15 Three John Galsworthys and “A Wonderful Red Letter Day”

Never at ease with himself or in any social role, Galsworthy was, in 1918, imperfectly separable into three different identities. The public Galsworthy worked hard for causes to relieve suffering, wrote to the newspapers, made temperate forecasts and issued pronouncements on international questions. A survival from 1910, when his opinions and plans had been welcomed by the establishment, the public Galsworthy still sounded measured, elaborately rational, drawing the lines of his humane distinctions carefully, as if he could achieve a kind of control over events. In addition to this, a second identity was more sceptical, even bitter, shocked by family internments and all the various brutalities, both at the front and in English society, revealed by the war. More circumspect about displaying the bitter identity, one that needed to overcome layers of convention and training in order to emerge, Galsworthy was likely to show this scepticism only in private, or in careful qualifications of the public pronouncements, or anonymously. The two identities edged against each other with a good deal of strain, each often moderating the other. The third Galsworthy, relentlessly private, lived within the fiction he worked on so assiduously. Becoming more confident by 1918, this Galsworthy approached his work with an unqualified dedication and was more interested in the responses of some members of his family and literary associates than in those of a larger public. One might argue, within the context of recognizing the arbitrary nature of numbering the elements of any human being, in which the outsider’s choice might locate three or five or seven interlocking Galsworthys, a fourth identity, the creator of genteel appeals to the sexual fantasies of a large public, using *Beyond, Saint’s Progress* and some of the stories as examples. But
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Galsworthy was far less conscious of that identity, and it was, in so far as he could see it, an excess of "emotion" or a displacement of his own emotions into sympathy for the woman he saw as victimized by society. By 1918, his treatment of sexual experience was beginning to be both less "cosmic" and less part of a social treatise, this identity gradually subsumed into the larger and more general one of the creator of private fictions out of himself and his past. These somewhat arbitrarily catalogued three identities, along with their intersections and occasional distortions of emphasis, illustrate coherently, although imperfectly, the Galsworthy who emerged from the First World War.

The public Galsworthy continued to chronicle each stage of the war, issue forecasts about its likely end and ascribe general characteristics to whole nations. Even his diary, for example, begins each entry in late March of 1918 with a report on the progress of the last German offensive. His politically moderate statements about public affairs could sound oracular and sententious, particularly when writing to those close to him. After the Russian revolution overthrowing the Czar in March 1917, for example, he wrote to Dorothy Ivens: "The successful revolution in Russia is the greatest piece of news we are likely to hear in our lives. It has incalculable significance for the future of the world. Of course their troubles are all before them; but whatever they may be I don't think it can ever mean going back to despotism." Less than four months later, he expanded on the theme:

A revolution is no picnic. Revolution in a vast country like Russia is taking the lid off a cauldron with a vengeance. Russia is in for years, perhaps a generation of dishevelment and chaos. All the same I say Heaven be praised. Very likely there will be dictatorships, further revolutions, something very like disruption; possibly a splitting up into several countries. All this was inevitable when and wherever the old bad order went by the board. And only those who know something of the utter cynical dejection of spirit in which Russia lived under the old regime will see that all that may be coming was better than that. I have little patience with those who can only look at the case and future of another country through the lens of how it suits their own. This is the reason of all the heart burning of the British – nothing impersonal or cosmic whatever