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Remarks On The Life and Writings Of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin

Orrery, John Boyle of

London, 1752

Letter XXI.

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Even in so serious a composition he cannot help indulging himself, in leaving legacies that carry with them an air of raillery and jest. He disposes of his three hats (his best, his second best, and his third best beaver) with an ironical solemnity, that renders the bequests ridiculous. He bequeaths "*to Mr. JOHN GRATTAN a silver box, to keep in it the tobacco which the said JOHN usually chewed, called pigtail.*" But his legacy to Mr. ROBERT GRATTAN is still more extraordinary. "*Item, I bequeath to the Reverend Mr. ROBERT GRATTAN, Prebendary of St. Audeon's, my strong box, on condition of his giving the sole use of the said box to his brother, Dr. JAMES GRATTAN, during the life of the said Doctor, who hath more occasion for it.*" These are so many last impressions of his turn, and way of thinking: and, I dare say, the persons thus distinguished look upon these instances, as affectionate memorials of his friendship, and as tokens of the jocular manner, in which he had treated them during his life-time.

His monumental inscription, written by himself, and inserted at the beginning of his *Will*, may confirm to you the observation which I made in a former letter, that he was not an elegant writer of Latin. An harsher epitaph has seldom been composed. It is scarce intelligible; and if intelligible, is a proof how difficult a task it is, even for the greatest genius, to draw his own character, or to represent himself and his actions in a proper manner to posterity.

I am now drawing towards the last scene of his life. The total deprivation of his senses came upon him by degrees.

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degrees. In the year 1736. I remember him seized with a violent fit of giddiness. He was at that time writing a satirical poem, called *The Legion Club*; but he found the effects of his giddiness so dreadful, that he left the poem unfinished; and never afterwards attempted a composition of any length either in verse or prose. However, his conversation still remained the same; lively and severe; but his memory gradually grew worse and worse: and as that decreased, and was impaired, he appeared every day more fretful and impatient. From the year *thirty-nine* to the latter end of the year *forty-one*, his friends found his passions so violent and ungovernable, his memory so decayed, and his reason so depraved, that they took the utmost precautions to keep all strangers from approaching him: for, till then, he had not appeared totally incapable of conversation: but, early in the year *forty-two*, the small remains of his understanding became entirely confused, and the violence of his rage increased absolutely to a degree of madness. In this miserable state he seemed to be appointed as the first proper inhabitant for his own hospital: especially as from an outrageous lunatic, he sunk afterwards into a quiet, speechless idiot; and dragged out the remainder of his life in that helpless situation. He died towards the latter end of *October* 1745. The manner of his death was easy, without the least pang or convulsion. Even the rattling in his throat was scarce sufficient to give any alarm to his attendants, till within some very little time before he expired. A man in possession of his reason would have wished for such a kind of dissolution; but SWIFT was totally insensible of happiness

happiness or pain: he had not even the power or expression of a child, appearing, for some years before his death, reserved only as an example to mortify human pride, and to reverse that fine description of human nature, which is given us by *Shakespeare* in an inimitable manner: "*What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.*" Thus poets paint; but how vain and perishable is the picture? The smallest thunderbolt from heaven blasts it in a moment, and every tinct is so effectually obliterated, that scarce the outlines of the figure remain.

SWIFT, as I have hinted in a former letter ^a, certainly foresaw his fate. His frequent attacks of giddiness, and his manifest defect of memory, gave room for such apprehensions. I have often heard him lament the state of childhood, and idiotism, to which some of the greatest men of this nation were reduced before their death. He mentioned, as examples within his own time, the duke of MARLBOROUGH, and Lord SOMERS: and when he cited these melancholy instances, it was always with a heavy sigh, and with gestures that shewed great uneasiness, as if he felt an impulse of what was to happen to him before he died.

Unless I am misinformed, he died worth about twelve thousand pounds, inclusive of the specific legacies mentioned in his will, and which may be computed at the

^a See Letter VI.

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sum of twelve hundred pounds; so that the remainder, near eleven thousand pounds, is entirely applicable to the hospital for idiots and lunatics: a charitable foundation, particularly beneficial in these kingdoms, where the epidemic distemper of lunacy is so prevalent, that it will constantly furnish the largest building with a sufficient number of inhabitants.

Lunacy may in general be considered as arising from a depraved imagination; and must therefore be originally owing to a fault in the body, or the mind. We see instances every day, where, in fevers, all the powers of sense and reason are utterly overturned by a raging madness: this frenzy conquers, or is conquered, soon: but, from more slow and chronical causes, such obstructions may be formed, as gradually to produce various degrees of this disorder, and to remain invincible to the very last moments of life. Nothing more strongly disposes the mind to this depraved state, than too fixed an attention to any particular object. Mr. LOCKE, if my memory does not deceive me, defines madness as arising from some particular idea, or set of ideas, that make so strong an impression upon the mind, as to banish all others: and the persons affected are chearful or melancholy, well-tempered or fierce, according as the objects and ideas of their minds are different. From hence it is evident, that we ought to consider the strength of the mind even in the pursuit of knowledge, and often to vary our ideas by exercise and amusements; constantly fixing a strict guard against any passion, that may be prevalent in too high a degree, or may acquire an habitual strength
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and dominion over us. Passions are the gales of life; and it is our part to take care, that they do not rise into a tempest.

Love, with all its charms, must be restrained within proper bounds, otherwise it will torture that breast which it was formed to delight. Love contains within itself a variety of other passions, and lays such a foundation of madness in the mind, that the frenzy, in this particular case, never fails to appear in its full force, and to display itself in all its strength of horror.

Religion, which can only make the mind happy, and is our surest and best defence against the passions, if considered in a wrong and melancholy view, has often perverted the seat of reason, and given more inhabitants to *Bedlam* than any other cause. A religious lunatic is miserable, even to the deepest tortures of despair.

The miser, whom I must always rank among madmen, heaps up gold with an anxiety that affects his looks, his appetite, and his sleep. The wretch dreads poverty in the center of plenty; and starves, only because he dares not taste those fruits which appear most agreeable to his desires.

In some other species of madness, the persons affected are really more happy than in their senses; and it is almost a crime to banish the agreeable delusion. You remember the case of the citizen of *Argos*, who, after a salutiferous dose of hellebore, cried out,

*Pol me occidistis, amici,
Non servastis (ait) cui sic extorta voluptas,
Et demptus per vim mentis gratissimus error.*

Such

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Such again would be the case of the beau of *Bedlam*, who, amidst darkness and confinement, still retains his pride and self-admiration; dresses himself up in straw instead of embroidery; and, when suffered to go to the window, imagines that he captivates every female, who chances to pass thro' *Moor-fields*. Is not such a man happier in his madness, than in his senses?

To specify the many different classes of madmen would be endless. They are innumerable: so that it is almost a rare felicity to enjoy *mens sana in corpore sano*. Some men have owed their reputation and success in the world to a tincture of madness, while others, merely from a superior understanding, have been ranked among lunatics: of the latter sort HIPPOCRATES (whom I wish you to look upon as a classic author, as well as a physician) gives a remarkable instance in one of his letters. He says, he was sent for by the people of *Abdera* to cure DEMOCRITUS of madness; but, to his surprize, he found him the wisest man of the age; and, by his laughing manner of talking and reasoning, he almost convinced HIPPOCRATES, that all the rest of the world, except DEMOCRITUS, were mad. It is not improbable, that madness has been coæval with mankind. There have certainly been many instances of it among the Greeks and Romans: among the Jews, the enthusiastic fury of SAUL is equally remarkable with the extatic rage of NEBUCHADNEZZAR: nor have any parts of the world, I believe, entirely escaped this raging evil. It was frequently mistaken for inspiration, and the prophetic Sibyls were obliged to put on the airs and looks of madness, to obtain

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tain an implicit belief to their prophecies. From these sacerdotal impositions, mad people reaped some remarkable advantages. They were often looked upon as messengers sent by heaven, to declare the will of the gods, and the prophetic decrees of fate: they were revered as persons sacred and divine; and, instead of scourges, they received tokens of adoration. In how great a degree must the subtilty of priests have prevailed, when they could make one of the greatest curses that attends human life, appear one of the greatest blessings?

Lunatics are so called from the influence which the moon has over bodies, when its attractive power is greatest; by which means the pressure of the atmosphere being lessened, the humours of the body are more rarefied, and produce a greater plenitude in the vessels of the brain. This has been illustrated by our good and learned friend Dr. MEAD, in his treatise *De imperio lune et solis*; and I have particularly observed, that in the last book ^a, which he published, he takes notice in his chapter *de Insania*, “that the blood of such persons, who have
“ been most liable to this malady, was thick and fizy,
“ and, upon dissection, their brain always appeared dry,
“ and their vessels filled with black sluggish blood:” from whence, perhaps, we may, in some measure, account for the principal source of SWIFT’s lunacy: his countenance being dark, bilious, and gloomy, and his eyes sometimes fixed, and immoveable for a long time. HORACE, I remember, attributes the madness of ORESTES to a physical cause, where he says,

^a Entitled, *Monita & præcepta medica.*

Hanc furiam, hunc aliud, jussit quod splendida bilis. ^{vocando}

So that diseases, formed originally in the mind, often bring on this disorder, and by degrees affect the body; especially in such constitutions as have any tendency to this distemper. But, what can be the reason, that it is so remarkably epidemical in these kingdoms? I am inclined to believe, that it must be owing to the grossness of our food, and to our immoderate use of spirituous liquors: the one frequently causing the deepest melancholy, the other the most unlimited rage. Our climate is so variable and uncertain, and our atmosphere is so perpetually filled with clouds and sulphureous vapours, that these causes must necessarily have a great effect upon the natural impatience and inconstancy of the inhabitants. We are apt to revel in a free indulgence of our passions; and they are as apt to agitate and enervate the fibres of the brain, and to imprint by degrees many fatal impressions, that can never be eradicated from the mind. Even the greatest blessing we enjoy, the freedom of our laws, may, I am afraid, in some measure, contribute to those rash actions, that often end in dreadful murders of the worst kind, parricide, and suicium. Men must be reckoned in the highest class of lunatics, who are capable of offending the great Author of nature, by depriving themselves of that life, which he only has a right of taking away, because he only had the power of giving it. No person in his senses can voluntarily
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prefer death to life. Our desires of existence are strong and prevalent. They are born with us; and our ideas of a future state are not sufficiently clear, to make us fond of hurrying into eternity; especially as eternity itself must ever remain incomprehensible to finite beings. Human nature has an abhorrence, and a terror of its own dissolution. The philosopher submits to death, because he looks upon it as a necessary event: in the meantime, he uses every method of prudence, and every art of caution, to lengthen out life as far as he possibly can extend it, and to prevent the least accident that may bring on death one hour sooner than the laws of the human structure require. The military hero meets the king of terrors more from the dictates of reason, than the impulses of nature. His fame, his fortune, every object that can be dear to him, depend upon his resolution to die. He exposes himself to the danger of being destroyed, because, an effort of securing his life, must be attended with contempt and infamy. But, on the other hand, who would wantonly chuse death, unless he were agitated to such a choice by the fumes and vapours of a distempered brain?

The subjects, where arbitrary power is established, live in a continual state of dread and apprehension, and all their other passions are subdued by fear: so that fewer instances of suicide have appeared in despotic governments, than in kingdoms, where liberty is more prevalent, and where the passions are less restrained.

The diet, the air, and the political constitution of a country, give the peculiar, and distinguishing character
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of the people: and as the characteristics change, the inhabitants undergo the same metamorphoses. How different are the modern Italians from the antient Romans! If BRUTUS were now living, he would probably acquiesce in the depending state of a cardinal, and the papal crown would be unanimously presented to CÆSAR.

The melancholy case of Dr. SWIFT has, I find, seduced me into a long digression: when I am writing to you, my Ham, I give a full scope to my thoughts, and wander licentiously out of my sphere. I aim at placing all observations in your way, which I think can be of any use in your future road of life. But, why talk to you on the melancholy effects of madness? only, my dear son, to observe in general, that temperance, exercise, philosophy, and true religion, are the surest means to make men happy, and to preserve them from a contagious malady, to which the inhabitants of these kingdoms are unfortunately liable.

A state of idiotism is less deplorable, not less shocking, than that of madness. Idiots are afflicted with no turbulent passions: they are innocent and harmless, and often excite pity, but never occasion fear. The proverb tells us, *They are the favourites of fortune:* but I suppose it alludes only to those fools, *who can number twenty rightly, and can tell the days of the week;* and alas! those are no idiots in the eye of the law. The absolute naturals owe their wretchedness to a wrong formation in their brain, or to accidents in their birth, or the dregs of fevers, and other violent distempers. The last was the case of the Dean of St. PATRICK'S, according to

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the account sent me by his two relations Mrs. WHITEWAY, and Mr. SWIFT^a: neither of whom, I think, make the least mention of a deafness, that from time to time attacked the Dean, and rendered him extremely miserable. You will find him complaining of this misfortune in several parts of his writings, especially in his Letters (of the eighth volume) to Dr. SHERIDAN^b. Possibly some internal pressure upon his brain might first have affected the auditory nerves, and then, by degrees, might have encreased, so as entirely to stop up that fountain of ideas, which had before spread itself in the most diffusive, and surprizing manner.

Having just now hinted to you the advantages that have accrued to madmen, I ought not to omit the honours that have been paid to fools. In former ages the courts of France and England were not thought completely embellished without a favourite idiot, who bore the title of the King's Jester, and who was as remarkably distinguished by a cap and bells, as his royal master was distinguished by a diadem and robes. This animal, like JUNIUS BRUTUS, frequently assumed the face and behaviour of folly, to answer his own particular views and advantages. His bluntness and simplicity recommended him in those places, where truths, if spoken by a man of sense, were disagreeable and dangerous. If he had not the honour, like BRUTUS, to save his country, at least he had the happiness to secure himself: and his ex-

^a See page 89, and page 91.

^b See Vol. VIII. page 419.

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pressions were often so full of humour and sarcasm, that, to this day, they are recorded as pieces of wit. Such was the famous reply of ARCHY to King JAMES the first, when his Majesty, amidst all his wisdom, was sufficiently inspired with folly, to send his only son into Spain. But, fools at present are no longer admired in courts, or, if they are, they appear there without their cap and bells.

And now, my dear HAMILTON, to quit reflections, that tend in general rather to terrify, than to improve your understanding, let me observe, in honour of my friend SWIFT, that his establishment of an hospital for idiots and lunatics, is remarkably generous: as the unhappy persons, who receive the benefit, must, for ever, remain insensible of their benefactor.

I am your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.



LETTER XXII.

THE Directions to Servants, which is the tract immediately following SWIFT's *Will*, is imperfect and unfinished. The editor tells us, that a preface and a dedication were to have been added to it. I think it was not published till after the Dean's death; but I remember the manuscript handed about, and much applauded,