

THE CHARADES OF METAPHYSICS

'HE was a great man,' says Isaac Disraeli of St. Thomas Aquinas, 'busied all his life with making the Charades of Metaphysics.'

The Charades of Metaphysics, or metaphysical charades, as we generally call them, must not be confused with the Physical Charades, invented by Francis Bacon, nor with the Dumb Charades which are our modern contribution to knowledge. They have a distinct character; they are really quite a different game. In these days when so much attention is paid to Morris Dances and medieval folk-lore, it may be a service to rescue from oblivion the varied accounts of this game which are to be found in our literature. I have drawn my quotations, not from the philosophers, but from the great literary writers of the past, because the best judges of any game are the onlookers who take no part in it. And if I seem to have a weakness for Thomases, it is because I feel that on those who received his name in Baptism, the mantle of Thomas Aquinas must surely have fallen.

Physical Charades was essentially an open-air game. Gallileo spent his spare time dropping bodies¹ from the top of the leaning tower at Pisa: Newton played in his orchard near Grantham. Metaphysical Charades, on the contrary, was emphatically an indoor game, and for this I have the authority of no less a supporter than Thomas De Quincey.

'The scholastic philosophy evolved itself, like a vast spider's loom, between the years 1100 and 1400. Men shut up in solitude, with the education oftentimes of scholars, with a life of leisure, but with hardly any books, and no means of observation, were absolutely forced, if they would

¹ Lest the gentle reader should be shocked by this assertion, we hasten to point out that, in the jargon of Newtonian Charades, 'body' is not synonymous with 'corpse.'

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avoid lunacy from energies unoccupied with any subject, to create an object out of those energies: they were driven by mere pressure of solitude, and sometimes of eternal silence, into raising vast aerial Jacob's ladders of vapoury metaphysics Metaphysics could be pursued by the monk in his unfurnished cell, where nothing ever entered but moonbeams Their vocation lay to metaphysics, as a science which can dance upon moonbeams Total extinction there was for them of all objective materials, and therefore, as a consequence inevitable, reliance on the solitary energies of their own minds.²

The 'aerial Jacob's ladders' reminds us that Isaac Disraeli also discovered this characteristic in their play. He speaks of the 'Herculean texture of brain which they exhausted in demolishing their aerial fabrics.' There seems, then, to have been a good deal of air about, only not, of course, fresh air.

But it was surprisingly energetic for an indoor game. Dumb charades can be pretty strenuous, but they are tame in comparison with the old metaphysical charades. Another namesake of Aquinas, Thomas Carlyle, whom Ruskin calls 'the greatest of historians since Tacitus,' has a passage written with his customary vividness, in which he describes a game actually in progress. It is so graphic a description that we feel he must have been an eye-witness of what he relates.

'Consider the old Schoolmen, and their pilgrimage towards Truth: the faithfullest endeavour, incessant unwearied motion, often great natural vigour; only no progress: nothing but antic feats of one limb poised against the other; there they balanced, somersettted, and made postures; at best gyrated swiftly, with some pleasure, like Spinning Dervishes, and ended where they began.'³ Further on in the same Essay he compares them to 'the Irish

² Essay on Style.

³ Miscellaneous Essays : Characteristics.

Saint who swam the channel "carrying his head in his teeth." But this, we feel, is an over-statement.

No wonder he says that metaphysics is a 'pure, un-mixed, though from time to time a necessary evil.' No wonder he says that 'had Adam remained in Paradise there had been no metaphysics.'⁴ Even the youngest of us tire of these rowdy games. It seems highly probable (I have not found it mentioned by the authorities) that it was on account of the rough-and-tumble nature of their pursuits that the monks kept their cells unfurnished and allowed only the moonbeams to enter. There was, of course, no sun in the Dark Ages.

The term 'Spinning Dervishes' calls for some explanation. While many authorities mention the spinning, there appears to be some difference of opinion as to the exact meaning of the word. Carlyle evidently takes it to mean a continued revolution of the body, but it will be noticed that De Quincey implies rather a spinning of some species of cobweb. This latter explanation is borne out by a significant passage from another great writer. We regret that we cannot endorse every word of it, and we quote it only for the light which it throws on this spinning controversy.

'Nay, I believe that metaphysicians and philosophers are, on the whole, the greatest troubles the world has got to deal with; and that while a tyrant or bad man is of some use in teaching people submission or indignation, and a thoroughly idle man is only harmful in setting an idle example and communicating to other lazy people his own lazy misunderstandings, busy metaphysicians are always entangling *good* and *active* people, and weaving cobwebs among the finest wheels of the world's business; and are as much as possible, by all prudent persons, to be brushed out of their way, like spiders, and the meshed weed that has got into the Cambridgeshire canals, and other such impediments to barges and business.'⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ruskin, *Mod. Paint.*, Pt. iv, Ch. xvi.

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Ruskin's authority must not be ignored. He was very good at metaphysical charades. He tells us so himself:

' I do not speak thus of metaphysics because I have no pleasure in them . . . for everyone conversant with such subjects may see that I have strong inclination that way.'⁶

It is true that this was written when he was a young man, but when we remember how he frowned on innocent undergraduate ragging we marvel that he should have had any inclination at all for such riotous games as metaphysical charades. But this is a digression. The point is that Ruskin agrees with De Quincey that the spinning was an *actio ad extra* (as the spinners themselves would have called it) and not a mere bodily gyration.

Still, everyone will agree that Carlyle's description is more consonant with the barbarity of the age, though there is no reason why, in so complicated a game, both kinds of spinning should not have found a place.

The weaving of cobwebs, however, was undoubtedly an integral part of the game. Ruskin is rather unfair when he suggests that they were deliberately weaved to impede the wheels of the world's business. They seem to have been done merely for the joy of creating. Hudibras, for instance, combined it with another innocent form of handicraft which we seldom meet with nowadays. This 'second Thomas'

with as delicate a hand
Could twist as tough a rope of sand
And weave fine cobwebs fit for skull
That's empty when the moon is full;
Such as take lodgings in a head
That's to be let unfurnished.

There is not the slightest hint in this passage that the old Metaphysicians (as these players were called) had any unworthy motives. Macaulay adds to their hobbies that of working a tread-mill, surely, of all occupations, the one that would give least annoyance to neighbours.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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No, it is only in the avowedly hostile writers that these players are accused of being bad citizens, or of playing a game which, like the saxophone, could be fairly dubbed a public nuisance. Who but the unworthy namesake, Thomas Hobbes, could have perpetrated such an unjust description as the following?

‘The Ecclesiastiques take from young men, the use of Reason, by certain Charms compounded of Metaphysiques, and Miracles, and Traditions, and Abused Scripture, whereby they are good for nothing else, but to execute what they command them. The Fairies likewise are said to take young Children out of their Cradles, and to change them into Naturall Fools, which Common people do therefore call *Elves*, and are apt to mischief.’

We hold no brief for the Fairies, but as regards the Ecclesiastiques, we submit that this passage exceeds the bounds of fair comment. Macaulay’s account of their activities, while it may make them seem monotonous in these days of progress, certainly does do justice to the innocuous character of their pastimes:

‘. . . labours resembling those of the damned in the Grecian Tartarus, to spin for ever on the same wheel round the same pivot, to gape for ever after the same deluding clusters, to pour water for ever into the same bottomless buckets, to pace for ever to and fro on the same wearisome path after the same recoiling stone.’⁷

It is interesting to note that Macaulay agrees with Carlyle in his interpretation of the spinning. Of the other activities there is not one that could reasonably be complained of by neighbours.

The supreme glory of our Dumb Charades is that they have discovered the marvellous laws of dressing up. Yet even here they seem to have been anticipated by the inventors of Metaphysical Charades.

⁷ *Leviathan*, Pt. 4, Ch. 47.

⁸ *Essay on Bacon*.

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Hobbes, who was certainly no lover of the game, is forced to admit that they knew something of this art. 'This doctrine of *Separated Essences* [a favourite charade], built on the Vain Philosophy of Aristotle, would fright them from Obeying the Laws of their Countrey, with empty names; as men fright Birds from the Corn with an empty doublet, a hat, and a crooked stick.'⁹

It must be admitted that there is some doubt whether this passage really does mean that they dressed up like scarecrows. But the matter is put beyond the least shadow of doubt by a writer of great eminence and impartiality, another namesake of Aquinas whom we have already quoted, Thomas Macaulay.

Macaulay knew a great deal about the old writers, down to small details of domestic trials that have escaped many other historians.

'We know,' he says¹⁰ for instance, 'that the ancient sages liked the toothache just as little as their neighbours.'

According to him, the ancients were primitive in the art of make-up, though we can see in it the germ of the expansion that came about in the Middle Ages.

'They filled the world with long words and long beards.'¹¹

In the later days of Scholasticism, they certainly reached a high standard of theatrical efficiency. Speaking of the decline of ecclesiastical power in the fifteenth century, he attributes it chiefly to the fact that the audience began to see through the make-up, and so began to tire of the game—an explanation with which we readily agree:

'They stood behind the scenes on which others were gazing with childish awe and interest. They witnessed the arrangement of the pulleys, and the manufacture of the thunders. They saw the natural faces and heard the natural voices of the actors.'¹²

⁹ *Leviathan*, Pt. iv, Ch. 46.

¹⁰ *Essay on Bacon*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Essay on Machiavelli*.

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It was then, and not till then, that people gave up playing this time-honoured game. Under the influence of an English playwright named Bacon (who is said to have written all Shakespeare's plays for him) the minds of men were turned to more useful pursuits. A New Organ to replace Aristotle's was the first improvement and later came the footlights. It will be remembered that the Metaphysical Charades were generally played in the dark, or at best by moonlight. That is why Hobbes treats of them in the *Kingdome of Darknesse*, where 'the Ecclesiastiques walke in Obscurity of Doctrine, in Monasteries, Churches and Church-yards.' But with Bacon came the blaze of footlights and the glamour of the modern stage. As a reviewer so eloquently put it:

'How nobly is the darkness which envelopes metaphysical inquiries compensated by the flood of light which is shed upon the physical creation!'¹³

Of Physical Charades and Dumb Charades we need say little. Their superiority has been often proved: their glory has often been sung. That the new game was a break with tradition is obvious.

'It would have been hard to persuade Thomas Aquinas to descend from the making of syllogisms to the making of gunpowder.'¹⁴ It would, indeed.

That the new game was a move in the right direction, towards Prosperity and Progress, is equally obvious.

'Ask a follower of Bacon what the new philosophy, as it was called in the time of Charles the Second, has effected for mankind, and his answer is ready: "It has lengthened life; it has mitigated pain; it has extinguished diseases; it has increased the fertility of the soil; it has given new securities to the mariner; it has furnished new arms to the warrior; it has spanned great rivers and estuaries with bridges of form unknown to our fathers; it has guided the thunderbolt innocuously from heaven to earth; it has

¹³ Quoted by Newman, *Essay on Rationalism in Religion*.

¹⁴ *Essay on Bacon*.

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lighted up the night with the splendour of the day; it has extended the range of the human vision; it has multiplied the power of the human muscles; it has accelerated motion; it has annihilated distance; it has facilitated intercourse, correspondence, all friendly offices, all despatch of business; it has enabled man to descend to the depths of the sea, to soar into the air, to penetrate securely into the noxious recesses of the earth, to traverse the land in cars which whirl along without horses, and the ocean in ships which run ten knots an hour against the wind." ¹⁵

In short, it has made this England a land fit for heroes to dwell in.

' If we were to prophesy that in the year 1930 a population of fifty millions, better fed, clad, and lodged than the English of our time, will cover these islands, that Sussex and Huntingdonshire will be wealthier than the wealthiest parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire now are, that cultivation, rich as that of a flower-garden, will be carried up to the very tops of Ben Nevis and Helvellyn, that machines constructed on principles yet undiscovered will be in every house, that there will be no highways but railroads, no travelling but by steam, that our debt, vast as it seems to us, will appear to our great-grandchildren a trifling encumbrance, which might easily be paid off in a year or two, many people would think us insane.' ¹⁶

We should.

GODFREY ANSTRUTHER, O.P.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Macaulay, *Essay on Southey's Colloquies*.