

I

It is a melancholy experience for a professional mathematician to find himself writing about mathematics. The function of a mathematician is to do something, to prove new theorems, to add to mathematics, and not to talk about what he or other mathematicians have done. Statesmen despise publicists, painters despise art-critics, and physiologists, physicists, or mathematicians have usually similar feelings; there is no scorn more profound, or on the whole more justifiable, than that of the men who make for the men who explain. Exposition, criticism, appreciation, is work for second-rate minds.

I can remember arguing this point once in one of the few serious conversations that I ever had with Housman. Housman, in his Leslie Stephen lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, had denied very emphatically that he was a 'critic'; but he had denied it in what seemed to me a singularly perverse way, and had

expressed an admiration for literary criticism which startled and scandalized me.

He had begun with a quotation from his inaugural lecture, delivered twenty-two years before—

Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasures, I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets . . . , if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Halley's comet: literary critics are less common. . . .

And he had continued—

In these twenty-two years I have improved in some respects and deteriorated in others, but I have not so much improved as to become a literary critic, nor so much deteriorated as to fancy that I have become one.

It had seemed to me deplorable that a great scholar and a fine poet should write like this, and, finding myself next to him in Hall a few weeks later, I plunged in and said so. Did he really mean what he had said to be taken very seriously? Would the life of the best of critics really have seemed to him comparable with that of a scholar and a poet? We argued these

questions all through dinner, and I think that finally he agreed with me. I must not seem to claim a dialectical triumph over a man who can no longer contradict me; but 'Perhaps not entirely' was, in the end, his reply to the first question, and 'Probably no' to the second.

There may have been some doubt about Housman's feelings, and I do not wish to claim him as on my side; but there is no doubt at all about the feelings of men of science, and I share them fully. If then I find myself writing, not mathematics but 'about' mathematics, it is a confession of weakness, for which I may rightly be scorned or pitied by younger and more vigorous mathematicians. I write about mathematics because, like any other mathematician who has passed sixty, I have no longer the freshness of mind, the energy, or the patience to carry on effectively with my proper job.

2

I PROPOSE to put forward an apology for mathematics; and I may be told that it needs none, since there are now few studies more

generally recognized, for good reasons or bad, as profitable and praiseworthy. This may be true; indeed it is probable, since the sensational triumphs of Einstein, that stellar astronomy and atomic physics are the only sciences which stand higher in popular estimation. A mathematician need not now consider himself on the defensive. He does not have to meet the sort of opposition described by Bradley in the admirable defence of metaphysics which forms the introduction to *Appearance and Reality*.

A metaphysician, says Bradley, will be told that 'metaphysical knowledge is wholly impossible', or that 'even if possible to a certain degree, it is practically no knowledge worth the name'. 'The same problems,' he will hear, 'the same disputes, the same sheer failure. Why not abandon it and come out? Is there nothing else more worth your labour?' There is no one so stupid as to use this sort of language about mathematics. The mass of mathematical truth is obvious and imposing; its practical applications, the bridges and steam-engines and dynamos, obtrude themselves on the dullest imagination. The public does not need

to be convinced that there is something in mathematics.

All this is in its way very comforting to mathematicians, but it is hardly possible for a genuine mathematician to be content with it. Any genuine mathematician must feel that it is not on these crude achievements that the real case for mathematics rests, that the popular reputation of mathematics is based largely on ignorance and confusion, and that there is room for a more rational defence. At any rate, I am disposed to try to make one. It should be a simpler task than Bradley's difficult apology.

I shall ask, then, why is it really worth while to make a serious study of mathematics? What is the proper justification of a mathematician's life? And my answers will be, for the most part, such as are to be expected from a mathematician: I think that it is worth while, that there is ample justification. But I should say at once that my defence of mathematics will be a defence of myself, and that my apology is bound to be to some extent egotistical. I should not think it worth while to apologize for my

subject if I regarded myself as one of its failures.

Some egotism of this sort is inevitable, and I do not feel that it really needs justification. Good work is not done by 'humble' men. It is one of the first duties of a professor, for example, in any subject, to exaggerate a little both the importance of his subject and his own importance in it. A man who is always asking 'Is what I do worth while?' and 'Am I the right person to do it?' will always be ineffective himself and a discouragement to others. He must shut his eyes a little and think a little more of his subject and himself than they deserve. This is not too difficult: it is harder not to make his subject and himself ridiculous by shutting his eyes too tightly.

3

A MAN who sets out to justify his existence and his activities has to distinguish two different questions. The first is whether the work which he does is worth doing; and the second is why he does it, whatever its value may be. The

first question is often very difficult, and the answer very discouraging, but most people will find the second easy enough even then. Their answers, if they are honest, will usually take one or other of two forms; and the second form is merely a humbler variation of the first, which is the only answer which we need consider seriously.

(1) 'I do what I do because it is the one and only thing that I can do at all well. I am a lawyer, or a stockbroker, or a professional cricketer, because I have some real talent for that particular job. I am a lawyer because I have a fluent tongue, and am interested in legal subtleties; I am a stockbroker because my judgement of the markets is quick and sound; I am a professional cricketer because I can bat unusually well. I agree that it might be better to be a poet or a mathematician, but unfortunately I have no talent for such pursuits.'

I am not suggesting that this is a defence which can be made by most people, since most people can do nothing at all well. But it is impregnable when it can be made without

absurdity, as it can by a substantial minority: perhaps five or even ten per cent of men can do something rather well. It is a tiny minority who can do anything *really* well, and the number of men who can do two things well is negligible. If a man has any genuine talent, he should be ready to make almost any sacrifice in order to cultivate it to the full.

This view was endorsed by Dr Johnson—

When I told him that I had been to see [his namesake] Johnson ride upon three horses, he said 'Such a man, sir, should be encouraged, for his performances show the extent of the human powers...'—

and similarly he would have applauded mountain climbers, channel swimmers, and blindfold chess-players. For my own part, I am entirely in sympathy with all such attempts at remarkable achievement. I feel some sympathy even with conjurors and ventriloquists; and when Alekhine and Bradman set out to beat records, I am quite bitterly disappointed if they fail. And here both Dr Johnson and I find ourselves in agreement with the public. As W. J. Turner has said so truly, it is only the

'highbrows' (in the unpleasant sense) who do not admire the 'real swells'.

We have of course to take account of the differences in value between different activities. I would rather be a novelist or a painter than a statesman of similar rank; and there are many roads to fame which most of us would reject as actively pernicious. Yet it is seldom that such differences of value will turn the scale in a man's choice of a career, which will almost always be dictated by the limitations of his natural abilities. Poetry is more valuable than cricket, but Bradman would be a fool if he sacrificed his cricket in order to write second-rate minor poetry (and I suppose that it is unlikely that he could do better). If the cricket were a little less supreme, and the poetry better, then the choice might be more difficult: I do not know whether I would rather have been Victor Trumper or Rupert Brooke. It is fortunate that such dilemmas occur so seldom.

I may add that they are particularly unlikely to present themselves to a mathematician. It is usual to exaggerate rather grossly

the differences between the mental processes of mathematicians and other people, but it is undeniable that a gift for mathematics is one of the most specialized talents, and that mathematicians as a class are not particularly distinguished for general ability or versatility. If a man is in any sense a real mathematician, then it is a hundred to one that his mathematics will be far better than anything else he can do, and that he would be silly if he surrendered any decent opportunity of exercising his one talent in order to do undistinguished work in other fields. Such a sacrifice could be justified only by economic necessity or age.

4

I HAD better say something here about this question of age, since it is particularly important for mathematicians. No mathematician should ever allow himself to forget that mathematics, more than any other art or science, is a young man's game. To take a simple illustration at a comparatively humble

level, the average age of election to the Royal Society is lowest in mathematics.

We can naturally find much more striking illustrations. We may consider, for example, the career of a man who was certainly one of the world's three greatest mathematicians. Newton gave up mathematics at fifty, and had lost his enthusiasm long before; he had recognized no doubt by the time that he was forty that his great creative days were over. His greatest ideas of all, fluxions and the law of gravitation, came to him about 1666, when he was twenty-four—'in those days I was in the prime of my age for invention, and minded mathematics and philosophy more than at any time since'. He made big discoveries until he was nearly forty (the 'elliptic orbit' at thirty-seven), but after that he did little but polish and perfect.

Galois died at twenty-one, Abel at twenty-seven, Ramanujan at thirty-three, Riemann at forty. There have been men who have done great work a good deal later; Gauss's great memoir on differential geometry was published when he was fifty (though he had had

the fundamental ideas ten years before). I do not know an instance of a major mathematical advance initiated by a man past fifty. If a man of mature age loses interest in and abandons mathematics, the loss is not likely to be very serious either for mathematics or for himself.

On the other hand the gain is no more likely to be substantial; the later records of mathematicians who have left mathematics are not particularly encouraging. Newton made a quite competent Master of the Mint (when he was not quarrelling with anybody). Painlevé was a not very successful Premier of France. Laplace's political career was highly discreditable, but he is hardly a fair instance, since he was dishonest rather than incompetent, and never really 'gave up' mathematics. It is very hard to find an instance of a first-rate mathematician who has abandoned mathematics and attained first-rate distinction in any other field.* There may have been young men who would have been first-rate mathematicians if they had stuck to mathematics, but I have never heard of a

* Pascal seems the best.

really plausible example. And all this is fully borne out by my own very limited experience. Every young mathematician of real talent whom I have known has been faithful to mathematics, and not from lack of ambition but from abundance of it; they have all recognized that there, if anywhere, lay the road to a life of any distinction.

5

THERE is also what I called the 'humbler variation' of the standard apology; but I may dismiss this in a very few words.

(2) 'There is *nothing* that I can do particularly well. I do what I do because it came my way. I really never had a chance of doing anything else.' And this apology too I accept as conclusive. It is quite true that most people can do nothing well. If so, it matters very little what career they choose, and there is really nothing more to say about it. It is a conclusive reply, but hardly one likely to be made by a man with any pride; and I may assume that none of us would be content with it.

It is time to begin thinking about the first question which I put in § 3, and which is so much more difficult than the second. Is mathematics, what I and other mathematicians mean by mathematics, worth doing; and if so, why?

I have been looking again at the first pages of the inaugural lecture which I gave at Oxford in 1920, where there is an outline of an apology for mathematics. It is very inadequate (less than a couple of pages), and it is written in a style (a first essay, I suppose, in what I then imagined to be the 'Oxford manner') of which I am not now particularly proud; but I still feel that, however much development it may need, it contains the essentials of the matter. I will resume what I said then, as a preface to a fuller discussion.

(1) I began by laying stress on the *harmlessness* of mathematics—'the study of mathematics is, if an unprofitable, a perfectly harmless and innocent occupation'. I shall

stick to that, but obviously it will need a good deal of expansion and explanation.

Is mathematics 'unprofitable'? In some ways, plainly, it is not; for example, it gives great pleasure to quite a large number of people. I was thinking of 'profit', however, in a narrower sense. Is mathematics 'useful', *directly* useful, as other sciences such as chemistry and physiology are? This is not an altogether easy or uncontroversial question, and I shall ultimately say No, though some mathematicians, and most outsiders, would no doubt say Yes. And is mathematics 'harmless'? Again the answer is not obvious, and the question is one which I should have in some ways preferred to avoid, since it raises the whole problem of the effect of science on war. Is mathematics harmless, in the sense in which, for example, chemistry plainly is not? I shall have to come back to both these questions later.

(2) I went on to say that 'the scale of the universe is large and, if we are wasting our time, the waste of the lives of a few university dons is no such overwhelming catastrophe':

and here I may seem to be adopting, or affecting, the pose of exaggerated humility which I repudiated a moment ago. I am sure that that was not what was really in my mind; I was trying to say in a sentence what I have said at much greater length in § 3. I was assuming that we dons really had our little talents, and that we could hardly be wrong if we did our best to cultivate them fully.

(3) Finally (in what seem to me now some rather painfully rhetorical sentences) I emphasized the permanence of mathematical achievement—

What we do may be small, but it has a certain character of permanence; and to have produced anything of the slightest permanent interest, whether it be a copy of verses or a geometrical theorem, is to have done something utterly beyond the powers of the vast majority of men.

And—

In these days of conflict between ancient and modern studies, there must surely be something to be said for a study which did not begin with Pythagoras, and will not end with Einstein, but is the oldest and the youngest of all.

All this is 'rhetoric'; but the substance of it seems to me still to ring true, and I can expand it at once without prejudging any of the other questions which I am leaving open.

7

I SHALL assume that I am writing for readers who are full, or have in the past been full, of a proper spirit of ambition. A man's first duty, a young man's at any rate, is to be ambitious. Ambition is a noble passion which may legitimately take many forms; there was *something* noble in the ambition of Attila or Napoleon: but the noblest ambition is that of leaving behind one something of permanent value—

Here, on the level sand,
Between the sea and land,
What shall I build or write
Against the fall of night?

Tell me of runes to grave
That hold the bursting wave,
Or bastions to design
For longer date than mine.

Ambition has been the driving force behind nearly all the best work of the world. In particular, practically all substantial contributions to human happiness have been made by ambitious men. To take two famous examples, were not Lister and Pasteur ambitious? Or, on a humbler level, King Gillette and William Willett; and who in recent times have contributed more to human comfort than they?

Physiology provides particularly good examples, just because it is so obviously a 'beneficial' study. We must guard against a fallacy common among apologists of science, the fallacy of supposing that the men whose work most benefits humanity are thinking much of that while they do it, that physiologists, for example, have particularly noble souls. A physiologist may indeed be glad to remember that his work will benefit mankind, but the motives which provide the force and the inspiration for it are indistinguishable from those of a classical scholar or a mathematician.

There are many highly respectable motives

which may lead men to prosecute research, but three which are much more important than the rest. The first (without which the rest must come to nothing) is intellectual curiosity, desire to know the truth. Then, professional pride, anxiety to be satisfied with one's performance, the shame that overcomes any self-respecting craftsman when his work is unworthy of his talent. Finally, ambition, desire for reputation, and the position, even the power or the money, which it brings. It may be fine to feel, when you have done your work, that you have added to the happiness or alleviated the sufferings of others, but that will not be why you did it. So if a mathematician, or a chemist, or even a physiologist, were to tell me that the driving force in his work had been the desire to benefit humanity, then I should not believe him (nor should I think the better of him if I did). His dominant motives have been those which I have stated, and in which, surely, there is nothing of which any decent man need be ashamed.