

MARX AND THE MAN¹

‘**T**O run slap into infinity is a momentarily annihilating experience.’ When a man has embraced an emotional faith in a supernatural, while, by force of puritanical environment, denying the natural, it is unlikely that the faith will live for long. What is not anchored to humanity is no safe and abiding refuge for a man. If he ‘lives in a large modern city where existence is insecure, and change is rapid, and further change imperative; where chaos is a standing threat, and yet in the reflux ballet of becoming every optimistic idea seems on tip-toe to be realised; where at the very lowest one must put one’s best foot forward to keep up with the march of invention and innovation: the How challenges at every turn, and (he) is irresistibly driven into its arms.’ The Why of things no longer concerns him; he joins in the quest for that Utopia which Marxism seeks. It is at least a refuge from the denial of human values which puritanism implies.

And at first he will feel the better for it. ‘It may have been merely the discovery that things which they had hitherto regarded as wicked were not only permitted, not only harmless, but good for one; in any case the whole atmosphere of their thoughts and feelings cleared They were happy without misgiving For suddenly all the suffering in the world, all the evils which they had once accepted as ordained, were revealed as remediable—things that could be “abolished.”’ The convert at first will feel the better for it. But perhaps not for long. For such a socialism is necessarily ‘indifferent to everything “personal”’; its ideal is ‘what is left when man eliminates from

¹ *Poor Tom*. By Edwin Muir. (Dent; 7/6.)

Blackfriars

himself all that is displeasing, unclean and painful; and that residue is finally the mere human semblance, deprived of all attributes save two, shape and colour: a beautiful pallid abstract of the human form; it socialises death so radically as to forget altogether that it is human beings who die, and that all human beings must die.' He is indeed far worse off than before, for his puritanical faith held at least to a personal perfection and happiness in the beyond of infinity: here he has lost both the personal and the beyond. Disillusionment comes, given any depth of feeling and clarity, if only inchoate, of vision. He finds that the feeling of communal, impersonal security, and peace, with which the socialist meeting inspired him, has faded; he finds men once again as they really are, separate, aloof, 'dwindled to their former size again'; he finds himself filled with alarm: 'something far wrong with the whole business; something soft and sticky.' He has severed himself from the Why and concentrated his attention on the How; yet the Why will obtrude itself suddenly on his consciousness, and infinity itself begin 'to weigh upon him like a massive vault, walling and roofing him in.' It is the fundamental and irremediable insufficiency.

Infinity is not to be gainsaid; immortality can find but a sorry substitute, the melancholy of Foscolo shorn even of its poetry. It is a myopic outlook that makes economic values ultimate. And though you may have thought in the first flush of enthusiasm that all evils were 'things that could be abolished,' you will find your faith rudely shaken and your Utopia tottering, if death comes suddenly close to you, comes into your home, takes your younger brother. Mansie Manson found a catharsis other than the purification which Marxism ordains. 'Something so strange had happened that it would have rooted him to a place where he desired far less to be: the walls had receded, the

Marx and the Man

walls of the whole world had receded, and soundlessly a vast and perfect circle—not the provisional circle of life, which can never be fully described—had closed, and he stood within it. He did not know what it was that he divined and bowed down before: everlasting and perfect order, the eternal destiny of all men, the immortality of his own soul; he could not have given utterance to it, although it was so clear and certain; but he had a longing to fall on his knees.'

Mr. Edwin Muir has written a novel which is deeply significant. His story is splendidly told, with insight, and frequent flashes of the poet's vision. It indicates very clearly the antinomy which for more than a century has made European life a dilemma; it portrays the two alternatives; it shows the insufficiency of both. It shows that the Marxist Utopia is a dream which for the individual is hopelessly unrealizable, for no amount of faith in it will make it whole; that there is need of a horizon which takes cognizance of natural values and does not deny humanity, but which, on the other hand, is not put out of reach by the necessary remoteness of a completion in Time; for only the proximity of the eternal can explain and answer the enigma of death, only the hope of immortality can give us fullness of earthly life so that we are 'embedded in it, fold on fold (he longed to go at once and look at Jean, as if she herself were life, sitting there by the fire),' only immortality and the enveloping arm of universal order can make chaos an organic unity, only Endymion's eagle can make the finite free.

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