

Selections from Within Living Memory

1. Learning Exists for the Sake of Man

July 6th

Well, gentlemen, it is ridiculous, but true and may very well be tragic that we so-called educated people are everywhere educated not to practise a stronger, nobler, and gentler life and language than the common multitude, but to offend and provoke them and to exalt ourselves above them and above one another. We are educated never to ask what we ourselves have done, or can and will do, but always what others have done or what in our opinion they ought and must do, without caring in the least how impossible it would be for us if we ourselves tried to do the same. This is what we call developing our minds and sharpening our wit, and, in fact, there is some truth in that. Learning has achieved a great deal through this form of education and will continue to do so until the endless critical scholarship drains man of his vitality, thereby setting free the unquenchable animal desire.

Then, of course, it will be all over for learning, reduced to a more plaything of the impotent spirit and held in contempt by carnal vanity. This was the way it went in Greece and Rome and it must be the way it will go in the new world as in the old because the laws of human nature can no more be changed or defied with impunity than other laws of nature. It must be the way, I say, if we cannot learn from the irreparable damage done partly to others and partly to ourselves whilst it still can be made good.

However, that I know we can do and shall do. Therefore it is no longer in despair, but with great hopes for the future that I now look back on the past and divide my attention between the good signs and the bad telling what I see and doing the little I can as I take comfort from the proverb: many a little makes a mickle.

You may well say, gentlemen, that at this point I myself is doing nothing but criticize, and you would be right; but if by doing so, I have taught just one of you that it is a bad failing, which for our own sake we must endeavour to correct, then I would have done much more than merely criticize, even though it may be at my own expense. However, I have come so far that I do not take it too much to heart, so long as I can make my contribution to the common good and make general this insight: that just as bad as it would be for all our doctors to be trained only to dissect, and to practise this skill on their patients while still alive, equally wrong would it be if in the world of the spirit we were educated and worked only to the same end. Consequently, the little advantage that learning gains by it is not only made at the expense of human life, both in ourselves, in society, and in all human relationships, but at so heavy a cost that only by turning down another road can we avoid bankruptcy. That is how I have escaped it, and that is the way I wish every nation to escape it, and that is how I hope at least my native land will steer clear of it. So I seize every opportunity to point out to you the obvious but forgotten or neglected truth that learning exists for the sake of life, human life, and must be neither practised nor promoted at the cost of life, but only in its service, for its enlightenment, and to its advantage, clarification, and embellishment instead of as now being generally employed to make life dismal for both ourselves and others, eroding its strength and distorting its true nature. Of this I must speak, and the only fault about it, which possibly ought to be avoided, is that I alone do the talking so that there is no live exchange of ideas between you and me. But that is also a result of our perverse education and scholarship, which never aimed at anything that improved life, but at producing by word of mouth or pen artistic tricks that people might like to dissect, or wrangles and literary feuds that might be diverting at our stage of development, just as bullfighting and cock-fighting were at another. I am therefore not in the least afraid to say that I would regard all my talk about society and man's great problems as being a waste of time, if I did not contribute to the living dialogue on the subject, which alone can profitably shed light on and clarify the ideas.

2. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Revolution

July 13th

I never thought that the fifth act of Louis XVI's tragedy would be so difficult or rather impossible for me to tell, since it is full of moving

incidents, and however much appearances may have deceived, Louis nonetheless dies evidently more royally than he lived. But as I was reproaching myself for my shortcoming, I recalled an episode from the same act that made me realize what sort of a task it was that was beyond my strength.

After the Tuileries had been stormed for the first time (on July 20th) the legislative assembly sent some members up to express their sympathy to the Royal Family, and as the Queen herself was walking round with people from the castle and complaining about all the destruction the mob had caused, she noticed that tears had risen to the eyes of even the intransigent Jacobin, Merlin of Thionville,¹ so she said to him, 'I see that you too cannot but weep to see how brutally the King and his Family are treated by a people he always wanted so much to make happy.' 'Yes, Your Majesty,' answered Merlin, 'I weep for your ill fortune as a beautiful, sensitive woman and housewife, but you must not think that I have a single tear for the King or Queen.' This was really such a rude thing to say that one must realise that Merlin was a Belgian before one can understand how it could be said to a beautiful queen in French. But as a historian I found that when I wished to relate the sad fate of these crowned heads, it was my task to do so in such a way that I would be heard to regret that Louis and Marie Antoinette, who in another situation would seem to have been a happy, lovable couple, should have been crowned to such an ill fortune, and to deplore the country whose Tree of Freedom, as one of the blackguards said, could only grow in royal blood, but not to deplore that such a horrible monarchy as the French ended as it deserved. This task I found too heavy to fulfil, and since I could neither narrate so serious an event with French levity nor present Louis as a martyr for the good cause, I felt that I had to give up completely all narrative and just point to both sides.

Now, gentlemen, you can hardly doubt that I am willing to let kings, and queens, even in France, be given their due with justice and fairness, since if you call me an *ultra*, it is bound to mean royalist; and that I possess the modicum of courage that may be required for professing one's royalism in Denmark that you surely do not doubt either. But nobody knows my view of the matter except me, and I shall endeavour to give you it as briefly and clearly as I can, since I think that both sides actually have a very distorted view of it.

I regard the democratic equality which the French aimed at in the revolution as a mirage that neither can nor should be found in

society, and if it were, it would be as deformed as a body made only of hands, or, as the hydra was depicted, only of heads. However there is not only equality before the law under which the Almighty judges us all without respect of persons; there is also a parity according to the laws of human nature which history must take into consideration so that we are equally fair in our demands on human nature, whether it shines on the throne or goes unheeded in the cottages. Monsters is therefore what history calls Louis XI and Louis XIV as well as Marat and Robespierre, and fixes the same inscription on the altar of the idol of royal absolutism as on that of democratic absolutism with its horrible multitude of sacrifices. So it is not the French Revolution alone but the whole history of France over thirteen centuries, which one must pray that heaven will preserve itself and every society from; and that is the great truth that must be proclaimed and repeated again and again. To the same degree that other princes have imitated French kings must they be prepared for their subjects to imitate those of Louis XVI.

And whilst it is a comforting historical truth that the French extremism is only to be feared in those countries where the royal family tree, as in Rome, was the shaft of a spear, and where the people's tree of freedom will therefore be a spiked stick, as in Paris, even so there are everywhere princes and peoples making unreasonable demands on each other. This creates bad blood and if left unchanged, will lead to disaster, which would be very sad even if it were a much more humane one than the French. Unintentionally Christianity has drawn a veil over this mutual lack of moderation which it is very much the duty of its apologists to remove, and therefore I shall endeavour to show where the mistake lies.

For if both people and princes regarded their mutual relationship in a perfectly natural way they would not, especially now that light is dawning on history, make inflated demands on one another; but with Christianity a far higher human ideal has come into the world with the testimony that it can be realized by every nation and in all corners of the world. And both princes and peoples throughout Christendom have made it an occasion for raising mutual demands that cannot possibly be fulfilled, inasmuch as the princes demand of their subjects, and the subjects of their princes that they be the perfect Christians in the flesh that the New Testament describes, that is, demigods in spiritual power and wisdom, humility and meekness, be lions and lambs, heroes and martyrs, all according to circumstances or as required.

That Christianity is now completely innocent of these mistakes would have been seen long ago if both princes and peoples had maintained a true freedom of religion. For then it would have been apparent that there are relatively few people anywhere who would so embrace Christianity as to make it a new principle for their lives, and one would never have expected Christian heroic strength of those who had not even reached Christian innocence. But then princes and peoples forced each other to be addressed as Christians and the priests made them believe that it helped if not here then hereafter, and thus the ideas have become so muddled as they have in the eighteenth century that even those who, like Frederik the Great, Rousseau, Voltaire and all their idolizers, explicitly refused to be regarded as superstitious slaves and idiots or mean hypocrites and impostors, which in their opinion all Christians must be – even they, however, demanded Christian perfection of one another and of the whole world. So the difference was only that they claimed it was the Christian faith that up to that point had prevented the Christian ideal of man from being realized in the secular society, which otherwise would soon happen if one just got rid of faith. Yes, gentlemen, it is absolutely ridiculous, and yet it is a fact, that the apparently unchristian and ungodly French court demanded that the people should perform and endure all that Christ's apostles alone could and would, and that the Parisian mob and its leaders for their part demanded the same of Louis XVI and all the other authorities

Therefore, wherever social relationships are indeed to be reborn and gain stability, Christianity, as a force quite free and incalculable, must be left completely out of consideration, remembering that the human ideal it has brought into the world, but seldom realized in convincing form, can still less be realized without it. One must stick to the human nature that history in any particular place reveals as that which decides the yardstick for the reasonable demands people can make on one another and creates the natural ideal which society can endeavour to realize there successfully. Then princes and people will not torture themselves and one another by guarding against every possible abuse of power and freedom, but strive to promote and facilitate the best use of them, which, being the most beneficial, both profits us best and makes the gross abuses of them as rare and bearable as such deeds rightly branded and severely punished as gross crimes always have been in a well-organized state. Then it will also be realized that, properly understood, the freedom of the King and

the freedom of the people, far from being incompatible, actually need each other much more. So it is mere illusion for them to believe that one side's gain is the other side's loss, since it is always only some beast of prey or other – calling itself the nobility, the clergy or what you will – that wins what they both lose. Thus, when mutual freedom and the good order which springs from it are recognized for what they always were, namely, the legal foundation of society, then great days will dawn, not so much perfect days, which are socially impossible for citizens on this earth, but real days, like the great days of every nation, and so much the more beautiful, as popular enlightenment and a natural education cannot help making them.

With these bright prospects I wish to thank you, gentlemen, for the attention you have hitherto accorded me, and to beg your attention during the continuation of my talks on the demands and signs of the present age. For I told you at the outset that only because I see bright prospects, especially for this plot of earth we call our own, this plot of earth which down the ages has never been the spoil of foreigners and will therefore never become a battleground for rebel slaves and effete tyrants, but a sanctuary like the Æsirs²² famous Place of Assembly under the ancient ash, where they spared even the Fenris Wolf³, so as not to defile the tree with blood – only because here I see bright prospects which need only historical enlightenment to develop and reveal themselves in all their glory, as our lovely country this summer eve needs only the morning sun to delight our eyes – only for this reason and in the hope of being able to give especially my younger countrymen a brighter and better founded hope for the future than they usually seem to me to entertain, only for this reason did I decide to speak in public about the past, and chose as a sample by no means the part of history I have loved the deepest and cultivated the most diligently, but precisely that part which for a long time I have scorned and as far as possible have ignored. I chose the most recent period of history because it is closest to us all and therefore makes the strongest demand on general attention and offers the clearest insight into the human life that we all share.

I said at the outset that I realised it was a daring venture and I repeat that this seems very much to be the case. But that was in my honest opinion the best I could do, so I am pleased still to have found the courage to attempt what cannot possibly be posterity's loss and may be something of a gain. And if my talks on more recent history, on the history of the nation at the moments when it fused with my

own, can help to awaken and nourish a brighter and more living view of human nature in its historical development and of the history of man in its natural setting, I shall not only be content for my talk to be called in all other respects unskilled work, which from now on will not be tolerated. But my triumph will be precisely that posterity finds it so and replaces it with masterpieces; because I know it is unskilled work, whether it is considered so or not, and I only find it bearable because I hope that I myself will gradually be able both to improve it a little and above all to arouse the younger generation to make it a lot better, to climb on to our shoulders, as is their calling, and see further, learn from our mistakes and profit from them.

It is not out of modesty, gentlemen, that I speak thus. For whether it be illusions or reality, I really do believe that I can speak just as clearly and lucidly about human matters as any of my contemporaries; but I realize it is unskilled work with all of us we are bunglers in our use of the mother tongue, bunglers in our history lectures, bunglers in the way we serve our audiences so long as we just talk and fail to understand how, through a living dialogue, we can initiate and sustain the general participation and interaction that is the life blood of the High School and the condition for progressive enlightenment. To this may be added, as I remarked, the fact that I have scorned and ignored more recent history, and have done so for natural reasons, so that I cannot move around in it nearly so freely, nor express myself nearly so spiritedly as I can in classical or medieval history – I say for natural reasons because as an individual I am of a historical-poetic nature, finding it easy to enthuse over the eagle-flight of the human race in its poetic youth and over its giant strides in its proper historical manhood, and consequently I am prejudiced against its snail's pace in the present, which seems to me to bespeak only an impotent, cold, mean-spirited old age – in a higher sense as unhistorical as it is unpoetic.

Even the revolution and its consequences, to which I would not deny a certain greatness, therefore seem to me to be a fearsome proof of the impotence and spiritual poverty of the race that acclaimed a monster, half animal and half devil, as its saviour⁴. So it was not until I joined the quiet in the land that I discovered that the present also has a historical-poetic side from which it can be regarded, and once it is, will come to stand in its proper light and become what it was obviously appointed to be – one of the great periods of transition between a past without hope and a future full of hope, with a glorious

flowering. Now for the first time I saw that we, who arrogantly rose above the present with its low, prosaic view of all human relations, its philistine interests, its puerile search for freedom and its self-conceit, that we, I say, stood in the way of a better future just as much as those who idolize the present, and that we would therefore do well to remember that we ourselves, with all our lofty opinions, belonged to the present that we so deeply despised and so bitterly railed against, and that we repaid only with ingratitude the age that begot and bore us and would deserve only the ingratitude of posterity if we wasted our strength on glorifying the past, which has irrevocably disappeared, while suppressing the present, which alone can accomplish anything, since it alone holds the last hope of the human spirit and is only to be abandoned in despair.

Then I set about regarding my times as closely and impartially as possible and whole heartedly involving myself with everything in them that prophesied a better and a happier future, better and happier not just for individual poets and scholars, not for individuals or classes, by whatever name they are known, but for the ordinary run of people and for the full development and clear enlightenment of our profound and wonderful nature, which is obviously the Creator's will and the inclination of the human spirit. Then I found, to be sure, neither the present in all its aspects, nor the French freedom and enlightenment which it idolized and still does idolize somewhat, to be beautiful and joyful, much less heavenly, but found, however, traces of what is essentially human even in the middle of Paris, and found that the tendency to general freedom and radical naturalness that the revolution points to, can and must lead to a relatively glorious and happy future, where human nature is a little better and deeper and therefore freedom is nobler and more unassuming and the enlightenment more thorough than in France. To be sure, I find great difficulty in suddenly having to make such a concerted effort to catch up the arrears in my closer acquaintance with my times, and even greater difficulty in being truly impartial lest, for fear of the opposite, I seem partial towards what is wicked, and the greatest difficulty of all in becoming engaged sympathetically with French history, which, like everything French, I find repulsive. But I have struggled with these difficulties as best I can and am still doing so, so just as long as you, gentlemen, do not lose patience, I very much hope to conquer them, so that at least my young fellow-students will realise they can

be overcome when, like those, one has a mind to do so and time on one's side.

Therefore, gentlemen, although I appear to have most of my life behind me I nevertheless do have a mind for something, a mind, if I can, to break through the ice not just to a truer appraisal of the past and the present but also to a freer relationship and a more lively exchange between the old and the young, which is the condition for all true freedom and all profound historical enlightenment. To a degree I owe this 'mind' to an old myth which is not even Nordic; the great Eastern myth about the Phoenix, which may only have come to us in scraps from Greece and Rome, but which in my eyes has been as exceptional of its kind as Fidiás's masterpieces were of theirs, so just as art connoisseurs rate the scraps from the Parthenon above a complete work of art by Thorvaldsen, so do I rate the handing down of the scraps of the phoenix myth above the best poem by Oehlenschlaeger⁵. For in these scraps I have found the human spirit's own ideal of its great destiny expressed with confidence, magnificence, and life. I presume you all know this, gentlemen, but I do not know whether you have noticed the little feature which particularly encourages me and which I think should encourage us all, and I cannot use this moment better than to remind you that this Phoenix, which every morning in its earthly paradise greeted the rising sun with heavenly song, is the symbol of the human spirit in its highest flight and most natural activity. And when the myth says that after a thousand years of life this bird built itself a nest in the palm forests of Syria of the most spicy fragrant plants on earth and burnt to ashes with it, kindled by the pure rays of the sun, this clearly depicts to my eyes the Middle Ages – the age of glowing hearts, wonderfully fiery and fragrant but also wrapped in clouds of smoke emptying itself out and wasting away. So when the myth ends with the ashes being rolled together into an egg, from which the sun hatches a living creature, first, to be sure, in the form of the smallest worm, but then nevertheless growing and developing from the morning dew into a bird in its father's likeness, with his voice and with the right of inheritance to the beautiful fatherland, to which, fully-grown and accompanied by all the birds of the forest it returns in joy and triumph, I cannot but see in this an image of modern times as encouraging as it is striking, in which learning up to now was undeniably a bookworm that only wanted to gnaw on the monuments of the beautiful song of the Bird of Antiquity, and therefore found only its eagle claws worth envying,

but nonetheless claimed to have been called to resemble him in everything and to be heir to all his demesne. However ridiculous therefore this claim sounds in the mouth of a bookworm, I nevertheless came to believe in its validity through the way the prophecy had hitherto been exactly fulfilled, and I thought I could feel within myself how the worm began to be transformed into a tiny bird. And since that time I see this change taking place wherever the spirit was present in olden days, and I consider my attitude to you now, gentlemen, to be just such a transformation through which the bookworm endeavours to shed its skin. This can, of course, be difficult enough to achieve and at times somewhat boring to watch, but if, as I hope, the result is a little bird that can learn to sing, it will be to our mutual delight.

3. On Germany and the German Spirit

October 26th

This evening, gentlemen, I am supposed to be informing you about Teutonism, properly speaking, as it whistled and roared about our ears in the years 1815-20;⁶ but to keep my conscience easy I must first of all remind you that I have a reputation for being almost as bitter an enemy of the Germans as of the Romans, of the holy as of the unholy Roman Empire. And since, according to the proverb, there is no smoke without a fire, I myself presume that in this matter as in many others I am somewhat lacking in historical impartiality.

However, you must not believe that it is bad as many of my books may conclude, partly because one often reads somewhat superficially and partly because I have found it unwieldy for everyday use to weigh all my words in a balance. Firstly, there is no question of my hating the Germans as people, but only of an incompatibility with the way of thinking which on the evidence of experience comes most naturally to the Germans. Secondly I believe that among the Germans there may and have been far better people than myself. And thirdly I think that Germany has of late deserved much credit for the freedom and the enlightenment of Europe. So all in all, the Germans will hardly find anywhere outside Germany and Denmark where there is less anti-German feeling than in me.

My whole quarrel with the Germans is really concerned with the fact that they are determined either to make me a German, or to regard me as a fool; and I give as good as I get and do not wish to be either. Instead I assert that Denmark is no more the tail of Germany than