



Glimpses of Pestalozzi

Descriptions by Silber, biographer of Pestalozzi

1. Pestalozzi 'has been described as a Christian as well as a humanist, as a representative of the Enlightenment and as a mystic, as a liberal, a socialist, a conservative, and a revolutionary, as an educationalist, a social reformer, or a political philosopher.' (From Silber)

2. 'A remarkable characteristic of Pestalozzi was his ability to divine the inner needs of people, though he was usually blind to the externals of behaviour. A countless number of anecdotes have been told about his charity. When a child ran to him he would lift it up and kiss it. He would shake hands with a notorious criminal who frequently escaped from jail whenever he met him on his way to a closer confinement, give him a thaler [a coin] and say a few comforting words. ("If you had been taken care of when you were a child," he used to add, "you would not now be where you are".) When he met a beggar on the road he would give him all he had. Once, when his pockets were empty, he took off his silver buckles and arrived in town in shoes tied with straw. Another time, he rushed into the house of a friend and asked for the thalers he needed to hand to a woman giving birth to a child in a barn.' (From Silber)

3. 'Pestalozzi's most outstanding feature was his utter devotion to the well-being of men. He believed in the divine spark in every human being, but in himself it shone with a brighter than usual light. His goodness and benevolence rose to the highest form of Christian charity. The more was demanded of him, the more he was able to give and the happier he became. His self-denial was by ordinary standards excessive, yet to him it was the natural expression of an irresistible urge. He surrendered himself completely and never expected gratitude. Even his enemies had to admit that he was utterly disinterested.' (From Silber)

4. 'In 1818 in a small town in French Switzerland a man was standing in front of an assembly and making a speech. He was on the one hand looking back over his long and varied life, on the other looking forward towards the future of mankind. The man was, of course, Pestalozzi, the occasion his 72nd birthday. If we had crept in at the back of this assembly, what would have been our reactions to the man giving the speech? At first, undoubtedly, we would have been almost unpleasantly surprised. For the man whose name at least was known throughout Europe, the man who in the 1770s had

corresponded with the future Emperor of Austria, the man who in 1802 had gone to Paris to negotiate with Napoleon, who in 1814 had been embraced by the Tsar of Russia and been given an audience by the King of Prussia, this man was anything but prepossessing. His face was lined with smallpox scars and covered with freckles, his clothes hung about him rather than fitted him. And when he walked, one of his friends tells us, one was afraid he would trip up over his own feet. It would have been tempting for us to think, “What an odd fellow”, shrug our shoulders and walk off.

It is, however, all too easy to be misled by superficial outward appearances, and if we had paused a moment to listen to the speech, or if we had moved forward and looked more closely at the speaker’s face, it would no longer have been possible for us to leave. Few people who met Pestalozzi remained unmoved by his words and facial expressions. There was, for instance, the little girl who lived in Brugg where Pestalozzi had retired at the end of his life. Someone had told her how original he was. “Shortly afterwards,” she tells us, “I saw him standing in the entrance to the school. I hurried and tried to slip past him. But when I came close to him he looked at me so intently and lovingly that I shall never forget the moment as long as I live. His eyes shone and seemed to illuminate the dark corridor. He appeared to me to be an angel.” It was not only children who found themselves irresistibly attracted by this extraordinary man. A German teacher who met him in 1811 described him as an old man who with a glance, by the magical sound of his voice, captured every heart, won everyone over to his cause. He seemed to be human love in person.’

Source

Silber, K. (1960) Pestalozzi The Man and His Work London: Routledge and Kegan Paul