

A. J. Hartley

CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM AND VICTORIAN MORALITY: THE INNER MEANING OF *TOM BROWN'S SCHOOL-DAYS*

THE STATEMENT that the three themes threading *Tom Brown's School-days* are "cruelty, conformity, and homosexuality" is, at best, but a part of the truth¹. These aspects of life are used merely to enforce a general thesis that only action which is right and good in itself can make and maintain the kind of polity that renders "living" tolerable. To elevate these aspects into thematic prominence is to ignore the historical context of the novel and to misunderstand Hughes's aim in writing it. There are, moreover, other aspects falling within the scope of the novel. Education, for example, might be examined with profit, as might the nineteenth-century attitude to discipline. Sportsmanship is also a big question. A discussion of the three aspects already mentioned will suffice, however, to illustrate the social nature of the work, and thus to clarify Hughes's aim.

Since its appearance in 1857, *Tom Brown's School-days* has been universally acclaimed as one of the best novels of its kind in the language. It owes much of its popularity to the author's realistic treatment of his school-boy experiences, which are none the less coloured by recollection and heightened by imagination. An artistic creation that lives from generation to generation, *Tom Brown* portrays life in an English public school, immortalizes the school-boy, and provides as well an enduring monument to Dr. Arnold and Rugby School.

Above all, however, *Tom Brown* is a social document depicting a polity in miniature as a model for national society. Hughes makes the aim of his book abundantly clear. In the first edition of his novel he quotes from the *Rugby Magazine*: "As on the one hand it should ever be remembered that we are boys, and boys at school, so on the other hand we must bear in mind that we form a complete social body . . . a society, in which, by the nature of the case, we must not only learn, but act and live; and act and live not only as boys, but as boys who will be men."² Learning is important, but secondary. Acting and living are of the first consequence: as boys act and live, so will act and live the men they become, and even such will society be.

Hughes announces that, like Thackeray, he is writing of "the Brown family" (the middle classes) and that he, Thomas Hughes, is "a devout Brown-worshipper". In Chapter II he refers to *Yeast* (1848), a work known to every one at the time for its radical sympathy with working-men; and, like Kingsley, Hughes deploras the "separation of classes consequent on twenty years of buying cheap and selling dear". He frankly longs for the social unity of "old England" when "gentlefolk and farmers" were mindful of "the poor", and cricket merged "the individual in the eleven" so that they—not he—may win. The whole book breathes corporate activity, depicting relationships of boys with boys, and boys with masters. Social behaviour is the theme throughout and "the little School world" is presented as a parallel of "the big world" around it.

A critic looking at *Tom Brown* must assume Thomas Hughes to have said what he meant, and to have meant what he said. Any other assumption inevitably falls into the kind of prejudice that bedevilled much criticism in the nineteenth century, against which F. D. Maurice (1805-72) constantly fulminated. The mentor of Hughes, Maurice took the general spirit of a work as an objective starting-point for valid criticism, and we can do no less. Hughes must be allowed to speak for himself, and he has a right to be heard on his own ground.

On April 10, 1848, when Chartism merged with Christian Socialism, Maurice and his enthusiastic young men who had gathered round him espoused the cause of the less fortunate members of the Brown family. As a clergyman, Maurice had renounced church "systems" for Christianity and was eager to affirm selflessness, co-operation, and brotherly love in pulpit and market-place alike.

The Christian Socialists, as the group called themselves, determined to make Christianity a reality among the "Browns", first, by rousing the more fortunate to accept their responsibility to poorer members of the family and secondly, by encouraging associations of working Browns who might share the profits of their corporate activity. A parent association of journeymen tailors was set up as a model, and other associations followed. Optimistically, Hughes and his friends thought their scheme would "usher in the millennium".³

Ideally, the plan was laudable and the Christian Socialists struggled valiantly to make it work. All gave a great deal of time and some of them, like Vansittart Neale, spent large sums of money to make the associations a success. In so novel a situation, however, self-interest asserted itself and

marred the thought of workers who had for too long had too little. It was soon evident that they were morally incapable of managing themselves. Local directors lacked the integrity to direct, and weak treasurers absconded with money entrusted to them for operational needs. By 1854, the most optimistic Christian Socialist had concluded that, for the Browns, education must precede self-government.

For a start, this social-minded band set up a night-school in Little Ormond Yard in central London. The neighbourhood was so disorderly that no policeman went there unaccompanied at night. The school, inaugurated to soften hard men, had its effect and slowly attracted local youth as well. Maurice's men took turns at teaching them.

A young lawyer, Hughes expressed sympathy with the efforts being made, and Maurice immediately recruited his help. Hughes began to attend meetings with the hope of converting Chartists into Christian Socialists. As a former pupil of Dr. Arnold, he was vigorously loyal to the Establishment and, in addition to helping Chartists, he was able in due course to give Parliament reliable information about the deplorable conditions in which workers were living. With Maurice and others he toured Lancashire, recommending co-operative societies; and in partnership with Vansittart Neale he accepted the trusteeship of the Central Co-operative Agency which the Christian Socialists had set up for the guidance of local associations. Later on, he edited the *Journal of Association* (1852), and his deepening interest in social welfare eventually took him to Parliament in 1865 as member for Lambeth.⁴

When the emphasis shifted to education, Maurice urged the value of writing as well as teaching. By teaching he and his men could reach the workers, but by writing they hoped to stimulate the better sort of Browns to action. As the chief interpreter of Maurice's social philosophy, Charles Kingsley dashed off *Yeast*, and this was followed by *Alton Locke* (1850), a novel of considerable power in exposing social conditions among the workers.

With a similar aim and the happy coincidence of his thoughts on education and Christian Socialism, Hughes found his pen. Considering what to tell his son before sending him to school, he "took to writing a story."⁵ With his attention thus focussed on Rugby, he saw "the Doctor as a ruler" and the school as the only "corner of the British Empire" that was "wisely and strongly ruled". Why not model the nation's polity on that of the school? Hughes thought the idea a good one and *Tom Brown's School-days* is his defence.

A complete society comprises elements both good and evil, but society

can be maintained as long as good holds evil in check. When evil is in the ascendant, however, social relationships deteriorate and the organism declines. Society develops, therefore, when the higher human instincts are cultivated in accord with reason, man's "inborn sense of right", and his conscience.

Once the human condition is accepted, cruelty, conformity, and homosexuality are as likely to exist as kindness, non-conformity, and heterosexuality. These modes of behaviour, like all others, may raise vast issues in the body politic for they are all equivocal. Kindness may kill the cat and evil, like good, is inherent less in modes themselves than in human responses to them. Choice is inevitable. The affairs of life must be controlled by action based on right reason and this, though incumbent upon the collective social body, is ultimately individual and particular.

In the school world of Tom Brown, a *complete social body*, Hughes portrays "the evil with the good". He also shows how either the one or the other of these elements is manifested by the response each character makes in a particular situation. Behaviour is character and behaviour involves relationships. Tom's microcosmic world is thus essentially identical with the national one it aims to instruct. Moreover, as society itself depends ultimately upon personal response, so Hughes in a public document relies upon each reader to distinguish good from bad, the desirable from the undesirable. Simply as human beings, readers will sympathize with and hope for the success of right action which, in the nature of things, will aid the cause of the commonwealth.

"The chapel" and "the place for fights" behind it are among the first spots that East shows Tom. Clearly, these indicate the alpha and omega of school life. There is a good deal of fighting in *Tom Brown*, and Hughes insists how very human it is. Fighting finds its source in selfishness—in jealousy and greed, tyranny and cowardice. It divides and destroys society. It is all too easy for a man to pamper the beast in him but, ideally, civilized people do not fight: "Now remember", the Doctor warns Brooke, "this fight is not to go on."

Paradoxically, however, fighting may be "a proof of the highest courage". Every man's "inborn sense of right" demands that he choose and uphold it, for justice must prevail. "In every society, however seemingly corrupt and godless", Hughes writes, "there are those who have not bowed the knee to Baal." For them, life itself is "a battlefield ordained from of old". Staunchly fighting for causes, men in the nineteenth century "dutifully" fought the "good fight" to the tune of *Onward Christian Soldiers*, and Hughes invariably catches the spirit of his generation—one, it may be argued, not wholly bad for the world.

Fighting of this kind is not cruel, for cruelty is an attribute of the "real bully": "it's no fun to him when no one is hurt or frightened". Tom's "roasting" illustrates the point. Hughes does not dwell upon Tom's courage in opposing Flashman. Rather, he shows us that Tom, who "turns deadly pale" over the fire, prefers burning to submission and cowardice. Manliness⁶—moral courage and strength in suffering pain—is uppermost in his nature, and while Hughes does not labour the fact that this is the stuff that heroes are made of, he none the less leaves no doubt in the reader's mind about the nature of cruelty: "You cowardly brutes!" cries East, as he returns to save the fainting Tom. Flashman and his friends "slink" away, one of them alone lingering long enough to ascertain that Tom has not "peached" on them. Hughes defines his contempt for cruelty and all it entails when Flashman's lingerer, returning to report, suddenly rises to his better self with the denunciation: "I'm sick of this work; what beasts we've been!" Coward and bully as he is, Flashman is ultimately despised by his own followers: his group disintegrating, he is unable to form a society, not even a bad one.

Conformity is a necessary and valid feature of society. Coherent language arises with nationhood, and nationals may be regarded as conforming linguistically. A similar kind of conformity attains in religious sentiment and practice, in national attitudes, and in habits of daily life. East's insistence upon Tom's exchanging his cap for "a regulation catskin" before introducing him to the school is meant as an outward and visible sign of their conformity to their world and it betokens Tom's acquiescence in it.

But it follows that though, ideally, the individual works within the group for the good of all, independence of thought and action are needed for balance. In a complete society, conformity is neither slavish nor blind and there is plenty of nonconformity in *Tom Brown*. Diggs, "the Mucker", is "equally indifferent to the sneers of big boys and the pity of small ones, and [lives] his own queer life with much apparent enjoyment to himself". In their refusal to conform to the fagging demand by fifth-form boys, Tom and East precipitate a "war of independence"; and for all his frailty, George Arthur acts out of all conformity with the habit of the dormitory when, before going to bed, he kneels down openly to say his prayers.

Hughes's point is well taken. Action which represents "whatever is true, and manly, and lovely, and of good report", action which stems courageously from a sense of duty performed in the teeth of opposition brings justice in its train, ennobling and uplifting the entire social body. Arthur's noncon-

formity helps Tom to conformity, and thus to a fuller life. Having conquered "his own coward spirit", he can now conquer "the whole outward world".

As to homosexuality, the "white-handed, curly-headed" boy seized by East may be regarded as having, among other social maladjustments, that of sexual perversion. This is the more probable since Hughes describes him as "petted and pampered", and explains that some of "the big fellows did all they could to spoil [him] for everything in this world and the next." As author, Hughes reinforces his statement in a footnote in which he refuses, honestly, to "strike out the passage" merely because "a wise critic, an old Rugbeian" has suggested that he soften the accusation.

Nor does this mean that Hughes condones homosexuality. Despite his slender paleness, Arthur is not effeminate. In "The New Boy" (II, 2) Arthur is deliberately contrasted with "the pretty little dear" so that East—and readers—cannot reasonably doubt the nobility of the growing friendship between Arthur and Tom. Arthur has "pluck", and in Tom's eyes that is "the only thing . . . that'll wash". East wants to put "the pretty little dear" in a museum where "he'd make a respectable public open its eyes", while Tom designates him the "worst sort [they] breed". Arthur, on the other hand, though "all over nerves" and deeply sensitive, is "a thorough little gentleman". In any case unmanliness is the last thing Hughes wishes to countenance in *Tom Brown*.

Propounding Christian Socialism, Hughes wishes to expose forthrightly, not only perversions, but also the susceptibilities of boys in the school world. He is pleading for private conscience and independent action as necessary elements in the building of character. Society, Hughes insists, begins with the individual and thrives in action manifesting itself in right relationships. He continually preaches co-operation and brotherly love, but whatever the love between homosexuals may be, brotherly it is not. Here more than anywhere, perhaps, the line between good and evil is delicately drawn, and so easily crossed as to be a subtle, but vital test of character.

East's first impression is that Arthur will "spoil", but Hughes draws him as the kind of boy who, though physically weak, possesses great strength of mind and will. Arthur's manliness is the most convincing aspect of his portrayal, and long before the close of the novel he is seen to be "less of a boy in fact than Tom". Structurally, Hughes uses Arthur, first, for the purpose of contrasting manliness with effeminacy but, secondly and more importantly, for the development of his hero.

The Doctor also plays a vital part in Tom's development. A father-

figure in the background, the Doctor, who has found the school in "a state of monstrous licence", is devoting his energies to "setting up order". He aims to make "good future citizens". Tom had always been conscious of the Doctor's "fighting" for his boys, and of his feeling that they, in turn, ought "to help him" and "one another". He had first "feared", then "respected" him; but not until he is leaving the school world does Tom realize how much he owes the Doctor who, with Arthur, had helped him at the turning-point in his career.

Tom had been "chucked" into school "like a young bear". He was expected to leave it "a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman". He was to go out into the world as "a gentleman and a Christian". Half way through the novel, however, his condition is critical. He and East have consistently contravened the "rules" which had been set for "the good of the whole school". As seniors they have "influence", but not of a kind to please the Doctor. As Part I ends, Tom and East are under a threat of dismissal.

Tom needs help and so does East. The "delicate" Arthur has needs too, but how different from Tom's! Can they not help each other? And the Doctor, and the School? The "great and wise and good man" had thought so, and he meant to find out.

He deliberately precipitates Tom's crisis. It is high time the "reckless young scapegrace" exchanged his boyish pleasures for those of responsible citizenship: "Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,/In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side." But the Doctor cannot work alone; Tom's warm human heart must meet his in a co-operative effort of association to help Arthur. "Come along, young 'un", Tom says, finally. Under the aegis of the Doctor he feels himself on "a higher social and moral platform at once". Hughes believes with Arnold and Tennyson that "men may rise on stepping-stones/Of their dead selves to higher things", and Tom Brown does so. He lends a brotherly hand and this is Christian Socialism.

Hughes strengthens his theme. Arthur has been instructed at home by his father, a clergyman with a "wholesome Christian love" for "poor struggling sinning men, of whom he felt himself one and with and for whom he spent fortune, and strength, and life". He has been trained by a veritable Christian Socialist. In Arthur unite the "little School world" and "the big world" of the Christian Socialists.

As in the school world, so in the big world each man has his place; and the "bond" linking "all living souls together in one brotherhood" transcends even as it secures that place. Like the Browns at school, the Browns in the

world must labour, not for themselves alone, but for "their fellow-men, their country, and their God". Thomas Hughes has translated into art for life the cardinal theme of Christian Socialism, a theme vital to a commonwealth at all times, and never more so than now. *Tom Brown's School-days* is perhaps the most important document in Christian Socialist literature.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Allsop, "A Coupon for Instant Tradition", *Encounter* (Nov., 1965), 60-3. For A. L. LeQuesne's letter on this article see *Encounter* (June, 1966), 93-4.
2. An Old Boy, *Tom Brown's School Days* (Macmillan, 1857), title page.
3. Thomas Hughes, *Memoir of a Brother* (1873), p. 111.
4. For the background of Christian Social Associations, see *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, ed. Fred. Maurice (2 vols., 1884).
5. E. C. Mack and W. A. G. Armytage, *Thomas Hughes* (1952), p. 86.
6. David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning* (1961), p. 197.

O INDIA, LOVE OF MY YOUTH

Joseph Di Profio

The first of the dark-skinned peoples
to rid itself of the bars of the Union Jack,
not through violence, but using passive resistance.
Gandhi, your Moses figure,
leading you to independence
filled my youth with dreams.

Today I read that another Gandhi
pays the poor \$3.60 to have themselves
sterilized.

At least the Nazis used clean force,
not bribery against starvation.

The headlines also shout that you are developing
a nuclear bomb
which will enable you to play at power politics.

O India, love of my youth
what does it feel like to have lost your virginity?