

Blackfriars

of brain and genius, the treasure of the heart, the resources of the mind.

Shall we fight to the bitter end for our dividends, for the right to live on the interest of our loans, as the slave-holders in the Southern States of America fought for the right to hold their slaves? Or shall we in all goodwill seek to understand the social changes demanded in our time?

Are our dividends a stumbling block to understanding? Can we not recognize that now it is given to us to take some part in helping to transform a society, rent by the bitter anti-social strife of capital and labour, disfigured by the hateful antagonisms of rich and poor, into a co-operative commonwealth where each shall readily aid his neighbour without thought of gain, and where reward shall be not in mastery but in service?

JOSEPH CLAYTON.



CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF ALICE MEYNELL.

[*With Mr. Page's leave I have submitted his letter to Mr. Osbert Burdett in order that both criticism and reply may appear in the same number.*—EDITOR.]

May 18, 1920.

SIR,

During this last year I have read with delight and almost entire agreement two articles by Mr. Osbert Burdett in *The New Statesman* and the *Dublin Review* on Coventry Patmore. It was therefore with amazement that I read his article on "The Poetry of Alice Meynell" in your May number, for there I find him attributing to Coventry

Correspondence

Patmore, inaccurately, what seems to me a frightful blasphemy. And the whole article itself seems to me nothing less than perverse.

And first as to Patmore. He ascribes to him the opinion that one of the "pleasures" of Heaven will be that of "beholding thoroughly bad people get their deserts" in Hell. Patmore does not say that, and I do not think it is a legitimate extension of his meaning, i.e. an inevitable corollary of what he does say. Writing on "Cheerfulness in Life and Art" Patmore says that it is a vulgar error to attribute melancholy to Dante: "The *Inferno* is pervaded by the vigorous joy of the poet at beholding thoroughly bad people getting their deserts." I will not conceal the fact that, in the poem Mr. Burdett alludes to, Mrs. Meynell expressly disclaims this "vigorous joy," in this life: my present point is that Patmore does not speak of it as one of the "pleasures" of Heaven. And since Mr. Burdett makes so much of Mrs. Meynell's use of one word ("Renouncement" instead of "Renunciation") may I ask him to consider his own word "pleasure," as used of Heaven? It seems to me as earthly and as unheavenly a word as could be, and a very grave misquotation from Patmore, who said: "Hate pleasure, if only because this is the only means of obtaining it. Reject the foul smoke, and it will be forced back upon you as pure flame," and again, "Delight is pleasanter than pleasure; peace more delightful than delight. 'Seek peace and ensue it.'"

And now as to Mrs. Meynell. I cannot understand how Mr. Burdett should find her chief characteristic to be melancholy or morbid sensibility, however tender, wistful, or exquisite. (I think Mrs. Meynell *is* always exquisite: she is exquisitely right; and this rightness has been shown in her rebukes both of false pathos and of insensibility.)

But how is it that Mr. Burdett has missed that constant note of grave rapture in her poetry—which is only not gaiety—if it is not sometimes gaiety—because it is so rapt? Mrs. Meynell loves to lose herself in a mystery, to pursue her reason to an *O altitudo!* and the very typography of her poems—the exclamatory *Oh's*, and the notes of exclamation—would guide Mr. Burdett to the lines that refute him.

Blackfriars

To shorten a long letter, let it stand as symbolical of Mr. Burdett's injustice and of the refutation that awaits him, that he cites it as an instance of Mrs. Meynell's morbidity that she should find her shroud in the living flocks, her bier in the growing tree, while he omits to mention that in at least two poems she also finds growing in the cornfields and the vineyards the Bread and the Wine of the Eucharist.

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,

FREDERICK PAGE.

SIR,

These careful criticisms impel me to turn the other cheek. Let us take that concerning Patmore first, that concerning Mrs. Meynell afterwards :

1. In regard to my attribution to Patmore of an inclusion "among the pleasures of Heaven (of) the spectacle of thoroughly bad people receiving their deserts," the word "pleasure" I must admit to have been inaccurate. I should have used Patmore's more emphatic word : "joy". That Patmore used the word joy in this connection is proved from the passage which Mr. Page, very happily, quotes. That Patmore correctly applied the term to Dante I am certain, for reasons too long to be given here. That, if Patmore felt this joy in his lifetime he expected to share it in eternity is obvious, because Eternity is not an extension of Time but an aspect of the soul in respect of it. Eternal life is either a present possession* or it is nothing. The poet is he to whom it is a present possession, the joy whereof he has the power to convey to others in words. Let me remind Mr. Page of the passage in *The Angel* wherein Patmore (it is not his strong phrase but his idea which concerns us) affirms that people

shall feel like fools to find
(Too late inform'd) that angels' mirth
Is one in cause, and mode, and kind
With that which they profaned on earth.

Book I, Canto VII, Prelude 2.

* Cf. Charles Gardner's *Vision and Vesture, William Blake in Modern Thought* (1916), p. 117.

Correspondence

Mirth (the word originally meant "religious joy") is profaned less by unseasonableness than by a Puritanical refusal to delight in it : that is why Pharisees are always the favourite butts of Comedy ; and who is not liable to be a Pharisee in the unguarded moments of his life ?

All the joys of the great poet are eternal, because only that which partakes of eternity contains joy. The evidence that Patmore felt this particular "vigorous joy" is of the class which Newman, I think, called "cumulative," and Patmore himself "infinitely corroborative." Every story of Patmore related by Mr. Basil Champneys, by Mr. Edmund Gosse, by anyone who knew him and has told, especially in the ease of private talk, their general sense of the habit and temper of his mind goes to prove it. Such a story as that of his reply to the lady who asked him to sympathize with a dog's defence league is typical. His joys were all "vigorous" ; and there is not, I think, anything tepid about this one. The evidence that he felt it is there ; it is intertissued with his thought and helps to invigorate his style : but it is not everyone who has ears attuned to hear it. Why this joy, which, I think, is traditional (The Editor of BLACKFRIARS or Fr. Joseph Rickaby will certainly know), should shock us modern people was once a mystery to me, until Patmore, in whom I recognized it as a matter of course, explained the fashion of our revulsion. It shocked the late Mr. Bertram Dobell to a pathetic degree when he found it in Thomas Traherne. Mr. Page will recall the prose passage in Patmore, the effect of which, in a criticism of humanitarianism, is that "a softening of the brain" is now **miscalled** a softening of the heart.

2. In regard to the criticism of Mrs. Meynell's *Collected Poems* (for whose work, by the way, I have too much respect to wish to make it an occasion even of abstract controversy), if I have seemed to belittle the substance, I should be sorry even on abstract grounds. For, it must be admitted, the profession of letters loses at present in the eyes of other professions from a want of mutual respect among its members, the tendency of whose criticism seems to be to decry each other's supposed or real weaknesses when we should, first, insist upon our fellow-writers' good points. I hope,

Blackfriars

but I cannot be sure, that I have not fallen into that which Sir Thomas Browne would have called a *pseudodoxicon epidemicon*, or, in our less scholarly phrase, a vulgar error.

Mr. Page's references to Mrs. Meynell's "grave rapture" I embrace with gratitude; but his word "morbidity," does not occur in what I wrote. He will agree, probably, that I could not quote her entire works, much as I should have preferred to have done so had space permitted. As things are, a critic has to compromise; and the compromise takes the form of quoting not necessarily the least good, nor the best, but the most characteristic, utterances. Those which I quoted seemed to me the most characteristic: to strike the key-note. It is always the business of a criticism to isolate this, not to the exclusion of other notes, but to the emphasis of this one. But, with the wish to forestall the misconception into which Mr. Page seems to have fallen, my longest quotation was from the most exuberant of the poems, *Christ in the Universe*, and this quotation was placed, to secure its due emphasis, as the parting word of the whole essay. With the view I held, what more could I have done? Of course, my criticism may have been mistaken. It is not a critic's obligation to be right; his obligation is to back his sincere opinion by the most convincing reasons which he can find. And only so far as a critic is sincere, is he, even primarily, qualified for the task of criticism. Only by this primary qualification, can his criticism hope to stand for a single day. In any case the verdict is given by Time, not by timeservers, however well-intentioned; for Time alone can impanel the Jury of their Peers, which is the only competent tribunal for Poets or other delinquents. Meantime, the more interpretations the better.

In conclusion, therefore, if I, Sir, were Editor of BLACK-FRIARS, I would invite Mr. Page to contribute essays upon the same two Poets, for that invitation, I hope, would be felt to carry with it a renewed assurance of the regard both of your readers and contributors for the Poetry of Mrs. Meynell.

OSBERT BURDETT.