Marie Corelli's Views on Fiction and Art.

Corelli's immethodical reading and lack of regular training were, in a large measure, responsible for the lack of balance and comprehensiveness in her pronouncements on fiction and art. This is seen in her occasional lectures and works. Her knowledge of English literature and of literary criticism was inadequate and mediocre. In a lecture called *A Little Talk on Literature* she explains her theory of art in a rather whimsical and confused way. "Strange as it may seem," she says, "the grandest poems, the finest fiction, are produced by authors who have never had, or never could have, the experience they deal with except in Imagination. Most of the great imaginative works of the world are beyond experience. To the poet and romancer 'Imagination' is experience. It is the Eye of the Soul, which sees all Earth and all Heaven."1 This exaltation of Imagination over Experience shows the characteristic unbalance that is revealed in her novels. As Tolstoy says: "To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds or forms expressed in words, so to transmit

that feeling that others experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.¹ No experience, no art. But Corelli misjudged the relation between Imagination and Experience.

She was at one with the Romantics in her glorification of the imagination. She exalted romanticists and dreamers above kings and statesmen. She found more truth in imaginary things than in the objects of the visible world. But in what degree and in which way, she did not explain. "The things that were called imaginary", she said once while talking on *The Vanishing Gift*, "were often more real than what is called realism ... Walter Scott's world was real, so real that a shrine was built to him in Princess Street, crowded with the sculptured figures of men and women, most of whom never existed save in his teeming fancy. No king, no statesman, can do for a country what its romanticists and dreamers can. The sovereignty of the inspired and imaginative soul is supreme and above all other earthly dominion, even as the fame of Homer is greater than the conquests of Alexander."²

At the time of the First World War in 1915, Corelli addressed the boys of the Harrow Country School. She said that there was no great poet to immortalise the courage and roll call of honour of her country. She considered the poets of

¹ What is Art and Essays on Art - by Tolstoy. p.123.
her time as feeble rhymesters. She desired that a Byron should
write an epic on the glory of her nation. "If Byron were
alive, what a difference it would make! Had he been living
now he would have given us England's Iliad as only Homer or
Shakespeare could." She valued Byron much more than Tennyson,
Browning and Swinburne. How could a Byron write an Iliad?
But this difficulty never crossed Corelli's mind. Corelli's
address was seized by Punch and it published a skit on her talk.
Corelli praised lavishly those who admired her works. While
appreciating the poetry of Tennyson, she addressed him as "peer
of the realm and Peer of Poets." She considered after Tennyson,
Corelli was not broad minded and catholic in her outlook
in literary matters. She could not tolerate the popularity
enjoyed by many other writers of her day. She found 'a very
devil of lewdness and atheism' in Swinburne's poetry. She did
not think Browning's poetry was worth considering. She preferred
Stevenson's poetry to his prose works. She called Rudyard
Kipling 'a mighty genius,' a 'blessed body' and 'treasure' of
journalism in a mocking tone. His work appeared to her 'shallow'.
In The Silver Domino, Corelli makes fun of many other
popular writers of her day like Edwin Arnold, Edmund
Gosse, Watson, Oscar Wilde, Hall Caine, Haggard, Grant Allen,
Hardy, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Mrs. Schreiner and Rhoda Broughton.
Corelli mentions Hall Caine's 'big-bow-wow style,' Guida's

2. The Silver Domino. p.228.
3. Ibid. p.316.
unvaried style and Rhoda Broughton's 'liberties' with the English language. She sees 'no beauty and no art' in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. She condemns it as 'an entirely hateful book'. She flatters herself for her individuality among the other 'writers in grooves' of her day. She seems to take malicious pleasure in her attack on the press. "Nothing is more irritating to a critic than to have to chronicle the reckless flights of this young woman's (Corelli's) unbridled and fantastic imagination. She tells us about heaven and hell as if she had been to them both, and had rather enjoyed her experiences. Valiant attempts to quash her have been made, but apparently in vain, and most of my brethren in the critical faculty consider her a positive infliction. ... As it is, her very name is, to the men of the press, what a red rag is to a bull. They are down upon it instantly with a fury that is almost laughable in its violence. But I suppose she is like the rest of her sex-obstinate, and that she will hold on her wild career, regardless of censure.\(^1\) Corelli's wrong assessment of works and authors was also evident in her preface to the poems of her step-brother, Eric Mackey. She placed his lyrics by the side of those of Shakespeare and Milton.\(^2\)

But Eric is no longer read now. Corelli's limited knowledge of

\(^1\) *The Silver Domino.* pp. 157-158.
\(^2\) *Marie Corelli* - by Bigland. p. 71.
literature is also witnessed in her prejudiced opinions about the great writers of modern fiction and drama like Zola, Ibsen, and Bernard Shaw.

Till the impact of continental influences in the eighteen nineties, the English novel was mainly objective. The masters of the traditional novel like Fielding, Scott and Dickens considered the novel as a prose form of literature meant primarily for entertainment and secondarily for moral and social reformation. They depicted the lives of individuals in relation to their society. Their method of reproducing reality was not that of the naturalistic school - describing everything in detail - but one of judicious selection. The novelists did not indulge in a morbid exposition of the sexual side of life. They interpreted life in a hopeful spirit. They were optimists in the broad sense of the term. Corelli had accepted the conventions and moral values of the traditional novel. She based the structure of her novels on the impressions she had formed of these models.

Corelli possessed some of the literary characteristics of Scott and the Victorian novelists. Like them Corelli can tell a moving story. Her novels also have loose plots, like theirs, of epic magnitude. Her novels are rich in vivid natural descriptions, settings and stirring incidents. Again, like Dickens and Thackeray, she has used the novel as a means of
reformation. Her moral outlook and conception of womanhood are the same as those of the Victorian novelists. She believed in preserving the respectability and decorum of the individual and the family. She did not mix the good and evil qualities of man in one character so as 'to injure the moral perception of the reader.'

But Corelli did not possess the immense knowledge of worldly life and learning that Scott had. Although she had a fantastic imagination, like Dickens, she did not become successful like him in creating living characters. Another great quality which Corelli lacked was humour. She resembles Charlotte Bronte in that respect. Dickens is often remembered for his humorous and macabre characters. In the Radcliffean paraphernalia too, Corelli does not rise to the height of Scott and Dickens. Dickens's figures of terror like Fagin or Bill Sykes are "shrouded in an atmosphere part sordidly realistic, part imaginatively eerie, or such sinister force as to shock the strongest nerves."¹ In comparison with these ghastly characters, Corelli's Romani in Vendetta or Gustav in Wormwood appear to be insignificant creations. Like Thackeray, Corelli exposes the snobs and sordid personages of upper class society. But her method is direct and vitriolic. Her comments are prejudiced and unbalanced. Thackeray was a man of high culture and artistic

¹ Early Victorian Novelists - by D.Cecil. p.36.
sensibility. She exposed the vain and fallen through lively characterisation. Becky Sharp reveals her personality in her dialogues and actions. Again, Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot possessed a deep psycho-analytical insight, which was unknown to Corelli. She did not possess even a 'skindeep' knowledge of humanity, as compared with Scott and Dickens. She was incapable of perceiving the feelings of other individuals. As Bertha Vyver remarks in Memoirs of Marie Corelli: "far behind her great writers, as she felt herself to be, she wrote her own books." She was an imitative artist rather than a creative genius.

Corelli trained herself in the traditional school of the novel after the manner of masters like Scott and Dickens. She appears to have followed their methods largely while writing her romances. Corelli praises lavishly Dickens in The Silver Domino: "Most of us, I suppose," she says, "have heard of Charles Dickens and his immortal novels, the most wholesome humane, sympathetic, and heart-invigorating books that ever, by happy fortune, were given to the public." Bertha Vyver has mentioned Corelli's favourite novelists and also discussed to some extent her conception of the novel in her Memoirs of Marie Corelli. When Corelli lectured in Manchester in 1903 on

2. The Silver Domino. p.201.
Literature she said: "For the best fiction they must go to Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray, and Charlotte Bronte, writers who had the courage to portray good as good, evil as evil, without mixing up the two in such a way as to injure the moral perception of the reader." Corelli's characters are either good or evil. She did not delineate angelic qualities in a villain. In the same lecture, Corelli talks about the purpose of the novel: "All authors worthy the name had unspeakable joy in their work, and performed that work in the hope to cheer, refine and elevate at least one soul in a million."

Corelli had read the works of Zola and other novelists of the 'realistic school.' But she did not study the new technique or realise its artistic significance. The realistic novels seem to have had a bad influence on her writing. Corelli was indirectly influenced by the 'realistic novels' of her time. She reads many of them. She was conscious of their popularity. But she seems to have found in them nothing but the nakedness of life. She hates the novels of sex and their psycho-analytical method. She condemns the critics who praise them. She often refers to them in her novels and makes fun of them. "Put in as much as you can about sexual matters and the bearing of children, - in brief, discourse of men and women simply as cattle who exist merely for breeding purposes, and

2. Ibid p.183.
your success will be enormous. There's not a critic living who won't applaud you, - there's not a school-girl of fifteen who will not gloat over your pages in the silence of her virginal bedroom !° In another context in the same novel she says: "If your book were a judicious mixture of Zola, Huysmans, Huysmans and Baudelaire, or had for its heroine a 'modest' maid who considered honourable marriage a 'degradation,' it would be quite sure of success in these days of new Sodom and Gomorrah."° Corelli's novels were not well received by the majority of leading critics. She was not on good terms with the English Press. When she found that the Press welcomed realistic novels, she felt slighted. She had nothing but contempt for the technique of the new novel. She observed in Ziaka that the realist "sacrifices all the canons of art and beauty to the discussion of topics unmentionable in decent society."°

In her lecture on The Vanishing Gift Corelli, perhaps unconsciously, made a few remarks which read like her own verdict on her novels. She said: "The novelists of a former time laboured with sustained energy, but we in our day could only produce imitations of their models with a vast amount of spasmodic hurry and clamour."° Her novels were written under pressure and in a hurry. They reveal her characteristic —

1. The Sorrows of Satan. p.35.
limitations and excellences as a novelist. An attempt will be made in the third part of this thesis to sum up her achievement as a novelist.

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