

MORE LITERARY TITBITS

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IN a former article on titbits in literature I mentioned the lyric, which, traced to its origin in early Roman and Greek times, turns out to have been what its name implies, a song. There was singing long before anybody thought of formulating a theory of music, just as there was very good poetry before prosody was ever heard of. The very ancient songs still chanted by Sicilian reapers in the harvest fields are the ancestral tree from which has come the modern lyric. Not all lyrics are set to music: some are, for one reason or another, difficult matter for the musician to work on when he wishes to give them a musical setting. But the best modern lyrics, those of Burns, Shelley, Heine and others, require to be mated to appropriate music to bring out what is best in them. The lyric will always be primarily a thing to sing, not to read. A good poem may be a good song, but not all good songs are good poems. Many songs of undoubted merit seem, when read, to be rather indifferent poetry; seem, I say, because their lack of poetic merit is often rather apparent than real.

Songs form a large part of the world's literature, rise when it rises and partake of its degradation. My introduction to them was early, and along traditional lines. From my fourth to my tenth year I suffered severely from insomnia. Among my most pleasant memories of that period are those of evenings when I lay awake in my cot, with my mother kneeling or sitting beside me, in a ball dress, the moonlight glinting on the jewels on her arms and throat, as she sang, often for hours at a time, lovely old Scotch, Welch, Irish and French songs, in an attempt, nearly always successful, to get me to sleep. Many an evening's pleasure she gave up on my account. At such times I never heard a cross or impatient word from her, though she could be sharp enough when I needed correction. She had a glorious contralto voice. My favourite lullabies were Rothsay Bay, Malbrook, Bonny Doon and the ballad of the Red Harlaw, which I found later in Scott's story, *The Antiquary*.

Writing or talking about modern songs is quite certain to bring to the mind of a classical scholar the glorious lyric passages in the Greek plays, which were of course written not for the library but for the stage. They were meant to be sung, not read, yet so

splendid are many of the lines that even an ordinary translation and the somewhat stuffy atmosphere of a library, redolent of Russian leather and old vellum, cannot wholly spoil them. How they must have thrilled the sensitive Greek intelligence as they rolled across the tiers of marble seats in the great Dionysiac theatre under the limpid blue and gold of an Attic sky! Many of these good things have been recalled to me quite recently by an interesting book, *History of Ancient Greek Literature*, by Professor Sinclair, of Belfast University. Those who do not know Greek literature at first hand will find this readable book an excellent introduction to the whole subject.

If one must read Homer in English, and it is a terrible privation not to be able to read the Greek, one might try Colonel Lawrence's version of the *Odyssey*, nearly the best translation of a Greek work I have yet met with. Form counts for so much in poetry that I dislike a great poem in a prose dress. It is like meeting one's best girl in plus-fours. But Lawrence has somehow succeeded in imprisoning, in his vivid English prose rhythms, not a little of the surge and thunder of the original, together with a tang, not unpleasant, of that stark savagery that is never quite absent from early Greek work and crops out occasionally in writers of the Alexandrian period. Professor Sinclair has good things to say about all my favourites, from Homer to Plato. I noted with pleasure his appreciation of that charming story teller, Herodotus, of the real greatness of Thucydides, and of that jolly thing *The Clouds*, one of the very best comedies ever written. Humour deals so much with the purely local and evanescent, in thought, speech, dress and all outward circumstance, that it soon loses its salt. Many lines of Shakespeare that must have set an Elizabethan audience in a roar do not move us to even a smile. Many a page of *Don Quixote*, once throbbing with life and laughter, now excites only a yawn. But the man who can read the *Clouds*, even in a fairly adequate translation, without grinning is beyond help from the spirit of laughter; humour is not in him.

In that fine book, *In the Steps of the Master*, by H. V. Morton, the author has some good things to say about the parables of Christ as compared with the famous Platonic dialogues. Mr. Morton evidently feels what I have long felt, that in the beauty of their language, which no doubt owes something to King James's translators, and in subtlety and dialectical skill the parables are no whit inferior to the best parts of Plato, and may with advantage be compared, even for purely technical reasons, by students of literature. With all due reverence be it said, there is more in

common than persons unacquainted with Greek work might suppose, between the thought of the great pagan teacher and that of the Founder of Christianity. If Christ is the sun, Plato is the exquisite clear, cold light that precedes the full splendour of sunrise.

The drama is an enormous field, too wide to enter on here. I have always had a sound notion that a good play is never quite so good as when seen across the footlights, performed by a competent company. My theatrical memories are among the happiest of my life. What I owe in the way of pleasure and sharpened insight to Sir Henry Irving, Duse, Bernhardt, Sir John Martin Harvey and others deserves a paper to itself. When reading Shakespeare, Sophocles, Molière or a modern dramatist, I always have an uneasy feeling that I am doing my author less than justice. If I were asked to name my five favourite plays (and why five?) I should, I think, reply, *Antigone*, *Henry the Fifth*, *Othello*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Ghosts*. I have no more intention of defending any of my choices, on either aesthetic or ethical grounds, than I have of attempting to explain why I prefer red rose to white, blue to green in the colour scheme of existence, or spring to autumn. Such things are quite beyond the coarse touch of analysis. If I must give a reason, I shall fall back on Portia's, I like them because I like them. Do I like *Faust*? Yes, in moderation, especially the First Part and the last Act of the Second, but only in German; the best things in it are more untranslatable than Homer.

Who that can afford to travel would read travel books? I fear Mussolini and his friends have spoiled my beautiful sleepy Rome of the Eighties and Nineties, where even the washerwomen were happy and it seemed as though nothing ever happened. Two things no one can spoil, the Roman sunsets and the vast sky that broods solemnly above the Campagna, like the sky in a Perugine picture. For many years now I have been compelled to travel *via* book instead of by rail or steamer, a poor substitute, but better than none. Of all the travel writers that I have come across, give me H. V. Morton for my money. He gives one not merely the outward circumstance and framework of a place, but its very atmosphere, its smells and sounds. As a boy I devoured such books as Anson's *Voyages* and Cook's, Speke's *Nile Journey*, Kipling's *Indian Stories*, Burton's *Pilgrimage to Mecca* and many others, coming in due time to *Arabia Deserta*. I wonder how many of the younger generation have even heard of Burton's *City of the Saints*. I think the book is out of print. It contains some of the best descriptions of western American scenery and people in the great

stage-coaching days ever done. There is also a vivid picture of Salt Lake City under the paternal despotism of Brigham Young. Hilaire Belloc's *Path to Rome* is another favourite travel book of mine, and let me not forget Bates's *Naturalist on the Amazon*.

Some people say that letters ought never to be published. To adhere too closely to this rule would be to impoverish literature greatly. The sound rule, I think, is this, never to publish any letter that was obviously intended for no other eyes than those of the person to whom it was addressed. Letters written with one eye on a publisher, e. g. Lady Mary Montagu's, Byron's and Gertrude Bell's, ought to be published. Does not Lady Mary tell us in one of her early letters that in fifty years she will be as well known and widely read as Madame de Sevigné? The three I have named are, along with dear garrulous old Cicero and Jane Welsh Carlyle, my favourites in this lively, self-revealing department. Walpole and Lamb I like as a young friend of mine likes Latin, in moderation. I have Walpole moods and Lamb moods, but I can read my favourites in any mood.

To the vast field of biography I received an early and sound introduction through the delightful pages of Plutarch and Boswell. Since then I have enjoyed a pleasant forty years sojourn, not in the wilderness, but I dare not let my pen stray, or it would go too far. My latest discovery in this pleasant orchard is John Buchan's fine *Life of Cromwell*, which I read only the other day. Let me mention a few of the Lives which I think ought to be written. Despite their tireless industry, our writers of biography are overlooking several good bets. We need a new Life of that strange adventurer, half pirate, halt empire builder, Sir Walter Raleigh. Is there anywhere an adequate study of Augustus, the Octavius of Shakespeare's fine play? I have never seen one. He was certainly among the most remarkable of men of his stormy but important age. We ought to have a Life of George Savile, first Marquis of Halifax, and one of that strangely neglected near-great poet, Dryden. Anthony Trollope is another good subject, unless he has been done lately; one cannot keep track of all these things. If there is a good Life of George Elliot, I do not know it. The author of *Middlemarch* is a strangely neglected figure. She was one of the earliest as well as one of the ablest of emancipated women, (a phrase unknown in her day.) Surely the darkness that has obscured the creator of Lydgate and Mary Garth is only a passing cloud; but then some clouds do not pass. A Life of James the First would be entertaining if well done. John Buchan would do it splendidly. Jamie had a pawky humour, and could write a letter

of expostulation and reproof to a disobedient chiel that would have warmed the heart of Samuel Smiles. For those who enjoy a mystery there surely never was a stranger one than the Gowrie Conspiracy. I should like to see what Buchan would make of that queer business.

If I once commence to write about diaries, memoirs and autobiographies, three varieties of one flower, I shall never stop. I will only mention such titbits as Cellini's *Autobiography*, *Pepys's Diary* and Mr. Creevy's *Journal*. For sheer juiciness, the power to revive the full flavour of a past age, Cellini and Pepys are unmatched. Another interesting journal is Swift's to Stella, which many would include under the caption, letters. Audubon's journal contains plenty of good things, and deals with a phase of American life gone for ever. A diary is worthless unless the writer puts the whole of himself into it, which implies that he is the sort of person worth putting into a book: this is the great merit of Pepys, of Cellini and of that queer fellow Davy Crockett.

The library of humour would require a fat book if one wished to do it even scant justice. *Don Quixote*, still the prince in that field, would call for several chapters, and Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Molière, running neck and neck for second place, would require several more. Dickens would need a long chapter, and Thackeray not a short one. One of the purest and keenest of English humourists is Jane Austen. Who that has once made their acquaintance can ever forget Miss Bates, Mr. Collins or Sir Walter Elliot of Kelynych Hall? There are good things in Sterne, in spite of occasional nastiness. I know of only one figure in English fiction worthy to be named in the same breath with Uncle Toby and Mrs. Walter Shandy; do I need to name Miss Betsy Trotwood? Among recent humourists P. G. Wodehouse is in the true line of descent from his great predecessors. I know of nothing better in its way than the immortal joke about the weather viewed from the inside of a larder:—"Deuced dark, Sir, and smells of cheese." How many young Canadians have ever heard of Thomas Love Peacock? My wife, who had a finer appreciation of all the finer kinds of humour than any other human being I have ever known, solaced herself during the heat of an Iowa summer, twenty years ago, by nestling into a hammock, slung between two large elms, and reading the Peacock novels. For several weeks they kept her in a steady ripple of delighted laughter. They are certainly delicious fun. There is not one kind of humour in Peacock, there is every kind, barring the slapstick. No one could cock a long snook at all the pomps, vanities and jackasseries of a wicked and not too wise world better than this gay elf, a perfect blend of Aristophanes and Mercurio.

Life for me has been a curious seesaw of ups and downs, mostly downs. The flap, the mutton bone and even the best and kindest of Marys have frequently gone back on me. But since I learned to read at the age of four, books have been a never-failing source of comfort, pleasure and strength. If the long night has come at last and we must part for ever, I can only say I am vastly grateful to my silent friends. As I bid them good-bye, running my hand along their smooth backs, I shall wish them a safe retreat in a good library, owned by someone who will keep them properly dusted, appreciate their merits and derive from them at least a part of the feast of pure joy, the purest we ever know in this life, that they have given me.

In a former paper on literary titbits I gave a short list of favourite books. With just such another list I will bring this article to a close. The first part of *Don Quixote*, Cellini's *Autobiography*, *Pepys's Diary*, the Peacock novels, *Walden*, Boswell's *Johnson*, Wyndham Lewis's *Villon*, Lord Charnwood's *Lincoln*, Plutarch, Cicero's Letters, Lady Mary Montagu's Letters from Constantinople, printed separately in a slim volume: I know of only one edition. I might also mention Shakespeare's Sonnets, *Maria Chapdelaine*, the first volume of Gertrude Bell's Letters in the two-volume edition by Benn, Saintsbury's Last Scrapbook, Donne's Love Poems, *Chicot the Jester*, *Behold the Hebrides*, by Alastair McGregor, *The Path to Rome*, *Hills and the Sea*, and Messer Marco Polo.

To all writers, publishers, distributors and intelligent readers of good books, past, present and to come, good luck, pleasant library evenings and, from me, a long good-night.