

## THE MANICHEAN UNREALITY

GENTILE attributes to post-Renaissance literary heresy the familiar form of Manicheanism. Body and soul, the Catholic believes, are married indivorcibly in this life: the historical Manichee emphasizes the soul and neglects the reality of the body. Historically the Manichees regarded marriage as sinful, with the consequence that many came to inflict on themselves sterilization, for that was their doctrine in effect. The outcome was soulfulness and Grundyism, which have permeated life and literature ever since. If Gentile errs in applying the emphasis on soul, it is because he neglects the counter-emphasis on the body. The revolt against post-Reformation Puritanism implicit in D. H. Lawrence is a natural though blind realization of the unreality of the spiritual superman exploited in romantic art. It is to a negative religiosity that Lawrence is merciless in his exposure of Miriam who was always begging things to love her. His own romanticist exploitation of sex is mere primitivism, but the Manichean attitude is evident in the fatalistic way logic is dissociated from the world of fact as when the Manichees ignored marriage in spite of its necessity for human preservation. It is useful, therefore, to take the fundamental Manichean spirit as centred obviously on either body or soul alone, for either way corrupts human integrity and disturbs the unity where body dovetails with soul.

The soul-emphasis in literature is reflected in modern aestheticism. This is partly due to the critical tendency which refines every line of the poem and partly to the abuse of art as religion. The principal influence, however, is the shattering of the proper unity of body and soul, and the consequent bias in the artist's vision. This tendency can be traced everywhere in the refusal to recognize factories and slums as part of the artistic material, and this exclusiveness was not a mere favouritism on the poet's part to fine language, but, on account of the fundamental depth of the artistic process, led to idealism in metaphysics and a

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sluggish humanitarianism in political social life. In spite of communist poets who wish to make time the instrument of a sensation in opposition to or in evolution from the dreamy futurism of the Utopian materialists, the aesthetic emphasis is by no means dead. In *The Waste Land* the poetry was virtually aesthetic. The war between soul and body was reflected in its author's obsession at that period with the dualism of the ideal and the real and the conflict between past and present. The echoes and quotations of traditional poems were not merged with the new post-war world. Mr. Eliot's picture of the present was grotesque and partial because of his own intellectual and emotional disunity; his own environment had nothing of the natural (almost ordinary) quality of a living present, but was rather parasitical on the life of the past. This is truly aestheticism because it is objectivity half-achieved. The soul-emphasis is subtle, but generally it may be pinned down as a shrinking from the facts of pain and inefficiency of the terrestrial body of man. The poets cannot face the apparent discrepancy between the disorder of matter and the order of the intellect. A similar failure is implicit in Wordsworth's psychological distinction between fancy and imagination in *The Prelude*; fancy, he says, perceives the superficial order and imagination the real order: on the contrary, only the Catholic equilibrium between body and soul can perceive the real order.

In the Press we have become conscious of reactions that are themselves intrinsically Manichean: for, this time it is body-emphasis. We have naturists and nudists who cannot wait for the resurrection of the body, but must have glorified bodies in anticipation. An honest book<sup>1</sup> has recorded these words of sun-bathing: 'And it became clear to me that a true return to Nature could not be effected, for the man who has evolved into a self-conscious being, by any such short cut; that a new spiritual sun had to dawn upon the night of his vexed inner being before he could come

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<sup>1</sup> *A Modern Prelude*. By H. Fausset. (London, 1933.)

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into real union again with the sun that ruled the physical heavens.' The same writer does not share Lawrence's illusion of the defeatist Christ, but he misunderstands Christian thought when he identifies in it the origin of the dualism between nature and supernature: grace perfects nature. Non-Catholic sects have tended to what is in the last analysis a soul-emphasis, by advocating asceticism for itself, or contrariwise to body-emphasis by gratifying indulgence for itself. To-day the virtue of indulgence crowns all. A recent poet, Spender, tells us what we have often been told: the church, representing religion, stands in the way of the sun. Unhappily, bodily indulgence is its own death: the practice of contraception means that the body is uncreative while the soul is creative, contradicting the life-long unison of body and soul.

Dominic brought dogma to the Manichees. The modern artist must feed on the mysteries of religion to illumine the practice of art. While Victorian Bolsheviks threw up tenements exemplifying their embryonic communism with their common staircase, bed (for several people), lavatory, and even house, Gerard Hopkins was achieving an understanding of ordinary people at least externally in his more than linear apprehension of their bodily solidarity; the result was not mere cubism: Felix Randal's grace of body is bound up with 'God's better beauty,' supernatural grace. To-day there is a gap between the poet's expression and his expression-material. He cannot co-ordinate his ideas and the life around him. To do this he must courageously accept body and soul in their fullness, and realise that violation of the soul, sin, involves the unhealth of the body. He must be born again as a whole, in a Catholic fashion. Further, his Catholicism must be whole, so that his art will be near to real things and real people, to objective truth, that it may have the ease of popular song.

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