THINGS ENGLISH AND JAPANESE: MORE OF THE UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF LAFCADIO HEARN: BY OSMAN EDWARDS

S MIGHT have been inferred from his devotion to the French Romantics, Lafcadio Hearn admired their greatest English disciple with similar enthusiasm and entered a similar protest against ungrateful decadence. Of Mr. Swinburne’s amplitude he wrote in ample praise:

“You have not yet, perhaps, fairly gauged the *envergure* of Swinburne: it takes time—for his genius is like ‘a land shadowing with wings.’ The greatest lyric poetry, the greatest trilogy of drama, the finest modern presentation in English literature of the Greek as well as of the Gothic spirit—even this is but a part of Swinburne. Surely he has the right to juggle with words occasionally—to make sounding skeletons of form that will teach new possibilities. I feel as if it were the duty of the broad thinker now to stand up for Swinburne—considering the real nature of the base reaction against him—the bigotry that dares the question ‘Is he a poet at all?’ Had he written only ‘Hertha’ he would still stand in the front line. Only Meredith has put thoughts like that into verse.

“I fancy that we are ungrateful to our greatest,—do not take the time to assure ourselves how great they are,—to convince ourselves that after a hundred readings the charm still grows, and will continue to grow from soul to soul forever. We are too much allured by the new—the charm of ‘the strange woman;’ and in ninety-nine cases out of one hundred the strange Muse does not deserve our worship.

... Surely a conservative movement in poetry must come—if only to prevent the desecration of the art of expression.”

One may infer from the transcription of a lecture on “Naked Poetry,” taken down in longhand by Mr. Teizaburo Inomata and printed in the appendix to Miss Bisland’s volume, that such talks on English literature had a higher value than the lecturer attached to them. Their fusion of ethical with literary comment would convey more of the spirit of an author than technical criticism of the form, necessarily unfamiliar to Tokyo students. It is to be hoped that Mr. T. Ochiai will give to the world more extracts from those “five manuscript volumes,” if only to confute the lecturer’s over-modest estimate of himself.

“—Ah! my lectures! No, they will never be printed. I could never become a critic. My talks to the students about the great poets
HEARN’S CRITICISM OF ENGLISH WRITERS

are the talks of a man without scholarship. I make the lectures appeal only to the emotional and intellectually-imaginative side of my pupils—I explain sentiments, make parallels with Buddhist philosophy and emotional philosophy. In fact I do everything which it is forbidden to do in a Western university—at least I so imagine. But the result, in the case of Japanese students, satisfies me: I excite their curiosity, prompt them to attempt translations, I have actually succeeded in making Rossetti popular with them, and in interesting them in Fitzgerald, Meredith, James Thompson, O’Shaughnessy, etc., as well as Swinburne in his Gothic phases. When I say this, you must understand me to mean only that I have evoked interest: the whole comprehension of such foreign poetry is out of the question. Were the lectures printed, everybody would laugh; but they were written out with a full comprehension of the difficulties to be overcome—and, at times, worded and illustrated as for children.”

Of the younger writers Kipling aroused his enthusiasm. He was angry with a criticaster, who had denied the possession of style to the author of “The Naulahka.” “Does he really think that Kipling has no style? Certainly his work shows immense care and control. But what do we mean by style?—I take style to be the personality, the character of the man, expressed in language—the individual difference made recognizable by choice of words and measure of sentences. Gosse is inclined to grant Kipling style. Let me suggest a reading of the passage from ‘The Naulahka,’ beginning ‘Listen, my sister.’ I think you will acknowledge style there. Still for a supplier and rarer quality I am fonder of Stevenson. Kipling’s greatness in poetry depends somewhat (although by no means altogether) on his recognition of the truth insisted upon by Emerson—that the language of the street is more forcible by far than the language of the academy. I believe the future princes of prose will be obliged to master both.”

Thus the weaver of beautiful words, himself a “prince of prose,” was less horrified than many fastidious purists by the auriferous slang of “The Absent-minded Beggar.” Though his sympathies were wholly with the Boers, he was touched by the Imperialist Tyrtaeus and expressed no grudging appreciation:—

“By this last mail I received from you the (to me precious) copy of Kipling’s ripping and ringing appeal. It is impossible not to feel stirred quite as much by the warm vigorous humanism of the thing, as by the glorious lilt and rhythm of the verses. Indeed Kipling seems to be directly inspired in most of what he sings by the very Lord and
HEARN’S CRITICISM OF ENGLISH WRITERS

Giver of Life—though I thought that there was something of an insincere tone in that poem about Paul Kruger in the ‘Old King.’

“My father, Charles Bush Hearn, was Surgeon-Major of the Seventy-sixth Regiment (now Second Battalion West Riding, I think); and I remember that when I was a child, our house used to be peopled at times with young men in scarlet and gold. With me the love of the English army is perhaps hereditary: I could not fail to sympathise with Kipling’s splendid call for help. Yet—for me for saying it—I could not but regret at the same time that the poor brave Boers have no bard to speak for them; and I should like to see the same humanism extended to the other side—à nos amis les ennemis.”

It was very natural that on general as well as particular grounds Hearn’s hereditary love of the army was far outweighed by other sentiments, which the Boer war called into play. While he felt deeply, he also reasoned soundly, and none who accept his premises could question the justice or the sincerity of his conclusions.

“As for the Boer war-episode,” he wrote, “alas! Kipling, whom I reverenced, and Swinburne, advocate of human freedom (!) have both sinned against justice in my poor opinion. Yes, as you say, the Boer system of society was ‘behind the age;’ but is that a reason why they should not be allowed to keep their country and customs to themselves, and to resist outside pressure that threatens the destruction, in short order, of their patriarchal contentment and simplicity? I confess that to me the introduction of Western civilization into Japan seems a horrible injustice; and the spectacle of an older and, in some respects, more moral system—full of delicacy and strange beauty—being deformed and destroyed by our industrial exactions, is not pretty! There are men who have the courage to state plainly that might is right, and in the cosmic order of things I suppose that it is. But I have the emotional bias. It does not seem to me quite certain that because our civilization of applied science has the effect of increasing, by forced effort, the cubic capacity of the brain, and the meshes of the nervous plexus—of obliging a race to become more powerful—it should not be resisted on just grounds. As for the ordinary moral question of right and wrong, I feel quite sure that we are hideously wrong. But the stars in their courses move against the weak.”

Replying to some pleas in extenuation of British policy, he thus arraigned it:

“I have no doubt about the condition of English subjects under
HEARN’S CRITICISM OF ENGLISH WRITERS

Boer jurisdiction being unpleasant. But my position would be that English subjects had no business in the Transvaal—no right to go there unless willing to submit to those hard conditions. It strikes me that English subjects in Russia would have to bear Russian law; and that their dislike of that law would not be a sound political or moral reason for declaring war against Russia. It would cost too much. England was ready to strike at the Transvaal, because she felt tolerably sure of winning. I cannot convince myself that she had any right to dictate there—except the right of might. However, governments are never moral. The Boer Republics are in the way of the expansion of the race in Africa—in the way of that grand dream, ‘by rail from Alexandria to Capetown.’ So I suppose they must go under. But I cannot help thinking with Herbert Spencer that we are going to lose our liberties for the very same reasons that impel us to attack the liberties of weaker peoples. Even the excuses of such leading papers as the Spectator for the war seem to me poignant proof that the war is felt to be wrong by the English conscience. We argue beautifully when we feel our consciences pricked: so does the Spectator. If the Boers had turned all Englishmen out of their territory, and confiscated English property there, I should still think the war morally wrong—unless all other means of obtaining compensation for the property had been exhausted.

“The great moral question to me, in this whole matter, appears to be the question of individual right. To enter another man’s house unbidden, and then attack the proprietor because he refuses to treat you like a member of his own family, is not exactly a moral assertion of individual right. That is what we have been doing.”

For the third and last time he thus emphasized his disapproval of the war:

“ —We need not waste our ink in arguing over the right and wrong of the Boer war. Of course I know how you feel about the moral justification: if you could not feel so, you would be unhappy. I am speaking of the matter again only because I would rather not leave you under the impression that I spoke from mere sentiment without knowledge. I knew of the former desire of the Transvaal for annexation; but it strikes me that the subsequent development of the mines had a good deal to do with the Government policy as represented by Chamberlain. Very possibly, and probably, I should detest the Boers if I had to live with them as an alien; but I am of unshaken opinion that Björnstjerne Björnson’s denunciation of English injustice in this war fairly represents the feelings of many who are competent to esti-
mate the ethics of the situation. I imagine that national opinion in such matters must nearly always be wrong. And, really, the morality of politics is, and must for thousands of years continue to be, the ethics of Nietzsche. That system has the merit of being in accordance with the movements of the cosmos: the stars in their courses uphold it.

"Here I, too, have been looking at scenes of the Boer war—shadowed by the kinematograph. The representation was managed so as to create only sympathy for the Boers; and I acknowledge that it made my heart jump several times. The Boer girls and wives were displayed as shooting and being shot. What you would have enjoyed were the little discourses in Japanese, uttered between each exhibition. They were simple, and appealed to Japanese sympathy—to the sense of patriotism, and the duty of dying to the last man, woman and child for one's country."

Political digression was a rare feature in Hearn's letters. English style and Japanese life were his main subjects. His ideal of style was thus defined in a generous mixture of compliment and advice to the present writer on receipt of a dedicated copy of "Japanese Plays and Playfellows."

"May I not attempt literary advice?—though a man of much less culture than yourself, I am nearly twice as old, you know; and I imagine that it is the duty of a literary friend to state where he thinks his comrade's strength lies. I don't think that you need to aim at compression or exactitude; your natural bent is in those directions sufficiently. But I think that you might well devote your aim to the splendid art of combining impersonality—realistic impersonality—with tenderness. There are signs of power in these pages of yours. And, secondly, I should strongly advise you to cultivate the fertile, delicious art of finishing a study (as you have finished not a few in this book) with a touch that leaves the mind a-thrill after the reading, and relights all that went before, like a searchlight flash."

The phrase "impersonality with tenderness" happily describes a frequent note in the writings of its inventor, who in another passage wrote:—

"Perhaps the perfect form of realism—as in the old Norse writers, and in de Maupassant—is the grandest of all prose. The awful perfection of the thing is the total absence of all personal feeling, especially sympathy. So demons or gods might write, 'with neither hate nor haste nor pity.' But when I spoke to you about a possible style
HEARN’S CRITICISM OF ENGLISH WRITERS

at once impersonal and tender, I was thinking particularly of Anatole France, and of such compositions as the ‘Tragédie Humaine!’ or the various little things in the ‘Etui de Nacre.’ How mocking and how charming at the same time!—something like the spirit of Heine in prose. And in France you never feel the real man: you are quite sure that the writer does not care one ten-thousandth part of a centime whether you or the priests or the mockers or the public of England or the public of Europe will be pleased or displeased. He only cares to express the truth and the beauty that is in him. Our English writers nearly always show that they feel the eyes and fear the tongues of their audience.”

Very probably this reproach would not have been leveled at Browning and Meredith, whose sins against style are thus summarized: “As for Browning and Meredith, I regard the bulk of the work of both as doomed to vanish because of its obscurity. I revere Browning—even though obscure. I have been lecturing upon him. I revere Meredith still more; and I have lectured upon him as the greatest philosophic poet of the nineteenth century—for is he not the only one who has embodied a complete ethical conception of the evolutional philosophy in poetry? But how much greater would both poets have been if they had written as clearly as Rossetti or Tennyson?

“There was a party of French artists who made what they called coffee-pictures—a wonderful album. Every one of these artists emptied the dregs of his coffee upon a sheet of soft paper, after dinner; and according to the suggestions of the shapes of the stains, pictures were inspired. I think that the obscurities of Browning and of Meredith are like those coffee-stains for the mystic-minded. They suggest pictures ineffable; but these are developed only according to the imaginative and artistic capacity of the reader.”

Many will appreciate the force of this criticism without sharing in any way the apprehensions of a coming tyranny, to which martyred stylists must succumb. Possibly distance and prejudice raised mountains from journalistic molehills:

“Now in literature today there is a strong English tendency to attack personal liberty. It has been declared immoral to write good English, to cultivate a style, to produce a single page of superior prose. Witness the utterance of these opinions in the Westminster Review (!) What does this mean but a wish to prevent any superior individuality from making mediocrity suffer by competition? What is this but the red democracy of letters denying to the literary aristocracy its right to exist? Stylists are necessarily indecent or untrustworthy scoundrels,
HEARN'S CRITICISM OF ENGLISH WRITERS

—this is a statement on a par with ‘aristocrats to the lantern!’ (I read such a statement with surprise in Literature the other day.) And the beauty of the statement is its retrospective force. For if it be true in this moment, equally must it be true of the whole past; and all men who have ever cultivated style must have been damned rascals—including Doctor Johnson, Bishop Berkeley, Sir Thomas Browne, etc.

“I imagine that all these things are signs of the coming of the time predicted by Spencer when no intellectual work will become possible for the ordinary person,—‘when no man will be allowed to do as he is bid, and when every man must do what he is told.’”

THE slowness of the English reading public to appreciate his work was probably a source of regret and certainly helped to foster in Hearn, always supersensitive, the delusion that his fame was retarded by malicious criticism. The proposal to dedicate my little volume of Japanese studies to him produced a striking example of this unwarranted belief.

“I have delayed till the last to speak about your kind proposal to dedicate a book to me. I should not adequately express myself by saying that I should be grateful and proud. But—and the ‘but’ is to think about—would it be a wise literary move for you? I do not think that it would. You are about to publish a first book; and the writer who publicly expresses good-will for your humble servant just now is likely to get ‘pitched into’—by the Athenæum, for example. I think that it would be more prudent for you to dedicate the book to a more imposing person, to somebody better situated in literary opinion. Having warned you of the possible consequences, however, I will only say now, do not think yourself under any promise in the matter; and be sure that whether dedicated to me or not, I shall read the book with delight and always be grateful for the kind suggestion.”

Unfortunately for the impassioned lover and inspired interpreter of old Japan, the converse of all that attracted him in the past repelled him from the present. Referring to an illustrated brochure of “Residential Rhymes,” which, after hitting off the merchant, the missionary, and the globe-trotter, pictured him as “The Professor in Nirvana,” awaiting his apotheosis in the attitude of the Buddha of a well-known kakemono, he declared:—

“The Professor in Nirvana” rather pleased me. As for the sentiments there to me attributed, concerning the old Japan, they are quite in conformity with the truth. It is the old Japan that I love—not by
any means the new, and I am happy only when I can get out of sight of the reforms and the changes."

This explicit declaration is the key to his relations with Japanese officialdom. Through his wife and a few pupils he had access to the intimacies and courtesies, the customs and legends and superstitions of the past, which made his happiness; but the necessities of his livelihood brought him into contact with a colder world of polite, critical, practical persons, whose habits of mind jarred at every point on his more wayward and emotional spirit. Writing on behalf of a Western friend, whom he considered to have been harshly treated by Oriental employers, he said bitterly: "Japanese officialdom is not lovable—and it is Oriental when unpleasant. It does not say 'Here! if you don't like things, get out! here's your salary.' On the contrary, it suddenly becomes coaxing, caressing, infinitely sweet, and invites you out for multitudinous insult. Then you are suddenly surrounded by smiling combinations unimagined and unimaginable and softly struck in a hundred ways. A knockdown blow is nothing to it. . . . I pity a man of letters in the Government service in Tokyo! Lasciate ogni speranza, etc."

In the last letter (written in July, nineteen hundred and one) occurs a striking instance of the love and loathing aroused in him by his adopted country. It illustrates with greater freedom than he usually permitted himself both the weaknesses and virtues of his peculiar position.

"—You will really return to Japan? How glad I shall be to have a chat with you some day. You say that you respect my opinion about Japan: therefore I am going to offer advice—for I might not be here to tell you by word of mouth.

"First. Who of us has not wished to be able to live for one day in the Greece of Pericles, or in the Rome of Caesar? But the man of culture who enters Japan has really an infinitely more wonderful experience than the realization of either dream would be. For he passes out of the nineteenth century, or twentieth century—not into a time of two thousand years before, but into a society incomparably older,—an antique world of which the social foundation is fully ten thousand years old. It is as if one passed into the life of the oldest Egypt, or the earliest Babylonia. Hence the strangeness of things—the queer shock they give. And the exterior strangeness is but the faint index of a profound psychological strangeness. Don't, for goodness sake, believe the stuff of the blind pedants and bigots who assert that the
Japanese are a materialistic people, indifferent to religion. No more wicked and foolish lie was ever uttered. They are the most profoundly religious race possible to imagine—a people whose every action and thought and word is governed by religious sentiment or tradition. They are religious as the old Egyptians or Arcadians, perhaps even more so. Try to think of them that way, and think of the extraordinary privilege of entering into so strange a life—even for twenty-four hours. Trust your eyes and ears and heart, not the pedants, the dullards, the missionaries, the intriguers in Government service.

"Second. Don’t visit ‘converts’: by doing so you pollute yourself in the eyes of this archaic people. You may visit a native Eta village, and be forgiven. But to visit converts to Christianity is bad—because no Japanese beyond the age of reason can become a convert unless he be a scoundrel, a hypocrite, or a miserable wretch without sentiment of any sort.

"What would you think of a man whom you saw spitting upon a crucifix in order to prove himself a freethinker? Or what would you think of a man whom you saw mutilating and befouling photographs of his father and mother? Now a convert to Christianity must do what is incomparably worse than either of the actions above imagined: he must cart away or destroy the ancestral tablets,—which are much more than images or likenesses of the dead, being supposed to represent their presence in the home. Foreigners who know nothing of Japanese life know, nevertheless, that Japanese converts are almost all fools or scamps. It is a rule of business in Kobe, Yokohama, and Nagasaki, never to employ a Christian. That is the sound rule, and exceptions don’t signify. Other things I should like to say, but they can be discussed later. The two points I dwell upon are, I think, very important."

One need not be a lover of missionaries to question the fairness of such a sweeping indictment. But it is well to have a prejudice stated clearly and forcibly, for every prejudice contains some grains of truth. It is refreshing at least, among the halting and time-serving apologies for Japanese faults, which alternate with exaggerated eulogies of their good qualities in the pages of most writers on Japan, to encounter one critic whose feelings are sincere and whose mind is made up. Criticism in Hearn was always colored by emotional bias: but much may be forgiven to one who, loving much, out of his love and suffering built such enduring sanctuaries of graceful and grateful art.