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PYTHAGORAS AND THE POETS.

At the early age of eighteen, Pythagoras was crowned as successful wrestler in the great Olympian circus of Elis. He is said to have been a youth of remarkable comeliness as well as strength—a reputation not easily acquired among a people who devoted so much attention to physical training. To a robust habit of body, he combined a studious, contemplative disposition, and had scarcely arrived at the period of legal manhood when he had exhausted as much as was known in Greece of music, astronomy, and medicine. He then travelled to Egypt, a land famous for the profound learning of its priests, who, it was reported, held the key of many deeper mysteries than even those hid behind the awful veil of the Eleusinian secrets. The Samian was tested by the severest ordeals before the sacred science was imparted to him; but it seems not to have satisfied his longing for knowledge, as he is reported to have subsequently studied numbers in Phœnicia, astronomy from the wise shepherds of Chaldea; and his acquaintance with some principles of moral philosophy suggest his having picked up in his wanderings many of the Hæbraic traditions of the East. On returning to his native country, after an absence of twenty-two years, he gave a series of lectures, expounding his peculiar doctrines, and soon gathered a large number of pupils about him. His system included a strict novitiate of silence, and an unquestioning obedience to himself as master, as well as an unwavering faith in his theories. He inculcated the virtue of self-denial, and encouraged the practice of wholesome corporal exercise. His pupils were not denied the chiefest charm of social intercourse, and ladies were permitted to become graduates in his college, though whether the rule of silence was imposed upon them does not clearly appear. At all events, the highest honours were open to them, as we find Themno, the wife of Pythagoras, succeeding her husband as president of the association after his death—a classical precedent for the rights of women, with which Miss Martineau is certainly acquainted.

Pythagoras seems to have gained an extraordinary ascendancy over his disciples, and it is evident he did not shrink from using a low species of imposture to increase the great respect and veneration in which they held him. He spread a report that he was the son of Hermes, and that he derived godlike powers from his origin. One of his thighs was of gold. He had a spell to tame the fiercest beast, or to make the eagle drop from the sky stone dead to his feet. The tutelary deity of a river was known to converse with him, and by a mere exertion of will he could appear in two different places at the same moment of time. Retiring to a cave for some months, he would issue forth pale and thoughtful, and relate how he had been to hell, and spoken familiarly with the poor wandering spirits who flitted by the dead shores of the Styx. For less

ains, he encouraged a belief in the gods amongst his followers, though such a man must have known as well as the Roman orator who came long after him, "that two oracles could not look each other in the face without laughing;" but he probably chose to accept as much of the mythology as suited his views, and such portions of it as would help to grace some of the wonderful æsthetic theories which he was the first to enunciate. What those theories were in their completeness is unfortunately unknown to us, though it is conjectured that Plato or Aristotle could have supplied the information. They would appear to have been based on the supposition of a universal rhythm and harmony regulating all the phenomena of nature, and it is suspected that Pythagoras reduced his speculations to some law of harmony and proportion applicable to the work of the sculptor, which served to produce those unapproachable models of art which the world has ever since been contented to imitate. We are only concerned with one chapter of his lucubrations at present, and it is the design of this paper to draw the reader's attention to it. His notion of the music of the spheres has been passed from hand to hand—from one poet to another—from the grey dawn of those ancient days down even to our own time. So popular did the legend become, that if one were to select for illustration the poetical extracts concerning the music of the spheres, they would occupy every column of this journal from its birth to this present issue. I survived the gods themselves. It was a belief affording the most agreeable explanation of a feeling not otherwise easy to define. "The most elevated idea of music," says Bishop Usher, "arises from a confused perception of ideal or visionary beauty and rapture, which is sufficiently perceptible to fire the imagination, but not clear enough to become an object of knowledge." Supposing we had not the revelations of Christianity to help us, could we find any better way of giving expression to the solemn emotions arising within us on the contemplation of the celestial bodies than by ascribing to them a power which in its influence (though exerting it through a different medium) was very similar, causing sensations of longing, or calm, or awe, or of desire, and of worship every one of which dispositions can be brought about by music? This would only be an ordinary effort of the mind, which is always endeavouring to explain that which is unknown and remote by something near at hand and familiar; and it would be no undue straining of any of the faculties to associate the "confused perception of ideal or visionary beauty and rapture" occurring at the moment of listening to good music, with the same feeling arising from the sight of the splendour and glory of the stars. When once we have begun to think that effects are analogous, we are anxious to establish an æsthetic of causes; and, indeed, it is by this process that every law of nature is constructed. It is not at all necessary to suppose that Pythagoras argued after this fashion, which more properly appertains to another system of thought than that with which he was accustomed to reason. The poet's brain, glistering with dew, which comes from every bush in the

summer morning, and lie upon the meadow like ornaments of lace and jewels upon a bride, are not more slight and fragile than the materials which we often use to clothe and deck our most pleasant fancies, and bring them within the visible reach of our knowledge. The reader will see many illustrations of this in the latter portion of the following extracts.

Pythagoras taught his class that the stars moved in a grand, never-ceasing march, making an eternal concert, as it were, led by two sidereal suns, who regulated the motions of this magnificent choir. He had heard this music himself, and could even mark the different variations of note as they echoed from the vaulted roof which arched a vast distance above the orchestra. Saturn boomed a deep bass note; and the moon, which was nearest to us, emitted a shrill tenor sound. The musical scale of seven notes was represented by seven planets, whose vibrations were in harmonic proportion to their respective distances. This theory of Pythagoras gained a new and nobler signification on the advent of Christianity. It was especially gratifying to consider the greatest works of God for ever hymning the praises of their Creator; and we find the music of the spheres introduced into the earliest devotional poetry. Gregory Nazianzen, a Greek Christian poet, looked upwards, and sang,—

"The great stars treading choral measures o'er us."

And Cynesius, of Cyrene, in a fervid burst of laudation, says,—

"And the holy stars stood breathless,
Trembling in their chorus deathless!"

Milton takes up the same theme,—

"And ye five other wandering fires, that move
In mystic dance, not without song."

So Young, in one of his boldest figures,—

"Thou who didst put to flight
Primal silence, when the morning stars,
Exulting, shouted o'er the rising ball!"

On this division of our subject, however, it is scarcely necessary to dwell, as out of Milton alone whole pages of such examples might be extracted. We will see how Messieurs the poets use the Pythagorean legend in the general exercise of their art, without any theological reference; and, first of all, hear how deliciously Shakespeare turns the harmonious astronomy to account:—

"Sit, Jessica, look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou seest
But in his motion like an angel rings."

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Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim.
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."

Byron heard the spherul music in its awful sublimity:—

"Suns, moons, and earths, upon their loud-voiced spheres,
Singing in thunder round me" [Cain].

Goethe, in that trumpet-tongued prologue to "Faust," makes Raphael say,—

"In chorus with each kindred star,
The sun sounds forth his ancient song."

And as we have got to the fatherland, hear Schiller and Klopstock on the same theme:—

"And comes the world's wide harmony in vain upon thine ears,
The stream of music borne aloft from yonder ethereal spheres!
And feel'st thou not the measure which eternal nature keeps,
The whirling dance for ever held in yonder azure deeps?"

"The heavenly ear can list the moving spheres,
And while Selene and Ptoleone roll
In thunder, and rejoicing hears
The sounds that swell beneath the pole."

Uhland—melancholy, dreamy Uhland—of course does not miss the divine music:—

"Ye marvellous tones, that scarce I hear,
What longing ye breathe from above!"

Longfellow, in the following passage, gives an exact and very elegant description of this beautiful fancy. The lines are full of just and musical expressions, every epithet felicitous and poetical. It is taken from one of his earlier pieces, the "Occultation of Orion":—

"I saw, with its celestial keys,
Its chords of air, its frets of fire,
The Samian's great Eolian lyre,
Rising through all its sevenfold bars,
From earth unto the fixed stars.
And through the dewy atmosphere,
Not only could I see, but hear
Its wondrous and harmonious strings
In sweet vibration, sphere by sphere,—
From Dian's circle, light and near,
Onward to vaster and wider rings,
Where, chanting through his board of snow,
Majestic, towering, solemn, pure,
And down the sunless towers of space
Retreating, the great Orion came."

Sir Isaac Newton said on one occasion, "that he was inclined to believe that some general laws prevailed with regard to the agreeable affections of all our senses. Hazlitt was of opinion that there was a harmony of colours, and a harmony of sounds unquestionably, and an original harmony of forms, as the principle of beauty and the source of pleasure. Perhaps, after all, the towers and walls of Thebes, rising into glorious shape at the sound of Amphion's harp, is but a legend hiding a deep and golden truth which may yet be brought to light. We have all heard of the blind man who compared a scarlet colour to the fanfare of a bugle, thus supplying a metaphysical derivation for the rather slangy adjective of "loud," as applied to gaudy and obtrusive hues. Schlegel used to insist that the paintings of Correggio produced exactly the same effect upon him as a piece of elaborate music. At the next exhibition of the Royal Academy, how often will the art critics of the London press speak of the *tone* of a picture, the harmony of such and such tints, the discord and noisy vulgarism of others, &c., &c. ! The poets, as well as painters, have plenty of sufficient excuses for taking harmony and melody as representatives of the highest manifestations of the beautiful, and they have done so with a remarkable unanimity. A landscape, a flower, the face and figure of a handsome woman,—in fact, all nature, all humanity, in the abstract and concrete, in the singular and general, share in this comparison. Byron tells us,—

"There's music in all things, if men had ears ;
This earth is but an echo of the spheres."

Coleridge expresses the purely Pythagorean sentiment,—

"And if all animated nature

Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought as o'er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each and God of all !"

Milton goes to a "solemn music,"—and indeed music must have had a special sanctity for the blind poet, shut out from the sight of things. He, too, sings of the harmony of nature, but his truly Christian Muse, ever consecrated to worship, turns the occasion to religious thought. Once a time was when the earth joined the seraphim and the cherubic host "in hymns devout and holy psalms,"—

"Till disproportion'd sin

Jarr'd against nature's chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion sway'd
In perfect diapason."

This music was not altogether silenced, for Wordsworth, passive to the impression of every stream, flower, mountain, grove, and lake, was able to hear it.—

"One song they sang, and it was audible ;
Most audible then when the fleshy ear,
O'ercome by modest prelude of that strain,
Forgot her functions, and slept undisturb'd."

What think you of music in the *scent* of a flower ?—

"And the hyacinth, purple, and white, and blue,
Which flung from its bells a soft peal anew
Of music so delicate, soft, and intense,
It was felt like an odour within the sense" (sensitive plant).—SHELLEY.

I wished I could make my pet geranium do something of this kind.
The bard of Rydal had also a concert in his flower-beds :—

"Where will they stop, those breathing powers,
Those spirits of the new-born flowers !

* * * * *
Up from their native ground they rise,
In *mute aerial harmonies* !"

Having noticed the music of the stars, the landscape, and the flowers, there yet remains a more charming object than any of them, to be regarded under the same condition. An ingenious Scotch gentleman,* who has done more for the true advancement of æsthetic science than any other living, engages that, with certain combinations of a circle, triangle, and square, the most perfect face and figure may be constructed ; and furthermore, that this combination may result in a more perfect type of beauty than has ever been witnessed in a human creature ; and further again, that the thing has been done successfully more than two thousand years ago ! I doubt much whether this announcement will meet with the favour of the ladies. Miss would not like to be told that the pretty face and neat shape which she contemplates with so much satisfaction in her looking-glass every morning, was a composition of triangles and squares, and other horrid things which her brother George is always poring over when "going in," as he calls it, for the medal on mathematical science. However, there is a gallant addition to Mr. Hay's theory, namely, that the regulation of his geometrical figures must be in accord with certain harmonic proportions existing in music ; so that we pass immediately from the prosaic figures to the poetical notes, and the ladies will, we are sure, have not the least objection to our considering them fashioned according to sweet tunes and harmonies. It may assist us, in believing this beautiful notion, to recollect that the word "harmony" originally signified the just proportions of things, and that its first application to sound was metaphorical. But who cares for philosophic data when wanting to say fine compliments ? Not

* Mr. Hay, author of "The Natural Principles of Beauty as developed in the Female Figure," "Orthographic Beauty of the Parthenon, &c.," "Theory of Harmony and Form."

your poet, certainly. Gentle Shakspeare, who played Troubadour and Bonnibel on his own account, in spite of the many wicked satires he wrote against poor wistful lovers, thus addressed his mistress in "The Passionate Pilgrim":—

"How oft when thou, my music, music play'st."

Elsewhere he says, "The *tune* of Imogen." A later poet speaks of—

"The music breathing from Zuleika's face;"

and Wordsworth very happily,—

"Beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face."

In the following description of "Evangeline" this fancy is deliciously expressed:—

"But a celestial brightness, a more ethereal beauty,
Shone in her face, and invested her voice, when, after confession,
Homeward serenely she walk'd with God's benediction upon her;
And where she had pass'd, it seem'd like the ceasing of exquisite music."

She is gone from you, but the tones vibrate yet,—linger in your ear like the recollection of a sweet melody long after the world and its hard necessities have placed you apart. Alas! life is made up of sterner stuff and much more vulgar purposes for the most of us, than to pass any of it in the pleasant melodious dalliances our poets sing of.

There is truly no more delicate way of expressing the warmest passion than by comparing its influence to melody. The tenderness of a kind look; the mere stirring of lips with the timid, half-spoken words of fondness fluttering about, and yet afraid to leave them; all the dear conceits of that wild and improbable dream, which go to make up the old, old tale, find their fittest utterance in music, and their meaning is best interpreted by comparison with it:—

"And we will talk until thought's melody
Becomes too sweet for utterance, and it die,
To live again in looks which dart
With thrilling tones into the voiceless heart."

SUMMIT, "Eurychiton."

Even these cold-hearted wits of the days of lagwigs, ruffles, and swords, were obliged to seek their best types of womanhood in the prim landscape gardens of Arcadia (constructed so as not to offend by *trug de verdure*). Even they were sensible of a similitude between Chloe or Phœbe, and the charms of music. In No. 603 of the *Spectator* there is a specimen Pastoral (with an air of sly satire about it) which contains an example of this. Colin (who in old pictures is generally drawn with knickerbockers, industriously playing on a flageolet, and surrounded by numerous sheep, whose appearances are ridiculously suggestive of well-stuffed bolsters) has lost his Phœbe. Whether she went off with a con-

sumption, or another Colin, the text discloseth not. She leaves, however, a blank not only in his faithful breast, but in the lovely scenes by which he is surrounded. When formerly Phœbe and he, in sportful innocence, played (reader, it was in their *salad* days) with the young (spring) lamb, how happy that time, when spring love and beauty (and salad, and perhaps mint sauce) were all in their prime! But now in their frolics, when by him (Colin) they pass, he (reckless creature) flings at their fleeces a handful of grass! He also, I am sorry to say, further indulges his cruel propensities by beating his dog with his crook, an animal who, in another verse, discloses quite a sentimental Tray in his character,—at last our Colin hits on the graceful compliment which almost gives the semblance of poetry to his doleful plaint:—

"But now she is absent; though still they sing on,
The words are but lonely, the melody's gone!"

Mr. Pope, in a mawkish composition not much better than that from which I have quoted, repeats the same idea:—

"Fair Daphne's dead,—and music is no more!"

The manner of a woman's walk—a dignified, easy gait, regulating the natural elasticity which sound health and perfect form is sure to give, which does not unduly disturb that engaging repose belonging to the most supreme beauty of person—has invariably been the subject of poetic admiration and enthusiasm. A goddess in mortal guise might be discovered by the unconscious dignity of her footsteps. Southey's Kailyal, in the gorgeous Oriental epic of Kehama,—

"Moved graceful as the dark-eyed nymphs of heaven,
Such harmony to her steps was given."

That dear old "Talking Oak" of Alfred Tennyson's, worth all the pastoral beech trees that ever nodded above the loose-kirtled shepherdesses of Arcady, thus gallantly describes a little favourite of his:—

"Yet, since I first could cast a shade,
Did never creature pass
So slightly, musically made,
So light upon the grass."

A broken heart (who does not recollect the "Broken Heart" of the "Annals" of forty years ago, with the guitar, the high-bodied dress, and the air of a sea-sick Lydia Languish?) shows itself on the blank, wearied face, with a sense of a dead, complete silence. Some weight of care or disappointment has stopped the vibration of all music there. Do we not meet with faces vivacious and sprightly as a gallopade, and just for a moment capable of wearing the more thoughtful cadence of a waltz? There are those also whom we can never regard without involuntarily

thinking of silly polkas, and other mere hop-and-turn-about tunes, seeming not to possess any power of changing to a graver mood or more serious measure. Such countenances are really dumb of themselves, but can echo dance music faithfully enough, every feature being alive and in play at the sound of the flutes and fiddles, but dropping to a dull, noiseless vacancy at the final twirl of the orchestra. Others, again, carry a tune of false sentiment (like that sort of music which the French term *classique*), and if your ear be defective, or your taste uncultivated, it is very likely you will be deceived into believing that the wretched trash is a real expression of pure and worthy fancies. The various clever movements, the dying falls, the startling chords, the brilliant meretricious roudades, —the whole symphony, indeed, made up of dangerous surprises, half truthful, half sensual, and completely mischievous, form the ogling stock in trade, the nods and wreathed smiles of Miss Blanche Amory and her syren companions. But they are exceptions, those Miss Sharps and Miss Amorys, or life would be a very burden, every man having to plug his ears like Ulysses. There are women of sweet, maidenly natures, growing up in the practice of kindnesses, of tender household duties, of simple, godly aims, and of genial, pleasant accomplishments,—

"Till, at the last, they set themselves to man,
Like perfect music into noble words."

There is no guile, no sensation tricks about them. They do not wear poke-pole hats or archery leggings. What a lovable lady is this that Bulwer describes in his "Duchess of Vallière"! in *musical* terms, too, which is to me a sufficient excuse for making the quotation:—

"In the maze
Of her harmonious beauties, Modesty,
Like some severer grace that leads the choir
Of her sweet sisters, every airy motion
Attunes to such chaste charm."

Another dramatist, quoted with much gusto by Southey in the "Doctor," tells how the fairer sex should be described after the manner of a song:—

"Sing of the nature of woman, and then the song
Shall be full of variety—old crotchets,
And most sweet closes. It shall be humorous,
Grave, fantastic, amorous, melancholy, sprightly,
One in all, and all in one."—MARSTON.

Schelling, whose curious speculations into the rather misty regions of transcendentalism have been fruitful of many strange and recondite truths, argues in what manner our mental faculties are subject to the influences of the material nature, and how again we can make the objective world itself yield to our own representations. "This could never be," he says, "if there did not obtain, between the ideal world and the real world, a sort of

pre-established harmony." The poetic effort is ever to comprehend and fully recognize this harmony, and give expression to it. It is in this endeavour that the objective world yields to the poetic representation. It is the production of Wordsworth's definition of the inspired art,—the description of things, not as they are, but as they seem, and, it might be added, as we would wish them to be. The old philosophers, Pythagoras and Plato for instance, formed their theories in this poetical kind; for their philosophy was, after all, only poetry in disguise. Pythagoras, with his music of the spheres; Plato, with his sad recollections of a happier state of being, both exemplify the identity of feeling which formerly existed between those who loved wisdom and those who sought the beautiful; and this alliance between poetry and philosophy is not yet broken off. The points of contact where they meet are daily becoming multiplied; the workers in the field of science often find themselves almost unconsciously following a track marked with the footsteps of the poet. Both are dealing with things of which at best they can know "only in part, and prophesy in part." The poor Greek strove to hear that music which man hath never heard, nor can ever hear while in this vesture of clay. But the inspiration of his thought was a noble one, and it was no mean legacy that Pythagoras left to the Poets.

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IN: ST. JAMES'S MAGAZINE
VOL. IX 456-465