

CHAPTER VII

NOTE UPON THE SHORTEST FORMS OF ENGLISH POETRY

PERHAPS there is an idea among Japanese students that one general difference between Japanese and Western poetry is that the former cultivates short forms and the latter longer ones. But this is only in part true. It is true that short forms of poetry have been cultivated in the Far East more than in modern Europe; but in all European literature short forms of poetry are to be found—indeed quite as short as anything in Japanese. Like the Japanese, the old Greeks, who carried poetry to the highest perfection that it has ever attained, delighted in short forms; and “The Greek Anthology” is full of compositions containing only two or three lines,—such as those charming lines addressed to a beloved person, which John Addington Symonds thus translated:

Gazing on stars, my Star? —
 Would that I were the welkin,
Starry with myriad eyes, ever to gaze upon Thee!

You will find beautiful translations of these in Symonds’ “Studies of Greek Poets,” in the second volume. Following Greek taste, the Roman poets afterwards cultivated short forms of verse, but they chiefly used such verse for satirical purposes, unfortunately; I say, unfortunately, because the first great English poets who imitated the ancients were chiefly influenced by the Latin writers, and they also used the short forms for epigrammatic satire, rarely for a purely esthetic object. Ben Jonson both wrote and translated a great number of very short stanzas—two lines and four lines; but Jonson was a satirist in these forms. Herrick, as

you know, delighted in very short poems; but he was greatly influenced by Jonson, and many of his couplets and of his quatrains are worthless satires or worthless jests. However, you will find some short verses in Herrick that almost make you think of a certain class of Japanese poems. After the Elizabethan age, also, the miniature poems were still used in the fashion set by the Roman writers,—then the eighteenth century deluged us with ill-natured witty epigrams of the like brief form. It was not until comparatively modern times that our Western world fully recognized the value of the distich, triplet or quatrain for the expression of beautiful thoughts, rather than for the expression of ill-natured ones. But now that the recognition has come, it has been discovered that nothing is harder than to write a beautiful poem of two or four lines. Only great masters have been truly successful at it. Goethe, you know, made a quatrain that has become a part of world-literature:

Who ne'er his bread in sorrow ate,—
Who ne'er the lonely midnight hours,
Weeping upon his bed has sate,
He knows ye not, ye Heavenly Powers!

—meaning, of course, that inspiration and wisdom come to us only through sorrow, and that those who have never suffered never can be wise. But in the universities of England a great deal of short work of a most excellent kind has been done in Greek and Latin; and there is the celebrated case of an English student who won a prize by a poem of a single line. The subject given had been the miracle of Christ's turning water into wine at the marriage feast; and while other scholars attempted elaborate composition on the theme, this student wrote but one verse, of which the English translation is

The modest water saw its Lord, and blushed.

Of course the force of the idea depends upon the popular conception of wine being red. The Latin and Greek model, however, did not seem to encourage much esthetic effort in

short poems of English verse until the time of the romantic movement. Then, both in France and England, many brief forms of poetry made their appearance. In France, Victor Hugo attempted composition in astonishingly varied forms of verse—some forms actually consisting of only two syllables to a line. With this surprisingly short measure begins one of Hugo's most remarkably early poems, "Les Djinns," representing the coming of evil spirits with a storm, their passing over the house where a man is at prayer, and departing into the distance again. Beginning with only two syllables to the line, the measure of the poem gradually widens as the spirits approach, becomes very wide, very long and sonorous as they reach the house, and again shrinks back to lines of two syllables as the sound of them dies away. In England a like variety of experiments has been made; but neither in France nor in England has the short form yet been as successfully cultivated as it was among the Greeks. We have some fine examples; but, as an eminent English editor observed a few years ago, not enough examples to make a book. And of course this means that there are very few; for you can make a book of poetry very well with as little as fifty pages of largely and widely printed text. However, we may cite a few modern instances.

I think that about the most perfect quatrains we have are those of the extraordinary man, Walter Savage Landor, who, you know, was a rare Greek scholar, all his splendid English work being very closely based upon the Greek models. He made a little epitaph upon himself, which is matchless of its kind:

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife,
Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

You know that Greeks used the short form a great deal for their exquisite epitaphs, and that a considerable part of the "Anthology" consists of epitaphic literature. But the

quatrain has a much wider range than this funereal limitation, and one such example of epitaph will suffice.

Only one English poet of our own day, and that a minor one, has attempted to make the poem of four lines a specialty—that is William Watson. He has written a whole volume of such little poems, but very few of them are successful. As I said before, we have not enough good poems of this sort for a book; and the reason is not because English poets despise the short form, but because it is supremely difficult. The Greeks succeeded in it, but we are still far behind the Greeks in the shaping of any kind of verse. The best of Watson's pieces take the form of philosophical suggestions; and this kind of verse is particularly well adapted to philosophical utterance.

Think not thy wisdom can illume away
 The ancient tanglement of night and day.
 Enough, to acknowledge both, and both revere:
 They see not clearliest who see all things clear.

That is to say, do not think that any human knowledge will ever be able to make you understand the mystery of the universe with its darkness and light, its joy and pain. It is best to revere the powers that make both good and evil, and to remember that the keenest, worldly, practical minds are not the minds that best perceive the great truths and mysteries of existence. Here is another little bit, reminding us somewhat of Goethe's quatrain, already quoted.

Lives there whom Pain hath evermore pass'd by
 And Sorrow shunn'd with an averted eye?
 Him do thou pity, him above the rest,
 Him of all hapless mortals most unblest'd.

That needs no commentary, and it contains a large truth in small space. Here is a little bit on the subject of the artist's ambition, which is also good.

The thousand painful steps at last are trod,
 At last the temple's difficult door we win;

But perfect on his pedestal, the god
Freezes us hopeless when we enter in.

The higher that the artist climbs by effort, the nearer his approach to the loftier truth, the more he understands how little his very best can achieve. It is the greatest artist, he who veritably enters the presence of God—that most feels his own weakness; the perception of beauty that other men cannot see, terrifies him, freezes him motionless, as the poet says.

Out of all of Watson's epigrams I believe these are the best. The rest with the possible exception of those on the subject of love seem to me altogether failures. Emerson and various American poets also attempted the quatrain—but Emerson's verse is nearly always bad, even when his thought is sublime. One example of Emerson will suffice.

Thou canst not wave thy staff in air,
Or dip thy paddle in the lake,
But it carves the bow of beauty there,
And the ripples in rhyme the oar forsake.

The form is atrociously bad; but the reflection is grand—it is another way of expressing the beautiful old Greek thought that "God *geometrizes* everywhere"—that is, that all motion is in geometrical lines, and full of beauty. You can pick hundreds of fine things in very short verse out of Emerson, but the verse is nearly always shapeless; the composition of the man invariably makes us think of diamonds in the rough, jewels uncut. So far as form goes a much better master of quatrain is the American poet Aldrich, who wrote the following little thing, entitled "Popularity."

Such kings of shreds have wooed and won her,
Such crafty knaves her laurel owned,
It has become almost an honour
Not to be crowned.

This is good verse. The reference to "a king of shreds and patches"—that is, a beggar king—you will recognize

as Shakespearean. But although this pretty verse has in it more philosophy than satire, it approaches the satiric class of epigrams. Neither America nor England has been able to do very much in the sort of verse that we have been talking about. Now this is a very remarkable thing,—because at the English universities beautiful work has been done in Greek or Latin—in poems of a single line, of two lines, of three lines and other very brief measures. Why can it not be done in English? I suspect that it is because our English language has not yet become sufficiently perfect, sufficiently flexible, sufficiently melodious to allow of great effect with a very few words. We can do the thing in Greek or in Latin because either Greek or Latin is a more perfect language.

So much for theory. I should like to suggest, however, that it is very probable many attempts at these difficult forms of poetry will be attempted by English poets within the next few years. There is now a tendency in that direction. I do not know whether such attempts will be successful; but I should like you to understand that for Western poets they are extremely difficult and that you ought to obtain from the recognition of this fact a new sense of the real value of your own short forms of verse in the hands of a master. Effects can be produced in Japanese which the Greeks could produce with a few syllables, but which the English cannot. Now it strikes me that, instead of even thinking of throwing away old forms of verse in order to invent new ones, the future Japanese poets ought rather to develop and cultivate and prize the forms already existing, which belong to the genius of the language, and which have proved themselves capable of much that no English verse or even French verse could accomplish. Perhaps only the Italian is really comparable to Japanese in some respects; you can perform miracles with Italian verse.