

CHAPTER XXV

POEMS OLD AND NEW, NOT ENGLISH, IN RELATION TO THE MOON

IN the general class, and in relation to the topic of night, I am going to give a number of English poems about the moon. But I must tell you that the English poems upon this subject are not nearly so interesting or so beautiful as the moon poems of other literatures. Old Greek poems, modern Greek poems, Italian poems and French poems about the moon are incomparably better. And in this special class we can very well take up subjects not exactly suitable to the larger miscellaneous class. So I shall begin this lecture with something about the Greek poems on the moon, and afterwards give you examples translated from other languages—not forgetting to use an English poem when appropriate to the subject.

Of course when we go back to ancient classic times we must expect to find the moon regarded as a person,—a divinity; and the poems about her are liable to be of a mythological character only. We cannot expect, indeed, to find good moon poetry in an astronomical age,—not at least just now. We have maps of the moon showing us the dried-up seas, the long extinct volcanoes, the waterless river courses;—we know that the moon is a waste of sand and stone, the dried-up corpse of a world; and to-day it reminds us only of the unpleasant fact, that our world is inevitably destined to die and dry up and crumble in just the same manner. So the moon does not now inspire us so much with pleasant ideas as with unpleasant fancies. But in the time when mankind did not know anything about the moon, and imagined her to be a goddess, the moon was indeed an endless

source of poetical inspiration. After all, science has destroyed for us a great deal of happy imagination; and we can only find consolation for this in the certainty that scientific knowledge must, at some later day, supply us with a larger and higher form of poetical suggestion. Yet I fear that time is far off.

The moon was especially in old times a source of inspiration for poems of a tender and melancholy character,—and indeed she has been an inspiration for melancholy poetry even in our own time. But the tender side of moon poetry deserves attention first; it has a more intimate relation to what is unchanging in human nature. As the special goddess of lovers, the moon has remained for thousands of years a source of imaginative and tender literature, both popular and refined.

I think that you all know that the Greeks had different moon goddesses, or rather that same goddess of the moon was considered by them to have various forms and attributes. Certainly Artemis, the stern goddess of chastity, was not a patron of lovers. Yet Artemis was identified with the moon both by the Greeks and Romans who called her Diana. However, Selene was also identified with the moon;—was it not she who kissed the sleeping shepherd Endymion? And Selene was especially the Lady of Lovers. It might seem to you that there is a plain contradiction in such mythologies. Well, there are contradictions in all mythologies and we need not trouble ourselves about them. But observe that as the Lady of Lovers Selene was prayed to especially—mostly by girls whose lovers had deserted them. And for this reason she is not so far removed by her attributes from that bright Artemis whose office it was to *protect* the chastity of maidens.

Now the worship of Selene is not even yet entirely dead in Greece. Greek girls—presumably those who have not studied astronomy at the new public school still sing hymns to her in the remote country districts. Is not this a very interesting survival of a very ancient faith? Such songs are sung partly as incantation;—the moon is asked to avenge

the girl whose lover has been cruel, or to bring him back to his duty without a changed heart. Listen to one of the little songs in question, and see how pretty it is, and how expressive of human nature:—

Bright golden moon that art near to thy setting, go thou and salute my lover,—he that stole my love, and that kissed me, and that said, “Never will I leave thee!” and lo, he has left me like a field reaped and gleaned, like a church where no man comes to pray, like a city desolate. Therefore, would I curse him, and yet again my heart fails me for tenderness. My heart is vexed within me, my spirit is moved with anguish. Nay even so I will lay my curses on him, and let God do even as He will,—with my pain and with my crying, with my flame, and with mine implications.

You will see a mixture of the pagan with the Christian element here: the old moon incantation is still believed in; but the Christian god is also asked to help the deserted maiden. How old the incantation, it were hard to say. Very possibly it may be even ten thousand years old, or older: but we have a version of it dating only from the time of Theocritus. When Theocritus wrote his “Second Idyl” in which the text of the incantation is placed—about two hundred and seventy five or three hundred years before Christ—the custom of thus praying to the moon was already thousands of years old. Let me quote to you some extracts from the prose version of the moon song as given by Theocritus:—

Go thou, Selene, shine clear and fair, for, softly Goddess, to thee will I sing. Bethink thee of my love, and whence it came, my Lady Moon! Even as I looked, I loved, loved madly, and all my heart was wounded. Woe is me and my beauty began to wane. Bethink thee of my love, and whence it came, my Lady Moon!

The girls of the time of Theocritus performed particular rites while praying to the moon in this way, and relat-

ed the whole story of their affection and their sorrow. Some of these rites may possibly have been learned from Asiatic sources. But the principal idea and feeling expressed in the "Second Idyl" is altogether Greek, and probably quite as old as the Greek race.

But to these lines I refer principally for the purpose of showing how very ancient is the relation of the moon to Western love poetry. The relation of the moon to the poetry of sorrow and regret is rather modern. I am not enough of a scholar to tell you how much poetry of the latter kind on the subject of the moon may be found in Greek literature. But the most remarkable moon poetry of the sorrowful sort is certainly much later than the poetry of love; and I think that I am right in calling it especially a modern growth—so far as Europe is concerned. It is not so as regards the Far East. I have read many French translations of old Chinese poetry about the moon—verses probably older than European civilization; and among these verses I found some very distinctive and impressive compositions of a sorrowful kind. But in European poetry, as I told you before, the great poetry of this class is modern—almost recent. One would expect especially to find it in a period of pessimistic philosophy—in the period, for example, of Schopenhauer. And that is just about the time when we do find it. There must have been poetry of the same kind before; but this is the time of the famous verses of Leopardi.

Giacomo Leopardi is thought by very good judges to be the greatest Italian poet after Dante. This is saying a great deal; and I do not think that any one but an Italian, or a man having a perfect knowledge of Italian literature, could exactly show you what it is that makes Leopardi so greatly important. He wrote very little: and all his pieces are short. It is not the thought of the poem, nor the feeling of the poem only, that gives the poet his rank—especially in Latin literature form is insisted upon, and I understand that the great wonder of Leopardi is the perfection

and melody of his form. You must try to think of him as a classic poet—that is, one who models all his work upon the best Greek and Roman conceptions of poetry, as well as upon a profound knowledge of all the great Italian poets that preceded him. It is the severe perfection of his verse, and the melancholy charm of its faultless music that causes him to be so highly esteemed. He is rather modern; for he was born in 1798 and died in 1837, so that he partly belongs to the last century, and was a contemporary of Tennyson. His life was very, very unhappy—owing to extraordinary circumstances. He was the son of a noble family; and his parents were very religious, very stern and very severe. They brought him up so strictly that he had known no pleasure in his childhood. No youth, no joy. Grown up, to live with those parents became impossible for him; and yet to support himself was no easy matter. By hard study he had become a wonderful scholar, an astonishing scholar; but his health would not allow of energetic work,—would not allow him, for example, to fill certain educational positions requiring constant effort. He was obliged to content himself with easier labour at a small salary,—working as librarian, as secretary, occasionally as translator. His health had probably been ruined by the very cruel way in which he was brought up. He was very sensitive and affectionate; and this made his first great sorrow in adult life almost unbearable for him. He fell in love with some handsome person, who encouraged his hopes only to amuse herself, and then left him to despair. At the age of thirty-nine he died of consumption. All his poetry was written about his own emotions and sorrows. He wrote poems about the women he loved or admired; he wrote poems about sickness and old age, about loss of strength and loss of hope, about death as being the end of all things, about life as being an illusion and a mockery. If you know the history of his own pains, and then read his poems, you cannot help sympathizing with them. But if you should not know anything of his personal history, then his poems would seem very morbid

indeed. Morbid they are—and you know the word “morbid” means “sickly.” But there are particular forms of beauty—beauty of form and beauty of feeling (beauty of aspect), which are associated with sickly conditions, with excessive sensibility of the nerves. Any doctor of experience can tell you about that. So the Italians who are the most artistic people in the world, called particular kinds of beauty, or rather particular qualities of beauty, by the strange word “*morbidezza*” signifying a form arrived at only through excessive sensibility, such as sickness makes. Now there is a particular beauty in the poetry of Leopardi which can better be qualified by this word of *morbidezza*.

That is enough to say about Leopardi. Among his poems there are two very celebrated pieces about the moon. These are, I think, the most remarkable examples in Western literature of melancholy poems about the moon. Therefore I think that we should know them. The first is the famous composition beginning with the beautiful phrase “*O graziosa luna.*” This I shall now attempt to translate in English prose from the French translation in prose by Professor Carré, which is probably the best translation yet made in any European language. The French translations are nearly always more successful than the English; and one reason of this is that they only make prose translations of great poems, artistically understanding that only the very greatest poet can make a worthy translation in verse:—

O gracious moon, I remember that just one year ago I came here to the top of this hill, full of anguish to look upon you;—and in that time you were hovering, even as you hover now, above that forest, which you fully illuminated with your beams. But your face then appeared to my eyes all clouded and trembling, seen through the tears which came to the edge of my eye-lids,—for my life was tormented then, and it is tormented still, and it does not change, O my beloved moon. And nevertheless it pleases me to remember,—it gives me pleasure to calculate the age of my sorrow. Oh! in the time of youth, when the

path to be taken is still long to hope and short to memory—then how pleasant it is to remember things gone by, even though they be sad, and that the sorrow must endure!

Moonlight is particularly apt to become associated with very painful or very pleasant memories, partly perhaps because of the comparative rarity of beautiful nights and of our natural inclination to profit by them when they occur. Thoughts like these no doubt occur in all literature; but they seldom have been so touchingly and so deeply expressed.

Yet a still sadder poem on the same subject, and a still more artistic poem has been given to us by this author. It is entitled "The Setting of the Moon." It is worth knowing, and I shall try to give you a prose translation. But you must remember that three-fourths of the beauty necessarily vanishes in any translation, unless the translator should happen to be a poet as great as Leopardi himself; all I can attempt to do is to give you the thought of the poem, more or less imperfectly.

When, upon some still night,--above the fields and the silvered waters, which the south wind caressingly touches with his wing,—and where the shallows take in the distance a thousand vague aspects, a thousand forms of illusion, in the midst of calm waters, the masses of foliage, the hills, and the villas;—when, on such a night, the moon, reaching the edge of the sky, descends behind the Apennines or the Alps, or into the infinite bosom of the Tyrrhenian Sea: then the world loses its colours, all the shadows disappear, and one universal obscurity envelops alike the valley and the mountain. Then the night becomes a funeral darkness; and, on the high road, the waggoner proceeds singing as he goes and saluting with his plaintive song, the last gleam of that dying light which had been serving as a guide upon his way.

I fancy that in nearly all countries with an agricultural population the little picture of the waggoner or farmer, here given, would be equally true. In Italy it was true three

thousand years ago: old Latin poets sang of the farmer going into town early in the morning before sunrise and singing on their way. And in the suburbs of this city, every morning we see the same thing: but we seldom stop to think how ancient it is, nor how in a thousand years to come farmers will still make their morning journey singing under the moon and the stars.

Even so does youth vanish away,—even so does she desert the mortal life of man. The beautiful shadows, the phantoms of all, flee away; and in like manner equally disappear those far-off hopes on which poor human nature for a time depends. Life becomes desolate and dark. And the traveller on life's journey then vainly seeks to perceive either the object or the end of that long road which still remains to be travelled. And he sees that the sojourn of mankind will henceforth for ever appear a strange land to him and that he himself is there only a stranger.

You must read the first part of the description carefully in order to perceive the extraordinary and complex beauty of this melancholy imagery. The poet has likened the vigour and joy of youth to pure moonlight and life to a landscape. The high hills in the horizon represent hopes of happy things to come; the shadows and the glitter of light upon the waters, these are illusions—illusions of bliss, success, joy. When youth passes,—all the force of life passing with it,—then the world no longer seems so beautiful to the feeble man. He is like a traveller who has been travelling by moonlight, but who sees the moon set before he has half completed the journey.

It must have seemed to the powers on high that our miserable lot would be too blissful, too happy, if the time of youth—in which even the least happiness is only obtained at the cost of a thousand pains, should last during the whole period of life. Even the terrible law by which all living creatures are condemned to die would seem too gentle if the afterpart of life were not made for living

beings even much more dreadful than dreadful death itself. The immortals therefore imagined a supreme evil,—an imagination well worthy of eternal intelligences, and that imagination was old age—old age in which desire remains strong, though all hope be dead,—in which the sources of pleasure are all dried up,—and in which the pain becomes ever greater and still greater, though no happiness can ever come again.

You, O hills and shores,—after the passing of the light that silvers the veil of darkness from the West,—even after the passing of that moonlight, you do not long remain desolate, O hills and shores. Soon from the opposite side of the sky you again behold heaven illuminated,—you behold the dawn arise, and the great sun shooting his mighty beams in all directions, and irradiating with torrents of light all the ethereal fields. But human life, after the passing of beautiful youth, is never again coloured by any other light,—is never again made rosy by the glow of another dawn. Widowed for ever she remains. And there is not any end to the night that follows after except that end which the gods have set thereunto—the tomb.

Reading this poem you need not be at all shocked by the pessimism of it,—observe only the beauty of the comparisons. It is a sinister beauty; but it is certainly beauty. The pessimism of Leopardi is the most innocent kind of pessimism imaginable; it is only the result of his ill health and unhappiness; and he is not speaking for the rest of the world but only for himself. So that the feeling with which we read his poem ought to be one of great compassion and pity. Think of the sorrow of a young scholar, mentally superior to almost all the men of his time in knowledge of esthetic literature, but rendered an old man at the age of thirty, and full of knowledge that no matter what he did or what doctor comes to help him he must very soon die. Even this will not excuse the despair on the part of the man having duty to perform—duty to others: father, mother, younger brothers or sisters. But this poor lad had not even the consolation of duty to perform. Cruelly treated by his

parents and practically banished from their home, separated from all who were dear to him, altogether alone, refused the hope of marriage for excellent reasons: one would scarcely expect this genius to think well of the eternal order of things. But we should remember that only in his poetry did he venture to express his pain. Otherwise he lived and suffered in silence; and we must believe that many of his verses were written as a moral exercise against suffering.