



PROJECT MUSE®

The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition

Eliot, T. S., Dickey, Frances, Formichelli, Jennifer, Schuchard, Ronald

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

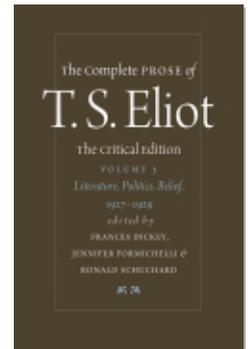
Eliot, T. S., et al.

The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/41952>

An Extempore Exhumation

A review of *The Skull of Swift*, by Shane Leslie

London: Chatto & Windus, 1928. Pp. 347.

The Nation and Athenaeum, 43 (7 July 1928) 470, 472

“An extempore exhumation” is not my invention; it is Mr. Leslie’s own sub-title for his book. The book is very readable, confused and confusing; it would be easier to criticize if one knew why Mr. Leslie wrote it, and why he chose to write it in this way.¹ The “exhumation” is really a romantic biography; the skull is a mere figurehead. The first chapter contains a reference to a phrenologist, who after examining the skull of Swift reported, “amativeness large and wit small”;² thereafter the skull slips back into its proper place. In the next chapter we are informed that the Life of Swift will never be written; and then Mr. Leslie proceeds to write it. The biography is bright, interesting, and apparently well informed; but Mr. Leslie does not bring us any further inside that mystery of Swift which he sets himself to study.

Perhaps it is partly because Mr. Leslie comes to his task with the wrong assumption. We are told on the wrapper that the “main thesis” of the book is that Swift was *a man without a soul*. Mr. Leslie makes the same observation at one point inside the book.³ He does not develop it explicitly; but if it is indeed the main thesis, it is incapable of explaining anything. And I cannot see what such an assertion means. Everyone may remark about somebody that he “has no soul”; but that is merely a set phrase, and we know how much or little it means. But to make the phrase the thesis of a biographical study implies some theory either theological or psychological; and I have never heard of any such theory. Most theology supposes that everybody has a soul; some psychology supposes that nobody has a soul; but there seems no warrant for selecting the unfortunate Dean Swift for exclusion. Mr. Leslie believes that Swift may have had a “heart,” though no soul. It would really be more plausible to say that Swift had little or no heart, but a soul – and a very sick one.

This picturesque belief may or may not affect Mr. Leslie’s view. What is almost more unpardonable than this touch of flightiness is his combination of historical narrative with the method of fiction. The book has not

the consistency of *Ariel* and such works,⁴ and indeed Mr. Leslie is half-hearted about this method. Chapter III begins with this sentence:

The Master of Moor Park in Surrey opened the door leading into his bowling green and garden. . . . [39]

We expect some sort of particular narrative, or perhaps a lively dialogue between Sir William Temple and young Swift.⁵ Nothing of the sort; Mr. Leslie drops this design after two sentences, and treats us to the more conventional method of description of Moor Park and its inhabitants, which is quite temperate and reasonable. It is true that he frequently regales us with pieces of insight like this:

Jonathan's thought had been read by his mother. The wolflike look in his eye was not lost upon her, though it was a mother's burning love that drove him from her door. [45]

If it were all conjecture or imagination of this sort we could bear it, but there is (to do the book justice) a great deal of genuine historical matter, which the more confuses us. Mr. Leslie takes, as you might expect, a final soaring flight when he comes to imagine what Swift was thinking about on his death bed:

He could see the Castle at Kilkenny. . . . Every figure was minutely recognizable. . . . He looked again and saw a risen Congreve. . . . Again he fell into oblivion and the dream of death. [328-29, 331]

It is usually Mr. Lytton Strachey who gets the blame; but, after all, Mr. Strachey does not mix things up like Mr. Leslie: he does restrain his imagination to legitimate historical uses.⁶

There is another quality of Mr. Strachey which Mr. Leslie misses. In imaginative biography it is essential that the author should maintain a consistent attitude towards his subject. With Mr. Strachey, we cannot define – or cannot define so easily as we might expect – this attitude, either in general or towards a particular subject of biography; but we feel immediately his consistency throughout, whether we like the attitude or not. It is difficult to believe that Mr. Leslie has any consistent attitude towards Swift, except in regarding him as a good romantic subject. From this point of view alone, the short studies of Thackeray and Mr. Charles Whibley, both biased and from opposite points of view, are (especially when taken together) more illuminating than Mr. Leslie's book.⁷ And with all of Thackeray's prejudice,

his is the most memorable phrase that has ever been made about Swift: “So great a man he seems to me, that thinking of him is like thinking of an empire falling.”⁸

T. S. ELIOT

NOTES

1. Shane Leslie (1885-1971) Irish nationalist, diplomat, and author, served as editor of the *Dublin Review* (1916-26) and wrote biographies of Edward Manning and Mark Sykes before turning to Swift.

2. Leslie describes a group of unnamed phrenologists, “who were camped at that time in the middle ground between Science and Fashion. This Phrenological Art enabled them to decipher “amateness large and wit small” between the sutures of his dead brain. With this sapient finding let Phrenology at least rest content” (4).

3. Leslie states in his prefatory survey of Swift’s life that “it is simpler to deal with his ecclesiastical career on the supposition that Swift had no soul. . . . Of all his poetry not one line was drawn from the higher heights. No poetry was so soulless” (9-10). He then asks, “But whether he had a heart? – Oh yes. – A soul? – Nay” (35).

4. *Ariel; ou, la Vie de Shelley* (1923), by biographer and historian André Maurois (nom de plume of Emile Herzog); translated as *Ariel: A Shelley Romance* (1924). On 5 Oct 1929, TSE wrote to Charles Du Bos: “unfortunately Maurois is producing a Byron in the spring, in English. I see no reason to believe that his *Byron* will be any more important than his Shelley but Maurois has a great vogue here among the semi-literate” (*LA* 627).

5. Sir William Temple (1628-99), statesman, diplomat, and author, retired to become master of Moor Park in Surrey and patron of Swift, who served as his secretary there for ten years from 1689. Temple’s essay “Upon the Ancient and Modern Learning” (1690) led to the “ancients versus moderns” controversy that caused Swift to write *The Battle of the Books* (1697).

6. TSE wrote critically of Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and *Queen Victoria* (1921) in his “London Letter” of July 1921, stating that “Mr. Strachey . . . has invented new sensations from history . . . No other historian has so deliberately cultivated the feelings which the inspection of an historical character can arouse” (2,365). In “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca” (1927), he criticized Strachey’s imaginative interpretation of Shakespeare’s final days in *Books and Characters* (1922) as characteristic of new liberties taken by modern critics: “If the only way to prove that Shakespeare did not feel and think exactly as people felt and thought in 1815, or in 1860, or in 1880, is to show that he felt and thought as we felt and thought in 1927, then we must accept gratefully that alternative” (3,245).

7. Thackeray’s short study of Swift appears in his collection of lectures, *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853). Whibley’s *Jonathan Swift* (1917) was his Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge that year.

8. *English Humourists* (London: Smith, Elder, 1853), 54. TSE returned to Thackeray’s view of Swift in a letter of 15 May 1964 to Roy Morrell, expressing his disagreement with Thackeray’s horror at Swift’s writing about a lock of Stella’s hair: “To me that was very poignant and expressed his contrition rather than cynicism. Thackeray redeems himself, however, by one magnificent phrase in which Swift’s end reminds him of an empire’s falling.”