

Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics in *Erewhon*: Samuel Butler's Ambiguous Utopia

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Abstract: This article seeks to analyse Samuel Butler's satirical treatment of Victorian institutions and values in *Erewhon* (1872). It focuses on the function of the utopian genre to account for the ideological struggles that inform society, and its capacity to suggest cures to social ills. Taking its theoretical bearings from Paul Ricoeur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1975) and Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia: A Sociology of Knowledge* (1932) it attempts to explain why Butler faces the difficulty of reflecting objectively on a society in which he was culturally immersed; In describing this difficulty, Ricoeur uses the expression "Mannheim's paradox" to refer to the ambivalent intersection of ideology and utopia in utopian thinking. A symptom of this ambivalence in *Erewhon*, as we argue in this article, is the resort to satire not only to mock and make a clean sweep of the values of Victorian society in compliance with the work's utopian impulse but to re-establish those same values on firmer ideological basis by resorting to carnivalisation.

Keywords: Butler, *Erewhon*, satire, carnival, ideology, utopia ambiguity, Victorian values

Introduction: Century ends are known to be periods of great expectations, and the end of the nineteenth century which had begun to reap the fruit of Enlightenment was no exception to the rule. Indeed, the triumph of empirical knowledge and reason over ignorance and superstition had produced scientific and theoretical breakthroughs, technological innovations and social progress, all of

which had turned Great Britain into an orderly body politic, a busy workshop and a powerful, self-confident economic and military world power under the rule of enlightened elites. The gradual discovery of natural laws increased man's control of natural forces, opened unlimited horizons before him and strengthened his belief that "laissez-faire" and Free Trade were the best way to establish an ideal state.

The *fin-de-siècle* was a period during which the hopes of the rising working classes for an improved future were echoed by the apprehensions of the middle classes that rule by the many may lead society back to anarchy. These conflicting feelings of aspiration and apprehension pervaded British society and produced a culture of expectancy that found expression in utopian writing. As the growing economic and political influence of the workers was not translated into political terms, a feeling that something ought to be done to meet the workers pressing demands for recognition pervaded British society. However, this feeling of empathy which stirred some middle class intellectuals to act as the voice of the workers through utopias hardly concealed their fear of a proletarian revolution as the inevitable outcome of historical evolution.

For Mathew Beaumont (2005), the utopias produced at that period were meant by their authors as imagined virtual answers to the concrete demands expressed by certain social strata, which if fulfilled here and now might cause the disruption of the ongoing established order. They represented an external view-point from which their authors tried to understand the contradictions of their society and hint at possible schemes whereby the tensions threatening their society could be released. However, holding an intermediate position between the working classes and the middle classes, the utopian writers displayed an ambivalent attitude which seemed to reflect their

difficulty to situate themselves socially and culturally. It is the purpose of the present article to look into the origin and the function of this ambivalence as expressed in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872).

Review of the literature, Issue and Hypothesis: Published anonymously by Trubner in 1872, *Erewhon* has already been the object of numerous critical studies. Indeed critics could be anything but indifferent to a daring work of art that undertook to strip naked the inconsistencies of Victorian society. However, while purportedly meant to 'hold a mirror up to Victorian society' (Kumar, 1991: 106) to reveal its incongruities, critics and readers alike have been baffled by the intended function of the satire. Butler's deliberate vagueness may explain the consensus reached by critics that "for all its qualities [Butler's novel] might have been written by the Erewhonian professor of inconsistency and evasion", to quote Darco Suvin who best epitomises this view (quoted in Parrinder, 2005:353).

Although meant by its author to function as a utopia, considering the anagrammatic relationship of his romance to Sir Thomas More's "Nowhere", the supposedly ideal society portrayed by Butler is deficient in the traits of a conventional utopia. In his discussion of the novel, T.J. Remington concludes that it is closer to a Swiftian satire than to 'a conventional utopian or dystopian fiction, or with modern science fiction for that matter. Set neither in an ideal future nor in an ideal past, *Erewhon*'s imaginary society falls short of utopian fiction or dystopian satire' (Remington,1983:37). Unlike most of Butler's critics, Remington refuses to read the views expressed by the writer in the chapter entitled "The Book of the Machines" as the precursor of science fiction, anticipating the horrific developments of science, but rather as a deliberate exaggeration of both the Darwinians who hold positivist views, and of the way evolutionary ideas could be distorted by conservatives in order to counter progress.

Much the same ambiguity in Butler's attitude is noted by Krishan Kumar. According to this critic, this ambiguity manifests itself through the writer's use of "utopian form to satirise Darwinian ideas but also to portray an alternative that [he] equally mocks and praises" (Kumar, 1996:65). Butler's possible intended aim is to warn against the quest of utopia, for any utopia is pregnant with a potential dystopia. Kumar notes "[a parallel between] the literary form of satire [and] the social form of the Saturnalia, an annual festival of mockery and destruction that was also a positive re-enactment of the pleasures of the Golden Age (ibid: 104) Like the Saturnalia, satire might be assigned a "carnavalesque" function insofar as it provides an imaginary dimension in which the conventions, the values and the taboos that bind the social subject can be safely violated. These transgressions, as Simon Dentith reminds us, function as a sort of safety valve playing a cathartic function (1996: 73). While it allows the participants to indulge in all sorts of excesses within the limits of the carnival, it actually prevents creative praxis for it helps the order to regenerate and perpetuate itself in non-marked time, once the tensions threatening to shatter it have been released. This form of criticism is ideological in nature for rather than transforming the established order, it tends to strengthen it. Although Kumar hints at the uneasy position and vague aim of the satirist, he does not, discuss the causes of this ambivalence.

The critic who probably best accounts for Butler's ambiguity is A.L. Morton who describes *Erewhon*

[as] the prospect of a utopia from the study window of a country rectory through the eyes of the rector's brilliant eccentric son. And it is one of the characteristics of the rector's clever son that he is able to feel extremely detached while in fact remaining very much a part of his environment. [adding to

describe the paradox in which Butler is caught: to be at the same time in an out of the system whose mores he scrutinises that] . . . he is like a weak swimmer, forever striking out from the shore and as often heading back in panic the moment he finds he is out of his depth. (Morton, 1969: 185-193).

Morton realises the difficulty Butler felt as a middle class intellectual, who is too content in the enjoyment of the material comforts of his position, to emancipate himself from the outlook of his group. It is, in part, this ambivalence of the utopian writer towards the “inconsistencies” of his society which this article aims to account for. More specifically, this article is premised on the assumption that Samuel Butler who set out to satirise Victorian mores was so constrained by the ideological outlook of his class that he finishes by complying with those values that he had initially intended to debunk. As an observer-participant, trying to look at his society from an ideologically neutral point of view, Butler seems to have been caught in a paradox.

Methodology: The Butlerian paradox will be analysed with the theoretical framework that Karl Mannheim and Paul Ricoeur have outlined, respectively in *Ideology and Utopia: A Sociology of Knowledge (1932)* and *Ideology and Utopia (2005)*. This appeal to theory about the dialectic of utopian and ideological thing will be supplemented by Butler’s public pronouncements made in two of his major essays: “Life and Habit” and “Unconscious Memory,” which might shed light on his doxa and paradoxa with which he started the writing of his utopian fiction. The ambiguity of his ideological position, as we shall argue, has led to fall in the trap of “Mannheim’s paradox”.

Elaborating on Marx’s concept of “False consciousness” Mannheim acknowledges his debt to Marxist philosophy that

“societies’ ruling ideas are the ideas of their ruling classes”, (quoted in Ricoeur, 2005). He goes on to explain that it was Marx’s merit and that of subsequent Marxist writings to have revealed that ideas representations, and consciousness prevailing at a given historical period are reflections of the material conditions in vogue at that period (ibid., pp.114-115). This “false consciousness”, also referred to as ideology, distorts the subject’s perception of reality by giving an idealised account of the praxis, thus concealing from view the unequal relations of power. Ideology for Mannheim consists of “the situationally transcendent ideas” whose aim is to maintain the on-going order. Since it aims at perpetuating the existing order, ideology, by virtue of its function, belongs to the ruling strata. It is, therefore, the cultural instrument whereby the ruling classes legitimise their power position. This legitimacy, however, is often the object of contention.

Contention usually arises in times of economic and social change in which rising economic and social strata contest or challenge the legitimacy of the existing order, its ideas and practices. The contending stratum, to whom the on-going order represents “the absolute evil” (Mannheim, 1932), suggests an alternative system in which the flaws of the former are corrected. By superimposing the image of the ideal utopia over that of the flawed on-going order, it becomes easy for observers to identify the defects of the system object of contention. Utopia is therefore a scheme for the improvement of society. Like ideology, utopia resorts to “situationally transcendent ideas” in its project of reordering society on “more convenient” bases. However unlike ideology which tends to naturalise the present system, the function of utopia is to shatter it. However, the same theorist takes care to precise that certain situationally transcendent ideas do not transform the existing order but aim only through wish fulfilling

images at providing a temporary escape from reality. These are ideological in nature (ibid)

Starting from the hypothesis that ideas produced in society reflect the interests of the social stratum that produces them, Mannheim sets himself the task to trace the social origin of different ideas by referring them to the respective groups whose interests they vehicle. And since different thoughts or interpretations of the world are used as weapons in the defence of the interests of the social group which produces them, Mannheim attempts through a “non-evaluative” approach referred to as The Sociology of Knowledge to map the social forces that inform society at a given moment of its history. However, since the sociologist himself is part of the very society he undertakes to study, and since he uses conceptual instruments bearing the cultural and ideological bias of the group that has devised them, he can’t escape ideological influence in his analyses, views and conclusions. This is the paradox in which Mannheim is caught, and which I tentatively suggest Butler the satirist did not manage to sidestep.

Results and Discussion

Erewhon is the story of a young Anglican who leaves his native home to go to some “new colony”, buy crown land, and use it for sheep breeding. He reports to have reached the new land during “the last months of 1968”. The country having already been peopled by Europeans, the narrator is hired as a shepherd. He dreams of exploring a stretch of land that lies beyond a range of mountains hoping to find fertile land or some precious mineral ore: gold, diamond or silver that will make his fortune. To achieve his aim, the narrator allures a native “chowbok”, with Brandy to help him cross the range. However, the latter runs away leaving the narrator alone as they are nearing a pass that was to lead him to Erewhon.

Although abandoned by his guide, the narrator resolves to cross the range whatever the dangers that might befall him. His dreams of fame and fortune were typical of the Victorian spirit of the time. The narrator who was no other man than Butler knew that

[The risks involved in going further into the unknown] were serious considerations, but the hope of finding an immense track of available sheep country which I was determined to monopolise as far as I possibly could sufficed to outweigh them; and in a few minutes, I felt resolved [. . .] that I would follow it and ascertain its value even though I should pay the penalty of failure with death. (Butler, 1872: 18)

In the mean time, the narrator regrets his failure to convert “chowbok” to the Christian religion, not out of a disinterested charity act to save a fellow creature from damnation, but out of sheer egotistic motives. In an ironical hint at the proselytising mission of the Evangelists the narrator explains his efforts at converting the native by the spiritual and material benefits he would reap both in this world and in the afterlife.

I had set my heart upon making “Chowbok” a real convert to Christian religion.

[. . .] I was all the more inclined to save the unhappy creature from an eternity of torture by recalling the promise of St James, that if anyone converted a sinner (which Chowbok surely was) he should hid a multitude of sins. (ibid)

This passage is an ironical hint at the evangelists’ conception of their mission and their relationship to the natives. Religion was a form of trade. Conversion was a dually profitable deal through which the missionary not only has his sins absolved but secures the natives’ submission and bodily strength in the real world as well. In return the convert receives hypothetical promises of salvation in the other world.

This deal implicit in the missionaries' efforts to convert the natives is instantiated by this lament expressing the narrator's frustration that Chowbok 'was stony ground, [. . .] and I could neither be of spiritual assistance to him, nor he of bodily profit to myself' (ibid: 22).

At the summit of the pass, the hero had to summon all his strength and courage to cross the threshold leading to Erewhon. This threshold or luminal passage is guarded by monstrous statues. The inhabitants of Erewhon are like Europeans, with the notable exception that they seemed to be healthier and to have more good looks. Though lagging about six hundred years behind England in terms technical progress, the country has much in common with the narrator's homeland. Technological backwardness, as the hero is soon to discover, is the result of a deliberate choice to wreck and then impose a ban on every sort machine. His being found in possession of a watch while being submitted to medical examination brought the narrator a prison sentence; for the possession of mechanical devices just like ill health and misfortune are criminalised by Erewhonian law. Fortunately, the narrator's "fair hair and good health' drew him the magnanimity of the magistrates, and the sympathy of the king and the queen" (ibid, pp. 28-30).

The narrator gradually discovers a country apparently different from his, but whose institutions, values and practices, when examined closely, reproduce and reflect, albeit in a distorted way, Victorian ones. Butler's Erewhon is described by Morton as

[. . .] *a Mundus Alter et Idem*, an antipodean country like and unlike [England], in its own wisdom and its own folly different from [it] but subtly complementary, so that it satirises and criticises on three different planes simultaneously. Its hero is at one and the same time Butler who satirises and a priggish young Anglican who is the object of the satire. (Morton, 1969:186)

The two places, England and Erewhon, are presented as two sides of the same coin, each of which is meant to reveal and suggest cures to the ills and inconsistencies of the other. These ills, the author interestingly seems to suggest, arise from man's quest and imposition of absolute truths or radical positions whether in science, religion or morals, without submitting their validity to regular empirical examination. The imposition of these absolutes is often dictated by man's natural drive to preserve power positions rather than by a quest of truth or justice *per se*.

This propensity to satirise his contemporaries' beliefs, conventions and practices arises from the author's abhorrence of received dogmas or doxas which, he suspects, partake of intellectual, moral and social stagnation and so lead to a general entropy, deadly to creative thought and practice. In his introduction to H.F. Jones's *The Notebooks of Samuel Butler Author of Erewhon*, Francis Byrne Hacket describes Butler as "a pragmatist, rebellious to intellectual conventions, habits of thought and claim for undeserved authority", all of which he perceives as mechanisms of ideological power. He is referred to as "a conscientious objector" because he was one of the first to realise with thinkers like Nietzsche that the perpetuation of views and practices whose validity is not regularly submitted to scrutiny, perpetuates the status-quo in the interpretation of the world, and so in the relations of domination and subjection. Butler who believes that the function of an intellectual is to constantly question institutionalised truths and naturalised practices, notes that

The world is full of [. . .] moss grown writers who once were advanced and revolutionary. If a writer has to be paraded as heterodox, it has to be shown that he has a manner, a method of dealing with things that really deserves to be considered advanced. (Hacket, 1910: iii)

It is arguably this conviction that prevented him from siding with any of the views held regarding machinery, religion, ethics or justice contenting himself to unveil their absurdity when they are erected as absolutes and integrated into the ideological arsenal of power. It is equally this depiction of falsehood and hypocrisy that makes *Erewhon* a modern novel and Butler a vanguard social critic despite his ideological bias which I shall discuss later.

Erewhon is an Arcadian society free from the problems of industrialism. Erewhonians are healthy comely and happy. Their religion is a mixture of Greek polytheism and idolatry and Christian monotheism. The number of church goers is steadily declining though outgrown by the adepts of “Ygdrun” the goddess of worldly pleasures. Their colleges teach conformity in thought and fight creative thinking and originality and so keep society in a state of permanent subjection to the official ideology.

The prohibition of machinery in Erewhon, despite this country’s potential to become a technological power long before England, may be read as a satirical backward glance at luddites and communists who had attacked the alienating effects of machines. It may also be interpreted as an attack on the Darwinians who hold positivist views on creation since they consider all forms of life as having gradually evolved from an original state of materiality. Appropriating the views of the evolutionists who advocate a mechanistic view of the universe Butler lends his voice to one of the professors whose book he pretends to quote and claims that man is no more than a highly advanced machine. He then goes on to argue that since man is a highly refined machine, machines in their turn might in the course of their “evolution” become human and even surpass and overthrow him from the status of master to that of slave, considering the speed of “mechanical evolution”. Anticipating on the arguments of his

opponents who contend that machines cannot develop a consciousness or a free will of their own, 'that though [they] should never hear so well and speak never so wisely, they will always do the one or the other for our advantage, not their own, that man will always be the ruling spirit and the machine the servant', the professor argues further that

[...]the servant glides by imperceptible approaches into the master; and we have come to such a pass that, even now, man must suffer terribly on ceasing to benefit the machines. . . 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? Is it not plain that machines are gaining ground upon us, when we reflect on the increasing number of those who are bound down to them as slaves, and of those who devote their whole souls to the advancement of the mechanical kingdom?[. . .] Are there not probably more men engaged in tending machinery than in tending men? [. . .] Are we not ourselves creating our own successors in the supremacy of the earth? Daily adding to the beauty and delicacy of their organisation daily giving them greater skill and supplying more and more of that self-regulating, self-acting power which will be better than any intellect? (Butler, 1872: 85-86)

The principle of "warfare and struggle"- that all forms of life have used with varying degrees of success; leading the stronger to outgrow subject or prey upon the weaker that lose the struggle and give in or disappear – has been supplied to machines by man whose fitness, and very existence has come to depend on the continuous development and perfection of machinery. So now, the relation has been reversed; turning man, whose survival depends on machinery, into an

“appendage of the machine” bound to a strict observance of his duties towards his master lest he stake his existence the moment he neglects them. Although today’s machines do not have senses or a reproductive system, “if this be taken that they cannot marry, and that we are never likely to see a fertile union between two vapour-engines with the young ones playing about the door shed . . .” (ibid:87), it is because they are still in a rudimentary stage of their development and so have to perform these functions through the agency of man. However considering the speed of their evolution, it won’t be long before they become autonomous. The fact that there are machine-making machines is forerunning evidence that in the remote future they may become able to “give birth” to machines without man’s intervention or even against his desire.

There is only one attempt to counter this ‘technocide’ and it is made by another professor who claims that man being a “machinate mammal” whose different organs and limbs are no more than integrated parts of the complex being; parts which have evolved to meet the contingencies imposed by his environment. It follows from this that machines and tools can be considered as external organs and limbs of the same being to which they are subservient. The only risk involved in allowing an unrestricted development of external organs is a “degeneracy of the human race [. . . with] the man himself being nothing but soul and mechanism, an intelligent but passionless principle of mechanical action” (ibid:93). The point developed by the second professor is that machines which are an inevitable by product of human civilisation have greatly added to men’s and nations’ power and sense of comfort. It is the possession of these extracorporeal means that make a difference between the mighty and the weak, the rich and the poor, a civilised race and a race of savages. It may even be to the advantage of man to be ruled by machines for these latter are

less inclined to emotional disturbance or prejudice and usually grant due reward to their servants. Still, in spite of the validity of these arguments, it was said that the first contender had the best of it and so a ban was imposed on machines and their possession outlawed.

Here a certain number of things have to be noted. The first and foremost is the author's attempt at keeping aloof with respect to the debates and struggles that informed British society; regularly resorting to satire or irony where he feels that ideas and conventions are used to secure or maintain positions of power. He takes care, as an author never to claim a definite truth, but uses various characters such as Higgs, the hero of *Erewhon*, and the professors he meets there to express the conflicting views about ethics, religion, money, social conventions, and progress that informed British society in his time. Butler seems particularly interested in the relationship of social institutions to the happiness of the social subjects; and any time a practice or an institution diverts from its purpose which is to serve man, he unveils it as a mechanism of control and power. Erewhon with all its pastoral beauty, may be read as a hint at the fate England might have faced at the fall of the century had the ideas of the "Luddists" triumphed and been carried to their logical conclusions. Without its gunboats, telegraph, railways and banking system England would have been a mere backward country at the mercy of technologically more advanced nations. The ironic tone in "The Book of the Machines" can be taken as reflection on the theses of the Darwinian zealots who claim that the possession of 'these extra-corporeal limbs' by an individual or a nation earned them the respect of technologically less fitted peers. Here, the writer wonders whether a world based on competition and selection in which the reign of the fittest is taken as part of the natural order of things was morally acceptable. The issue is worth raising in a society where such leading

social thinkers as Thomas Carlyle and Mathew Arnold shared these views according to Josephine M. Guy (Guy, 1998:24)

Equally important is the author's scepticism that a blind belief in the power of reason, science and technology to achieve the *summum bonum* as promised by utilitarianism. Through the hero Higgs, whom he sometimes uses as his mouthpiece, the author wonders whether a society impregnated by Darwinism could be trusted to relieve the poor from the burden of want, cure the sick and improve people's morality. On the contrary, the criminalisation of sickness, insanity and poverty in Erewhon and the complacency with which theft, swindling, and even crime are dealt with are ironical attacks on British judicial system which condemns the vagrants, the sick and the disabled to workhouses, the lunatics to asylums; failing to notice that the wealth of the rich had been accumulated through swindling and the sweated labour of the working classes. Rather than dealing with the symptoms of the social ills, the author ironically suggests, the Victorians would be better inspired to look for their root causes as the Erewhonians do with their deviant subjects whom they entrust to straighteners. However, in Erewhon as in England, current beliefs, values and conventions are those most likely to strengthen and perpetuate the existing social order.

In this respect, one strange custom observed by the narrator is the attitude of Erewhonians toward ill health, poverty and misfortune which are considered as different forms of crime and punished accordingly. By contrast, forgery, swindling and robbery, which in England are considered as crimes, are treated in Erewhon as misdemeanour with the subject 'taken to hospital and carefully tended at public expense' (Butler, 1872). The narrator attends the trial of a man in the last stages of tuberculosis being sentenced to a life imprisonment for 'persisting in his criminal conduct' (ibid). To avoid

trial the Erewhonians make it a paramount duty to feel well and often resort to all sorts of artefacts and falsehood to conceal their ill health in much the same way as Victorians will conceal their immoral conduct whatever the cost. The laws of the land, Butler wants to suggest, find their explanation in the constitution of the country. Erewhon, which is founded on eugenic bases, criminalises ill health and deformity. Likewise, England which conditions respectability with material comfort creates laws that would reinforce divine protection and favour of the fortunate in their accumulation of wealth at the expense of the have-nots. In other words, the mighty that monopolise economic and so political power make laws that would praise them for their success while the same laws would lay blame on the poor for their improvidence.

Reluctance from the Erewhonians to admit their ill health, like the reluctance of the Victorians to confess their sins or immoral conduct may find explanation in the reactions of indignation which these forms of misconduct arouse and the disgrace incurred by their authors afterwards. If ill health in Erewhon were understood to be caused by objective biological or social causes such as germs, malnutrition or lack of hygiene and entrusted to doctors as was the case in England; and if correspondingly poverty, theft and fraud in England were taken to have objective social and economic conditions, and treated as a form of sickness as was done in Erewhon; both societies would find remedies to their inconsistencies.

What the author suggests is a scientific approach to criminality in England. The best way to prevent crime was to look for its deep economic, cultural or political causes and suppress this evil by suppressing the conditions that have created it. The Erewhonian judge who had inflicted a life sentence to hard labour to the man suffering from tuberculosis is again a sideward glance at those English judges

who blindly enforce the New Poor Law regulations in the vain hope of preventing disability or poverty. Indeed, in 1870, the Local Government Board returned to the spirit of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, with a tightening of outdoor relief and a return to the workhouse system. This resulted in an official fall in the rate of paupers to 2% but actual figures gave the rate of 30% (Farraut: 1995), Quoted in Beaumont, 2005).

The judge who pronounced the sentence against the patient suffering from tuberculosis was fully convinced of the fairness of the verdict so immersed was he in the values and prejudices of the society 'in which he had been born and bred' (Butler, 1872: 47) Again the author satirises the English judicial system as an ideological apparatus set by the powers that be to insure the preservation and perpetuation of the social body and their privileges. The judge who leads the trial is not interest in the deep causes of the disease.

I am not here to enter upon serious metaphysical questions as to the origin of this or that [he declares . . .]; which would result in throwing guilt on the tissues of the primordial cell or on the elementary gases. There is no question of how you came to be wicked, but only this—namely, are you wicked or not? This has been decided in the affirmative.... (ibid: 44)

He looks for facts that lay blame on the criminal regardless of the deep causes which have prompted his action. Justice, conventions and other institutions, the author suggests, are mechanisms developed by the social body in its quest for self preservation; just like living organisms are prompted by their self preserving instincts to evolve according to the contingencies of their environment. When he comments on the Erewhonian law, the narrator concludes that the social order and the commonwealth transcend individual welfare and happiness. Reflecting on the concepts of right and duty, the author

wonders: ‘.Who shall limit the right of society except society itself? And what consideration for the individual is tolerable unless society be gainer thereby? [. . .] Property, marriage, the law; as the bed to the river, so [are] rule and convention to the instinct (Ibid,:46).The writer tells us that rule and convention are useful to preserve society. Here the writer hints at the arguments of organicism to support the claim that the social body has the natural right to rid itself of “a bad organ” through cure or amputation. For Butler, the ethical value of institutions, conventions and practices is measured by the extent to which these contribute to the preservation of the existing political order. The moment the political order becomes oppressive beyond endurable limits, turning man into a mere element in a political system, it becomes the duty of the writer as an artist to come to the rescue by unveiling the excesses of the system.

This is what butler attempted to do through his attacks on Darwinism, the judicial systems, certain academic practices through his satire about “the professors of inconsistency and evasion”. This is what he also did through his satirical depiction of the Erewhonian religious institutions: “the Musical Banks”. Officially and openly Erewhonians profess adherence to the official religion through their frequent visits to the Musical Banks the currency of which they pretend to value better than they do the other money. However, and in practice all of them know that in their daily dealings the other currency is essential. Higgs who acts as Butler’s mouthpiece admires the pragmatism of the Erewhonians who ‘pay lip service’ to their religion and conventions while in practice they pursue worldly ends.

Erewhonians are admirable because they are practical people respectful of their religion without disregarding the pursuit of happiness and the pleasures of life. They are vigorous, healthy, good-looking and unconscious of self. These qualities reach their perfection

in the character of the “high Ygdrunite”; those people who ‘in the matters of human conduct and the affairs of life have got about as far as it is in the nature of man to go. [. . .] They are gentlemen in the full sense of the word (Butler, 1872: 176-177). In his portrayal of the “High Ygdrunites”, Sharma notes that

Butler presents the results of his most careful and mature thinking on moral and religious matters. The more he thought, the more he became convinced of the unnatural and unhealthy character of the Puritan ethic which had acquired such a strong hold over the English mind in the wake of the Evangelical movement. It produced an obsession with the ideas of sin and sacrifice that poisoned the lives of people by cheapening the present life (Sharma, 1963:103-104)

For butler, religion should be made for man; not man for religion. As such, its first task is to make man happy and healthy. While the author admits the function of religion as a factor of social cohesion and individual integration, he warns against its use as an ideological instrument of conformity and subjection. Hence, Butler admires the High Ygdrunites because they are true to life. They give life supporting instincts their due share; being guided as they are by the quest of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

In contradistinction to the “High Ygdrunites”, to whom they constitute the negative counterpart, stand the “Cashiers of the Musical Banks” who represent the clergy. These have ‘a cramped expression upon their faces, the result of something in their lives that had stunted their natural development. [. . .] They lacked, with a few exceptions the true Erewhonian frankness; and an equal number from any other class would have looked happier and better men (Butler: 1872:57). Butler ironically wonders whether Erewhon would be a better place

were their expression to be transferred to the rest of the people promptly responding by an emphatic “no”.

Here again, Butler satirises the ideological function of religion without denying its social importance. What he questions is the deadly grip it may exert on the minds and vitality of the social subjects. Butler’s depiction of the Musical Banks is a satirical attack on Victorians’ self deception. Most of them possess ‘a skin deep’ religiosity while in practice they behave as inveterate philistines. Nonetheless, the author explains his contemporaries’ hypocrisy by their effort to reconcile a strict morality imposed by social conventions with individual sanity and balance. Through Higgs, who had noted the prevailing indifference of the Erewhonians to the precepts of the Musical Banks in their everyday dealings, the author concludes that the Erewhonians were on the eve of a revolution that would bring about a ‘new order more in harmony with the minds and the hearts of the people’ (Ibid:59).

Conclusion

Butler is ‘a philosophical writer’ coupled with an original artist. He makes use of irony and satire to stir debate about the flaws of his society. His originality as a writer comes from the fact that he uses various *personae* to express conflicting views about such issues as mechanism and humanism, religion and science, education, and the relationship of laws and ethics to society to name only these; never arrogating himself the final word. The author, who abhors dogmatic positions whether in science, religion, or morals, refuses to take clear cut positions regarding the issues he raises. Butler’s use of irony often unsettles the reader who is at pains to decide when the author is satirising and when he is making objective observations of facts. This makes *Erewhon* a polyphonic novel open to various interpretations. As an artist and critic, Butler points at the flaws of his society and the follies of his contemporaries which he interprets as mechanisms of adaptation, survival and self-perpetuation. Although critical of his

society he believes in the soundness of its institutions and its capacity to construct consensus through gradual improvement instead of radical change the author's motto being "surtout point de zèle".

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