

Richard Jefferies'

Letter to Disraeli

1871

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Published in *Disraeli's Novels Reviewed*, by RW (Robert Wilson) Stewart (ed.), Metuchen, N.J. USA: Scarecrow Press 1975, pp.271-3.

Part-quoted and referenced by Andrew Rossabi in *A Peculiarly English Genius or A Wiltshire Taoist: A Biography of Richard Jefferies, Volume II: The Years of Struggle 1867-1876*, chap. IX, Petton Books 2020.

Benjamin Disraeli was Conservative Prime Minister 1868 and 1874-80 and Leader of the Opposition when Jefferies wrote to him. Disraeli was also a successful novelist, of which *Lothair* was published in 1870.

Jefferies' letter to Disraeli, penned when he was 22, is significant in that it is the first known explicit written record of his deep sense of nature mysticism that was to characterise his most profound and spiritual writing. Being expressed to someone of high standing, it reads as something of a purposeful confession, setting out his stall, a clear manifesto of the beliefs that would later fire his most inspirational texts. His noted draft manuscript *Fortune or the Art of Success in Life* was never published is not known to have survived.

RDS

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Stewart Introduction:

Letter from Richard Jefferies, 12 July 1871

It has sometimes been said that Disraeli had no connection with the contemporary literary world. That may be true as regards his relations with authors whose names are "household words," but he did sometimes show interest in and give encouragement to more obscure writers. Among those who sought his advice was Richard Jefferies, in 1871 a journalist in Wiltshire. This letter has not hitherto been published. No record of a reply has been found.

[A copy of Disraeli's reply has indeed survived—reproduced at the foot of this document, from *Richard Jefferies' Letters to Aunt Ellen*, Petton Books 2011, pp.93-4.]

Sir,

I am irresistibly drawn to acknowledge the deep impression *Lothair* has made upon my mind, I may even say my soul: and the benefit I have derived from it in a manner possibly never expected by its author. From my earliest youth I have lived in the closest communion with nature: the beauty of the trees and the streams, the sun and the sea cast a glamour over me, and poured into my soul thoughts of unutterable magnitude.

It seemed as if they spoke to me in a language of their own. I felt a deep mystic delight, something like that of listening to music; and yet at the same time a painful longing to grasp the spirit, the Form of this beauty, as one might wish to grasp the Form of a beautiful air of music. I searched for it diligently on the seashore and the hilltop, and in the beechen forests, and sometimes thought I was near upon it, standing upon the threshold of God. I verily nearly worshipped nature, the glowing sun, and the ocean — they seemed to me Persons, Beings: and I almost fear I did worship the beauty in which they were conceived. Growing older it seemed to me that the very highest beauty resided in the perfect human form. I could not conceive of God apart from perfect Form, and here seemed the perfect Form.

But man could not be God, nor a perfect exemplification of God, because he could not do anything by mere volition of will — could not say "Be" and it was. God must be a Being of pure power.

So that while half if not quite worshipping the beauty of Form my conscience reproached me, and I thought of Abraham in the Koran, who searched for God, and saw the sun, & said, Surely this is God. But the sun went down, and Abram said I like not gods that set. There must be a Being of Illimitable Intellect.

I found that the house of Israel possessed in their sacred scriptures the most perfect conception of such a Being; a Being who created, who said Be and it was. But I could not reconcile the commands and precepts of this Being with what seemed the natural conclusion of the fact that all nature, all creation, strove to clothe itself in the most perfect Form. For if this was the life ordained for man that he should strive to become perfect in Form, he must be purely selfish, disregarding all others — expanding his own power at whatever loss to others. The God of pure spirit forbade this when he said "Thou shalt not kill", "Thou shalt not covet" "Thou shalt not commit adultery. " How could I reconcile the conflict between these two systems, of the body, of nature, and of the intellect, of God? The question intruded itself into every act of life and hourly embarrassed me.

I was in the deepest perplexity when I read *Lothair*. Here I found the two conflicting systems clearly defined and personified — that of beauty in the theory of Phoebus, in Theodora herself; that of spirit in Paraclete among the oaks of Bashan. Contemplation upon these showed me that it was possible to harmonize perfection of form with

perfection of spirit, the materialism of the Aryans with the spiritual truth of the Semitic race. It seemed as if the Aryan race had been ordained to perfect the body of man and the Semite to perfect his soul. My doubts and troubles were solved, and I felt that I at last saw the truth. I became enamoured of the book. My family has been conservative for three centuries & has voted for the Goddards, our representatives, for two generations. It was a deep pleasure to me that my doubts had been solved by the leader of our party; so strong was my enthusiasm that I went to London to catch a glimpse of the author of this work at the House of Commons.

Since then incessant occupation distracted my attention together with travel abroad, till recently I met with *Lothair* again, & re-read it three several times. For the pleasure and the benefit I have derived from that book I offer you my acknowledgements. And now that after a year's hesitation I have overcome my reluctance to address you I feel that I must ask your opinion. I too have written a book but I hesitate to publish it. It was suggested by the immense personal influence which I found you possessed. I traced the effect of personal influence in every sphere of life. I decided that success in life depended upon personal influence and I wrote a book to reduce it to an art, I have called it "Fortune or the Art of Success in Life." I say that books have been written upon almost every topic except that which lies nearest every one's heart, fortune and success. By fortune I mean success in anything especially in what depends upon the favour of men & women, even courting: success in which would be thought the highest fortune by many thousands. I demonstrate that success depends more upon personal influence than upon technical ability, and I endeavour throughout to educate the reader how to possess it. I begin with the Knowledge it is necessary he should acquire; the only way to acquire it is by constant observation. Next comes the character of men and women, their nature and how to influence them. Their personal appearance, how to dress — manners and style; how to talk so as to please the ladies and acquire the confidence of men. Then Persuasion; how to persuade them; the spirit which should animate, & guide here, the principles of action. Finally how to lay down a successful Plan: and a few selected aphorisms. I have spent much time upon it; and every sentence is a fact or a thought. But in proportion as I spent more thought upon it so grew my hesitation about publishing. Do you think I might venture? Supposing it written sufficiently well to be intelligible, do you think it would be a moderately popular subject? My mind is set upon your opinion, it will decide me, for I have implicit confidence in your judgment. If I have intruded it is the fault of my admiration of your genius,

I have the honour to be Sir,

Your obedient & humble Servant

Richard Jefferies

[Hughenden Papers, E /VI /S /99.]

Coate [Wiltshire]

July 28, 1871

My dear Aunt

I feel sure that you will be delighted to hear of a great success which has befallen me at last. I told you that I had been bending all my energies to the completion of a work. I completed it a short time since and an opportunity offering I wrote to Disraeli describing it and asking his opinion. You know he is considered the cleverest man in England, that he is the head of the rich and powerful Conservative party and that he is a celebrated and very successful author. His reply came this morning:

Grosvenor Gate.

Dear Sir,

The great pressure of public affairs at the present moment must be my excuse for not sooner replying to your interesting letter which I did not like to leave to a secretary. I think the subject of your work of the highest interest, and I should have confidence in its treatment from the letter which you have done me the honor [sic] of addressing to me. I should recommend you to forward your MS to some eminent publisher whose interest and experience would qualify to judge of it with impartiality.

Believe me dear Sir,

with every good wish,

Yours faithfully, B. Disraeli.

A recognition like this from so great an intellectual leader is a richer reward to oneself than the applause of hundreds or than any money can possibly be. And it is a guarantee of success even in a money sense for what publisher would not grasp at a work commended by Disraeli. This is a day of triumph to me. In an obscure country village personally totally unknown name never heard of, without the least assistance from any living person – alone and unaided – I have achieved the favourable opinion of the man who stands highest in our age for intellectual power – who represents the nobility gentry and clergy of the land – who is the leader of half England. This too after enduring the

sneers and bitter taunts of so many – and my own father among them – for idleness and incapacity. Hard indeed have I worked these many months since I last saw you, and at all times it has been my intention – and looked forward to as a reward – to write and tell you of my success. And at last – at last. Write to me and tell me you rejoice for without someone to rejoice with you success itself is cold and barren. My success is now assured.

I hope the seaside is doing you good and that you enjoy it. Is Sarah well? I had a note from Ted the other day. Mother seems pretty well. I am still very busy restlessly working. I shall be eager to hear from you. Believe me dear Aunt with much love

Your affectionate nephew

Richard.

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