

NO DISTURBING RENOWN

HELEN PARRY EDEN

WHEN Wilfrid and Alice Meynell visited Francis Thompson at Pantasaph, Alice wrote of her fellow-poet who was lodging in a cottage at the monastery gates, 'There is no disturbing renown to be got among the cabins of the Flintshire hills'. She envied the Franciscan peace to which her friend came homeward at nightfall. Viola Meynell's gracious and discerning account of Wilfrid Meynell and Francis Thompson shows a strong personality and a weak one fulfilling each other in the Christian charity that makes give and take possible, and united in serving three things recognised by their age as worth individual sacrifice—religion, domestic love and poetry. Journalist and poet, happy if hard-pressed father of seven children and waif of the London streets, their unique and self-effacing collaboration did more for the conversion of the England of their day than any publicist is likely to achieve for ours. As in some sort one of their converts, I should like to glance at this aspect of Viola Meynell's book¹ and endorse it from my own experience.

The Quaker Wilfrid's own conversion at eighteen was the result of a chance meeting with a Dominican in the train. At twenty-five, after a lay apprenticeship to good works at St Ethelreda's, Ely Place, he was the accepted suitor of Alice Thompson (no relation of the poet's). He had much ado convincing her father, who had lived all his life on plantation dividends, that he could earn enough to keep a wife and family. However the young couple were married in 1877; and in 1881 Archbishop Manning handed over *The Weekly Register, A Catholic Family Newspaper, Price 3d.*, to Wilfrid, who edited it for eighteen years. It was a Liberal rival to the *Tory Tablet*; but its thirty-two pages found no room for art, literature and 'the redemption of the workers'. It seems odd that Manning did not think it possible

¹ *Francis Thompson and Wilfrid Meynell. A Memoir by Viola Meynell.* (Hollis and Carter; 18s.)

to give anything but diocesan and parish news to his own paper—but so it seems to have been. His verdict on members of his flock, ‘I have always known that they were good Catholics; perhaps some day they may be good Christians’, was the kind of comment he kept for private circulation. Wilfrid noted several examples of the Archbishop’s caustic wit—they are reproduced in his daughter’s book; but he realised that the *Register* was not intended as a critical organ, still less a civilising one; so he and Alice started *Merry England* to fill the gap. The paper, a shilling monthly, had a galaxy of contributors, Catholic and otherwise: George Saintsbury, Hilaire Belloc, Lionel Johnson, Coventry Patmore, W. H. Hudson, Wilfred Blunt, Aubrey de Vere, Alice’s sister Elizabeth Butler (the painter, of *Roll-Call* fame) and her husband, afterwards General Butler, contributed illustrations and historical articles. But Alice and Wilfrid, under their own names and half-a-dozen aliases, were the mainstays of the enterprise. Finally it enlisted Francis Thompson.

Everyone knows the story of the Meynells’ adoption of Francis Thompson, whose well-meaning mother had launched him on De Quincey and opium in his student days and who was then starving on the London streets. But as they were alive when Everard Meynell wrote his sensitive life of their protégé, no one realised how costly and wearing a business it was to bring up a waif of genius and seven children into the bargain. Viola Meynell has filled in the outlines with deft sympathy for everyone concerned; though it is obvious that while the poet immortalised the children, they tended, as they grew up, to find him rather heavy going. But for their father, love meant service. It is significant that his brother, a Quaker business-man, could write, ‘Do not fail to believe, dear Wilfrid, how much such a life as yours consoles and sustains your very affectionate brother. . . . Your verses move my heart.’ Perhaps the verses were those quoted at the end of Viola Meynell’s book:

When my last fires of life burn low
 (I that have loved the firelight so)
 When hence you bear my load of dust
 To the grave’s pit as bear you must,

Remember that naught perisheth
 In all God's universe but Death.
 Weep not, though tears be holy water,
 Tears of a wife, a son, a daughter.
 Think of me only when you laugh;
 And when you write my epitaph,
 No name and date be there, but rather
 Here lies Her Husband and Their Father.

In 1897, when I was twelve, Thompson published his last and most unsuccessful book, *New Poems*, and my father, Judge Parry, bought it—why, I have no idea. He had none of its predecessors. The critics had fallen on it like one pack. ‘Q’, William Archer and I were alone in our admiration; and needless to say, mine was not bolstered up by any knowledge of theirs. The book was a dead failure; but to me, as time went on, it was a two-fold delight. I admired the Shakespearean diction:

I will not perturbate
 Thy paradisal state
 With praise
 Of thy dead days.

It brought back Latin-English and English-English as stirring as

Rather shall this my hand
 The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
 Making the green one red.

But I chiefly prized it as yet another of those rare clues to Catholic faith and practice which I had been looking for almost ever since I could remember.

These were very scarce and hard to come by. We knew few Catholics. Father Bernard Vaughan used to come to our Manchester home and cap my father's Lancashire stories; and a grizzled Presbyterian friend of the family used to call for me on Sunday evenings and take me to Benediction at the Jesuit church about three miles away. I remember Father Day being billed outside the church to preach on *Helbeck of Bannisdale*. The novel was supposed to be an anti-Catholic tract; but I read it as a Catholic one. I once screwed my courage up to approach the great doors of The Holy Name on a week-day. They were shut and I did not know there

was a little door at the side, so I never tried again. I never had a Catholic book before I had *New Poems*; though I wrung every drop of Papistry out of Scott and Charlotte Yonge and even out of Kingsley! But from *New Poems* I copied out *Assumpta Maria* to take back to Roedean with me; and got one of my school-friends who was going to Venice for the holidays to bring me back a photograph of the central figure of Titian's *Assumption*, triumphantly linking Earth and Heaven. Years afterwards, after enduring with what fortitude I could muster Catholic vernacular hymns to our Lady, I found a Terry tune for *Assumpta Maria* and could sing to her as she ought to be sung to. Ultimately my father got tired of my borrowing *New Poems* and gave me the book. It was all I had of Francis Thompson until I published my own first book in 1914. By that time I was married, my husband and I had been received into the Church together, and Father Vaughan had motored into the wilds of Essex to christen our first baby.

Those were good days for poetry; and Wilfrid was typical of his time. Periodicals of all sorts, from evening papers like the green *Westminster Gazette* to reviews like the imposing *Englishwoman*, the organ of the 'constitutional' suffragettes, sought out good verse and paid for it. So when John Lane asked me to guarantee the sales of my first book, I was able to laugh and say I had made £40 out of serial rights already. I knew none of my reviewers: Arnold Bennett, Barrie, Chesterton and the rest. I had seen, as a child, the All Souls Fellow who reviewed me for *The Queen*. Then came America, with William Benét and Joyce Kilmer, the precursors of a far less fickle public than the English one. And then came a letter from Wilfrid Meynell.

2a Granville Place
Portman Square, W.
10 February, 1914

Dear Madam,

It seems less than honest to receive great delight and to make no sign of gratitude. Accept then the heartfelt thanks of all my family for the joy, *and sustenance*, we have had in *Bread and Circuses*.

Matthew Arnold says somewhere that three generations are needed to place a poet. Behold them under one roof! All our seven children delight with us in your verse, and my eldest grandchild now joins the circle when we read aloud from your work, as we repeatedly do. How many books are there that can stand that test of fame? I can think of none but yours. So please take all my gratitude.

Believe me,
yours,

WILFRID MEYNELL

I hope I did not take Wilfrid's kind-hearted sophistry seriously. His three generations were not, like Matthew Arnold's, three successive generations of grown-ups, but a family from grandparents downwards. Family reading has disappeared amid hoots of derision. But what fun it was—*Alice in Wonderland*, *The Rose and the Ring*, Edward Lear, Hood, Dickens, Bret Harte. All that merriment has disappeared between the crevasses that are now supposed to yawn between youth and age.

I first met Alice at a Women Writers' dinner to which she asked me as her guest. It was my first public meal—and my last but one. I only remember the spectacle I beheld from Alice's right hand: the grace with which Lady de Clifford—another Catholic—presided, the beauty of an Indian poetess in a *sari* at our table, and the scent of bay-leaves from the little bunch—for poetesses only—by our plates. But I remember my first lunch in the flat over Burns and Oates, because Wilfrid opened fire by insisting that we must have met before; could I tell him if there was anything in the ordinary press that had helped my husband and myself along our path to Rome? Yes, I said, there were some articles in, I think, *The Illustrated London News* which a staunch old Protestant friend of my husband's used to post to our Essex cottage. They had reported the Eucharistic Congress. Wilfrid beamed. 'Those were mine', he said. 'I kept wondering how much they would stand!'

After this we never met again except in letters, as I was never in London and he was seldom far away from his work. But years later, my son married his grand-daughter. My last

sight of him was in the library at Palace Court which we had to ourselves while the young couple were getting ready to catch their boat-train. He got out some proofs of *The Dublin Review*, passed by Alice and initialled by her. They were old articles of my own and the 'A.M.' in her beautiful handwriting was on their margins. 'Do you know what that stands for?' said Wilfrid. 'A marriage.'

FRA ANGELICO

GERVASE MATHEW, O.P.

MR JOHN POPE HENNESSY'S recent study on Fra Angelico¹ has already been widely and appreciatively reviewed. Yet it is curious how few of its reviewers seem to have noted the profound originality of his treatment and conclusion.

The volume is in itself an admirable specimen of the Phaidon productions at their best. It would be possible to criticise some of the colour reproductions but we are still at the stage when the majority of colour reproductions are liable to criticism. The photographing is excellent, the selection of details ideal for its purpose. The reproductions are predominant over the text as is so often the case in English Art History publications, yet here this is counter-balanced by Mr Pope-Hennessy's rare capacity for conciseness. In ninety pages of introduction and of catalogue he describes definitively three previously unknown yet major Italian painters of the Quattrocento.

One of these may still be described as Fra Angelico, but there is little in common between this Fra Giovanni da Fiesole, 'Fr Ioannes Petri de Magello iuxta Vichium Optimus Pictor', and the Angelico popularised by Rio in *De l'Art Chrétien*. He is a consummately accomplished and professional painter, employed by many patrons, working from carefully considered and balanced schemes, and consistently influenced by the ideals in the *Lucula Noctis* of his Dominican master Giovanni Dominici. The author of the *Lucula Noctis* was familiar with the technique of his contemporary Italian humanists and could write as well as they of 'Myrrha, Phaedra or Ganymede', but he rejected so many of their standards of value. To him the art of rhetoric seems over-prized. 'The beautiful form of the poem is like clothing. The body is worth more than the clothes which cover it. The soul is worth more than both.' He looked backwards to a half-imagined more simple past. So too Angelico, though as technically accomplished as any painter of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, rejects the fashionable forms of rhetoric in art, the 'Gothic'

¹ *Fra Angelico*. By John Pope-Hennessy. (Phaidon Press; £3 13s. 6d.)