

## THE ABC OF ESCAPISM

THE keyword of our generation is "Life." The pathos of this will to live occasionally electrifies cafés and dance halls in the hysteria of an adolescent or middle-aged woman. By typography and photography the Press galvanizes its dead news to an artificial life. The educator no longer sells the corpse of knowledge with copy-book slogans like "Knowledge is power," but alike for adult and child baits the powder with the jam of "vital interest." A radio or a dance band resurrects from the dead our animal appetite for food. That our will to life is the drowning hope of a bankrupt age in despair, that is the diagnosis of our critics, and I for one do not deny its truth. But the bankruptcy of life is a bankruptcy of love. The Waste Land is our legacy from the nineteenth century humanists and humanitarians, who taught us to love our neighbour because we can only be certain of ourselves. How repulsive is that ingrown love with all the neuroses it breeds in us! And so, certain workers and certain bourgeois find that hate at least is healthy and primitive and radical in human nature. The nineteenth century did not, however understand the nature of love. Love desires *something else*; it wishes to explore and penetrate other things for their own sake. No man can lead a human life who rejects this interpretation: life is destitution itself if love has no way out to other things and other people. The human unit of grace and nature is disorganized and the heart indulges in orgies of self-pity to the detriment of the mind. The only exit from self is in sentimentality—love directed to the unreal.

The recovery of love would mean that we could love the whole world philosophically, politically and aesthetically: idealism, class-war and aestheticism all point to an artificial dichotomy at the centre of the modern spirit. But the modern man can only greet such a declaration with a black heart. Love, he feels, is built on lies. When Coleridge became a philosopher, Coleridge the poet died. Poetry is the enemy of science and cannot breathe at all under the

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hostile frost of fact. We love an unreal world, because it is not possible to love what we know. What a condemnation are sentiments like these of the philosophy of which they are the spawn! The official minister of religion who talks of love of God is so often merely "talking shop." What meaning can divine love have for us if it is not a human meaning and has no analogy to human love, and what meaning has human love when we release it of its truth? No—love and life and reality are linked and we cannot cut the cables. Even for the artist love is a vehicle whereby the world may be realized. The aesthetic world, too, is the whole world, or the vision that art conveys is emasculated of its truth. It is the contemporary world, because it is in time, and time is real. "Il y a une forme générale de la sensibilité qui s'impose à tous les hommes d'une même période."<sup>1</sup> There is no need to follow Gide in setting art versus nature:

L'œuvre d'art est œuvre volontaire. L'œuvre d'art est œuvre de raison. Car elle doit trouver en soi sa suffisance, sa fin et sa raison parfaite; formant un tout, elle doit pouvoir s'isoler et reposer, comme hors de l'espace et du temps, dans une satisfaite et satisfaisante harmonie. . . . Dans la nature rien ne peut s'isoler ni s'arrêter; tout continue. . . . Et voici bien l'opposition que je disais: Ici, l'homme est soumis à la nature; dans l'œuvre d'art au contraire, il soumet la nature à lui.<sup>2</sup>

Aesthetic contemplation is in time, and conquers time. Gide has stated the artist's problem, to isolate a world—a paint-world, a word-world, a tone-world—but his vague talk about "nature's" subjection to man assumes that the laws of man's mind and the laws of external reality are unsuited to one another. For him art perfects nature by destroying it; he is the puritan turned aesthete. Disunite the divine, the human, and the natural realities, and what remains?

Love and reality—are they divorced? Love particularizes, but surely it discerns the concrete particular in its white-hot clarity? Man loves as a knowing being. His heart and mind interact. His knowledge-by-love of single persons and things is only anarchical when it denies or ignores the true

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<sup>1</sup> Rémy de Gourmont, *Problème du Style*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Prétextes*, p. 45.

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order that is also part of reality. But modern thinkers are happy to be escapist. Reality does not interest them. They have no destination; they are at peace to stay on the train. At first, doubt is a technique: by questioning authority we think. Doubt at first is a mechanical device for helping philosophers, but soon it displaces philosophy and becomes the axiom of axioms. This is true enough, at least in tendency. I think the introverted love that confines modern man within himself is also responsible for confining his philosophy to the epistemological problem. Self-realization, as Paul in *Sons and Lovers* understands it, is the freedom to follow an impulse that is temporal and local and individual; this has the effect of destroying the unitary impression that a novel must give: lyrical poetry alone can convey the momentary unity that his personality attains. We thus see that the humanitarian egoistic altruism narrows the scope of philosophy and art.

To the idealist the world is inevitably static and inanimate. It is a Waste Land. He has no appetite for external reality, and his song of experience presents one who has shrivelled up and broken down:

Come home, my children, the sun has gone down  
And the dews of night arise;  
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,  
Your winter and night in disguise.

Even William Blake's poignancy is unequal to the tragedy of philosophical escapism. It is easy to picture a day in winter when there is little to distinguish trees and telegraph poles, with no animal alive, and snow deadening the differentia of vegetable nature. It is the idealist's world. He alone spectates. Night intervenes like a shadow cast in one's own mind. It is easy then to disguise the independence of things and to decide that history is only an affluence of my own mind. The external world is paralyzed in its separate being and the facts of geography and medicine are not allowed to obtrude. Is this not the dead world of my opening paragraph? It is our world, and its chaos and despair are common to all of us, Christian and agnostic, proletarian and bourgeois, of contemporary sensibility. We can drug

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ourselves into forgetfulness by ordering cigarettes and a cocktail. It is no use departmentalizing philosophy and art and politics. If idealism, aestheticism and class-war are possible it is because these things are in our bones. The idealist philosophizes in order to escape reality; the aesthete writes private poems to be communicated to nobody; the politician's politics provide either for the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. Blake's word was "disguise," mine is "escape." Escapism is the vice of those bigoted sectarians who cannot have a Catholic mind, because they have no mind. It is the vice of those birth-controllers who subserve matter at the expense of life. It is the vice of those who censor one's conversation unconsciously by turning to the landscape when its content is realistic and pressing. Escapism is the dislocation of reality and love and its only enemy is the Catholic Church's confession, the sacrament of God's naked eyes. Not man's intellect, but God's; that is the norm of reality.

The modern dethronement of the intellect is the work of those, like Berkeley, who intellectualized the world; and the intellect could only blush to learn of its sublimation. Outside my intellect there is no overplus. All the world's a stage. The ballet of the bloodless, fleshless *sensa* is enacted in my mind. What I think and do is the beginning and end of the world. The concrete gave matter its charm, but it is gone; the abstraction, the *sensum*, that remains. I am a thinking thing, an intellectual nucleus in a night of matter. Our little life is rounded with a sleep.

Since the physical was a sin, gesture lost its currency. Gesture is the knowledge that the physical is interpenetrated by the intellectual and vice versa, it is what Donne means when he says, "Her body thought." It was forgotten that the primary gestures not even a puritan can interdict—talk and tears. Modern physical culturists and Mr. D. H. Lawrence's blood co-religionists have not gone so far as to awaken us from the bodily illiteracy that idealism imposes. The English gentleman was no contradiction of the English philosophy. In a world become drawing-room the Incarnation became incredible and criminal. It was not morally

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possible to whistle in Edinburgh on a Sunday and, God knows, it is a feat still. English society was a nightmare of artificiality, art being to the Anglo-Saxon mind the enemy, not the friend, of nature. The War smashed that society up, but even to-day a *Spectator* critic solemnly discounts Mr. T. S. Eliot's criticism because he mentions Kruschen Salts and poetry in a single breath. The same puritanism is responsible for that hothouse spirituality that won't have *Tantum Ergo* in an office or Christ in a jigsaw puzzle; to the same iconoclastic fury we owe the skimmed milk of the abstract in place of the cream of the concrete.

Romanticism is a terror of reality, a failure of nerve, and collapse of the act of love by which mind is committed to being. The aesthetic union requires an adjustment, a creative intimacy, between man and reality, a common sense between person and thing. The romantic emotions scare the mind off the plunge into that reality that is less shallow, whose waves rise and resist the will's confidence, whose taste is salt to all but the robust appetite. A nervy generation loses balance and drowns its fright in the one thing it need not fear—itsself. The imagination's small store of aesthetic events is used to create an opposition world, nourished by constant diving into superficial waters, starved of the crucial deep sea experience. The poetic image is now less pedestrian and more graphic, originality is at a premium to rejuvenate the limited aesthetic memory and subjectivism alienates the poet from the real. Unreasoning panic before that cold current into which mind and will, poor naked little worms, must fling all their faith and love, demoralizes the poet into an aesthete. Recoiling into self, he loses focus, he cannot isolate aesthetic factors to perceive the pervasion of reality by order; the clairvoyance of the classicist in direct contact with reality however virile, gives way to camouflage in oblique contact through books. The romantic habit is breaking up to-day, but that sourness in Mr. T. S. Eliot's early poems is a glimpse of the romantic moment. That sense of the sweetness of order which is antithetic to the chaotic melancholy of romanticism is not the dilettante's sip of the chalice but the wholehearted drinking of the love that defeats terror and

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crushes lies. It is the "sweetness" of the saints, of St. Catherine of Siena, not saccharine or banal, but positive and piercing, because their awareness is not foreshortened and they have no appetite for illusion.

There is no complete escape, and the "great romantic does increase the potentialities of human experience."<sup>3</sup> Latent in the romantic revolt against reality may be a more pointed sense of tragedy which the formulae and platitudes of the eighteenth century shelved or disowned. Their effete optimism can be as dead as organized community singing. Even love, that is so final, is dashed to pieces on the last shore of being: and at that moment, tragedy is born. Break we must, but never too late. We must never tell such lies to ourselves as Messrs. Auden, Day Lewis and Spender do about death, that it is an end without relevance, a happy caprice. Horace's broken-hearted lines cry shame on a sophism so casual, a frivolity so unreal. Our humanism must be the humanism of men who say their prayers with their eyes open.

Sentimentality has invaded the blood-stream. Dissociate love and reality and all our emotional system is poisoned. The atmospherics that pass for religion sicken people with a sense of things. The confectionery that passes for poetry and music deprives the artist of his responsibility to reality. The easy tears for themselves and others that lurk behind the hard bright stares of modern people, the pathological faith in futility, the neurasthenic fidget, the strident sensitiveness of those whom reality has defeated—this sentimentality is no friend to true humanism or to Christ. Pain blinds the sentimental man; it wounds his very thinking; its prospect becomes nightmarish and the sentimentalist makes cynicism his defence-mechanism. This is not a transitional phenomenon: the War was the mere coming to a head of a sore centuries old. Sentimentalism is vicious: suicides, homosexuals and divorcees are victims of emotions that take no colour from reality, but this is not perhaps so much a per-

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<sup>3</sup> G. M. Turnell: Dryden and the Religious Elements in the Classical Tradition in *Englische Studien*, August, 1935, p. 251.

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sonal delinquency as a corollary of the society of which they are units. The frank man to-day is less often a realist than one whose emotions have flooded and carried him away in the flood. The sensitive man to-day is not the lover whose genius penetrates reality with joy, but one who has found reality cold.

The note of our society, the ideal subscribed to everywhere, is *life*. Our boredom may be skin-deep, and there may be a hunger for the real in our starved souls. There are constructive minds who are trying to mend themselves in conformity to a human norm. There is yet a danger that the bourgeois devil may inhabit us unawares. The love of life is nothing if it comes from the circumference of our selves; it must be central. We need not indict Pharisaism and Philistinism in others if our own living is on the surface and takes no profundity from knowledge and love. If everything is dead for us, if we are graves, let us be honest; don't let us be whitewashed graves. Christ Our Lord fought so relentlessly that men should not lie about themselves. If our life is not organic and integral, we can assume the shroud of convention and perfume ourselves in hypocrisy. We can freeze the primitive joy at its source in the hearts of girls and boys; we can spread our corruption through the members of Christ's Body. No! If our appetite for life is not fundamental, we are not Christ's and let us not claim to be His; He carried no more bitter war than against us. We all have our share of contemporary pharisaism. There is much that is negative in all of us. Through no fault of ours we have been born to this death. *In tenebrosis collocavit me quasi mortuos sempiternos*. But Christ wants us to live. We must go back to the ground of life—reality. The man who goes to the ground goes to his origins. That is humility: to be at home with the real, not to idealize ourselves, to see ourselves in the glass clearly not as captains of our soul, nor further, as Berkeley did, see external things as *captives* of our soul; we are not our own property, they are not our property. Life is God's, coming from Him, going to Him; if we want it, let us expect it from Him alone.

There are poseurs, of course, among us, who find things

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stark and hard and "other" for fashion's sake; who cheapen a contemporary desire for realism otherwise sterling. There are those who overwork the pathos of things because they are diseased with sentimentality. And yet, too, there remain those who have quite a virgin sense of the fact that things are and things die, and we think tenderly of them precisely because of the death that is in their birth. The concrete confronts us as something almost personal, and the abstract seems deathly and anti-human. Actuality in all its verve and spontaneity, the logic of life. The genesis of things is not then but now. The creative act is a contemporary act, the world is lyrical with the novelty of being. It is only our minds that are senile, only our ideas that are dying. Our realism may be naïve but things *are*. We tend to primitivism. "Nature" is man minus mind; we are bodies, and so are flowers and seas and machines. It is a monistic world, and, as it closes on us, we recognise the Waste Land. Where all things are body, man is a materialistic determinist.<sup>4</sup> The new universe has been depersonalized because mind makes the person, and where there are no persons we are all communists. Our very joy in the uniqueness and truth of the concrete is darkened and drowned by the material necessity that kills its spontaneity and ours; only so long as the concrete had its roots in spirit could its flowers have any meaning or their birth any joy or their death any mystery.

God is breaking through the historical process—the Person who makes the concrete personal. Gassed and poisoned by despair, our selves no longer present an aesthetic spectacle to us and we are ready to say "No" to self, ask God what He wants and let Him break us suddenly to the fresh air; it is torture, but it is surgical. Baptism is not escapist. It wants life, it is not afraid of it. The unbaptized become Stoics and so commit cultural suicide. Gentleness is to nature what charity is to supernature. This gentleness is the life-breath of art, what makes it human. It breaks the ice between man and man, and its lack formalizes social intercourse. Without it we are automata and our intimacies are

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<sup>4</sup> And an artistic functionalist. Industrialism is also the result of monism.



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animal.<sup>5</sup> The world of Hitler and Stalin, of communism and fascism, is too masculine to be gentle. It is a Stoic world, and deifies force, not culture. It is the world for heroes and its gospel is the survival of the fittest.

But we are not heroes, and as the concrete world is precious because it can die, so we are precious because we can be broken by time. We also are tragic things, because our creative exuberance is held against odds, and at any moment a blow may drive the heart out of us and so leave us—broken things that shall not be mended again. The Stoic is never broken, is not gentle to broken people, does not care about breaking people and things. He scraps tradition, he modifies tragedy; the compassion of Jesus Christ is an insult to him. The Byronic lie is an easy lie to tell, and easy to believe because it is all about oneself. But the reality, the very poetry of the human race, is that it is brittle and it can be broken.

The Stoic is a hero because his world is only for fun. The Christian's world is for fun secondarily. The Stoic's is an aesthetic attitude to life. Men are not any longer pantheists getting sermons from stones, or Christians getting sermons in churches, but aesthetes getting sermons in novels. Men want life, and when they will not take it from baptism they are born again in novels; they can thus see things synthetically; they can re-create themselves in fiction where baptism re-creates them in fact. We must take men as they are, and the Catholic literary critic has to remember that men now go to novels not for literature but for life; not for fun, but for theology. Character begins to matter, plot begins to go. Man is in love with himself.

Love God, love our neighbour. Christ is both our neighbour and our God. God is faithful because He is eternal, and we cannot escape Him because we can only escape the temporal. There are theological Stoics who are so much in love with God that they are not afraid of Him.<sup>6</sup> We have no

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<sup>5</sup> Communist poets defend homosexuality. Cf. Mr. Auden, André Gide, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Macmurray in *Creative Society* says that Fear is unchristian.

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need to be afraid indeed if there is no reality above the human reality. But our love is a small thing and pain makes it snap and God intervenes in public and personal history like a thief in the night. The Stoic is not afraid, but his love is frigid. The furtive fear of puritans and prigs and "religious maniacs" is not Christian, that is true. Because Jesus Christ was visible, men loved Him and children were not afraid. His Body is visible still, and we who are its members by baptism are not afraid of the Reality that makes us and is our mother. There is no Christian love without fear that does not know the Church in the truth of His flesh. But Christians are ready to commit the sin of the angels and despair of uniting divine and human, of marrying spirit to matter. The Church, like Christ, is not ashamed to be incarnate. She addresses Him *in veritate carnis tuae*<sup>7</sup>; and she too is not less divine because she is real, and not less Christ because she is flesh; she is not afraid to be there.

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<sup>7</sup> Mass of the Epiphany.