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Lionel Johnson

T. K. Whipple

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## LIONEL JOHNSON

A score of years have passed since that courageous band of young Englishmen who styled themselves the Rhymers' Club tried to transplant the air of the Latin Quarter into London, by meeting at the Cheshire Cheese to discuss welsh rarebits, ale, and each other's verses. Time has played havoc with their ranks, and to some extent with their works. Some of them have died; several have abandoned song for scholarship; Mr. Le Gallienne has migrated to America; Mr. Yeats devotes himself to managing the Irish renaissance. Of the two most characteristic voices of the period, one, that of Ernest Dowson, was silenced years ago; Arthur Symonds alone still carries the old banner. French decadence apparently did not flourish on English soil, and Dowson's "one strayed, last petal of one last year's rose" has yielded to Mr. John Masefield's pugilism and to the smoke of Mr. W. W. Gibson's factories.

The Rhymers' Club did perhaps stand for an exotic and not altogether healthy ideal, and I suppose we must not lament that the movement died a sudden death. But in all the patter of the aesthetes there is one voice to which we should still hearken, for it speaks with authority. I mean the voice of Lionel Johnson. It has been more than ten years now since he died, and if we may judge from the publication of his essays in the volume called *Post Liminium* and from the announcement of a biography and of his collected poems, he is beginning to inherit his kingdom. It is high time; we have need of such as he.

There is now, it seems, a more or less widespread dissatisfaction with the prevailing type of criticism, which to many people appears somewhat spineless and inchoate. I mean the sort of impressionistic criticism which tells much of the critic but little or nothing of the subject treated. Once we have granted that standards are impossible, it becomes easy for any one to criticise, since he need only talk of himself, of his own reactions. As a result not only are we surfeited with the introspection of little men, but even those who are not impressionists themselves lose the courage of their convictions and, fearful of deriving their principles from the classics, adopt contemporaneous standards

which are of small value. It has been said recently that until criticism does win back definite standards and dares to measure current writing by the acknowledged masterpieces, it must expect scant attention, because such is its desert.

For this invertebrate condition Lionel Johnson's critical method, it seems to me, would supply an excellent antidote. If he did not hold fast to absolute fixed laws, as did the eighteenth century, at least his criticism was established on a solid foundation that insured it a positive character. This foundation was composed of knowledge and insight. By birth he was gifted with discrimination and understanding, and he zealously armed himself with the "ancient might of true humanities." Both by nature and by training he possessed to the full that "instinctive just estimate of things as they pass" which is so wholesome and so rare in an age that would like to be self-sufficient, to be measured by rules of its own choosing or by none at all. He qualified himself to speak always with authority through an intimate comprehension of the masterpieces of at least five languages. Mere "modernity" was nothing to him; he says: "*My* sole days among the dead are passed among stillborn or moribund moderns, not the white days and shining nights free for the ancients in fame." Not that he was at all an indiscriminate *laudator temporis acti*; but he was so thoroughly at home with true excellence that nothing false or shoddy could impose upon him. His verdicts are always fearlessly independent: witness his scathing condemnation of Marie Bashkirtseff, whose *Journal* was then at the height of its vogue: "Silly petulance, ill-bred ostentation, unfathomable conceit, offensive vulgarity, and no trace of affection or of thought: these are the gifts and qualities which we are called upon to study and to admire." On the other hand, Johnson did not grudge generous praise to those of his contemporaries who deserved it, as his volume on *The Art of Thomas Hardy* and his papers on Stevenson, Newman, and Pater amply testify.

Indeed, he has often been claimed for the disciples of Walter Pater. Such he was, beyond doubt, to some extent in the matter of style. Nevertheless, in his critical aims he seems to me to have a closer affinity with Matthew Arnold than with Pater. Arnold at present is under something of a cloud, because he tried to get definite results in his criticism, and that, we are told, is impossible. One is inclined to suspect, however, that it is rather

the difficulty than the impossibility that deters contemporaries. Some one has said that nowadays a critic's equipment consists of *The Rubaiyat* and *Alice in Wonderland*. But Johnson at least had a more exacting conception of his calling. We who, with our blunted taste and untrained eye, profit by his clear understanding, must not forget the rigorous discipline to which he had gladly submitted himself. For literature to him was no idle matter of an empty day. Indeed, he felt that he had chosen the highest and most arduous of vocations. He practically dedicated his life to his work; in spite of his many warm friendships, he lived much like a recluse. His confessions are in the stanzas entitled "Magic":

"They wrong with ignorance a royal choice  
Who cavil at my loneliness and labour:  
For them, the luring wonder of a voice,  
The viol's cry for them, the harp and tabour:  
For me divine austerity,  
And voices of philosophy.

"Ah! light imaginations, that discern  
No passion in the citadel of passion:  
Their fancies lie on flowers; but my thoughts turn  
To thoughts and things of an eternal fashion:  
The majesty and dignity  
Of everlasting verity. . . .

"Men pity me; poor men, who pity me!  
Poor charitable scornful souls of pity!  
I choose laborious loneliness: and ye  
Lead Love in triumph through the dancing city:  
While death and darkness girdle me,  
I grope for immortality."

Although he belongs to that despised period, the immediate past, he was free from its worst failing. In spite of the fact that he has the technique, the mastery of his craft, that characterised the post-Swinburnians, he was free from their curse of facility. Beauty to him was too holy, too easily profaned, for him to bring her any but his choicest offerings. One doubts whether Mr. Masfield and Mr. Gibson, or indeed any of their school—Messrs. Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, W. H. Davies, James Stephens, and the rest have precisely this feeling for their art. Without belittling at all their evident sincerity, we cannot help feeling that they have cast overboard too much ballast.

Needless to say, since Johnson was one of those who are damned in a lump as minor poets, he had not that range and rich variety which characterise the major voices of poetry. This limitation was the price he had to pay for his aloofness, for his complete neglect of the less lofty phases of existence. He has to suffer for dwelling almost exclusively in "the high places that are beauty's home." That intense, flaming purity which is perhaps his finest note was not compatible with a broad human sweep. This note it is which differentiates him most strongly from the decadent school and from our present-day "futurists," as they have been termed, who find poetry in everything human, in the degradation of the poor, in the ugliness of the slums and factories, in all social evil. But he would be querulous indeed who could find fault with Johnson because he could say, in his most famous line, "Lonely, unto the Lone I go." His very isolation is a necessary part of his significance.

Three themes, at least, never failed to rouse him. One of these was his religion. Here again he stands out in curious contrast from his contemporaries; Beardsley and Wilde underwent perfunctory conversions to Rome on their deathbeds, but Johnson's faith was no sensuous worship, born of incense and lighted tapers and the ringing of bells. His poetry almost everywhere is touched with the glory of it. Perhaps it shines nowhere more clearly than in "Te Martyrum Candidatus":

"Ah, see the fair chivalry come, the companions of Christ!  
White Horsemen, who ride on white horses, the Knights of God!  
They, for their Lord and their Lover who sacrificed  
All, save the sweetness of treading, where He first trod!

"These through the darkness of death, the dominion of night,  
Swept, and they woke in white places at morning tide:  
They saw with their eyes, and sang for joy at the sight,  
They saw with their eyes the Eyes of the Crucified.

"Now, whithersoever He goeth, with Him they go:  
White Horsemen, who ride on white horses, oh fair to see!  
They ride, where the Rivers of Paradise flash and flow,  
White Horsemen, with Christ their Captain: for ever He!"

This is as intense as Vaughn, or Crashaw, or Francis Thompson himself, very different from the mysticism of Mr. Yeats's "defeated dreams."

Lionel Johnson's two other favourite themes were the cause

of Ireland and the glory of the classics. His championship of Ireland is the stranger, inasmuch as his own claim to Irish blood was tenuous in the extreme. But in those days Celticism was in the air, though not yet triumphant, and Ireland was well represented in the Rhymers' Club. At any rate, in her behalf he can speak out loud and bold:

"A dream, a dream, an ancient dream!  
Yet, ere peace come to Inisfail,  
Some weapons on some field must gleam,  
Some burning glory fire the Gael."

But of still more intrinsic value to his work was his enthusiasm for the classics of antiquity. It was his Hellenic taste and training which enabled him to maintain so uniformly high a standard. His indebtedness he acknowledges in "Oxford," in "Plato in London," and in "The Classics":

"Fain to know golden things, fain to grow wise,  
Fain to achieve the secret of fair souls:  
His thought, scarce other lore need solemnise,  
Whom Virgil calms, whom Sophocles controls."

In a word, he belongs to the tradition of Gray and Landor and Matthew Arnold, to those men who by the fineness of their output emphasise for us the value of discipline.

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