

Afterword to *Erewhon*

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Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* is the first modern utopian romance. With *Gulliver's Travels*, of which Butler made a close study, it directly anticipates Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *1984*, and that huge variegated mass, covering everything from the genuinely imaginative to the crassly sensational, which we know as science fiction. In its gaiety, wit, and inventiveness, *Erewhon* seems distinctly more contemporary than most of its successors, tougher and less wish-fulfilling than William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1891), less glumly single-minded than the average nightmare future envisioned by living writers. It is in comparison with the utopian narratives preceeding it, however, that the characteristic qualities of *Erewhon* appear most clearly.

Its title refers us back to that other equivalent of "Nowhere," More's *Utopia* itself, the parent of innumerable vague schemes or dreams concerned with human betterment and, like them, weakened as fiction by the dimness with which its marvels are visualised as well as by its tenuous connections with the real world. In these respects, the other main stream of the utopian tradition is generally superior, that in which features of contemporary society are stood on their head for purposes of satire or simple clowning, and of which the *Mundus Alter et Idem*, attributed to Bishop Hall (1607), with its women's parliament in perpetual session and its drunkards' paradise, is one of the earliest and most entertaining examples. Only Swift, before Butler, saw the utopian convention as elastic enough to accommodate both sets of interests, the serious-ideological and the comic-satirical, and widened it further to include adventure, preaching, wonder, terror, parody, obsession.

Butler's achievement can be neatly gauged by a reading of *The Coming Race*, which was published in 1870, two years before *Erewhon*. The author was the fashionable novelist and ex-dandy Lord Lytton, who was widely believed, *Erewhon* having appeared anonymously, to be the author of that, too. (With typical grouchiness Butler complained that his sales fell off when the true authorship was revealed the following year in the fifth edition.) Such a belief does little credit to the penetration of the Victorian reading public, for *The Coming Race* is a naive, pompous, disquisitionary tale, more modern than Butler's book only in its accidental anticipation of something analogous to atomic energy, re-

calling Swift only in the utter deadness and negativism of the paradisaal society it depicts, lively only in the vulgarity of some passages of anti-American satire.

In contrast, *Erewhon* is a model of agile sophistication, no less talkative but never pedagogical, making its points in half a dozen different ways instead of the single one of flat exposition, in the one episode of the musical statues inspiring more wonder than any of Lytton's conventional monsters and automata, embodying the perception that in a story of this kind, many thrusts can best be made parenthetically, as diversions – one thinks of the Hospital for Incurable Bores, rumours of which in the outside world have done much to maintain Erewhon's isolation, or of the self-contained allegory of sexual rebellion in which a youth breaks the prevailing vegetarian code by devouring a beefsteak and feels just wonderful the next day. To speak of such matters as thrusts emphasises the point that *Erewhon*, on the surface at least, is a work of deflation, the author's wit being used as an offensive weapon to probe the reader's mental laziness, to find out the vulnerable areas in his habitual reasoning, and to puncture his complacencies.

The main tactic used by Butler to this end is to advance arguments on more than one side of a question and to change from one side to another when apparently in full unambiguous rhetorical flood. Only right at the end do we reach a passage in which the satire moves in a single direction against a single target: the proposal "to take a light gunboat (for we must protect ourselves) to the outskirts of the Erewhonian country" and bring the inhabitants under British colonial rule. Higgs, the hero, assures us that this will bring unsurpassable benefits all round, the heathen natives enjoying the twin blessings of useful work and conversion to Christianity, their protectors similarly enriched both financially and in the agreeable consciousness of working God's will. Elsewhere, Higgs is a double figure, sometimes satirised by Butler as an earnestly pushing member of the Church of England, eager for the glory of having, as he imagines, rediscovered the lost tribes of Israel in the Erewhonians, but more often a stalking horse for the author's satirical onsets on conventional attitudes.

In each of the half dozen chief topics or episodes of satire, Butler works from at least two points of view, usually contradicting one another. Thus, in the account of the Erewhonians' worship of Ydgrun – Mrs. Grundy, or conventional what-will-the-neighbours-say propriety – what one might expect to be a wholehearted attack on this deity, with her law of "conformity until absolutely intolerable," is swiftly modified by the less easy notions that at any rate she provides some sort of rule of life for those in need of one but unable to grasp a

worthier, and that the raising of conventional standards of morality would be a more practicable “spiritual boon” than most. Similarly, when received religious ideas are allegorised as the valueless currency of the Musical Banks, with ministers appearing in the guise of cashiers and articling their sons to the profession in infancy (Butler’s father wanted him to follow parental precedent and be ordained), satire is abruptly laid aside at the last minute and the Banks commended for their refusal to meddle in the diviner mysteries. The universities, again, come in for a severe and very entertaining assault as the Colleges of Unreason (Butler had a score to pay off against Cambridge), citadels of mediocrity in which the giving of an opinion is at all costs to be avoided, and the satire here comes close to being unidirectional, but once more there is qualification, in the evident practical value of the course in Worldly Wisdom.

So far, the issues, if complex, are at any rate straightforward. The two main satirical episodes, however, those involving the Erewhonian treatment of crime and disease, and the Erewhonian theories of machines, are complicated. It is not always easy to detect the stage at which Butler leaps from one side to another in his argument, nor should we suppose that each and every point in the debate is to be exhausted by a single interpretation, for in the handling of the crime-and-disease topic there are five discernible threads. When Higgs finds that the Erewhonians deal with crime as an illness to be treated scientifically, his cautious approval of this notion is Butler telling the Victorians that their treatment of crime is grossly irrational, outdated, and inhumane, but when Higgs notes the fantastic tribulations accepted by the peccant Mr. Nosnibor at the hands of his “straightener,” Butler is satirising his public’s slavish reliance on doctors, and incidentally providing a sort of comment-by-anticipation on the unquestioning obedience contemporary man pays to his psychoanalyst. In the third place, Butler conveys through Higgs his own feeling that the Erewhonians are not merely being eccentric in the admiring tribute they pay to health and prosperity: we all do this, he says, and rightly, for these qualities are truly admirable, both in themselves and as desirable social goals, and he rubs this in by Higgs’s observation that Erewhonian delinquents are shunned as we shun “those who are either poor or poorly.” Court prosecutions for illness and misfortune shock Higgs as leading to a denial of common humanity, which is Butler on the other side of the fence demonstrating how far strict adherence to logic will take us in the direction of cruelty or absurdity. The whole is rounded off by a satirical dig at penal reformers who retain the concept of deterrent punishment: “they would therefore both flog and hang, but they would do so pitifully.”

The complications of Butler's arguments about the Machines, which are in part a discussion of evolution, reflect his ambivalent attitude to Darwin as, in the first place, a glorious liberator from the shackles of religious literalism, and in the second place, a fearful heresiarch encouraging a mechanistic view of human nature (plus a bit of a father figure in Butler's life, which, in view of Butler, senior's, behavior, was worse still). Consequently, although the extracts from the Erewhonian Book of the Machines are based on earlier material written when Butler was a devout Darwinian, their effect in *Erewhon* is of an attack on Darwinism. If man is only a machine, Butler propounds through his first Erewhonian mouthpiece, then machines can become superhuman – but, just as in the case of the trials for misfortune, logic and argument can take us beyond reason, and machines by their unchangeably mechanical nature are a negative demonstration of the humanity of man. And if, as the second Erewhonian writer maintains, machines are only man's artificial limbs, then the human functions of his natural limbs are the result, not of blind Darwinian chance, but of purposeful Lamarckian effort.

The dust of forgotten controversy lies thick upon this part of Butler's tale – less thick nowadays, even so, than at any previous time in this century, for the arrival of the electronic computer has given a new topicality to the idea of thinking machines, and Butler has done a service he can never have dreamed of by setting out in all their self-evident absurdity parts of the case for holding that thought is conceivable outside the human brain. But this aside, it must be admitted that the non-Darwinian, nonanalogical aspects of the Book of the Machines appeal more directly to a reader of today. Butler's machines function in part as forerunners of our own scientific revolution, of the age of automation, and embody a simple warning of its dangers, fusing here with innumerable subsequent mechanisations glimpsed by the contemporary fancy. With that contrariety so typical of Butler, however, the machine is viewed not only as a threat, a constricting force, but also as a promise, a liberation from the tyranny of petty toil. Alongside all his dedicated self-absorption, Butler was not wholly indifferent to the people who did the work in Victorian England.

But he nearly was, as to everybody who failed to arouse his deepest personal enmity or love, and that was nearly everybody. His was a life thin in intimacy of any kind. Only in his single straight novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, does Butler betray an interest in men and women as individuals, and there it was mostly a profound, hostile and resentful interest in his father and mother, enabling him to write the first great antifamily book. When Higgs reappears in *Erewhon*

Revisited (1901) as the central figure in a satire on religious revelation, and finds that in addition to having become a god he has also fathered a son on Yram, his former jailer's daughter, his shocked surprise is matched by that of the reader, who has difficulty in imagining him capable of noticing the girl to the extent necessary. Arowhena, too, with whom Higgs escapes at the end of *Erewhon*, is a figure visualised so anemically as to recall the heroines of that other and very different architect of the modern utopia, Jules Verne. It was this emotional poverty as much as anything, perhaps, that prevented Butler from extending his preludial adventure narrative beyond the first episode in *Erewhon* itself, and kept him bogged down, as Lytton and Swift had been before him, in the slack routine of arrival (more or less circumstantially detailed), conducted tour (rich in description, poor in incident), and departure (hasty). Despite Huxley's far greater skill in disguising it, one can trace the same pattern of inaction in *Brave New World*, and might assign it to a similar cause.

Connections can likewise be drawn between another weakness in *Erewhon* and one in Butler's character. The changes of front in argument, the sustained ambiguities, play their important part in giving the book its dry, invigorating flavor, but seen in another way, they come perilously close at times – the Yd-grun section is such a time – to being mere equivocation, a hedging of bets, not audacity but caution. Something in Butler prevented him from ever quite revealing himself as he was, and it is not hard to see what. His childhood had been one long agony of dissimulation, a battle not so much with his father as with his treacherous, confidence-betraying mother; his maturity was tortured by (almost certainly Platonic) homosexual attachments desperately disguised as friendship; his relations with the woman who meant most to him were poisoned by his dread of intimacy and his inability to confess this to her. His life came perforce to be built on saying one thing, meaning another, and doing a third. Although ostensibly his father's bitter enemy, he never broke with him; it was in deference to Canon Butler that cuts were made in *Erewhon*, that the book was published anonymously to start with, and this, one may be sure, was not only the result of Butler's financial dependence on his father.

It is not surprising, then, if the intention of *Erewhon* is sometimes obscure, and Butler's irony could become so devious that his next work, *The Fair Haven*, intended as an attack on the evidence for the Resurrection, was quoted from Victorian pulpits as an inspiring refutation of scientific scepticism. Butler's character was enmeshed in paradox (a form of epigram to which he was significantly attached): he craved affection and was afraid of it; he would have liked

evolution to be a testimony to the human spirit, and correspondingly he was an atheist of sorts working for a Christianity of sorts – he rebelled and yet remained within the fold. This last was his real tragedy, and it was none of his doing: that stifling ecclesiastical household in nineteenth-century provincial England, with its dreary puritanism denying all forms of pleasure, rendered him for life the prey of doubt, misgiving, dissatisfaction, restlessness, apathy.

Butler's career accordingly contains large tracts of wasted time. Who now glances at the pictures he tried for years to learn to paint, listens to the Handelian oratorios he dabbled with, reads his interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets, bothers with his industriously assembled proofs that Nausicaä was the authoress of the *Odyssey* and that the poem describes a circumnavigation of Sicily? Even the *Note Books*, full as they are of fine caustic thrusts, are always falling into eccentricity and dullness; even *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*, which will survive on their merits for a good long while yet, suffer from the speculating, philosophising compulsion that turns into essay and statement what would have been better dramatised. It is a final irony that the most vivid and memorable feature of *Erewhon* is not the ideas which so fascinated Butler but the physical appearance and aura of the inhabitants themselves.

Here Butler's obsessions and frustrations take off on their own. Being himself ugly, shabby, and introverted, perpetually ailing and surrounded by the ailing, he reverences the Erewhonians, as he revered the Italian peasants he travelled among, for their beauty, their look of glowing health, their pride in their appearance, their natural confident courtesy. But more than this he admires their temperament, which was all his could never be, their sharp way with illness, with the unfortunate, the squalid, the difficult, the upsetting, the conscience-arousing. And above all, the Erewhonian is completely his own man, not plagued by guilt or sentimentality, instinctively doing the right and appropriate thing without the intervention of sterilising, incapacitating thought. He, not Higgs, not Butler, not the Professor of Worldly Wisdom, not any voluble contributor to the Book of the Machines, is the real hero of *Erewhon*.