

The Satire of Samuel Butler

Edmund Wilson
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The genius of Samuel Butler was a livid intense flash. It brought out the black darkness around it, then itself rather quickly dimmed out.

The child of a provincial English rectory, he grew up in the narrowest, the most snobbish, the most bigoted and the most ungracious atmosphere which the Protestant nineteenth century produced. He rebelled against it and broke away from it, and he damned it forever in his masterpiece, *The Way of All Flesh*, which is likely to survive as one of the classical accounts of how hateful life could become when the successful British middle class mixed avarice with religion. "I had to steal my own birthright," says Butler. "I stole it and was bitterly punished. But I saved my soul alive." The punishment had affected him more permanently than he knew. He had blasted Langar Rectory to eternity, but it had left upon him its blight. His soul was alive; but, as Bernard Shaw says, he had been maimed by his early training. Having begun as the bad boy of a pious family, he was never to outgrow his original reactions. The dread of his father's bullying rage and his mother's harrowing prayers could still inhibit his mental processes; and up to the day of his death he could never assert himself without something of the sulkiness of the adolescent child who blurts out that he doesn't believe the Bible, betraying by his excessive pugnacity the delusion that the world, like his family, was conspiring to keep him down.

The Freudian would be able to show how, even after Butler had escaped from the domination of his father, he was still forced to keep putting in his father's place other persons of high authority and, identifying himself with some lesser person, to insist on the latter's superior claims. Dante, Virgil, Bach, Beethoven and Darwin had all to play the role of old Butler, while Handel, Giovanni Bellini, Tabachetti and Guadenzio Ferrari were one by one put forward as the snubbed young man. When he did admire accepted reputations, as in the case of Shakespeare and Homer, he had to work up heretical theories that flew in the face of authority as to who they had really been and what they had really meant. And though in *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh* his revolt against his father had inspired him to what is certainly his most brilliant work, his controversies with substitute fathers became less and less interesting as Butler grew older, and he himself ended as a kind of crank. The shadows of the rectory

were closing on him. His wit had attracted attention when *Erewhon* had first come out, but his work was not to be accepted as a part of the general culture of the time till after Butler's death, when *The Way of All Flesh* was published, and Bernard Shaw, the great popularizer, introduced him to a larger public. Shaw points out that, though Butler had revolted against the intolerance of his parents and though he yearned all his life toward a world in which opinions were playful and manners easy, he became as intolerant about Darwin as his father had been about himself; and the elder Yeats has put on record that, if one happened to meet Butler on a railway journey, his aspect could be so forbidding that one did not dare to speak to him first.

Erewhon, however, which was written in Butler's late twenties and early thirties, has the freshness and the bravado of his first defiance of the rectory and of his escape from his father and from England; and it is consequently his most attractive though not perhaps his greatest book. While the young Samuel Butler, just up from Cambridge, had been preparing for ordination in London, his religious faith had been shaken by his discovery that, among the poor boys in a class he was teaching, the ones who had not been baptized were by no means, so far as he could see, morally inferior to the ones who had; and, to the tune of lamentation and fury on the part of his father and mother, he had decided that the Church was not for him. He had persuaded his father to send him to New Zealand; and there in less than five years' time he had nearly doubled the £4,400 with which his father had grudgingly equipped him. The adventures amid wild and beautiful landscapes which finally bring Butler's hero to Erewhon are simply Butler's own travels in New Zealand; and his satire has here the clear-headedness and the high spirits of freedom of a young man on his own a long way from home. When he comes back to England, his father will not fail to cloud this clearness by insisting that the publication of *Erewhon* has caused Samuel's mother's death; and when in later years he travels in Sicily, he will receive no more vital revelation than that of his unprovable theory of the feminine authorship of the *Odyssey*. But he enjoys, in his *Erewhon* period, something of true intellectual liberation. (Two of the best of his later books – *The Way of All Flesh* and *Life and Habit* – followed closely on *Erewhon*.) He comes into contact here more intimately than ever afterwards with that ideal race of healthy and natural beings, gay, good-mannered and with comfortable consciences, whom he had imagined as the antithesis of the rectory and who were to haunt him and make him wistful all his life. (It will still be the legend of such a race which will delight him so much in Homer; and the "authoress of

the *Odyssey*” herself seems a fantasy of such an ideal mate as he might have hoped to find among them.) Here even the eternal antagonism that Butler felt toward his father loses some of its bitterness and strain. In the chapter on *The World of the Unborn*, there is a magnanimous, an almost tender, insight of a kind very rare in Butler. For the moment he is free not to hate; he can understand that parents have not chosen their children any more than their children have chosen them, and that the plight in which the situation places us may be equally cruel for both.

Butler’s *Erewhon*, therefore, is not a production that can be compared with *Candide* or *Gulliver’s Travels*. The book is not a definite expression of a satirical point of view based on mature experience: it is the brilliant first fling of an able and gifted young man. It does not pretend to either the logic of Swift or the singleness of intention of Voltaire. The narrative is simply a device for uniting an assortment of satirical notions – in some cases, reductions to absurdity of English conceptions and institutions; in other cases, whimsical suggestions for improving them by their own methods; in still others, flights of fantastic reasoning whose application is rather uncertain.

Of this last kind, *The Book of Machines* is a curious and interesting example. Here there seem to be several intentions involved. One recognizes at once a burlesque of the methods of theological controversy. Samuel Butler had been brought up on theology, and its sophistries had affected his habits of thought in such a way that, when he sets out to write mock apologetics in a later book, *The Fair Haven*, attempting to discredit the Resurrection by inventing a simple-minded churchman who defends it with fallacious arguments, he misses fire through working on too large a scale and sounding too much in earnest, whereas the arguments of *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, which he means to be taken seriously, coming after his insidious satires, only put us on our guard against his theory. *The Book of the Machines*, he asserted as first, was a parody of the famous *Analogy* of that Butler (unrelated to himself) who had tried to defend revealed religion against the attacks of the Deists by demonstrating that their objections could equally well be urged against the known constitution of Nature. In a discussion of *Erewhon* in a letter, not long after its publication, Butler says of what he calls his “obviously absurd theory that they [the machines] are about to supplant the human race and be developed into a higher kind of life”: “When I first got hold of the idea, I developed it for mere fun and because it amused me and I thought would amuse others, but without a particle of serious meaning; but I developed it and introduced it into *Erewhon* with the intention

of implying: ‘See how easy it is to be plausible, and what absurd propositions can be defended by a little ingenuity and distortion and departure from strictly scientific methods,’ and I had Butler’s *Analogy* in my head as the book at which it should be aimed, but preferred to conceal my aim.”

But he had also another book in mind. This disquisition, when it had first appeared as an article in a New Zealand paper, had been called *Darwin Among the Machines*; and though Butler denied in his preface that he had intended to make fun of Darwin’s theory, he acknowledged later on that he had intended to criticize it. “With *Erewhon*,” Butler declared in a letter of 1902, “Charles Darwin smelt danger from afar. . . . He knew very well that the machine chapters in *Erewhon* would not end there.” *The Book of the Machines* is thus, also, the first thrust in the battle with Darwinism that Butler was fighting all his life. If man and the other animals could develop through natural selection, why could not machines do so likewise? Had not Darwin, in assuming that the animals were mechanical, made it unthinkable that life should be purposive? Had he not “banished mind from the universe”? Samuel Butler has put himself in the queer situation – which would be interesting to analyze – of attacking on moral grounds the man who had supplied the most damaging weapons to the assault on that orthodox religion against which Butler himself was a rebel. For Samuel Butler was a moral philosopher, to use the old-fashioned term: he never became a modern scientist. He stuck halfway in an anomalous position between science and traditional theology. It was again the shell of the rectory which Samuel the rebel could never shed – and perhaps he felt some envy of Darwin, who had been a pupil of his grandfather’s, the Bishop Butler who had been head of Shrewsbury School. Yet, working in his cramped intellectual space, he was able to drive home his Lamarckian point with intensity and telling effect.

There is, of course, however, in the fantasy of the machines another satiric theme and one much more obvious to us today, though evidently not so obvious to Butler: the appalling possibilities of the enslavement of man by the machine. “Man’s very soul,” Butler writes, “is due to the machines; it is a machine-made thing; he thinks as he thinks, and feels as he feels, through the work that machines have wrought upon him, and their existence is quite as much a *sine qua non* for his, as his for theirs.” Nor does he fail to note the relation between the development of machinery and the competitive industrial system: “It is for neglecting them [the machines] that he [man] incurs their wrath, or for using inferior machines, or for not making sufficient exertions to invent new ones, or for destroying them without replacing them. . . . The machines, being of

themselves unable to struggle, have got man to do their struggling for them: as long as he fulfills this function duly, all goes well with him – at least he thinks so; but the moment he fails to do his best for the advancement of machinery by encouraging the good and destroying the bad, he is left behind in the race of competition; and this means that he will be made uncomfortable in a variety of ways, and perhaps die.”

How did Butler, five years after *Das Kapital*, eighteen years after Dickens’ *Hard Times*, fail to satirize the profit-motive, which was turning the machine into a tyrant? He was far from approving the kind of civilization that the middle class had brought with it in its rise. He envied, on the one hand, the civilized primitives of the world of the Homeric poems (who lived before the machines) and of Erewhon (where they had destroyed them); and, on the other hand, the worldly upper class as represented by Townley in *The Way of All Flesh*. When he makes Ernest in *The Way of All Flesh* turn shopkeeper and marry the housemaid whom his mother has turned away and send his children to be brought up by simple people such as his own great-grandfather had been, Butler is criticizing the evolution of his own family. The Butlers, taking flight from the linen-draper who had been the father of Bishop Butler, had accumulated in two generations the education, the religion and the snobbery which they had unloaded on the unhappy Samuel. He understood very well the preoccupation of the Victorians with money; and in his use of money as a comic motivation he ran true to the satiric school of his time. For the Elizabethan dramatists, the Barabases and the Volpones were still more or less exceptional monsters. But for Dickens, the Jonas Chuzzlewits, the Bounderbys, the Smallweeds and the Grides were common types of the dominant class. And with such comedies of Gilbert’s as *Engaged* and the plays of the Marxist Shaw, money comes to play a similar role to that of gallantry in Wycherley and Congreve. Samuel Butler could not even write a classical oratorio on the idyllic theme of Narcissus without yielding to an impulse to ridicule it with such program notes as the following:

An aged lady taken ill
Desires to reconstruct her will;
I see the servants hurrying for
The family solicitor;
Posthaste he comes and with him brings
The usual necessary things.

With common form and driving quill
He draws the first part of the will,
The more sonorous solemn sounds
Denote a hundred thousand pounds, etc.

It is the entanglement of quarrels about money with disputes about religion that makes the conflict between Ernest and his father in *The Way of All Flesh* so comic and so ignoble.

Yet Butler, though he could be most amusing about people's mercenary motives, was too much a middle-class man himself to analyze the social system, in which, for all his financial difficulties, he occupied a privileged position. As soon as he got back from New Zealand, he invested all the money he had made there in a group of new joint stock companies, which a banker friend of his had financed and in which he was induced to become a director. These companies were manufacturing steam-engines, patent gas-meters, tanning extracts and other commodities produced by the menacing machines. The companies all failed, and Butler lost most of his money. He had felt bound in honor to buy back the shares of friends who had invested in them at his advice. Then, almost as badly off as before he had gone to New Zealand, he threatened to make certain claims against an interest in a family estate to which he believed his father had induced him, while still a minor, to sign away his rights – the case of the youth in *Erewhon* who “was charged with having been swindled out of a large property by his guardian” – and compelled the old man to make him an allowance. “If in my books,” wrote Butler late in life, “from *Erewhon* to *Luck or Cunning?* there is something behind the written words which the reader can feel but not grasp – and I fancy that this must be so – it is due, I believe, to the sense of wrong which was omnipresent with me, not only in regard to Pauli, the Darwins and my father, but also in regard to my ever-present anxiety about money.”

When the elder Butler died, however, Samuel inherited his interest in the estate and lived comfortably the rest of his life. For all his satiric insight, he had basically the psychology of the *rentier*. One of the things that had nagged him most all his life was the fact that he had not had the family income to which he thought himself entitled; and when he did finally get it, he promptly sat down to write the Life and Letters of his grandfather, Bishop Butler, whom he had satirized in *The Way of All Flesh*. Later he described himself, in the preface to his last book, *Erewhon Revisited*, as “a member of the more advanced wing of the English Broad Church.”