCLUSION

It can therefore be concluded that Alice Meynell was a critic of Art. She has put forward a definite and oft-repeated theory of Impressionism; she has used the criticism of caricature to attack social abuses; and she has revealed

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her deeply human love of children in the examination of the work of the Italian Masters. At no time does she profess to be an expert, and her criticism reflects her limitations. It is perhaps largely for this reason that Alice Meynell can claim a place in the Art Criticism of the Victorian age.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters of this thesis an attempt has been made to establish Alice Meynell as a critic. Having defined Criticism and having briefly examined the thought of its various schools and the qualities necessary to a critic, we proceeded to study Alice Meynell's contribution to criticism in the Victorian age. It was found that her most important and vital work had been done in the field of poetry. Her own poetic gift, her application of her theories to her own poetry, and her fidelity to demand the same qualities in the poetry of others revealed her critical integrity. Her wide knowledge of the works of the great poets, her keen attention to literary history and the poetry of the various centuries, as well as her love for authentic metre and rhythm qualified her to be a critic of poetry. Great poets of her own time acknowledged this critical ability and paid her homage. George Meredith wrote of her: "Seeing that she is critical chiefly to admire, and courteous when her delicate stroke is mortal, we have to seek her peers, that is, in England".¹

1. George Meredith, Letters to Alice Meynell, p. 91

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Francis Thompson, in a letter to Wilfrid Meynell, encloses a poem on which he wishes a critical judgment and writes: "Now, if Alice and you, after you have read it in proof, say "this is bad poetry", I will cut out half the book; but not half a line to please a publisher's whim".²

Walter de la Mare, having sent her a volume of his verses entitled Songs of Childhood, wrote to thank for her praise: "I value your judgment highly . . . how proud I feel that these little verses have won your praise".³

Others who have praised her and who are quoted elsewhere are Alfred Noyes, John Drinkwater, J. C. Squire and Chesterton. Even Patmore who did not believe that any woman could be capable of intellectual poetry had to revoke his judgment in her behalf.

In the criticism of prose Alice Meynell was less sure of her way. Sometimes it was with poetic theories that she judged prose; sometimes it was from a psychological or social standpoint. Her demand for the purity of language and her campaign for a vivid style were not the least of her contributions to a language stilted and stiffened by Latinized-English diction. This part of her prose criticism was direct

2. Viola Meynell, Francis Thompson and Wilfrid Meynell:
A Memoir; quoted from a letter of

Francis Thompson, p. 56
3. National Book League, Alice Meynell, Centenary Edition, p.

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and determined. The criticism of character, however, was casual and somewhat psychological. There was often a social motive in her work, champion as she was of the female sex and the sexlessness of art.

In the criticism of painting Mrs. Meynell was still less sure of her path. Attracted by the theories of the Impressionists, favoured by a life-long familiarity with the works of great artists, and gifted with keen powers of observation, she was capable of producing critical judgments on painting. She always maintained, however, that it was not as an artist that she spoke, but as a lover of human nature, a woman of Letters, and indeed, more strictly as a poet.

But it must be stated that in all her criticism Alice Meynell kept within her limitations. Using comparison and analysis, the tools of the critic, she made an honest inquiry into a work of art, in search of beauty and truth. She endeavoured, although not always too successfully, to lay aside personal prejudice and to judge with impartiality. She was in search of perfection, of exactness of expression, and therefore belonged to the Classical school; but in her careful study of human nature and its expression through the works of the poet or writer, she foreshadowed to some small extent the New Criticism of our own day.

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It seems, therefore, that this thesis has fulfilled its purpose in establishing Alice Meynell as a critic and in proving that, within her limitations, she is a type of critical integrity.

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