

**RUPERT BROOKE AND THE
INTELLECTUAL
IMAGINATION. A
LECTURE**

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Rupert Brooke and the intellectual imagination. A lecture by Walter De la Mare

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WALTER DE LA MARE

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A LECTURE**

Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination

A Lecture
by
Walter de la Mare

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Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination

ONE evening in 1766, Dr Johnson being then in the fifty-seventh year of his age, his friends, Boswell and Goldsmith, called on him at his lodgings in Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, with the intention of persuading him to sup with them at the Mitre. But though he was proof against their cajoleries, he was by no means averse from a talk. With true hospitality, since he had himself, we are told, become a water-drinker, he called for a bottle of port. This his guests proceeded to discuss. While they sipped, the three of them conversed on subjects no less beguiling than play-going and poetry.

Goldsmith ventured to refer to the deplorable fact that his old friend and former schoolfellow had given up the writing of verses. "Why, sir," replied Johnson, "our tastes greatly alter. The lad does not care for the child's rattle. . . . As we advance in the journey of life, we drop some of the things which have pleased us; whether it be that we are fatigued and don't

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choose to carry so many things any farther, or that we find other things which we like better."

Boswell persisted. "But, sir," said he, "why don't you give us something in some other way." "No, sir," Johnson replied, "I am not obliged to do any more. No man is obliged to do as much as he can do. A man is to have part of his life to himself." "But I wonder, sir," Boswell continued, "you have not more pleasure in writing than in not writing." Whereupon descended the crushing retort, "Sir, you *may* wonder."

Johnson then proceeded to discuss the actual making of verses. "The great difficulty," he observed—alas, how truly, "is to know when you have made good ones." Once, he boasted, he had written as many as a full hundred lines a day; but he was then under forty, and had been inspired by no less fertile a theme than "The Vanity of Human Wishes," a poem that, with other prudent counsel, bids the "young enthusiast" pause ere he choose literature and learning as a spiral staircase to fame:—

Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes
And pause awhile from Letters, to be wise . . .

None the less, Johnson made haste to assure Goldsmith that his Muse even at this late day was not wholly mum:—"I am not quite idle; I made one line t'other day; but I made no more."

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“Let us hear it,” cried Goldsmith, “we’ll put a bad one to it!” “No, sir, I have forgot it.” And so sally succeeded sally.

How much of the virtue of Johnson’s talk we are to attribute to Boswell’s genius for selection and condensation, and how much to the habituality of his idol’s supreme judgment, penetration, humanity and good sense, is one of the delectable problems of literature. This fact, at any rate, is unquestionable; namely, that Johnson seldom indeed let fall a remark, even though merely in passing, which is not worth a sensible man’s consideration. He knew—rare felicity—what he was talking about. He spoke—rare presence of mind—not without, but after, aforethought. However dogmatic, overbearing and partisan he might be, not only in what he is recorded to have said is there always something substantive and four-square, but frequently even a light and occasional utterance of his will stand like a signpost at the cross-roads positively imploring the traveller to make further exploration.

“The lad does not care for the child’s rattle.” Here, surely, is one of those signposts, one more enticing invitation to explore. By rattle, obviously, Johnson meant not only things childish, but things childlike. For such things the ‘lad’ does not merely cease to care. He

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substitutes for them other things which he likes better. Not that every vestige of charm and sentiment necessarily deserts the rattle, but other delights intrude; and, what is still more important, other faculties that will take pleasure in these new toys and interests come into energy and play. Does not this rightly imply that between childhood and boyhood is fixed a perceptible gulf, physical, spiritual, psychological, and that in minds in which the powers and tendencies conspicuous in boyhood, and more or less dormant or latent in earlier years, predominate, those of childhood are apt to fade and fall away?

This is true, I think, of us all, whatever our gifts and graces; but in a certain direction I believe it is true in a peculiar degree of poets—of children and lads (and possibly lasses, though they, fortunately for me, lie outside my immediate inquiry) who are destined, or doomed, to become poets. Poets, that is, may be divided, for illustration and convenience, into two distinct classes: those who in their idiosyncrasies resemble children and bring to ripeness the faculties peculiar to childhood; and those who resemble lads. On the one hand is the poet who carries with him through life, in varying vigour and variety, the salient characteristics of childhood (though modified, of course, by subsequent