

Dr. Annie Besant as a Literary Artist.

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Politics may come and politics may go, but literature goes on forever. Dr. Besant's service to India in the realm of politics was unique and supreme. Her service in the cause of Hinduism was equally valuable. Her service in the cause of the essential unity of religions, which she expressed as Theosophy, was equally unique. But I wish to concentrate here on her wonderful achievement as a literature, as a past master in the art of arts, that is, the literary art.

People may differ in their views about her political and social philosophy; but there is no difference of opinion in regard to her literary art.

When in December 1896 her speeches at Adyar for the first, swept off the feet of many of her comrades and many of her elders. Her resonant and silvery voice, flexible and full of potent rhythms and charming cadences and modulations, cast a spell over the audience. Every subject was carefully thought out beforehand, and yet the speech had a natural and artless flow. The highest art is to conceal art; and when art becomes so habitual and ingrained as to be second nature, there comes before our inner vision a natural creation throbbing with beauty and splendor. Mrs. Besant gave us an introductory peep into the evolution of the discourse, and then the speech went on with a clear beginning and an orderly progression of thought towards a perfect conclusion. The subject was summarized and wound up, and the scintillating peroration, full of beauty of thought and coruscating phrase, would move on to a magnificent close.

It is a pity that her greatest speeches, delivered in the early gramophone and radio era, were not recorded, and cannot be heard by succeeding generations, in her own sweet yet stately and sonorous voice and in her own wonderfully modulated tones which by themselves formed a charming work of art, apart from the thought content and the flash of phrase.

I cannot describe the art of Mrs. Besant the litterateur better than she herself has done in her address on "The Spirit of Man and The Spiritual Life" in describing the art of the sculptor as being not the hewing of a block of marble into a statue, but the setting free of a statue hidden within the block. "Be then," she said "artists in life; be sculptors laboring in the workshop of the world; and so when you come to pass away, you will know yourself as the Spirit Eternal, and not as the bodies that you leave behind; and you will pass into the bodies that you leave behind; and you will pass into a wider life, a more splendid destiny, a grander future; for you will be free, the liberated destiny, a grander future, for end and goal of man."

Dr. Besant may not have written, any special species of the literary art, such as lyric or epic, didactic poetry, drama or fiction, or been a past master of belles letters in any restricted sense of the word. But there can be,

even in respect of science or ethics, philosophy or religion, a charming, memorable and artistic presentation by a consummate literary artist, or an ugly, dawdling sprawling, diffuse, In artistic presentation.

Before I show the greatness of Dr. Besant in these fields, I wish to describe briefly a realm of Belles Letters – an autobiography in which she is a past master, and wherein she has produced a great work of art. The very commencement of her autobiography is an arresting piece of writing: “On October 1, 1847, my baby eyes opened on the light of a London afternoon.... We are born into earthly life under certain conditions, just as we were physically affected by them prenatally, and these will have their bearing on our subsequent physical evolution”. Here is a gem describing her mother: “It is well to be to look back to a mother who served as ideal of all that was noblest and dearest during childhood and girl-hood, whose face made the beauty of home, and whose love was both sun and shield. I have never met a woman more selflessly devoted to those she love, more passionately contemptuous, more keenly sensitive on very question of honor, more iron in will, more sweet in tenderness.” We then get a glimpse of the inner blossoming of mysticism in her, despite the atmosphere of scientific skepticism in which she lived for a time. She says: “The dreamy tendency in the child, that on its wordly side is fancy imagination, on its religious side is the germ of mysticism.....I discovered the sensuous enjoyment that lay in introducing colour and fragrance and pomp into religious services, so that the gratification of the aesthetic emotions became dignified with the garb of piety”.

Along with the blending of aestheticism with mysticism was another trait, altruism: “Looking back today over my life, I see that its keynote-through all the blunders, and the blind mistakes and clumsy follies-has been this longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self”. Then follows a wonderful passage which I regard as one of the great masterpieces of English prose: “It has been so strong and so persistent that I recognize it now as a tendency one; and this is shown by the fact that to follow it is not the act of a deliberate and conscious will forcing itself into submission and giving up with pain something the heart descries, but the following it is a joyous springing forward along with easiest path, The ‘Sacrifice’ being the supremely attractive thing, not to make which would be to deny the deepest longings of the soul, and to feel oneself polluted and dishonored.”

There are two other great works of literary art by Dr. Besant to which I wish to refer. One is her translation of the “Bhagavad Gita”. It throbs with the beauty and sublimity that characterize that supreme world-gospel, and must be read and read to realize how only a great master of words as well as ideas could have written it. Her preface to it a minor work of art by itself. She says in it “Among the priceless teachings that may be found in the great Hindu poem of the ‘Mahabharata’ there is none so rare and precious as this, ‘The Lord’s Song’..... it is meant to lift the aspirant from the lower depths of renunciation.....to the on templatation while his body and mind are actively employed in discharging the duties that fall to his lot in life. That the spiritual man need not be a recluse, that union with the Devine Life may be achieved and maintained in the midst of worldly affairs, that the obstacles to that union lie not outside us but within us such is the central lesson of the ‘Bhagavad Gita’.

The second book consists of her lectures on Giordano Bruno. The second portion of the work, The Story of Gionardo Bruno, I shall quote here only its fascinating introduction: “A boy was lying on a vine-clad hill,

looking dreamily over the blue Mediterranean Sea. As he lay there he could see the beautiful Bay of Naples curving inwards to the fair city; and behind him rose, stern and forbidding, the mountain Vesuvius, sending its dark smoke up into the stainless purity of the sky. One of the loveliest scenes in Italy, or that perhaps even the world could offer, was spread before his eyes; but the boy, readily sensitive as he generally was to all beauty of form and colour, today seemed indifferent to it all, and the large eyes, 'full of speculation,' were blind to the landscape he knew and loved so well. For the lad

was on the verge of a grave decision, should he or should he not bid farewell to the brightness of his youth, and shut himself within the grey walls of a nest of his youth, and shut himself within the grey walls of a Dominican monastery, to devote himself there to study and to the search after truth?" Dr. Besant's delineation of the fight of Bruno the young rebel from Italy into and beyond Switzerland, and then into France and England and Germany is fascinating. Even in her definition of a 'Nation' we can smell the fragrance of her literature. 'A nation is a spark of the Divine Fire a fragment of the Divine Life, out breathed into the world, and gathering round itself a mass of individuals, men, women and children, whom it binds together into one..... The magic of Nationality is the felling of oneness and the use of nationality is to serve the world in the particular way for which its type fits it..... The whole world suffers where a Nationality is distorted, or suppressed, before its mission to the world is accomplished.

She started lecturing on the Social Reforms needed for the country right from 1900 and her lectures "Wake Up, India" in 1913 saw its culmination. In the meantime she as protector, initiated organizations such as Sons of India, Daughters of India, Round Table, Theosophical Sanyasis. She actively took up political work in the country with a clearly stated object of claiming Dominion status for India within the British Commonwealth. The commonweal, a weekly journal for national reform was begun on 2 January 1914 and the same year in July she brought in a daily newspaper. New India and this lasted for 15 years. It is said to have revolutionized the modes of Indian Journalism. She believed in a sort of Divine sanction to all her activities. What she did for the uplift of moral, social and political life of the country is less known to the later generations, and this needs to be well documented if we have to draw inspiration from the past history and the august persons who steered it.

Dr. Besant published 330 books and pamphlets, and in collaboration with others, 25 books mainly on occult and religious subjects.

I cannot close this appreciation of Dr. Annie Besant as an artist in literature better than by quoting her Autobiography another passage which is beautiful in itself "To face the controversies of today is not the unbelief of the sty but the unbelief of the educated conscience and of the soaring intellect; and unless it can arm itself with a loftier ethic and a grander philosophy than its opponent, it will lose its hold over the purest and the strongest of the younger generation." Yes, Dr. Besant is the friend of the educated conscience and of the soaring intellect of our ear, and has vitally helped Religion to have its hold over the purest and the strongest of the younger generation.

Conclusion

I would like to close with the following observation that may be important for the enthusiast who believes any organization to an obstacle to truth rightly or wrongly. How did Besant do all that she did without great formal education or any definite knowledge of the Divine Plan for the evolution of the world and its citizens? Be it women's right legislative reforms, child education, social abuses of bride-money, great grasp of spirituality and the benefits and defects of religion as it was practiced in many places and systems etc.? After she became a Theosophist, as she writes, she came from storm to peace.

In Dr. Besant's case we find that the personal suffering at the crucial stages of her life made her understand human suffering at large. Suffering of her child, her suffering for the child resulted in the awakening of sufferings for humanity. The burning questions and doubts about the very existence of God, with the depth of wisdom turned into immense, unfathomable faith in divine power and a mankind.

Thus, the pain, the suffering, sorrow, conflicts, doubts and questions eventually resulted in her personality becoming the fountainhead of limitless love, compassion and deep concern for the entire world. In theosophical parlance we generally say 'To live to benefit mankind.'

In fact much of the initiative for social and national work must come from these voluntary organizations. Unfortunately, very little work has been done in this direction in the country at large with the result that the energies of India's youth are at present directed along lines, which are not particularly, useful to the Nation. At a time like this we should provide useful channels of social work to the younger generation and thus lead them on to Idealism by means of spreading Besant's literature.

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