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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 I.

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LETTER I.

To the Honourable

HAMILTON BOYLE,

Student of *Christ-Church* College
in OXFORD.

My dear HAMILTON,

I Want no motive to gratify your request of hearing often from me, especially as your letters always give me a particular pleasure. I read them over not only with the fondness of a father, but with the affection of a friend. They revive in my mind, the agreeable hours which attend a studious life, in that elegant seat of the muses, from whence they are dated. In such a situation, amidst the best authors, and in a free conversation with men of letters, you will be able to adorn your mind, and give it a serene and a just way of thinking: And I shall have the happiness not only of seeing you forming yourself every day for public life, but rendered more capable of exerting your faculties,

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with

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with dignity and advantage to your country, and with a rising reputation to yourself.

For my own part, early disappointments, the perplexed state of my affairs, indifferent health, and many other untoward incidents, all contributed to make me, even in my earliest part of life, too fond of retirement. Years have encreased the inclination, and time rather confirms, than corrects the error; however, I have not suffered my mind to be totally inactive: but by holding as little connection as possible with the living, I have employed myself in conversing, and forming an acquaintance with the dead: and have from thence received more real satisfaction and improvement, than probably might have attended me, had I been directed in the pursuit of fame, fortune, or ambition.

I am much pleased that you approve of my observations on PLINY's letters. I engaged in that work, with a design of pointing out, to your brother Lord BOYLE, the amiable qualities of that elegant Roman. But I cannot rest satisfied unless I offer to you also, some public token of my paternal affection: and therefore, I have lately been examining the works of Dr. SWIFT, with an intention of gathering materials for my future correspondence with you: and here, my dear HAMILTON, I dedicate to you, those criticisms which have occurred to me; and shall mix with them such particulars of his life and character, as I flatter myself, may tend at least to your entertainment, if not to your improvement.

Let me begin by giving you a short but general view of SWIFT's character.

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He was in the decline of life when I knew him. His friendship was an honour to me, and to say the truth, I have even drawn advantage from his errors. I have beheld him in all humours and dispositions, and I have formed various speculations from the several weaknesses, to which I observed him liable. His capacity and strength of mind were undoubtedly equal to any task whatever. His pride, his spirit, or his ambition, call it by what name you please, was boundless: but, his views were checked in his younger years, and the anxiety of that disappointment had a visible effect upon all his actions. He was sour and severe, but not absolutely ill-natured. He was sociable only to particular friends, and to them only at particular hours. He knew politeness more than he practised it. He was a mixture of avarice, and generosity: the former, was frequently prevalent, the latter, seldom appeared, unless excited by compassion. He was open to adulation, and could not, or would not distinguish between low flattery, and just applause. His abilities rendered him superiour to envy. He was undisguised and perfectly sincere. I am induced to think, that he entered into orders, more from some private and fixed resolution, than from absolute choice: be that as it may, he performed the duties of the church with great punctuality, and a decent degree of devotion. He read prayers rather in a strong nervous voice, than in a graceful manner: and altho' he has been often accused of irreligion, nothing of that kind appeared in his conversation or behaviour. His cast of mind induced him to think, and speak more of politics than of religion.

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His perpetual views were directed towards power: and his chief aim was to be removed into *England*: but when he found himself entirely disappointed, he turned his thoughts to opposition, and became the patron of *Ireland*, in which country he was born. Here it may not be improper to observe to you, that many of his friends imagined him a native of *England*, and many others, I know not whether to call them friends or enemies, were willing to suppose him the natural son of Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE. Neither of these facts are true. He was born in *Dublin*, *November* the thirtieth, in the year sixteen hundred and sixty seven, and was carried into *England* soon after his birth, by his nurse, who being obliged to cross the sea, and having a nurse's fondness for the child at her breast, conveyed him on ship-board, without the knowledge of his mother or relations, and kept him with her at *Whitehaven* in *Cumberland*, during her residence three years at that place. This extraordinary event made his return seem as if he had been transplanted to *Ireland*, rather than that he had owed his original existence to that soil. But perhaps, he tacitly hoped to inspire different nations with a contention for his birth: at least in his angry moods, when he was peevish, and provoked at the ingratitude of *Ireland*, he was frequently heard to say, "I am not of this vile country, I am an Englishman." Such an assertion, although meant figuratively, was often received literally: and the report was still farther assisted by Mr. POPE, who in one of his letters has this expression, "Tho' one or two of our friends are gone, since you saw your native country, there

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“there remain a few.”” But Dr. SWIFT, in his cooler hours, never denied his country: on the contrary, he frequently mentioned, and pointed out the house where he was born. The other suggestion concerning the illegitimacy of his birth, is equally false. Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE was employed as a minister abroad from the year sixteen hundred and sixty five, to the year sixteen hundred and seventy: first at *Brussels*, and afterwards at the *Hague*, as you will find by his correspondence with the Earl of *Arlington*, and other ministers of state: so that Dr. SWIFT's mother, who never crossed the sea, except from *England* to *Ireland*, was out of all possibility of a personal correspondence with Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE, till some years after her son's birth.

I have already mentioned to you the exact place, and date of Doctor SWIFT's nativity, but the rules of biography make it necessary to give you some account of his family. It shall be as short as possible, since, although his ancestors were persons of very decent, and reputable characters, he himself has been the herald to blazon the dignity of their coat. His grandfather was the Reverend Mr. THOMAS SWIFT, Vicar of *Goodridge* near *Ross* in *Herefordshire*. He enjoyed a paternal estate in that county, which is still in possession of his great grandson DEANE SWIFT, Esq; He died in the year sixteen hundred and fifty eight, leaving six sons, GODWIN, THOMAS, DRYDEN, WILLIAM, JONATHAN and ADAM.

Letter LXXX. Mr. POPE to Dr. SWIFT, *March* 23, 1736-7.

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Two of them only, GODWIN and JONATHAN, left sons. The descendants of GODWIN are mentioned in GUIL-LIM's heraldry. JONATHAN married Mrs. ABIGAIL ERICK of *Leicestershire*, by whom he had one daughter and a son. The daughter was born in the first year of Mr. SWIFT's marriage; but he lived not to see the birth of his son^a, who was called JONATHAN, in memory of his Father, and became afterwards the famous Dean of *St. Patrick's*.

The greatest part of Mr. JONATHAN SWIFT's income had depended upon agencies, and other employments of that kind: so that most of his fortune perished with him: and the remainder being the only support that his widow could enjoy, the care, tuition, and expence of her two children devolved upon her husband's elder brother, Mr. GODWIN SWIFT, who voluntarily became their guardian, and supplied the loss which they had sustained in a father. Mrs. SWIFT, about two years after her husband's death, quitted *Ireland*, and retired to *Leicester*, the place of her nativity.

The faculties of the mind, appear and shine forth at different ages in different men. The infancy of Doctor SWIFT passed on without any marks of distinction. At six years old, he was sent to school at *Kilkenny*, and about eight years afterwards, he was entered a student of Trinity College in *Dublin*. He lived there in perfect regularity, and under an entire obedience to the statutes: but the moroseness of his temper, often rendered him very

^a Doctor SWIFT was born two months after his father's death.

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unacceptable to his companions ; so that he was little regarded, and less beloved. Nor were the academical exercises agreeable to his genius. He held logic and metaphysics in the utmost contempt, and he scarce considered mathematics and natural philosophy, unless to turn them into ridicule. The studies which he followed were history and poetry. In these he made a great progress ; but to all other branches of science he had given so very little application, that when he appeared as a candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, he was set aside on account of insufficiency.

You will be surpris'd at such an incident in his life : but the fact was undoubtedly true : and even at last he obtained his admission *speciali gratiâ* : a phrase which in that University carries with it the utmost marks of reproach. It is a kind of dishonourable degree, and the record of it, notwithstanding Dr. SWIFT's present established character throughout the learned world, must for ever remain against him in the academical register at *Dublin*.

Ambition, you will agree with me, could scarce have met with a severer blow. HERCULES found himself set aside for want of strength ; or, if admitted among the wrestlers, admitted only by favour and indulgence ; yet still he must be conscious, that he was HERCULES. Disappointments, the earlier they happen in life, the deeper impression they make upon the heart. SWIFT was full of indignation at the treatment which he had received in *Ireland*, and therefore resolv'd to pursue his studies at *Oxford*. However, that he might

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be admitted *ad eundem*, he was obliged to carry with him the *Testimonium* of his Degree.

The expression *speciali gratiâ* is so peculiar to the University of *Dublin*, that when Mr. SWIFT exhibited his Testimonial at *Oxford*, the members of the *English* University concluded, that the words *speciali gratiâ* must signify a degree conferred in reward of extraordinary diligence, or learning. You may imagine, he did not try to undeceive them. He was immediately admitted *ad eundem*, and chose to enter himself of *Hart Hall*, now *Hartford College*, where he constantly resided (some visits to his mother at *Leicester*, and to Sir WILLIAM TEMPLE at *Moore Park* excepted) till he took his degree as Master of Arts, which, if I remember rightly, was in the year ninety one.

Having attended my friend SWIFT thus far in his road of life, let me rest a little before I proceed farther with him in the journey, and let me desire you to keep this letter, as I intend that it shall be followed hereafter by others of the same sort, and relating to the same person.

I am, my dearest HAMILTON,

your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y,

L E T.