

# THE COLLEGES OF UNREASON

A Post-humorous Eulogy  
Prepared By Samuel Butler  
As A Post-mortem  
For Dead Minds  
And Buried Intelligence

Of genius they make no account, for they say that everyone is a genius, more or less. In like manner there is no genius who is not also a fool, and no fool who is not also a genius. When I talked about originality and genius and said that original thought ought to be encouraged, I had to eat my words at once . . . A man's business, they hold, is to think as his neighbours do, for Heaven help him if he thinks good what they count bad. And really it is hard to see how the Erewhonian theory differs from our own, for the word "idiot" only means a person who forms his opinions for himself.

The venerable Professor of Worldly Wisdom spoke to me very seriously on this subject in consequence of the few words that I had imprudently let fall in defence of genius. He was one of those who carried most weight in the university and had the reputation of having done more perhaps than any other living man to suppress any kind of originality.

"It is not our business," he said, to help students to think for themselves. Surely this is the very last thing which one who wishes them well should encourage them to do. Our duty is to ensure that they shall think as we do, or at any rate, as we hold it expedient to say we do."

As regards the tests that a youth must pass before he can get a degree, I found that they have no class lists, and discourage anything like competition among the students; this indeed they regard self-seeking and unneighbourly. The examinations are conducted by way of papers written by the candidates on set subjects, some of which are known to him beforehand, while others are devised with a view of testing his general capacity and savoir faire.

My friend the Professor of Worldly Wisdom was the terror of the great number of students; and, so far as I could judge, he very well might be, for he had taken his professorship more seriously than any of the other professors had done. I heard of his having plucked one poor fellow for want of sufficient vagueness in his saving clauses paper. Another was sent down for having written an article on a scientific subject without having made free enough use of the words "carefully," "patiently," and "earnestly." One man was refused a degree for being too often and too seriously in the right while a few days before I came a batch had been plucked for insufficient distrust of printed matter.

I told them of Homer's noble line to the effect that a man should strive ever to be foremost and in all things to outvie his peers; but they said that no wonder the countries in which such a detestable maxim was held in admiration were always flying at one another's throats.

"Why," asked one professor, "should a man want to be better than his neighbours? Let him be thankful if he is no worse."

I ventured feebly to say that I did not see how progress could be made in any art or science, or in-

deed in anything at all, without more or less self-seeking, and hence unamiability.

"Of course it cannot," said the professor, "and therefore we object to progress."

Later on, however, a young professor took me aside and said he did not think I quite understood their views about progress.

"We like progress," he said, "but it must commend itself to the common sense of the people. If a man gets to know more than his neighbours he should keep his knowledge to himself till he has sounded them, and seen whether they agree, or are like to agree with him." He said it was an immoral to be too far in front of one's own age as to lag too far

although he had never shown the slightest proclivity towards it, while he had been endowed with not inconsiderable ability for several other branches of human learning. He assured me that he would never open another hypothetical book after he had taken his degree, but would follow out the bent of his own inclinations. This was well enough, but who could give him his fourteen years back again?

I sometimes wondered how it was that the mischief done was not more clearly perceptible, and that the young men and women grew up as sensible and goodly as they did, in spite of the attempts almost deliberately made to warp and stunt their growth. Some doubtless received damage, from

them, while for those who had no special capacity, the loss of time was of comparatively little moment.

And yet perhaps, after all, it is better for a country that its seats of learning should do more to suppress mental growth than to encourage it. Were it not for a certain priggishness which these places infuse into so great a number of their alumni, genuine work would become dangerously common. It is essential that by far the greater part of what is said or done in the world should be so ephemeral as to take itself away quickly; it should keep good for twenty-four hours or even twice as long, but it should not be good enough a week hence to prevent people from going on to some-

expressing an opinion of some sort, they will commonly retail those of some one who has already written upon the subject, and conclude by saying that though they quite admit that there is an element of truth in what the writer has said, there are many points on which they are unable to agree with him. Which these points were, I invariably found myself unable to determine; indeed, it seemed to be counted the perfection of scholarship and good breeding among them to have — much less to express — an opinion on any subject on which it might prove later that they had been mistaken. The art of sitting gracefully on a fence has never, I should think, been brought to greater perfection than at the Colleges of Unreason. Even when, wriggle as they may, they find themselves pinned down to some expression of definite opinion, as often as not they will argue in support of what they perfectly well know to be untrue. The fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease was fatal to the intelligence of those infected by it, and almost every one at the Colleges of Unreason had caught it to a greater or less degree. After a few years atrophy of the opinions invariably supervened, and the sufferer became stone dead to everything except the more superficial aspects of those material objects with which he came most in contact. The expression on the faces of these people was repellent, they did not, however, seem particularly unhappy, for they none of them had the faintest idea that they were in reality more dead than alive. No cure for this disgusting fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease has yet been discovered.

—Samuel Butler  
Erewhon (1872)



"Some of you students have urged me to teach that bourgeois society is corrupt, so here goes.

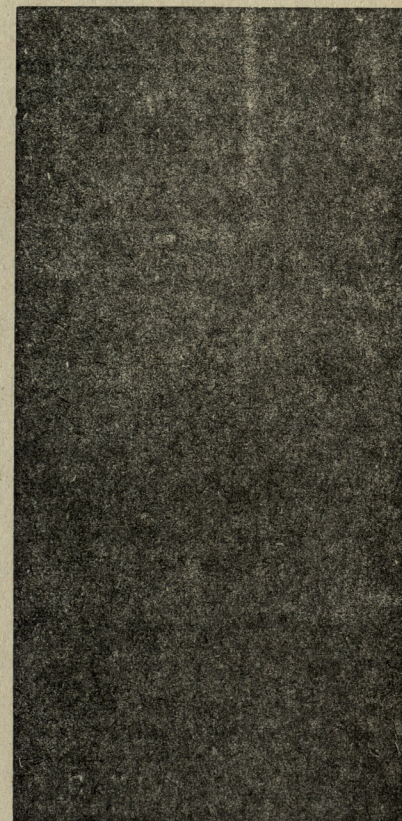
Bourgeois society is corrupt. Returning to the question of congruent triangles..."

behind it. "If a man can carry his neighbours with him, he may say what he likes; but if not, what insult can be more gratuitous than the telling them what they do not want to know? A man should remember that intellectual over-indulgence is one of the most insidious and disgraceful forms that excess can take. Granted that every one should exceed more or less, inasmuch as absolutely perfect sanity would drive any man mad the moment he reached it, but..." I met one youth who told me that for fourteen years the hypothetical language had been almost the only thing that he had been taught,

which they suffered to their life's end; but many seemed little or none the worse, and some, almost the better. The reason would seem to be that the natural instinct of the lads in most cases so absolutely rebelled against their training, that do what the teachers might they could never get them to pay serious heed to it. The consequence was that the boys only lost their time . . . Moreover those who had any special tastes could not be restrained from developing them: they would learn what they wanted to learn and liked, in spite of obstacles which seemed rather to urge them on than to discourage

thing else . . . the fact that our seats of learning aim rather at fostering mediocrity than anything higher, is due to our subconscious recognition of the fact that it is even more necessary to check exuberance of mental development than to encourage it. There can be no doubt that this is what our academic bodies do, and they do it the more effectually because they do it only subconsciously. They think they are advancing healthy mental assimilation and digestion, whereas in reality they are little better than cancer in the stomach.

If they cannot wriggle out of



—Hornby photo

Two black bears skinny — dipping in the Black Lagoon at midnight with their eyes closed.