


THE ART AND CRAFT OF LETTERS

SATIRE by GILBERT CANNAN

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BY

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OF all literary adventurers there is none who more appeals to my temper or lays a larger call upon my sympathy than the satirist, for he is a poet or a soul well-born who has been parlously out of luck. There are men, like Goethe, whose luck is so stupendous as to put them out of the running for the reader's comradeship. I have ever been a reader, often devout and whole-hearted, but with the lucky men I can never stay long, and to some, since my boyish prostration, I have never turned again. There are too many stormy places and dark ways in human life upon which their imagination has never cast its light. Shakespeare never had this overwhelming luck; he had always to wrestle with the powers of darkness for his imagination. And he won, and took flight with as many passengers as cared to go with him. Goethe, on the other hand, passed straight out of the turmoil of adolescence into the most

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elegantly appointed imagination, and was often inconsiderate enough to fly right out of sight, or straight into the sun, so that no human eye can follow him. The satirist, poor wretch, never flies at all, or achieves a clumsy hopping from point to point with clipped or muddied wings. It is not a matter of selling your birthright for a mess of pottage—that is another turn in the literary adventure unprofitable to consider, but entirely an affair of luck. Mark for mark there is not much in it between Shakespeare's equipment and Swift's; certainly since Shakespeare there has been no such prose as you may find in the *Battle of the Books* or *Gulliver*; but Shakespeare had luck and Swift ran out of it with his youth. The one became the greatest of poets, in the lightness of his heart, every now and then, having his satirical fling; the other became the greatest of satirists, and, for poetry, never rose above verse as heavy as the periwig of his time. There is a sort of indignation which more than any other moral affection drags poets down from their poetry. To realise poetry in art is not enough; art ever leads back to life, and

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there is always, beyond the poetic impulse and its expression, the desire to realise poetry in life, to bring experience up to the topmost level of imagination. It is a crying for the moon perhaps : the argument from history and experience mocks it, but there are just enough moments in life to justify it and set aspiration leaping in the hearts of those men to whom art is the sword of freedom : enough moments only to confirm the fierce desire and to plunge into despair at the small satisfaction it is ever granted. Then do they swing the sword in their hands and sharpen its edge to slay those men, and the follies and abuses that seem to them to stand in their way. They cast about to discover the enemies of art, all those for whom the shining symbol has no meaning, and the world is joyless and dull or a source of profit only, and they set about to destroy them, to strip them of their complacency and the dead ideas in which they have clothed themselves. So Heine, in a letter prophesying songs of liberty after the revolution of 1830, suddenly realising, as poets out of luck do, the probable deafness of men, cried : “ And thou,

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sweet Satire, daughter of great Themis and goat-footed Pan, lend me thy aid. Thou art on thy mother's side sprung from the race of Titans, and thou dost hate, even as I, the enemies of thy kindred, the weakling usurpers of Olympus. Lend me thy mother's sword that I may slay them, the detested brood, and give me the reed-pipes of thy father that I may pipe them down to death." In fortunate poets, whose being has thrilled triumphantly into song, this indignation is gusty, and is often only expressed in a tiresome petulance like that of *Peter Bell the Third* and *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, or in an Olympian and oracular examination of the relation of artists and public. In the unfortunate, those who for one reason or another are prevented from this self-realisation, it becomes a tremendous motive force, and possesses their souls to the exclusion of all else, both the joy of the higher sort of men and the meanness of the lower sort. It becomes their passion to protect the joy they can never gain from the meanness they despise. Being passionate, this indignation is noble, and it is fearless. Driven to despair by

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the apparent sterility of his imagination and his perilous position between the greater and the baser sort of men, the unhappy poet is only saved by the discovery of laughter. Though he be never so pressed, yet he can laugh at himself, at his own misery, at his own aspiration, at the lives and the misery and the aspirations of all men. Everything he will measure by his untried vision, and everything he will find small and fit only for derision, and yet, however hot his indignation may grow, however improbable all phenomena may seem to his ruthless logic, yet he will never for one instant cease to find all things and all men lovable. His unsatisfied and unsatisfiable love feeds his indignation and drives him on to destroy and cleanse and purge, to scour his own and all men's minds and make them fit for art and the freer exercise in life of the divine power of imagination. His own imagination by his misfortune is turned in upon itself, and therefore cannot feed the imagination of other man, but when its light is turned upon the world of human affairs great and small, it shows up monstrously everything that has grown rank and dis-

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proportionate, and these offences satire is called in to hew away.

Waterloo, they say, was won on the playing-fields of Eton, but first the power of Napoleon over the minds of men was broken by the satire of Gilray, Rowlandson and Cruikshank, and those cartoonists who in every country in Europe emulated their methods. The weaker grew the Emperor's sense of proportion as the intoxication of his success began to tell on him, the fiercer became the attacks of satire, the more surely its light turned upon him from every quarter of the Continent, showed up his foibles, and reduced him in the general estimation from the super-human to the sub-human. Loud, gross, coarse the cartoons were—(satire was begotten of Pan the goat-footed)—but they fetched out the corresponding qualities in the Emperor, and at the last tumbled him in the mud. Satire applies to its victim the measure of earth, the test, which, until a man have passed, he may not attempt to soar. Icarus is the typical figure of satire, that is as a glass to concentrate the heat of the sun upon all those who attempt to rise

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on wings of wax. The mind of man is jealous of its power of flight, and none may exercise it until his right be proven. A false flight ever leads to a heavy fall. No tyrant, no tyrannous idea ever came crashing to earth but it was first wounded with the shafts of satire : no free man, no free idea ever rose to the heights but it endured them. It is not that men love to roll in the mud, but that they know how, out of their agony and bloody sweat, truth and beauty are forged, and no falseness may be set up in their stead. It touches their honour, and to defend it they have no sharper weapon than laughter and ridicule.

In Greece, from which our civilisation is, in both senses, descended, satire might never be directed against the community, but no person, no god even, was held immune. Aristophanes could show Euripides and Sophocles weighing words against each other, make sport of Jove himself, and only win laughter and applause for his readjustment of values. In England, on the other hand, as Swift discovered, persons are held sacred, while upon the nation

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and its character abuse may be poured, and the author be devoutly thanked by every member of his audience for his courageous and piously truthful utterances. "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets with in the world and that so very few are offended with it." So, when Swift arranged that wonderful series of distorting mirrors, *Gulliver's Travels* he could count on none being hurt by his derision of man, and knew that, when he pushed his thesis to its conclusion, and revealed the revolting habits of the Yahoos in contrast with the nobility of the Houyhnhnms, the polite world would shrug away and declare him mad, and ascribe so brutal a vision to the fits of giddiness from which he was known to suffer. And the polite world, as it has grown politer, has continued to hold that opinion, by expurgation has drawn the sting of the gibe and turned the *Travels* into a nursery tale for children. *Politesse oblige!* But the soreness and the uncomfortable knowledge remains, and that appalling

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vision of the degeneration of man is a part of and a potent leaven in human consciousness. Never before or since has that particular service to mankind been so thoroughly performed. Generally the reminder of blunt facts has been tempered with a certain blandness, as in Thackeray, for instance, who, sipping port over a shining table, mildly assured his host that he was a snob, a tradesman, a glutton, a trifler with venial sins, and turned a blind eye upon the real festering offences as unmentionable in good society. The true satirist knows no obligation to society but that of showing its individual and collective villainy, cowardice and hypocrisy. To fulfil that obligation he needs to be the one man picked out of ten thousand, an honest man; without which his work, like that of Thackeray, will degenerate into flattery.

Satire has ever flourished in England, presumably because the English are grosser in their national hypocrisy than any other nation, and English poetry has needed a fiercer attack to defend it against the weakness of English character: certainly it needed Byron to defend Keats

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and Shelley against the Scotch reviewers, who have ever been the spokesmen of English indifference, and shamefully by their business have turned it into an active grinding force, and made it repulsively articulate. Doctor Johnson was something of a satirist, and an honest man, and his instinctive hatred of Scotchmen came from his knowledge of their immemorial habit of exploiting English Philistinism, by which they substituted the thistle for the English rose and so roused the satirical itch.

Always satire is the result of chafing. It is not recorded that Esau lampooned Jacob, but in his heart there must have been the hot sense of injustice which, melting into laughter, perceives the force of mockery both as solace and as a means of attack. The subsequent history of Esau is hidden, but he must have taken a savage delight in the satirical turn in his brother's affairs when Jacob served for Rachel, to be rewarded with Leah, who had sore eyes and none of his love. It is the satirical temper to search out the places in life where no love is, to point out the shame of them to all men, and

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to demand their obliteration. And often the satirist, concentrating upon the object of derision, finds that for his own mind the idea of it is soon demolished, and upon its ruins he begins to construct a fair edifice. *Don Quixote* began as a satire upon the tales of chivalry: *Joseph Andrews* in its inception was a burlesque of Richardson's *Pamela*. So out of satire grew the English novel, which has never lost the marks of its parentage. From Fielding to H. G. Wells there have always been threads of satire in the weaving of it. Indeed, there can be no prose written imaginatively that does not tend to turn in upon and mock its own inadequacy; and, to avoid being consumed in its own heat, it will whet the appetite upon those cloying elements of existence which necessitate its prosaic quality. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is satire as well as allegory, and its satirical overflow is drawn off in the *Life and Death of Mr. Badman*.

But the concern here is with the deliberate satire and satirist, the artist who finds himself fenced in from the free impulse of his imagination, and condemned, so to speak, to a prosaic

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use of his art, a secular employment of his divine armoury. Such men have been rare, but they are among the most courageous, for they have not in themselves or their work the joy and ecstasy which, for poets, makes courage easy, and the labour and agony of conception light to bear. Their eyes are fixed in a horrible fascination upon vice and folly, and all the moral distempers and diseases which eat into the heart of human life and bring it rotting to the grave : awfully they gaze into the Valley of the Shadow, and like Job they whisper, "I have said to corruption, Thou art my father : to the worm, Thou art my mother and my sister." And behind them they know is the light of the everlasting life, and they can hear the singers chanting to the eternal glory of things in general and the mortal wonder of men in particular, but in their hearts is the bitter knowledge of the deaf, blind and dumb stupidity of their kind, and upon the exploiters of them they raise a vengeful cry, and like Heine, call for the sword of Themis to slay them, and the pipes of Pan to pipe them down to death.

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The complete satirist is Swift, the grand general in this bellicose art. They do not do these things better in France, but for brilliant mastery of technique and consummate organisation of a long guerilla campaign there is Voltaire, the most astonishing, though not the most admirable, human being who ever put pen to paper. The satirist's is a grim trade, but Voltaire plied it with gaiety. Gulliver lands upon his islands and continents through storms and bloody adventures; L'Ingénu sails peacefully over from Plymouth to the coasts of Brittany. Candide is cast out upon the world for a little excess of freedom in his handling of love. Swift hammers through the crust of life with horror; Voltaire opens the pie with a slice neatly cut with the blade of his malice. The difference in the handling came from their different purposes. Swift was out to kill, Voltaire to cure. Voltaire had a panacea, Reason; Swift had none. To the Frenchman it seemed that men could be pinched and stirred into being reasonable animals, and they had no enemy but their own superstition and religion, terms which in his

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vocabulary were interchangeable. To the great Dean men were caught in the mire of their own brutality; their eyes, ears, noses and mouths were stopped with filth so that nothing could get into or out of them uncontaminated; at their best they were cockerels scratching for pearls on a dunghill; they were lured by their very intelligence only deeper into the swamp; the central fire of their lives, the religious and heroic quality in all its expressions ended only in foulness, and nowhere among them were the two most precious things in the world, sweetness and light. That was the truth as he saw it, and it is truth, truth in the shadow of death in life. But this same truth, under the light of that free imagination of which the satirist has been deprived, shines forth with the light of heroism and inspiration, with the sweetness of courageous endurance, and the powerful logic of genius, which in the shadow has flinched from no step however appalling, is led forward and up to a higher circle. It is precisely through its delving into the gross stuff of humanity that the intensive imagination of satire leads back to the extensive imagination

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of poetry, weds and serves it. Every work of art is an act of faith, and the plunge downward is no meaner performance than the upward flight. In art the only meanness is to attempt to drive the imagination along the beaten level ways, and that leads inevitably to dull caricature, trite mimicry, or silly joking and, in the end, to a cheapening of the moral currency. The men who do so, in whatever walk of life, are the weakling usurpers of Olympus whom Heine set out to destroy. Only he was not a satirist, but a Jew, a journalist and a poet, who, fundamentally, could mock at nothing but the discordant trinity in himself. Just such another was Sterne, the razor of whose wit never cut into anything more real than his own sentimentality, as Byron was for ever raging and tearing at the bonds of his own rhetoric. The satirist is one who, passing beyond, or escaping, the lyrical impulse, cannot yet reach up to the dramatic, the highest region of artistic creativeness, and so turns upon the world to break the insensibility that has infected him with its paralysis. It is not spite nor a spirit of personal revenge that is the motive force, but a

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necessity as natural as that of water, which will turn back upon its own direction to carve out a channel for its passage to the sea. Art is man's engine with which to hew his way to his own divinity, and to bite through his own childishness he has evolved satire, whose first and most immediate function is to collate his material and his moral progress, the result nearly always being a sight for pitiful laughter. So Juvenal, in the full glory of Rome, winged the pride of the Romans and brought it down to earth. There was then no room for the banter—the word most detested by Swift—of a Lucilius. The discrepancy between the material and the moral streams of life was too glaring. (Tacitus had written his history in the torment of it.) Juvenal's morality is not exactly profound or noble, but it is at any rate sound enough. With a higher morality he would not have been a satirist, but a poet, content to leave Rome to stew in its own juice. Being a satirist, he turned upon the life immediately before him and examined it imaginatively, peeling off skin after skin until he came to the rotten heart of it. Of

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the resulting horror he created the sixteen satires, of which two at least, the sixth and the third, are masterpieces, and the tenth in one masterly passage presents the crux of the matter of morality, which remains valid and has never been better stated, because it is no dogma but only a discovery by the way. It happens to be his ultimate discovery at the top of his journey. If he had been animated by a moral purpose he would not have written masterpieces. The satirist is an artist; he is concerned only to exercise his imagination in the way laid down for him by his character and circumstances, and his purpose is so mightily passionate as to baffle and transcend consciousness. No artist can do more than set his practised and controlled talent to work on the subject chosen and constantly developed for him by the inspiration of his genius. It was so with Juvenal, and it has been so with the whole line of satirists.

The word satire is from *satura*, a mixture, and until Lucilius adopted it into the written language of Rome it was applied only to the

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miscellaneous entertainments of strolling players, who were the abstract and brief chroniclers of the time, and were no doubt, as their descendants have always been, licensed to amuse with clumsy jests and gibes at prominent men, unpopular institutions and open scandals. The playhouse has always been so powerful an engine of satire that priests, princes, governors and demagogues have persistently gagged it, and no dramatist since his day has ever had so free a hand as Aristophanes. In a healthy community the theatre would be nobly used for the dual purpose of dramatic poetry and satire to create sensibility to it, but there are no healthy communities, and satire has to creep in at the tail of the separate arts and pounce upon such lagging genius as she can find, and most often she has to put up with the scraps and superfluous energy of men like Molière, or Beaumarchais, or Goldoni, to whom satire is a salt to be stirred into a comic concoction to savour it. They are too genial for the disturbance of moral indignation, too merciful or too indolent for ruthless dissection. Your satirist must be as single-minded and devoted

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in his research as a scientist. Like the medical student he spends his life in the discovery of diseases. The cure he leaves to others.

It needs some violent discrepancy in the life of a community to produce a satirist. The research student must have an inkling of a disease before he sets out to track it down. In Russia in the nineteenth century individual freedom, moral and artistic, met the derision of political tyranny; in England we have political freedom—or at least responsibility to an electorate—but moral and artistic freedom are unknown. Russia produced a magnificent satirist in Nikolai Gogol, England a satirist in the direct line from Swift in Samuel Butler, who, as he says in the preface to *Erewhon* (1901 edition), “was allowed almost to call them [the English] lifelong self-deceivers to their faces, and they said it was quite true, but that it did not matter.” Butler, you see, always had his moral indignation perfectly under control, so perfectly indeed that he could see the fun of his own satirical position and was ever on the verge of satirising his own satire, but never fell over into that pitfall,

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which he left very neatly dug and skilfully covered over for his headlong follower, Bernard Shaw, to fall into it. Butler was too fine an artist, too rarely disciplined an intelligence, ever to mistake a chase after his own tail for the thrilling adventure of satire, which, contrasted with the Shavian exercise, may be compared to the breathless excitement of looping the loop—a whirl round and out of the conventional human consciousness.

Convention may be cast-iron, but cast-iron is easily broken and melted down and forged into a new shape. It is a peculiarity of the English character that it is always reluctant to destroy or reshape any necessary thing. It makes conventions, as it builds houses, to last for generations; an Englishman wears new ideas, as he wears new clothes, self-consciously, and prays miserably for the time when the novelty may be gone from them. No man, as Butler saw, makes so ridiculous a father as an Englishman. It is as though he could never recover from the natural change in his status as a human being. He sighs for the happy self-deceptions of adolescence and

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carries them over into his more responsible position, with lamentable, but, for that, none the less comic results. He shuffles the burden of parentage off on to the woman and gives her as a mother the homage which he withholds from her as a human being. So the woman also is placed in a false position, and the English comedy goes sombrely forward. In that comedy Samuel Butler was a specialist. In the pursuit of it he developed a nimbleness and an agility keener than that of any other writer with the possible exception of Voltaire, who, had he been faced with this task of concentrating his imagination upon the English vice of humbug, would have flung off into a wild, blithe and witty lewdness. It needs a Puritan to catch a Puritan. In the English character the vice of humbug is so omnipotent as to leave small room for any other ; the very breaches of the commandments have to don hoods and masks to creep into and play their part in the life of the community, while the virtues have no pride in their purity and under assumed names slink into the currency. Upon this hardness indignation might hammer

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in vain, and the edge of wit must be blunted ; it needed a satire like an acid to eat through it, and this Butler with scientific deliberation distilled. It is not universal but local satire. The vice of self-deception is common to all men, but nowhere else has it been raised to the seat of authority as it was in these islands after the Napoleonic wars had accentuated the insularity of the inhabitants, and given them first of all the opportunity to grasp the material advantages of scientific and mechanical discovery. It was as though the English, perceiving the immense distance opened up along the road of material progress, had deliberately put their energy and vitality into blinkers, so as to travel as swiftly and directly as possible without disturbance or distraction by the way. There is no disputing the success of the expedient in its own immediate purpose, but the result of the substitution of self-deception for moral principle and authority was so appalling that no power could deal with it but that of satire, no mind bear to contemplate it but that of a satirist. Thackeray tasted the bitter savour of it and rolled it round his tongue

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like the literary epicure he was. Dickens saw the obvious injustice of some of the effects and roared in protest. Carlyle, and after him Ruskin, thundered Isaiah-fashion, but prophecy and denunciation alike rolled like water from a roof off the thick and still thickening crust, hard-baked in the oven of success. The cunning English thwarted all attacks by making literature the fashion and involving its practitioners in their unholy game, and voices were raised in praise of the captains of industry before industry had begun to promote the well-being of the community or become anything but a bout of animal-grab. An attempt at satire had been made before Butler by the unhappy poet of *The City of Dreadful Night*, James Thomson, but only in fugitive essays written to keep life in his body for a trade-advertising journal called *Cope's Tobacco-plant*. It remained for Butler, a figure entirely aloof both from industry and its fashionable literature, to pour the effective acid on the crust. In the chapter of *Erewhon* on the Colleges of Unreason it bites through:—

“ I should warn the reader, however, that I

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was rarely sure what the men whom I met while staying with Mr. Thims really meant ; for there was no getting anything out of them if they scented even a suspicion that they might be what they called ‘giving themselves away.’ As there is hardly any subject on which this suspicion cannot arise, I found it difficult to get definite opinions from any of them, except on such subjects as the weather, eating and drinking, holiday excursions or games of skill.

“If they cannot wriggle out of expressing an opinion of some sort, they will commonly retail those of someone who has already written upon the subject, and conclude by saying that though they quite admit that there is an element of truth in what the writer has said, there are many points on which they are unable to agree with him. Which these points were, I invariably found myself unable to determine ; indeed, it seemed to be counted the perfection of scholarship and good breeding among them not to have—much less to express—an opinion on any subject on which it might prove later that they had been mistaken. The

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art of sitting gracefully on a fence has never, I should think, been brought to a greater perfection than at the Erewhonian Colleges of Unreason.

“Even when, wriggle as they may, they find themselves pinned down to some expression of definite opinion, as often as not they will argue in support of what they perfectly well know to be untrue. I repeatedly met with reviews and articles even in the best journals, between the lines of which I had little difficulty in detecting a sense exactly contrary to the one ostensibly put forward. So well is this understood, that a man must be a mere tyro in the arts of Erewhonian polite society, unless he instinctively suspects a hidden ‘yea’ in every ‘nay’ that meets him. Granted that it comes to much the same in the end, for it does not matter whether ‘yea’ is called ‘yea’ or ‘nay,’ so long as it is understood which it is to be : but our own more direct way of calling a spade a spade, rather than a rake, with the intention that everyone should understand it as a spade, seems more satisfactory. On the other hand, the Erewhonian system lends

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itself better to the suppression of that downrightness which it seems the express aim of Erewhonian philosophy to discountenance.

“However this may be, the fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease was fatal to the intelligence of those infected by it, and almost everyone at the College of Unreason had caught it to a greater or less degree. After a few years atrophy of the opinions invariably intervened, and the sufferer became stone dead to everything except the more superficial aspects of those material objects with which he came most in contact. The expression on the faces of these people was repellent; they did not, however, seem particularly unhappy, for they none of them had the faintest idea that they were in reality more dead than alive. No cure for this disgusting fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease has yet been discovered.”

It is the inevitable consequence of indulgence in the vice of self-deception that the victims of it lose all motive force except the craven desire to be shielded from the consequences of it, and to gain assurance against them they will

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suffer every faculty to atrophy through which they may be attacked. From this perpetual atrophy in the nineteenth-century English came the insensibility to moral values, the hatred of moral and artistic freedom, which enthroned humbug so securely that abdication could never be so much as thought of—except by Butler.

An analysis of the sales of his books made in 1899 shows that of *Erewhon* 3842 copies had been sold, and of his other works none above 700. *The Way of All Flesh* was not published until after his death, and its fame and sale are still small. The English may have agreed with his diagnosis and said that it did not matter, but they are no longer the same. The national habit of self-deception led in literature to the corrupt flowers of the Æsthetic Movement and the Kailyard School, in life to the South African War and its terrible disillusionment, hammering home the bitter lesson of the Crimean War; but without satire and its discipline of laughter there could not have been the wholesome reaction and the splendid release of vitality which have led to the fine hopefulness of the early years of

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the twentieth century. It may be that Butler's service to English life and letters will be not less great than that of Boileau to the French. It is too much to say that Boileau, with his unrelenting criticism and satire of the moribund artificiality of his predecessors and the majority of his contemporaries, made possible the work of Molière, Racine and La Fontaine, but he did undoubtedly prepare the way for the great period, and more by satire than with the enunciation of principles. Like Butler he was animated by a healthy love of common sense and downrightness. Probably if he had known Handel's music he would have shared Butler's adoration of it. And Boileau, again, was a local satirist with a definite æsthetic if not a moral subconscious purpose. By the exigencies of his own nature he had to break through a crust of artificiality, just as Butler could never rest until he had found a way through the crab-shell of British complacency, and made the nineteenth-century Englishman see himself as very like a crab, sidling upon the ooze of his own particular pool, and sinking into the mud

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and throwing up a cloud of it upon any approach. To Butler English philosophy, religion and art appeared as so much mud thrown up as the English settled down in their slithery complacency. The accomplishment in crabs would be wonderful, but for human beings, especially for human beings who were blowing their own trumpets with increasing loudness, it was an injurious scandal, and with his dry, caustic wit he set to work to prick the inflation of those who were battenning on them. His satire is still valid, and will remain so, for it takes many generations to shake off a disease like the fear-of-giving-themselves-away. His own constructive books like *Life and Habit*, *The Note-books*, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, and the growing number of clearly post-Butler books are an inoculation against it.

No forms of art are less bearable than blunt or incompetent satire, but there is little of it. It dies quickly unless it bites home into its object; when it lives until it be shaken off. The world has rid itself of much of Juvenal's

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satire, as it has rid itself of Boileau's and the *Satire Menippée*, and a great deal of Voltaire's and even much of Swift's. In England Butler's phagocytes are still at war with the disease he hated and yet understood with the understanding of love. But even when great satire has lost its sting it survives for the beauty of its craftsmanship. Satire is a room in the house of art which no man enters except he be very sure of himself, and he will never issue from it until he is master of his tools. There has been no satirist who has not laboured greatly in the exercise of his medium whether in words or paint or line. And the mind itself in the close concentration and constant assaying necessary to acquire the material for satire gains a brilliance and an efficiency not to be found in any other of its faculties or contemplations. There can be no taking of short ways, no leaping from hill-top to hill-top, but a close pursuit of living processes through brake, through briar, over hill, over dale. There can be no dealing in substitutes, no fobbing off a literary idea as a real idea, nor any confusion of authorities or

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values ; no test can be accepted but the inmost truth as in itself the mind of the satirist knows it. Satire is a very delicate operation, and no man will trust himself with it except he be in possession of a thorough training, a clear purpose and a sound knowledge of moral anatomy. Genuine satires are very few : hardly would the sum total of them in literature fill a six-foot shelf, but for technical accomplishment in the use of words and the precise and logical presentation of ideas, they are above all the other masterpieces that were ever written, and in the many writers of the company of Lucilius, the charming autobiographists, Montaigne, Pepys, Saint-Simon, Lamb, Heine, it is to be observed that their prose takes on a greater keenness whenever they turn satirically upon their own foibles or the general follies in which they are involved. No book ever opens so precisely and with such admirable curtness as a genuine satire. Take this from Swift (*The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*) :—

“ It is recorded of Mahomet that upon a visit he was going to pay in Paradise, he had an offer

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of several vehicles to conduct him upwards ; as fiery chariots, winged horses, and celestial sedans, but he refused them all, and would be borne to heaven upon nothing but his ass. . . .”

Or from Voltaire :—

“ Dans une de ces planètes qui tournent autour de l'étoile nommée Sirius il y avait un jeune homme de beaucoup d'esprit, que j'ai eu l'honneur de connaître dans le dernier voyage qu'il fit sur notre petite fourmilière : il s'appelait Micromegas, nom qui convient fort à tous les grands. . . .”

In the word *micromegas* is the whole spirit of satire, the measuring, the constant shifting of the lights to make the big look little, the little big : the telescopic vision, and then the peeping through the wrong end of the telescope ; the asseveration that there is more in things than meets the eye, and that impressions are in constant need of adjustment, or they lead to insensibility even to impressions. There is a nimbleness necessary for the process which, moral considerations apart, gives to satirical productions in every kind a zest which stimulates

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the mental appetite, purifies the palate, and rouses it to a greater fastidiousness. No mind that is not alive to satire can be fully open to the wonder of poetry, nor will it be free from that emotional thickness which makes it impossible to walk freely and joyously in the realms of gold. Satire, God be praised, is a purge, and a healthy man takes to it as naturally as a dog to grass, for the release of his humours.

No community is ever without satire of one kind or another, in its theatres or its comic press. Munich is a lively city, and to its spirit the Prussianism of the German Empire and Siegfried Meyer has always been a glorious joke. *Simplicissimus* comes from Munich. In England satire has almost faded from the pages of *Punch*, which is on the side of the angels of well-worn morality. Every community tends to the only perfect morality which is perfect stagnation, and every community contains a proportion of lively fellows in revolt against that tendency. Most of them, as a rule, will spend themselves in riotous living, and will form a community

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within the community, as the sporting and betting fraternity in England. Germany has *Simplicissimus* because of the chafing of the Prussian and South German character. England, which so powerfully absorbs Scotch, Irish, Welsh and all provincials into the great vat of London, is, for satirical journalism, dependent on the sporting and betting fraternity who produce the *Sporting Times*, which unfortunately is so esoteric in its humour that its general appeal is limited to the paragraphs spiced with an amiable lewdness. And in the English theatre there is no effective satire, because those who control it are as segregated as the sporting and betting gentlemen, and can only satirise their kind, and their own work. True, the censorship puts a stop to the burlesque of public persons, so that no comedian can go further than the mention of, say, Lloyd George ; religion may not be touched in any critical spirit ; no morality may be presented but that of stagnation, except it be done with a sly wink, so that the theatre hardly ever progresses in satire beyond a rather timid transposition of theatrical values.

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Of course, for real satire, practised as an art, the world is dependent upon a lively fellow of genius, and of a genius which insists upon having the last ounce of fun out of its garment of flesh, and upon sharing immediately in the life of the community in which it has appeared. If that community is so near stagnation as to make its life repulsively dull to him, then our lively fellow will do his best to stir it up. It is the fortunate experience of communities that when they reach the dullness of an exaggerated respect for time and persons and their particular conception of conduct, some of their genius goes to the making of an individual who will have no respect for these things. The parlous state of the community will not be parlous enough to squeeze out a man of action, nor genial enough to permit of the growth to full stature of a poet, but such a state will be ideal for the development of a satirist. There is no need for satire when the best of a community can reach expression. It is when the second-rate rises to the surface and brings about the degradation of all standards that the corrective of a clear-sighted humour

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is needed, and almost always arises to supply the necessity. It then insists on a winnowing, and a sifting, in religion, art, politics, rules of conduct, commerce and human relationships, untiringly observes and collates and sorts facts, and reveals the ridiculous distortions of them by habitual bending to expediency, and in art startles and sometimes shocks by using symbols with a clear and precise meaning.

Voltaire, for instance, found the world living as contentedly as it ever lives, and with its usual complacency, under the obsession of a religion which had been organised out of the healthy worshipfulness which is the essence of religion. He found that it led to stagnation and to the cruelty and injustice and blood-thirstiness and bestiality in which human vitality tending to stagnation finds its expression. Therefore he attacked religion and, the better to effect his purpose, raised himself by the ladder of the literary adventure to an eminence from which he could not but be seen and heard. (A precaution which Butler omitted: but then Butler had a more insidious vice to attack, and

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a people to deal with so riddled by it that they obviously could not hear him, a people among whom the only possible eminence was that of Haman.) The tyranny of that particular abuse of religion has been broken. France is well-nigh clear of it, rid of it so far as the community is concerned, and other countries follow where France leads. Probably *The Tale of a Tub* was the last satire in that kind needed in England. *Erewhon Revisited* depends structurally upon the effect of a miraculous ascent to heaven with an earthly bride upon the mind of the inhabitants of that country, but almost at once the satirist returns to his pet figures, Hanky and Panky, personating the two aspects of a vice for which in him long familiarity had bred an affection. For the satirist is human ; perhaps more than any other imaginative artist he may say, *nil humanum a me alienum puto*, and familiarity with the repulsive traits of human nature, ignored or deliberately covered up by others, gives him a fond tolerance and indulgence unknown to artists of a freer joy. After all, an artist must love his material before he can begin to work

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on it, and surgeons have been known to take pride in the growth and malignancy of a cancer successfully removed.

Common-form religion in England now calls for no satire, unless the national god, Humbug, should suffer a sea-change and clothe himself in it once more. Turn the satiric vision upon English life, cut it open like a pigeon's crop, and you shall find only two facts, money and sex, and those disguised. The ideas of all other facts have long since been thrown by the board, and these two which are essential for the movement towards stagnation have been coated over so that such movement may be as like stagnation as may be. Get the ideas of them clear, and at once other ideas, and the recognition of other facts, become necessary. That is work for satire to do, and it will be done as soon as the lively fellow of genius is squeezed out of the ferment which like mud underlies the stagnation. Until it has been done it is very certain that nothing else will—neither in art, nor in politics, nor in social reform, for English fathers will go on lying to their sons about money and sex so that

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they must either spend their lives in a hectic floundering reaction or subscribe to the current cant about those two all-important facts, and so come to a disastrous atrophy of all their faculties. The end of the nineteenth century saw the collapse of the pretence that anything but money and sex mattered to the English. Hence the hopefulness of the younger generation. But unless those unhappily isolated facts are faced that hopefulness is doomed to disappointment, and the younger generation, for all its jolliness, its mood of expansion, its sports, and shows and amusements, and easy flights abroad, will be brought suddenly to the edge of the Valley of the Shadow, and its only voice will be the voice of another Swift, to contrast their Hooliganism with the nobility of the beasts of the field, and behind the laughter will be the bitter tears of terror and its sudden heat at the throat.

Every age needs its own genius, and it produces it through an ordeal of fire. "We are all alike in our worship of genius that has passed through the fire. Nor can this universal instinctive

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consent be explained otherwise than as the welling up of a spring whose sources lie deep in the conviction that great as this world is, it masks a greater wherein its wisdom is folly and which we know as blind men know when the sun is shining, certainly, but not distinctly." As expediency the reduction of life by the English to money and sex is a wonderful achievement, though it is a flying in the nature of things and an attempt to put a quart into a pint pot. It would be an excellent beginning in the construction of a really practical existence if there were clear ideas of money and sex to make way for the domination of mind over them. But nothing could be further from the case. Isolated facts are tyrannous, and these two, meanly at war with each other, have pooled their differences and agreed to set up Humbug as their common representative. Together they provide for the sustenance of one generation and the creation of the next, and for all other human needs no arrangement whatsoever is made, and Humbug mops up every other desire which, contrary to the decree of self-mutilation,

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struggles into existence. For those whose consciousness extends no further than the superficial aspect of the material objects with which it is surrounded, humbug will always be too strong; they will never cross water without dropping the bone for the shadow; they will yield to the community's tendency towards stagnation, and be brutalised (in England) by the false ideas of money and sex begotten of that tendency. But for a man of genius in whom consciousness is every day establishing the relation between phenomena and the greater world from which it is certain of having sprung, the whole tendency, the limitation of existence by hocus-pocus, and the discarding of many precious facts, will be repulsive. And if the community be so far gone that its poetry is dithered with metaphysics, its tradition in the applied arts almost faded out of memory, its political institutions congealed into a mechanical routine, its drama sunk into cold fantasy, its satire diluted to a genial quipping of successful persons, its religion broken up into sectarianism, so that nothing can move men but money or sex,

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and those being unilluminated by poetry or art or statesmanship or drama or religion, then genius, which, of its nature, cannot despair, must take refuge and the offensive in laughter. A man of genius must take life as he finds it; the material for his art is the existence of his contemporaries; English life presents him with nothing but money and sex and with them he must do his best, for he will get no other. Impossible to transcend them; he is hemmed in and oppressed by the discrepancy between the things themselves and the accepted ideas of them. Impossible with such impure material to create; the imagination becomes critical, finds nothing to criticise, sees the humour of the situation, and finds its material admirably suited for satire. If it can start no pure idea nor joy to disturb the stillness of the muddy flow, yet it can send up bubbles of laughter to cause a stir in it. It is simple enough. At the bottom of every genius there is, as Stendhal said, a fund of good logic. Nothing more is needed than its application to the false ideas with which men's minds are beset. Carry them to their logical extreme

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and you arrive at absurdity, just as when a pure idea is developed it tops imagination, takes wings unto itself and reaches sublimity wherein to dwell in harmony with all other ideas. A modern poet could thus apply the logic of his genius to the idea of money or the idea of sex, if he could find either idea pure enough. Modern poets are out of luck, and they end in spleen, or rhetoric, or sentimentality, or metaphysics. A great poet will one day arise to apply his sturdy logic to the two impure ideas of money and sex, and he will arrive at satire, and his work will prove the release of ideas for the genius which comes after him. In a way he will be lucky, if it be luck to find your job lying to your hand and easy of performance, and easy this will be, because of all things genius is less bound by money and sex than by any other, has no respect for them, can go for them without excess of hatred, and, as the ideas of them are easily identifiable, will be able to pick them out of men's brains, wipe them clean, and replace them without any serious shock to the human constitution. When that operation has been performed, then money and

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sex will begin to exercise their natural function of gravitation towards all other facts, will establish connections with them again, and once more human energy will begin worthily to express itself, and, incidentally, English life will become dramatic instead of theatrical and hypocritical.

I have embarked upon this consideration of modern English life not in order splenetically to insult the English nation (who have always relished insult, even to the point of constantly mistaking and honouring impudence for genius), but to show the importance of satire generally and the utility of the work of Samuel Butler in particular. There are times when art is constrained to become useful, times when literature and painting and other arts have become no more than penny toy balloons gaily coloured to amuse childish minds, and the purveyors of them are like the old women who sit outside Kensington Gardens and sell balloons. And that is a sad sight to see, for no young artist can be content to live and work among old women.

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It is such sights that turn artists into satirists ; they must laugh not to weep, and they must seek the reason of this strange substitution of penny balloons for the fine arts. Seeking, they will find tyranny seated in the minds of men ; religion, or the fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease, or fear in one of its thousand and one disguises, or an epidemic vanity, or, as in the more modern instance, impure ideas of money and sex. Whatever they discover they will recognise as their material, and know that they cannot deal with it other than satirically ; any higher endeavour will but add to the number of balloons. Imagination must pierce to the heart of the discovered tyranny and blow it to pieces before it can exercise its constructive functions ; and it must make the satirical effort even though it be to meet the fate of Samson ; better that than to sit among the old women beneath the cloud of their balloons.

Thackeray wrote of Swift that his downfall was as the overthrow of a mighty empire ; but the breakdown of his mind was the logical Samson-end of satire. It was that or a dwelling

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among the Laputans, and between the two Swift did not hesitate, but pushed his work through to the very end, to tragedy, whose child and handmaiden satire is, making ready the house against her coming. And when the mistress cometh, then is the handmaiden no more seen but in her work. When the human comedy of manners and men is out of gear through the tyranny of either over the other, and existence is become a travesty and a caricature of life, so heavy and lumpish that it cannot even move towards the melting-pot, then, when men can neither laugh nor weep, comes satire to break the congestion in them and make them laugh and weep together ; upon the which exercise they begin to kick against their sluggishness and to throw down the walls wherewith they have hemmed themselves in, and to admit the cleansing fires and winds of pity and terror bringing new life. And last of all comes mercy, to crown this as she crowns every other cycle in this system of round worlds.

Like the Muses, when Satire has no great

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work in hand, she will generously busy herself with providing entertainments for men, and inspire artists in the creation of burlesques and caricatures, and that adorable nonsense which, if it were carried a little farther, would spill over into sense and become biting criticism. In this kind there are two masterpieces, Lear's *Nonsense Rhymes* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Mr. Belloc's *Bad Child's Book of Beasts* is reluctant to leave sense, and is almost a deliberate satire and of that literary kind which is ephemeral—

The only sin of Henry King
Was chewing little bits of string . . .

is drily amusing enough, but it is not so near a genuine mood of the spirit as—

In autumn when the leaves are brown
Take pen and ink and write it down . . .

or that wonderful narrative in which the corkscrew was taken from the shelf with the horrid purpose of waking someone up ; very near akin to the purpose of satire, which has often found expression in the epigrammatic style as in Martial

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and the Schiller-Goethe *Xenien*, a collection of epigrams like a nest of wasps let loose upon the German literary pests of the time.

Take the sting out of an epigram and you get something very near pure nonsense, and a form which fits nonsense like a glove. There have been many instances in which the satirical impulse, shying at its subject, or conscious of a certain lack of agility, has taken refuge in nonsense. *Alice in Wonderland* is, I fancy, the result of such a process, and in *Sylvie and Bruno* the satirical impulse became conscious and spoiled the fun.

Between sense and nonsense there is an enchanted region, a sort of backwater of satire where from the stress and strain of the world the mind may take refuge in a merriment as heartless as that of a child, who can laugh at physical deformities and pore over the struggles of a fly plucked of its wings. In this region were created Pierrot and Harlequin and Columbine and Pantaloon and their descendants such as Figaro and the figures of Restoration comedy. There are minds from which poetry is remote,

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though worshipful ; minds intensely susceptible to the charm of things, yet too sensitive for the rude vitality of the things themselves. They are often shocked by the discrepancy between the charm and the rudeness, and like sturdier minds shocked by the world's moral discrepancies, they turn to satire, which opens up for them the fair, still region. Here they weave fantasies like the *Rape of the Lock* or Mr. Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, in which there is a faint shadow of satire like the patches on the moon or a pout on a pretty girl's face, and they are lit not with the warm light of imagination, as full-blooded satire, which, like the spirit of man, is a candle to search the inward parts of the belly, but with a moony light caught in a reflection. But in the comparison of this enchanted region and the world of men and women is a device which satire can legitimately use. In his caricature, for instance, Mr. Beerbohm removes men and women from the world of their activities to his own fantastic world to see how they do there. Drastically he applies to them a logical scale of values, and, if they fit perfectly into the

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heartless fantasy, demonstrates thereby their absurdity in the world that is governed by the heart. There is no indignation in the experiment, but only a curiosity almost scientific; a boyish vivisection of insects, a rubbing of the colour from butterflies' wings to see what makes them gaudy. The satire is almost by the way. It is as though the caricaturist hoped there would be nothing in his subjects to defy caricature, as, sometimes, happily for him, there is nothing. Then does he achieve a complete and perfect work of art in which he abstracts his material, an editor or a fashionable dramatist, and gives him an enchanted life more real than any he has perceived and enjoyed here below.

It is only in this boyish employment that satire can win full mastery of its material. When the heart is engaged there is always a nobility in life that defies capture. Like all other human things satire desires fullness of power. It would, if it could, dethrone its betters. There is a fable of a snake that wasted the best part of an evening gnawing at a file. That is a fair portrait of the clumsy satirist who

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gnaws and gnaws and gets no more for his pains than a bitter taste of rust. Satire, no more than any other art, cannot thrive where no love is. Its energy is the energy of love repressed and denied its sustenance, and it cries havoc upon all love's enemies.

There are only two religions in the world, the religion of doubt and the religion of the humble. Between the two are travesty and callousness. The religion of doubt is that in which the mind takes refuge after it has discovered the necessity for the correction of natural deceptions, as the apparent passage of the sun round the earth. The religion of the humble is that of poets and simple souls for whom it is no great matter whether the sun moves or no, and it is enough to live and have the love of life. Without the travesty and the callousness there would be no religion of doubt, and there would be no satire. Both religions accept, and admit ignorance, but the conscious doubting mind is roused to a fury when a Bishop claims an intimate knowledge of the original plan of the Creator, and from that pretension

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develops a system of rules and conduct which he imposes on his gullible flock, who then cling in a desperate obstinacy to an authority which is no authority, and in course of time set up their terrors and prejudices as laws based ultimately upon the letter and not upon the spirit. Then the doubting mind raises its voice in denunciation, as Blake in the *Everlasting Gospel* and many passages in the *Prophetic Books*, or, where it has more *savoir faire* and knowledge of affairs and men, draws a picture showing the logical effect of that disastrous pretension, or probes back and riddles the evidence, myths, legends, superstitions, on which it is based. Thus Mr. Bernard Shaw, with a right satirical instinct, has recently, in *Androcles and the Lion*, gone back to the early Christians to expose their reality and deprive the Bishop of their support. But unfortunately their reality has escaped Mr. Shaw. His indignation is warmed by no love; its directness is warped by his self-indulgent humour; his concern is rather with the propagation of what he holds to be a reasonable set of ideas than with the release of life. He is a semi-

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satirist ; a doubter who wishes to supplant the religion of the humble with the false religion of the arrogant. But for his repudiation of authority he would have made an admirable Bishop, and at bottom his indignation seems to be no more than resentment at the Bishop's enjoying a position which in the Shavian society he himself would fill. Mr. Max Beerbohm is more nearly the true satirist of the early twentieth century in England than Mr. Bernard Shaw, whose work however, if it has not cleared the way for vision, will have had this value of having shown that it is possible to think of things upside down and no great harm be done, and the world go on much the same. That the conventional ideology could be held upside down without anything happening is sufficient proof of its emptiness, and it only needs a David-like satirist to smash it with sling and pebble. *Ça ira*, as they said in the French Revolution. It will be fun to see the shards and fragments of it go clattering down over the vested interests which uphold it, and to hear their victims calling for the pipes of Pan, to pipe them down to death.

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Only there will be no bloodshed to choke laughter ; there will be anger but no tears ; there will be no violent death but that of false ideas, and they will be slain with mockery ; the cry will be not “ *À la lanterne,*” but “ *Circulez, circulez, messieurs!* for you have no true interest but in movement, you have no true interest apart from ours, as we have none apart from yours, and we must all move on, for life is never still, and those who stay and impede the forward march shall be put to scorn, and shall live only in our laughter. *Circulez, messieurs!*”

There are always revolutions toward. Day and night, the changing seasons, are revolutions, the circulation of the blood, the acts of eating, drinking, and generation are revolutionary, whether we like it or no. And all natural revolution is so swift that it creates the illusion of steadiness and ponderability, so that habit can build its house on them. And in and out and round about the house revolutions move and the mightiest whirl it with them, and every now and then we are jaded and lose count and ap-

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preciation of them. Then do we cast about in ourselves for remedies to medicine our sluggishness and deliver us from our ill-humour and distemper, and no more potent distillation of the human spirit has ever been discovered than satire.

The summary shall be left to that great practitioner of the art, Henry Fielding:—

“To say the truth, as no known inhabitant of this globe is really more than man, so none need be ashamed of submitting to what the necessities of man demand: but when great personages condescend to aim at confining such low offices to themselves—as when, by hoarding or destroying, they seem to desire to prevent any others from eating—then they surely become very low and despicable. . . .

“The only true source of the Ridiculous is affectation. Now, affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy. . . .

“Now, from affectation only, the misfortunes and calamities of life, or the imperfections of nature, may become the objects of ridicule.

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Surely he hath a very ill-framed mind who can look on ugliness, infirmity, or poverty as ridiculous in themselves: nor do I believe any man living, who meets a dirty fellow riding through the streets in a cart, is struck with an idea of the Ridiculous from it; but if he should see the same figure descend from his coach-and-six, or bolt from his chair with his hat under his arm, he would then begin to laugh, and with justice. . . . Much less are natural imperfections the object of derision; but when ugliness aims at the applause of beauty, or lameness endeavours to display agility, it is then that these unfortunate circumstances, which at first moved our compassion, tend only to raise our mirth. The poet carries this very far.

None are for being what they are in fault,
But for not being what they would be thought.

Where, if the metre would suffer the word Ridiculous to close the first line, the thought would be rather more proper. Great vices are the proper objects of our detestation, smaller faults of our pity; but affectations

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appear to me the only true source of the Ridiculous.”

It is when affectation has grown in upon man's vitals like a tumour that satire has been forged and sharpened to cut it out.

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