

describes as 'one of history's wonders', and with his own interpretation of pre-1917 Russian history. Nevertheless, the gigantic figure of Trotsky comes through, and his tragedy is the tragedy of Europe and indeed of the world.

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THE OVERREACHER: A Study of Christopher Marlowe. By Harry Levin. (Faber and Faber; 2 IS.)

Overreaching, as the attempt to ignore or overpass the confines of traditional moral and intellectual experience, is seen here as the central theme of Marlowe's plays, and of his own life and character. Professor Levin explores the implications of the word he has revived in his title, through a detailed and sensitive exposition of Marlowe's verse. He examines the way in which the hyperbole of the language creates the superb, monstrously self-assertive figures of the dramas. Woven into the close textual study are references to the literary and historical background of the period, and its moral and theological traditions in the light of which overreaching, as a form of pride, must be understood.

The study moves rather too easily at times between literary criticism and biographical comment, so it is made to appear that the extravagances of Marlowe's own life and opinions, and the excessive appetites of his dramatic figures, are part of the same spectacle. The characteristics of the plays are suggested by the anatomizing of Marlowe's own character. Thus, Professor Levin neatly summarizes the main themes of the plays, but presents them as the appetites of Marlowe himself:

'The unholy trinity of Marlowe's heresies, violating the taboos of medieval orthodoxy, was an affirmation of the strongest drives that animated the Renaissance and have shaped our modern outlook. In the stricter categories of theology, his Epicureanism might have been *libido sentiendi*, the appetite for sensation; his Machiavellianism might have been *libido dominandi*, the will to power; and his Atheism *libido sciendi*, the zeal for knowledge. Singly and in combination he dramatized these ideas. . . .'

Marlowe himself becomes a figure from his own tragedies.

That Marlowe himself may have proclaimed that he was an atheist and a libertine, and shocked some of his contemporaries by the intemperance of his behaviour and conversation, is of course of some interest; but I doubt if it is so essential for a full understanding of the plays as Professor Levin seems to suggest. Faustus's deliberate rejection of grace, as conceived by Marlowe in its whole dramatic context, is a very different spectacle from that of Marlowe's own wild life. The play presents sin and suffering in moral proportions which are not

perceptible in the mere disordered life; and whatever extravagant opinions Marlowe may have professed in his life, he shows in his drama a firm grasp of religious principle and moral purpose which contrasts with the aimless sensationalism of Webster no less than with the subtler understandings and distinctions of Shakespeare.

Perhaps Professor Levin, when he leaves his analysis of the plays to characterize the man and the period, rather underestimates the extent to which Christian ethical and theological teaching must have permeated men's conscience at that time, and commanded an inward assent deeper than any deliberate, external rejection of them. The mode of human experience was formed by the 'taboos' of medieval orthodoxy; and to break the 'taboos' was, in a manner, to destroy the self, as Professor Levin rightly observes in writing of *psychomachia*. The conflict is thus not so simple or unique as it appears when the protagonists are popularly represented as 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' man. It is a pity that Professor Levin has not taken this opportunity to refine upon the popular conception of the opposition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, considered as undifferentiated 'periods', which has led to so much uncertainly based generalization in literary criticism. That he would be well qualified to do so is shown in his penetrating analysis of the plays themselves, which many will find more satisfying than his general impressions of Marlowe and his age.

It is interesting to reflect on the moral sophistication and theological knowledge which Marlowe assumed in his audience, and to consider that, now, the nature and significance of the vices of excess which his dramas portray have to be explained to a well-educated public by a professor of literature. Meanwhile, in some highly-esteemed modern literature based upon theology, a *libido sentiendi* unknown to Marlowe is gratified. For Marlowe, whose drama is based upon his recognition of the objective fact of sin, could never have attempted to sensationalize the subjective condition of the sinner in the way with which we have become familiar in the modern 'religious' play and novel. The plain and resonant statements of situation found in Marlowe:

'So soone hee profites in Divinitie,
The fruitfull plot of Scholerisme grac't,
That shortly he was grac't with Doctor's name,
Excelling all, whose sweete delight disputes
In heavenly matters of *Theologie*,
Till swolne with cunning, of a selfe conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And melting heavens conspirde his overthrow . . .'

contrasts with the excited searching of other people's consciences which characterizes so much recent literature.

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