

A DEFENCE OF SLANG

The aristocrats of the nineteenth century have destroyed entirely their one solitary utility. It is their business to be flaunting and arrogant; but they flaunt unobtrusively, and their attempts at arrogance are depressing. Their chief duty hitherto has been the development of variety, vivacity, and fulness of life; oligarchy was the world's first experiment in liberty. But now they have adopted the opposite ideal of 'good form,' which may be defined as Puritanism without religion. Good form has sent them all into black like the stroke of a funeral bell. They engage, like Mr. Gilbert's curates, in a war of mildness, a positive competition of obscurity. In old times the lords of the earth sought above all things to be distinguished from each other; with that object they erected outrageous images on their helmets and painted preposterous colours on their shields. They wished to make it entirely clear that a Norfolk was as different, say, from an Argyll as a white lion from a black pig. But to-day their ideal is precisely the opposite one, and if a Norfolk and an Argyll were dressed so much alike that they were mistaken for each other they would both go home dancing with joy.

The consequences of this are inevitable. The aristocracy must lose their function of standing to the world for the idea of variety, experiment, and colour, and we must find these things in some other class. To ask whether we shall find them in the middle class would be to jest upon sacred matters. The only conclusion, therefore, is that it is to certain sections of the lower class, chiefly, for example, to omnibus-conductors, with their rich and rococo mode of thought, that we must look for guidance towards liberty and light.

The one stream of poetry which is continually flowing is slang. Every day a nameless poet weaves some fairy tracery of popular language. It may be said that the fashionable world talks slang as much as the democratic; this is true, and it strongly supports the view under consideration. Nothing is more startling than the contrast between the heavy, formal, lifeless slang of the man-about-town and the light, living, and flexible slang of the coster. The talk of the upper strata of the educated classes is about the most shapeless, aimless, and hopeless literary product that the world has ever seen. Clearly in this, again, the upper classes have degenerated. We have ample evidence that the old leaders of feudal war could speak on occasion with a certain natural symbolism and eloquence that they had not gained from books. When Cyrano de Bergerac, in Rostand's play, throws doubts on the reality of Christian's dulness and lack of culture, the latter replies:

'Bah! on trouve des mots quand on monte à l'assaut; Oui, j'ai un certain esprit

facile et militaire;'

and these two lines sum up a truth about the old oligarchs. They could not write three legible letters, but they could sometimes speak literature. Douglas, when he hurled the heart of Bruce in front of him in his last battle, cried out, 'Pass first, great heart, as thou wert ever wont.' A Spanish nobleman, when commanded by the King to receive a high-placed and notorious traitor, said: 'I will receive him in all obedience, and burn down my house afterwards.' This is literature without culture; it is the speech of men convinced that they have to assert proudly the poetry of life.

Anyone, however, who should seek for such pearls in the conversation of a young man of modern Belgravia would have much sorrow in his life. It is not only impossible for aristocrats to assert proudly the poetry of life; it is more impossible for them than for anyone else. It is positively considered vulgar for a nobleman to boast of his ancient name, which is, when one comes to think of it, the only rational object of his existence. If a man in the street proclaimed, with rude feudal rhetoric, that he was the Earl of Doncaster, he would be arrested as a lunatic; but if it were discovered that he really was the Earl of Doncaster, he would simply be cut as a cad. No poetical prose must be expected from Earls as a class. The fashionable slang is hardly even a language; it is like the formless cries of animals, dimly indicating certain broad, well-understood states of mind. 'Bored,' 'cut up,' 'jolly,' 'rotten,' and so on, are like the words of some tribe of savages whose vocabulary has only twenty of them. If a man of fashion wished to protest against some solecism in another man of fashion, his utterance would be a mere string of set phrases, as lifeless as a string of dead fish. But an omnibus conductor (being filled with the Muse) would burst out into a solid literary effort: 'You're a gen'leman, aren't yer ... yer boots is a lot brighter than yer 'ed...there's precious little of yer, and that's clothes...that's right, put yer cigar in yer mouth 'cos I can't see yer be'ind it...take it out again, do yer! you're young for smokin', but I've sent for yer mother.... Goin'? oh, don't run away: I won't 'arm yer. I've got a good 'art, I 'ave.... "Down with croolty to animals," I say,' and so on. It is evident that this mode of speech is not only literary, but literary in a very ornate and almost artificial sense. Keats never put into a sonnet so many remote metaphors as a coster puts into a curse; his speech is one long allegory, like Spenser's 'Faerie Queen.'

I do not imagine that it is necessary to demonstrate that this poetic allusiveness is the characteristic of true slang. Such an expression as 'Keep your hair on' is positively Meredithian in its perverse and mysterious manner of expressing an idea. The Americans have a well-known expression about 'swelled-head' as a description of self-approval, and the other day I heard a remarkable fantasia upon this air. An American said that after the Chinese War the Japanese wanted

'to put on their hats with a shoe-horn.' This is a monument of the true nature of slang, which consists in getting further and further away from the original conception, in treating it more and more as an assumption. It is rather like the literary doctrine of the Symbolists.

The real reason of this great development of eloquence among the lower orders again brings us back to the case of the aristocracy in earlier times. The lower classes live in a state of war, a war of words. Their readiness is the product of the same fiery individualism as the readiness of the old fighting oligarchs. Any cabman has to be ready with his tongue, as any gentleman of the last century had to be ready with his sword. It is unfortunate that the poetry which is developed by this process should be purely a grotesque poetry. But as the higher orders of society have entirely abdicated their right to speak with a heroic eloquence, it is no wonder that the language should develop by itself in the direction of a rowdy eloquence. The essential point is that somebody must be at work adding new symbols and new circumlocutions to a language.

All slang is metaphor, and all metaphor is poetry. If we paused for a moment to examine the cheapest cant phrases that pass our lips every day, we should find that they were as rich and suggestive as so many sonnets. To take a single instance: we speak of a man in English social relations 'breaking the ice.' If this were expanded into a sonnet, we should have before us a dark and sublime picture of an ocean of everlasting ice, the sombre and baffling mirror of the Northern nature, over which men walked and danced and skated easily, but under which the living waters roared and toiled fathoms below. The world of slang is a kind of topsy-turveydom of poetry, full of blue moons and white elephants, of men losing their heads, and men whose tongues run away with them--a whole chaos of fairy tales.