

THE DEATH OF A WANDERING SCHOLAR

WHEN a man dies we reflect that he might have lived otherwise and attained to a *Times* obituary. W. W. Coupe, one of the more reverent of outcasts, would not have been more than mildly amused by a tribute to his spirit in the columns of *The Times*. But his death should not pass entirely unnoticed. In these days of 'self-expression' and gross over-publication we fail to realise just how many unpublished and unpublicised near-geniuses may live and die under the noses of the eminent and accepted arbiters of culture.

Coupe's work was thinking. He was, in his way, a fine scholar and an interesting philosopher, yet when he died a short while ago only a handful of people knew of his work and were therefore able to recognise the extraordinary brilliance of his analysis. There are many reasons for this, the main one: Coupe. He had no talent for self-advertisement and made little effort at publication. Perhaps he would have enjoyed fame and notoriety, and gained a little happiness from academic distinction, for he was, I imagine, a reckless and ambitious fellow in his youth, and retained to the end an acute sense of humour. But he was by nature observer, analyst, commentator, even perhaps a bird of prey. He did not seek praise, he sought the response of understanding and exchanged ideas. He cared little for the mass, whether of scholars or of newspaper-readers, though he cared always, as every religious man must, for the innocent.

He did in fact physically resemble a bird of prey—a mild and kindly vulture, if this is possible, with a cock of the head more like a robin's than a vulture's.

Whether Coupe did possess academic qualifications of any kind I do not know. He would return no straight answer to questions of this kind. They were irrelevant, even perhaps indecent, and certainly tactless. He had been for some time a Latin teacher in England, and for some time an English teacher in Spain; undoubtedly he spent some years at Oxford University, but I have a strong though baseless suspicion that he left that centre of learning without completing his course, and crossed straight to Spain in the arms of a Cook's Tour. It is possible that he was training for the Ministry and that his conversion to Catholicism caused his flight—I don't know. When the 'Tour' left Spain, Coupe did not. He remained there for more than ten years, poor and contented, until the Civil War chased him over the border. He always retained a deep love for Spain and for the Spanish people, and as a scholar he loved particularly Cervantes and Calderón. An admirer, too, of the great Nietzsche, Coupe was fond of contrasting Calderón's 'Do what is right, for

God is God' (Obrar bien, que Dios es Dios) with Nietzsche's 'God is Dead'.

For Coupe's catholicism was very real. Non-catholics persistently accused him of Jesuitry, for he had that acute kind of intellect often called 'Jesuitical', while Catholics regarded him as almost heretical. He was in fact an experimental architect building his extraordinary palaces on the firm foundations of faith. I have watched him failing to defend himself against the attacks of Catholic-haters, a breed as bitter as Jew-haters, and with more arguments in their armoury, though less justification for their attitude. He did not defend himself nor did he defend the Church, for he judged neither to be in need of the support of his voice. The rock of the Church, he felt, was eternal, and he stood upon it, humble, but not too humble.

He would remove the pipe from between his thin lips, shut his nut-cracker jaw, nod his narrow skull quietly and his blue eyes would twinkle with a mild frostiness. If asked a question he would answer it, but he did not argue. He would discuss, and that is different. He was amenable, willing to listen, even to alter his views, but on matters of faith unshakable. If there was heat in his opponent's tone, then Coupe would agree wherever truth was hinted at, but where truth was entirely hidden he would shake his head and twinkle and say nothing at all, smiling occasionally, for, as he said: 'All conversation is revealing'.

One did not think of Coupe as a Catholic, but as a man, a philosopher and a scholar. He did not proselytize nor display his religion as though it were an appendage of himself—he was too sure of it. He lived on it as on Mother Earth. It was a surprise one day to see Coupe let slip a rosary from his pocket when drawing out a handkerchief.

So far as I am aware, the Catholics made no effort to claim or to encourage their shabby thinker. Of course he was not respectable, and could not even keep his room tidy. It was difficult to understand how a man of intellect who was no abstractionist could be so blind to *matter* as to leave half-empty cans of food lying all over his room. But then, Coupe had no interest in material authority. He was a wandering scholar, not a monk; essentially one of the un-orthodox, an inevitable pauper, an outcast, a watcher on the fringe of society.

There are many such. The difference between Coupe and the others is simply this, a slight difference which few seemed to notice—genius. I agree, it is difficult. There are so many eccentrics, oddities, cranks, quacks, omnivorous readers and convinced expounders. It would be natural to think, after once meeting Coupe:

'Yes, there goes a clever, thriftless, quiet fellow who has read everything there is to read in Latin, Greek, German, Spanish and Russian and prefers the odd to the ordinary. A pity; his type never finds a niche for itself'.

And that is as it should be, for society is transformed by the leaven in the lump. The men who transform society are never recognised by it, for they transform partly because they are indifferent to society and care only for values, which society will not admit unless it can manufacture a brand designed to ensure comfort of mind. In fact these men are hardly noticed at all. Those who *are* noticed are never the ones who initiate (or rather 'perceive' and transmute) ideas, but merely those who twist and transform the ideas given them by the hidden thinkers.

Coupe was aware of this, aware of most things, never a study, but a street and café man, modestly and clearly aware of the destiny of man and his own small part in it. He was content to discuss realities with those interested in his contribution to the illumination of meaning. And his contribution was almost always remarkable. You might at the time think it necessary to remind yourself: 'Yes, but I must separate the extravagant and fantastic from the significant'. Later you would find time to realise your stupidity, for reality *is* extravagant and fantastic. That lecture Coupe once gave, for instance, 'The Reversibility of Perception'—an eccentric, even a ludicrous title. And yet, what a lecture! Coupe was not a good lecturer. He lacked a platform personality, and sensibly preferred to help formulate the ideas of those men *with* forceful platform personalities—and this, to my knowledge, he succeeded in doing. But once unequivocally asked to deliver a lecture, he would deliver a lecture containing enough material for a course—not merely first-rate but even astounding material, the delivery concealing this from most of the audience.

He died of cancer of the brain, and a subscription was necessary to collect the money for his funeral expenses. He left behind him one careful article in an obscure review, two anonymous pamphlets published by an obscure group, and certainly a number of manuscripts he made no attempt to publish and about which, unfortunately, I have little information, though I believe they include a treatise and an unfinished novel. These unpublished manuscripts would be worth their weight in gold—not to posterity, as blind as the present generation—but to any man anxious to discover the meaning of life, not merely to discuss and argue and talk about intellectual problems and to weave tissues of abstractions about the concrete realities of existence.

A few phrases will give an inkling of Coupe's approach. 'The capacity to be mirrored is the sole capacity of corporeality. A mirror can reflect everything except the mirror itself. We cannot see our seeing, or hear our hearing: we can only see a sight, hear sounds. But we can think our thinking.' Obvious enough, but it leads very far, for from it we step to one of Coupe's basic tenets, which is worth reflecting on: 'The act of thinking is not part of the cosmic process at all, but something which cuts across it'. And again: 'The activities of the intellect are an attempt to return to the Earthly Paradise'. 'Ratiocination is the development of the Ego-principle of identity. Will is its affirmation.'

Coupe's preoccupations were those of Nietzsche: Will, the Ego, the nihilism of modern man, the mission and the danger of the intellect. His published essay on Nietzsche, though less original and alarming than much of his thought, is of profound interest, and is prefaced by a more radical analysis than is usual in an age of irrelevant penetration.

'The present situation', he writes, with almost deliberately comic pedantry, 'is one of not knowing which way to turn. It is true that there are not wanting those who are deluded into seeking a salvation in political, economic, cultural and even religious programmes, all of which, as they are ostensibly directed towards the future, lay claim to a species of originality. This is a claim which can deceive no one who has penetrated far enough to see that both spiritually and economically all such programmes are laden with the antagonisms of existing society and that, even if they were realized, any partial relief they might afford would be more than offset by the accentuation of tendencies which, though at one time they gave man opportunity for free development, are now well past the point at which they first began to be destructive of human personality'.

Nietzsche asked for 'a reversal of values' and Coupe claims that Jesus's message was itself a call to the reversal of values, and not to moral progress. The modern idealist, Coupe says, sees the future as plastic, malleable to his own ideas, whereas in fact the forces which the idealist does succeed in setting to work produce results often diametrically opposed to his wishes. What we *can* do, he holds, is to 'change the past by the meaning we give to it, and in so doing even affect the future as well'.

He goes on to consider the thought of Nietzsche himself, who wrote: 'I am a destiny. One lives before me or one lives after me'. Coupe applauds the profundity and acuteness of Nietzsche's analysis of the ego, but goes on to say: 'The cardinal error . . . manifested in the words of Nietzsche . . . is the assumption that the

ego as thinking subject has no identity with itself but is involved equally with the rest of the phenomenal world in the ceaseless, ever-changing cosmic flux. To the *Panta rhei* of perpetual and objectless Becoming, Nietzsche was guilty of the illogicality of attributing that faculty which, as the primary condition of its functioning requires an object—the faculty that is, of the WILL, peculiar to the ego and to the ego alone, of which, under a multiplicity of forms it constitutes the one and the same perpetually repeated self-assertion. . . .’

‘Is it not remarkable’, he goes on, ‘that a philosopher who unmasked the false values of the so-called eternal verities, proving as he did how fictitious they were seen to be, when finally exposed as mere instruments of the ego’s cunning, should have failed to see that the world of the ego is not the world of nature, and that an attribute which is the fundamental expression of the one cannot possibly be applied to the other?’

One can now see clearly the direction of Coupe’s thought, and his attitude is definitely and dogmatically expressed in this sentence: ‘Nietzsche never fully grasped the fact that truth is simply a schematic exposition of the real and phenomenal cosmos, effected by means of concepts which can only divide and isolate *that which is already given* and which as abstractions have an absolute, not a relative, value as necessary modes of operation of the thinking subject’.

Coupe saw ‘the thinking subject’ as ‘invested with an absolute, non-contingent, underivative character’, claiming that man’s existence revolves round two centres—‘one the centre of his vitality, the psychological ego, and the other the thinking subject, the intellectual ego’. Now we see what Coupe is leading up to—Intellect as *Being*.

He was always prepared to illustrate, elaborate and justify this concept, and was never content to rest, but plunged always further and further into the maze of metaphysic. ‘There are two aspects to every concept—a conceivable and an inconceivable aspect. It must too be borne in mind that only in so far as that which can be indicated by thought is a unity can we apply the Principle of Identity A is A and mean the same thing a second time.’ In other words, he is now taking us beyond reason, to a region which he describes as a region lying outside thought—the images ‘on the hither side of the perceptive and ratiocinating faculty—and without which the principle that A is A . . . would be a pure tautology. . . .’

He finishes his essay on Nietzsche with this passage. ‘But however much reason there may be to form the intellectual scaffolding

of any institution, that reason will turn against its own creation and . . . will destroy it. . . . And if we turn to life itself our state is no better, for on the waters nothing stable can be built. There is no salvation from this sorry state unless it be in a constantly creative work in the doing of which we have placed our feet upon a foundation which is outside ourselves. Can we realise our vocation otherwise than in union with Him who in His Person has reconciled all opposites?

'Our civilisation has lived too long upon abstractions, and has ended by sacrificing personality to systems and institutions, all of them . . . the expressions of the ego, the tyrant of self-assertion. . . . In our time the work of the spirit can, from the very nature of the case, only be division and war. Before we attempt another ascent to higher realms of the spirit, we must go down to the waters of life. A man must be born again. That is his indispensable *metanoia*, a repentance, a change of mind and intention; but he must be reborn not only of the spirit, but of water also.'

Well, but that is metaphysical stuff, and where is its originality? Much is owed to Ludwig Klages, a good deal of it can be found in Jaspers, much is Nietzsche himself. For Coupe's originality in matter, approach and treatment we must turn to the two anonymous pamphlets published by London Forum Publications: 'On Innocence' and 'On Casuistry'. (It will be as well to mention here that the 'London Forum' was not formed or run by Coupe himself.)

These are elaborate dialogues between 'Honest Enquirer' and 'Member of the London Forum', the latter putting forward an entirely Coupian philosophy. The originality of Coupe's approach lies in his treatment of words and their literal and figurative interpretation, the amusing and exciting way in which 'Forum Member' leads 'Honest Enquirer' through 'Innocence' and 'Casuistry' by means of the discussion of one specific word after another.

The first dialogue begins like this:

H.E. I understand you are an initiate of the London Forum. I should be most grateful if you could spare the time to make my mind clear on a few points.

F.M. I will do all I can to help you, but allow me to say that you start off under a misapprehension. I am not an *initiate* of the Forum. In fact the Forum has no initiates. The term would imply that the Forum is in possession of some sort of secret doctrine, some occult wisdom, hidden from the generality. That is not so; the London Forum makes no such claims. The esoteric which it expounds is simply the obvious.

H.E. Then if the esoteric is so obvious, why do I not see it?

F.M. The best way to hide a thing is to put it in the most obvious place.

This leads the talk to intellect, that instrument which discovers what is hidden, and Forum Member tells Honest Enquirer he is at fault in causing *his* intellect to 'make constructions'.

H.E. Why should my intellect accept whatever is put before it?

F.M. It is not required to accept everything put before it. All that is required is to stop it showing you what is not there.

H.E. I think all this is nonsense.

F.M. Not in your case, my friend. If your intellect were nonsense it would also be innocence, and there would be a possibility of it understanding something.

Then follows a typical Coupian transition.

H.E. This is mere quibbling. You know very well what I mean. When I say that my intellect makes sense, I mean that what it discovers admits of a rational interpretation.

F.M. Then, my good friend, you should say what you mean. You cannot be too careful in your choice of words; that is one of the first lessons imparted by the esoteric. To make sense is not the same thing, by any means, as to discover sense.

H.E. Then where is sense if it is not in the intellect?

F.M. In-no-sense.

H.E. Did you say innocence or in no sense?

F.M. Both. They are the same thing. If you will pardon a linguistic explanation, the root of the word 'innocence' is the Latin intransitive verb 'noceo' which means 'I hurt', or rather 'I am harmful', but cannot have an object, so that the sense is indeterminate. 'Innocens' is the adjectival present participle with a negative prefix, and means to be harmless and aimless.

A consideration of propaganda follows, and Forum Member says that the London Forum exists to supply a need which no other organisation or Party provides.

H.E. What may I ask, then, is the need which you claim to supply?

F.M. The recovery of lost innocence.

Honest Enquirer, naturally, laughs, but this indeed is the theme of the pamphlet. It is noticeable that Honest Enquirer has definite individuality and character. He is an ego defending itself against analysis, jumping to conclusions to save himself from being dragged further. Forum Member also has character—he is an ironic, humorous, lively pedant: in fact, he is Coupe. The pamphlet is full of

humour. When you remember that the work is anonymous, passages like this produce an affectionate smile.

F.M. The best characterisation or personification of innocence that I know is contained in one of the *Autos Sacramentales* of Calderón.

H.E. And who is he?

F.M. What, have you never heard Mr Coupe speak of Calderón?

H.E. In the London Forum, I suppose you mean. Well, it's only occasionally that I go to the Forum, and as for that fellow Coupe, I never take any notice of what he says. He's numbered among your innocent ones, I suppose?

F.M. Well, not exactly. That is hardly how I should describe him.

The pamphlet continues through considerations of all kinds to the point where Forum Member says:

F.M. The understanding of the esoteric means the understanding that the mind of man is being built.

H.E. Built in innocence?

F.M. I have told you that innocence may be recovered—but on another plane. That is the re-birth of water and the spirit of which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus when he came to Him by night. . . .

H.E. accuses Forum Member of 'exploiting innocence'.

F.M. Innocence recognises that it receives from outside, that wisdom is revelation, and that it expresses nothing of itself. Exploitation occurs when we fondly imagine that we are uttering our own words, and are inspired by our own enthusiasm, whereas all the time the words, the ideals, the righteous causes, the enthusiasms are suggested from outside, and *we do not know it*.

Forum Member then considers the efforts of those men he terms 'Builders of the Tower of Babel', and the pamphlet ends:

H.E. I take it then that knowledge exists for the sake of freedom, which is fundamentally consciousness, and that the outcome of the work of the builders is that innocence passes from unawareness to wisdom?

F.M. It is as you say, but it is not done with the intention of the builders, who reject innocence, which nonetheless becomes the cornerstone.

The writer of whom Coupe most reminds me is Lewis Carroll. Both are philosophers and poets of a kind and both surprise the reader by taking words *literally*, Carroll for fun, Coupe to demonstrate their true sense. The work of both appears at first sight slightly obscure, and when you study it, crystal clear.

Coupe ends his pamphlet 'On Casuistry':

F.M. Every intentional effort to encase the ego makes it all the more virulent. Every attempt at limitation is, with more or less subtlety turned into a defence. I should not be surprised, indeed, if Mr Coupe is not striving to make—or shall we not say, to 'make out—a case for his own ego and, like the rest of us, can't quite manage it.

Although his work is done, his task fulfilled, so that he may be at rest, I should be sorry to think that such an ironic and delightful philosopher's passing should be ignored and his words forgotten.

J. B. PICK.

STATISTICAL TRUTH¹

THE natural sciences, especially physical science, have made very great strides in this century. I refer especially to Einstein's theory of relativity and the quantum theory. There can be no doubt that these theories are valid; that is to say, either they are true, or they are abstractions bearing such a relation to truth that they systematise observations and lead to correct predictions. Among scientists theories are no longer regarded as true but have come to be recognised as abstractions, as a result of the teachings of Mach, but even more so as a result of the impact of relativity and quantum theory. The naïve realism of Newtonian physics is dead. But at the same time nobody has succeeded in building up a system of natural philosophy showing exactly how theoretical science is related to reality. The effect of this has been, on the one hand, to move scientists towards scepticism or even a kind of Kantian idealism, as in the case of the late Sir Arthur Eddington, doubting or denying the validity of the concepts of reality and truth. On the other hand it has prevented the Thomist arguments for the existence of God from resting upon the conclusions of natural science through the mediation of natural philosophy. Instead they rest upon the nature of common-sense. Indeed, there is another way of stating that at present there exists no system of natural philosophy. If there were, the flagrant and absurd contradictions between natural science and common-sense knowledge would be resolved without in any way destroying either common-sense or natural science. Now one of the very important causes of such conflict arises from the absence of an explanation of the source and validity of the statistical method. In default, the statistical method is accepted on observational grounds alone and so, standing

¹ The text of a paper read to the Newman Association during the Summer School at Stonyhurst College.