

Maxwell warts

A HOUSEWIFE'S  
OPINIONS.

BY

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## *POETS AND PERSONAL PRONOUNS.*

THERE is no objection against the use of human lay figures by the novelist which does not equally apply to their use by the poet; and, from the solely artistic point of view, the objections in the case of the poet are yet stronger than in the case of the novelist. We ask from the novelist a definiteness and possibility for each personage, a suitability of conduct, language, and sentiment, to the epoch and theatre of events chosen, which shall make the story read as true: but we ask of the poet that his personages shall not be sharply definite, shall not even in drama be definite with the minute definiteness of the novel, while it shall seem impossible for them not to be, or to be other than they are; and we ask a suitability not so much to a given epoch and theatre as to always and everywhere, no matter under what disguise of date and story. The poet has therefore yet greater need than the novelist of that full conception of the character he is treating which can only come from creation. He need not, of course, create in the sense that the personage or the events he is interpreting shall not have pre-existed in fact or fiction; on the contrary, the highest powers of creative imagination have usually found their fittest exercise in intensified pourtrayal of the men and women and events of history or of legends and tales. It seems as if the resistance, so to speak, offered to the plastic despotism of the artist by characteristics accepted, not made, called forth a subtler

and a stronger skill than if he had worked with the limitlessness of free invention. The poet creates as the sculptor does; he need not make the stone as well as the statue. His function is not, like the novelist's, to devise new stories, but to make old stories new. But the men and women he portrays must have been born again in his brain; they must be his by creation, not by copying. It will not answer, if he wants to poetise the mood of a good man conscious of temptation, to take the clergyman of his parish and try to imagine what he would feel if he could be in such a position; nor will it be inspiring, artistically speaking, if he needs a villain triumphant, to select his most hostile reviewer to sit for a likeness. For even supposing that he really could look into an individual heart as the oculist, by the proper arrangement of lens and light, can look into an individual eye, and that, being thus enabled to map out an *absolutely* true copy of the man, he could, by virtue of the poetic instinct of fitness, provide it with exactly and only such accessory incidents and surroundings as should keep it *relatively* true to nature, the successful result would be no poet's success. Nobody wants the poet so to draw characters that each shall seem the presentment of some special person known in the flesh; that is an aim to be left to the novelist—the nature of whose art and materials renders him fifty-fold more competent to fulfil it. We look to the poet for feelings, thoughts, actions if need be, represented in a way which shall affect us as the manifest expression of what our very selves must have felt and thought and done if we had been those he puts before us and in their cases. He must make us feel this not only of what we ourselves, being ourselves, could come to think and feel and do in like circumstances, but of what no circumstances could possibly call out in us. One may be hopelessly incapacitated by a limp and considerate mental temperament from ever becoming a murderer even in a moment's thought, and for the matter of that so may the poet, but if the poet describes the sensations of an intending murderer he has to make one feel that he has found out just what one's sensations

would be if one could have been capable of thinking about committing murder. Or one may be impermeable to any more ecstatic love than goes to make a matrimonial choice in a comfortable way, but the poet describing the passion of love must make one feel that one knows it all for a fact, that those are just one's own sentiments—or at least what one's own sentiments would be if one were of the sort to fall in love. Not many have it in us to be Iagos, but we feel sure that, if we were to be an Iago, we should be *that* Iago.

And yet, with the very nature of the poet's delineation to show that he cannot effect it in reference to individual models, it is the poet especially whom the general public are wont to assume to have filled his canvases with direct studies from living lay figures. People will not understand that he embodies his conception, say, of modesty and girlhood, in some fair girl-shape of his imagination, without measuring to the pattern of somebody he knows who is a girl and is modest; or his conception of martial valour in a soldier whose personality grew in his own brain, instead of setting down the results of his contemplations of some distinguished officer of his acquaintance. He writes a poem about an unnatural grandmother; people guess which of his two grandmothers it was who endeavoured to poison him in his youth and left him with such an unpleasant feeling about it; and, if it is quite certain that he never had a grandmother, then the question is which of the grandmothers of his confidential friends he has had for heroine. Points of personal description are seized on in the most ludicrous way for identifying purposes: must not Lady Blanche Dove be the "fair fierce fiend" and the "passionate Upas blight" of Mr. Bayleaf's poem "The Golden-haired Witch;" for has she not golden hair and is she not fair, and, though she does not strike ordinary observers as ferocious or passionate or anything but a very meek well-behaved young lady, yet was she not believed to have, in her quiet way, let Mr. Bayleaf pay her a good deal of attention before he engaged himself to the lady with dark hair he is going to marry?

And whom can Mr. Bayleaf mean in his poem of "The False Lover's Return" by the hero with "low pale brow" and "strong and eager gait," but his friend Captain Steadyman who has got a low forehead and does usually walk fast, and who, having been to India, did return, and who, being good-looking and in the army, might very likely have flirted with Mr. Bayleaf's sister or some other lady Mr. Bayleaf knew? It would be interesting to know how many young ladies were, on the strength of the least little aquiline curve in their delicate noses and the having been more or less frequently in the same room with the laureate, or somewhere where he could if he pleased perceive their noses, declared with absoluteness "the Original of Tennyson's Maud." The present writer was favoured with the sight of one, and heard of five or six; others were understood to be plentiful. Nothing seems more likely.

But more especially still is the poet believed to be his own lay figure. He is taken as offering his readers the presentment of himself, his hopes, his loves, his sorrows, his guilts and remorse, his history and psychology generally. Some people so thoroughly believe this to be the proper view of the poet's position towards the public that they will despise a man as a hypocrite because, after having written and printed, "I am the bridegroom of Despair," or "No wine but the wine of death for me," or some such unsociable sentiment, he goes out to dinners and behaves like anybody else. One even hears it adduced as a fault in the moral character of poets generally that they do not feel all they write—meaning that they do not feel it in their own persons, part of their own experience. It is heartily to be hoped of most of them that they do not. Turn over the pages of any dozen poets now living, men and women, and take all their utterances for their own in their own persons, suppose the first personal pronoun not artistically vicarious but standing for the writer's substantive self; what an appalling dozen of persons! Not to speak of those legions of love-affairs simultaneously carried on in which they indulge—although some of them, being

married and moving in respectable society, ought long ago to have "renounced all others"—not to speak of these, what sort of existences can they be that allow of all the miscellaneous tragedies and idylls which appear to diversify the days of these multifarious beings? and how do they preserve their reason through such a conflicting variety of emotions, sonnet by sonnet and stanza by stanza? We have only to try to imagine what, if I meant I, must be the mental state of these writers of many emotions, to see, in the fact of their being able to correct their proofs and get their books through press, consoling evidence that, as a rule, I does not mean I.

There are exceptions to the rule. Every now and then even a reticent poet does distinctly express emotions which belong to him in his actual life, and not in that life of interpretership which in some ways he feels as even more real to him than the actual. Naturally he will do so chiefly, or only, as to moods which belong to all human nature, and which would find like expression whether he expressed them in his own ego or in an imagined one; they will be poems, not biography. And there have been poets who, accepting the popular theory of poetry being, as it were, confessional, have systematically put their personality forward. Yet where this is obvious it is not always real. The burst of sorrow has many a time had its ostensible subject hit upon only when it was wanted for the printers; the anger and withering scorn have found their theme in something that happened after the taunts and the rhymes were irrevocably fixed; the dirge has had to wait for a death to make it relevant; the love poem has had to be antedated to give it an appropriate motive. Byron's most Byronic heroes were certainly less a portrait of him than he of them; he made them and then imitated them. Where a poet falls into the popular fallacy and takes it that the public have a right to form a theory of his life from his writings and to expect him to be consistent to it, he is quite likely to become, with unconscious hypocrisy, a claimant to virtues which are too hard for him or "*le fanfaron des*

vices qu'il n'a pas." In his interpreter life he knows the bitter and the sweet of love, as what poet does not; but he conceives it incumbent upon him to have an "object" and, like Don Quixote, looks for his Dulcinea. So with the other passions; he knows them, he possesses them; as a part of the interpreter life he feels them with a completeness and intensity which experience of them in himself as a study of actual life can in no way increase and could lessen; but he feels that he ought to get at them somehow in his private capacity and practise them up, like a young lady with her show pieces. The hate of hate, the scorn of scorn, will not answer the purpose; he must hate Jones and scorn Robinson. He tries to do it, and he says in verse that he has done it.

Nothing is truer than that the poet sings because he must. He sings because singing is his sixth sense, and because it is so bound up with all the others that if you deprived him of it he would feel as if they too were leaving him. Yet you can reduce even the linnet's song to rule—whether the linnet is aware of a rule or no—and the rule of the poet's expression seems to be that it is not the revealing of him but of themselves to others; and to him the revealing of them and himself among them. At all events, few poets are even ostensibly autobiographical; and it is hard on them to investigate them as if they were putting themselves through a process of vivisection for the public to see how they were getting on inside.

Their difficulty comes from the personal pronoun they have to use; and it is only by some reform here that they can escape misconception from the majority of non-literary readers. If instead of I they took to the editorial We, for instance, a man might thus write:—

We loved, she was unworth our heart;  
We scorned her, but loved not again

without the public thinking him disrespectful to his wife from any point of view: or he might begin, "We wept alone o'er him we slew," without fear of his readers thinking him a case for the police. But then poets are

so fond of saying "we" in an emphatic manner as short for the particular *she* and I, and confusion might arise. The use of a little i instead of a big I might have some effect as a sort of modest disclaimer of the writer's personality in the matter; but the printers would never stand that. Our vernacular "says he" and "says she" interspersed among the I's with a prudent frequentness would give considerable protection; but then if they were inserted in the matter of the poems they would put the metres out, and if they were relegated to footnotes or marginal arguments the very readers they were meant for would be just those who would never look at them. The indefinite "one" might be of some avail; but scarcely sufficient, because it is so frequently used as a more bashful but equally individual I that it does not convey the required distinction. On the whole the editorial pronoun, the "We" and the "Our" and the "Us," is what can most safely be recommended to poets for their future protection.