

CHARLES KINGSLEY

PHAETHON: LOOSE
THOUGHTS FOR LOOSE
THINKERS

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for Loose Thinkers**

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PHAETHON; LOOSE THOUGHTS FOR LOOSE THINKERS. 1852

Templeton and I were lounging by the clear limestone stream which crossed his park and wound away round wooded hills toward the distant Severn. A lovelier fishing morning sportsman never saw.

A soft gray under-roof of cloud slid on before a soft west wind, and here and there a stray gleam of sunlight shot into the vale across the purple mountain-tops, and awoke into busy life the denizens of the water, already quickened by the mysterious electric influences of the last night's thunder-shower.

The long-winged cinnamon-flies spun and fluttered over the pools; the sand-bees hummed merrily round their burrows in the marly bank; and delicate iridescent ephemerae rose by hundreds from the depths, and, dropping their shells, floated away, each a tiny Venus Anadyomene, down the glassy ripples of the reaches. Every moment a heavy splash beneath some overhanging tuft of milfoil or water hemlock proclaimed the death-doom of a hapless beetle who had dropped into the stream beneath; yet still we fished and fished, and caught nothing, and seemed utterly careless about catching anything; till the old keeper who followed us, sighing and shrugging his shoulders, broke forth into open remonstrance:

“Excuse my liberty, gentlemen, but what ever is the matter with you and master, sir? I never did see you miss so many honest rises before.”

“It is too true,” said Templeton to me with a laugh. “I must confess I have been dreaming instead of fishing the whole morning. But what has happened to you, who are not as apt as I am to do nothing by trying to do two things at once?”

“My hand may well be somewhat unsteady; for to tell the truth, I sat up all last night writing.”

“A hopeful preparation for a day's fishing in limestone water! But what can have set you on writing all night after so busy and talkative an evening as the last, ending too, as it did, somewhere about half-past twelve?”

“Perhaps the said talkative evening itself; and I suspect, if you will confess the truth, you will say that your morning's meditations are running very much in the same channel.”

“Lewis,” said he, after a pause, “go up to the hall, and bring some luncheon for us down to the lower waterfall.”

“And a wheelbarrow to carry home the fish, sir?”

“If you wish to warm yourself, certainly. And now, my good fellow,” said he, as the old keeper toddled away up the park, “I will open my heart—a process for which I have but few opportunities here—to an old college friend. I am disturbed and saddened by last night's talk and by last night's guest.”

“By the American professor? How, in the name of English exclusiveness, did such a rampantly heterodox spiritual guerilla invade the respectabilities and conservatism of Herefordshire?”

“He was returning from a tour through Wales, and had introductions to me from some Manchester friends of mine, to avail himself of which I found he had gone some thirty miles out of his way.”

“Complimentary to you, at least.”

“To Lady Jane, I suspect, rather than to me; for he told me broadly enough that all the flattering attentions which he had received in Manchester—where, you know, all such prophets are received with open arms, their only credentials being that, whatsoever they believe, they shall not believe the

Bible—had not given him the pleasure which he had received from that one introduction to what he called ‘the inner hearth-life of the English landed aristocracy.’ But what did you think of him?”

“Do you really wish to know?”

“I do.”

“Then, honestly, I never heard so much magniloquent unwisdom talked in the same space of time. It was the sense of shame for my race which kept me silent all the evening. I could not trust myself to argue with a gray-haired Saxon man, whose fifty years of life seemed to have left him a child in all but the childlike heart which alone can enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

“You are severe,” said Templeton, smilingly though, as if his estimate were not very different from mine.

“Can one help being severe when one hears irreverence poured forth from reverend lips? I do not mean merely irreverence for the Catholic Creeds; that to my mind—God forgive me if I misjudge him—seemed to me only one fruit of a deep root of irreverence for all things as they are, even for all things as they seem. Did you not remark the audacious contempt for all ages but ‘our glorious nineteenth century,’ and the still deeper contempt for all in the said glorious time who dared to believe that there was any ascertained truth independent of the private fancy and opinion of—for I am afraid it came to that—him, Professor Windrush, and his circle of elect souls? ‘You may believe nothing if you like, and welcome; but if you do take to that unnecessary act, you are a fool if you believe anything but what I believe—though I do not choose to state what that is.’ Is not that, now, a pretty fair formulisation of his doctrine?”

“But, my dear raver,” said Templeton, laughing, “the man believed at least in physical science. I am sure we heard enough about its triumphs.”

“It may be so. But to me his very ‘spiritualism’ seemed more materialistic than his physics. His notion seemed to be, though heaven forbid that I should say that he ever put it formally before himself—”

“Or anything else,” said Templeton, sotto voce.

“—that it is the spiritual world which is governed by physical laws, and the physical by spiritual ones; that while men and women are merely the puppets of cerebrations and mentations, and attractions and repulsions, it is the trees, and stones, and gases, who have the wills and the energies, and the faiths and the virtues and the personalities.”

“You are caricaturing.”

“How so? How can I judge otherwise, when I hear a man talking, as he did, of God in terms which, every one of them involved what we call the essential properties of matter—space, time, passibility, motion; setting forth phrenology and mesmerism as the great organs of education, even of the regeneration of mankind; apologising for the earlier ravings of the Poughkeepsie seer, and considering his later eclectic-pantheist farragos as great utterances: while, whenever he talked of Nature, he showed the most credulous craving after everything which we, the countrymen of Bacon, have been taught to consider unscientific—Homœopathy, Electro-biology, Loves of the Plants à la Darwin, Vestiges of Creation, Vegetarianisms, Teetotalisms—never mind what, provided it was unaccredited or condemned by regularly educated men of science?”

“But you don’t mean to assert that there is nothing in any of these theories?”

“Of course not. I can no more prove a universal negative about them than I can about the existence of life on the moon. But I do say that this contempt for that which has been already discovered—this carelessness about induction from the normal phenomena, coupled with this hankering after theories built upon exceptional ones—this craving for ‘signs and wonders,’ which is the sure accompaniment of a dying faith in God, and in nature as God’s work—are symptoms which make me tremble for the fate of physical as well as of spiritual science, both in America and in the Americanists here at home. As the Professor talked on, I could not help thinking of the neo-Platonists of Alexandria, and their exactly similar course—downward from a spiritualism of

notions and emotions, which in every term confessed its own materialism, to the fearful discovery that consciousness does not reveal God, not even matter, but only its own existence; and then onward, in desperate search after something external wherein to trust, towards theurgic fetish worship, and the secret virtues of gems and flowers and stars; and, last of all, to the lowest depth of bowing statues and winking pictures. The sixth century saw that career, Templeton; the nineteenth may see it re-enacted, with only these differences, that the Nature-worship which seems coming will be all the more crushing and slavish, because we know so much better how vast and glorious Nature is; and that the superstitions will be more clumsy and foolish in proportion as our Saxon brain is less acute and discursive, and our education less severely scientific, than those of the old Greeks.”

“Silence, raver!” cried Templeton, throwing himself on the grass in fits of laughter. “So the Professor’s grandchildren will have either turned Papists, or be bowing down before rusty locomotives and broken electric telegraphs? But, my good friend, you surely do not take Professor Windrush for a fair sample of the great American people?”

“God forbid that so unpractical a talker should be a sample of the most practical people upon earth. The Americans have their engineers, their geographers, their astronomers, their scientific chemists; few indeed, but such as bid fair to rival those of any nation upon earth. But these, like other true workers, hold their tongues and do their business.”

“And they have a few indigenous authors too: you must have read the ‘Biglow Papers,’ and the ‘Fable for Critics,’ and last but not least, ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’?”

“Yes; and I have had far less fear for Americans since I read that book; for it showed me that there was right healthy power, artistic as well as intellectual, among them, even now—ready, when their present borrowed peacocks’ feathers have fallen off, to come forth and prove that the Yankee Eagle is a right gallant bird, if he will but trust to his own natural plumage.”

“And they have a few statesmen also.”

“But they are curt, plain-spoken, practical—in everything antipodal to the knot of hapless men, who, unable from some defect or morbidity to help on the real movement of their nation, are fain to get their bread with tongue and pen, by retailing to ‘silly women,’ ‘ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth,’ second-hand German eclecticism, now exploded even in the country where they arose, and the very froth and scum of the Medea’s caldron, in which the disjecta membra of old Calvinism are pitiably seething.”

“Ah! It has been always the plan, you know, in England, as well as in America, courteously to avoid taking up a German theory till the Germans had quite done with it, and thrown it away for something new. But what are we to say of those who are trying to introduce into England these very Americanised Germanisms, as the only teaching which can suit the needs of the old world?”

“We will, if we are in a vulgar humour, apply to them a certain old proverb about teaching one’s grandmother a certain simple operation on the egg of the domestic fowl; but we will no less take shame to ourselves, as sons of Alma Mater, that such nonsense can get even a day’s hearing, either among the daughters of Manchester manufacturers, or among London working men. Had we taught them what we were taught in the schools, Templeton—”

“Alas, my friend, we must ourselves have learnt it first. I have no right to throw stones at the poor Professor, for I could not answer him.”

“Do not suppose that I can either. All I say is—mankind has not lived in vain. Least of all has it lived in vain during the last eighteen hundred years. It has gained something of eternal truth in every age, and that which it has gained is as fresh and young now as ever; and I will not throw away the bird in the hand for any number of birds in the bush.”

“Especially when you suspect most of them to be only wooden pheasants, set up to delude poachers. Well, you are far more of a Philister and a Conservative than I thought you.”

“The New is coming, I doubt not; but it must grow organically out of the Old—not root the old up, and stick itself full-grown into the place thereof, like a French tree of liberty—sure of much the

same fate. Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid already, in spiritual things or in physical; as the Professor and his school will surely find.”

“You recollect to whom the Bible applies that text?”

“I do.”

“And yet you say you cannot answer the Professor?”

“I do not care to do so. There are certain root-truths which I know, because they have been discovered and settled for ages; and instead of accepting the challenge of every I-know-not-whom to re-examine them, and begin the world’s work all over again, I will test his theories by them; and if they fail to coincide, I will hear no more speech about the details of the branches and flowers, for I shall know the root is rotten.”

“But he, too, acknowledged certain of those root-truths,” said Templeton, who seemed to have a lingering sympathy with my victim; “he insisted most strongly, and spoke, you will not deny, eloquently and nobly on the Unity of the Deity.”

“On the non-Trinity of *it*, rather; for I will not degrade the word ‘Him,’ by applying it here.

But, tell me honestly—*c’est le timbre qui fait la musique*—did his ‘Unity of the Deity’ sound in your English Bible-bred heart at all like that ancient, human, personal ‘Hear, O Israel! the Lord thy God is one Lord’?”

“Much more like ‘The Something our Nothing is one Something.’”

“May we not suspect, then, that his notion of the ‘Unity of the Deity’ does not quite coincide with the foundation already laid, whosoever else may?”

“You are assuming rather hastily.”

“Perhaps I may prove also, some day or other. Do you think, moreover, that the theory which he so boldly started, when his nerves and his manners were relieved from the unwonted pressure by Lady Jane and the ladies going upstairs, was part of the same old foundation?”

“Which, then?”

“That, if a man does but believe a thing, he has a right to speak it and act on it, right or wrong.

Have you forgotten his vindication of your friend, the radical voter, and his ‘spirit of truth’?”

“What, the worthy who, when I canvassed him as the Liberal candidate for —, and promised to support complete freedom of religious opinion, tested me by breaking out into such blasphemous ribaldry as made me run out of the house, and then went and voted against me as a bigot?”

“I mean him, of course. The Professor really seemed to admire the man, as a more brave and conscientious hero than himself. I am not squeamish, as you know; but I am afraid that I was quite rude to him when he went as far as that.”

“What—when you told him that you thought that, after all, the old theory of the Divine Right of Kings was as plausible as the new theory of the Divine Right of Blasphemy? My dear fellow, do not fret yourself on that point. He seemed to take it rather as a compliment to his own audacity, and whispered to me that ‘The Divine Right of Blasphemy’ was an expression of which Theodore Parker himself need not have been ashamed.”

“He was pleased to be complimentary. But, tell me, what was it in his oratory which has so vexed the soul of the country squire?”

“That very argument of his, among many things. I saw, or rather felt, that he was wrong; and yet, as I have said already, I could not answer him; and, had he not been my guest, should have got thoroughly cross with him, as a pis-aller.”

“I saw it. But, my friend, used we not to read Plato together, and enjoy him together, in old Cambridge days? Do you not think that Socrates might at all events have driven the Professor into a corner?”

“He might: but I cannot. Is that, then, what you were writing about all last night?”

“It was. I could not help, when I went out on the terrace to smoke my last cigar, fancying to myself how Socrates might have seemed to set you, and the Professor, and that warm-hearted, right-

headed, wrong-tongued High-Church Curate, all together by the ears, and made confusion worse confounded for the time being, and yet have left for each of you some hint whereby you might see the darling truth for which you were barking, all the more clearly in the light of the one which you were howling down.”

“And so you sat up, and—I thought the corridor smelt somewhat of smoke.”

“Forgive, and I will confess. I wrote a dialogue;—and here it is, if you choose to hear it. If there are a few passages, or even many, which Plato would not have written, you will consider my age and inexperience, and forgive.”

“My dear fellow, you forget that I, like you, have been ten years away from dear old Alma-Mater, Plato, the boats, and Potton Wood. My authorities now are ‘Morton on Soils’ and ‘Miles on the Horse’s Foot.’ Read on, fearless of my criticisms. Here is the waterfall; we will settle ourselves on Jane’s favourite seat. You shall discourse, and I, till Lewis brings the luncheon, will smoke my cigar; and if I seem to be looking at the mountain, don’t fancy that I am only counting how many young grouse those heath-burning worthies will have left me by the twelfth.”

So we sat down, and I began:

PHAETHON

Alcibiades and I walked into the Pnyx early the other morning, before the people assembled. There we saw Socrates standing, having his face turned toward the rising sun. Approaching him, we perceived that he was praying; and that so ardently, that we touched him on the shoulder before he became aware of our presence.

“You seem like a man filled with the God, Socrates,” said Alcibiades.

“Would that were true,” answered he, “both of me and of all who will counsel here this day.

In fact, I was praying for that very thing; namely, that they might have light to see the truth, in whatsoever matter might be discussed here.”

“And for me also?” said Alcibiades; “but I have prepared my speech already.”

“And for you also, if you desire it—even though some of your periods should be spoiled thereby.

But why are you both here so early, before any business is stirring?”

“We were discussing,” said I, “that very thing for which we found you praying—namely, truth, and what it might be.”

“Perhaps you went a worse way toward discovering it than I did. But let us hear. Whence did the discussion arise?”

“From something,” said Alcibiades, “which Protagoras said in his lecture yesterday—How truth was what each man troweth, or believeth, to be true. ‘So that,’ he said, ‘one thing is true to me, if I believe it true, and another opposite thing to you, if you believe that opposite. For,’ continued he, ‘there is an objective and a subjective truth; the former, doubtless, one and absolute, and contained in the nature of each thing; but the other manifold and relative, varying with the faculties of each perceiver thereof.’ But as each man’s faculties, he said, were different from his neighbour’s, and all more or less imperfect, it was impossible that the absolute objective truth of anything could be seen by any mortal, but only some partial approximation, and, as it were, sketch of it, according as the object was represented with more or less refraction on the mirror of his subjectivity. And therefore, as the true inquirer deals only with the possible, and lets the impossible go, it was the business of the wise man, shunning the search after absolute truth as an impious attempt of the Titans to scale Olympus, to busy himself humbly and practically with subjective truth, and with those methods—rhetoric, for instance—by which he can make the subjective opinions of others either similar to his own, or, leaving them as they are—for it may be very often unnecessary to change them—useful to his own ends.”

Then Socrates, laughing:

“My fine fellow, you will have made more than one oration in the Pnyx to-day. And indeed, I myself felt quite exalted, and rapt aloft, like Bellerophon on Pegasus, upon the eloquence of Protagoras and you. But yet forgive me this one thing; for my mother bare me, as you know, a man-midwife, after her own trade, and not a sage.”

ALCIBIADES. “What then?”

SOCRATES. “This, my astonishing friend—for really I am altogether astonished and struck dumb, as I always am whensoever I hear a brilliant talker like you discourse concerning objectivities and subjectivities, and such mysterious words; at such moments I am like an old war-horse, who, though he will rush on levelled lances, shudders and sweats with terror at a boy rattling pebbles in a bladder; and I feel altogether dizzy, and dread lest I should suffer some such transformation as Scylla, when I hear awful words, like incantations, pronounced over me, of which I, being no sage, understand nothing. But tell me now, Alcibiades, did the opinion of Protagoras altogether please you?”

A. “Why not? Is it not certain that two equally honest men may differ in their opinions on the same matter?”

S. “Undeniable.”

A. “But if each is equally sincere in speaking what he believes, is not each equally moved by the spirit of truth?”

S. “You seem to have been lately initiated, and that not at Eleusis merely, nor in the Cabiria, but rather in some Persian or Babylonian mysteries, when you discourse thus of spirits. But you, Phaethon” (turning to me), “how did you like the periods of Protagoras?”

“Do not ask me, Socrates,” said I, “for indeed we have fought a weary battle together ever since sundown last night, and all that I had to say I learnt from you.”

S. “From me, good fellow?”

PHAETHON. “Yes, indeed. I seemed to have heard from you that truth is simply ‘facts as they are.’ But when I urged this on Alcibiades, his arguments seemed superior to mine.”

A. “But I have been telling him, drunk and sober, that it is my opinion also as to what truth is. Only I, with Protagoras, distinguish between objective fact and subjective opinion.”

S. “Doing rightly, too, fair youth. But how comes it then that you and Phaethon cannot agree?”

“That,” said I, “you know better than either of us.”

“You seem both of you,” said Socrates, “to be, as usual, in the family way. Shall I exercise my profession on you?”

“No, by Zeus!” answered Alcibiades, laughing; “I fear thee, thou juggler, lest I suffer once again the same fate with the woman in the myth, and after I have conceived a fair man-child, and, as I fancy, brought it forth; thou hold up to the people some dead puppy, or log, or what not, and cry: ‘Look what Alcibiades has produced!’”

S. “But, beautiful youth, before I can do that, you will have spoken your oration on the bema, and all the people will be ready and able to say ‘Absurd! Nothing but what is fair can come from so fair a body.’ Come, let us consider the question together.”

I assented willingly; and Alcibiades, mincing and pouting, after his fashion, still was loath to refuse.

S. “Let us see, then. Alcibiades distinguishes, he says, between objective fact and subjective opinion?”

A. “Of course I do.”

S. “But not, I presume, between objective truth and subjective truth, whereof Protagoras spoke?”

A. “What trap are you laying now? I distinguish between them also, of course.”

S. “Tell me, then, dear youth, of your indulgence, what they are; for I am shamefully ignorant on the matter.”

A. “Why, do they not call a thing objectively true, when it is true absolutely in itself; but subjectively true, when it is true in the belief of a particular person?”

S. “—Though not necessarily true objectively, that is, absolutely and in itself?”

A. “No.”

S. “But possibly true so?”

A. “Of course.”

S. “Now, tell me—a thing is objectively true, is it not, when it is a fact as it is?”

A. “Yes.”

S. “And when it is a fact as it is not, it is objectively false; for such a fact would not be true absolutely, and in itself, would it?”

A. “Of course not.”

S. “Such a fact would be, therefore, no fact, and nothing.”

A. “Why so?”

S. “Because, if a thing exists, it can only exist as it is, not as it is not; at least my opinion inclines that way.”

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