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The Material and the Divine: Entwined Aesthetics in Alice Meynell's 'The Two Poets'

Lesa Scholl

Alice Meynell's adherence to a reserved lyrical mode could be read as a desire to maintain a sense of teleological order, in which the ironic timelessness of the lyrical moment reinforces the divine purpose of the material. However, the silences and reserve for which Meynell's work is known instead reinforce paradoxical moments of trauma that are held up and unspoken as impossible to understand within the human experience. The intensity of the lyric depends on the visceral yet disturbingly silent recognition of an aesthetic predicated on violence. From this perspective, the poem becomes a theological and aesthetic space in which a transformative encounter takes place, one that is predicated on human contact that confronts each subject's understanding of the world and their position within it. Importantly, Meynell's poetry, like her theology, rests on paradoxes — of theology and aesthetics; of the material and the divine; of the temporal and the eternal; of violence and beauty — in such a way that creates mutual, dynamic spaces rather than a binary structure that defines and divides.

Whose is the speech
That moves the voices of this lonely beech?
Out of the long West did this wild wind come —
Oh strong and silent! And the tree was dumb,
Ready and dumb, until
The dumb gale struck it on the darkened hill.

Two memories,
Two powers, two promises, two silences
Closed in this cry, closed in these thousand leaves
Articulate. This sudden hour retrieves
The purpose of the past,
Separate, apart — embraced, embraced at last.

'Whose is the word?
Is it I that spake? Is it thou? Is it I that heard?'
'Thine earth was solitary; yet I found thee!'
'Thy sky was pathless, but I caught, I bound thee,
Thou visitant divine.'
'O thou my Voice, the word was thine.' 'Was thine.'[1]

'The Two Poets' (1902), written in a moment of juncture between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, exemplifies Alice Meynell's theology and aesthetic of paradox that seeks to find meaning by embracing beauty in pain and life in death. Meynell's poetry was famed for its musicality and reticence, and, typical of the lyric, its capacity to occupy a space outside of time while simultaneously speaking acutely to its age. In reviewing her friend's work, Katharine Tynan wrote, 'So delicate, so austere, so choice is this Muse that one has a feeling, reading her poems, as though one had stepped from the roar of London into a sunny, deserted cloister of her own Italy.'[2]

There is an aesthetic beauty found in the ability to transport the reader imaginatively; yet Meynell's power lies in her ability to merge such transportation with deep philosophical, theological, and social concerns. Her framework for addressing these concerns lies in her spiritual understanding of the world, from her earlier Anglo-Catholic and later Roman Catholic convictions of incarnational and materialist

[1] Alice Meynell, *Later Poems* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1902), pp. 33–34.
[2] Katharine Tynan, 'Mrs. Meynell's Collected Poems', *Bookman*, 44 (1913), 167–68 (p. 167).

theologies. In her lyric poetry she thus embodies the role of poet-prophet. Specifically of 'The Two Poets', Tynan continues,

> Side by side with this beauty, that soars almost out of sight, there are simplicities. There are modernities as well as the eternal verities. This is a modern muse, for the poet is of her moment and her day. She is not lost, not out of sight in the ether in which she sings. She has the modern responsibilities which in the old days were for the priest and the poet. (p. 168)

First published in the collection *Later Poems*, 'The Two Poets' uses the image of the wind blowing the seeds of the beech tree and dispersing them as a representation of new life emerging from a moment of violence. This paradox preoccupies much of Meynell's poetry, as she grapples with the conflict between faith in a perfect heaven and the imperfections of the human world. Nature not only stands as a metaphor for human existence, but as a representation of the divine in the world. Nature gives voice to greater truths beyond human understanding, while entities like the beech tree have an existence beyond the human lifespan. In this way the life that is borne from the violence wreaked upon the beech articulates the hope of new life following an era of revolution and human violence wreaked upon both nature and human society.

Isobel Armstrong envisages a world for the Victorian poet that was 'post-revolutionary, existing with the constant possibility of mass political upheaval and fundamental change in the structure of society, which meant that the nature of society had to be redefined'. Within this context, she argues that 'because of its awareness of teleological insecurity, Victorian poetry is arguably the last theological poetry to be written'.[3] From this perspective, Meynell's adherence to a reserved lyrical mode could be read as a desire to maintain a sense of teleological order, in which the ironic timelessness of the lyrical moment reinforces the divine purpose of the material. However, the silences and reserve for which Meynell's work is known instead reinforce paradoxical moments of trauma that are held up and unspoken as impossible to understand within the human experience. The intensity of the lyric depends on the visceral yet disturbingly silent recognition of an aesthetic predicated on violence. From this perspective, the poem becomes a theological and aesthetic space in which a transformative encounter takes place, one that is predicated on human contact that confronts each subject's understanding of the world and their

[3] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

position within it. Importantly, Meynell's poetry, like her theology, rests on paradoxes — of theology and aesthetics; of the material and the divine; of the temporal and the eternal; of violence and beauty — in such a way that creates mutual, dynamic spaces rather than a binary structure that defines and divides. In this way Meynell's work exemplifies what Marion Thain refers to as the 'route out of that deadlock' — 'a cynical deadlock between self and other' in order to 'shock one out of one's own internal landscape'.[4]

Meynell's poetic and theological heritage, in her aesthetic reserve as much as her appreciation of nature, paradox, and allegory, lay with the Romantics and the Tractarians. She therefore not only aligns with what Hilary Fraser refers to as 'one of the most prominent and characteristic features of Victorian thought: a proliferation of religio-aesthetic theories designed to reconcile the claims of Christianity and beauty, morality and art', but also holds a more specific alliance with Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic theologico-aesthetic modes.[5] Meynell at once buys into the aesthetic sensibility of the Anglo-Catholic revival, identifying the 'inherent similarity between reserve in poetry and mysticism in religion' and seeing the poet's role as 'stimulat[ing] religion and moral associations in the imagination of the reader' (Fraser, pp. 17, 18). Yet as much as Meynell's theology and aesthetics inform each other towards a teleological purpose, it is crucial to recognize that in her work these paradoxical associations are rarely comfortable beneath the reserve. There is a disquieting violence deemed necessary to create the connection — the struggle with the bloodiness of a necessary crucifixion, or of human suffering — that unsettles the lyrical moment, that reveals a poet unsatisfied with the disjunction between incarnational theology and the state of the natural and material world.

Within the poem the two poetic voices express the inward struggle of a divided self, also communicating the struggle between the temporal and the eternal that preoccupied Meynell. And yet these qualities are unstable from the start: the beech tree seems material and solid, while the wind is typically symbolic of the spiritual; but at the same time, it is the beech that has the potential for rebirth, while the wind is temporal. Importantly, in this confusion of attributes, both the beech and the wind are silent until the 'dumb gale struck' the beech. Thus neither voice can be heard without the entanglement of the material and the ethereal, and there is a sudden awakening

[4] Marion Thain, 'Victorian Lyric Pathology and Phenomenology', in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. by Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 156–76 (p. 165).

[5] Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 1.

in this moment of violent conflict. The lyrical moment is one of paradox: destruction, but also epiphany. The beech — a tree that is identifiable by the way in which the one tree is made up of several major trunks — resembles the Body of Christ, first as the bloodied and stricken body on the cross, and second as the multitudinous Body that is the metaphor of the Church. In the lyrical moment of the striking gale, the poem recalls the moment of Christ's death when lightning struck and darkness fell 'on the darkened hill' at Calvary. Meynell's use of a wind-pollinating tree, through which new life is made possible by the wind carrying seeds across miles, reflects the theological idea of the flowing blood of Christ bringing new life: through battering and death, pollination and redemption.

The questioning of the opening lines, which is reflected in the questioning in the final stanza, creates a sense of yearning for wholeness, a desire to reconcile the voices so that they can be heard. It is through this entanglement of memories, powers, promises, and silences that such an awakening can take place. As much as the two voices become dispersed through the cries of the dense canopy of the thousand leaves, they are brought together in the caesura after 'Articulate', which occurs almost directly in the centre, therefore at the core of the poem. In the search for teleological meaning it is in this acute moment that the past, now seemingly insignificant, is made known, as the pollen is separated from the branches, ironically 'embraced, embraced at last', but now by the wind in its uncertain path. In spite of the 'pathless' sky, the beech has found meaning: 'but I caught, I bound thee, | Thou visitant divine.' At the same time, the wind has found purpose in the earth it deemed 'solitary'. The division and identification of the voices become blurred in the final stanza and, in Meynell's vision, it is in that moment of melded voices that they become poetic.

Meynell's rhythmic techniques, her use of questions, enjambement, assonance, and consonance all work together aesthetically to create an ironic sense of movement in an infinitesimal moment of time. As Caroline Levine argues for 'an alternative model for relating the rhythms of poetry to the rhythms of social experience, which [...] are often messy, complex, and overlaid', Meynell's irony holds together the paradox of material and aesthetic, eternal and temporal.[6] Theodor Adorno expresses a similar irony when he observes that 'the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society'.[7] In Meynell's irony the richness of intense reserve is most evident, encompassing her mutual aesthetic and materialist theologies. The

[6] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 74.

[7] Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), I, 37–54 (p. 43).

richness of the divine can be felt in an inexpressible moment; yet that moment is filled with all the doubt and faith, the pain, struggle, joy, and beauty of human and divine experience. The entanglement of life, death, and rebirth in the context of nature within the lyric mode condenses and intensifies all aesthetic and theological meaning past, present, and future within the paradoxical *now*.