

CRABTREE AND THE SAGE OF PITTENWEEM

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In reviewing the state and needs of Crabtree studies, I came to the conclusion that much remained to be discovered about those crucial years in the seventeen-nineties after Crabtree had made that memorable decision to abandon Annette and their unborn child and to allow Wordsworth to pose as the child's father. Guided by some of my colleagues in the Department of French at King's College, I read various autobiographies and memoirs covering the seventeen-nineties. I found that one of these works was worthy of particularly close scrutiny. It is *Les Mémoires de la Comtesse de la Blague*, published in a chastely illustrated edition by the Dockyard Press, Marseilles, in 1797. Some of the Comtesse's most lively recollections concern an Englishman with whom she had an interesting encounter at Carcassonne in the summer of 1792. This Englishman had little knowledge of French, a great liking for dogs, and a solemn, even disconsolate demeanour. The Comtesse vividly illustrates these characteristics in an anecdote which bears the marginal gloss, 'Le fond du caractère anglais, c'est l'absence de Bonheur'. The Englishman, she tells us, had with him a greyhound, a female of the species, and was anxious to perpetuate the stock by finding a suitable mate for her. On being informed that the Comtesse possessed a male of the species, he decided to ask for the loan of this animal, and went to some pains to learn sufficient French to make his needs clear to her. After being presented to the Comtesse by a mutual friend, he blushing asked her, 'Voudriez-vous Comtesse, me prêter votre chien pour — pour couvrir ma chienne?' The Comtesse graciously assented; her dog was borrowed and duly returned. Shortly afterwards, on a particularly hot afternoon, the Englishman encountered her in the great square of Carcassonne, and, removing his hat and sweating profusely, he thanked her in his halting French for the loan of her dog. Sorry to see him bareheaded and sweating so profusely on so hot a day, the Comtesse said, 'Mais, monsieur, couvrez-vous!' To the Englishman, however, 'couvrez' had only one meaning, and, after a few seconds' hesitation, he stammered out the words, 'Oui, Comtesse, de temps en temps' and then, with a deeply dejected air, stumbled across the square and out of sight, leaving the Comtesse, to use her own words, 'très curieuse et un peu piquée'. The question at once presents itself, gentlemen: was this Englishman Crabtree? And have we here a vital illustration of his ambivalent state of mind after departing from Orléans and Annette: interested on the one hand in dog-breeding, exhibiting on the other hand every sign of a guilt-complex when obliged to use the vocabulary which that interest made necessary? There is certainly an impressive array of evidence to support this inference. We know that Crabtree was in France at this time; we know that his knowledge of French was almost non-existent; we know of the emotional crisis which caused him to surrender Annette to William Wordsworth; and we know, too, from Wordsworth's cancelled lines in *The Leechgatherer* Ms, which describe Crabtree 'wrapt in glory and in joy, casting his fly along the riverside', that Crabtree was addicted to field sports. To clinch the matter, only one more item of evidence seemed necessary: was Crabtree a dog-lover and interested in greyhound-breeding during the early seventeen-nineties?

Revolving this problem in my mind, I made my way last summer to St. Andrews, that ancient university town in the ancient Kingdom of Fife. Here I heard news that at once aroused my curiosity. I was informed that the Fulbright Visiting Professor was Kemper T. Guggenheim of the University of Western Nevada, Reno, Nevada; that he had come equipped with the full apparatus of literary research, including a portable model of the Shinman double-cross-referencing and back-dating machine; and that he had recently discovered important documents at Anstruther Braes, the ancestral home of the Anstruther family in the ancient and picturesque village of Pittenweem. With mounting excitement, I tried to recall where I had last heard the name Kemper T. Guggenheim, and suddenly it flashed upon me. It was in 1954 that Sutherland drew our attention to Guggenheim, the American scholar who was seeking the Ms of Crabtree's *Ars Salutandi*. Half hoping (and half feeling) that Professor Guggenheim had at last salvaged the *Ars Salutandi* from oblivion, I at once sought him out and explained to him my special interest in Crabtree. Regretfully, Professor Guggenheim told me that he had not yet found the *Ars Salutandi*, but, with a voice tremulous with joy, he informed me that his Pittenweem discovery did prove beyond doubt that Joseph Crabtree had been in Scotland and had spent a week at Anstruther Braes. You can well imagine, gentlemen, the gratitude with which I received this precious piece of information, and the alacrity with which I began to subject it to some of those disciplines which have made modern criticism — what it is.

For instance, as I pondered over this northern peregrination of Crabtree's, it struck me how many significant literary precedents, parallels and analogues there were for it. Ben Jonson had crossed the border to converse learnedly and scandalously with Drummond of Hawthornden; Doctor Johnson had been pleased to inspect some of the Western Isles with Boswell at his elbow; Wordsworth and Coleridge had sauntered in the Lowlands,

keeping Dorothy Wordsworth two or three miles in front of them to make sure that board, lodging, warming-pans and other necessities of the poetic life were available for them at the end of the day. Not long afterwards Keats had followed a similar route. As these recollections multiplied, there rose before me the idea of Scotland as an archetype fit to engage the intellect of a Carl Jung or even a Maud Bodlia: an archetype of fabulous rest, recreation, spiritual and spirituous refreshments. Just as the ancients had their Elysium, the Middle Ages its Land of Cockaigne, the Renaissance its Utopia, the twentieth century its Shangri La, so, perhaps, Joseph Crabtree had his Pittenweem.

I asked Professor Guggenheim upon what proofs he based the remarkable statement that he had just given me. He answered me in detail. Ever since an important Ms by Boswell had been found in a stable, he told me, he had felt that it was his duty as a scholar not only to investigate the libraries of great houses but to explore every nook and cranny of the lesser buildings attached to them, no matter how humble or utilitarian they might be. So it was that he had found, in what must euphemistically be described as one of the outhouses of Anstruther Braes, the notebooks of Hamish Anstruther, the sage and scholar who dominated the intellectual life of Pittenweem during the last four decades of the eighteenth century. These notebooks contain precious references to Crabtree's visit to Pittenweem and invaluable quotations from his conversation with Anstruther. The dating of those portions of the Ms referring to Crabtree had been established with infallible accuracy by one of the rarest and most fascinating creatures of modern science. At this point, with a dramatic gesture, Professor Guggenheim drew aside a plastic cover and revealed to me The Shinman double-cross-referencing and back-dating machine in all its nickel-plated splendour. With its four strong legs, its unblinking dials, its apertures and orifices of various shapes and sizes, and its numerous coloured push-buttons, the machine epitomized precision and efficiency. From a large blot on Anstruther's manuscript Professor Guggenheim had removed a spicule of ink and paper and had fed it into the appropriate aperture at the back-dating end of the machine. Here the spicule was dehydrated, emulsified, and eventually broken down into atoms of ink and paper. These atoms were then subjected to a process of electronic radiation which was focussed upon the appropriate dials of the machine. While these complex operations were going on, Professor Guggenheim withdrew to England for the weekend in case the apparatus exploded. He returned on the Monday and scrutinised the dials above the back-dating aperture. They revealed that Anstruther's paper had been manufactured in 1790 and that the ink of his record of Crabtree had dried on August 28th 1793.

As you will appreciate, gentlemen, this revelation of the precise date of Crabtree's visit to Pittenweem obliged me to abandon, with some regret, my archetypal interpretation of Crabtree's visit to Scotland. In 1793, the storm and stress of his parting from Annette were too recent to allow this happy interpretation to be sustained; indeed, we must now be on our guard against those malicious critics who will claim that Crabtree's visit to Scotland was a flight, not a quest; that his motives were utilitarian, not recreational; that he secretly fled from France to Scotland because of a gnawing fear that Wordsworth and Annette might break off the excellent arrangement to which they had consented and leave Crabtree holding the baby. The mind and motives of Crabtree are not to be interpreted in so crude a fashion as this, as his conversations with Anstruther amply demonstrate. Before discussing these conversations, however, I must say something about the character and literary activities of Crabtree's host, Hamish Auchtermuchty Anstruther. During the last forty years of the eighteenth century, no sojourn in Fifeshire was complete without a visit to Anstruther at his ancestral mansion in Pittenweem. Anstruther's literary fame would be even greater than it is, had it not been for his selfless devotion to the rehabilitation of the ancient Kingdom of Fife, and his refusal to write in any language except Faffans, Faffans being his name for the illustrious vernacular of Fife, which he had painstakingly compounded out of the many dialects of the region. Envious critics were in the habit of asserting that Anstruther was the only person in Fifeshire who could understand Faffans, but he invariably silenced them by quoting Dante's great dictum on the nature of the illustrious vernacular: 'its fragrance is everywhere, its home is nowhere'. Hamish was also the founder, the president, and the honorary secretary of the Pittenweem Folk-lore, Place-name, and Antiquarian Society. Many were the hours that he spent brooding over local tumuli, dolmens, barrows, brochs and cromlechs and over those tall, rough-hewn columns of granite, which, standing erect, impart a distinctive atmosphere and lend a masculine charm to the coastal plain of Fifeshire.

Several of these enthusiasms of Anstruther's figured prominently in his conversations with Crabtree. Professor Guggenheim is still hard at work transcribing the conversations and translating them from Faffans into English, but he has given me enough material to illuminate the state of Crabtree's mind and art in August 1793. Crabtree's despairing sonnet of 1790, 'When I consider how my strength is spent ...', makes clear what no literary critic worth his salt would hesitate to believe: that Crabtree's mind was then in a traumatic state induced by a conflict between his super-ego (dominated as it was by the impervious father-figure of his Methodist uncle) and a pro-filial psychosis generated by Annette's interesting condition. The 1793 conversations with Anstruther reveal a triumphant reassociation of Crabtree's sensibility, finding expression in a style very different from that

of 1790 and the 1780s. His *Ode to Claret*, written in the seventeen-eighties, that happy product of carefree hours in the cellar of his uncle's wine-shipping establishment in Orléans, is, you will remember, exquisitely Augustan in mood and technique; effortless in the care of its settled numbers, limpid and graceful in its personifications, elegant in its apostrophes, urbanely content to sing what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed. The conversations with Anstruther reveal a remarkable departure from these earlier themes and styles; a gnomic, teasing and allusive spirit now invests Crabtree's imagination; his imagery becomes ratiocinative, recondite, and witty; heterogeneous objects are yoked by violence together (here, no doubt, memories of Wordsworth and Annette are at work); and his sensibility begins to take an unprecedented delight in multiple levels of meaning, showing a strong preference for the first, the third, and the fifth of Professor Empson's seven types of ambiguity.

The transcriptions from the Anstruther papers which Professor Guggenheim has allowed me to study show that Crabtree's new mode of utterance sometimes caused moments of friction during his association with the sage of Pittenweem. There was the occasion, for instance, when they saw some of the happy peasantry of Pittenweem dancing down the main street of the village shortly after closing-time at the village dram-shop, and Hamish, in an access of patriotic zeal, indulgently described the spectacle as a 'Bacchic revel'. 'Sir,' said Crabtree, 'it is merely a considerable exuberance.' The Johnsonian overtones of this retort were not apparent to Anstruther and an uneasy silence ensued. On another occasion, Hamish drew Crabtree's attention to those tall rough-hewn columns which dot the landscape around Pittenweem and learnedly associated them with the male principle in the fertility rites of the ancient kingdom of Fife. 'Popular fallacies' was Crabtree's only rejoinder, and again Anstruther failed to discern the fifth type of ambiguity and dourly changed the subject. My next item from the Anstruther Papers has a special relevance to the episode from *Les Mémoires de la Comtesse de la Blague* which I recounted earlier this evening. One evening Anstruther outlined to Crabtree one of the main ideas advanced in a recently published treatise, Lord Monboddo's *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, namely, that the human race had evolved from the orangutan, and that monkeys of this superior species could play the flute, and, if necessary, could efficiently undertake the duties of cabin boys. It was typical of Crabtree's taste for saturnalian paradox at this time that he should have replied that he thought it more likely that the monkey evolved from the man than vice versa. What is more important, however, is that at this point in the papers Anstruther informs us that Crabtree had an inordinate affection for animals, and that he was constantly accompanied by two greyhounds, which (here I quote) 'he had bred in France and which he called Vaudracour and Julia'. Here, then, thanks indirectly to Lord Monboddo, we have a missing link which even he did not foresee — the last link in the chain of evidence which proves that it was none other than Joseph Crabtree who left the Comtesse de la Blague with such tantalizing memories of the hot summer at Carcassonne in 1792. The fact that Vaudracour and Julia are also the names of two characters in a somewhat sentimental narrative in Wordsworth's *Prelude* is also of some literary moment. The discovery of these names applied to greyhounds in the Anstruther papers will obviously make the psychoanalytic study of Wordsworth an even more hare-raising activity than it has been in the past.

Though there were occasions when the Sage of Pittenweem was ruffled by Crabtree's cryptic comments, he was mollified by Crabtree's keen interest in Faffans. It is clear that Crabtree listened attentively to Hamish's incessant disquisitions on the subject. Though Crabtree could not be prevailed upon to learn by heart the various paradigms, declensions, conjugations, irregular verbs and improper nouns which Hamish pressed upon him, he showed a singular aptitude for what Professor Guggenheim calls 'The methodologies of linguistic science', and sometimes astounded Hamish with his capacity for discerning connections between the dialects from which Faffans was being forged (I use this verb metaphorically, not literally), and for discerning and formulating laws governing the differences between cognate words. In a man of Crabtree's genius, these intellectual endeavours were, of course, subordinate to the shaping spirit of his imagination. How well his imagination assimilated this philological diet is revealed by the longest extract from the Anstruther papers vouchsafed me by Professor Guggenheim. Anstruther had heard vague reports of a sport called cricket which had become popular south of the border. When questioned, Crabtree gladly gave him an account of it, and the following passage is part of his inspired description of the laws of the game. I quote:

If there is a voiced appeal (*Howzat*) the umpire must give a declension; if the appeal is voiceless (*Howsat*) no declension is necessary. He must give the batsman ablaut LBW if, at the moment of inflection, the batsman's leg is in the inter-vocalic position, thereby preventing the ball from causing a breaking (whether monosyllabic or disyllabic) of the conjugation of stumps and bails, bearing in mind any possible syncopy of bat and pad, gradation of pitch, influence of nasals or any other factor that might inflect his declension. He will give the batsman ablaut by a raising of the initial stop-digit of the right hand; the batsman is then required to mutate himself to the pavilion, and the doubling of the batsmen occurs again by the arrival of the next man. If the umpire's verdict is arrived at independently, it is known as an isolative declension; if in deliberate collaboration with the bowler and the fielding side

generally, it is known as a combinative declension. There is no need to stress that the umpire (or 'umlaut', as the outgoing batsman is wont to designate him) must be firm and consonant in the application of laws, and that he must not indulge in too much assimilation of ante-vocalic liquids during stop-consonants.

I am addressing an audience well versed in the sleights and expedients of literary criticism so there is no need for me to end this oration with a lengthy exposition of the merits of this remarkable passage, which exhibits Crabtree's neo-metaphysical style in its maturity. I need only glance at the unerring instinct with which Crabtree finds an objective correlative for his feelings about cricket in the mythology of linguistics, replete as it is with profound intimations of the mutability of things. Nor is it necessary for me to elaborate the felicity with which his reassociated sensibility finds expression in the exquisite counterpointing of disciplines as diverse as those of Bradman and Sievers. Had I more time at my disposal, I would be tempted to dwell on the local richnesses and disciplined awareness revealed by this passage, on its hint at the responsibilities of minority culture in the reference to 'isolative declension', on the austere control of emotion with which it envisages such calamities as the wrongful dismissal of a batsman or the intemperance of an umpire. Some of us, I have no doubt, are already marvelling at the miraculous way in which the diction of this passage anticipates the terminology of modern philology. Well we may! But let us humbly acknowledge that the workings of genius are inscrutable and that no genius has been less predictable than Crabtree. And let us acknowledge, too, that genius has its prophetic moments. Just as Tennyson's 'airy navies' in *Locksley Hall* anticipated the aeroplane, just as Shakespeare's great line about 'cracking nature's moulds, all germens spilling at once' anticipated one of the basic principles of the Shinman double-cross-referencing and back-dating machine, so Joseph Crabtree, gazing into a glass darkly, foresaw the machinations of Grimm, Verner and all their sect. Let me conclude this tribute, therefore, by extending Arnold's famous dictum on Keats to Joseph Crabtree: HE IS WITH SHAKESPEARE!