

WALTER BAGEHOT: WRITER AND BANKER

BY HOLBROOK JACKSON

[*Mr. Jackson is editor of To-Day.*]

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THE relationship between the practice of banking and literature is not very clear. At the same time the well-known fact that the trade of dealing in money has produced a number of distinguished practitioners in the equally respectable trade of dealing in words might suggest that there was some subtle undertone of association between the two faculties. But consideration of the idea destroys this pleasant thought, at least from the banking side, because the banker-author has been content to remain an amateur of letters even when he had proved his capacity to rank with the professionals.

It is not, of course, suggested that literary bankers have been averse from accepting the earned increment of the pen, but rather that the caution which they have learned or inherited as bankers has prompted them to look upon writing as a hobby rather than as a means of subsistence. Thus the relationship between the two faculties is probably one of convenience or opportunity rather than anything more subtle.

Banking, despite the solemnity and grandeur with which it is surrounded, is doubtless an easy, nonexhausting trade, taxing the gray matter little, and leaving its members at the end of the day's routine fresh for more exacting tasks like golf or letters, bridge or politics, science or philosophy. Thus may we account for the achievements of men like Samuel Rogers, Walter

Bagehot, and Lord Avebury, and, in our own time, of Lord Latimer (Francis Money Coutts), and Mr. Edward Clodd.

Nor has the money business influenced the expression or point of view of such writers. Among the five banker-authors named, four of them might have come from any class or trade. But the other, Walter Bagehot, was equally inspired as a writer on economics and finance as on literature and politics. He left to banking its one piece of literature, *Lombard Street*, and to literature a collection of essays in criticism which have not even yet received their full measure of appreciation, although they have been enshrined both in an 'authoritative' edition and a popular reprint.

Walter Bagehot is interesting and will remain interesting for many reasons. One of those reasons is that he was the first of realists among English critics. He looked at literature in his own way, and told you what he saw and what he thought about it without undue reference to standards or opinions or principles. He was cultured without being 'highbrow,' and he added to first-rate mental gifts and sane scholarship the inestimable training of a business career. He had wit and humor, too, though neither a wit nor a humorist; he was humane without making a fuss about it, and, being by the grace of God an amateur, he escaped the neurosis of jealousy which

so often paralyzes the generosity and obscures and discolors the vision of those who live by what they say rather than by what they do.

Walter Bagehot was a man first and then a critic. He may or may not have seen things steadily and seen them whole, — as a matter of fact he did, — but he certainly gives the impression of one who saw things leisurely and saw them clearly. There is nothing mincing or mean about his criticism. He is spacious in outlook and incisive in opinion; and shining like a beacon through his essays is a fairness, a scrupulous honesty, recalling Dr. Johnson minus that great man's crankiness.

'The sense of reality,' said Bagehot, 'is necessary for excellence.' He sought both, and the gift of a character as sterling as the bullion in Stuckey's strong rooms enabled him to achieve his aim.

Walter Bagehot was born at Langport, Somersetshire, in 1826, and died there in 1877. His father was the head of the famous West Country bank still known as Stuckey's. The bank was more famous in the West of England than the Bank of England. It is reported that the sturdy natives of that typically English countryside have been known to refuse the paper money of Threadneedle Street in favor of notes bearing the trusted name of Stuckey.

Walter began his education at a Bristol school and, in 1842, entered University College, London. He read law and was called to the Bar ten years later. He did not pursue the law, having made up his mind to join his father in the banking business at Langport, and he ultimately became the head of the concern. But, in spite of his keen energy in business, Bagehot found time for reading and writing on literature, politics, finance, and economics. He was a regular contributor to the *Prospective Review* and the *National Review*,

and one of the editors of the latter throughout its existence. For the last seventeen years of his life he edited the *Economist*, many of his financial essays having been written for its pages.

Before entering business he spent some weeks in Paris just at the time of the *Coup d'État*, which was the occasion of his first literary work. This took the form of a series of letters to a journal called *The Enquirer*. Walter Bagehot scandalized his Liberal friends by supporting Louis Napoleon. These witty and daring letters have improved with time. The sense of reality is revealed in every line, and they own a sprightliness which he did not permit his riper pen.

Walter Bagehot's style, however, was never dull. He had a naturally bright mind, but he escaped the perils of that 'brilliance' which is the curse of so much modern writing, where facile epigram and acrobatic paradox are often the grimace of the thought-bound. To use one of his own happy phrases, his style was dressed in 'a sober suit of well-fitting expressions.' His brightness had definition. It had the qualities of fork lightning to strike and searchlight to illuminate.

This definition, which gives outline to his ideas and opinions, comes of a kind of mental hardness, the bright hardness associated with steel blades; it would suggest lack of sympathy to the half-baked, but was really the technique of a first-rate brain in perfect working order. His mental equipment belongs to the Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw class, with, of course, strict limitations. Here is a record of his student days at University College: —

'In those early days Bagehot's manner was often supercilious. We used to attack him for his intellectual arrogance — his *ὕβρις* we called it in our college slang — a quality which, I believe, was not really in him, though

he had then much of its external appearance. Nevertheless, his genuine contempt for what was intellectually feeble was not accomplished by an even adequate appreciation of his own powers. At college, however, his satirical "Hear, hear," was a formidable sound in the debating society, and one which took the heart out of many a younger speaker; and the ironical "How much?" with which in conversation he would meet an overeloquent expression, was always of a nature to reduce a man, as the mathematical phrase goes, to his "lowest terms."

'In maturer life he became much quieter and mellowed, and often even delicately considerate for others, but his inner scorn for ineffectual thought remained, in some degree, though it was very reticently expressed, till the last. For instance, I remember his attacking me for my mildness in criticizing a book which, though it professed to rest on a basis of clear thought, really missed all its points. "There is a pale whitey-brown substance," he wrote to me, "in the man's books which people who don't think take for thought, but it is n't," and he upbraided me much for not saying plainly that the man was a muff.'

The last thing that you would deduce from Walter Bagehot's essays would be that he was the sort of man who would suffer muffs gladly. He does not peptonize, he makes clear. The process of digestion is left to the reader. A pleasant acidity of expression pervades his work like a *sauce piquante*, or, better, like that squeeze of lemon which is permitted to give, dare I say, a kick to certain delectable dishes — deviled whitebait, grilled sole, turtle soup, and Whitstable oysters. He introduces it with his literary, political, and even financial dishes, making the dulllest of them, for he reveled in dull subjects, palatable.

For example, while criticizing the failure of a certain brilliant Chancellor of the Exchequer, he said: 'The faculty of disheartening adversaries by diffusing on occasion an oppressive atmosphere of businesslike dullness is invaluable to a parliamentary statesman.' 'The business of a critic is to criticize,' he said again, 'it is not his duty to be thankful.' And scattered over his work are such phrases as: 'French is the *patois* of Europe, English the language of the world'; 'In every country common opinions are very common'; 'Affection as a settled subject is incompatible with art.' On every page there is some such seasoning, *piquante*, acrid even, but never sour, and only bitter in the sense that many excellent tonics are bitter, stimulatingly bitter.

He is equally good at flashing a portrait in a phrase. Each of his essays on writers, such as those on William Cowper, Gibbon, Shakespeare, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Milton, Clough, Crabb Robinson, is given a humanizing touch, often no more than a hint, which instantly brings you into personal touch with the subject.

Here are a few of his flashlight portraits — Swift: 'a detective in a dean's wig.' Sydney Smith: 'an after-dinner writer.' 'Mr. Disraeli owes his great success to his very unusual capacity for *applying* a literary genius, in itself limited, to the practical purposes of public life.' 'Lord Brougham had the first great essential of an agitator — the faculty of easy anger.' Lord Lawrence: 'A Nasmyth hammer which can chip an egg or flatten an iron bar, but only within its groove.' Horace Walpole: 'Not a very scrupulous narrator; yet it was too much trouble even for him to tell lies on many points.'

The sense of the personal was a powerful ingredient of his sense of reality. A work of art for him was not a segregatable thing, but an expression

of an individual which was the more valuable because it was humanly associated with the scheme of things. The method has its dangers, which Bagehot generally managed to avoid. But occasionally he slipped badly because innocently.

An instance occurs in a comparison between Keats and Shelley in the essay on the latter. He points out that Shelley is 'an abstract student, anxious about deep philosophies,' and Keats the exact opposite, whose love of sensation prompted him to pepper his tongue, 'to enjoy in all its grandeur the cool flavor of delicious claret.' So far all is well, but he goes on to say that 'When you know it [the pepper story], you seem to read it in his poetry.' Exact criticism, if such there be—which is more than doubtful—would have deduced this peculiar sensuousness from the poetry instead of introducing it from the personalia of the poet. Personality may be used as comment; but a poem or any other work of art must stand alone. It is to be judged finally on its own personality—and on merit—and not that of its creator.

Walter Bagehot realized this oftener in practice than in theory. His conclusions are sometimes more convincing than his methods. During his law training he distinguished himself in the art of special pleading, and his critical method reveals the tricks and weaknesses of the special pleader. But he is generally saved by instinctively sound judgment, which with wide reading and infinite patience enable him to build up his case for or against an author with exquisite justice, buttressed by a wealth of valuable and interesting evidence of fact, opinion, and speculation.

All criticism is colored by the mental attitude or predilection of the critic: criticism in the last resort being personal opinion, and its final value being

the quality of taste which inspires it. Bagehot had an orderly brain and he preferred an orderly to a disorderly scheme of things both in art and life. If he had many of the characteristics of his period, he escaped most of its faults. He was rational without being a rationalist; he had ideals, but was not an idealist. He was lucky in the possession of a temperament which did not fit into a category. He came nearest to pigeonholing himself in his regard for form. He was, in a sense peculiarly his own, classical rather than romantic.

'Men of genius may be divided into regular and irregular,' he says in his masterly essay on Charles Dickens. 'Certain minds, the moment we think of them, suggest to us the ideas of symmetry and proportion. Plato's name, for example, calls up at once the impression of something ordered, measured, and settled: it is the exact contrary of everything eccentric, immature, or undeveloped.' Of the two he preferred the regular because he believed that 'symmetricalness' and 'proportionateness' were the ordained methods of the highest and most powerful expression.

At the same time his austerity was tempered by recognition and appreciation of the warmth of humor and the acid of satire. He refers good-humoredly to 'the faculty of making fun'; in another admirable study, that on William Cowper, he finds the 'best charm of this earth' in 'the medley of great things and little, of things mundane and things celestial, things low and things awful, of things eternal and things of half a minute.'

In Walter Bagehot's *critique* art is graded down under three heads—the Pure, the Ornate, and the Grotesque. And in one of the most profound and most original essays in criticism of his century he gives examples of the three methods from the poetry of Milton,

Tennyson, and Browning: the speech of Belial in *Paradise Lost* for the Pure; *Enoch Arden* for the Ornate; and *Caliban upon Setebos* for the Grotesque. Fault could be found with some of his conclusions, but his analysis is both luminous and instructive.

At the moment, however, we are reviewing Bagehot, not criticizing him, and it is only necessary to note that his grading down is from the classical to the romantic; it should be noted also that he does not deny either genius or art to what he does not happen to approve — provided, of course, genius and art are there, as they are pretty generally in *Caliban upon Setebos*, and occasionally even in *Enoch Arden*.

His definition of *pure* literature is that which 'describes the type in its simplicity . . . with the exact amount of accessory circumstance which is necessary to bring it before the mind in finished perfection, and *no more* than that amount.' It is the 'last grace of the self-denying artist,' and makes you recall not the artist but 'the exact phrase, the *very* sentiment he wished.'

The opposite to this is *ornate* literature, which 'wishes to surround the type with the greatest number of circumstances which it will *bear*. It works not by choice and selection, but by accumulation and aggregation.' Contrary to the *pure* style, it does not present an idea with 'the least clothing it will endure, but with the richest and most involved clothing that it will admit.'

He refers, with a modern touch, to the *rouge* of ornate literature, in which nothing is described as it is, everything having about it an atmosphere of something else. It is the literature of illusion — romantic literature — and he likens it again with agreeable modernity, very *topical* in our day, to 'the sudden millionaires' who 'hope to dis-

guise their social defects by buying old places and hiding among aristocratic furniture.' Ornate art is like moonlight — 'it gives a romantic unreality to what will not stand the bare truth.'

The third type, the *grotesque*, differs from the others where they most resemble one another. 'It takes the type, so to say, *in difficulties*. It gives a representation of it in its minimum development, amid the circumstances least favorable to it, just while it is struggling with obstacles, just where it is encumbered with incongruities.' This art found its highest expression in the architecture of the Middle Ages. It is scarcely distinct from the ornate or romantic art.

Browning is a good example of the type among poets, and Bagehot makes good use of him, less soundly than he does of Tennyson in the earlier class, proving that even good critics are fallible, and that not even the best of them could understand a phenomenon such as Browning in 1869. It sounds more grotesque even than *Caliban upon Setebos* to be told, as Bagehot tells us, that Browning 'puts down what is good for the naughty and what is naughty for the good' — almost as grotesque as Oscar Wilde's 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning.'

It is well to recall the work of this masculine interpreter of ideas and life at a time like the present, when new methods in art are passing into premature conventionalism and even idol-breaking has become a 'fashion.' It is time to turn our backs on the successors of the *ornate* and the *grotesque* and to contemplate the last graces of the self-denying artists. In our retirement we may profit by association with Walter Bagehot, with whom we shall not always agree, but whose clear thinking and sane preferences will command our admiration.

DRAWINGS FROM INDIA

BY MAJOR T. SUTTON

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THE pictorial art of the East, so far as Persian and Chinese elements are concerned, has been fully dealt with by several eminent authors; the former especially by Dr. F. R. Martin, and the latter by Laurence Binyon, Aurel Stein, and some others. Two authors have written upon Indian drawings as well, but in nothing like so full a manner, and the subject seems to call for further treatment. Much has been written and learned in the last twenty years; more is still to learn. Some fine collections have been formed, and it is not yet too late to find, in England and Europe, specimens of this most interesting branch of Indian art.

These drawings are usually small, seldom larger than small folio, the majority being about octavo. They are, in their original condition, surrounded by several borders of strips of paper painted in running design, and the whole picture completed with a wide margin, which is also usually finely painted either with floral sprays or, in earlier types, with spots of gold leaf, which give a jeweled effect. The drawing is in body color, built up on a white ground; the paper consists of several thicknesses pasted together to obtain the requisite stiffness; the colors employed are all of native manufacture, very permanent, and compare favorably with the colors used in illuminated manuscripts of the fifteenth century.

The earliest Indian drawings are book-illustrations; but quite early in the existence of the art the picture, as a separate leaf to be handed round

to assist a story-teller's narrative, or purely as a piece of decoration, became the rule.

The origin of the art is roughly this. The Emperor Babar on his return from exile brought to India some Persian artists, and his grandson Akbar and the two immediate successors Jehangir and Shah Jehan encouraged the work of the Indian artists, who carried on the Persian tradition upon Indian lines. Probably also certain influences can be traced from the Herati school of painting. But from whatever sources the genesis of the drawings developed — Persia, China, and Herat all had a share — in a few generations the art had become purely Indian. Of all the arts of Hindustan the miniature drawings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the truest and liveliest reflection of the history, religion, poetry, and, above all, the domestic life of the Indians that we possess.

A knowledge of the existence and an appreciation of the beauty of these drawings is no new thing to Europeans. Rather one is inclined to believe that their artistic merit has been overlooked or forgotten in the last fifty years or so. Otherwise it is difficult to account for the utter extinction of the art and its artists in India. Apart from the well-known story that Rembrandt drew his inspirations for night scenes from Indian drawings — night scenes being some of the most successful creations of the Indian artist — and the fact that Sir Joshua Reynolds himself was highly appreciative of their superb beauty,