

APPRECIATIONS OF POETRY

BY
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SELECTED AND EDITED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY
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NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1926

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PRINTED IN U. S. A.

INTRODUCTION

I

THIS volume contains a second selection from the lectures which Lafcadio Hearn delivered at the University of Tokyo between 1896 and 1902. An account of these lectures and of the remarkable student notes in which they were preserved, is given in the Introduction to the first selection, "Interpretations of Literature," 1915. The reader of the present volume should be reminded at least that Lafcadio Hearn lectured without notes, but very slowly, choosing simple words and constructions, in order to make the foreign language as easy as possible to his Japanese students; and some of his students managed to take down many of his lectures word for word. From their notes the present volume, like the "Interpretations of Literature," is selected.

The fact that the lectures come to us indirectly, in places perhaps inaccurately, without Hearn's revision and therefore without the exquisite surface of his style, may give us at first a sense of loss; but second thoughts suggest rather our good fortune in having the lectures as they are. The best of Hearn's style, the man himself, is perhaps more clearly revealed here than in any of his finished work. His letters indicate that had he come back to lecture in the United States, as in 1902 he thought of doing, he would have used the substance of some of these classroom talks; and he apparently thought of writing them out and publishing them. He had made no beginning on them, however, when he died. Even if he had lived to publish a volume or two, it is not likely that he could have come before the public as a critic with the same lack of self-consciousness with

which he addressed his classes, for he modestly undervalued his wide and profound knowledge of the essentials of literature, and he was aware of the fault-finding abilities of professional scholarship. It is doubtful also whether we should have suspected from carefully written lectures his extraordinary genius as an interpreter of the West to the East, since he would have been writing for us rather than for the Japanese. The complete range of his powers could have been recorded only in a faithful report of what he said in his classroom; and this his students have provided for us in their notes.

It is perhaps unnecessary to say that with few exceptions these chapters were not composed in the order in which they are here grouped. In fact, it is impossible to tell, save in one case, just when the lectures were delivered. From a date at the end of the Browning notes, it appears that the course on Tennyson, Rossetti, Swinburne, and Browning was brought to a close in May, 1899. Since the notes of the Tennyson lecture were hopelessly inadequate, a fragment on that poet from a single, more elementary lecture on Victorian literature is substituted. The editor believes that this lecture gives in substance Hearn's interpretation of Tennyson, though without the brilliant illustrations of the elaborate study.

It seemed wise to omit from most of these chapters a number of paraphrases, which Hearn employed to clarify the English poems for his Japanese students, but which are superfluous for the English reader. It also seemed best to omit a sentence here and there, where the notes were hopelessly tangled; if the reader detects an occasional abruptness, he may attribute it to such an omission, and be thankful that he was not invited to decipher the original. Such places, however, are not many, and the lectures are sufficiently coherent to encourage the hope that nothing important has been thrown overboard. No attempt has been made to reconcile an occasional contradiction, as when

Hearn seems to say, at different times, that Tennyson is the greatest artist of the Victorian era, and so is Rossetti, and so is Swinburne. The editor believes that such variations of mood, so natural to all lecturers, and especially to lovers of poetry, should stand untouched. He has imposed his personal tastes upon Lafcadio Hearn only in the choice of passages for publication. The further task he set himself has been merely mechanical—the correction of spelling and of punctuation, and the verification of facts, dates, and quotations. In preparing this volume, as in preparing the “Interpretations of Literature,” he has enjoyed the advice and the assistance of Pay Director Mitchell McDonald, U. S. N., Lafcadio Hearn’s friend and literary executor.

II

In the Introduction to “Interpretations of Literature” the editor stressed the significance of those lectures as interpretations of the Western mind to the Eastern. Hearn’s published works taught us to understand something of Japan; in his classroom he performed a service as remarkable, in helping the young men who now mould some part of Japanese opinion, to think intelligently and kindly of our civilisation. The unique position in world culture which he thereby won for himself, appeals easily to the imagination, and it is not surprising that the first two volumes of his lectures were accepted promptly and cordially as the documents of this portion of his fame. In the same Introduction, however, the editor tried to stress also what seems to him Lafcadio Hearn’s very great genius as an interpretative critic. He is glad of this opportunity to make the attempt again, for a number of reviewers stumbled somewhat over his praise, denouncing it as extravagant and as likely to react to Hearn’s disadvantage. The editor persists in thinking that what he said was not extravagant; if it is,

however, he wishes to turn it plainly to his own discredit rather than to Hearn's.

The passage that bothered the reviewers was this: "In substance if not in form they [the lectures] are criticism of the finest kind, unmatched in English unless we return to the best of Coleridge, and in some ways unequalled by anything in Coleridge." The sentences immediately following were intended to make clear what the editor meant by "criticism of the finest kind": "Most literary criticism discusses other things than the one matter in which the writer and the reader are interested—that is, the effect of the writing upon the reader. It is hardly too severe to say that most critics talk around a poem or a story or a play, without risking a judgment on the centre of their subject; or else, like even Coleridge at times, they tell you what you ought to read into a given work, instead of showing you what is waiting there to be seen. Lafcadio Hearn is remarkable among critics for throwing a clear light on genuine literary experience—on the emotions which the books under discussion actually give us."

Some of the objections to this praise of Hearn doubtless were simply the expression of surprise that the great name of Coleridge should be brought into comparison with any contemporary name. Against those who think that to be great a writer must have been dead a long time, the editor is not eager to defend himself. He did not mean to suggest that in creative genius Lafcadio Hearn is the equal of Samuel Taylor Coleridge at his best. He did have in mind, however, the fact that in his critical writings Coleridge for the most part discusses philosophical principles rather than particular books; that his criticism is studied chiefly for those abstract discussions of poetry; and that he left us all too few examples of the ability he undoubtedly had, the ability which Lafcadio Hearn's lectures exhibit on so vast a scale—the ability to explain to us our own feelings about books, why we like this or are perplexed by that, and what

else there is in the book to fascinate or perplex us. This kind of interpretation, though it looks simple, is extraordinarily rare; it is possible only to the critic who understands human nature, and who approaches books from the poetic or creative point of view. Coleridge had the knowledge of human nature, and in dealing with the poetry of his own school or age he had creative sympathy of the finest kind. But he left us no evidence that his sympathy extended much outside of the romantic period; what would he have said of Zola or of de Maupassant or of Kipling or of Masefield? Later English critics, following Coleridge in their smaller way, have discussed general principles of art, and in most cases have shown creative sympathy with their own particular kind of art—the limits of their sympathy, it would seem, becoming narrower and narrower, until in Arnold and in Pater we find a certain estrangement even from the best writers of their own day. The remarkable fact about Lafcadio Hearn is that though his professed creed was a somewhat narrow romanticism, he exhibits again and again the most acute understanding of writers whose temperament, training, and environment differed widely from his.

The point may be made more plainly. From Aristotle down, the academic tradition of criticism has dealt with principles which, if valid, would afford a basis for judging literature, for classifying it, for deciding what is bad and what is good. Fascinating, amusing, or distressing as the tradition may be as a record of large ambition and of human mistakes, it has often been a source of grief to creative writers, since it can be carried on—it sometimes has been carried on—with authority by men who knew little about writing and cared less, and it has therefore tended frequently to degenerate into formulas of technique. A more radical objection, however, is that the principles in this tradition are drawn from observations of established literature—a great many plays, for example, being taken as the phenomena

from which the definitions of drama are deduced. In this process criticism has never found a method to distinguish safely between what is local and what is universal in the phenomena before it, and the definitions so made have had to be revised continually in a hopeless attempt to keep up with a living and growing art. It would be more profitable to examine the original terms on which art lives, studying, for example, the effect of the play upon the audience, rather than the theory of the action on the stage. If our logic is resolute, we must come to that at last; for when we examine all the great plays of our time, as Aristotle did, to determine what a great play is, an earlier verdict has already decided for us which are the great plays; the most that our criticism can hope to accomplish is a belated and elaborate restatement of our own premises. Meanwhile there are curious pitfalls for even the best of theoretical critics. Arnold, for example, looking over the poems generally recognised as great, concluded that they were so recognised because they had the grand style; the grand style makes a poem great. If there were any connection between poetic greatness and the grand style, Arnold might have enjoyed peace of mind thenceforth, knowing that the grand style would bring about an automatic recognition of poetic greatness. But he proceeded to preach the recognition of the grand style as a cultured obligation rather than as a scientific fact, and we cannot take his word for it that his own verse in the grand style is greater poetry than some other verse we like better.

Over against the traditional criticism there has always been the practical science, the shop-talk, of the artists themselves. The best critic of a wagon is probably the wagon-builder, as the immortal shoe-maker was the best critic of the shoe in the Greek picture. When he ventured to criticise the painting further, the shoe-maker was told to stick to his last. The creative artist might repeat the invitation to the merely academic critic who cannot himself create. The creator is not greatly concerned with pigeon-holing

his art; he is interested in the work before him for what it is intended to accomplish, and he draws on his practical experience for an opinion as to whether it will accomplish its purpose. Therefore he is not afraid to give an opinion about an entirely new work of art; he recognises immediately its essential usefulness, as Emerson foresaw at once the great career of Walt Whitman's poetry. Traditional criticism, on the contrary, is often unwilling to readjust itself to new genius. If it is thought that the shop-talk of artists would naturally be impressionistic or haphazard, it should be remembered that they alone among critics work out the illustrations of their principles, as the wagon maker illustrates his idea of a wagon. The basis of a real science is here; these critics try to understand in order to practise the art.

In literature, as distinguished from other arts, the wisest talk of the creator has to do with life, with human nature; for these are the materials he works in, and for his knowledge of these his readers are best equipped to judge him. In the letters and the memoirs of expert writers, what incomparable criticism we often find! Witness the various penetrating remarks of Tennyson recorded in his memoirs, the superb insights of Charles Lamb in his letters, especially to Wordsworth, and the equally remarkable observations in the journals of Emerson and of Hawthorne. This wisdom shows no sign of deserting the contemporary writer. A Broadway playwright remarks that nowadays you cannot let your hero and heroine, in anything but a farce, fall in love at first sight, because most of your audience have fallen in love by the more deliberate modern process. Professor Santayana expresses the same truth when he says that wherever the sexes have been jealously guarded from each other, with few opportunities for meeting, they have fallen in love at first sight, since fall in love they must. Similar knowledge of life, together with the creative observation of that which lies under our eyes,

but which the average reader and the theoretical critic often do not see, might be illustrated in several passages from Professor Santayana's too inaccessible study of "Hamlet." He says in effect, for example, that no one ever feels that Hamlet is mad, but everybody feels that he is irrational. Though we cannot all of us explain why we feel he is irrational, our impression is correct. The impression is produced by such episodes as the performance of the play before the king. Hamlet had no doubt that his uncle murdered his father; his question was whether he should avenge the murder by assassination. To clear his doubts, he set a trap which merely confirmed the king's guilt, but gave no advice as to taking revenge. To those of us who have felt Hamlet's irrationality, without perceiving the slip in his logic, this kind of criticism brings intelligence in understanding our old impressions, and increases our susceptibility to new ones.

This is what the editor meant by "criticism of the finest kind"—the discussion of art by those who know how to create it, the interpretation of books which opens our eyes to life, which sets no gulf between the problem of how to read and the problem of how to write. For this kind of criticism, the editor believes, Lafcadio Hearn's lectures have a unique place in English literature, unmatched in quality by any but the best of Coleridge, and in quantity quite without parallel.

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CHAPTER I

ON LOVE IN ENGLISH POETRY

I OFTEN imagine that the longer he studies English literature the more the Japanese student must be astonished at the extraordinary predominance given to the passion of love both in fiction and in poetry. Indeed, by this time I have begun to feel a little astonished at it myself. Of course, before I came to this country it seemed to me quite natural that love should be the chief subject of literature; because I did not know anything about any other kind of society except Western society. But to-day it really seems to me a little strange. If it seems strange to me, how much more ought it to seem strange to you! Of course, the simple explanation of the fact is that marriage is the most important act of man's life in Europe or America, and that everything depends upon it. It is quite different on this side of the world. But the simple explanation of the difference is not enough. There are many things to be explained. Why should not only the novel writers but all the poets make love the principal subject of their work? I never knew, because I never thought, how much English literature was saturated with the subject of love until I attempted to make selections of poetry and prose for class use—naturally endeavouring to select such pages or poems as related to other subjects than passion. Instead of finding a good deal of what I was looking for, I could find scarcely anything. The great prose writers, outside of the essay or history, are nearly all famous as tellers of love stories. And it is almost impossible to select half a dozen stanzas of classic verse from Tennyson or Rossetti or Browning or Shelley or Byron, which do not contain anything about kissing, embracing, or longing for some imaginary or real beloved. Wordsworth, indeed, is

something of an exception; and Coleridge is most famous for a poem which contains nothing at all about love. But exceptions do not affect the general rule that love is the theme of English poetry, as it is also of French, Italian, Spanish, or German poetry. It is the dominant motive.

So with the English novelists. There have been here also a few exceptions—such as the late Robert Louis Stevenson, most of whose novels contain little about women; they are chiefly novels or romances of adventure. But the exceptions are very few. At the present time there are produced almost every year in England about a thousand new novels, and all of these or nearly all are love stories. To write a novel without a woman in it would be a dangerous undertaking; in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the book would not sell.

Of course all this means that the English people throughout the world, as readers, are chiefly interested in the subject under discussion. When you find a whole race interested more in one thing than in anything else, you may be sure that it is so because the subject is of paramount importance in the life of the average person. You must try to imagine then, a society in which every man must choose his wife, and every woman must choose her husband, independent of all outside help, and not only choose but obtain if possible. The great principle of Western society is that competition rules here as it rules in everything else. The best man—that is to say, the strongest and cleverest—is likely to get the best woman, in the sense of the most beautiful person. The weak, the feeble, the poor, and the ugly have little chance of being able to marry at all. Tens of thousands of men and women cannot possibly marry. I am speaking of the upper and middle classes. The working people, the peasants, the labourers, these marry young; but the competition there is just the same — just as difficult, and only a little rougher. So it may be said that every man has a struggle of some kind in order to marry, and that

there is a kind of fight or contest for the possession of every woman worth having. Taking this view of Western society, not only in England but throughout all Europe, you will easily be able to see why the Western public have reason to be more interested in literature which treats of love than in any other kind of literature.

But although the conditions that I have been describing are about the same in all Western countries, the tone of the literature which deals with love is not at all the same. There are very great differences. In prose they are much more serious than in poetry; because in all countries a man is allowed, by public opinion, more freedom in verse than in prose. Now these differences in the way of treating the subject in different countries really indicate national differences of character. Northern love stories and Northern poetry about love are very serious; and these authors are kept within fixed limits. Certain subjects are generally forbidden. For example, the English public wants novels about love, but the love must be the love of a girl who is to become somebody's wife. The rule in the English novel is to describe the pains, fears, and struggles of the period before marriage—the contest in the world for the right of marriage. A man must not write a novel about any other point of love. Of course there are plenty of authors who have broken this rule, but the rule still exists. A man may represent a contest between two women, one good and one bad, but if the bad woman is allowed to conquer in the story, the public will growl. This English fashion has existed since the eighteenth century, since the time of Richardson, and is likely to last for generations to come.

Now this is not the rule at all which governs the making of novels in France. French novels generally treat of the relations of women to the world and to lovers, after marriage; consequently there is a great deal in French novels about adultery, about improper relations between the sexes, about many things which the English public would

not allow. This does not mean that the English are morally a better people than the French or other Southern races. But it does mean that there are great differences in the social conditions. One such difference can be very briefly expressed. An English girl, an American girl, a Norwegian, a Dane, a Swede, is allowed all possible liberty before marriage. The girl is told, "You must be able to take care of yourself, and not do wrong." After marriage there is no more such liberty. After marriage in all Northern countries a woman's conduct is strictly watched. But in France, and in Southern countries, the young girl has no liberty before marriage. She is always under the guard of her brother, her father, her mother, or some experienced relation. She is accompanied wherever she walks. She is not allowed to see her betrothed except in the presence of witnesses. But after marriage her liberty begins. Then she is told for the first time that she must take care of herself. Well, you will see that the conditions which inspire the novels, in treating of the subject of love and marriage, are very different in Northern and in Southern Europe. For this reason alone the character of the novel produced in France and of the novel produced in England could not be the same.

You must remember, however, that there are many other reasons for this difference—reasons of literary sentiment. The Southern or Latin races have been civilised for a much longer time than the Northern races; they have inherited the feelings of the ancient world, the old Greek and Roman world, and they think still about the relation of the sexes in very much the same way that the ancient poets and romance writers used to think. And they can do things which English writers cannot do, because their language has power of more delicate expression.

We may say that the Latin writers still speak of love in very much the same way that it was considered before Christianity. But when I speak of Christianity I am only refer-