Two Reviews by Virginia Woolf

A MAN WITH A VIEW*

It is probable that any one who reads Samuel Butler will wish to know more about him. He is one of those rare spirits among the dead whom we like, or it may be dislike, as we do the living, so strong is their individuality and so clearly can we make up our minds about their manners and opinions. Johnson is of this company, and we can each add others according to our private tastes; but the number of people who will put Samuel Butler upon their list must be increasing every day. For this reason we would give a good deal to have a life of Butler, with plenty of letters and anecdotes and reports of those private sayings and doings in which surely he must have excelled. Mr. Harris has had access apparently to no more information than is already before the public, so that he cannot gratify us in this respect; and at first there may seem little reason for another study of Butler's works when Mr. Cannan's book is scarcely a year old. But Mr. Harris is quite strong enough to dispel our doubts. He writes clearly and with considerable force; he generates in us a desire to contradict him flatly, and again he makes us sigh, half with relief and half with annoyance, when he says something so true that we have always been on the point of saying it ourselves. His work has the merit, in particular the very clear chapter on the scientific books, of bringing out the main lines of thought which unite all Butler's work, so that instead of thinking him an eccentric who took up subjects much at random, we have a more serious picture of a man who built up solidly a house with many storeys. But the justification of Mr. Harris's volume is that directly we have finished it we take down Butler to see what the change in our conception of him amounts to.

All this writing and disputing on his account is, of course, much what Butler himself expected of an intelligent posterity. But why is it that his lamp not only still shines among the living, but with a light that positively grows brighter and seems altogether more friendly and more kindling as the years go by? Perhaps it is that the other lights are going out. Certainly Mr. Harris paints a very depressing picture of the great Victorians. There was George Eliot with her philosophic tea parties; and Tennyson declaiming pompously before the statues in the British Museum; and Pater with a style that Butler likened to

*Review of *Samuel Butler: Author of Erewhon, the Man and his Work*, by John F. Harris (*Times Literary Suplement*, 20 July, 1916).

the face of an enamelled old woman; and Arnold's "odour which was as the faint sickliness of hawthorn." It was an age, according to Mr. Harris, "of false values and misplaced enthusiasms, unaccountable prejudices, astonishing deficiency in artistic perception, and yet with it a bewildering lack of real practical efficiency." Whether this is true or not, it represents very fairly Butler's own point of view. Further on, however, Mr. Harris points out more suggestively that Butler was singular in being the spectator of his age, an amateur, "a non-professional worker... as well as a lover." These words seem to us to indicate the most vital distinction that there was between Butler and his contemporaries. The Victorian age, to hazard another generalization, was the age of the professional man. The biographies of the time have a depressing similarity; very much overworked, very serious, very joyless, the eminent men appear to us to be, and already strangely formal and remote from us in their likes and dislikes. Butler, of course, hated nothing more than the professional spirit; and this may account for the startling freshness of his books, as if they had been laid up all these years in sweet-scented roots and pungent spices. Naturally his fellow-men owed him a grudge (though we should like more evidence of what Mr. Harris calls "the conspiracy" against him), as schoolboys set to do their sums in a dreary schoolroom have a grudge against a boy who passes the window with a butterfly net in his hand and nothing to do but enjoy himself.

But why, if they were imprisoned, was Butler free? Had the achievement been an easy one, we should not owe him the enormous debt of thanks which is his due. To free himself from the fetters which he found so galling it was not enough by a long way merely to refuse to be a clergyman. He had to preserve that kind of honesty, originality, or sensibility which asserts itself whether you are about to baptize a child or to go to an evening party, and asks, "Now why am I doing this? Is it because other people do it? Is it right? Do I enjoy doing it?" and is always preventing its possessor from falling into step with the throng. In Butler's day, at any rate, such a disposition was fatal to success. He failed in everything he took up – music and science, painting and literature; and lived the most secluded of lives, without need of dress clothes, in a set of rooms in Clifford's Inn, where he cooked his own breakfast and fetched his own water. But his triumph lay not in being a failure, but in achieving the kind of success he thought worth while, in being the master of his life, and in selecting the right things to do with it. Never, we imagine, did Butler have to plead that he was too busy for some pleasant thing, such as a concert or a play, or a visit to a friend. Every summer found him with sufficient pocket money to

afford a trip to Italy; his week-end jaunts to the country were conducted with extreme regularity, and we should guess that he seldom put himself out to catch a train. But, above all, he had achieved a freedom of soul which he expressed in one book after another. In his obscurity he had wrought out a very clear notion of "the Kingdom of Heaven" and of the qualities needed by those who seek it; of the people who are the "only people worth troubling about," and of the things "which nobody doubts who is worth talking to." He had, of course, a splendid collection of hatreds, just as he worshipped Handel and Shakespeare, Homer and the authoress of the *Odyssey*, Tabachetti and Bellini, so as to make him rather suspicious of other worshippers. In his isolation and idiosyncrasies he sometimes recalls Edward FitzGerald, but with the great difference that whereas FitzGerald early realized the vanity of fighting the monster, Butler was always busy planting his darts in the flanks of his age, always pugnacious and always full of self-confidence. And against neglect and disapproval he had a private supply of most satisfactory consolations. It was much better fun, he said, to write fearlessly for posterity than to write "like, we will say, George Eliot, and make a lot of money by it." These reflections certainly kept his temper cooler than is usual in the case of a man who has so much to satirize, and also preserved in all its vigour his most uncompromising individuality. But perhaps his greatest fault as a writer springs from this irresponsibility, his determination, that is, to humour his own ideas in season and out of season, whether they serve to clog the story to stagnation, as sometimes happens in *The Way of All Flesh*, or to give it shade and depth. Very occasionally he reminds one of those eccentric and insistent people who persist in bathing daily in the Serpentine, or in wearing a greatcoat all the year round, and proclaim that such is the only road to salvation. But that trifling defect is the one drawback of the solitude to which he was condemned.

His many-sided training in art and music, sheep-farming and literature, by exposing so many different sides of his mind to the light, kept him amazingly fresh to the end of life; but he achieved this freshness quite consciously also by treating life as an art. It was a perpetual experiment which he was for ever watching and manipulating and recording in his note-books; and if today we are less ambitious, less apt to be solemn and sentimental, and display without shame a keener appetite for happiness, we owe this very largely to Butler's example. But in this, too, he differed very much from his contemporaries.

All these qualities and a thousand more – for Butler is a very complex personality, and, like all great writers, finally inscrutable – are to be found in

his books. Of these the most remarkable, perhaps, are *The Way of All Flesh*, and *The Note-books*. He had worked upon both for many years, and the novel he would have written yet again had he lived. As it is, it has all the qualities of work done almost as a hobby, from sheer love of it, taken up and laid down at pleasure, and receiving the very impress of the maker's hand. And yet it is easy to understand why it did not arouse enthusiasm when it first appeared – why it yields more upon the third reading than upon the first. It is a book of conviction, which goes its own way, passing the conventional turnings without looking at them. But, after reading it, we hardly care to inspect some of the masterpieces of English fiction; it would be as unkind as to let in the cold light of day upon a dowager in a ball dress. It would be easy to enumerate many important and splendid gifts in which Butler as a novelist was deficient; but his deficiency serves to lay bare one gift in which he excelled, and that is his point of view. To have by nature a point of view, to stick to it, to follow it where it leads, is the rarest of possessions, and lends value even to trifles. This gift Butler had in the highest degree; he gives a turn or a twist to the most ordinary matter, so that it bores its way to the depths of our minds, there to stay when more important things have crumbled to dust. If proof of this is wanted, read his account of buying new-laid eggs in *The Note-books*, or the story of "The Aunt, the Nieces, and the Dog," or the anecdote of the old lady and her parrot in *The Humour of Homer*. These *Note-books* of Butler's will certainly beget many other note-books, which will be a source of profound disappointment to their owners. It seems so simple a thing to have a note-book and to have ideas; but what if the ideas refuse to come, or lodge in the same place instead of ranging from earth to Heaven? We shall, at any rate, learn to respect Butler more highly. The truth is that despite his homeliness and his seeming accessibility, no one has ever succeeded in imitating Butler; to do so one would have to unscrew one's head and put it on altogether differently. At one time we think it is his humour that eludes us, that strange, unlaughing, overwhelming gift which compresses his stories at one grasp into their eternal shape; at another the peculiar accent and power of his style; but in the end we cease to dissect, and give ourselves up to delight in a structure which seems to us so entire and all of a piece; so typically English, we would like to think, remembering his force of character, his humanity, and his great love of beauty.

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH*

"... like most of those who come to think for themselves, he was a slow grower," says Samuel Butler of Ernest, the hero of *The Way of All Flesh.* The book itself has had the same sort of history, and for much the same reason. For seven years after the first publication in 1903, it sold very slowly. It was reprinted, "widely reviewed and highly praised," but still hung fire. Then, in 1910, the flames caught; twice in that year it was reprinted, and the impression before us is the eleventh of the second edition. A wise author might choose that fate rather than one of more immediate splendour. No reading public is going to be rushed into buying an author who thinks for himself; its instinct of self-preservation protects it from that folly; first it must go through all the processes of inspection and suspicion. But the public is fundamentally sagacious. It makes up its mind after seven years or so as to what is good for it, and when it has made up its mind it sticks to it with dogged fidelity. Therefore, one is not surprised to find that in the year 1915 "Butler's writings had a larger total sale than in any previous year since their publication."

Satisfactory as this record is, it is also much in keeping with the character of *The Way of All Flesh.* The book was written very slowly. Butler worked at it intermittently during twelve years. It is thus like a thing that has grown almost imperceptibly, a cactus or a stalactite, becoming a little shapeless, but more and more solid and sturdy year by year. One can imagine that he had grown too fond of it to part with it. Such a work is too uncompromising to make many friends when it first appears. It bears in every part of it the mark of being a home-made hobby, rather than the product of high professional skill. All his convictions and prejudices have been found room for; he has never had the public in his mind's eye. So, just as Butler himself would have appeared in a crowd of fashionable people, *The Way of All Flesh* appeared among the season's novels, awkward, opinionated, angular, perverse. Nor, upon re-reading, does it appear that time has softened these qualities, and, to speak the truth, they are not qualities that are admirable in a novel. The note-book which, according to Butler, every one should carry in his waistcoat pocket, has left that secret post of observation and thrust itself forward. Shrewd, didactic passages taken from its pages constantly block the course of the story, or intrude between us and the characters, or insist that Ernest shall deliver them as if they were his own. For

*Review of *The Way of All Flesh*, by Samuel Butler (*Times Literary Suplement*, 26 June, 1919).

this reason Ernest himself remains a sheaf of papers, written all over with the acute and caustic observations of his maker, rather than an independent young man. Such is the penalty that a writer pays for indulging his hobby too far, even though the hobby be, as it was with Butler, the hobby of using his brain. The scene when Ernest attempts the seduction of Miss Maitland is a proof that when Butler's young men and women stepped beyond the circle illuminated by his keen intelligence they found themselves as thin and faltering as the creations of a tenth-rate hack. They must at once be removed to the more congenial atmosphere of the Law Courts. There are certain scenes, it appears, which must be written a great deal too quickly to allow of the deliberate inspection of a note-book, and viewed with a passion impossible to the disillusioned eyes of the elderly. There is a sense, after all, in which it is a limitation to be an amateur; and Butler, it seems to us, failed to be a great novelist because his novel writing was his hobby.

In every other respect his gifts were such as to produce a novel which differs from most professional novels by being more original, more interesting, and more alive. The elderly and disillusioned mind has this advantage – that it cares nothing what people think of it. Further, its weight of experience makes up for its lack of enthusiasm. Endowed with these formidable qualities and a profound originality which wrought them to the sharpest point, Butler sauntered on unconcernedly until he found a position where he could take up his pitch and deliver his verdict upon life at his ease. *The Way of All Flesh*, which is the result, is thus much more than a story. It is an attempt to impart all that Butler thought not only about the Pontifexes, but about religion, the family system, heredity, philanthropy, education, duty, happiness, sex. The character of Christina Pontifex is rich and solid, because all the clergymen's wives whom Butler had ever known were put into her stew. In the same way Dr. Skinner has the juice of innumerable headmasters in his veins, and Theobald is compounded of the dust of thousands of middle-class Englishmen. They are representative, but they are, thanks to Butler's vigorous powers of delineation, distinctly themselves. Christina's habit of day-dreaming belongs to her individually, and is a stroke of genius – if Butler did not promptly remind us that it is a little silly to talk about strokes of genius. We should not like to say how often in the course of reading *The Way of All Flesh* we found ourselves thus pulled up. Sometimes we had committed the sin of taking things, like genius, on trust. Then, again, we had fancied that some idea or other was of our own breeding. But here, on the next page, was Butler's original version, from which our seed had blown.

If you want to come up afresh in thousands of minds and books long after you are dead, no doubt the way to do it is to start thinking for yourself. The novels that have been fertilized by *The Way of All Flesh* must by this time constitute a large library, with well-known names upon their backs.