Mrs. Meynell Resumes.*

Quite a number of our superior critics dislike Mrs. Meynell’s way of writing. In heavily breathed toes they accuse her of preciosity. If I were Mrs. Meynell I should take this kind of blame as a compliment, for with those who use the word in disparagement *preciosity* signifies choice, fastidiousness, precision, a writing with the ear as well as with the eye. And for myself, I am among those who admire Mrs. Meynell’s style prodigiously. It has, first and last, distinctness; it has more distinctness than any style at present written, except perhaps that of Mr. Henry James. It has all kinds of merits: it is direct, pointed, glittering, brief. Words blaze in the sentences like gems—skilfully chosen gems. It finishes what it has got to say without surplusage. It does what Emerson was always trying to do—"Emerson without props," you might call it. But I find in this style a colour, a fragrance, which Emerson had not: equal serenity, a less metallic background. If Mrs. Meynell is sometimes cloudy and obscure, as people say, it is her thinking, not her expression. I see in this book the descriptions of a sea-wall, of the Channel in a high wind, of a sleepy autumn, of a Roman Street—what pictures! Have you seen these things in just that way or have you read them of? You confuse your vision with the artist’s vision, which is a triumph for the artist. After that, our friend the ponderous critic, breathing hard, can mutter gloomily about "preciosity" and "unnaturalness" as long as he pleases. Who cares?

An unnatural style? Yes, in so far forth as it is obviously a work of art. I don’t know exactly what the natural style is, or where to look for it. The charwoman changes her mode of expression when she takes pen in hand; so does the butcher. Supposing talk to be natural, nobody can write exactly as he talks: it is a different operation. The nearer you get to apparent bareness and simplicity, the more art appears. The artificial styles, such as Sterne’s, Gibbon’s, Carlyle’s, Meredith’s, and Mrs. Meynell’s, too, are less unnatural than we are led to suppose by our superficial tests. As for Mrs. Meynell’s essays, we should say, against the less frigid kind might be unable to absorb an essay of Mrs. Meynell’s without a shiver. She does disconcert a ponderous critic, breathing hard, can mutter gloomily about "preciosity" and "unnaturalness" as long as he pleases. Who cares?

Not that we are denied revelations of benignity. Indeed, a kindly tolerance for the freaks and miseries of mankind, from the Bank Holiday gambols of Jack and Jill to the suicide of Haydon, is the dominant note of her writing. Her chapter on the life and death of Haydon is an altogether beautiful lesson in the mercy, forbearance, generosity without condescension, which should cover the man whose life has been reckless, unlucky, disastrous. She protests against the imper-This is the usual complaint against Mrs. Meynell’s writing: they say she is incapable of abandon-ment, or—to use a foreign word nearer to my meaning—of élan. Personally, I disagree with that. I admire (say these readers) restraint and dignity if you perceive a disposition to scamper away and flourish the heels resolutely kept in dust; it might be better said? Has anything been as well said on this matter? “No: the forsaken man only,” she ends, “but also the fallen city evokes this exercise of historical morality, until there is not a watering-place upon our coasts but is securely aware of merited unfortune on the Adriatic.”

Here, as in the chapter on "Popular Burlesque," and in the one called "Two Burdens," an essay of profitable reflection upon every wing of the Suffragist army, does Mrs. Meynell strike her own note. But after these, even the impression is left that Mrs. Meynell studies life from a second-storey window. Even when she decides to descend into the street she does not join in the thick of the crowd, but keeps apart, a little puzzled, trying dispassionately to arrive at what they are squabbling and shouting about. We simply state this fact as a fact to be noted without comment. Heaven forbid that we should ask any talent to do anything in a different way from the way it does it, for that is to ask it to be less than itself. Shall we require the good dray-horse to be a racehorse, or the Arab courser to tug the trucks? Shall we have remorse of heart because the young author, D’Annunzio, or of Mr. Hardy because he is not Willkie Collins? That, when you think of it, is the error which produces, and at the same time stultifies, all censorship.

Mrs. Meynell has her own method. In one of her most well-known poems she tells—"I quote from memory, and may have some of the words wrong—of the repression, of the secrecy the poet is forced to throughout each ‘difficult day.’"

But when the first dream comes with the first sleep, I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart!

That is just it. It is the progress of the “difficult day” she shows us in her essays, but the outburst, thrill of joy or cry of regret, she enfolds in the shadow of a dream. 

VINCENT O’SULLIVAN.

* * * "Ceres’ Runaway, and other Essays." By Alice Meynell. 

(London: Constable.)
Our German Cousins and the English Nation.

Does the business man realise how important it is to understand the character of the people in whose country he wishes to sell his goods? Is it not necessary for a statesman, for a leading politician to study the psychological features of the nations with whom he has to deal? This knowledge is as important as in both facts, theories, or other events. By anticipations and logical conclusions in the psychological field both the business man as well as the statesman achieve a great deal of their success.

The recent book, entitled "Our German Cousins," although not having met with the success anticipated by its originators, is admirably compiled. German life is well pictured therein, and particularly when it is borne in mind how difficult it is to draw comparisons for the reason that the basis is often an entirely different one. A few instances might explain this.

German language purists have tried hard to translate into their mother tongue the word "gentleman," without, however, finding a suitable term; nor could it be possibly done, as the English gentleman is the product of long breeding under conditions not existing in other countries.

In other words, England is an aristocratic country, Germany democratic. When the waves of the French Revolution reached England, the account of its island position, remained unaffected, and, as a consequence, the English aristocracy—frequently identical with individual wealth—is unsurpassed by any other country. Thus, whilst the bourgeoisie left their stamp on German culture, the reverse has been taking place in England. Gentleman-like behaviour, respectability, and even loyalty to the reigning house are products of cultivation. Society plays an important part, and the ordinary people interested in it can be gauged from the fact that nearly all papers have a Society column. The English language in literature, in style, in grammatical order varies little, whilst the German one is subjected to all sorts of treatment by various authors. An English representative of the Labour Party who may have worked previously in the mines is soon affected by the refined air of Parliament—though exceptions are not infrequent now after becoming a chosen representative for that house.

Tradition is backed up by the law. The daily papers in England display an infinitely better tone than those in Germany. A libel action is a costly thing in England, successful results rarely to a typical English compensation. Personages are talked of in papers in Germany in a manner which would be found absolutely disgusting here. These facts make the freedom of the English Press practically illusionary.

The English nation is fairly homogeneous, and the same interest, the same likes and dislikes prevail. Not so in Germany, where the people are of a composite nature, and where internal wars and constitutional differences up to recent times have often shaken the country to its foundations.

The unbroken record, along with a cool temperament, is responsible for the conservative nature of the English people. Changes are only gradually effected, and a new generation has to bear his father's way, if the latter has been a representative of the Labour Party who may have worked previously in the mines is soon affected by the refined air of Parliament—though exceptions are not infrequent now after becoming a chosen representative for that house.

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Father and Son. By Edmund Gosse. (Heinemann. 25.)

In the preface to this reprint of Mr. Gosse’s interesting little book, it is variously described as a document, a source of vital and religious conditions, the diagnosis of dying Puritanism, a study of the development of moral and intellectual ideas during the progress of infancy, a narrative of a spiritual struggle, a slice of life, and a moving and complex tragedy. But, either, it is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences, and almost two epochs. The truth is it is a literary, rather than a biological or psychological, study of a lonely child in its parental Calvinistic cloister, with personalities, beliefs, etc., exerting an influence over its thoughts and life. It is written with that literary distinction which characterises the writings of Mr. Gosse, and altogether is an instructive essay on early literary and religious formative influences.

The Master of Destiny. By James Allen. (Putnam 35. 6d.)

Mr. Allen aims in his ten chapters to show that by the cultivation of the will we may steer a middle course between determinism and free will, and by the development of such virtues as self-control, thoroughness, concentration, and so forth, may ultimately arrive at a mastery of that mysterious thing we call destiny. The little book is well written, and it approaches destiny in the modern mood as something in our own hands. It shows that a man makes its appeal to those who are convinced that human conduct should be guided by mathematical rules of life rather than by spontaneity, which has very little place in the new methods of training the will and mind.

Principles of Political Economy. By John Stuart Mill. (Longmans. 5s.)

We doubt whether there is sufficient interest in Mill to-day to justify a new edition of this work. Mill was at the best but a doubtful sociologist, and the synthesis of which the “Principles” is part is a very faulty achievement, seeing that it rests on the great error of the laissez faire school. Still, though we are a generation or two beyond the mental gymnastics of this school, there may be students of political economy who have always been strong in the Hindu spirit. Hence arose the New Buddhism contained in this abridged translation of the original Sanskrit of the Badhi-charyavatara. The Thought of Enlightenment is jewelled with that wealth of word-polishing in which the Eastern imagination so finely expresses itself.

Napoleon. An Historical Tragedy. By Algernon Boyesen. (Unwin. 5s.)

Mr. Boyesen is mistaken in believing that the English theatre is not worthy of such a play as his. We assure him that managers are keenly on the look-out for unusual historical melodramas written round Napoleon’s career, seeking “to trace the rise and fall of a great ambition, to represent a conflict which covered a period of twenty years, the beautiful agony of an expansive and vigorous vitality struggling to realise itself against the inevitable force of environment;” containing sixty speaking parts, and quite devoid of distinction and humour. And if he will but eliminate the long, minute, and utterly impossible analyses of scene and character, and send his piece round in a practical form, it will be welcomed. But he must also prevent his Napoleon from saying Ba! For a stage Napoleon who baas noth there’s nothing but boos.

Moreton and Altemur. By James B. Winterbotham. (Chapman and Hall. 5s.)

These papers, “which were written at considerable intervals for a private literary society,” do not call for much comment. The author’s method has been to select themes and to quote apt verse illustrating all sides of them. His themes are many and varied, ranging from “What is Poetical,” “Drinking Songs,” “Sermons,” “The Baby,” to “Other People’s Houses.” A subject of special interest at the moment is “The Noises in the House.” Herein the author shows his ability for viewing things in their proper perspective, and his descriptions of the noises in the House of Lords, mostly of a dull and soporific nature, and those in the Lower House, are convincing. A very readable book of poetic morals.

Church and Nation, or Wealth with Honour. By Elliot E. Mills. (Simpkin Marshall. 10s. 6d.)

Mr. Mills has joined the swelling ranks of those who seek to reconstruct society on a religious basis. He has no love for our present political form of administration, and this anti-political bias manifests itself in favour of the Church. Accordingly he asks us to return to pre-Reformation times and to institute a Neo-Catholic form of social administration, under which the heads of the Church would become the custodians, not only of souls, but of sovereigns. We are to make “a wealthy scientific Neo-Catholic corporation the casual labourer’s landlord,” whatever that may mean. It sounds very pretty, but it will not work. The bishops as a board of banking directors is simply rot. A not uninteresting feature of Mr. Mill’s book is its Mariolatry, in what the author terms “The redemption of the Queen.” Thus the greatest factor of the Neo-Catholic civilisation of the future will be the Virgin Mary, but the scientific and none the less reverent form of an attempt to create an environment for every mother and every child, the Church would become the custodians, not only of souls, but of sovereigns. We are to make “a wealthy scientific Neo-Catholic corporation the casual labourer’s landlord,” whatever that may mean. It sounds very pretty, but it will not work. The bishops as a board of banking directors is simply rot. A not uninteresting feature of Mr. Mill’s book is its Mariolatry, in what the author terms “The redemption of the Queen.” Thus the greatest factor of the Neo-Catholic civilisation of the future will be the Virgin Mary, but the scientific and none the less reverent form of an attempt to create an environment for every mother and every child, the Church would become the custodians, not only of souls, but of sovereigns. We are to make “a wealthy scientific Neo-Catholic corporation the casual labourer’s landlord,” whatever that may mean. It sounds very pretty, but it will not work. The bishops as a board of banking directors is simply rot. A not uninteresting feature of Mr. Mill’s book is its Mariolatry, in what the author terms “The redemption of the Queen.” Thus the greatest factor of the Neo-Catholic civilisation of the future will be the Virgin Mary, but the scientific and none the less reverent form of an attempt to create an environment for every mother and every child, the Church would become the custodians, not only of souls, but of sovereigns. We are to make “a wealthy scientific Neo-Catholic corporation the casual labourer’s landlord,” whatever that may mean. It sounds very pretty, but it will not work. The bishops as a board of banking directors is simply rot.