THE HUNTING OF LEVIATHAN

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SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY REACTIONS TO THE MATERIALISM AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS HOBBES

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PREFACE

Hobbes was the *bête noire* of his age. The principal objection to him, the one to which all other criticisms of him can ultimately be reduced, was that he was an atheist. He was the 'Monster of Malmesbury', the arch-atheist, the apostle of infidelity, the 'bug-bear of the nation'. His doctrines were cited by Parliament as a probable cause of the Great Fire of 1666. His books were banned and publicly burnt, and the ideas which Hobbes expressed in them in his lucid and potent style were the object of more or less continuous hostile criticism from 1650 to 1700.

The present study is an examination of this contemporary reaction in England. I have isolated Hobbes's materialism and moral philosophy because these two parts of Hobbes's system provoked the strongest reaction in their own time. Hobbes's critics viewed his denial of spirit and his ethical relativism as defections from the fundamental order of things, as heresies with the most dangerous consequences for religion; moreover a number of Hobbes's critics recognized that his materialism and his assumptions about morality were cardinal principles from which most of his other ideas flowed.

In our own time Hobbes is read chiefly as a political philosopher who developed a severely logical theory of absolutism. Hobbes's contemporaries would have regarded such an approach to his thought as too narrow: they considered his religious and metaphysical opinions and his political doctrines to be inseparable. The theory of commonwealth concerned them most for its Erastian implications, but even that was subordinated by them to the generally irreligious outlook which they detected in Hobbes's work. By studying their reactions we can gain a wider perspective of Hobbes's ideas, besides enriching our knowledge of seventeenth-century intellectual history. Modern scholars have, I believe, neglected the contemporary reaction at their peril. Even so closely-argued and brilliant a book as Howard Warrender's *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford, 1957) suffers from the absence

of an appropriate historical context against which the analysis of Hobbes's ideas can be measured.[1]

Seeing Hobbes against the background of his age is valuable not only for the light it sheds on Hobbes himself, but also for the revealing glimpses it affords us of seventeenth-century thought. Hobbes's impact was subtle: he provoked intense hostility, but he also obliged his critics to employ his own method of rational argument. Their absorption of his method while they resisted his ideas is an extremely interesting feature of seventeenth-century rationalism.

For the most part the critics were men of high intellectual attainment. It is fascinating to watch them grapple with the perennial problems of philosophy, to recall the strong religious convictions which animated their attacks on Hobbes, to sense the urgency and depth of their feeling, to realize that Hobbes was more than an abstraction; he was a real and vital challenge to their most cherished beliefs. The literature against Hobbes is charged with the drama of different world-views in collision.

The first chapter of this study offers a biographical sketch of Hobbes, with special regard to the controversies in which he was personally engaged. I have also thought it worth while in this chapter to indicate the wide range of Hobbes's interests, and to convey some sense of his personality. The second chapter is a retrospective view of Hobbes's system, and especially of his nominalism, materialism, legal positivism, and

[1] Only three modern scholars have studied the literature against Hobbes as a separate subject. They are John Laird, in his *Hobbes* (London, 1934), pp. 247–317; Sterling Lamprecht, in 'Hobbes and Hobbism', *American Political Science Review*, XXXIV (1940), 31–53; and John Bowle, in *Hobbes and His Critics: A Study in Seventeenth Century Constitutionalism* (London, 1951). Laird has studied Hobbes's influence from the contemporary period to the present day; his treatment of the contemporary reaction is brief, and is largely confined to rapid characterizations (in a few sentences each) of the major critics, with bibliographical notes on the minor writers. Some of Laird's comments are shrewd, but his study, though a readable survey of the whole subject, is cursory. Lamprecht defends Hobbes against misrepresentations, both contemporary and modern, and argues that the contemporary criticism was based very largely on misreadings and biased interpretations of Hobbes's works. Lamprecht's own reading of Hobbes is sympathetic and perceptive, but his treatment of Hobbes's critics is something less than fair. He does not analyse or even cite from the work of a single critic, and is thus able to leave the erroneous impression that all of the critics shared the misconceptions of the very worst among them. Bowle confines his book entirely to the political criticisms of Hobbes, excluding the attacks on Hobbes's metaphysics and religious opinions. It is with the latter two types of criticism that this present study is chiefly concerned.

ethics. The third chapter provides a rapid chronological survey of the criticism, plus a discussion of such questions as Hobbes's 'atheism' and the personal motives, if any, which moved his critics to attack him. In the remaining chapters, I have examined the separate reactions to Hobbes, which I have arranged by topics, following the order in which Hobbes himself presented his ideas in the *Leviathan*. Although I have only occasionally alluded to Hobbes's literary achievements, I have been conscious always of his role as a man of letters, a part which he played with great distinction, not merely because he was an accomplished prose stylist, a minor poet of some merit, and a literary critic of undoubted influence, but because his philosophical system itself attains to the status of art. He regarded his work as part of the long literary tradition of historiography, political theory, metaphysics, and ethics, and I have myself assimilated this broad and venerable conception of literature into my view of Hobbes as a man of letters.

In writing this book I have received sympathetic criticism and advice from many scholars and friends. It is a pleasure to record my debt of gratitude to them. Professor Marjorie H. Nicolson, who has supervised my work through all its stages, has been the best of all mentors—kindly, penetrating, instructive. Professor Rosalie L. Colie, besides encouraging me to write, has read my manuscript and offered the most valuable insights. Professors Sidney Gelber and Sidney Burrell have provided their own philosophical and historical criticism, and have saved me from many errors. I am indebted to Professor Allen T. Hazen for bibliographical advice, given with his usual generosity, and I acknowledge with thanks the help of Mrs Matilda Streichler. My colleagues at the City College of New York, Professor Philip P. Wiener and Professor Albert Friend, have made suggestions from which I have benefited. I am also grateful for a grant from the Research Fund of the City College.

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Trinity College was an invaluable guide, both to Hobbes and to Cambridge. I must also thank the many librarians who have helped me locate books, and especially Mr A. N. L. Munby, Fellow and Librarian of King's College, who placed at my disposal Lord Keynes's rich collection of Hobbesiana; Mr J. P. T. Bury, Fellow and Librarian of Corpus Christi College, who directed me to manuscript sources for the career of Daniel Scargill; and Mrs Hugh N. Foster, Curator of the McAlpin Collection at the Union Theological Seminary, for her tireless and cheerful service in my behalf. My greatest debt, for sustaining me with patience and tolerance through many years of labour, is to my wife.

S. I. M.

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