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978-1-107-68133-0 - Leslie Stephen and Matthew Arnold as Critics
of Wordsworth

John Dover Wilson

Excerpt

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LESLIE STEPHEN AND
MATTHEW ARNOLD AS
CRITICS *of* WORDSWORTH

The lecture you are presently to hear was already written when I became aware, to my dismay, that my immediate predecessor, Mr Desmond MacCarthy, had anticipated me by taking Leslie Stephen as the subject of the Leslie Stephen lecture for 1937. But dismay turned to self-congratulation when I read his discourse and saw that, so far from conflicting with or merely repeating him I had, in effect, written a sequel which he might have directly inspired. Two of his observations, in particular, will serve as the text for much that I shall have to say later. "It is impossible to imagine", he writes, "a Matthew Arnold who had never been at Oxford and a Leslie Stephen who had never been at Cambridge"; after which he goes on to define Stephen's literary criticism as "the adventures of the soul of

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Cambridge among masterpieces".¹ But Leslie Stephen was more than a Cambridge man, he was a student and don of Trinity Hall. And mine is a privilege denied to Mr MacCarthy. For, appointed at a time when the Master of Trinity Hall is Vice-Chancellor of the University, I stand to-day in the college which was Stephen's home for fourteen years and on the dais from which he must I suppose himself have delivered many lectures. Piety, therefore, would have compelled me to address you upon some aspect of Stephen's work, apart from all other considerations.

Of Stephen's connection with Trinity Hall it would be impertinence in me to speak; for I am an outsider, even if, being myself connected with the house over the way, I can claim to be in some sense a neighbour. Nor do I need to remind this audience that, during the reign of the Rev. Leslie Stephen as junior tutor and rowing coach, Trinity Hall for the first time finished head of the river and pro-

¹ Desmond MacCarthy, *Leslie Stephen*, 1937, p. 23.

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duced a senior wrangler. He is said to have “*made* the boat of 1859 which was the pioneer of all Trinity Hall’s successes” since.¹ And it is from the senior wrangler, afterwards Sir Robert Romer, Lord Justice of Appeal, that we receive the most intimate picture of him at Cambridge. “Perhaps I can best describe him”, Romer writes, “as he appears in my memory, by saying that he was a great athlete in mind and body, with a most generous and affectionate nature. That he was a great athlete in body was apparent to all. With a tall, almost gaunt body, devoid of all superfluous flesh and with muscles like steel, he was, for an amateur, one of the very best walkers and mountain climbers of his day.” Yet, Romer continues, “it was not as an athlete even then that he was chiefly distinguished, or that he acquired the great influence that he had over the young men that were under him. What chiefly impressed and affected us was the keen intellect he displayed, coupled with the

¹ *Life of Leslie Stephen*, by F. W. Maitland, p. 58.

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generous enthusiasm he had for the subjects that interested him—and they were many—and above all the warm heart that was apparent to all that knew him”.¹

What the older Fellows thought about him it is difficult to discover; but he must have seemed to the undergraduates the almost perfect tutor. And if anything was needed to set the seal upon their admiration for the sportsman, the scholar and the man, it was supplied by an unconventionality and indifference to appearances which the young always rejoice to find in a don. Stephen, it appears, was one of the founders of athletic sports in the university, and once he made a match with a well-known runner for a race in which *he* should walk two miles while the runner ran three. He was beaten in the last thirty yards, but the finish brought him laurels of a kind. For walking, Romer tells us, “in an old flannel shirt and ordinary trousers. . . his shirt gradually worked itself up and had

¹ *Life*, p. 57.

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ultimately to be discarded, to the great scandal of some of his brother dons, and to the delight of all the undergraduates and strangers". The scene became famous, and even gave rise to the printing of an elaborate mathematical joke setting forth the problem of the "successive denudations" of "a certain graduate whose regard for appearances varies inversely as his velocity". Equally famous were the grey flannel trousers which he wore on the towing path as he cursed the boat. The said trousers, we are told, were graced "with a large amorphous patch of reddish purple material in the seat thereof", the material having once "formed part of the petticoat of the wife of an Alpine guide", who had been called upon to mend a rent torn by a jagged rock. "This", remarks his biographer, "is the only purple patch with which Sir Leslie Stephen can be charged";¹ which from F. W. Maitland is high praise, indeed.

But as Beowulf's poet has said: "Oft have

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we heard in the days of yore, how the kings of the Danes won glory, how the athlings wrought mighty deeds of valour.” And so, only one more Cambridge reminiscence, this time from Stephen’s own pen, as an introduction to what follows. More than thirty years after leaving Trinity Hall, he delivered a lecture, which he called “Forgotten Benefactors”, commemorating among others a former student of his, in these words:

Long years ago I knew a young man at college; he was so far from being intellectually eminent that he had great difficulty in passing his examinations; he died from the effects of an accident within a very short time after leaving the university, and hardly any one would now remember his name. He had not the smallest impression that there was anything remarkable about himself, and looked up to his teachers and his more brilliant companions with a loyal admiration which would have made him wonder that they should ever take notice of him. And yet I often thought then, and I believe, in looking back, that I

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thought rightly, that he was of more real use to his contemporaries than any of the persons to whose influence they would most naturally refer as having affected their development. The secret was a very simple one. Without any special intellectual capacity, he somehow represented a beautiful moral type. He possessed the “simple faith miscalled simplicity”, and was so absolutely unselfish, so conspicuously pure in his whole life and conduct, so unsuspecting of evil in others, so sweet and loyal in his nature, that to know him was to have before one’s eyes an embodiment of some of the most lovable and really admirable qualities that a human being can possess. . . . He would have been unfeignedly surprised to hear, what I most sincerely believe to have been the truth, that his tutor owed incomparably more to his living exemplification of what is meant by a character of unblemished purity and simplicity, than he owed to the tutor, whose respectable platitudes he received with unaffected humility.¹

There speaks the essential Stephen; there glows “the warm heart that was apparent to all that

¹ *Social Rights and Duties*, II, pp. 247–9.

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knew him". But his singling out of this particular type for notice reveals something even more about him: it shows him to have been instinctively and passionately of Wordsworth's mind. For the portrait of the unnamed Trinity Hall boy who died in the late fifties or early sixties of last century, though of course not intended to challenge them in the sphere of art, belongs in feeling and emphasis to the same school as *Michael*, *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, *The Leech-gatherer* and other figures in Wordsworth's gallery.

He resembled Wordsworth too in his passion for truth as he saw it, in his almost stark integrity of mind, and above all in his profound moral sense. For though, as we shall see, intensely disliking cant and always ready to smile at moral priggery, he was himself to sacrifice too much to conscience to regard it as anything but one of the great realities. A nature like his was indeed bound to suffer. And the crisis which Wordsworth describes in the tenth book of *The Prelude* finds its

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parallel in the years, to him years of anguish, during which Stephen, having discovered that he could no longer live as a clergyman, gave up first his tutorship and then his beloved home in this college. He stole out of Cambridge at the beginning of 1865, without fuss, without following, almost without being noticed. And the brief memorandum of his thoughts at the time, jotted down in shorthand for no eye but his own, has for me the heroic quality we associate with the records of Antarctic exploration. It concludes with these words: "I now believe in nothing, to put it shortly; but I do not the less believe in morality, etc., etc. I mean to live and die like a gentleman if possible."¹

Then there is Stephen the nature-lover. He knew the Alps as well as any other man of his time; and no one who has read *The Playground of Europe*, which contains "The Alps in Winter" and "Sunset on Mont Blanc", two of the most satisfying descriptions of mountain

¹ *Life*, p. 144.

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scenery in the language, can have failed to observe the affinity with Wordsworth. Not that Stephen is in the least derivative; at times he seems even to resent the thought of Wordsworth at his elbow, and turns, as it were, to exorcise his spirit. He has scaled the heights by his own efforts and skill, and worships the divinity in his own right and with his own eyes. Yet the divinity is the same, and the posture of the two men strikingly similar. Wordsworth speaks of

a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky and in the mind of man.

And Stephen asks:

Where does Mont Blanc end, and where do I begin? That is the question which no metaphysician has hitherto succeeded in answering. But at least the connection is close and intimate. He is a part of the great machinery in which my physical frame is inextricably involved, and not the less inter-

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