

THREE SHAKESPEAREAN CRITICS.

(Lamb, Coleridge and Hazlitt).

Early nineteenth century prose is specially noteworthy in the realm of criticism. Most important of all in this department was the rise of the great school of Shakespearean critics, in Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb. They may have owed something to Germany. But there was in their work an insight, a brilliancy and a justness of appreciation that are too seldom found among the Germans. The eighteenth century produced numerous critics and emendators but it had not a single critic of the calibre of these three men.

The new school of critics arose with the suddenness of a tropical sunrise. The effect of Romanticism upon the critical faculty was such as to inaugurate a new school of critical appreciation with which are associated the three great names. Divergent in character and genius, these men were animated by a common ideal, namely, to interpret Shakespeare through sympathetic imagination. Their criticism is at once historical and aesthetic,—historical, in so far as it judged a man's work in relation to his time,—aesthetic, in as much as it tried to appreciate the work as the expression of an individual temperament. This is widely remote from the absolute standard of criticism implied in the famous, "This will never do", of Jeffrey.

We note a vital change of critical outlook in the critics of the nineteenth century. The new critics deliberately discarded all the rules which deductively governed all literature in the eighteenth century. Deductive criticism is that which judges everything by the standard of some preconceived rules and canons. The method adopted by the new school of critics is inductive. Inductive criticism means the judgment of a work on its individual merits by

noting three things, viz : the aim of the author, the circumstances under which the work was composed and how far that aim has been achieved. Inductive critics judge by the inner light alone, and as the inner light burns with the clearest and brightest flame they judge very well by it.

Lamb is the pioneer of the New Criticism. It was three years after the publication of Lamb's "*Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*" that Coleridge lectured on the Shakespearean drama and Hazlitt wrote his "Shakespeare's Characters." Lamb was the first to draw men's attention to the rich treasures of thought and poetry to be found in the Elizabethan drama generally. His "Specimens" are the high-water mark of impressionistic criticism. The following passages from his "Specimens" sparkle in brilliant flashes of criticism :—

"The insipid levelling mortality to which the modern stage is tied down, would not admit of such admirable passions as these scenes (of Middleton and Rowleys' "Fair Quarrel") are filled with. A puritanical obtuseness of sentiment, a stupid infantile goodness, is creeping among us, instead of the vigorous passions and virtues, clad in flesh and blood with which the old dramatists present us.

"The old play-writers are distinguished by an honest boldness of exhibition, they show everything without being ashamed. If a reverse in fortune is to be exhibited, they fairly bring us to the prison-gate and the alms-basket. A poor man on our stage is always a gentleman. Our delicacy in fact forbids the dramatising of distress at all."

Lamb takes Shakespeare as the standard by which his contemporaries were to be measured. He institutes many fantastic comparisons; for instance, he styles Heywood as a kind of "prose Shakespeare." The importance of Lamb's "Specimens" is very great because when it was published the Elizabethan dramatists were little known to the public at large.

Lamb was a lover of paradox. This love is manifested in the essay on "The Tragedies of Shakespeare", considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation. Lamb disputes the acting qualities of Shakespeare's plays. He speaks in a strain of contempt of the "low tricks upon the eye and the year" as contrasted with the "absolute mastery over the heart and soul of man, which a great dramatic poet possesses". According to him, the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted; theatrical artifices and splendours are vulgar, in the presence of the sublime Lear of Shakespeare, "and that sea of his mind, with all its vast riches." Lamb's critical position is this;— drama and literature are different things; drama *may* be literature but, it is not bound to be; the points to which drama cannot do full justice, are in literature of the greatest importance. A few characteristic passages will make Lamb's position clear.

"The characters of Shakespeare are so much the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions, that while we are reading any of his great criminal characters, Macbeth, Richard or Iago, we think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity which prompt them to overleap those moral fences..... Reading possesses over seeing the vantage ground of abstraction,..... The sublime images, the poetry alone, is that which is present to our minds in the reading..... What we see upon a stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind, and its movements. The feeling of a tragedy presents to the fancy just so much of external appearances as to make us feel that we are among flesh and blood, which by far the greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of their character."

Lamb illustrates these general remarks by the characters of Hamlet, Lear, Othello and Macbeth. Speaking of Hamlet's

soliloquies, Lamb says,—“These effusions of his solitary musings, these silent meditations, these profound sorrows, these light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce dares utter to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulating actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience, making four hundred people his confidants at once?” Lamb criticises *Othello* in the same strain:—“Nothing can be more soothing, more flattering to the nobler parts of our natures, than to read of a young Venetian lady of highest extraction, through the force of love and from a sense of merit in him whom she loved, laying aside every consideration of kindred, and country, and colour and wedding with a coal-black moor,—it is the perfect triumph of virtue over accidents, of the imagination over the senses. She sees Othello’s colour of his mind. But upon the stage, when the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty, we are apt to sink Othello’s mind in his colour. We find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona. The actual sight of the thing over-weighs all that beautiful compromise which we make in reading.” Lamb contrasts the reading and the seeing of the Witches in *Macbeth* in this way,—“When we read the incantations of those terrible beings, the effect upon us is the most serious and appalling that can be imagined. Do we not feel spell-bound as Macbeth was? But attempt to bring these beings on to the stage, and you turn them instantly into so many old women, that men and children are to laugh at. The sight of a well-lighted house, and a well-dressed audience, shall arm the most nervous child against any apprehensions.” The crowning paradox of Lamb’s essay is that “Shakespeare’s tragedies are less calculated for performance, than that of any other dramatist whatsoever.” Lamb was thinking of certain qualities of the poet which are incommunicable

by the medium of actors. People commonly talk of Shakespeare's plays being so *natural* that everybody can understand him ; but says Lamb,—“They are natural indeed, they are grounded deep in nature, so deep that the depth of them lines out of the reach of most of us.”

Another notable feature of Lamb's Shakespearean criticism is that he regards criminality as only a minor trait, a secondary accident in the genius of Richard, Macbeth, or Iago. A butcherlike representation of these characters upon the stage would excite nothing but disgust and horror. They will stand out as unredeemed murderers and villains, but where is their lofty genius, rich intellect, inexhaustible resources, wit, accomplishment, buoyancy of spirits and insight into characters? Lamb, a lover of humanity, loved to find some soul of goodness in things evil. In this respect Lamb is at one with his friend Coleridge. Lamb's qualities as a critic are, his gift of luminous enthusiasm and his faculty for distinguishing the human qualities from the academic but he is lacking [in Hazlitt's breadth of range and Coleridge's subtlety of analysis.

If we now turn to Coleridge's Shakespearean criticism we find a large part of it to be scrappy and fragmentary. But this does not impair the value of his “*Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare*”. He was unfettered by the restraints of systematic treatise. He freely ranges with us over many a flowerstrewn field. Despite the fragmentary nature of Coleridge's critical work, his was the greatest mind among his contemporaries. “Coleridge”, says his biographer Mr. Traill, “is in the domain of Shakespearean commentary absolute King.” He it is who gave impulse to modern Shakespearean criticism and he was the first to deal with the whole of Shakespeare's work as the expression of a single mind. Coleridge was the first man to show that Shakespeare was not only a great genius but also a first-rate artist,

Coleridge undertook a philosophical and analytical criticism of Shakespeare. The philosophic and artistic processes are so combined in him that they interpenetrate and illuminate each other. Coleridge applied his judging intellect not only to the thought and stuff of poetry, but also to style, expression and music. Since Coleridge most English critics have fought shy of philosophy and it has been revived of late by Prof. Bradley in his "Shakespearean Tragedy."

Coleridge has been accused of plagiarism, of having borrowed his principles of analysis from Schlegel without acknowledgment. German critics will find an abundant supply of German transcendentalism and metaphysic in Coleridge's lectures. But these are not borrowings but his own excogitations. He owed nothing in this matter to German Shakespeareanism except its profoundly philosophising spirit.

Coleridge's criticism penetrates deeply. He sees far into his subject. His conception of the more complex of Shakespeare's personages, his theory of their character and his reading of their motives is often subtle but always sane. He discusses the nature of Othello's jealousy in this way:—"Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago,—such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained who had believed Iago's honesty as Othello did. We, the audience, know that Iago is a villain from the beginning, but in considering the essence of the Shakespearean Othello we must perseveringly place ourselves in his situation, and under his circumstances.....Othello had no life but in Desdemona:—the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence, wrought a civil war in his heart. As the curtain drops, which do we pity the most"? In this and many other passages Coleridge's interpretation and language are highly imaginative. His acute estimate of the character of Polonius may be cited:—"In his admonitions to his son and

daughter, Polonius is uniformly made respectable; in these admonitions, Shakespeare did not mean to bring out the senility or weakness of that person's mind. It is to Hamlet that Polonius is, and is meant to be, contemptible, because in inwardness and uncontrollable activity of movement, Hamlet's mind is the logical contrary to that of Polonius". In the character of Hamlet, Coleridge traces Shakespeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy. Coleridge's searching analysis of the character of Hamlet may be quoted below:—

- "That this character (Hamlet) must have some connexion
- with the common fundamental laws of our nature may be
- assumed from the fact, that Hamlet has been the darling of
- every country in which the literature of England has been
- fostered. In order to understand him, it is essential that we
- should reflect on the constitution of our own minds. Man is
- distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought
- prevails over sense : but in the healthy processes of the mind,
- a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions
- from outward objects and the inward operations of the
- intellect;—for if there be an over-balance in the contemplative
- faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation
- and loses his natural power of action. Now one of Shakes-
- peare's modes of creating characters is, to conceive any one
- moral or intellectual faculty in morbid excess. In Hamlet
- he wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance
- between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our
- meditation on the workings of our mind,—an equilibrium
- between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this
- balance is disturbed : his thought and images are far more
- vivid than his actual perceptions. Hence we see an enormous
- intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action
- consequent upon it. This character, Shakespeare places in
- circumstances, under which it is obliged to act on the spur
- of the moment.—Hamlet is brave and careless of death ; but
- he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought,

and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve..... The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without,—giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all commonplace actualities".

The consummate piece of criticism quoted above is essentially and above all the criticism of a poet and a philosopher. Coleridge's criticism is such as could not have been achieved by any man not originally endowed with the divine gift of the poetical faculty. His criticism possesses the commanding advantage of a poet interpreting a poet.

If we compare Coleridge with Lamb, we find Coleridge more reliable than his friend. Lamb is not as subtle and penetrative as Coleridge. Lamb studied Shakespeare's humanity only whereas Coleridge considered all the various aspects of his master's genius. He made the first serious effort to 'grasp totality of Shakespeare's work, and to trace out the inner history of his mind through chronology. But acute, suggestive and stimulating critic as Coleridge was, he was not without a defect. His defect lies in regarding Shakespeare as completely independent of all conditions of time and place. But we all know that Shakespeare was a child of his age and his immortal dramas are the product and the mirror of Elizabethan England. It is quite certain that born in another age he would have been a different man. Born in the year with Pope or Tennyson his genius would have taken another direction. No poet of however mighty genius can escape from the tyrannous influence of his age, with its dominating ideals, passions, aspirations, hopes, fears, doubts and misgivings. And it was a fundamental mistake on Coleridge's part to represent Shakespeare as overleaping the boundaries of time and space. But his immense merit as a critic of Shakespeare more than overweighs this solitary blemish.

Let us now turn to Hazlitt who is a greater prose stylist than either Lamb or Coleridge. Hazlitt introduced an entirely new spirit into the criticism of his day. He showed that the way to comprehend a work is to enjoy it and that just perception is allied to sympathy. He has pure zest or 'gusto' of letters and a keen enjoyment of every trait of beauty. He is a lover of quotations which are unmistakably felicitous. Although his criticisms are captious at times, nevertheless they exhibit an astonishing vitality of thought and a pungency of expression.. We have seen how Coleridge had first appropriated the faculty of the imagination for critical purposes and had made criticism, no less than poetry, a creative art. Hazlitt was Coleridge's lineal successor in criticism, and if less penetrating in insight, he transcended his master in lucidity and incisive vigour of expression. Hazlitt wanders far and wide in search of beauty and is willing to go anywhere for fresh sensations.

Hazlitt, like Lamb, preferred the words to the action, an eloquent passage to the most superb pantomime. He pronounces Shakespeare to be too great for the stage and declares that he would never go to see a play of Shakespeare acted because the more refined poetical beauties, the minuter strokes of character and the impressive passages are lost to the audience.

Hazlitt's "*Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*" falls far short of Coleridge's "*Lectures and Notes*" in profoundness and subtlety. His "*Characters*" is an encomium on Shakespeare rather than a critique on him. It is written to show his extraordinary love of Shakespeare's dramas. Being fully possessed of the beauties of his author, he impresses them upon his readers. Jeffrey wrote in his "*Edinburgh Review*"— "Hazlitt is not merely an admirer of our great dramatist, but an idolator of him, and openly professes his idolatory.."

To illustrate Hazlitt's critical method, let us quote the characters of Falstaff and Shylock which are masterpieces in Hazlitt's *bravura* style:—

"Falstaff is perhaps the most substantial comic character that ever was invented, Sir John carries a most portly presence in the mind's eye; and in him, not to speak it profanely, 'we behold the fullness of the spirit of wit and humour bodily.' We are as well acquainted with his person as his mind, and his jokes come upon us with double force and relish from the quantity of flesh through which they make their way, as he shakes his fat sides with laughter, or 'lords the lean earth as he walks along'. Other comic characters seem to resolve themselves into air, 'into thin air'; but this is embodied and palpable to the grossest apprehension: it lies 'three fingers deep upon the ribs', it plays about the lungs and the diaphragm with all the force of animal enjoyment. Falstaff's wit is an emanation of a fine constitution, an exuberance of good humour and good nature; an overflowing of his love of laughter, and good-fellowship a giving vent to his heart's ease and over-contentment with himself and others. He would not be in character, if he is not so fat as he is; for there is the greatest keeping in the boundless luxury of his imagination and the pampered self-indulgence of his physical appetites. He manures and nourishes his mind with jests, as he does his body with sack and sugar. His tongue drops fatness, and in the chambers of his brain 'it snows of meat and drink'.....Yet we are not to suppose that he is a mere sensualist. His sensuality does not engross and stupify his other faculties'.....He is represented as a liar, a braggart, a coward, a glutton, etc., and yet we are not offended but 'delighted' with him; for he is all these as much to amuse others as to gratify himself.....The secret of Falstaff's wit is for the most part a masterly presence of mind, an absolute self-possession which nothing can disturb. His repartees

are involuntary suggestions of his self-love ; instinctive eyascious of everything that threatens to interrupt the career of his triumphant jollity and self-complacency"—*Henry IV (Two Parts)*

Shylock is a *good hater* ; a man no less sinned against than sinning. If he carries his revenge too far, yet he has strong grounds for 'the lodged hate he bears Anthonio', which he explains with equal force of cloquence and reason. He seems the depository of the vengeance of his race ; and though the long habit of brooding over daily insult and injuries has crusted over his temper with inveterate misanthropy, and hardened him against the contempt of mankind, this adds but little to the triumphant pretensions of his enemies. Here is a strong, quick and deep sense of justice mixed up with the gall and bitterness of his resentment. The constant apprehension of being burnt alive, plundered, banished, reviled and trampled upon, might be supposed to sour the most forbearing nature, and to take something from that milk of human kindness', with which his prosecutors contemplated his indignities. The desire of revenge is almost inseparable from the sense of wrong ; and we can hardly help sympathising with the proud spirit, hid beneath his 'Jewish gaberdine' stung to madness by respected and undeserved provocations, and labouring to throw off the load of obloquy and oppression heaped upon him and all his tribe by one desperate act of 'lawful' revenge, till the ferociousness of the means by which he is to execute his purpose, and the pertinacity with which he adheres to it, turns us against him, but even at last when disappointed of the sanguinary revenge with which he had glutted his hopes, and exposed to beggary and contempt by the letter of the law on which he had insisted with so little remorse, we pity him, and think him hardly dealt with by the judges. His character is

displayed as distinctly in other less prominent parts of the play, and we may collect from a few sentences the history of his life—his descent and origin, his thrift and domestic ceremoniey, his affection for his daughter whom he loves next to his wealth, his courtship and his first present to Leah his wife! He would not have parted with the ring which he first gave her 'for a wilderness of monkeys! What a fine Hebraism is implied in this expression." (*The Merchant of Venice*.)

It would not be out of place to make a passing reference to De Quincey who has a share in the elucidation of *Macbeth* in his. "*On the knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*" which is a wonderfully profound and suggestive criticism.

In our foregoing dissension we have seen how the new criticism of Lamb, Coleridge and Hazlitt is swayed by revolutionary and romantic interest. An important mission of this remarkable group of critics was to free criticism from Neo-Classic restraints. Hazlitt accused the great Dr. Johnson of having made criticism 'a kind of Procrustes' bed of genius, where he might cut down imagination to matter of fact, regulate the passions according to reason, and translate the whole into logical diagrams and rhetorical declamation. In Lamb, in Coleridge, in Hazlitt we have real "judging authors." In these for the first time appears that body of pure critical appreciation of the actual work of literature which was missed so sorely in the eighteenth century. They show an effort to taste, to enjoy and so to deliver that judgement which without enjoyment is inadequate. They are honestly appetent of the milk and honey of the rich field of Shakespearean literature for themselves and generously eager to impart it to others.

Prabhat Chandra Das.

M. A. B. L.

(Ex-Student, Bangabasi College).