

FREEDOM TO SURRENDER

“NOW it appears to me that almost any man may, like the spider, spin from his own inwards, his own airy citadel. The points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine web of his soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean—full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wanderings, of distinctness for his luxury.” These words of a nineteenth century poet are the doctrine of a decadent scholasticism in creative art. Objectivity is passivity to a world that is only a function of oneself—“the innocent eye,” or else it is creation by the self. But beauty is not a measurement of an eye that first blinds itself to the object measured. It has to be conquered and found, and conquest means pain. It requires the effort of a body and soul caught up in life, in the commerce of the wind and the rain. The philosopher approaches truth by several routes, to do justice to its diversity and without prejudice to its unity: similarly the writer must approach beauty actively otherwise his view will be remote and partial. The Pre-Raphaelite aesthetes selected beautiful words from a dictionary and so composed their poems. The Georgians abandoned the dictionary for the countryside, and the late Georgian, Mr. Auden, abandons the countryside for the town. But objectivity requires only one abandonment, and that abandonment neither the nineteenth century nor the twentieth century can countenance: and that is the abandonment of the self. The work of art is not the visual tension, the interplay of convex and concave. It is plastic action. A private poem is therefore an escape from reality, both because that is the condition of its creation, and because it is public to one, and reality public to all. Mr. Auden’s *The Orators* shows that he is not the fearless rider into the unseen that he claims to be: the recurrent sneer is the expression of an escapism that does not accept the evil he has found, or the necessity that faces him:

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“Nothing shows the power of the enemy more than that while the fact that a state of tension seeks to relieve itself, seems to us to be perfectly obvious, an orderly arrangement, the natural result of such an effort, is inexplicable without introducing first causes or purposive ends.

“The second law of thermodynamics—self-care or minding one’s own business” (p. 41).

Contrasting with this, the Christian surrender to God is an adventure out of the world of self into the unseen world of grace that transcends self. God is the Reality, not merely as the First Cause as Auden would admit, but because every cause can be forced back to Him: and even if beauty does not at least touch reality at a tangent, yet, just because it is something we can never get to the end of, it is in contact with God: for that is the definition of God.

In the ancient world of Fate and Necessity plot was apposite in art. Catholicism upset this unrelenting mechanism and the life of man becomes not a plot but a growth. Yet the extreme of Marcel Proust is not for the Catholic writer more valid than the extreme of Calvin: if the latter chokes growth, the former denies it. Our destiny is hidden but present, as the sacramental Christ is hidden but present. Nevertheless art is not life nor a context for life: it is a notation that has correspondence with life. The cry

Enough of gondolas, hammocks and garlands; I want someone to build me music I can live in, like a house¹

is timely, but the desire is vain. But because art is a notation, sentimentality, even about Catholic things and people, is anti-artistic, realizing as it does the fear of going under the skin of reality, and so destroying the correspondence. With Mauriac, half-hearted Christianity is to be floodlit without mercy if the artist himself is to survive it.

Without plot, however, can the work of art be a unit? Mr. Wilson Knight points out how Shakespeare unifies his work with the symbols, for example, of music and tempest. Mr. Auden himself uses the Airman to symbolize the life of realization of self. Evidently then symbols may or may not

¹ *A Call to Order*, by J. Cocteau, p. 19.

project from reality and nothing represents reality with certitude except reality itself. No external schematic intention can override the dogmas of original sin and the Incarnation, which might well, better than any aesthetic formula, impose their laws on the Catholic novelist. If the dogma of original sin, then the Incarnation, for Christianity is only negative because positive.

The modern writer has not faced Christianity. Auden does not know it, and *The Orators* presents its lowest specimens. He reverts to an ideal of ancestor-worship, which is a denial of history instead of an affirmation, because he reserves it to his biological ancestor. His real ethic however is a private ethic and as much an escape from God as a private poem is an escape from criticism. The intellect has the primacy in us, and imprisoned as it is in the spatio-temporal it cries out for ventilation. Auden admits that God is an end and a beginning. But logic itself asserts that the connexion between beginning and end should not be buried, and that also is God. We are not left to develop our awareness as we prefer, like a machine that turns helplessly until by necessity it stops: that is the loss of freedom. By baptism we enter into a new life whereby Christ becomes incarnate in us, expelling all that is alien to Himself from our bodies and our souls: and we can choose to retain that and expel Him. The dogmas of the Church are the traffic signals that ensure a quiet road and prevent us crashing into other cars: they are even the fuel necessary to the awareness that Mr. Auden would cultivate. Hence there can only be one answer to Mr. Auden's final prayer:

Not, Father, further do prolong
Our necessary defeat;
Spare us the numbing zero-hour,
The desert-long retreat.

If it is defeat in this life, it is zero-hour and retreat in the next, and only in Christ is there victory. There is no other answer.

To be with God everlastingly one must be with Him temporally. Every act must be plotted in line with God's will, and if God's will is admitted, space and time do not

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neutralize it, even paralyze it. If we seek complete terrestrial otherness from God's will, hell itself will complete that otherness alone. The rhythm of reason is not destroyed either here or there; it persists: it becomes insistent. Truth is not a kind of ectoplasm of self. Even the egoist cannot row with the oars flat side up in the water, nor can he swim by propelling the water with an anaemic arm, nor can he sing without pursing up his energy. The naked sense is not the camera of the real. Pain descends like a darkness on body and spirit, and death, we know, is inevitable, and if there is not a light outside, there is a light nowhere. There is often an internal Cross after baptism or before. What therefore I am suggesting is not a surrender to pain and the espousal of Christianity because the Cross is a brilliant metaphor, for even if our life was painless and the access to reality easy, the contemplation of truth would be cathartic, for truth is not only a floodlight, it is a fire; it illumines reality and destroys its antithesis. Grace is dynamic; it creates a new awareness and canalizes the old; there are moments in the lives of the saints when all the effort of mankind rises to an apex and we catch our breath, as we might in the theatre at the voice of an actress singing, as though the sum of her beauty was playing on a single nerve.

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