

MRS. MEYNELL IN HER PROSE

Beata quæ esurit et sinit justitiam

HAVING gained permission from the Editor of BLACKFRIARS to contribute an article on Mrs. Meynell's prose that should, as it were, balance Mr. Osbert Burdett's recent article on her poetry, I find it well to set myself a wide and easy limit, and not attempt to appraise critically her writing, nor to discuss its technique, and only incidentally to settle the question of her "preciosity." I am of Francis Thompson's persuasion, and do not know the body of her writing from its soul, and could love it for its very faults—if such were proved in it—so deeply have the beauties of its virtues ensnared me.

My subject, then, is not the prose of Mrs. Meynell, but Mrs. Meynell in her prose, who is its style.

In Miss Winifred Lucas's *Fugitives* (1899) there are some lines which may have been intended for their writer's friend, Mrs. Meynell, and which shall serve me as a text for this paper.

Since in the paths of mental liberty
A finished saint,
To such as you 'twere death to be
A moment free
Of thought's restraint.

I have to expound the perfect applicability to Mrs. Meynell of the first two lines, and to indicate the qualification necessary to the last three before we can so apply them.

Mrs. Meynell is a "saint of intellect": her thought is always just.

Her writing abounds in the enjoyment of absurdities, in derision of folly, and in reproof of (as it proves) nothing else than injustice. But her laughter is without

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scorn, and her scorn is of scorn itself alone. As to hate, I should think her to be almost without it: its place being taken by incredulity, wonder, extenuation, pity. It is Patmore who has noted, almost, one is tempted to think, in spite of himself, that Mrs. Meynell "has always pity and palliatory explanation for the folly and falsehood which she exposes so trenchantly." Her reproof is reserved for those whom she venerates: for Patmore, for Ruskin. For us others there is instruction. Or if she has reproof for us, she has pleading with them, and always in mitigation of their sentences of extreme condemnation. It is not that, with her, mercy seasons justice, but that she perceives mercy to be justice.

"It is right that I should quote this unjust passage," she says in reproof and disproof of her revered Ruskin, and in searching for the passage—which need not now be further quoted—I encounter more than one perfect example of the justice of Mrs. Meynell's intellect. She writes: "When in course of time" (in an historical survey) "we come to the day of the Press, Ruskin announces 'printing, and the gabble of fools.' We need to remember his former phrase of pity for peasants who have no books." "We need to remember"—in justice to Ruskin, in justice to the Press,—

Justice, which the spirit contents,

as Patmore described it. Mrs. Meynell is a spirit whom every injustice discontents. She quotes for its humour—and to disallow it, as she elsewhere disallows the pathetically false excuse of a child: "I didn't know what I was doing"—Ruskin's justification of his own injustices as those of one who "never is unjust but when he cannot honestly help it." "Injustice," she comments, "may be as inevitable as 'stumbling or being sick,' but evitable was the proclamation of this [particular] stray, uninstructed, and unjustified judgment,

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The pardon of these implicit injustices surely depends upon their privacy, upon the silence that is not irrevocable, and on the secrecy wherewith a man keeps his own counsel as to his prejudice." Surely that is the self-knowledge of a "finished saint" of intellect!

True it is that her justice does not always issue in a recommendation to mercy: she will not forgo a moiety of her principle. She thinks hardly of Thackeray, of Swinburne, of Mr. Bernard Shaw. Yet she is but the counsel for the prosecution and puts in her evidence. Thackeray "has no saints" as Dickens has; Swinburne she would not condemn on the score of such and such poems, which she names; and Mr. Shaw in that he has no reverence for Christ. It is for us, the Court, to ratify or disallow the pleading of Portia. Injustice is done when a sentence is promulgated on grounds the existence or the character of which is falsely insinuated.

She pleads for justice to Johnson and to Johnson's wife which is honour; for justice to Steele and his Prue which is love, thinking no evil; for justice to Swift's Mrs. Dingley which is acceptance; for justice to Horace Walpole and to Goldsmith which is a candid reading, discovering Walpole's humanity, and the almost incredible bluntness of Goldsmith's moral sense; for justice to Haydon which is suspension of judgment; and justice to women which is simply not prejudgment; and justice to the naughtiness of children which is understanding, and to their slowness of apprehension which is patience; for justice to the stupid from the clever which is that reverence which Juvenal bade us pay to children and Christ to all "little ones"; for justice to beggars which is courtesy; for justice to Italian, French, and English national characteristics which does not generalize; for justice to our own times, the Justice that holds the balance of good and evil; for justice

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always which is discrimination ; for justice to the Blessed Virgin which is the history of her blessing throughout all generations, who " for blessing, blessing gives again." If our justice is to exceed that of the Pharisees, it may set itself to emulate that of this scribe.

Obviously Mrs. Meynell's " preciosity " is *la recherche du mot juste*.

We may learn that it was the touch of exaggeration in the denunciations by Patmore and Ruskin that put Mrs. Meynell upon her guard, for she teaches us that exaggeration would coerce our intellect, whereas caricature appeals to it, and there would be a touch of exaggeration in Miss Lucas's last three lines if we read them quite literally, and without stressing the intended antithesis of " mental liberty " and " thought's restraint : " mastery of thought, and loyalty to it. The exaggeration would be one which Mrs. Meynell has herself combated. " 'Twere death to be a moment free from thought's restraint ? " Nay, but rest and refreshment ! " Is not Shakespeare . . . our refuge ? Fortunately unreal is his world when he will have it so ; . . . and in that gay wilful world it is that he gives us—or used to give us, for even the word is obsolete—the pleasure of *oubliance*." Must we be as distressed at Shakespeare's taming of Katherine the shrew as was Grant Allen ? Mrs. Meynell is no less concerned than he was for justice to women, but her essay on Pathos is a derision of that self-conceit which takes everything (including Shakespeare's clowns and clowning) as heavily as it takes itself : " I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests." Mrs. Meynell cannot but smile at the probably quite genuine incapacity for nonsense which made Taine shudder at Mr. Augustus Moddle. We know her to be as public-minded as any of our women novelists, but she hints a regret for the times when stories were written for fun,

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If these are Mrs. Meynell's comments on literature, what is her commentary on life? She is not without a due sense of the world's sorrow: she "knows our haplessness all through," and knows "it is not infinite." Like Ruskin, she does not wonder so much at what men suffer as at what they lose, and so she would educate our senses to perceive all that is offered them for their pleasing, and principally it is the eye that her essays "on things seen and heard" would instruct. She is as much concerned to refine our visual as our moral perceptions, and indeed they are interchangeable. For her the senses are the "spiritual senses."

Meredith, with great faith, called Nature "our only visible Friend": we may wonder where he found the intention of friendliness—where, without supernatural, he found his metaphysics. But perhaps I may dare to call the senses "our only immediate Angels," and to say that Mrs. Meynell would make it our weekday religion to receive their heavenly annunciations. Moral perceptions are part of what she (with Ruskin) calls the innocence of the eye. By hearing we should understand, and by seeing we should perceive, were not our hearts waxed gross.

—Our weekday religion, but also its sabbatical rest. Tolstoy, watching over humanity, slumbered not nor slept, except only literally, but Mrs. Meynell is glad to forget for a while, and she offers us Nature as well as Shakespeare for a refuge. I have sometimes thought that the professing Nature-worshippers appear but half-hearted in their absorption into extra-human and extra-animal life compared with this Catholic. The Blessed Virgin has succeeded to the throne of Demeter. Deduct the slight Yankee element from Thoreau and you have the nature-essays of Mrs. Meynell, but in her there is all the rest besides.

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