

CHAPTER VIII

EPIGRAMMATIC POEMS

THE lecture last given in this class was of necessity a little heavy. By way of change, I propose this term to give a few shorter and lighter lectures—the first of which will be upon the subject of epigrammatic poetry with especial reference to correspondencies in English and Japanese poetry.

Let us first take the word “epigrammatic” and consider its history. I need scarcely tell you that the word is Greek in origin and signifies a “writing upon”—a surface especially. An epigram originally was a combination intended to be *inscribed* upon a surface:—the original meaning was therefore an inscription. And the original inscription, in very ancient times was probably of a funeral kind: we may suppose that the first compositions of the sort were inscriptions upon tombstones—epitaphs.

Any inscription intended for the surface of a monument, unless the monument should happen to be a very large one, would have to be of small size. It would be necessary to say as much as possible in a very few words. Accordingly a great deal of art, literary art, would be required for effective work of this kind. The art of saying great things in very few words is the art of high poetry.

Now we find that this was just how the old Greeks understood and practised the art of short poems intended for inscription upon tombstones or monuments or marble altars of their gods. It was required for such work that the writer should be able to bestir an emotion very deeply, or to utter a thought very profoundly, or to make a religious petition very beautifully,—all in the space of a few lines. Afterwards this art of short poetry was applied to a much

larger variety of subjects; but it was still called by the ancient name. After the Greeks, the Romans took up this art, and wrote thousands of epigrams. But they never did quite so well as the Greeks; and the most precious poetry of this kind in the Western world still are the thousands of epigrams forming the bulk of what is called "The Greek Anthology"—consisting of epitaphs, votive inscriptions (for altars and offerings to the gods), inscriptions for presents made to friends, poems written in time of joy and sorrow, love poems, inscriptions probably used for the decoration of apartments or guest-chambers (much as Chinese texts are used in Japan), and a vast number of tiny gems of verse on a variety of subjects, ranging from jest to philosophy.

From the list of subjects just given, you may be reminded of subjects to which the shorter forms of Japanese poetry are commonly devoted; and the suggestion is worth remembering. In order to do full justice to Japanese poetry,—in order to understand its real worth and rank in the range of world literature,—it is very much to be hoped that somebody will sooner or later attempt a proper comparison of Japanese and Greek verse. I do not think that Greek scholarship is at all necessary for such an undertaking—though it would be useful. "The Greek Anthology" has been very extensively and very carefully translated into every European language of importance. Japanese scholars should be careful to read not the metrical ones. Probably the German work is the best; but there are very beautiful French studies and English studies also on the subject.

So much for the meaning of epigram. Epigrammatic poetry, you see, is an ancient rather than a modern art; and epigrammatic poetry of English literature, which is scanty, is not very old. But there is quite enough of it for our present purpose. Let us now speak about those forms of Japanese verse which might be compared with the various forms of epigrammatic poetry in Western literature.

You have the form called *tanka*, consisting of thirty-one syllables,—suitable for serious subjects;—you have the *haikai*,

consisting of seventeen syllables—suitable to an immense variety of subjects:—you have the *dodoitsu*, consisting of twenty-six syllables and usually devoted to love subjects. All these forms may justly be called epigrammatic poetry; and parallels for them can be found in English literature, as well as in Greek. Remember that we need not trouble ourselves while making this comparison about the mere matter of form in detail. Whether the verse be measured, as in Greek, by quantity, or as in English, by accents, the form need not concern us at all except in regard to brevity. We may dismiss it as a mere fashion of language from present consideration. But the spirit of the short poetry—the intellectual and emotional requirements of it—those we must consider, and we shall find that they are the same, or nearly the same, in the East as well as in the West. You, much better than I, know the rules about the sentiment to be expressed in the three forms of Japanese poetry which are really epigrammatic. I need not therefore attempt to say much about them. But we shall find that in English epigrammatic poetry, as in Japanese, it is the rule that the little verse should express or suggest a single emotion or idea in a powerful or clever way. However, as I said before, Greek verse offers better material for comparison. As this is only a class of English literature, nevertheless, an attempt to lecture on Greek epigrams would be quite out of place, and I shall make one comparison by way of illustration. The subject is an epitaph, composed probably about 2500 years ago for the grave of a little boy called Diodorus (Zonas of Sardis):—

“Do thou, who rowest the boat of the dead in the water of this lake, full of reeds, for Hades, having a painful task, stretch out, dark Charon, thy hand to the son of Cinyras, as he mounts on the ladder by the gang-way, and receive him. For his sandals will cause the lad to slip about; and he fears to put his feet naked on the sand of the shore.”

There could not have been any relation between the Greek fancy of the time of that inscription, and the Japanese fancy of the eighth century. But some time between the years

700 and 750 the Japanese poet, Okura, made a verse about the death of his little son Furuhi which is strangely like the Greek epigram. The form is *tanka*, and I suppose you all know the original text,* which I have tried to render as follows:—

“So young he is that he cannot know the way. To the messenger of the Underworld I will give a bribe, and entreat him, saying:—‘Do thou kindly take the little one upon thy back along the road.’”

This is the beautiful serious form of an epigram; and modern Western epigrams are best when they are serious. Considering these verses I shall begin a series of quotations, and those of you who love poetry will probably be able to find in old Japanese poetry the parallel for every citation I am able to offer.

Poems on death naturally take the first place, and these do not always lose their beauty because the pathos always mingles some light or pretty play of words. Here is an example on the death of twin sisters—the art of the composition plays with the fact of the extraordinary resemblance which twins usually bear to each other:—

ON TWIN-SISTERS

Fair marble, tell to future days
 That here two virgin-sisters lie,
 Whose life employ'd each tongue in praise,
 Whose death gave tears to every eye.
 In stature, beauty, years and fame,
 Together as they grew, they shone;
 Somuch alike, so much the same,
 That death mistook them both for one.

Unknown.

DYING YOUNG

Is it not better at an early hour
 In its calm cell to rest the weary head,
 While birds are singing and while blooms the bower,
 Than sit the fire out and go starved to bed?

* *Manyōshū*, Bk. V.

That is to say, is it not better to die while we are young and happy, than to die in the time of old age when the world has become lonesome, and all our friends are dead? To die thus old and forlorn is like sitting at a fireplace until the fire has gone out, and the room has become cold, and then to go hungry to bed. (This is by Landor.)

L I F E

Various the roads of life; in one
 All terminate, one lonely way.
 We go; and "Is he gone?"
 Is all our best friends say.

That is to say, the Roads of Life are many in number; but they all end in the grave. (This also is by Landor.)

AT THE AGE OF SEVENTY-FIVE

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.

Notice the splendid pride of the first line—so characteristic of Landor:—"I never entered into a contest with anybody; because I never met a man worthy to contend with me." Landor used to say that the only man whom he ever met, whom he had ever thought better than himself was Kosciuszko, the Polish patriot. It is true that Landor never dreamed of contending with anybody in the literature of which he was a peerless master. But he was in private life a terribly passionate and violent—though a noble and generous—man.

AT EIGHTY YEARS OF AGE

To my ninth decade I have totter'd on,
 And no soft arm bends now my steps to steady;
 She, who once led me where she would, is gone,
 So when he calls me, Death shall find me ready.

LAST EPIGRAM ON DEATH

Death stands above me, whispering low
 I know not what into my ear:
 Of his strange language all I know
 Is, there is not a word of fear.

These noble epigrams are truly Greek in manner; and Landor was a Greek scholar, and followed Greek models in all his work. That is why he wrote so many epigrams. But here is something by him still more Greek:—

ON THE DEATH OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Stand close around, ye Stygian set,
 With Dirce in one boat convey'd!
 Or Charon, seeing, may forget
 That he is old and she a shade.

The poem is commonly entitled "Dirce." The word "Stygian" means "of the dead," "of Hades"—it is derived from the name of the river Styx, over which the souls of the dead were ferried by Charon. Paraphrased, the quatrain signifies:—"Come hither, O ghosts who must cross the River of the Dead with Dirce! When you enter the boat with her, place yourselves about her so that she may be hidden from the eyes of the boatman. For otherwise, Charon, seeing so beautiful a form, might forget that he is too old to make love, and that she is only a ghost."

SEPARATION

There is a mountain and a wood between us,
 Where the lone shepherd and the late bird have seen us
 Morning and noon and eventide repass.
 Between us now the mountain and the wood
 Seem standing darker than last year they stood,
 And say we must not cross—Alas 'Alas'

This is again by Landor. Does it not remind you of certain Chinese poems on the same subject of separation?

D R E A M

It often comes into my head
 That we may dream when we are dead,
 But I am far from sure we do.
 O that it were so! then my rest
 Would be indeed among the blest;
 I should for ever dream of you.

Landor.

A more beautiful thought could not be expressed in fewer words, than this wish after death to dream for ever of the beloved person :

D E C E I T

You smiled, you spoke, and I believed,
 By every word and smile deceived.
 Another man would hope no more;
 Nor hope I what I hoped before:
 But let not this last wish be vain;
 Deceive, deceive me once again!

Landor.

E P I T A P H

Gaily I lived as ease and nature taught,
 And spent my little life without a thought;
 And am annoyed that Death, that tyrant grim,
 Should think of me, who never thought of him.

Unknown.

T H I N K O N L Y O F T H E E N D

My soul, sit thou a patient looker-on;
 Judge not the play before the play is done:
 Her plot hath many changes; every day
 Speaks a new scene; the last act crowns the play.

The above is by Richard Quarles the famous author of the curious book called "Emblems." Quarles was a religious mystic—he was born in 1592 and died in 1644. There is nothing to explain in the quatrain except the use of the word "her" at the beginning of the third line. We should now

say "its." In the time of Shakespeare, and indeed throughout the period of Tudor English, it was customary to use the possessive pronoun "his" and "her" where it would not be admissible to use "its." The quatrain signifies this: "My soul, you are like a person at the theatre who becomes impatient with the play before he has seen even half of it. Be patient. The name of the play is Life—and when it is done,—then you will be able to understand it and to judge it more justly."

TO SLEEP

Come, gentle sleep, attend thy votary's prayer,
 And, tho' Death's image, to my couch repair;
 How sweet, tho' lifeless, yet with life to lie,
 And without dying, O, how sweet to die!

The author is John Wolcot, a poet of the latter part of the eighteenth century. The allusions here are partly mythological. Greek mythology called Death and Sleep brothers;—and Love was sometimes also called a brother of Death. Death and Sleep in Greek art were represented like twins—hence the poet can classically call Sleep the image of Death. But of course he is also stating a beautiful natural fact—that sleep is a temporary death without pain.

TO A LADY

'Tis not the lily-brow I prize,
 Nor roseate cheeks, nor sunny eyes,
 Enough of lilies and of roses!
 A thousand-fold more dear to me
 The gentle look that Love discloses,—
 The look that Love alone can see!

This gracious fancy is by Coleridge, and it is well worthy of him. Truly the most beautiful thing in the world is the simple look that speaks affection; and, compared with it, all other beauties are as nothing.

EPITAPH

May! Be thou never graced with birds that sing,
 Nor Flora's pride

In thee all flowers and roses spring,
Mine only died.

This is by the poet William Browne, of Tavistock;—he flourished between 1588—1643. May is especially the month of birds and flowers. The poet craves that in that month no birds shall sing or flowers bloom, because his bird, his flower, his beloved died on the tenth day of that month in 1614. Browne was also the author of a very famous epitaph on the Countess of Pembroke:—

Underneath this sable herse
Lies the subject of all verse:
Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother:
Death, ere thou hast slain another
Fair and learn'd and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee.

That is to say that Death himself must die before another person so good as this sister of Sidney shall die. Time will first kill Death. The word "herse" is now usually spelled "hearse." It means the black carriage in which the coffin is borne to the cemetery.

THE CHARM OF HOME

The singing Kettle and the purring Cat,
The gentle breathing of the cradled Babe,
The silence of the Mother's love-bright eye,
And tender smile answering its smile of sleep.

(Nothing more true than this has ever been written: it is by Coleridge.)

SOUL-BEAUTY

O beauty in a beauteous body dight!
Body that veiling brightness, became bright,—
Fair cloud which less we see, than by thee see delight.
Coleridge.

MARRIAGE

There are two births, the one when Light
First strikes the new-awaken'd sense—

The other when two souls unite,
And we must count our life from then.

Coleridge.

TO THE SPIRIT OF A DEAD HUSBAND

Yet art thou happier far than she
Who feels the widow's love for thee!
For while her days are days of weeping,
Thou in peace, in silence sleeping,
In some still world, unknown, remote,
The mighty parent's care hast found,
Without whose tender guardian thought
No sparrow falleth to the ground.

Coleridge.

(The allusion is Scriptural; but the grace of the composition is almost of the very highest.)

I believe the last example is one of the very longest. However, epigrammatic verses exist in England shorter than any of these. I am not giving any attention at all to what are commonly called epigrams in these later times—satirical or merely wicked: I am quoting only true epigrams, real poetry in the best sense. But it is worth while observing that formerly English poets thought that such things could be effectively written only in Latin or in Greek, and in the history of English literary scholarship there are few things more interesting than the Latin epigrams of Richard Crashaw. I am quoting Crashaw's name because it has been so often said, about Japanese poetry, that nothing great can be done within a very small limit. The shortest poem of Japanese poetry, I suppose is seventeen syllables. Here is the shortest form of Crashaw's epigram:—

Vidit et erubuit nympha pudica Deum.

(The modest Nymph beheld her God and blushed.)

Here are only fourteen syllables—an immortality. The subject given to the student at Cambridge was the miracle at the marriage feast at Cana when Christ changed the water into wine. Crashaw is said to have written only that one line

on the subject, but that one line obtained the prize and perpetual honour. A little explanation is necessary. Crashaw did exactly what the Japanese poet does—he used one word to express two meanings. That word is *Nymph*. Nymph means in Latin either the divinity of a river or a spring or the water of the spring. You will now see how the changing of the water into red wine might be classically compared to the modest blush of a maiden—the divinities of the spring being all represented as maiden goddesses by antique artists. If so much can be done with fourteen syllables, what is the matter with seventeen syllables or twenty-six syllables, or thirty-one syllables? But we have one line epigrams in English as well as in Latin. Here is one by Rossetti and it is grand:—

TO ART

I loved thee ere I loved a woman, Love.

You must understand the word “love” is in apposition with “thee.” Love is a common term of caress between husband and wife. Here are a few more examples from Rossetti of extremely brief form:—

As much as in a hundred years, she’s dead:
Yet is to-day the day on which she died.

(More sorrow could not be uttered in two lines—that is an utterance of supreme despair.)

Regret for unkind things done:

Where is the man whose soul has never waked
To sudden pity of the torn past?

(Here past time is substituted metaphorically for heart—the thought is really this: “What man does not sometimes think with pain of the pain that in other times he needlessly gave to others?”)

AT THE APPROACH OF DEATH

Who shall say what is said in me,
With all that I might have been dead in me?

Paraphrased: “Now splendid inspiration come to me,—

O how much there is that I wish to say. But never shall I have time to say it,—for my youth and strength are gone,—and there never will be anyone else who can say it for me, because there will never be in this world any other mind that has felt and suffered in exactly the same way as mine.”

D O U B T

Would God I knew there were a God to thank
When thanks rise in me!

(That is to say: “When I feel my heart full of gratitude and delight, how much do I wish that I could be sure there were a God so I might speak my thanks to him.” This is much more than a poem of doubt though I have so entitled it. It expresses also the pain which a generous nature feels at the absence of human sympathy, and the fear that higher sympathy may not exist.)

I am not sure that you know that even Tennyson wrote poems of this kind. His famous lines about the flower are a good example of a metaphysical or philosophical epigram.

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

This is true—if we could understand even the mystery of life in a little plant, we could understand the secret of the Universe. This little poem might be entitled “The Mystery of Life.” Another example from Tennyson entitled “The Play”:

Act first, this Earth, a stage so gloom'd with woe
You all but sicken at the shifting scenes.
And yet be patient. Our Playwright may show
In some fifth Act what this wild Drama means.

This is an old subject of epigram poetry; you have already had one example. The terms used are theatric;

and you must remember that the phrase “to shift a scene” or “scene shifting” is commonly used of moving and changing the artificial scenery on a stage. But of course Tennyson uses the word “scene” in a double meaning—both in the meaning of appearance or condition, and in the meaning of artificial painted scenery. The reference to “a fifth act” also needs a word: you must remember that most English plays of the grand school are written in five acts—so that the expression “fifth act” really means “last act.” Paraphrased now, we have the meaning thus: “This world is indeed like a stage and like the play that is being performed upon that stage. We do not like the play. It is very gloomy, very sad. But let us be patient. So far we have seen only the first act. When the fifth act—when the last act—shall have been played—then we shall be in a better condition to judge.” One more from Tennyson, it is an epitaph; and he has written several others, but this will interest you most. It was written for the tomb of the great Caxton, the first English printer, who is buried in Westminster Abbey. Caxton’s motto was “Fiat lux”—two Latin words signifying “Let there be light!”—and taken from the Vulgate version of the Bible. It is necessary to remember this in order to understand the beauty of Tennyson’s inscription.

Thy prayer was ‘Light—more Light—while Time shall last!’
 Thou sawest a glory growing on the night,
 But not the shadows which that light would cast,
 Till shadows vanish in the Light of Light.

In the first line the words “light” signify knowledge—in the last line they signify Supreme Knowledge. We must paraphrase freely in order to present the whole beauty of the thought:—

“Caxton, you prayed that there should be more knowledge in the world, and that knowledge will always continue to grow and spread. But you did not then understand how much pain and sorrow larger knowledge would bring—you

did not perceive the shadows which the light of knowledge would cast. Yet that cannot be helped. We must accept all knowledge, and the pain which it brings, cheerfully until all pain shall vanish in the light of the Knowledge Supreme.”

Here is something lighter and a little bit longer. It is a very great love epigram; and you will understand it better by remembering two things—the custom of women in wearing roses in the breast, when in full dress, and the custom of adopting the rose as a political emblem in the great Civil War in England. At that time the House of Lancaster adopted as an emblem the red rose; and the House of York adopted the white rose. Hundreds of years ago some gentleman fighting on the York side loved a girl whose family belonged to the Lancaster side; and he sent her a rose with this little poem. Nobody now knows who he was or who she was; but the poem is so pretty that it still lives:—

If this fair rose offend thy sight,
Placed in thy bosom bare,
'Twill blush to find itself less white,
And turn Lancastrian there.

But if thy ruby lips will spy,—
And kiss it thou mayst deign,—
With envy pale 'twill lose its dye,
And Yorkshire turn again.

Here is a little bit in quite another form, from George Meredith: it is only another version of Tennyson's

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.*

But it is very pretty and a little deeper, giving the prospective rather than the retrospective consideration of the problem:—

Joy is fleet,
Sorrow slow.
Love so sweet,
Sorrow will sow.

* *In memoriam* XXVII, 15-6.

Love, that has flown
 Ere day's decline,
 Love to have known,
 Sorrow, be mine!

Perhaps this is just a little bit beyond the border of the true epigram; but it comes so close to certain brief forms of Japanese poetry that I think it better to consider it as an epigram.

In modern times the epigram has been successfully cultivated only by really great poets: no small mind can make a good epigram. But certain poets not exactly of the first class have been moderately successful within the past few years. Here are a few epigrams from Watson,—still a living poet:—

ON A DOG, FOR AN EPITAPH

His friends he loved. His fellest earthly foes—
 Cats—I believe he did but feign to hate.
 My hand will miss the insinuated nose,
 Mine eyes the tail that wagg'd contempt at Fate.

The best stroke of art in this quatrain is the use of the word "insinuated." Literally this word means, according to the Latin etymology, to slip between or wind between—like a snake. Now as flattery of the gentler kind makes subtle and covert approaches, like a serpent, it is often spoken of as insinuating, and there the word has the double meaning of caressing flattery and of constant quiet intrusion. How clever a dog is at putting its nose into your hand at an unexpected moment needs no comment.

A CHURCH-SPIRE

It soars like hearts of hapless men who dare
 To sue for gifts the gods refuse to allot;
 Who climb for ever toward they know not where,
 Baffled for ever by they know not what.

(A church-spire pointing straight to the sky—yet always becoming smaller the higher it climbs, and at last vanishing in a point—makes us think of hopeless aspiration. And do

not men, in fact, continually aspire to the impossible?—are they not always praying for what could only be misfortune to them if they got it? As a matter of fact religious aspiration is much like an attempt to climb to somewhere we know nothing about, and to find ourselves kept back by something that we are equally ignorant about.)

TO A SEABIRD

Fain would I have thee barter fates with me, —
 Lone loiterer where the shells like jewels be,
 Hung on the fringe and frayed hem of the sea.
 But no,—’twere cruel, wild-wing’d Bliss! to thee.

You will see that this is inspired by Swinburne,—and that it is an attempt to repeat Swinburne’s thought in a personal way. That is generally the trouble with writers of the second or third class: they have to borrow ideas. But it is not bad.

In all the foregoing examples, you will find that I have kept to the classical meaning—the old Greek meaning of the word epigram. If I were to accept the modern meaning, I could quote hundreds and hundreds of merely witty or comical or satirical short poems without any difficulty. But it seems to me that the merely witty poems of this class—unless very pretty—correspond rather to what is called in Japanese literature [*senryū*] than to really true poetry, the poetry which can do something better than make us laugh. And as for satirical poetry I do not think that any kind of satirical literature deserves to be ranked high as compared with other verse. However, if a satirical utterance happened to contain some extraordinary truth,—some universal truth, or proverbial truth, then we may give it honour. For instance this, by Sir John Harrington who lived in the sixteenth century, is deservedly famous.

TREASON

Treason doth never prosper—What’s the reason?
 If it doth prosper, none dare call it treason.

Again a witty poem, if it touches something deeper than

the feeling of amusement, may deserve to be called an epigram in the Greek sense. Here is an example from Sir John Suckling who lived in the beginning of the seventeenth century:—

If man might know
The ill he must undergo
And shun it so,
Then it were good to know:
But if he undergo it,
Though he know it,
What boots him know it?
He must undergo it.

Platitude, if you like, so far as the mere statements are concerned; but these lines remind us, and really make us think about the fact that it would be a great misfortune for mankind to be able to know the future. If every one of us could know exactly what is going to happen to him or her—think of the consequence, the pain, the fear, the anxiety!

I have not said anything and will not say anything about the epigrams of Ben Jonson, or the hundreds of epigrams by Herrick, or the savage epigrams of Pope—all these belong to the class of literature which I am purposely ignoring. I only wanted you to realize that even in Western poetry very brief verse may be very great verse, and that, after all, a question of merit is quite independent of any question of length. No one form of poetry is better than any other form, except as it is used: all forms of verse become great in great use. And in the same way all style, all scholarly literature, is equally good: it is quite useless to say that one form is better than another, except in relation to appropriate use. The philosophy of the epigram may best be summed in an epigram which reminds us that nothing is so hard to do in this world as to give mankind new pleasures of thought and feeling:—

Many can rule and more can fight,
But few give myriad hearts delight.

Landor.