

Samuel Butler and his Work *Erewhon*

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The rationalistic tendency from John Lock to David Hume in the wake of Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham had greater power to develop the capitalistic civilization. Whenever the people were under control of the civilization and became to think of everything in it, the faith in the past could not help being perturbed. The people who had consigned the faith to oblivion could not rest satisfied with the vacuum of their minds, and yet they could not find out any new faith. In these social conditions, there was mental restlessness of the people. This mental restlessness in the late nineteenth century is continued to the gloomy subconscious current of the twentieth century literature. Already in the end of the nineteenth century rose one writer in the world who had predicted and symbolized the future of the twentieth century literature; that was Samuel Butler. He begins to throw doubts on Christianity and denies it at last. He suspects himself if he can believe the Death, the Resurrection, the Assumption and the other various miracles of Christianity. Thereafter he chooses the scientific rationalism as his basic thought. He thinks the thought he entertains may vanish away in an instant, but that he cannot help living his life until he finds out any other satisfactory reason to change his thought. In this way, he has abandoned all the Christian dogmas and moralities. Keeping up with his thought and denying what does not accord with reason, he soon came upon that everything could not be resolved by reason only. What is universal truth then? It can only be explained that truth is what most people can accept, he thought. Nevertheless, there are many exceptions. How should the exceptions be managed? Reason cannot be the key to settle down every trouble. It is better not to decide by way of reasoning, but to depend on instinct which means to live on faith. The axioms of Euclidean geometry are true beyond their proves. But even Euclid, its basis is belief, thought its superstructure is reasoning. Thinking thus, he abandoned the point of rationalistic view and returned to some new faith. He had already lost faith in Christianity; but faith in something — that unknown god which should decide justice as justice and injustice as injustice — grew larger day by day in his mind.

Rationalism was a motive power as a kind of modernism to establish the

capitalistic civilization. Samuel Butler was obliged to notice something unreasonable after making a thorough investigation of it, and pursued the great unknown god to find himself way out of the restlessness of his mind in the late nineteenth century. He had already lost the faith in the past and yet looked for some unknown god in the restless spiritual vacua. It happened frequently even in the twentieth century after 'Immanent Will' of Thomas Hardy. Some were G. B. Shaw, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy from the standpoint of social criticism, the others were Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh who set forth their writings from the standpoint of Catholicism.

It can be proved how the human relations became perfunctory, superficial, and hypocritical in the middle of the Victorian age. Regardless of the general tendency, however, Samuel Butler kept up his own unique and heretical views without following the fashions of the day and indulging in the optimistic mass entertainment. Though Butler was a man who lived wholly in the Victorian age, he was one of the prophetic writers who took first the problems of today's literature. He was going to enter the ministry for the wishes of his father after graduating from St. John's College in Cambridge, but he went abroad to New Zealand in opposition to his father's will and engaged in sheep farming there for five years. Getting a great shock to have read *The Origin of Species*, he often contributed to the local press during the time. At first he was a passionate Darwinian, but he was estranged from Charles Darwin because of his connecting 'the theory of evolution' with 'natural selection'. Erasmus and Lamarck had the theory that various variations get accumulated into species and the variations are contributed logically to intelligence. Butler could not think the intelligence was not in man but in God, though he concurred in views with them. He called to his mind the thought of putting the intelligence in all living beings as he had already abandoned the agency of Providence. Pantheism is a kind of atheism. God of the orthodox school is nonsense because of having not any flesh but only soul; and therefore it is also a kind of atheism. God should have flesh as well as soul. All the animals and vegetables seem to have been changing step by step from one protyle; both flesh and soul trace back into one origin. So God is the animal and vegetable world; animal and vegetable world is God or God of organic growth. This is God the Known, and there exists the god still unknown in the back of it: that is God the Unknown.

Just like Butler's thought, Friedrich Nietzsche resulted in the thought 'Übermensch' after rejecting Christianity as Sklavenmoral, and Henri Bergson created 'L'évolution créatrice' against the mechanistic trend of Neo-Darwinism. It can also be said that Butler had been a forerunner of 'Life Force' by G. B. Shaw who declared himself in the preface to *Major Barbara* :

The late Samuel Butler was in his own department the greatest English writer of the latter half of the XIXth Century.... It drives me to despair of English literature when one sees so extraordinary a study of English life as Butler's posthumous *The Way of All Flesh* making so little expression that when, some later years, I produce plays in which Butler's extraordinary fresh, free and future-piercing suggestions have an obvious share. I am met with nothing but vague cacklings about Ibsen and Nietzsche.¹

Furthermore, Butler developed his unique criticism of arts. As a translator, he published the prose-versions of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer, and announced a new opinion that *Odyssey* had been written in Sicily and that by a woman; while studying Shakespeare's works, he set up a new interpretation of *Sonnets*. In such branches as religion, science, and literary arts, he established his own unique views revolting against already settled theories, and extricated himself of the optimistic view of life in the late nineteenth century by noticing the mysteriousness lying in the depth of human mentality. But professionals of each branch always tried not to take any notice of him. He says himself in *The Note Books* : "I am the enfant-terrible of literature and science."² And also in the last chapter of *The Way of All Flesh*, Pontifex the other self of Samuel Butler is spoken ill of by the publisher of his books :

'He is in a very solitary position, Mr. Overton,' continued the publisher. 'He has formed no alliances, and has made enemies not only of the religious world but of the literary and scientific brotherhood as well. This will not do nowadays. If a man wishes to get on he must belong to a set, and Mr. Pontifex belongs to no set — not even to a club.'³

In the final analysis, Samuel Butler could not demonstrate his ability to the full even in one branch of learnings and ended his whole career as a minor without casting his shadow largely on history. It was nothing but limitation of his faculty and thought he could not get over. But, anyhow, he is immortal in the history of English literature as the author of *Erewhon* which took the lead of anti-utopian literary works such as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell.

(A) Utilitarianism of Mr. Higgs, the Hero

Great Britain, from the beginning of the nineteenth century into the prosperous Victorian age, got start in the wide world to obtain colonies for the purpose

of conquering the world. In one of these colonies, Mr. Higgs who remained nameless until in *Erewhon Revisited* was engaged in sheep farming to be wealthy just as Samuel Butler himself in 1859 went abroad to one colony New Zealand for making a good fortune. As soon as shearing was over and the wool was sent off to England, Mr. Higgs set out exploring to find new sheep country or gold with an old native nicknamed Chowbok. On the way near the main range, Chowbok turned back with fear and Higgs alone with the burden of solitude found his way over ranges and rivers at all risks into Erewhon at last.

The wonderful skill of Butler's prosaism to chapter V reminds us of that of Swift or Defoe. We readers are compelled to be led in his skill of narration and to be dragged into reading through the abnormal events from the next chapter which could not have been read through if written unskillfully. What is expressed here, on the other hand, is nothing but the thought of Utilitarianism being represented as freedom or liberty in the society in those days, nay, in our own time just as written in the last chapter :

It is believed that the money thus realized would enable us to declare a handsome dividend, and leave a considerable balance, which might be spent in repeating our operations, and bringing over other cargoes of Erewhonians, with fresh consequent profits. In fact we could go backwards and forwards as long as there was a demand for labour in Queensland, or indeed in any other Christian colony, for the supply of Erewhonians would be unlimited, and they could be packed closely and fed at a very reasonable cost.⁴

This quotation shows the instinctive but ugly phase of human beings that the stronger prey upon the weaker ; and also in the first chapter Butler makes Higgs say concerning the thought of Utilitarianism :

Suffice it, that when I left home it was with the intention of going to some new colony, and either finding, or even perhaps purchasing, waste crown land suitable for cattle or sheep farming, by which means I thought that I could better my fortunes more rapidly than in England Even if I did not find country, might I not find gold, or diamonds, or copper, or silver?⁵

As for an individual, the above shows an appearance of a modern who wants to win any position, or honour, or fortune based on a school career as be seen in the struggle of entrance exams of Pupils and students how trifle it may be in the mechanized modern society. As for one of the nations, it shows an aspect of Japan now that is planning to find her way into Southeast Asia and then to promote national welfare by free trade. As for Utilitarianism, however, it is the

belief that we should aim at 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. But more or less it had been impossible on the earth both mentally and materially. Then, how will it be possible in the future? The essence is to make the society of 'the right man in the right place' based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

(B) Erewhonian Morality

After stepping into Erewhon, Mr. Higgs falls in with various manners and customs of novelty. At first he was found by two lovely girls and was taken to a small village. The inhabitants were surprised to see him smoke and strike a match, and they seemed to be some five or six hundred years behind Europe in their inventions. But he was amazed at their physical beauty saying :

The women were vigorous, and had a most majestic gait, their heads being set up upon their shoulders with a grace beyond all power of expression. Each feature was finished, eyelids, eyelashes and ears, being almost invariably perfect The men were handsome as the women beautiful I should add that all seemed to take a pride in their personal appearance, and that even the poorest (and none seemed rich) were well-kept and tidy. ⁶

This means the adoration of perfect human flesh against physical decrepitude and old age. Mr. Higgs was respected at the same time for having fair hair and blue eyes. It is natural that everyone wants to be beautiful or handsome, but everyone should be as he is; never as in the world of Huxley's *Brave New World* though it is the possible future world !

Before long, he was found to be having a watch and he noticed the chief-magistrate show the expression not of fear but of hatred. Then he was taken to the museum of the town that was occupied with broken machinery of all sorts, and that some of them were fragments of the most advanced inventions in Europe though seemed all to be several hundred years old in Erewhon. After all, he is put in prison for having had a watch; there he happens to catch severe cold and knows that illness of any sort is considered in Erewhon to be highly criminal and immoral and that anyone who is ill is tried before a jury and imprisoned for a period longer or shorter as the case may be. In the meantime, he is going to be sent up to the metropolis in order to see and converse with the king and the queen, and is asked to be a guest of the delightful man who is one of the leading merchants and yet who has lately recovered from embezzling a large sum of money. How much he was surprised would be unquestionable :

"I am not much afraid of infection," said I, impatiently, "but I have some regard for my character; and if I know a man to be an embezzler of other people's money, be sure of it, I will give him as wide a berth as I can. If he were ill or poor ——" "Ill or poor !" interrupted the interpreter, with a face of great alarm. "So that's your notion of propriety ! You would consort with the basest criminals, and yet deem simple embezzlement a bar to friendly intercourse. I can not understand you."⁷

On his way to the metropolis, he is further surprised to know the odd habit that he himself tells in the middle of chapter IX :

To my surprise, I was met with the kindest expression of condolence, and heard it buzzed about the room that I was in an ill temper; whereon people began to give me nice things to smell and to eat, which really did seem to have some temper-mending quality about them, for I soon felt pleased and was at once congratulated upon being better.⁸

The part of description Erewhonians adore physical beauty shows a desire for the ideal society where there is not any disease. As for the places of inversion between illness and crime, they show desires for the completely equipped society where an illness can be considered to be a private crime and for the completely organized society as is impossible to commit any crime. The social structure of the ideal society Butler has conceived cannot be described so logically as that of *Utopia* by Thomas More; it is the defect and limitation of Samuel Butler himself as a writer of profound thought. This work is, however, a severe satirical one against the society of many crimes and punishments in those days and also a utopian prose one in which everyone yearns for the society there is neither crime nor punishment, and yet the problem concerning crime and punishment is just the one against the society in our own time. We go out in an instant to consult a doctor without any hesitation when we fall ill. We confess the condition of the disease obediently to the doctor, receive medical treatment without any pang of conscience, and endure any physical or mental suffering in order to get better from it as soon as possible; while I wonder why such crimes as bribery cases of the government officials, forging of cheques, setting a house on fire, incessant thefts and robberies can render the punishments to each criminal ! Can the criminal not be worthy to be treated as the mentally diseased without being punished or ostracized from the society? It may be said that these mental diseases break out of the discrepancies in the society. In one case a patient should receive any treatment, in the other the society itself should receive any reformation. Then, what is the ideal society? It is the society of individual

liberty and equality with no clash of interests. It is obvious what Butler intended with his satirical skill of turning upside down the relations of diseases and crimes was to reveal the discrepancies in society by throwing the doubt how each criminal could be punished personally.

(C) Erewhonian Religion

Mr. Higgs continued his sojourn with the Nosnibors, and there he knew there were two different currencies. Someday he visited one of the Musical Banks with Mrs. Nosnibor and her two daughters, and made sure of the system saying :

I cannot describe all that took place in those inner precincts, for a sinister-looking person in a black gown came and made unpleasant gestures at me for peering I happened to have in my pocket one of the Musical Bank pieces, which had given me by Mrs. Nosnibor, so I tried to tip him with it; but having seen what it was, he became so angry that I had to give him a piece of the other kind of money to pacify him. When I had done this he became civil directly.⁹

Higgs, the other self of Samuel Butler, severely criticized the Musical Banks (Churchs), the worthless Musical Bank pieces issued from the Banks (the papal indulgences), and both cashiers and managers of the Banks (Ministers and Priests).

So far as I could see, fully ninety percent of the population of the metropolis looked upon these banks with something not far removed from contempt. If this is so, any such startling event as is sure to arise sooner or later, may serve as nucleus to a new order of things that will be more in harmony with both the heads and hearts of the people.¹⁰

I quoted only the essence that Butler tried to express the bitter satire for the church-system or the ecclesiastical government, for the indulgence as an outcome of human vanity which was of no use, and for the formality, hypocrisy, conservativeness and blind belief of ministers and priests through Butler's experience. Though these customs have almost vanished away in our time, we cannot disregard the work as a period-piece. The problem Butler offered us is really the one in our own time. Twice caused the miserable World Wars in spite of the good Samaritanism as the basic thought of Christianity ; and nowadays even the good Samaritanism of Christianity cannot solve the problem of negros in the Christian

country. Religion can be said to be 'the opium of the people.' This means that religion is to believe in the absolute being without reasonable thinking. It becomes to be the source of the ruling and subordination. As for the religious sentiment, however, everyone may have. The point is to pay deep regard to the individual liberty based on the idea "There is no sentiment without reason and there is no reason without sentiment." Butler had denied the system and institution of Christianity, but could not have surmounted the inconsistencies existing in the essence of Christianity, nor could have abandoned his religious thought. This was nothing but his limitation of ideology, and also he was one of the victims of the epoch the fin de siècle.

(D) From Birth to Death and the Erewhonian Education

While staying at the house of the Nosnibors, Higgs falls in love with the second daughter Arowhena ; but he knew one rule in various views of the Erewhonians that whoever married into a family must marry the eldest at the time unmarried. So in despair he took a lodging after he left the Nosnibors. A few days after from the event, he visited the Colleges of Unreason with the cashiers of the Musical Banks because of being unable to endure much of his discomfort. The views of the Erewhonians concerning death and birth are quite opposite to those of our society ; but how to bring up children after birth is precisely the same as Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh* :

The Erewhonians regard death with less abhorrence than disease. If it is an offence at all, it is one beyond the reach of the law The birth of a child is looked upon as a painful subject on which it is kinder not to touch ; . . . The relations between children and parents in that country are less happy than in Europe. It was rarely that I saw cases of real hearty and intense affection between the old people and the young ones.¹¹

We can easily understand how much Butler detested his parents and the relationship between parents and their children in those days. Furthermore, Butler tells how wonderful 'the World of the Unborn' is, and makes the Erewhonians say even to the extent that "To be born is a felony." But the Erewhonians think that death is only an affair of being more frightened than hurt. We are delighted at the birth of a child, but the Erewhonians think it unhappy and believe in the pre-existence — the World of the Unborn — just as some of us believe in the World after

Death. Once a child is born, there is a Birth Formula that is Butler's bitter sarcasm for the baptizing of Christianity.

After the subject of parents and their children, Higgs makes his way to discussing education. The Erewhonians have the absurd educational system based on authoritarian principles. Students are chiefly taught hypothetics in the Colleges of Unreason and its purpose is as follows :

To imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies, and require the youths to give intelligent answers to the questions that arise therefrom, is reckoned the fittest conceivable way of preparing them for the actual conduct of their affairs in after life.¹²

Mr. Higgs somewhat expresses his approbation for the hypothetics, but he really thinks it of no use to solve the problems presented in the civilization and it is a waste of good human energy for the students because of it being compelled from the authorities, and therefore most of the students are disinclined towards it. The purpose of teaching hypothetics is for the extraordinary, and the study of unreason is required for the daily conduct of affairs. The professors of Unreason tell about reason and unreason as :

There is no need of encouraging reason. With unreason the case is different. She is the natural complement of reason, without whose existence reason itself were non-existent. If, then, reason would be non-existent were there no such thing as unreason, surely it follows that the more unreason there is, the more reason there must be also?¹³

We can tell how much Butler suffered in the chasm of religion and science; and at the same time, if we think of the revival of mythology and the prosperity of religion against the priority of scientific thought in our time, they are the problems of our own and therefore we can understand still more the suffering of the people in those days.

Intermingling delicately his true manifest thought with fiction, Butler criticizes severely the education especially in colleges in those days as if he were talking viciously of that now :

It is not our business to help students to think for themselves. Surely this is the very last thing which one who wishes them well should encourage them to do. Our duty is to ensure that they shall think as we do, or at any rate, as we hold it expedient to say we do... And yet perhaps, after all, it is better for a country that its seats of learning should do more to suppress mental growth than to encourage it.¹⁴

In succession, Butler tells most of the colleges are related to academic bodies and most of the professors are to journalism; and yet most of the professors have caught 'the fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease' to a greater or less degree because of the objection to progress. So what they speak are only such subjects as weather, eating and drinking, holiday excursions, or games of skill; and at last Butler makes an humourless attack on them:

The art of sitting gracefully on a fence has never, I should think, been brought to greater perfection than at the Erewhonian Colleges of Unreason.¹⁵

(E) Attack on Machines and the Right of All Living Beings

Samuel Butler, dealing with the origin and the growth of life and consciousness, had done away with the division between an organic body and an inorganic matter, and also the classification between a living thing and a non-living thing. His evolutionary theory which resembles a kind of dialectical materialism is so complicated that we can not easily fathom his intentions as if we were reading a philosophical work. Thus his unique mechanical views on machines spread out hereafter.

See what strides machines have made in the last thousand! May not the world last twenty million years longer? If so, what will they not in the end become? Is it not safer to nip the mischief in the bud and to forbid them further progress? But who can say that the vapour engine has not a kind of consciousness? Where does consciousness begin, and where end? Who can draw the line?¹⁵

Then Butler tells about a plant that eats organic food with its flowers and about a potato that has anyhow intelligence like metaphysic wit as well as an oyster has somewhat consciousness and emotions. Moreover he tells about the superiority of machines to human beings:

How many men at this hour are living in a state of bondage to the machines? How many spend their whole lives, from the cradle to the grave, in tending them by night and day? . . . What an army of servants do the machines thus employ! Are there not probably more men engaged in tending machinery than in tending men?¹⁷

Butler, proceeding thus his view on machines, persuades us the possibility of a new

reproductive system of machines by giving an example that man is a kind of reproductive system of machines just as insects are to many of the plants. But in the end caused the civil war between the machinists and the anti-machinists. Happily the latter got the victory and succeeded in destroying all the inventions that had been invented for the preceding 271 years.

We cannot help being fascinated by the humanity of the Erewhonians contrasting with the men in our time, though Butler did not write realistically the process of the civil war in detail, but only satirized the various phenomena in society disregarding his own rhetorical skill. Once we think of the limitless exploitation of nuclear weapons by the Powers, of the estrangement of peoples by such new machines as electronic computers, and of the traffic accidents increasing day by day, we cannot help being charmed with Butler's universal faculty as well as feeling tremendous hatred at the discrepancies in the modern society of machine civilization. We can appreciate his attack on machines on the different view-point of the civilization critique from that of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell. Basing on the Darwinian theory, Butler expedites his unique revolutionary theory of animals and vegetables, and makes the two reformers in Erewhon criticize the mechanized society including his severe irony on Christianity :

My friends, if it was wrong of you to kill and eat your fellow-men, it is also wrong to kill and eat fish, flesh, and fowl. Birds, beasts, and fishes have as full a right to live as they can unmolested by man, as man has to live unmolested by his neighbours.¹⁸

About six or seven hundred years after the death of the above vegetarian prophet, another philosopher — the other self of Darwin — appeared to reveal the inconsistency of the prohibition to eat animal food, and he drove his fellow-countrymen into the predicament as :

... both animals and plants have had a common ancestry, and that hence the second should be deemed as much alive as the first ... The conclusion he drew, or pretended to draw, was that if it was sinful to kill and eat animals, it was not less sinful to do the like by vegetables, or their seeds.¹⁹

After all, the country came to the conclusion after wandering in the wilderness of philosophy that it was inevitable for men to eat animal food and vegetables. And as for the relation between reason and instinct, Butler makes Mr. Higgs say at last as follows :

Indeed I can see no hope for the Erewhonians till they have got to understand that reason, uncorrected by instinct, is as bad as instinct

uncorrected by reason.²⁰

This complication between reason and instinct is Butler's biting sarcasm against the high developed machine civilization in which the people have lost the touches of humanity and their genuine human-relations, and against those people who always look to their own interests deviated from what a man should be and who cannot treat the advanced inventions rightfully. we are obliged to remember the Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels*.

(F) Escape with Arowhena and Conclusion

Mr. Higgs was busily engaged in translating the extracts of various views of the Erewhonians into English, while planning his escape with Arowhena. During the time, he noticed he was going to be indicted for measles though in fact for having owned a watch and for attempting the reintroduction of machinery. Luckily there was a long drought, so he found out a plausible reason that he would go up into the sky in a balloon to interview with the air god. In this way, he could escape with Arowhena and come back to England. After getting back to England safely, he denounces his old friend Chobok for his superficial and hypocritical ministry. At the same time, he blames those religious people in the Victorian age who were deficient in the scientific thought to think for themselves and judge justice as justice and who have been blind minded in the contradictory society without any will to do away with many discrepancies.

Samuel Butler had denied Christianity but concluded the work *Erewhon* by 'God the Unknown' as be seen in the escape of Mr. Higgs. He escaped from Erewhon with Arowhena without rectifying abuses in the country; and after the death of Arowhena he revisited Erewhon twenty years later. But anyhow Butler ended his life as a mere citizen without creating Brave New World by breaking down many discrepancies in the society though he could notice them. He was a man of independent free-will and self-will, fearless of any adverse circumstance. Starting from the impressions of his personal affairs, he set forth his own views of renovation on Christianity; he went a step further on his unique revolutionary theory, and it developed into his extensive views on science and religion. He became one being of significance in the period of transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth one. He was rather a proponent of various problems than a man of their amicable settlement, and most of the problems he offered have not settled yet even in our time after about a century.

Notes

1. Gerge Bernard Shaw : Preface to *Major Barbara* (Constable, London, 1931), p.161.
2. Henry Festing Jones (ed.) : *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1912), p.68.
3. Samuel Butler : *The Way of All Flesh* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1903), p.429.
4. Samuel Butler : *Erewhon : or, Over the Range* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1872), Ch. XXIX, p.188.
5. *Ibid.*, Ch. I, p.9.
6. *Ibid.*, Ch. VII, pp.42-43.
7. *Ibid.*, Ch. IX, pp.53-54.
8. *Ibid.*, Ch. IX, p.56.
9. *Ibid.*, Ch. XV, p.93.
10. *Ibid.*, Ch. XV, p.99.
11. *Ibid.*, Ch. XIII, pp.81-85-122.
12. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXI, p.131.
13. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXI, p.132.
14. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXII, pp.133-136.
15. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXII, p.138.
16. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXIII, p.141.
17. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXIV, pp.148-149.
18. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXVI, pp.164-165.
19. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXVII, pp.171-175.
20. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXVII, p.176.

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