

A. N. WHITEHEAD: A PUPIL'S TRIBUTE

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THIS is the first of two papers on the philosopher Whitehead. In the present number I shall attempt to describe Whitehead as I knew him and to give a brief account of his life. In the next number I propose to examine more fully the nature of his thought and the importance of his contribution to philosophy.

I

The ancient philosophers seem often to have lived lives full of incident and to have participated actively in the outward events of their time. Whitehead's life resembles that of most modern philosophers in being remarkable chiefly for the quality and intensity of its inner activity in an environment continuously and almost exclusively academic.

Alfred North Whitehead was born in England, at Ramsgate, in the Isle of Thanet, Kent, on 15 February, 1861. His father was Canon Whitehead, vicar of St. Peter's, Isle of Thanet. Both his father, and before that his grandfather, had from an early age been headmasters of a private school at Ramsgate, the latter having been appointed at the age of twenty-one and the former at twenty-five. At about the time of Whitehead's birth, however, his father had taken orders and a few years later he gave up school-mastering to become a country parson in the immediate neighbourhood. Whitehead has written of his father that he was "the last example of these East Kent clergymen who were really homogeneous with their people and, therefore, natural leaders on all occasions, secular and religious."¹

In a series of occasional papers,² written after he came to America, Whitehead has left us a touching and beautiful description, full of a delicate and almost wistful charm, of his early environment in an East Kent country vicarage, in a countryside full of historical associations and of Roman, Saxon and Norman remains. At fourteen he was sent to Sherborne, in Dorset, the "Sherston Abbas" of Hardy, where he received a classical education in the monastic surroundings of a school founded nearly twelve-hundred years before by St. Adhelm, and where an earlier Alfred, known to history as "the Great" had been a pupil before him. Here, he has told

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(1) *Essays in Science and Philosophy*, New York, 1947, p. 48.

(2) Reprinted in *Essays etc.*

us, he worked under the sound of the Abbey Bells, brought from Tournai by Henry VIII on his return from the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and in his last two years had the "Abbot's Room" as his private study. In his final year he was Head of the School and Captain of the Games.

In 1880, at the age of nineteen, he went on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where as undergraduate, fellow and ultimately as Senior Mathematical Lecturer, he was to remain for the next thirty years. The lectures he attended were all on mathematics, the more liberal side of his education being supplied by those incessant conversations with friends and teachers, which, he tells us,³ were like "a daily Platonic dialogue." Among those who influenced him at the time were Lowes Dickinson, Henry Head, Sorley, Sidgwick and Maitland. After his marriage he lived for some years in the Old Mill House at Grantchester, with Byron's Pool and other poetical associations, which did not yet, however, include Rupert Brooke. His Cambridge period seems to have been the only one in which he took an active part in controversial questions. In the 1890's he was defending the equality of status of women at the University. He spoke, too, at evening political meetings in parish school-rooms in the neighbourhood of Grantchester, where the rotten eggs and oranges with which he was frequently assailed were considered to be "indications of vigour rather than bad feeling."⁴ Among his pupils at Cambridge was Bertrand Russell, who afterwards became his colleague and collaborator over a period of many years in the production of *Principia Mathematica*, perhaps Whitehead's greatest work. Of Russell he says, "Our fundamental points of view—philosophical and sociological—diverged, and so with different interests our collaboration came to a natural end."⁵

Then, in 1910, he moved to London, at first to University College, and afterwards, from 1914-24, as Professor of Applied Mathematics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology at Kensington. In addition to his teaching he held several high academic administrative posts. He was a member of the Senate and Dean of the Faculty of Science in the University of London, Governor of the Borough Polytechnic at Southwark, and Chairman of the Academic Council and of the Delegacy administering Goldsmith's College.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 7.

(4) *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

It was during this period, towards the close of the first Great War, that he began to interest himself in philosophy, and in 1924, at the age of sixty-three, he accepted the invitation to cross the Atlantic and become Professor of Philosophy at Harvard, "the greatest of all existing cultural institutions," as he was later to call it.⁶ Here he continued to teach till he was seventy-six, when he became Professor Emeritus. Meanwhile he had delivered many important series of lectures and received many honours. In 1919 he had given the Turner Lectures at Trinity, in 1927-29 he was Gifford Lecturer at Edinburgh, and in the United States he gave the Lowell Lectures at Boston, 1925-26, and others at Virginia, 1926; Princeton, 1929; Chicago, 1934; Wellesley, 1937-38, and finally, the Ingersoll lecture on Immortality at Harvard in 1941. He was the first recipient of the James Scott Prize of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Among other honours were the Sylvester Medal of the Royal Society, London, the Butler Medal of Columbia University and, in 1945, the very great distinction of the Order of Merit from the King. Just at the close of last year, on 30 December, he died at Cambridge, Massachusetts, of a cerebral haemorrhage, in his eighty-sixth year.

II

When I first knew Whitehead he had already been teaching philosophy at Harvard for four years. He had just returned from giving the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh, and was perhaps at the height of his fame, and of his vigour, as a philosopher. I should like to set down the impression he made on a young graduate student at that time, some twenty years ago.

The question of first impressions is interesting, but puzzling. Of all English writers it was the poet Blake who best expressed the idea that "the body is the part of the soul which we can see." But in this he was only stating his contempt of the body as compared with the soul, and of the senses as compared with spiritual vision. Psychology has long struggled, without much success, over the problem of deducing the qualities of the personality from the observation and measurement of the properties of the body. There are certainly many people of whom we feel this Swedenborgian notion to be far from the truth, whose physical presence and spiritual qualities are ill-matched or even at variance. Gandhi's puny frame linked with his mighty

(6) *Ibid.*, p.224

soul is an obvious instance. But, more rarely perhaps, there are others, and of these Whitehead was one, whose outward form does indeed seem but the concrete embodiment, the material index or symbol of their inner qualities. In such cases further acquaintance only serves to confirm the initial impression. At any rate the most striking first impression that Whitehead gave me was of gracious, kindly, genial goodness, and this was strengthened by what I came to know of him later. It is perhaps a tribute to so great a mind that the first impression it gave was moral rather than intellectual.

Yet it is easy to oversimplify in retrospect what was complex in actuality and to forget the initial confusion of the accidental and the essential. First impressions are usually a blur. Their combined effect may grasp well enough the significant character of the whole. Yet the details that stand out so conspicuously are, under subsequent inspection, as often as not seen to have arisen more from some prepossession in the observer than from qualities inherent in the object itself. I confess that it seemed strange to me that Whitehead, who was then only sixty-seven, should present an appearance so venerable and that the venerableness, moreover, should be so notably clerical in character. To this his dress, which was European rather than American, no doubt contributed something. His clothes were dark, of a formal cut, and he wore a wide neckcloth (what is sometimes called an "Ascot tie") and stand-up collar. Indeed, he looked as if he might have stepped into Emerson Hall straight from the Victorian country vicarage of his childhood. So strong was this clerical suggestion that one instinctively looked down and was surprised to find that he wore ordinary trousers and not, as an unconscious association of ideas had led one to expect, the gaiters of ecclesiastical dignity.

I was greatly struck, too, with there being something oddly familiar about his appearance, which puzzled me a good deal at the time for I had known nothing about him beyond his reputation and the general trend of his thought. Indeed the first sight of him had already thrown me into that tantalizing state of mind, compounded equally of baffled perplexity and keen anticipation, which accompanies the first vague and faint stirrings of the more deeply buried layers of the memory. Where could I have seen before the smooth, rounded, fresh-coloured cheeks, the good-humoured mouth, the capacious, shining, bald cranium with its fringe of white hair, the sturdy figure, the dignity tempered with graciousness,

the air of extreme neatness and cleanliness, of beaming and twinkling benevolence? The answer, when it came, brought with it a rush of sudden pleasure. If meeting Whitehead was like meeting an old friend it was because I had so often seen his likeness before in the old-fashioned illustrations, so much more satisfying than modern photographs, of some long-forgotten tale in a bound volume, perhaps, of *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*. Perhaps Mrs. Gaskell, or Mrs. Henry Wood, or Dickens or Trollope, perhaps all in turn, had described him. At any rate there was something reassuring, something that greatly disarmed apprehension, in the association of ideas that linked the great modern philosopher of science with all the familiar, kindly, old gentlemen of the Victorian novelists.

Later I realized that in all this I was somewhat merging the man himself with the class, and indeed the whole civilization from which he had sprung. The venerableness he displayed was not more individual or personal than it was of the tradition he exemplified. What had happened was that by some strange chance the embodiment of middle-class, Liberal, Victorian, Southern England had been translated within the walls of the Yard. It was almost as if Dickens had resurrected an intellectual Pickwick and, out of time and out of place, amid the green baize bags, the crimson ties and the crew-cut heads of modern Harvard, had set him to delivering lectures on philosophy.

It became evident that the impression of venerableness required to be qualified in still another way. Whitehead was not, in 1928, really old. He gave no hint of any impairment of faculty or failure of vitality. He was in fact at the height of his power and reputation as a philosopher, though his work as a mathematician was done. If he was old it was with an oldness to which we attach a peculiar virtue and which implies a long antecedent process of maturing and perfecting, of ripening and mellowing. The sense of completeness, of having arrived at the full enjoyment and fruition of his speculative powers was forcibly conveyed by Whitehead at this time in his lectures. His occasional Mandarin manner was perhaps only the outward sign of the inward consciousness and assurance of the actualization of insight. It was this, and not any calculated pose, that explained the apparent contradiction between the mighty intellectual power, so evident in the matter of his discourse, and the innocent and occasionally almost child-like simplicity of his manner of speaking. For in this attribute of

settled assurance and conviction of power, maturity stands at the opposite pole, not from childhood but from adolescence.

III

In the class-room we soon fell under his spell, but at first the evident contrast between the manner and the matter of his lectures struck one as not a little incongruous. For the manner was that of a kindly elder who had gathered the willing children around his knee and, to his own delight as much as theirs, was inventing some simple and pretty tale full of small jokes and innocent surprises. Yet when one listened, the words one heard would be something like this: "In a process of concrecence, there is a succession of phases in which new prehensions arise by integrations of prehensions in antecedent phases. In these integrations feelings contribute their subjective forms and their data to the formation of novel integral prehensions; but negative prehensions contribute only their subjective forms." Yet the charm of his lectures undoubtedly lay in just this mingling of the abstract and the concrete, of the formal and the informal, of the grave, solid stuff of his discourse and his entire freedom from assumed formality. Thus while his system is one of the most impersonal of philosophies, he himself was one of the most personally interesting and human of philosophers. He spoke so engagingly and persuasively that he succeeded in suffusing the most abstract conceptions with at least a fleeting illumination. He would say something like "Finite transience stages the welter of incompatibles in their ordered relevance to the flux of epochs," with such eager, emphatic directness that one was almost persuaded that one understood. He had a way of stressing, and, as it were, relishing certain words like "welter" and "flux" in the example just given, that conveyed warmth and a hint of suggested humour, so that the mere experience of listening to him provided in itself a kind of satisfaction and a sense of a momentary sharing in the profundity of the thought.

Whitehead once said that the first thing a teacher has to do when he enters the class-room is to make his class glad to be there, and I think he would have added that the teacher can do this only if he is glad to be there himself. By his eager, enthusiastic and emphatic manner, his evident inner excitement, Whitehead was eminently successful in conveying the impression that lecturing on philosophy was the highest state of human

enjoyment, the very summit of human felicity. He was so eager to begin, in the first place. His rather high-pitched voice could be heard over the hum of the assembled class as he came in through the door and, smiling and talking all the time, made his way through the crowded room to the table at the top, as if he could not wait to make a more formal beginning. One could not help taking pleasure in his pleasure and so feel pleased oneself. It was not at all a case of the cheerfulness always breaking in to what was otherwise a sorry business. For the cheerfulness, the good humour, the zest and vitality were obvious from the moment his voice was heard coming in through the door. Yet he was what I call a "serious" lecturer. He kept closely to the subject, made no detours around the steeper places, and was never betrayed into weakening or reducing his ideas for the sake of easier assimilation. He so obviously took it for granted that we were willing to surmount the obstacles of obscurity and difficulty that might deter more frivolous minds that, by the implied compliment to our sincerity and zeal, he attached our loyalty and put us on our mettle. Sometimes he would seem to be reading from a manuscript; I suspect it was the manuscript of *Process and Reality*, which was then going through the press. But he would so frequently break off to illustrate and enlarge that even his reading did not lose the quality of a personal communication. After twenty years I can still hear him taking Herbert Spencer to task for not realizing that "the unknowable is also the unknown"—hence the folly of Spencer in talking as if he knew all about it. He would illustrate the insubstantiality of what the senses reveal to us as solid matter by inviting the class to imagine that they had caught half a dozen mosquitoes, secured them in a brown paper bag, carried them to Memorial Hall and there released them to disperse and fly about in that vast and empty space. That, he would conclude triumphantly, was how solid the atom was.

"Philosophy," Whitehead has said, "is an attempt to express the infinity of the universe in terms of the limitations of language." The struggle with the limitations of language was constantly evident in his lectures, and contributed to the sense of actuality. He had often a little hesitation in his speech, which, while it did not amount to a stammer, produced a retardation in the flow of his words while the idea struggled to find expression. When the words came there would be the suspicion of a chuckle, as if he were agreeably surprised at the success of his own mental operations. But sometimes nothing would come or else he had changed his mind. Then there

would follow one of his most baffling utterances: "What I mean to say is (pause), namely (prolonged pause) y-o-u, y' know!" There the matter would rest and we would have to be content with process that never quite attained to reality.

For more than one reason I was incapable of appropriating much, perhaps most, of what he said. I was unfamiliar with the "categorical scheme" of his philosophy, and the books that might have helped me had not then been published. In any case my powers of dealing with such high generalities were limited. So, as he spoke so engagingly of actual entities and prehensions, of togetherness and concrescence, of the primordial and the consequent natures of God, I would find my head in a whirl. Yet if education be, indeed, what is left after all that one has learned, or failed to learn, is forgotten then Whitehead was a great factor in my education. For he had the essential qualities of the great teacher. He created a conviction of the importance of his subject, and he had the rare gift of suggesting, inspiring and stimulating not only a momentary interest but a continuing desire to go further. For after all philosophy cannot be taught, anyway. The "teaching" of philosophy is really the indirect cultivation of new awareness. Its function is, as Socrates maintained, maieutic; it is helping ideas to be born. The task of the philosopher is not to sledge-hammer the learner's mind with proofs of the correctness of his own system but to awaken wonder and to excite the effort to overcome obscurity by the development of new powers of appreciation and insight. This he will do most effectively, not by reasoned demonstration but by the contagion of his own enthusiasm.

Another quality that was part of Whitehead's greatness as a teacher was his generosity. He knew how to give encouragement to the sincere but timid struggler who is diffident of his powers and impeded in his progress by lack of confidence in himself. Whitehead would read personally and take great pains over the written work of students who sought his help outside the class-room. While he did not hesitate to condemn roundly what he called the merely "literary" treatment of philosophical questions, he praised generously what he felt deserved praise. I still treasure the small slips of paper, fastened on with paper-clips, on which, in his somewhat angular and irregular hand, he had written his careful criticisms of my own first clumsy flights. This was a time when he was busy over the proofs of *Process and Reality*.

Still another side of Whitehead was revealed to me when, a little later, I began to attend the evening seminar, which he

held once a week in the study of his apartment, one in a large block overlooking the Charles. The whole apartment was beautifully furnished and kept, a little oasis of good taste and quiet order and a place of refreshment after the cramped drabness of student quarters. He had a fine library, and we would sit in that pleasant book-lined room, on small folding chairs, while a paper was read and a general discussion followed. It was noticeable that Whitehead did not attempt to dominate the course of the discussion, though he certainly did not hold himself aloof, but guided without interfering or damping its spontaneity. After these more formal proceedings were over some of us might remain, Mrs. Whitehead would appear with cups of tea, other teachers might drop in, and in this propitious atmosphere, and sometimes in more than one language, the talk would go on. One sample must suffice, the one fragment that remains in my memory of all this talk, so enchanting at the time, so difficult to recapture afterwards. A distinguished French visitor found himself in conversation in the train with a prosperous American business-man, who, after asking him what he did and discovering him to be a philosopher, demanded to be told what philosophy was. After prolonged endeavour on the philosopher's part the revelation came at last, and the man exclaimed: "Ah! I see. It is a kind of *psychology*!" It should be added that the philosopher in question was a distinguished Thomist.

IV

In practical affairs Whitehead's views were Liberal in the English meaning of the word. This did not prevent him from admitting, in 1941, that his vote would now be given for "the moderate side of the Labour Party." That he was fully aware of what was going on in the world can be seen from an address he delivered in 1933 to the Harvard School of Business Administration and from the *Appeal to Sanity*, which he published just before the outbreak of war in 1939. He diagnosed correctly enough the sickness of society in the West and saw that the rise of large-scale industrialism and of what he called "the barbarous overemphasis on nationalism" had brought many evils and much ugliness. And he foresaw most of the consequences of the late war. Yet it was the destruction of the old Liberal values that most distressed him: the loss of individualism, of free-expression, of moderation and compromise. "In our economic system as now developed there is a starvation of human impulses, a denial of opportunity, a limitation of beneficial activity—in short, a lack of freedom."⁸ "So far as sheer individual freedom

(8) *Essays*, p. 168.

is concerned, there was more diffused freedom in the City of London in the year 1633, when Charles the First was King, than there is to-day in any industrial city of the world."⁹

Of his writings on non-philosophic and non-scientific subjects perhaps the best are on education, and in particular on university education. His views are so sane and refreshing because he sees so clearly to the heart of the matter, is perfectly aware, for example, of the inadequacy of the Oxford-Cambridge type of university education to meet all the needs of a modern industrial civilization, yet retains no illusions about the fatuousness of much that passes for education in some places; and he has no pet schemes or crotchets of his own. Not every college governor or president would endorse the following sentiments, yet they may be worth quoting as they express a view that is beginning to be more and more rarely heard in the educational dark age into which we seem now to have entered: "It would be the greatest mistake to estimate the value of each member of the faculty by the printed work signed with his name. There is at present some tendency to fall into this error, and an emphatic protest is necessary against an attitude on the part of the authorities which is damaging to efficiency and unjust to unselfish zeal."¹⁰ "For half a century, on both sides of the Atlantic, I have been concerned with appointments. Nothing is more difficult than to distinguish between a loud voice and vigour, or a flow of words and originality, or mental instability and genius or a big book and fruitful learning. Also the work requires dependable men. But if you are swayed too heavily by this admirable excellence, you will gather a faculty that can be depended upon for being commonplace. Curiously enough, the achievements of the faculty do not depend on the exact judiciousness of each appointment."¹¹ A more important factor in the production of learning is the creation of a stimulating atmosphere.

Despite his liberal views we may trace in Whitehead's political and educational opinions the influence of his early environment, which inspired him with deep reverence for the past. Yet he held that history is the drama of effort, and no one knew better that for each generation the problem is new. Perhaps no saying of his better expressed the spirit of his thought than the characteristic words: "The best homage we can pay to our predecessors to whom we owe the greatness of our inheritance is to emulate their courage."¹²