CHAPTER V

Marie Corelli's Style.

True literary style is a rare achievement. It is less an ornament of the theme than the voice of the writer. The intense and decisive emotion of the writer naturally moulds the manner of his writing. If the writer's mode of thinking and feeling is not sincere and deep, he cannot possibly have a distinctive style.

Corelli's descriptive powers naturally presuppose the possession of a style which would lend itself to description of various kinds when the occasion demanded it. But does Corelli possess a personal literary style? If Corelli was just a 'popular' novelist and wrote her novels to entertain and instruct her reading public, can she be expected to have a personal style of her own? While discussing the problem of true literary style Middleton Murry says: "A style must be individual, because it is the expression of an individual mode of feeling. Some styles will appear more peculiar than others, either because the writer's mode of feeling is unusually remote from the normal mode, or because the particular emotional experiences he is seeking to convey are outside the ordinary range of human experience, or, finally, because the writer, inspired by some impure motive such as vanity or the desire to astonish..."
the bourgeois, has deliberately made his language outre and bizarre. This last is the false idiosyncrasy.¹

Corelli was an imitative, rather than an original, artist. She tried to startle and attract the reading public of her day not only by novelty of her themes and ideas but even by her style, the style which she thought of as an ornament, as a 'painful re-polishing of the surface.' Her style is the 'trick of the trade' of the popular novelists of her time. It is the artistry of a skilful writer rather than the distinct voice of an authentic artist. In her anonymous work, The Silver Domino, Corelli says about her own style: "They (critics) invariably 'go' for one of our newest inflictions, Marie Corelli, of whom it may be truly said that she has written no two books alike, either in plot or style."² There was the vogue of the elaborate and artificial style in the eighteen nineties. Writers, like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, loved to play with words and colourful phrases. They tried to weave gorgeous tapestries in words, in their writings. They cultivated the habit of using epigrams and paradoxes. Corelli seems to have been influenced by this vogue. But when her style is at its best, its imaginative quality can hardly be doubted.

1. The Problem of Style- by Middleton Murry. p.15.
2. The Silver Domino. p.156.
Corelli possessed some remarkable features of narrative style. There is a rapid and dazzling flow in her narration. Her style is not at all hampered by an inadequate vocabulary. She arouses the curiosity of her readers and holds them in suspense to the end of her narration. She gives imaginative and gorgeous descriptions of different objects and creates a colorful atmosphere to suit the action of her stories. She is also sometimes merely decorative in her descriptions. Being a writer of romances, Corelli is not at all handicapped by the restrictions of time and place. Corelli's emotional appeal is direct. She is eloquent and poetic. She deals frequently with the tender aspects of life and evokes pathos successfully in many contexts.

But Corelli lacks some of the essential qualities of good prose. She is not plain and precise. She is unrestrained in her use of words. Her sentences are not well balanced. Her use of punctuation and her habit of forming new words are whimsical. Her prose is often clumsy, obscure and pretentious. It lacks the nobility and elegance of good prose. Even her pictorial art is not exalted. In her descriptions, the mysterious and spiritual presence of Nature becomes physical and lifeless. But in great writers like Shakespeare the physical is permeated by spiritual. Corelli is dogmatic and sometimes even full of
inventive in her writing. She delighted in sensational and melodramatic effects and her prose is mainly a medium for her sensationalism and melodrama. But it becomes imaginative and poetic in a few romantic contexts.

Corelli's earlier works, on the whole, appear to be more elaborate and laboured than the later ones. They also seem to be more vigorous. Her style, in general, presents a combination of many interests. It is elaborate, exuberant, vigorous, rhetorical, poetic, sentimental, whimsical, didactic, sincere, or artificial, according to the tenor of the theme.

Corelli laboured consciously over many passages of vivid description. Her settings, like the descriptions of Norwegian scenery in Thelma, show her florid art. But this does not seem to obstruct the flow of her narration. This ornamental style is seen even in her first romance. The descriptions of the regions of Heaven and the luxurious dinner party before the death of Zara by lightning reveal it in A Romance of Two Worlds. Corelli could create an atmosphere of seriousness, vividness and gloom. Here is a passage describing the stillness at the time of a banquet in Vendetta. "We had reached that stage of the banquet when the game was about to be served, the invisible choir of boys' voices had just completed an enchanting stornello with an accompaniment of mandolines, when a stillness, strange and unaccountable, fell upon the company - a pause - an ominous hush, as though some person supreme in..."
No one seemed disposed to speak or to move, the very footsteps of the waiters were muffled in the velvet pile of the carpet; no sound was heard but the measured plash of the fountain that played among the ferns and flowers. In another context of the same novel, Corelli gives a profusely adorned portrait of Nina. Nina had dressed for the brilliant ball shortly before her approaching death. There is a dramatic movement in Corelli's way of narration inspite of the tone of exaggeration which colours the description as it is given by the jealous husband: "But fairest where all were fair, peerless in the exuberance of her triumphant vanity, and in absolute faultlessness of her delicate charms, was my wife,—the bride of the day, the heroine of the night. Never had she looked so surpassingly beautiful, and even I, even I, felt my pulse beat quicker, and the blood course more hotly through my veins, as I beheld her, radiant victorious, and smiling—a veritable queen of the fairies, as dainty as a drop of dew, as piercing to the eye as a flash of light. Her dress was some wonderful mingling of misty lacc, with the sheen of satin and glimmering showers of pearl; diamonds glittered on her bodice like sunlight on white foam; the brigands' jewels flashed gloriously on her white throat and in her tiny shell-like ears,

while the masses of her gold hair were coiled to the top of her small head and there caught by a priceless circle of rose-brilliants, brilliants that I well remembered—they had belonged to my mother. Yet more lustrous than the light of the gems she wore was the deep, ardent glory of her eyes, dark as night and luminous as stars; more delicate than the filmy robes that draped her was the pure pearl-like whiteness of her neck, which was just sufficiently displayed to be graceful without suggesting immodesty. Noticing the highly decorative style in Vendetta the "Morning Post," in its review alluded to her "full blooded, Turkey-Carpet style of writing." Corelli's love of decorative style seems to have decreased in her later writings.

Corelli can also be rhetorical. On such occasions her style is vigorous and exuberant. Some of her stories are narrated by the hero or heroine. Hence it was convenient for Corelli to identify herself with the narrator and to depict the doings of the hero or heroine with exuberance and passion. Corelli's rhetorical style is seen also in the sermons of monks and priests. The narratives in Vendetta and Wormwood have become as vigorous and dramatic as they deal with numerous incidents in the lives of the heroes. But the sermons are monotonous because of their abstract theme and argumentation. In Holy

2. Marie Corelli by Eileen Bigland, p.87.
Orders, the Rev. Mr. Richard preaches once to a packed congregation in St. Paul's Cathedral, London. He sermonizes on a passage from the prophet Jeremiah. The author describes the scene with some comments in the middle, which make it more lively. "Hear, 0 earth; behold I will bring evil upon these people, even the fruit of their thoughts." After pronouncing these words slowly and with emphasis he waited a moment.

The stillness of the congregation was remarkable,—not a man or woman moved, and all eyes were directed towards him..."what is the fruit of a thought?" he began, and his voice rang clear through the great Cathedral like a silver clarion—"Have we ever rightly understood that a thought can bear fruit at all? We, whose brains in this present generation more resemble empty guards in which dried peas are put to rattle for the amusement of children, than that complex, beautiful and wonderful God's design of fine cells for the storage of the honey of wisdom,—do we, can we realise the mechanism and evolvement of thought?... It would trouble you too much, and by many of you be considered a waste of your time, if I were to ask you to go back with me in history and try to realise the splendid of past civilization in those great empires and kingdoms of ancient days when Britain was unknown, and which are now mere dust-heaps in the world for occasional antiquarians to explore..." The sermon may sound verbose and eccentric in

its exposition of thought. But it has an imposing lilt of its own.

Corelli's poetic manner is seen in some of her descriptions and narrations. It can be seen in *Borobbas* and *The Sorrows of Satan*, where she deals with Biblical characters. The fall of Lucifer - the 'Son of the Morning' - echoes the tone of Milton's epic. Some of the scenes like the destruction of the Nagaya temple in *Ardath* or the sailing of Lotys to the infinite in *Temporal Power* are rich instances of Corelli's poetic qualities. In the following passage from *Thelma* there is a description of Norway in winter - 'the land of the long shadow.'

"Night on the Altenfjord, - the long, long, changeless night of winter. The sharp snow-covered crests of the mountains rose in the white appeal against the darkness of the sky, - the wild north wind tore through the leafless branches of the pine-forests, bringing with it driving pellets of stinging hail. ...

Suddenly a strange, unearthly glow flashed over the sombre scene, - a rosy radiance deepening to brilliant streaks of fire. The dark heavens were torn asunder, and through them streamed flaring pennons of light, - waving, trembling, dancing, luminous of red, blue, green, and a delicious amber, like the flowing of golden wine, - wider, higher, more dazzlingly lustrous, the wondrous glory shone aloft, rising upward from the horizon-
-thrusting long spears of lambent flame among the murky retreating clouds, till in one magnificent coruscation of resplendent beams a blazing Arch of gold leaped from east to west, spanning the visible breadth of the Fjord, and casting towards the white peaks above vivid sparkles and reflections of jewel-like brightness and colour.1

Corelli's poetic temperament is also seen in the use of lyrics and hymns in her novels. She quotes from other poets and sometimes gives verses or songs of her own composition. The lyrics are generally ditties, madrigals or love-songs. They are sometimes sung to the accompaniment of a piano or mandoline. Some of the songs—like the song of Prince Ivan in A Romance of Worlds about his love for Zara:

"As the billows fling shells on the shore,  
As the sun poureth light on the sea,  
As a lark on the wing scatters song to the spring,  
So rushes my love to thee,"2

or the song of Thelma about pure love in the novel of her name—

"Lovest thou me for my beauty's sake?  
Love me not then! ...  
Lovest thou me for Love's own sake?  
Aha, sweet, then love me! ... "3

are emotional and tender and they express the sentimental feelings of lovers. But her poetic descriptions in prose are far more appealing than these songs.

Her style becomes artificial whenever she writes about spiritual training or about the principles of her philosophical creed. She seems to have lacked true spiritual or yogic training. While some of the priests of her creed lecture on their philosophy to their disciples, they do not appear to convince them by giving them true spiritual vision. Their way of teaching looks like a mesmeric feat. The heroines in A Romance of Two Worlds and The Life Everlasting got their spiritual knowledge through some drinks and when they are in a trance. Some melodramatic events are projected before their inward eye and spiritual knowledge is thus imparted to them. The priests then give them lengthy, monotonous sermons. In Ardath Heliobas makes the sceptic Theos submissive by the magical power of his eyes. Here is a description of the spiritual power of Heliobas.

"Back! Back! he [Heliobas] cried warningly. 'If you come one inch nearer to me I cannot answer for your safety—back, I say! Good God! You do not know your own power!'"

"Alwyn scarcely heeded him,—some fatal attraction drew
him on, and he still advanced, when all suddenly he paused, trembling violently. His nerves began to throb acutely, the blood in his veins was like fire, there was a curious strangling tightness in his throat that interrupted and oppressed his breathing, he stared straight before him with large, luminous impassioned eyes. What was that dazzling something in the air that flashed and whirled and shone like glittering wheels of golden flame? His lips parted - he stretched out his hands in the uncertain manner of a blind man feeling his way. 'Oh God! God!' he muttered as though stricken by some sudden amazement - then, with a smothered gasping cry, he staggered and fell heavily forward on the floor - insensible. It is in this condition of unconsciousness that Theos meets his angel love Edris, writes a long poem and sees the events of his former life in Al-Kyris. Does not this description of the way of imparting spiritual knowledge seem melodramatic and mesmeric? The atmosphere of a seance hangs heavily on such a description. The novelist seems to doubt the effect of her own description, because she takes pains again, at the end of the novel, to convince the reader that the experience of spiritual perception, which Alwyn gets in his insensible state, is real and not the dream of a person under a mesmeric spell. Description of this kind is

fanciful rather than realistic. Corelli's knowledge of yogic experience seems to have been superficial. Her style is, therefore, artificial and unconvincing, whenever she tries to describe situations involving such an experience. Her insincerity and pretence are seen in some of the affected statements in her novels. Bigland quotes a passage from one of the letters addressed to her publisher, Bentley, in which she tries to hoodwink him about her knowledge of Arabic and of the antiquity of the discovery of electric light. 1 The portions of the novels, in which Corelli discusses her philosophy, are logical, and they exhibit her sincerity. But there is no hint anywhere of an authentic expression of direct spiritual or intuitive experience.

Corelli aims at novelty in her style. She even seems to have taken considerable liberty in her use of the English language. She is whimsical in some of her expressions and she forms new words like "youngness," "exhaustless" and "deathful." She uses archaic expressions like 'thou,' 'thou,' 'art' and 'wert.' In the interest of vividness of effect, she frequently uses compound words and sometimes frames new compounds. But her use of the dash ('-') as a connecting mark in between the compound words does not seem always necessary and her compounds are

not always happy. Here are some of her coinages: "Topaz-tinted wine, suddenly-released wrath, luscious smiling, softly-coloured, deeply-flushed face, blossom-white hand, softly-worded flatteries, rose-brilliants, dry-eyed despair, proudly-incompetent, learned-ignorant, sorrowfully-wondering eyes."

Corelli has some compound expressions of similitude like "diamond-like lumps of ice, Juliet-like figure." She also uses a few slang words like 'upperten' for upper class society, 'rapid lady' for 'fast lady' and 'tom-boy tennis-players' for 'new women' of fashion and education.

Corelli's use of punctuation is unusual in many of her passages. Here is a passage from Ardath in which her use of the dash and exclamatory sign is seen to be whimsical. It is in the form of a dialogue. "Ages upon ages rolled away, - the centuries between Earth and Earth's purposed Redemption passed, - and, - though in Heaven these measured spaces of time that appear so great to men are as a mere world's month of summer, - still, some, for once God's golden days seemed long! I had lost thee! Thou wert my soul's other soul, - my king! - my immortality's completion! - and though thou wert alas! a fallen Brightness, yet I held fast to my one hope, - the hope in thy diviner nature, which though sorely overcome, was not and could not be wholly destroyed."

On the whole, it can be said that Corelli's style is seen at its best in its ornamental or poetical aspect. The extraordinary beauty of Nature and the novelty of certain philosophic ideas set her imagination to glow and it was at these moments that she was able to use all the opulence of expression she had in the most effective manner. Even the tricks of archaism and of unusual punctuation helped her in her task of securing the desired effect. She must have played the sedulous ape to Carlyle, Ruskin and Pater, for these were the masters with whose style her own had a close affinity.