APPENDIX

HER LOVE POETRY

Appropriately one fourth of the poems in the Collected Poems of Alice Meynell may be regarded as love poems. Even a cursory reading reveals their range and variety, not in poetical ingenuity, – for she attempted few metrical variations – but in the number of fancies, both pleasant and perceptive, that she has about the emotional life. Within this body of work two general divisions are obvious. They are, first, Alice Meynell's early love lyrics, sensuous, often earthy, second, her later poems, poems that reveal her nature and abiding passion in a real form, the dark questionings and occasional haunting fears and disillusionments that are brought to her together with serenity and a sense of fulfilment.

What we have here, then, is a charming history of our poet's experience of love. This is its true value to us. For here we can trace Alice Meynell's experience through
the troubled days of hotblooded youth to the calm of old age. Here we can see her development from an almost primitive greed of the senses to the experiencing of a love, more spiritual than physical.

According to psychologists there are two periods, adolescence and the age of fifty noted for the actual mood for love. During these periods of life vague desires produce a pleasant sense of anticipation. At such moments a man gives himself up to a sylph-like figure of his fancy. Alice Meynell is no exception to it. As a love poet she is a robust and happy lover of former days. She has written of her beginnings: "I began to write when I was about nine; it had no kind of promise in it, nothing noticeable or ever excusable, except a good ear for prosody."1

She published her first volume of poetry, the Preludes, in 1875. For a very long time she continued writing secretly. Later she showed these early poems to an American friend of hers who appreciated her compositions and disclosed the fact to her parents. This
aroused their interests in the creative power of their daughter. During her early years of service to the Muse, Alice Meynell came into contact with a priest who became quite precious to her. He had received her into the Church when she accepted Catholicism quite early in life. This intimacy with the priest inspired her to write poetry with increased vigour. He took absorbing interest in her verses and was a source of constant encouragement to her. But the intelligent woman knew the rules of the Church and thought it better to abandon this friendship. About her love poetry of the early period, Alice Meynell writes in one of her sonnets:

A poet of one mood in all my lays,
Ranging all life to sing one only love,
Like a West Wind across the world I move,
Sweeping my harp of floods mine own wild ways.²

These lines bear an eloquent testimony to her great interest in love and life. This period of life is characterized by gaiety which knows no bounds. Like the West Wind days, her poetry possesses wildness for which
Alice Meynell was all praise. She is very eloquent when she thinks of her west-wind days and is quite confident that her days shall last:

The countries change, but not the west-wind days

Which are my songs. My soft skies shine above,
And on all seas the colours of a dove,
And on all fields a flash of silver days.³

But it is, however, shocking that the zest for life so beautifully expressed in the first few lines of the poem quoted above does not last long. The last stanza shows a complete change in her mood – a realization that the sweetest things of life are not meant for her. The central source of her verse is going to be not the wildness of the West Wind characterising her love, but the tears that life brings in its train. The thought which she cherishes most and considers her priceless possession is:

I make the whole world answer to my art
And sweet monotonous meanings. In your ears
I change not ever, bearing, for my part,
One thought that is the treasure of my years
A small cloud full of rain upon my heart
And in mine arms, clasped, like a child in
tears.

The first phase of her poetic production is chiefly characterized by the composition of love poems which are, in essence, the poems of separation. Not unlike the metaphysical poets who wrote poems of voluptuous love and sacred love simultaneously, Alice Meynell, too, produced love poetry mostly voluptuous during her early period and wrote a poem or two which showed her leanings towards sacred love – the love of Christ – which reached its culmination in her Later Poems and Last Poems. Her love poetry of this period is akin to the poetry of the seventeenth century. The two strains of the poetry of the seventeenth century are well discernible in her poetry though there is no doubt about a heavy burden of sadness in Alice Meynell’s poems, the zest for life is not always at a low ebb. The imprint of her personality on the multitude of poems is quite visible even during this period. The poems seem to be made of a breath of fresh
air, love-fancies, and address to flowers. The light joy of frivolous heart, a fancy pleased by whatever has grace or beauty, the trenuous melancholy of a reveller which remembers how ephemeral is that which charms him. Such are her moods. To the latter she turns again and again as she watches the flowers - the daisy, the blossoms of the fruit trees, the fresh and green meadows. The essence of the mood is well expressed in "A Song of Deprivations".

I am like the blossom of an hour.
But long, long vanished sun and shower
Awoke my breath i’ the young world’s air;
I track the past back everywhere
Through seed and flower and seed and
flower.  

Or I am like a stream that flows
Full of the cold springs that arose
In morning lands, in distant hills;
And down the plain my channel fills
With melting of forgotten snows.  

The ephemeral character of beauty is also brought into focus by the poet in "Your Own Fair Youth".
She knows that the charm of youth is a fleeting phase of life. It will be destroyed by the fell hands of time. Similarly joy is an occasional thing in the drama of life which is full of pain. She writes:

Your own fair youth, you care so little for it—Smiling towards Heaven, you would not stay the advances Of time and change upon your happiest fancies. I keep your golden hour, and will restore it.

To guard all joys of yours from Time’s estranging, I shall be then a treasury where your gay, Happy, and pensive past unaltered is.

The intensity of the poet’s feeling is contained in the first line of the sonnet, “Thoughts in Separation” when she experiences the pain of separation even at the time of meeting the lover:

“We never meet; yet we meet day by day Upon those hills of life, dim and immense—"
The poet is aware of her meeting with the beloved everywhere:

Our guardian spirits meet at prayer and play.
Beyond pain, joy, and hope, and long suspense,
Above the summits of our souls, far hence,
An angel meets an angel on the way. 9

But the parting produces the poetry of profound poignancy. “Parted” expresses a lack in her life, a sort of vacuum which aches her all the time. Every object of nature is full of life but she is full of sadness. This contrast has been beautifully expressed in the following lines:

Although my life is left so dim,
The morning crowns the mountain-rim;
Joy is not gone from summer skies,
Nor innocence from children’s eyes,
And all these things are part of him. 10

Later the poet feels that her beloved is not vanished, for the earth is still green. She argues:

He is not banished, for the showers
Yet wake this green warm earth of ours.
How can the summer but be sweet?
I shall not have him at my feet,
And yet my feet are on the flowers.\(^{11}\)

The thought of her loved one being away pains
the poet immensely. The beloved is silent and out of the
reach of the poet. What distracts her most is that
sadness does not leave her alone.

Farewell to one now silenced quite,
Sent out of hearing, out of sight –
My friend of friends, whom I shall miss.
He is not banished, though, for this,–
Nor he, nor sadness, nor delight.\(^{12}\)

But the objects of nature have felt the absence of
her lover. They are filled with inexpressible sadness:

Though I shall talk with him no more,
A low voice sounds upon the shore,
He must not watch my resting - place,
But who shall drive a mournful face
From the sad winds about my door?\(^{13}\)

The poet is willing to adapt herself to her new
conditions and be oblivious of the joyful days spent in
the company of the beloved. "His tears must not disturb my heart" is an expression of her innermost feelings.

The period of separation is an extremely painful affair. Very few are able to reconcile themselves to their changed condition. Alice Meynell, not unlike others was all the time haunted by the presence of her beloved. The thought of his always continues to disturb her. Her sadness which she accumulated in her heart ever since her childhood found its outlet in her early love poetry. She is, however, happy that social barriers cannot stand in her way. In "Beloved" the poet speaks of the darkness and solitude after separation. She feels that the silence of the woods has also been disturbed. It has become one with her pensive songs. She writes:

Oh, not more subtly silence strays
Amongst the winds, between the voices,
Mingling alike with pensive lays,
And with the music that rejoices,
Than thou art present in my days."
The silence on the part of the lover is vexing. She feels life is at its height in other places merely because her lover is silence personified:

Full, full is the life in hidden places.
For thou art silence unto me.
Full, full is the thought in endless spaces.
Full is my life. A silent sea
Lies round all shores with long embraces.  

The poet is conscious of the presence of the lover in every object of the universe:

Most dear pause in a mellow lay!
Thou art inwoven with every air.
With thee the wildest tempests play,
And snatches of thee everywhere
Make little heavens throughout a day.  

The image of the loved one as 'silence unvexed', and 'silence all unperplexed' and 'Sweet and mystery' makes an undying appeal to us. In another stanza of the same lyric, she speaks highly of the loved one when she recognizes his healing touch during the period of distress:
O pause between the sobs of cares;
O thought within all thought that is;
Trance between laughters unawares:
Thou art the shape of melodies,
And thou art the ecstasy of prayers!\textsuperscript{17}

"To the Beloved Dead" is another love poem. It was considered a fine piece of art when it just appeared. The poet is immensely grieved to think of the beloved lying in wind and rain.

Though the beloved is dead, the poet consoles herself by thinking that she can never have a separate entity. He is a part and parcel of herself. Death cannot create any barrier:

Dead thou, dost live in me
And all this lonely land is full of thee.\textsuperscript{18}

In her love songs, she sings of him and him alone. He is the inspirer of his songs:

Thou song of songs: – not music as before
Unto the outward ear,
My spirit sings thee inly evermore,
Thy falls with tear on tear.
I fall for thee, thou art two sweet, too dear.\textsuperscript{19}
Away from his beloved, the poet feels a void in her heart and pines for a glimpse of his:

"Of thee, thee, thee, I am mournfully aware.
Contained in one pure mind."

"Regrets" is a description of the state of mind of the poet after the passing away of the beloved. She has no rest in life. Only the thought of her beloved brings true consolation. Every action of the poet bears the impress of her beloved:

So in the tide of life that carries me
From where thy true heart dwells,
Waves of my thoughts and memories turn to thee
With lessening farewells;"

The same idea has been superbly described in yet another poem, "After the Parting". The more the poet wants to be oblivious of him, the more he haunts her:

"Farewell has long been said; I have foregone thee;
I never name thee even."
The beloved is omnipresent:

Thou dost beset the path to every shrine;
My trembling thoughts discern
Thy goodness in the good for which I pine;
And, if I have from but one sin, I turn
Unto a smile of thine.\(^{23}\)

It is beyond her power to forget him, for her life is conditioned by him. To her he is faith and hope and her life without him will be deprived of its pleasure. She writes:

How shall I thrust thee apart
Since all my growth tends to thee night and day—
To thee faith, hope, and art?
Swift are the currents setting all one way;
They draw my life, my life, out of my heart.\(^{24}\)

After the loss of the beloved, the poet, though shaken to her foundation, does not lose heart and is quite sure that she shall have an envious position in her heart. There is a ray of hope in the midst of the loss of all happiness:
I would the day might come, so waited for,
So patiently besought,
When I, returning, should fill up once more
Thy desolated thought;
And fill thy loneliness that lies apart
In still, persistent pain.
Shall I content thee, O, thou broken heart,
As the tide comes again.25

That time's fell hands destroy the beauty of
everything in the world is the bitter experience of all
lovers. The lover is aware of this and tells the beloved:

My Fair, no beauty of thine will last,
Save in my love's eternity.
Thy smiles, that light thee fitfully,
Are lost for ever – their moment past –
Except the few thou givest to me.

Thy sweet words vanish day by day,
As all breath of mortality;
Thy laughter, done, must cease to be,
And all thy dear tones pass away,
Except the few that sing to me.26

Alice Meynell's love poetry reminds us of Shelley.
Like him, she, too, is the poet of youth with all its
beauty. Sometimes we find in her early verse, which is chiefly love poetry, the utterance of a mind which ranges the fresh fields of life in rapture and in awe:

Though we have strayed from the place of heather
You cry and mine speed on together
Above the spring and the summer weather.  

Thus it can be said with a measure of confidence that the love-poetry of Alice Meynell is the typical song of youth. The thought of her mind is, as she confesses in her sonnet, the poetic confidence, a weight potential of pain:

A small cloud full of pain upon my heart
And in mine arms, clasped, like a child in tears.  

Alice Meynell feels that youth is fraught with uncertainties. She knows the touch of the present upon the future. "A Letter From a Girl to Her Old Age" is expressive of the girl’s mind. It is full of her wild thoughts. Its imagery is of the winds of the flowering season, of driven clouds about the great hills. It has a
strain of sadness which characterizes Alice Meynell's early verse:

Only one youth, and the bright life was shrouded.
Only one morning, and the day was clouded.
And one old age with all regrets is crowded. 29

The one who now thy faded features guesses,
With filial fingers thy grey hair caresses,
With morning tears thy mournful twilight blesses.' 30

The study of the love poems makes it abundantly clear that Alice Meynell's love poems are more often than not the expression of sadness which was deeply engrained in her nature. A hypersensitive woman, Alice was almost incapable of facing the onslaughts of life, love and time, and that is why she often gave way to despair. What really lends poignancy to her poems is the intensity of passion in her life which evokes the love poetry of the highest order. All love poetry is passionate and Alice Meynell was not a passion-free poet. There is, however, an undertone of joy in the west wind days of her youth.
"The Garden" presents the true picture of love-laden heart. The poet feels elevated. Her happiness at the coming of the lover, it seems, will know no bounds:

My heart shall be thy garden. Come, my own, 
Into thy garden; thine be happy hours 
Among my fairest thoughts, my tallest flowers, 
From root to crowning petal, thine alone.

My heart has thoughts, which, though thine 
eyes hold mine, 
Flit to the silent world and other summers, 
With wings that dip beyond the silver seas. 31

The thought of the poem "A Shattered Lute" in the feeling of real joy the poet feels in touching the heart of the lover who knows not that he alone fills her mind and heart:

I touched the heart that loved me as a player 
Touches a lyre. Content with my poor skill, 
No touch save mine knew my beloved (and still 
I thought at times: Is there no sweet lost air 
Old loves could wake in him, I cannot share? ).

Oh, he alone, alone could so fulfil
My thoughts in sound to the measure of my will.

He is gone, and silence takes me unaware. 

But in the last stanza of the poem the joy almost vanishes and the poet compares herself to a shattered lute:

The songs I knew not he resumes, set free
From my constraining love, alas for me!
His part in our tune goes with him; my part

Is locked in me for ever; I stand as mute
As one with vigorous music in his heart
Whose fingers stray upon a shattered lute. 

Alice Meynell has Herrick-like simplicity, the same zest for life, the same charm and strangeness as a personality, the same frank contentment of spirit, the same self-delighting and innocent passion as Herrick’s. But she has greater directness and an intensity that Herrick cannot match. Less effective as a lover, she is more effective as a singer.
From her love Alice Meynell had gained contentment and peace though she grew restive on occasions, being a woman of moods and memories. These love-poems are not mere literary exercises but human documents. We are charmed by her early naivety of manners, her freshness of youth amidst disillusionment and her deep and abiding interest in life and love, though it is an interest charged with wistful and pitying amusement at life and its pretensions.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Poems (1923) 44 (“A Poet of One Mood”).

4. Poems (1923) 44 (“A Poet of One Mood”).

5. Poems (1923) 45 (“A Song of Derivations”).

6. Poems (1923) 45 (“A Song of Derivations”).

7. Poems (1923) 23 (“Your Own Fair Youth”).


13. Poems (1923) 10 ("Parted").

14. Poems (1923) 5 ("To the Beloved").

15. Poems (1923) 5 ("To the Beloved").

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17. Poems (1923) 6.


20. Poems (1923) 11.

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27 Alice Meynell, Preludes (London: H. S. King, 1875) 17.

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31 Poems (1923) 22 ("The Garden").

32 Poems (1923) 27 ("A Shattered Lute").

33 Poems (1923) 27 ("A Shattered Lute").