

CHAPTER XVIII

ON TREE SPIRITS IN WESTERN POETRY

REALLY one of the very best ways in which to utilise the resources of European poetry you will find to be the establishment of the romantic or emotional relations of that poetry to Japanese literature and legend. Last year one of the literary class wrote for me a very pretty version of the wonderful old story of the *Sanjiusan-gendo*, and I thought, while reading it, that it was rather strange that no effort had been made to call the attention of literary students to the beautiful stories of the same class existing in Western literature. To-day I am going to attempt to show you how the same idea as that of the Japanese legend produced some beautiful literature in the West.

The best stories of this class—indeed, the best of any class belonging to what has so well been called zoological mythology,—are Greek. Many of the Greek stories you have heard something about. You know that the cypress tree was once a beautiful boy called Kubarissos (if we spell the name in the true Greek way—otherwise Cyparissus) and that he killed, by mistake, a pet deer, and therefore would have died of grief, had not the god changed him into the tree that still bears his name. You have heard no doubt that the anemone, or “wind-flower,” is the flower of young Adonis—that he was changed into it after having been mortally wounded by a wild boar. It was at that time that the rose, originally white, became red; for the goddess Aphrodite, hurrying to help Adonis, tore her beautiful feet with the thorns of the plant, whose flowers remained red with her blood. Doubtless you know that the flower Narcissus bears the name of the handsome youth who refused the love of the

nymph Echo, but thereafter, beholding his own face and figure reflected in water, fell in love with the shadow of himself, and pined away, and was turned into a flower. And there is the hyacinth, the flower of the youth Hyacinthos, accidentally killed by the god of the sun, while the two were playing at quoits; the god changed him into the plant, and the flowers of the plant bear the Greek letters "ai! ai!"—a cry of lamentation. I need not speak of the story of the laurel tree and of many others. Enough to say that in Greek mythology almost every plant, tree, bird, insect had some such legend attached to it. These are commonly known facts. It is less generally understood that the Greeks considered everything infused with spirit,—that rocks and trees, clouds and waters, had their particular souls or animating principles. Every river, every spring, every tree had its particular god, or demi-god. To touch the subject at all satisfactorily would require a great deal of time, and I can only suggest to you in a brief way that the thoughts of the Greeks about the ubiquity of divine or half-divine persons were much like those of the Far East in respect to the ancient gods, with some differences of a particularly humane and often beautiful kind. To-day I shall speak only of the beliefs about trees; this properly introduces the topic of the lecture.

Tree-spirits were considered by the Greeks as of two kinds. The spirits of fruit-trees were called Meliades; the spirits of all other trees were called Dryads or Hamadryads. They were principally female, and sometimes appeared in the shapes of beautiful women. They had great supernatural power, but their lives depended altogether upon the life of the tree, and when the tree died the spirits also died. Accordingly they were very anxious about their trees, and they could reward or punish men according to whether their trees were respected or injured. To cut down certain trees was therefore considered very dangerous. In Japanese legends, the *enoki* is often mentioned as a tree which it is dangerous to cut down. A number of Greek trees were not only thus

dreaded, but were regularly propitiated with sacrifice.

Of course the literary value of this tree mythology depends, like that of kindred Japanese myth, upon human interest,—upon the poetry or sentiment attaching to the old stories. Some are very beautiful and very sad; they not only touch our emotions, they also teach us a moral, or remind us, in a way never to be forgotten, of certain weaknesses in human will. One such story, perhaps the most beautiful of all, is the story of Rhœcus (the English poet Landor spells the name Rhaicos, but the other spelling is more correct; the true Greek word would be Rhoikos). This was a man who loved a tree spirit. It had been his intention to cut down her tree; but she came out of her tree, and pleaded with Rhœcus so eloquently and so tenderly that he promised to spare the tree on condition that she would love him, because he saw that she was more beautiful than any mortal woman. Then she told him that it was dangerous to love the spirit of a tree. “I am,” she said, “very jealous; and if you should ever show affection to any other person, or if you should refuse to come to me when I send for you, then all will end between us, and you will become very unhappy. It is not a trifling matter to love a daughter of the gods.” Of course the young man said what a lover might be expected to say under such circumstances. But the nymph said, “There is yet another matter to remember: the life of man is not long, but the life of a tree is very long—I shall still be young and beautiful when you are old and dead. Are you not as rash as Tithonus was?” Rhœcus still made sincere promises and protestations; and at last the tree spirit agreed to his wishes. “But,” she said, “I cannot live with you in your father’s house, I must not go so far away from my tree, and you can only come to me when there is nobody else in the woods. Whenever I wish you to come I will send you a bee. When you see the bee flying round your head, then come you must. If you cannot come, I shall know that something terrible has happened.” Everything was happy after that for a long time. But one day

Rhœcus, together with a number of young friends, began to play a game of draughts; and while he was playing the bee came. Then he forgot all about the tree spirit and struck the bee with his hand impatiently. The bee came back again, and he hit it again. All of a sudden he remembered—jumped up from the draught board and ran to the forest. But he was too late. The bee had been there before him; the tree of the nymph was withered and dead—she was gone for ever. Then Rhœcus could not be comforted. He sat down before the dead tree, and presently he himself died of grief. That is the whole story in substance.

You will see that from a literary point of view, such a story may be treated in a variety of ways. The American poet Lowell treated it from a moral point of view; and I believe that it had been treated from a merely romantic point of view by several French poets. But Landor has certainly succeeded best with it; he retells it after the fashion of the idyllic poet, in a dialogue, and his scholarly knowledge of Greek literature and life shows to advantage in this version. I may remark that the Greek text of the original story is lost—probably for ever. It was the work of a writer called Charon, of Lampsacus—a name easy to remember, being the same as that of the ghostly ferryman who rowed the souls of the dead over the shadowy river Styx.

Now we shall read some extracts from Landor's beautiful rendering of the legend, to which he gives the title of "The Hamadryad." We need not read the introduction, as the composition is rather long. It begins with an account of how the father of Rhœcus orders his son to go and help a household servant cut down an oak tree in the wood. He goes to the tree and finds the servant axe in hand before it, and he notices that the servant hesitates to strike. "What is the matter?" asks the lad.

"There are bees about,
Or wasps, or hornets," said the cautious eld,
"Look sharp, O son of Thallinos!" The youth
Inclined his ear, afar, and warily,

And cavern'd in his hand. He heard a buzz
At first, and then the sound grew soft and clear,
And then divided into what seem'd tune,
And there were words upon it, plaintive words.
He turn'd, and said, "Echion! do not strike
That tree: it must be hollow; for some god
Speaks from within. Come thyself near." Again
Both turn'd toward it: and behold! there sat
Upon the moss below, with her two palms
Pressing it, on each side, a maid in form.
Downcast were her long eyelashes, and pale
Her cheek, but never mountain-ash display'd
Berries of colour like her lip so pure,
Nor were the anemones about her hair
Soft, smooth, and wavering like the face beneath.

The ghostly character of the tree is first revealed by a humming noise, which both men imagined to be made by bees. But listening carefully, they are startled to find that this is not the sound of humming, but the sound of a thin sweet voice that is uttering words, very sad words of fear and grief. And before this surprise is over, suddenly they see, sitting under the tree, a beautiful shape like a young girl, very pale, but with strangely red lips. Looking at her face, its lines appeared as uncertain and wavering as shapes of ripples on the surface of water; but there were living flowers in her hair, real, not ghostly flowers; for they were quite distinctly seen. There is something in the appearance that frightens both men, in spite of the beauty and the softness; the supernatural character is revealed by the fact that all the outlines of the shadow seem to be flowering—ready to vanish like smoke in another moment. But presently the sweet strange thin voice speaks, calling Rhœcus by name and bidding him send away the servant. The servant is only too glad to be sent away, for he is frightened almost to death; and then the tree spirit—for such she proves to be—begins to talk to the young man and to plead with him.

Hamad. And wouldst thou too shed the most innocent
Of blood? No vow demands it; no god wills
The oak to bleed.

Rhaicos. Who art thou? whence? why here?
And whither wouldst thou go? Among the robed
In white or saffron, or the hue that most
Resembles dawn or the clear sky, is none
Array'd as thou art. What so beautiful
As that gray robe which clings about thee close,
Like moss to stones adhering, leaves to trees,
Yet lets thy bosom rise and fall in turn,
As, touch'd by zephyrs, fall and rise the boughs
Of graceful platan by the river-side?

Hamad. Lovest thou well thy father's house?

Rhaicos. Indeed
I love it, well I love it, yet would leave
For thine, where'er it be, my father's house,
With all the marks upon the door, that show
My growth at every birthday since the third,
And all the charms, o'erpowering evil eyes,
My mother nail'd for me against my bed,
And the Cydonian bow (which thou shalt see)
Won in my race last spring from Eutychos.

The description here of the nymph is Landor's own—perhaps Lowell follows the Greek idea more closely in representing the nymph as naked; but the artistic device of the appearance of leaves and moss is finer, and a little more ghostly. As yet the young man has no idea that he is talking to a tree spirit; he only sees before him a charming maiden, so charming that he is willing not only to spare the tree at her request, but to give up everything for her,—even to leave his father's house and the things which youth delights in. Of course he does not yet understand what the question means as to whether he would not regret to leave his father's house. The tree spirit wanted him to say that he could not or would not leave his father's house, so that she might reply to him, by way of argument, “Then think how much you would make me suffer by destroying my

house—my tree!” But he is already so much in love with her that he answers in the very opposite way. There is a pretty naïveté, a boyish innocence, in his replies which paints his character very prettily; this is also one of Landor’s inventions. The reference to the door with marks upon it showing how tall the boy was at each year from his childhood, is perhaps more English than Greek in thought; yet it is certainly a very human touch. It is a custom in England every year to measure the growth of a boy by making him stand with his back to a wall or door, and putting a little mark on the wall or door to show how high his head reached on such or such a date.

The conversation proceeds; the young man is still ignorant of who this beautiful person may be, and even when she asks him if he has never heard of the tree spirit, he does not think that he is talking to one. He can only tell her that he loves her; he arranges the moss smoothly under her tree, picking up and throwing away the little pebbles and fixing a corner to make a comfortable seat; and when she sits down again before him, he begs her to come with him to his father’s house as his bride. But she answers :

Hamad. Nay; and of mine I cannot give thee part.

Rhaicos. Where is it?

Hamad. In this oak.

Rhaicos. Ay; now begins

The tale of Hamadryad: tell it through.

Hamad. Pray of thy father never to cut down
My tree; and promise him, as well thou mayst,
That every year he shall receive from me
More honey than will buy him nine fat sheep,
More wax than he will burn to all the gods.
Why fallest thou upon thy face? Some thorn
May scratch it, rash young man! Rise up; for shame!

Rhaicos. For shame I cannot rise. O pity me!
I dare not sue for love—but do not hate!
Let me once more behold thee—not once more,
But many days: let me love on—unloved!

I aimed too high: on my own head the bolt
Falls back, and pierces to the very brain.

But she comforts him—bids him not to be afraid—even promises to love him, only she cannot go to his house. Returning full of joy, the young man intercedes with his father for the tree—promising that he will every year obtain from that tree a certain quantity of wax and honey. The father is quite pleased and agrees not to destroy the tree. And every day Rhœcus goes to see the dryad in the woods. Sometimes he does not find her; then he is very unhappy. So to console him she tells him about her bee.

There is a bee
Whom I have fed, a bee who knows my thoughts
And executes my wishes: I will send
That messenger. If ever thou art false,
Drawn by another, own it not, but drive
My bee away: then shall I know my fate,
And—for thou must be wretched—weep at thine.

In other words, she vaguely threatens him, in case of unfaithfulness. It will make her very unhappy if he should love somebody else; but the result for him would be even worse.

From this point there is a considerable divergence between the treatment of the story by Landor and by the American author. Lowell represents the young man as rough, wine-flushed, playing for money with a number of riotous comrades. But, as you have already seen, such conduct would not be at all in accordance with Landor's conception of the character of Rhœcus, whom he depicts as an affectionate and gentle boy. In the English poem Rhœcus, or Rhaicos, does not play at draughts with rough companions, but only with his father; and he strikes the bee through the fault of forgetfulness only.

Rhaicos was sitting at his father's hearth:
Between them stood the table, not o'erspread
With fruits which autumn now profusely bore,

Nor anise cakes, nor odorous wine; but there
 The draught-board was expanded; at which game
 Triumphant sat old Thallinos; the son
 Was puzzled, vex'd, discomfited, distraught.
 A buzz was at his ear: up went his hand
 And it was heard no longer. The poor bee
 Return'd (but not until the morn shone bright)
 And found the Hamadryad with her head
 Upon her aching wrist, and show'd one wing
 Half-broken off, the other's meshes marr'd,
 And there were bruises which no eye could see
 Saving a Hamadryad's.

The use of the word "expanded" in speaking of the draught-board may puzzle you; but the Western draught-board is commonly made so as to open and shut like a book, —indeed, it used to be the fashion to make these boards resemble when closed two large volumes bound in leather. The word "meshes," referring to the wing of the bee, signifies of course the reticulations of the wing, scientifically called "nervures."

And now for the close, which is very briefly told. The youth heard the hamadryad utter a cry of pain; and he ran at once into the forest:

No bark was on the tree, no leaf was green,
 The trunk was riven through. From that day forth
 Nor word nor whisper sooth'd his ear, nor sound
 Even of insect wing; but loud laments
 The woodmen and the shepherds one long year
 Heard day and night; for Rhaicos would not quit
 The solitary place, but moan'd and died.
 Hence milk and honey wonder not, O guest,
 To find set duly on the hollow stone.

The last lines refer to the Greek custom, so often described by Theocritus, of placing offerings of milk and honey before the places supposed to be haunted by a woodland divinity. In spite of some little modern touches, the whole conception of the story by Landor is quite Greek in

its way,—and especially in its tenderness. If you will take the trouble some day to study the legend, you will easily see that it is one of those stories which never can grow old, and which neither Landor nor Lowell could exhaust. There is a strange vitality about Greek stories. A thousand different poets may take up the same Greek story century after century and write about it; yet the thing remains as fresh as ever, inviting still greater genius to do it justice. Some future Japanese poet might certainly find in the substance of this story the inspiration for a very pretty romance containing a very deep moral.