10 "Almost Passionate Impartiality"

The public sense of Galsworthy as representing something "new" evaporated rather rapidly. Allowing for transatlantic time-lag, in 1909 Ellery Sedgwick (one of the first American advocates of his talent) could still, in refusing two short Galsworthy pieces for the *Atlantic Monthly* he edited because they had already been published in England, write of his respect for Galsworthy because "for to me he typifies a new England with which I feel great sympathy".¹ By the end of 1911, in the English Press, Compton Mackenzie's first novel, *The Passionate Elopement*, was widely praised because it was "new", owing nothing to the old conventions and concerns of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy.²

In general public discussion, in England, by 1911, class postures were hardening again. The Liberal consensus for reform, as well as the capacity of writers and intellectuals to influence government in a common effort to make society more just and equitable, was breaking apart. The Boer War had receded into the past, and the overwhelming parliamentary Liberal majority of 1906 had turned into narrow, precarious majorities in both elections in 1910. Themselves divided over the new crucial issues of Irish Home Rule and the bill to abolish the House of Lords, the Liberals dissipated the impulse for social reform.

Although his work was still discussed frequently in the Press, Galsworthy worried about all the contradictory and superficial placements of himself and his work in social terms. In response to both his anxiety and a particularly vague criticism of his work, Conrad tried to be encouraging:

The truth is that the only foundation on which criticism for your work can be built is *our common humanity*. That and nothing else. I don't see any change in Mr Galsworthy's attitude. But then I am not looking at him from the standpoint of some
political or social theory. However the fact must not be shirked that in whatever you do my dear Jack people will look inside or beyond your art for the idea. And it is on the enunciation of the idea that you’ll have to put on stress if you want to guide the judgment of your contemporaries.\(^3\)

In a slightly earlier letter, Conrad had used a phrase that placed Galsworthy in public terms somewhat more sophisticated and individual than allegiance to a party or programme. Claiming that he could not anticipate how a particular Galsworthy story he liked would appeal to the public, that no artist could give the “public what it wants because humanity doesn’t know what it wants”, Conrad wrote that Galsworthy’s work was getting deeper and deeper, his mastery distinguished by his “almost passionate impartiality”.\(^4\) The “passionate impartiality” adequately describes Galsworthy’s stance in *Strife*, his dramatic presentation of both locked sides in a social conflict becoming more irresolvable the more deeply and passionately it is explored. Gradually, the public Press began to take up the idea, describing Galsworthy as impartial and judicious, standing apart from the social conflicts and issues he depicted. In any full or definitive assessment of Galsworthy’s work, “impartiality” is not very much more accurate or probing than a party or programmatic label, but the tag did describe a little more deeply, more emotionally, and it had the additional merit of not violating his conception of himself. The qualification of “almost” also gave some measure of his distance.

Galsworthy invited the view of himself as always balanced between two alternatives. Although he had, two years earlier, not joined Wells in trying to dislodge the “old gang” of Fabians, in 1909, one of the leaders of the “old gang”, Beatrice Webb, impressed by *Strife* and by Granville Barker’s recommendation, tried to enlist Galsworthy to her cause, hoping that he might write a play dramatizing one or another of the ideas in the Fabian programme. Galsworthy wrote that he thought the report she sent “a wonderful document”, but politely declined:

I don’t know if you’ll understand me, but I regard it as my business to visualise things and set them down in terms of art (when I’m lucky enough to win the smile of that goddess). In visualising what one finds round one, if one has any sense of