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Before the University of Cambridge on 26 May 1917

Charles Whibley

Excerpt

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JONATHAN SWIFT

The most of writers are freed by death from the enmities and controversies of life. Of Swift alone it may be said that the evil opinion they held of him, who had felt his righteous scourge, was not interred with his bones. Ever since the light of his genius went out in the darkness of misery, he has been attacked, with a violent rancour, by critics who regarded him not as a great historical figure, but as a miscreant who had inflicted upon them a personal injury. These critics clamoured in a loud voice not for judgment, but for vengeance. The passage of a century did not mitigate their animosity nor soften their rage. For Macaulay, Swift was an apostate politician, a ribald priest, a perjured lover, a heart burning with hatred against the whole human race, a mind richly stored with images from the dunghill and the

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lazar-house. These expletives mean nothing more than that Macaulay was a Whig, and that Swift was a Tory, a kind of antiquated Croker, whose varlet's jacket it was the proper business of an Edinburgh Reviewer to dust. Thackeray's attack upon Swift is far more virulent and less easily explained than Macaulay's. There is no vileness, of which a Yahoo might be capable, that the author of *Esmond* does not attribute to his foe. Indeed I do not know why the sinister figure, which Thackeray chooses to invent, should have been included in a gallery of English Humourists at all. There is little humour in the ruffian, whose very virtues were, according to Thackeray, vices in disguise, who insulted those whom he succoured, who flung his benefactions in poor men's faces, who was "boisterously servile," and who, a "life-long hypocrite," put his apostasy out to hire. Of Swift's *Modest Proposal* Thackeray has nothing wiser to say than that "he enters the nursery with the tread and gaiety of an ogre." Even *Gulliver*, which, defying time and place, is

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as fresh to-day as when it was written, and has found a home in every corner of the globe, which is read by children for its fable and by men for its satire, merely arouses the wrath of the critic: "As for the moral," says Thackeray, "I think it horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous; and giant and great as this Dean is, I say we should hoot him."

Hooting is perhaps not the soundest method of criticism, and yet were Swift all that he has been painted, hooting would seem mild and inefficient. "If you had been his inferior in parts"—again it is Thackeray who speaks—"his equal in mere social station, he would have bullied, scorned, and insulted you; if, undeterred by his great reputation, you had met him like a man, he would have quailed before you, and not had the pluck to reply, and gone home, and years after written a foul epigram about you—watched for you in a sewer, and come out to assail you with a coward's blow and a dirty bludgeon." Of course this amazing invective, which has no touch with reality, is an expression of Victorian prejudice and no more.

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Thackeray himself does not attempt to justify it, and it is not worth refutation. But it makes us wonder why Swift, alone of men and writers, should be thus singled out for posthumous obloquy, and persuades us to discover if we can what definite charge has been brought against his character and his genius.

He was a misanthrope, says the Friend of Man. And Swift himself gave some colour to this charge. In a famous letter to Pope he explained the system upon which he had governed himself many years. "I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities," he says, "and all my love is towards individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-One, and Judge Such-a-One....But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth." And which, indeed, is better: to love John, Peter, and Thomas with a constant heart, or feigning a bland and general love of abstract humanity, to wreak a wild revenge upon individuals? We know well enough

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whither universal philanthropy leads us. The Friend of Man is seldom the friend of men. At his best, he is content with a moral maxim, and buttons up his pocket in the presence of poverty. “*I give thee sixpence! I will see thee damned first.*” It is not for nothing that Canning’s immortal words were put in the mouth of the Friend of Humanity, who finding that he cannot turn the Needy Knife-grinder to political account, gives him kicks for ha’pence, and goes off in “a transport of republican enthusiasm.” Such is the Friend of Man at his best. At his worst, he expresses his philanthropy most eloquently upon the scaffold. Robespierre and the infamous Joseph Le Bon, for instance, loved humanity so dearly that they delighted to see the heads of men and women too fall beneath the knife of the guillotine. Perhaps they thought of Humanity as a tree, which would grow in greater strength and beauty, the more savagely it was pruned.

For this philanthropy, then, Swift cared nothing. He loved such of his friends, as he deemed worthy of his love, with

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an unchanging loyalty. He did not close his eyes to the general infamy of mankind. He had lived at too close quarters with politics and politicians to harbour the genial, easy-going illusions of the philanthropist. While he knew the true worth of his friends, he admitted that such men as they were rare visitants upon this earth. “Oh! if the world had but a dozen Arbuthnots in it, I would burn my *Travels*”—thus he wrote to Pope soon after the publishing of *Gulliver*. But there were not a dozen Arbuthnots, and the irony of *Gulliver* was abundantly justified.

And then we hear Thackeray objecting that he would not have liked to live with Swift, he would not have been a friend of the great Dean. As he lay in no danger of this awkward companionship, the objection seems irrelevant. But there is no doubt that the best of Swift’s contemporaries were very eager to live with him. He was, so to say, a great centre of amiability and friendship. He held together, in pleasant bondage to himself, the most highly distinguished men of his

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time. Since he did not waste his affection upon the vague thing, called humanity, he had all the more to spare for those friends who loved and understood him. Even when he is as far from them as Dublin is from London, he dominates them by the mere force of his constancy. You feel that they would not have thought so warmly one of another, if they had not united in thinking warmly of him.

Nor did he take a light or trivial view of the bond which he believed should hold good men together. "I have often endeavoured," he wrote to Pope, in 1723, "to establish a friendship among all men of genius, and would fain have it done. They are seldom above three or four contemporaries, and if they could be united would drive the world before them. I think it was so among the poets in the time of Augustus, but envy, party, and pride have hindered it among us." Swift's was a dream which could never come true. What could men of genius, held together by an indissoluble bond, achieve against the settled opposition of mediocrity? They could indulge their talent for friend-

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ship—that is all. And in this indulgence assuredly Swift never fell below his opportunity. Those friends he had, and their adoption tried, he kept until the last separation of death. They belonged to many worlds, and Swift was the captain of them all. If they were busied with affairs, Swift knew how to separate the man from the politician. “I always loved you just so much the worse for your station,” he wrote to Harley in the hour of Harley’s trial, “for in your public capacity you have often angered me to the heart, but, as a private man, never once.” His affection for Harley survived all the chances and changes of life, even the bitter feud, which separated St John from his leader; and the affection was transmitted faithfully to Harley’s son.

So too Ormond, Peterborough and Bathurst delighted in his companionship, without thought of self. But the four friends, whose names will ever be linked with Swift’s, are Bolingbroke and Arbuthnot, Pope and Gay. There is nothing in the correspondence, which passed be-

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tween these great men, that does not do them honour. Transparently sincere himself, Swift schooled even Pope to sincerity. When Swift is in Ireland, they are urgent one and all that he should visit them in London. They disclose their literary plans to him, as to one who is always ready with counsel and never at fault. And Swift treated them, each after his kind, with the truthfulness of a friend.

Indulgent to Gay's foibles, he addresses him as a father might address a loved and careless son. He would have him save his money, that he might live happily independent of court and patronage. He is anxious always lest Gay should squander his talent unworthily, and be content to repeat himself and his old successes. And yet so nicely did he measure the limits of Gay's fancy, that it was he who suggested the theme of *The Beggar's Opera*. "What think you of a Newgate pastoral," wrote Swift to Pope, in his desire to fit Gay with a subject, "among the thieves and whores there?" And Gay repaid his friend with a joyous devotion, sent him the news of the town, touched lightly

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as he alone could touch it, persuaded the Duchess of Queensberry to entertain the Dean with letters, and was tireless in transmitting the kindly messages of his friends. Nor did he forget Swift in the very presence of death. "He asked for you a few hours before," wrote Pope, and Swift showed his sensibility by endorsing Pope's letter, a sad messenger of woe, with the words: "On my dear friend Mr Gay's death; received December 15th, but not read till the 20th, by an impulse foreboding some misfortune."

It mattered not which of the four Swift addressed. He wrote to him fully and faithfully what was in his mind. Now and again he seems to remember that Pope is vastly superior to him in the artistry of verse. Of this superiority he makes full confession in the poem on his own death:

In Pope I cannot read a line,
But with a sigh I wish it mine;
When he can in one couplet fix
More sense than I can do in six.

But otherwise his comradeship knows no