CLASSICAL POEMS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649550418

Classical Poems by William Entriken Baily

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BY

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Hoc est
Vivere bis, vitâ posse priore frui.
—MARTIAL.

PRESS OF
ROBERT CLARKE & CO.
CINCINNATI, O
1892.

PREFACE.

It may be well to refer to some of the conditions by which the essential number of the poems in this book has been produced. Though they are not all classical in subjects, yet those that are not are often classical in spirit, as well as lyrical. They owe their origin first, to temperamental characteristics; secondly, to the animus of a great deal of what constitutes orthodox English poetry, as found in the pages of SHAKESPEARE, MILTON, COLLINS, KEATS, WORDSWORTH and TENNYSON, with, perhaps, influences at work from SHELLEY and his school. The undercurrent of meaning of the poems, in many cases, is didactic, as much so (if not more) as certain passages in SPENSER's "Fairy Queen." It has been shown by eminent critics on both sides of the Atlantic that this is a false principle in the art of verse; on the contrary, it has been shown by other eminent critics that it is a true one. If a reader of an epic feels that its strain, its intellectual tenor, its grouping of noble characters for instructive effects, its subtile agreements with the finer elements of civilization perpetually in play (that have been taught the author by the philosophers, moralists and theologians of his time), and the occasional free display of them in the course of the story, are of the didactic kind, his feelings must certainly be a judge to himself in the matter, but not to others. His emotions naturally appropriate to themselves what supports the nature of their instincts, this nature having perhaps an entirely different bias in another reader, and thus the two are unable to feel and see in a like manner, not only in the perusal of an epic, but also of a drama at its best. Two able readers, of unlike bent in appreciation, may write in combination a critique on an epic, and do it justice; but it often takes four to write one on a drama with the same result, because the elements in it are of a more complex order.

It inclines, even in its tragic form, to the pleasurable in a more obvious way. Notwithstanding that SHAKESPEARE represents the spirit of the troubadour in his plays—plays most especially addressed to the courtiers, the pedants, the pleasure-seekers and the men-about-town of his day—the didactic, mingled with the real and the ideal, is frequently presenting itself; notably in his aphorisms, in his numerous outlines suggesting the moral artist, in his use of what is called poetic justice, in his ethical tendencies as a whole (above those of other dramatists of his time), and in his sense of responsibility to the higher consciousness of humanity. In JOHN MILTON we find the spirit of the Puritan—a spirit that easily adjusted itself to what is harsh and doctrinal in life and religion, for the scholastic spirit to take up and form into a long narrative poem of undoubted didactic type. He was too much of a scholar and a man of genius not to know the value of art in clothing his doctrines as a mere thinker of common experience; and he was too much of a scholar and a man of fine instincts not to know the value of SHAKESPEARE to other mere thinkers of the doctrinal class would they but see him through the eye of scholarship. His lines to the great dramatist are in this respect very significant. We thus see in SPENSER the didactic is a controlling principle; in SHAKESPEARE it is an occasional, but still a manifest principle; and in JOHN MILTON it is, as with SPENSER, a controlling principle. Coming down to WORDSWORTH, we find it a settled principle with him, his name alone suggesting virtue, honor, reverence, duty, love, humility, honest poverty, time and fate, abstract qualities holding an ever varying relation through his muse to the strictest rules of didactics in prosaic life. If a philosophical sect were now formed after the manner of some of those of the ancients, having in view the mere teaching of moral laws, it would without a doubt derive much help, not only from WORDSWORTH, but also from many of his poetical contemporaries and successors in point of time who have the beautiful before them, yet who show, unconsciously, a presence—a main idea or a stray idea—in their poems akin to the inculcation of a precept or precepts. The love of certain higher

attributes in man leads to an idealization of them in statuary and painting; and to say that poetry of the beautiful should ignore such attributes, is to say that it is inferior in its mission to statuary and painting—is to ascribe to it an inherent tone of weakness—is to charge it with inability to embody with itself the fact that this age is pre-eminently didactic in its drift. As for the successful expression of the beautiful, with its impalpable essence, no other century, not excepting the Elizabethan era, equals the present one in its list of poems. Such writers as KEATS, SHELLEY and TENNYSON have given to the English-speaking world examples in this respect very difficult to surpass. The poet-laureate, in particular, has an influence over his readers through a mastered craft that sublimates whatever it touches, and that tends to add to their perceptions of the noble and to broaden their existence in a wise way. In this regard, and in others, he takes a decided superiority over either SHELLEY or KEATS, and holds strong connections with WORDSWORTH and MILTON, also with SPENSER in an esthetic way. It thus can be seen the system of poetry has for one of its prime resources the didactic, infusing into its work, as it does, elements of usefulness, reality and strength. A moral meaning may be presented so as to impress its purpose too emphatically; then it tends not to high art—it tends to utility for utility's sake—to the ground where prose wears the mask of rhyme. In a true poem, some essential fact of life, the soul of the piece, reveals itself in an unity of details, the fact losing itself apparently in the details at times, but in its impression as a whole it is effective in inducing a frame of mind in the reader more favorable to its cause than in a single rigorous disclosure of itself. In this case the charm and the lesson go hand-in-hand, and the Powers that rule over the destiny of poetry are generally satisfied.

In offering these explanations, it is with no desire to make certain ideas in a matter of art obtrusive, but with a desire to supply information that in its absence might make the poems herein printed seem to be without a key, holding as they do relations to English literature of a kind indicated. W. E. B.

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