

ROMANTIC LOVE AND HERESY

THERE is this special reason and excuse for undertaking a lengthy expositional review of M. de Rougement's *L'Amour et L'Occident*,¹ that if, as seems likely, its historical thesis fails to win general approval the book is bound to suffer neglect. Whereas in fact it has a doctrinal significance that does not depend on the soundness of its history. It is alive with the inspiration of a great theological vision. It succeeds in laying open the real meaning of the conflict between the love of *Eros* and the love of *Agape*; and to do that is to display one of the deepest and most vital of all religious issues.

The historical thesis turns on a particular theory concerning the origins of the European cult of Romantic, Passionate Love. It is universally recognized that it descends from the cult of Courtly Love practised by the Troubadours of twelfth century Provence, and that it was through the prestige of their poetry that it captured the imagination of Europe and became thereafter the chief theme of our literature and a dominant force in our civilisation. What is new in this book—new at least in the force of its conviction and the weight of its arguments—is the attempt to show that the Troubadour movement was itself originally an integral part of the heresy of Albigensianism or Catharism. It is maintained that the Courtly Love celebrated by the Troubadours was a symbolic idea invented to represent the unearthly love of Catharist mysticism. The characteristic themes of anguished love, of passion frustrated, of marriage denounced and chastity exalted are interpreted as a secret expression of the Catharist ideal of the flight of a soul from this world and all worldly happiness to achieve union with absolute love. It is then supposed that what

¹ By Denis de Rougement. ('Présences.' Librairie Plon, Paris 1939.)

was intended symbolically presently came to be taken literally—human love to be substituted for divine love, and so was formed the pseudo-mysticism of Passionate Love, through the transposition of Catharist mystical love values into the sphere of human love.

The argument in support of this proceeds somewhat as follows. The heresy of Catharism had become a national cause of Provence, and the Troubadours were of Provence. Some of them are known in fact to have belonged to the 'Church of Love.' In general they frequented or were attached to certain courts that were hotbeds of the heresy. Then there is the striking circumstantial evidence of the close correspondence of their Courtly ritual and behaviour to those of the Catharists. There is the detail, for example, of the single kiss bestowed by the Donna, a sign of initiation into the Way of Love, and known as the *Consolament*. There is the formal distinction they made of two orders of perfection in this same Way of Love. There is their practice of travelling two and two in pilgrim style. There is the motif of their Aubade. There is the fact of their bitter anti-clericalism. But most important, of course, is the doctrinal correspondence. Their destructive, contemptuous attitude to marriage is well known. It was an essential article of their faith that the love they proclaimed could find no place in married life; to attempt to introduce it there would be criminal. But, further, this love excluded not only marriage but physical expression or satisfaction of any kind. Chastity was essentially demanded; and yet it was the vocation of a Troubadour to devote his whole life to the courting of some married woman,² chosen as his Lady, served with utter obedience as his sovereign. That is to say, it is an unhappy, an avowedly frustrated love that they celebrated, a love that yields and is nourished

² Her married state would at once denote—theoretically—her inaccessibility, and provide an opportunity for setting the Troubadour way of love in defiant opposition to married love.

by anguish of spirit, so that it burns in a continual fire of unquenched longing.

Undeniably this was a new way of love to be practised in Christian Europe. Nor could it be paralleled in the ancient classical world—except in the Platonic or Neoplatonic cult of heavenly Eros. And, according to M. de Rougement, the presence of Iranian influences in Platonism is now an established fact! But within Islam a perfect parallel to this Provençal phenomenon is to be found, in the erotic poetry and symbolic ceremonial of a certain school of Sufist mysticism that flourished about the ninth century and onwards. Here the sense of the poetry is professedly religious, the love it celebrates is divine love. And the theology of this school is Manichean. In fact, that was the reason of its being persecuted by Mohammedan orthodoxy and the ground of its formal condemnation. There was the following charge made, for example: 'Adorer Dieu par amour seulement est le crime des Manichéens . . . (ceux-ci) adorent Dieu par amour physique, par l'attraction magnétique du fer pour le fer, et leurs particles de lumière veulent rejoindre, comme un amant, le foyer de lumière dont elles sont venues.'³ Here, heresy and poetry are one. There is little doubt historically that an actual influence was exercised by this Moslem movement in the transmission to Provence both of *her* heresy and of *her* poetry. It becomes difficult, then, to suppose that on this side the poetry and the heresy were purely independent.

However, it is not in the poetry and the ritual of the Troubadours that M. de Rougement finds the perfect symbolic expression of Catharist mysticism, but in the Romance of Tristan and Iseut, which represents the charging of Celtic legendary material with the secret meaning of the Southern heresy; the capturing, therefore, of an important psychological stronghold, the infusion of the heresy

³ Quoted from Massignon, *Passion de al Hallaj*.

into a main stream of European culture. It is held that the love history of Tristan and Iseut is a secret allegory of the dialectic movement of Manichean love, and that it was the achievement of this Romance to supply the heresy with its requisite sacred Myth. Here, again, the subject is one of self-tortured love, of passion deliberately frustrated in order that it may burn more fiercely. For passion gratified is no longer passion. Or in the literal terms of Manichean theology, passion gratified means surrender to earthly love and fulfilment, the abandoning of the way that leads through suffering and death to the burning out of the individual self and its absorption into the Absolute. Nothing could be clearer than that Tristan does not love Iseut. What he wants of her is only the incentive of passion. It is against the law of his love that he should possess her; for, were he to do so, she would at once cease to represent the object of his infinite, absolute desire. As Madame Tristan, Iseut would be annihilated! It is not out of regard for her marriage vows that he compels himself to chastity; it is made very clear that it is in the name of a love that despises the laws of marriage. Her marriage is dishonoured; but only that they may elope on a chosen way of suffering leading to death—to a death, however, that was thought of as glorious and transfiguring.

But as with the poetry of the Troubadours so with the Romance of Tristan, it is supposed that its true meaning was soon lost, and that it became in effect the sacred book of a new pseudo-mystical religion of human love. Passionate human love was divinised, made to be the supreme end of life. And it was for this new religion to inherit all the deadly values and a great measure of the devilish beauty and magic of the heresy by which it was accidentally begotten. This was the coming of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, rising from the foam of Manichean rhetoric.

It must be clearly recognised that this Passionate Love is not the same thing as vehement physical desire. It is, in fact, its enemy. It is a spiritual force which by not merely

idealising but in effect divinising this desire, frustrates it. It becomes involved in an endless, mad pursuit of a passionate experience that should comprise infinite, ecstatic bliss. The new spirit is one of essential infidelity; for it is bound to repudiate whatever is finite, limited. For a moment it may imagine that it has found its 'ideal'; then, being disillusioned, it is away again on its mad career. It hates and despises marriage. It considers itself to be above all laws, whether of morals or of honour or of happiness. It imagines that its fever is the working out of some magic philtre (as in the Romance), that it is the creature of a terrible, glorious, unchallengeable Destiny. It can only feed on suffering and frustration, which it thinks of as purifying and life-giving and as opening the way to some all-important source of Knowledge. Those who are free from its own madness it represents as the slaves of shoddy bourgeois conventions of morality and happiness, as ignoble creatures who do not know what it is to 'live.'

When allowance has been made for all the various healthy ways in which the theme of tragic and heroic love can be employed, common sense will probably agree that this spirit of Passionate Love of M. de Rougement's describing, or something very like it, is a very real and active force in our present civilisation. One might very well disagree with many points in the account here given of the former marks it has made on history; but it is certainly true that since its first appearance it has held powerful sway in our literature and has been a constant influence fostering the cause of paganism against Christianity. Among the characteristic phases or moments in its history are those of its Don Juanesque degradation, of its eighteenth century German florescence, of its Wagnerian grand climax, and of its modern vulgarisation largely brought about through the propaganda of the cinema. Finally, there is a brief account here of the very latest phase arrived at—represented for M. de Rougement by such exponents as 'un Lawrence, un Caldwell, un Falkner'—in

which it is no longer emotion or sentiment that is glorified, but physical instinct and appetite itself. Romanticism is ostensibly repudiated, only to be taken up with on a lower level. ' Je voudrais avoir autant de vitalité qu'une vache ' is a well-chosen sample saying.

At this point one ventures the comment, that in view of the close spiritual relationship manifestly existing between the cult of Passionate Love and the heresy of Manicheism, to perceive that it sprang from the heart of Manichean Provence, bearing all the outward signs of heretical relationship mentioned above, and still to hold that it had no vital historical connection with the heresy—surely it is that that deserves to be called a daring hypothesis. It might occur as an objection to the present view that a great deal of the Troubadour poetry emphatically suggests a more than symbolic preoccupation with human love; added to which there is the known fact of the licentious manner of life of a good number of these poets. But it is here acknowledged that the number of Catharist initiates among the Troubadours may have been very few; that many of them may have been entirely unaware of the original mystic sense of the language they used and the ritual they practised. Even though it were finally decided that the object of Troubadour poetry throughout was the exaltation of human love, it would not affect the essential meaning of this book. It would only so far mean that the Troubadours as a body were victims rather than preachers of the heresy, original exponents of that sub-product of Manicheism that is the cult of passionate human love.⁴

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⁴ Yet it needs to be remembered that to men of that age it would not seem necessary in using the language of human love for purposes of religious symbolism to refine and etherealize the terminology.

The essential doctrinal components of the gigantic 'heresy,' of which Manicheism is a branch, are Dualism, creational, cosmological Dualism, and transcendent Monism. Working as a Christian heresy it disintegrates Christian truth with incomparable thoroughness. It cannot allow the reality of the Incarnation, cannot allow that the Word was made Flesh, that the Light really shone into the Darkness of this world. The divine is utterly opposed to what is finite, diverse, created. Salvation can only be by flight from the order of creation, which is an order of essential evil. Creatureship is not a mode of relationship to God: it is the disaster of being separated from identification with God, the Absolute. The return to God, therefore—and accordingly the aim of love—consists in the process of reabsorption into the Absolute. The movement of love is thus a movement away from life, towards death; a movement that refuses to enter into relations with anything belonging to this order of creation. The only possible function of this love is Desire. It cannot be creative, for there is nothing upon which it can seize and work. According to this heresy, love of one's neighbour would be heretical. In this life there is only one conceivable object upon which this desire can fix itself, and that is death; or else suffering and denial, interpreted as stages on the way to death. For that way alone lies the hope of rescue from the state of createdness, of individual existence.

Such was the heresy, contained in certain forms of early Gnosticism, that both St. Paul and St. John had to meet as the chief menace to the truth they taught. It is perhaps not far-fetched to see it not merely as the first and greatest Christian heresy, but as the aboriginal heresy of the world, considering the hatred it has of creation and the attempt it makes to deify man. The Oxford Dictionary happily quotes from Echard: 'Leo said that the Devil reigned in all other heresies, but had raised his very throne in that of the Manichees.' Particularly interesting as coming from Echard. And yet it is a common notion that the

Albigensian Crusade was launched in fury against some eccentric kindly variety of an evangelical mysticism.⁵

St. John's constructive counter-doctrine centres in the enunciation of the reality of the Incarnation. It can be found summarised in the prologue of his Gospel. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . All things were made by Him . . . And the Word became flesh.' The world that was of God's making is not merely saved by the Incarnation; it is re-created. It is properly, characteristically, formally, a place, an order, in which to attain to communion with the Blessed Trinity, for those who accept the grace that is abroad. Supreme love in man must no longer be thought of as primarily a straining away from the temporal, the finite, to an absolute that is Beyond, but as a closing with infinite love that has tabernacled in the heart of the temporal, of the finite.

Through the Incarnation, the infinite longing of the human heart is pacified. And yet precisely as Desire it has not been satisfied. For God has not unveiled the glory of His divinity. It is only by Faith that He can be found under the species of the temporal, the finite, the limited. And nevertheless it is said, and it is true, that 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst again.' It is that the frenzy of desire has been healed. But the all-important explanation of this is that a *new* Way of Love has been begotten—a way of love that is not in the same line with that of desire. This new way of love is that of Charity, of *Agape*. Through the Incarnation men have been taught and given to love God in Himself, for His own sake; and no longer merely as desirable; to love Him, that is, with the love of friendship. So that now, instead of an egoistic flight from everything that does not promise to

⁵ Mr. Ford Madox Ford's *Provence*—for the rest a very civilised and charming book—is perhaps the most notable recent contribution to this fund of stupidity.

satisfy the craving of desire, an active, generous love is at work which can find scope and happiness in what is not desirously all-perfect, provided that it there finds the opportunity of 'doing the will' of the One it loves.

It is possible at this point to insert a passage of Thomistic exposition in order to render the sense of the doctrine of this book; for the correspondence is substantially perfect. It is a matter of expounding a little further the significance of these two ways of love:—Let it be said, then, that it is the first and the indefeasible instinct of man to love himself. He naturally takes *complacentia* in himself, seeks his own well-being, bears towards himself what is called a love of *Benevolentia*. It follows that insofar as they are seen to serve the cause of his well-being he will presently also 'love' things outside of himself. This is not to love them in themselves, for their own sake, or for their own good. Such love as this is therefore called the love of *Concupiscentia*, or of Desire. It is a love which does not seize upon what is 'substantial,' but on what is 'accidental.' It skims the surface of reality. It loves, for example, not persons but qualities of persons, which it can assimilate, make part of itself, and so be enriched by. It 'loves' a person merely for the sake of beauty or wit or charm, etc., or for the sake of the satisfaction of being-in-love or having-a-friend. Hence the anguish that attends on this way of love, through the realisation that what is most real, most truly desirable, is not attained. Nothing is attained, in fact, except the self. Apart from self, there is only acquisition. And while it remains unmodified there is no possible triumphant issue for this love of desire. For it is not possible to absorb the infinite into oneself, or oneself to be absorbed into the infinite, into God. But that is precisely the hope that is entered upon in the mysticism of Manicheism and—in effect, at least—in the pseudo-mysticism of the cult of Passionate Love. The only way of life is through a new way of love that is not immediately a movement making for self-fulfilment, but a recognizing, an acclaiming of subsistent

goodness in another and a cherishing of that goodness for its own integral sake. So to love is to find *another* self. It is to love another with the same love of Benevolence with which one loves oneself ('Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'). It is to be enriched by a relationship of one's whole self to another whole self. It is by this process that is not directly a seeking of self-fulfilment that true self-fulfilment is reached. This is the deepest meaning of the law of sacrifice, that one can save one's life only by losing it. If Charity is to be born Desire has first to die; and then it rises again re-made. 'We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love the brethren'; that is to say, with the love of *Agape*.

The formula of the supreme love of *Eros* was that of the yearning of the soul towards the absolute. The highest symbol of the love of *Agape* is to be found in marriage, in the marriage of Christ and the Church. Man cannot *become* infinite, but he can enter into the relationship of friendship with God Who *is* infinite goodness. (Friendship is the communion between two persons who love each other with the love of *Benevolentia*.) Given this friendship with God, then already in this world a man can know the happiness, the triumph of love; for the limitations, the suffering, the darkness that still afflict the love of desire in no way frustrate the love that is that of charity. Suffering does not hinder the loving of God for His own sake! And so it is true of the specific movement of Charity but not of the specific movement of Desire, of Hope, that it will never be suspended. 'Charity does not pass away.' It—at least—is already eternal life. And it is able to attain eternal life because it is able to accept, to seize upon, to enter into this life; and so find God, who has become incarnate. The love of desire has not been abrogated—as the Quietist heresy pretends. Only it has become as one aspect of a fuller love. It is now a desire, a Hope, to 'enjoy' God as a friend. Consequently, although in this life it remains restless, it is not feverishly restless; since the

highest movement of love is being realised so long as Charity has scope to do the Will of God, to find God in its characteristic way. For Charity as such that is *sufficient*—to do the Will of God.

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In the order of human love it will no longer appear eccentric to affirm that it is in the acceptance or the repudiation of marriage as an indissoluble contract of love that the issue between *Agape* and *Eros* is summarised. For what repudiates this idea of marriage is normally the conception of marriage basing it on a happiness belonging to the order of Desire. Indissolubility, fidelity is at once precluded. Since desire can be faithful only to itself; whatever it finds it lacks it is bound to go on to covet. Therefore: 'Choisir une femme pour en faire son épouse, ce n'est pas dire à Mlle. Untel: "Vous êtes l'idéal de mes rêves, vous comblez et au delà tous mes desirs, vous êtes l'Iséut toute belle et désirable—et munie d'une dot adéquate—dont je veux être le Tristan." Car ce serait là mentir et l'on ne peut rien fonder qui dure sur le mensonge. Il n'y a personne au monde qui puisse me combler: à peine comblé je changerais. Choisir une femme pour en faire son épouse, c'est dire à Mlle. Untel: "Je veux vivre avec vous telle que vous êtes." Car cela signifie: c'est *vous* que je choisis pour *partager* ma vie, et voilà la seule *preuve* que je vous aime.' The love of *Agape* does not need to pretend that the beloved is all-perfect. What it loves, it loves in itself, for its own sake: it is concerned to give, to make, to create. When two such loves meet a happiness is achieved which desire, of itself alone, could never envisage.

These final chapters of the book might very well be turned into a pamphlet and made a *vademecum* for young lovers. Unless perhaps among the several blemishes, one is to be judged serious enough to prohibit this. For M. de Rougement adopts a final attitude which, ironically

enough, must seem to a Catholic to be a lapse into Dualism of a kind. He proclaims that it is through Agape that Eros finds its salvation. And this is true. Only by this he seems exclusively to mean that physical sexual appetite is saved, by escaping from being caught up in a movement of insatiable desire. As for the emotions, sentiments, dreams, idealisations that attend upon Eros, he seems to find no place for them, as though they were destroyed by Agape. He has failed to recognize that without the love of Desire there can be no love of Agape. A thing cannot seem good in itself, for its own sake, unless it seems good to, for the one who loves it. The meaning of the love of Agape is that it does not love *because of* the joy that accrues from the beloved: it transcends this motive. It is the movement of love that reaches outwards, entirely unselfishly. Because of charity, however, the 'selfish' love of desire is no longer primitively selfish. It is in accordance with, serves the purposes of Agape: flowing into it, flowing from it. It is the achievement of Agape that this world has come to be accepted as being divinely sacramentally significant. Thereupon, whatever beauty is there to be found—instead of being something to weep over with pagan melancholy, because it cannot be wholly grasped and because of its transitoriness—can be taken as expressing something of the beauty, of the attractive goodness, the desirableness of God. It is accordingly something worthy to be dreamed about, to be 'idealised'. It is significant that Dante's love of Beatrice is here given a Manichean interpretation. It seems that one notable historical truth touching his subject has been missed by M. de Rougement: that he has failed to see how a certain Christian 'misinterpretation' of the Troubadours providentially served to further the true cause of Agape.

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