

**On the Character of  
Mrs. Hemans's Writings**  
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## ON THE

## CHARACTER OF MRS. HEMANS'S WRITINGS.

“Oh! mes amis, rappelez-vous quelquefois mes vers ; mon ame y est empreinte.” “Mon ame y est empreinte.” Such is the secret of poetry. There cannot be a greater error than to suppose that the poet does not feel what he writes. What an extraordinary, I might say, impossible view, is this to take of an art more connected with emotion than any of its sister sciences. What—the depths of the heart are to be sounded, its mysteries unveiled, and its beatings numbered by those whose own heart is made by this strange doctrine—a mere machine wound up by the clock-work of rhythm! No ; poetry is even more a passion than a power, and nothing is so strongly impressed on composition as the character of the writer. I should almost define poetry to be the necessity of feeling strongly in the first instance, and the as strong necessity of confiding in the second.

It is curious to observe the intimate relation that subsists between the poet and the public. “Distance lends enchantment to the view,” and those who would shrink from avowing what and how much they feel to even the most trusted friend, yet rely upon and crave for the sympathy of the many. The belief that it exists in the far off and the unknown is inherent as love or death. Under what pressure of the most discouraging circumstances has it existed, given enjoyment, and stimulated to exertion. The ill-fated and yet gifted being, steeped to the lips in poverty—that bitterest closer of the human heart—surrounded by the cold and the careless—shrinking from his immediate circle, who neglect and misunderstand him, has yet faith in the far away. Suffering discourses eloquent music, and it believes that such music will find an echo and reply where the music only is known, and the maker loved for its sake.

Fame, which the Greeks idealized so nobly, is but the fulfilment of that desire for sympathy which can never be brought home to the individual. It is the essence of such a nature to ask too much. It expects to be divined where it is too shy to express. Praise—actual personal praise—oftener frets and embarrasses than it encourages. It is too small when too near. There is also the fear of mistaking the false Florimel flattery for the true Florimel praise. Hence Hope takes the wings of the morning, and seeks an atmosphere, warm, kindly, and congenial, and where it is not ashamed. Without such timidity, without such irritability, without a proneness to exaggeration, the poetical temperament could not exist. Nor is its reliance on distance and on solitude in vain. We talk, and can never be sure but that our hearers listen as much from kindness as from interest. Their mood may or may not be in unison with our own. If this be the case even in ordinary intercourse, how much more must it be felt where the most shrinking, subtle, and sorrowful ideas are to be expressed. But the poet relies on having his written page opened when the spirit is attuned to its melody. He asks to be read in the long summer-mornings, when the green is golden on the trees, when the bird sings on the boughs, and the insect

in the grass; and yet when the weight of the past presses heavily upon the present, when—

“memory makes the sky  
Seem all too joyous for the shrinking eye.”

In such a mood the voice of passionate complaining is both understood and welcome. There is a well of melancholy poetry in every human bosom. We have all mourned over the destroyed illusion and the betrayed hope. We have quarrelled in some embittered moment with an early friend, and when too late lamented the estrangement. We have all stood beside the grave, and asked of the long grass and ever-springing wild flowers why they should have life, while that of the beloved has long since gone down to the dust. How many have

“laid their youth as in a burial urn,  
Where sunshine may not find it.”

I remember to have read of an Hanoverian chorister, who, having lost by an early death the young village girl to whom he was betrothed, rudely carved upon her tomb a rose-bud broken on its stem, with the words beneath, “*C'est ainsi qu'elle fût.*” This might be emblem and inscription for all the loveliest emotions of the soul. While such recollections remain garnered, poetry will always have its own appointed hour. Its haunted words will be to us even as our own. Solitude and sorrow reveal to us its secrets, even as they first revealed themselves to those

“Who learnt in suffering what they taught in song.”

I believe that no poet ever made his readers feel unless he had himself felt. The many touching poems which most memories keep as favourites originated in some strong personal sensation. I do not mean to say that the fact is set down, but if any feeling is marked in the writing, that feeling has been keenly and painfully experienced. No indication of its existence would probably be shown in ordinary life: first, because the relief of expression has already been found in poetry, and secondly, from that extreme sensitiveness which shrinks from contact with the actual. Moreover, the habit has so grown up with us,—so grown with our growth, and strengthened with our strength, that we scarcely know the extraordinary system of dissimulation carried on in our present state of society.

In childhood, the impetus of conversation is curiosity. The child talks to ask questions. But one of its first lessons, as it advances, is that a question is an intrusion, and an answer a deceit. Ridicule parts social life like an invisible paling; and we are all of us afraid of the other. To this may be in great measure attributed the difference that exists between an author's writings and his conversation. The one is often sad and thoughtful, while the other is lively and careless. The fact is, that the real character is shown in the first instance, and the assumed in the second. Besides the impulses of an imaginative temperament are eager and easily excited, and gaiety has its impulses as well as despondency, but it is less shy of showing them. Only those in the habit of seclusion, occupied with their own thoughts, can know what a relief it is sometimes to spring, as it were, out of themselves. The fertile wit, the sunny vivacity, belong to a nature which must be what the French so happily term *impressionable* to be poetical. The writer of

a recent memoir of Mrs. Hemans deems it necessary almost to apologize for her occasional fits of buoyant spirits :—

“ Oh, gentle friend,  
Blame not her mirth who was sad yesterday,  
And may be sad to-morrow.”

The most intense sunshine casts the deepest shadow. Such mirth does not disprove the melancholy which belonged to Mrs. Hemans's character. She herself alludes to the times when

“ Sudden glee  
Bears my quick heart along  
On wings that struggle to be free  
As bursts of skylark song.”

Society might make her say—

“ Thou canst not wake the spirit  
That in me slumbering lies,  
Thou strikest not forth the electric fire  
Of buried melodies.”

But it might very well strike the sparkles from the surface.

I have said that the writer's character is in his writings: Mrs. Hemans's is strongly impressed upon hers. The sensitiveness of the poet is deepened by the tenderness of the woman. You see the original glad, frank, and eager nature

“ Blest, for the beautiful is in it dwelling.”

Soon feeling that the weight of this world is too heavy upon it—

“ The shadow of departed hours  
Hangs dim upon its early flowers.”

Soon, too, does she feel that

“ A mournful lot is mine, dear friends,  
A mournful lot is mine.”

The fate of the pearl-diver is even as her own :—

“ A sad and weary life is thine,  
A wasting task and lone,  
Though treasure-grots for thee may shine  
To all beside unknown.

Woe for the wealth thus dearly bought !  
And are not those like thee  
Who win for earth the gems of thought,  
Oh wrestler with the sea ?

But oh ! the price of bitter tears  
Paid for the lonely power,  
That throws at last o'er desert years  
A darkly-glorious dower.

And who will think, when the strain is sung,  
Till a thousand hearts are stirr'd,  
What life-drops from the minstrel wrung  
Have gush'd at every word.”

Imagine a girl, lovely and gifted as Mrs. Hemans was, beginning life,—conscious, for genius must be conscious of itself,—full of hope and of belief;—gradually the hope darkens into fear, and the belief into doubt; one illusion perishes after another, “ and love grown too sorrowful,”



" I have been  
Too much alone."

With the same sympathy does she stand beside the grave of the author of "Psyche"—

" And mournful grew my heart for thee—  
Thou in whose woman's mind  
The ray that brightens earth and sea,  
The light of song was shrined."  
" Thou hast left sorrow in thy song,  
A voice not loud but deep!  
The glorious bowers of earth among  
How often didst thou weep !"

Did we not know this world to be but a place of trial—our bitter probation for another and for a better—how strange in its severity would seem the lot of genius in a woman. The keen feeling—the generous enthusiasm—the lofty aspiration—and the delicate perception—are given but to make the possessor unfitted for her actual position. It is well ; such gifts, in their very contrast to the selfishness and the evil with which they are surrounded, inform us of another world—they breathe of their home, which is Heaven ; the spiritual and the inspired in this life but fit us to believe in that which is to come. With what a sublime faith is this divine reliance expressed in all Mrs. Hemans's later writings. As the clouds towards nightfall melt away on a fine summer evening into the clear amber of the west, leaving a soft and unbroken azure whereon the stars may shine through ; so the troubles of life, its vain regrets and vainer desires, vanished before the calm close of existence—the hopes of Heaven rose steadfast at last—the light shone from the windows of her home as she approached unto it.

" No tears for thee, though light be from us gone  
With thy soul's radiance, bright and restless one—  
No tears for thee.  
They that have loved an exile must not mourn  
To see him parting for his native hour,  
O'er the dark sea."

We have noticed this yearning for affection—unsatisfied, but still unsubdued—as one characteristic of Mrs. Hemans's poetry : the rich picturesque was another. Highly accomplished, the varied stores that she possessed were all subservient to one master science. Mistress both of German and Spanish, the latter country appears to have peculiarly captivated her imagination. At that period when the fancy is peculiarly alive to impression—when girlhood is so new, that the eagerness of childhood is still in its delights—Spain was, of all others, the country on which public attention was fixed : victory after victory carried the British flag from the ocean to the Pyrenees ; but, with that craving for the ideal which is so great a feature in her writings, the present was insufficient, and she went back upon the past ;—the romantic history of the Moors was like a storehouse, with treasures gorgeous like those of its own Alhambra.

It is observable in her minor poems that they turn upon an incident rather than a feeling. Feelings, true and deep, are developed ; but one single emotion is never the original subject. Some graceful or touching anecdote or situation catches her attention, and its poetry is developed in a strain of mourning melody, and a vein of gentle moralizing. I

always wish, in reading my favourite poets, to know what first suggested my favourite poems. Few things would be more interesting than to know under what circumstances they were composed,—how much of individual sentiment there was in each, or how, on some incident seemingly even opposed, they had contrived to ingraft their own associations. What a history of the heart would such annals reveal! Every poem is in itself an impulse.

Besides the ideal and the picturesque, Mrs. Hemans is distinguished by her harmony. I use the word harmony advisedly, in contradistinction to melody. Melody implies something more careless, more simple, than belongs to her style: it is song by snatches; our English ballads are remarkable for it. To quote an instance or two. There is a verse in that of "Yarrow Water:"—

" O wind that wandereth from the south,  
Seek where my love repaireth,  
And blow a kiss to his dear mouth,  
And tell me how he fareth."

Nothing can exceed the tender sweetness of these lines; but there is no skill. Again, in "Faire Rosamonde," the verse that describes the cruelty of Eleanor,—

" With that she struck her on the mouth,  
So dyed double red;  
Hard was the heart that gave the blow,  
Soft were the lips that bled."

How musical is the alliteration; but it is music which, like that of the singing brook, has sprung up of itself. Now, Mrs. Hemans has the most perfect skill in her science; nothing can be more polished than her versification. Every poem is like a piece of music, with its eloquent pauses, its rich combinations, and its swelling chords. Who that has ever heard can forget the exquisite flow of "The Voice of Spring?"—

" I come! I come!—ye have call'd me long;  
I come o'er the mountains with light and song!  
Ye may trace my step o'er the waking earth,  
By the winds that tell of the violet's birth,  
By the primrose stars in the shadowy grass,  
By the green leaves opening as I pass."

It is like the finest order of Italian singing—pure, high, and scientific.

I can never sufficiently regret that it was not my good fortune to know Mrs. Hemans personally; it was an honour I should have estimated so highly—a happiness that I should have enjoyed so keenly. I never even met with an acquaintance of hers but once; that once, however, was much. I knew Miss Jewsbury, the late lamented Mrs. Fletcher. She delighted in speaking of Mrs. Hemans: she spoke of her with the appreciation of one fine mind comprehending another, and with the earnest affection of a woman and a friend. She described her conversation as singularly fascinating—full of poetry, very felicitous in illustration by anecdote, happy, too, in quotation, and very rich in imagery; "in short, her own poem on 'The Treasures of the Deep' would best describe it." She mentioned a very striking simile to which a conversation on Mrs. Hemans's own poem of "The Sceptic\*" had led:—

\* The Sceptic. Murray.

“ Like Sindbad, the sailor, we are often shipwrecked on a strange shore. We despair; but hope comes when least expected. We pass through the gloomy caverns of doubt into the free air and blessed sunshine of conviction and belief.” I asked her if she thought Mrs. Hemans a happy person; and she said, “ No; her enjoyment is feverish, and she desponds. She is like a lamp whose oil is consumed by the very light which it yields.” What a cruel thing is the weakness of memory! How little can its utmost efforts recall of conversation that was once an instruction and a delight!

To the three characteristics of Mrs. Hemans's poetry which have already been mentioned—viz., the ideal, the picturesque, and the harmonious—a fourth must be added,—the moral. Nothing can be more pure, more feminine and exalted, than the spirit which pervades the whole: it is the intuitive sense of right, elevated and strengthened into a principle. It is a glorious and a beautiful memory to bequeath; but she who left it is little to be envied. Open the volumes which she has left, legacies from many various hours, and what a record of wasted feelings and disappointed hopes may be traced in their sad and sweet complainings! Yet Mrs. Hemans was spared some of the keenest mortifications of a literary career. She knew nothing of it as a profession which has to make its way through poverty, neglect, and obstacles: she lived apart in a small, affectionate circle of friends. The high road of life, with its crowds and contention—its heat, its noise, and its dust that rests on all—was for her happily at a distance; yet even in such green nest, the bird could not fold its wings, and sleep to its own music. There came the aspiring, the unrest, the aching sense of being misunderstood, the consciousness that those a thousand times inferior were yet more beloved. Genius places a woman in an unnatural position; notoriety frightens away affection; and superiority has for its attendant fear, not love. Its pleasantest emotions are too vivid to be lasting: hope may sometimes,

“ Raising its bright face,  
With a free gush of sunny tears, erase  
The characters of anguish;”

but, like the azure glimpses between thunder-showers, the clouds gather more darkly around for the passing sunshine. The heart sinks back on its solitary desolation. In every page of Mrs. Hemans's writings is this sentiment impressed; what is the conclusion of “ Corinne crowned at the Capitol?”

“ Radiant daughter of the sun!  
Now thy living wreath is won.  
Crown'd of Rome! Oh, art thou not  
Happy in that glorious lot?  
Happier, happier far than thou  
With the laurel on thy brow,  
She that makes the humblest hearth  
Lovely but to one on earth.”

What is poetry, and what is a poetical career? The first is to have an organization of extreme sensibility, which the second exposes bare-headed to the rudest weather. The original impulse is irresistible—all professions are engrossing when once began; and acting with perpetual stimulus, nothing takes more complete possession of its follower than



literature. But never can success repay its cost. The work appears—it lives in the light of popular applause; but truly might the writer exclaim—

“It is my youth—it is my bloom—it is my glad free heart  
I cast away for thee—for thee—ill fated as thou art.”

If this be true even of one sex, how much more true of the other. Ah! Fame to a woman is indeed but a royal mourning in purple for happiness.

NOTE.—I have alluded to Miss Jewsbury (Mrs. Fletcher); and cannot resist a brief recollection of one who was equally amiable and accomplished. I never met with any woman who possessed her powers of conversation. If her language had a fault, it was its extreme perfection. It was like reading an eloquent book—full of thought and poetry. She died too soon; and what noble aspirings, what generous enthusiasm, what kindly emotions went down to the grave with her unfulfilled destiny. There is no word that will so thoroughly describe her as “high-minded;” she was such in every sense of the word. There was no envy, no bitterness about her; and it must be a lofty nature that delights in admiration. Greatly impressed as I was with her powers, it surprised me to note how much she desponded over them.

“Day by day,  
Gliding, like some dark mournful stream away,  
My silent youth flows from me.”

Alas! it was the shadow of the early grave that rested upon her. Her letters were very brilliant, and I believe her correspondence was extensive; what a pity that they should not be collected. Speaking of Wordsworth she said, “There is about him a grand and noble plainness, a dignified simplicity—a something of high ideal Paganism, that I never saw in any one else. He is not so much a rock covered with flowers, as a rock crowned with a castle. He is a dweller on the heights—he would have made a friend for Phocion. He reminds me of the Druidical oaks, strong and sacred.” Again, while discussing the intercourse of society,—“You consider society something like a honeycomb—sweet, but hollow; so do I. But you seemed also to consider it expedient for every one by right or courtesy termed ‘distinguished’ to play truant—laying aside all habits of thought or feeling by which such distinction had been acquired. As if the earnestness of genius were less endurable than the heartlessness of the world; nay, as if the polished chain-mail of the latter were the only garb fit to be worn by the former. Personally speaking, I should be sorry to go into public with any other disposition than one anxious to give and willing to receive pleasure. Very high or very deep conversation, anything like communion of heart, would be out of place; but I do not see that we are called upon to pay so costly a compliment to society, as to assume a character diametrically opposed to our real world; to utter sentiments we secretly disbelieve—to be as angry with our better nature for their bursting from restraint, as at other times with our inferior nature for refusing submission. I think that wisdom may wear ‘motley,’ and truth, unlike man, be born laughing; and that until we go into society thus determined to seek for more than mere amusement in pleasure, we must not be surprised to find ourselves

living in Thalaba's palace of the desert—a creation of clouds. Genius ought everywhere to be true to itself—to its origin, the divine mind—to its home, the undying spirit—to its power, that of being a blessing—to its reward, that of being remembered. If genius be not true to itself, if in reckless sport it flings around the flowers and tendrils, how are we ever to look for a fruitage time?"

I need not dwell on the eloquence and beauty of such passages, and her letters were filled with them. Mrs. Fletcher went to India, full of hope and belief—she thought she might do much good. These anticipations were fated to disappointment. The tomb has closed upon her warm and kindly heart. Better it should be thus.

“Where couldst thou fix on mortal ground  
Thy tender thoughts and high?  
Now peace the woman's heart hath found,  
And joy the poet's eye\*.”

L. E. L.

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\* It is almost needless to say, that all the poetical quotations are from Mrs. Hemans's own writings.

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