

ALICE MEYNELL

IT is but to repeat the general verdict to say that Miss Viola Meynell has written a worthy memoir of her mother.* She has been wise in avoiding the expansive, exhaustive, two-volumed, official biography. Her book is a memoir, a reminder, a brief record of things memorable; her aim is nothing more pretentious than to give fleeting glimpses, lively sketches, running commentaries which enlighten by flashes the rare life and work of her subject. A daughter is not always considered the one best qualified to write the Life of her mother: family affection might stress the unimportant things, discretion might suppress essential features, filial piety might withhold a perfect portrait. But Miss Meynell has kept in an excelling manner the balance between reverence and unreserve, and one may ask—knowing well how the question would be answered—Who else could have done the work better? Love is blind—perhaps sometimes; but more often love is keen-sighted and, according to the inspired text, love rejoiceth with the truth. Anyhow, it seems clear that the intimacy of family affection, far from handicapping Miss Meynell in her task, has actually proved to be her pre-eminent qualification in revealing and interpreting her mother.

Alice Meynell has been hailed as 'beyond challenge the most eminent woman writer since George Eliot and Christina Rossetti.' 'Your wife's prose,' wrote Coventry Patmore to Wilfrid Meynell, 'is the finest that was ever written, and none but kindred genius can see how great it is . . . it is the test of capacity in the

**Alice Meynell: A Memoir* by Viola Meynell. (Jonathan Cape; 15/- net.)

reader for the understanding of what prose is
If I were you I should go mad with pride and joy.' This whole-hearted praise (so stated that to question it is to confess your own ignorance as to what is prose) has its counterpart in the good-natured and carefully worded protest of Mr. Max Beerbohm who, besides calling to mind the fact that 'between her and Mr. Coventry Patmore the shuttlecock of praise has flashed incessantly,' complains that her style, 'quite perfect in its sort,' was considered by critics to be 'the one and only way in which fine English could possibly be written.' 'In a few years,' he writes, 'Mrs. Meynell will have become a sort of substitute for the English sabbath.' Mr. Beerbohm's irritation against erecting Mrs. Meynell into an esoteric cult is no denial on his part of her supremacy among the women writers of our time, but rather an appeal for a wider recognition of her literary glory than her own limited circle could give.

'Fastidious' and 'precious' are the convenient labels ready-made for the tired reviewer's use when he is putting Mrs. Meynell in her place. She is criticised as having used a style of writing characterised (like Meredith's) 'by the studied avoidance of simplicity.' She is said to have sometimes improvised upon the language and written English in an idiom not English. Her style is too concentrated—so, it is said. 'She puts too much into a sentence. The words have no room to breathe in.' These criticisms, which are not altogether meaningless nor groundless, might have cumulatively an effect damaging to the rare fame of her against whom they are made. Miss Viola Meynell's *Memoir*, without any shadow of special pleading or any thesis other than that of sketching the life and character and work of her mother, does somehow manage to correct this notion of excessively fastidious originality and far-fetched

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preciosity. It gives a new aspect of Mrs. Meynell when we are told that she read with appreciation the stories of O. Henry and that the humour of W. W. Jacobs consoled her when she was dying. Her esteem for Dickens, which was inspired by something more than an interest in his romantic attachment to her parents, led her to plead his cause in the face of Meredith's disparagement. Johnson, too, was one of her favourites—'one of the noblest of all English hearts,' she called him; and in preparing a book of Johnson selections she found pleasure in being a collaborator with his modern counterpart, G. K. Chesterton. 'The chief enthusiasm in contemporary reading of all her later years was this for Chesterton. She found him to be at once the wittiest and the most serious of living writers. The habit he was charged with of turning things upside down was to her mind the setting right of things that had been standing on their heads. Exhilarating blows and buffets she felt to strike her from his pages. Her enjoyment passed beyond a reader's detached approval: "If I had been a man, and large, I should have been Chesterton," she asserted with a smile, really feeling that there was something more than mere agreement between his mind and hers.' All these are unexpected enthusiasms for one who is criticised as Mrs. Meynell has been for her precious style. On the other hand she can speak with scanty praise of Newman, 'who can write verse unworthy of himself without a pang,' and Swinburne, the mere manipulator of words, was not among those she favoured.

Her early literary apprenticeship as a contributor to *The Weekly Register*, a Catholic periodical of which her husband was for eighteen years editor, sub-editor, contributor and office boy, was in the more harassed tradition of journalism: it meant an indescribable effort and struggle against time every Thursday, and

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it was not the most congenial training for encouraging undue fastidiousness. She worked, too, on *Merry England*—an ever memorable journal because it led to the discovery of Francis Thompson. Some of her best writing appeared in a weekly article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* under the heading the 'Wares of Autolycus' and was praised by George Meredith as 'princely journalism.' And in an article in the *National Review* he writes, 'A woman who thinks and can write, who does not disdain the school of journalism, and who brings novelty and poetic beauty, the devout but open mind, to her practice of it, bears promise that she will some day rank as one of the great Englishwomen of letters.'

It was for the quality of intellectual virility that Patmore praised her essays: her writing bears 'in every sentence, the hall-mark of genius, namely the marriage of masculine force of insight with feminine grace and tact of expression Gaiety of manner with gravity of matter, truth perceived clearly and expressed with ease and joy, constitute the very highest and rarest of prose writing.' Alice's father taught the two little girls 'all that he would have taught them had they been sons.' This perhaps explains what is meant by the biographer's suggestion that the father was somehow transfused into the daughter's blood. Surely it is calm strength, ascetic economy of phrase, perfect emotional control yet combined with an exquisite delicacy and tenderness which make up the greatness of Mrs. Meynell's poetry and prose.

Coventry Patmore considered Mrs. Meynell to have 'the finest contemplative powers of any woman since Madame de Guyon.' She wrote great poetry and her poetry was essentially religious and of the Faith. When one thinks of the modern multitude of inept dabblers in religious verse and of the cheap sentiment of our tawdry hymns, contemplating the whole mass

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of it like a jungle choked with weeds, one hesitates for some other description of Mrs. Meynell's poetry. Yet religious it was in the sense of being the beautiful expression of the highest movements of the soul towards God—the offering of the fruits of a mind imbued with faith.* Among much that might be quoted let us transcribe the sonnet which she wrote when, on becoming a Catholic, she made deliberate choice of that faith which was the guide of her own life and the vital force in all she wrote :

Who knows what days I answer for to-day?
Giving the bud I give the flower. I bow
This yet unfaded and a faded brow ;
Bending these knees and feeble knees, I pray.
Thoughts yet unripe in me I bend one way,
Give one repose to pain I know not now,
One leaven to joy that comes, I guess not how.
Oh rash ! (I smile) as one, when Spring is grey,
Who dedicates a land of hidden wheat.
I fold to-day at altars far apart
Hands trembling with what toils? In their retreat
I sign my love to come, my folded art.
I light the tapers at my head and feet,
And lay the crucifix on this silent heart.

It was not sentiment or emotion or aesthetic appeal that led her to the Catholic Church. 'Always ardently a Christian, in Catholicism she saw the logical administration of the Christian moral law,' says her biographer. 'I saw, when I was very young,' writes Mrs. Meynell to her daughter Olivia, 'that a guide in morals was even more necessary than a guide in faith. It was for this I joined the Church. Other Christian societies may legislate, but the Church *administers* legislation. Thus she is practically indispensable. I may say that I hold the administration of morals to

*We consider that the reviewer in *Punch* who refers to Mrs. Meynell's 'incipient doubt which a resolutely held faith never completely dispelled' makes an unenlightened and unjustified assertion.

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be of such vital importance that for its sake I accepted, and now accept, dogma in matters of faith—to the last letter. To make my preachment clearer : Right or Wrong (morals) are the most important, or the only important, things men know or can know. Everything depends on them. Christian morality is infinitely the greatest of moralities. This we know, by our own sense and intellect without other guidance. The Church administers that morality, as no other sect does or can do, by means of moral theology. The world is far from living up to that ideal, but it is the only ideal worth living up to'—a valuable statement worth repeating in the hope that it might be overheard and taken in by modern ears.

A character so secluded, so shy, aloof, silent and contemplative is not easily sketched and enshrined in a book ; but Miss Meynell has succeeded in a difficult task and given us a complete picture of the writer, the poet, the mother, the wife : she has accomplished her task with reverence and tact, knowing when to speak and when to be silent : she has given us a book which will help to make her mother's life endure as a beautiful memory.

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