

Addison: An Architect of Public Opinion

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Abstract

Addison was the real spokesman of the age in which he lived. Regarding the real worth of Addison as spokesman of public opinion in the 18th century. The main aim of Addison as a writer was to amuse the readers and to improve and correct the social vices of the age through his essays. Addison performed his task through his periodical essays. The periodical essays had a great attraction for the reading public. *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were very popular among those periodical essays. The great work of Addison was a work of a civilization through conciliation. He followed a middle path for the reformation of manners of the society.

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Addison was the real spokesman of the age in which he lived. Regarding the real worth of Addison as spokesman of public opinion in the 18th century Courthope opines:

“To estimate Addison as his real value we must regard him as the chief architect of public opinion in the eighteenth century”.¹

As Addison was closely related with the age “it is necessary to study the work of Joseph Addison in close relation to the time in which he lived. For he was a true child to his century. And even in his most distinguishing qualities he was not so much in opposition to its ideas as in advance of them.”²

The main aim of Addison as a writer was to amuse the readers and to improve and correct the social vices of the age through his essays. It was also his task to refine the taste of his contemporaries and to widen their outlooks. In this context we may quote O.M. Myers said:

“It was Addison’s task to refine the taste of his contemporaries and to widen their

outlook, so that common ground on which to meet and to learn each from the other; it was his endeavour to enliven morality..... till I have recovered them out of that desperate state of vice and folly into which the age in fallen.”³

Thus, Addison performed his task through his periodical essays. The periodical essays had a great attraction for the reading public. *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were very popular among those periodical essays. It was because in the best papers of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* one finds a faithful and well composed portrait of the age and vivid description of everyday life. Through his papers, Addison undertook a serious task to educate and to amuse the public. Regarding Addison’s task Courthope’s observation is noteworthy:

“Addison in particular took seriously his task of educating the public in morality and criticism as well as amusing it by satire and portraiture. The fact that he could run eighteen

spectator papers on Milton and eleven
on the pleasures of the imagination
.....”⁴

Addison effectively pooled his talent to achieve extra ordinary success in endeavor “to enliven morality with wit and to temper wit with morality.”¹ His aim was frankly educational. He wrote about his aim in the tenth spectator:

“....And to the end that their virtue and discretion may not be short, transient, intermittent starts of thought I have resolved to refresh their memories from day to day till I have recovered them out of the desperate state of vice and folly into which the age is fallen.”⁵

He added:

“I shall be ambitious to have it said of me that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses.”⁶

This was a moral educational programme for post-Restoration English society, particularly for the rich classes and the rising middle classes in general.

A great deal was done by Addison to make society better; and he was loved by society for it. A great deal of learning was imparted by him, but he was never pedantic. All the scheme such as the philosophic thought, the description, the character. And so on, which the earlier essayist had taught him, were used by him. He brought philosophic thoughts close to the life that everyone knew. He also enlarged the imagination. The range covered by him is immense. Telling

about the immensity of his writings, Bonamy Dobree says:

“The range covered is amazing from hen-pecked husbands to idolatory, from a grinning-match to the sublimities from French frivolity to the meaning of tragedy. There were allegories and stories, descriptions of people, imaginary letters, discussions of the ballads, wit enlivened morality and gentle satire gave a spice to serious reproof.”⁷

Bonamy Dobree further says that one finds something about his essays which attracts one as one read them, and “this something is the valiant attempt to see all behaviour as a whole to make man into a civilized creature.”

In this way Addison was remarkable for his literary innovation as well as being a successful moral. Jeremy Cellier had made the stage free from immorality to some extent, but it was Addison who purified the taste and morals in which the evil traditions of Charles II’s court still continued. Arguing the importance which Addison observes in having created a sound public opinion on matters of social significance, Macaulay says:

“To Addison, therefore, belongs, the chief credit for having created a sound public opinion on matters of taste, morals, and religion. To him especially we owe if that impiety and profligacy, rowdiness and ignorance, ceased to be considered the natural and proper characteristics of a gentleman; that the name of God was restored to, veneration, the institution of marriage and the dignity of home to

respect, and the greatest literary glories of the English people to their rightful heritage of love and honour.”⁸

The great work of Addison was a work of a civilization through conciliation. He followed a middle path for the reformation of manners of the society. The following passage well illustrates the point:

It is fact that the licentiousness of the Restoration had been cleared away at the time of the appearance of ‘The Tatler’. Yet there still existed in the public mind a bad notion that there was some connection between genius and profligacy, between the domestic virtues and the sullen formality of the puritans. That sullen formality of the puritans.

Addison wrote on the subjects concerned with the daily life of the people. He touched upon the small things of life which were of interest to the people in general:

“But to consider this subject in its most ridiculous lights, advertisements are of great use to the vulgar:”⁹

We know that the periodicals which Addison wrote were the result of the joint effort of both Addison and his friends Steele. They wrote most of them in collaboration. It is also to be noted that they wrote with the some motives to reforms the society. So while discussion Addison as a satirist and minor moralist we must take in account Steele’s contributions to the same. Addison’s friend Steele also attacked the vices of the society. He attacked the fashionable evil of gambling. The practice of dueling was also criticized by him. In this regard courtptphone’s opinion is noteworthy:

“Steele attacked with all the vigour of which he was capable the fashionable vice of gambling. So severe were his comments on the subject in ‘The Tatler’ that: he raised.”¹⁰

In ‘The Tatler’, the folly of the woman was exposed. The women readers waited impatiently for sicker staff’s next number. In this context the following passage may be quoted:

“One of the follies being exposed at the moment in ‘The Tatler’ was the folly of woman milling into the old Baily to hear cases for rape. Steele disapproved, not because this stampede showed fainted mind, but because woman were powerless.”

Thus a very great portion of the papers in ‘The Tatler’ are devoted to the service of fair sex. A Chalmers says in his preface to the British Essayists:

“Our Essayists would naturally avail themselves of incidents like this, which everyday produced, which generally made public and which were afforded so happy a mixture of the serious Jowse, exhibited such a variety of characteristics foibles.

A very great portion of the ‘Spectator’ too is devoted to reflections on the manners of women. ‘Addison saw clearly’, says Mr. Courthope: “how important a part the female-sex destined to play in the formation of English taste and manners. Removed from the pedestal of enthusiastic devotion on which they had been placed curing the feudal ages, women

were treated under the restoration as mere playthings and luxuries. As manners become more decent they found themselves secured in their emancipated position, but destitute of serious and rational employment, it was Addison's object, therefore, enlist an aid of female genius in softening, refraining and moderating the gross and conflicting taste of a half-civilized society."

Telling about the usefulness of the papers in 'The spectator', Addison

says: "There are none to whom this paper will be more useful than to the female world. I have often thought these have not been sufficient, pains taken in finding out proper Employments and Diversions for the Fair ones."

The satire in 'The spectator' was mild. So the mild and social character of 'the spectator' satire did not commend itself to some of the vigorous spirits of the age. It was too feminine for Swift.

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