

WOWSERS

EXAMPLE is the best definition,' says Sainte-Beuve. Far from it, say we. It is the easiest, as small boys find out before their preceptors. It is the test, the touchstone of definition, but it is not definition, so how can it be the best? French clarity, where art thou?

Now what is a Wowser? It would be easy to define by examples. Stiggins and Chadband were Wowsters with a difference: they embodied only a sect, a thing, virulent and intense; even if drowned in Dickens's scorn of all the tribe. The thing was extant in his day (when has it not been?), but the inspired nomenclature was in the womb of time, if this be not an indecent expression by now (for the Wowser works like the coral insect, defiling words deep down by identifying them with defilement in his imagination, and he rages like the tempest against Beauty and her father, Freedom-of-Heart, and her mother, Simplicity).

So far as researches go, the priceless word Wowser comes to us, all dewy with another dawn, from Australia. They understand and use it there, I am told, for a minister or apostle of the *Religions of Talk*; those which have no Sacrament, certainly no sacrifice, no facts remaining, and, consequently, have to fall back on a 'morality' which is the ember or ashes of their burnt-out enthusiasm, and is perpetually slipping its hold on fact. 'Sinful' used to be one of their favourite words, applied with plentiful lack of discrimination; discrimination being slow and even painful, and, as I said, their religion has no sacrifice, and must flash, for it cannot shine.

The spirit was from the beginning. Cato, the Stoic politician, was a Wowser. So were the Pharisees and the Scribes and the Zealots. 'Tis one who having the key of knowledge enters not in, who pays the law every

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deference save that of loving to understand it, or loving to make it lovely or reasonable. Wowsers want to glory in our flesh. They are amateur moralists who pit righteousness against freedom and trade them wholesale. Therefore, they lose their temper freely in the good cause, and confuse the wrath of men with righteous indignation. From this they advance to make indignation the master instead of the servant, and the sum of all is that there need be no love in the fulfilling of the law. So they set five-bar hurdles for cripples, and will insist that 'tis the chief use of cripples.

Let no one think that holding the true faith will surely exempt him from this insidious *eidolon*. We ought to know by now the class of mind which acquiesces in the notion that even God was forgetting His holiness when He invented sensual pleasures, especially when He invented Sex, which is the crown and sum thereof. But we do not yet take for granted the type of mind which finds the shock of novelty an overwhelming reason against the morality of anything novel, even though the newness be merely subjective and accidental to individuals. Some of these cannot take time to get used, and are out brandishing the sword of the spirit against windmills. Indeed, it is amusing to hear their incoherence against quite harmless or comparatively harmless things, and to see the camels of olden corruption they can swallow! To descend to particulars: every dance is bad while it is new—indeed, all dances are wicked even when they are stale, as singing on the Sabbath was in Scotland; and we are deaf with the eternal fulminations against what women are wearing or doing, or not wearing or not doing. The grand proof of the universality of this mental or moral infirmity is that only one commentator in à Lapidè is quoted as intelligible on the Parable of the Unjust Steward—one in two thousand years,

and he does not now get any credit whatsoever. God's indulgence is censured as putting a premium on sin! So now we look to the police to compel folk to those people's notions of righteousness. Imputed indeed!

As these words were written before Chesterton's *Sidelights* was published, it may be interesting to quote from page 147 of that book: 'the particular scruple of the modern puritan differs from that of the original puritan save in the essential point, that both have always been at once violent and trivial. The essential of the Puritan mood is the misdirection of moral anger. It is having righteous indignation about the wrong thing . . . they take care to be wrong about what they think wrong.'

Conscience maketh cowards of us all, and it is not easy to have a sensitive conscience and at the same time dispense with the waterproof or armour-plate, call it what you will, of mere watchfulness about the letter of the law, so that it would be unfair to ascribe Wowserism merely to Spiritual Pride, though much of it can be credited to that account.

Bremond's famous book on Armand de Rancé cannot solve the problem as to whether his hero were a prey to spiritual pride or to the panic which would seize a deeply religious man at seeing the physical and moral decay in which a great order had settled down content. Perhaps spiritual gunpowder was the only remedy for the ruin, but he specialised in that sort of gunpowder. Even his partiality for the Jansenists need not be confused with a persuasion of Jansenism; and from the stories one hears of Dr. Pusey, one cannot help thinking that though his Puritanism was extreme, yet he was a very humble man. However, there is nothing related of him analogous to the story of St. Philip Neri, when he perceived a tendency among his friends to credit him with superior holiness. As rumour began to thicken, he lay in wait for the beg-

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ging friar, Felix, and seizing from him the great bottle in which the Saintly Felix collected all the offerings of wine, good, bad and indifferent, he put it to his lips with great gusto and took a long draught with every appearance of enjoyment. Fortunately, for his purpose, there were enough Wowsers in the street to spread the good news that Philip was a glutton and a wine-bibber.

But these rambling remarks must commence to be more instructive. We know Who said, 'the letter killeth, the spirit quickeneth.' Why so? Because the Spirit breatheth where it listeth, and if the man with the fixed idea is the French for an uncertified lunatic, so the over-rigid administration of any given law leads to the breaking of countless others, in fact to lawlessness. (Is it necessary to mention Prohibition, brought in under the very misleading name of Temperance?) The plight of this country in the mere matter of sweepstakes would be tragic if it were not comic. The tragedy of course is the quantity of unearned increment accruing to the Irish Free State, but the tragedy is older than this. The improvement of the breed of horses, which really means running races so as to have something to bet on, has cost the toiling millions, and even the idle rich, probably more than the value of all the horses put together, though it kept the money in the country: all the Wowsers in Christendom do not amount to the elimination of a single race-meeting, and even the papers edited by them or for them must perforce produce elaborate daily columns dealing with one kind of information or another on this subject. But Wowsers continue to send the police on their errands in another direction. The men of money cannot be prevented from endless improvement of the breed, etc., but the commonalty can be interfered with, and sham crimes can be prevented while the real ones go on.

If you are looking for the monument, look about you. They manage these things much better in countries where the Wowsers never capture the seats of the mighty. Instead of race-meetings, every city of over a quarter of a million inhabitants has a grand Saturday drawing, a State Lottery, in fact, in which only eighty numbers can be drawn upon. Only five numbers are actually taken from the urn, and the chances are calculated actuarially so that a poor man who puts a halfpenny on a certain five numbers coming out in order receives about a million times the value of his stake. If his numbers come out in any other order, he only receives about half that amount, and so on. Those with a passion for accuracy far greater than that of the present writer, may go to such cities as Florence and Milan and study the conditions locally; but it must be seen at once that, whereas numbers can only be drawn, horses can be pulled, or doped, or even scratched. We know of one race in which only six horses ran, and all except one were backed by the owners to lose. But one of the outside five, bestridden by a careless jockey, got the bit in his teeth and came home half-a-field in front of the intended winner. The present writer can guarantee the accuracy of this, and even the place, but not the day nor the year.

Francis de Sales was not thirty years old when he began his *Controverses* (1595). The Chablais was subject to the Duke of Savoy, but it had been converted to Calvinism from Berne and Geneva, and though there was a truce between the Protestant Swiss and the Duke, they were always threatening to break it if Popery got too active among the people of the Chablais. So the district was not only Protestant, but was politically interested in keeping on good terms with Geneva and Berne. (It was as if a king of Ireland in 1797 wanted to restore Ulster to National unity and

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orthodoxy, with all England full of Ironsides who kept threatening to repeat Drogheda and Wexford in Belfast and Portadown if those places should for the instant cease to celebrate the twelfth of July.)

Even those personages who were dying to hear what he had to say, had to come in disguise to the church, and listen in the organ loft, crouching down behind the parapet. He went to Thonon because it was the most Calvinistic town in the Chablais. The Calvinist ministers there kept wisely silent, so it is to their studied silence that we owe the writing down of what he had so well spoken. He had to write several copies out and send them to the ministers, since he could not get them printed for quite a long time. He complains of having no books at hand, and regrets that *Messieurs les Ministres* did not come to listen, as the spoken word is alive and the written comparatively dead.

For the French clarity which is to seek in Sainte-Beuve is clear enough in Francis de Sales, and those who want a clear definition of the Wowser will find it in his works : ‘ Ceste grande facilité que les hommes ont de se scandaliser fit dire, ce semble, a Nostre Seigneur, qu’il estoit *impossible que scandale n’advint*, ou, comme dict Saint Mathieu, *il est nécessaire qu’il arrive des scandales*; car, si les hommes prennent occasion de leur mal du souverain bien mesme, comment se pourroit-il faire qu’il ni eut du scandale au monde ou il y a tant de maux? ’¹ ‘ If men take occasion of sin from the sovran good Himself, how shall there be no scandal in a world where there is so much ill? ’

He goes on to say how there be three kinds of Scandal; one called by theologians Active, and that is an evil act which occasions ill-doing to another; the person giving this scandal is rightly called scandalous.

¹ Preface to *Les Controverses*. Oeuvres, tome premier. (Anancy, 1892; p. 7, etc.)

The other two kinds are called Passive Scandals, but one kind is from without, the other from within. Those who are scandalised from within are they who having no occasion else, build up and forge themselves one inside their own brain and scandalise themselves with a scandal entirely of their own growing. He that scandalises another lacks charity to his neighbour; he that scandalises himself lacks charity towards himself; he that is scandalised by another is wanting in strength and courage. This last is the least sinful, but the second last is the most sinful, and takes pre-eminence in wickedness because it is the most uncalled for, the most unpreventable, and the most pernicious. It is that of which Our Lord Himself was the object. But Our Lord cannot be called scandalous. How, then, can it be that many were scandalised in Him, and that he was sent for the ruin of many? He came to set up the true ideal of goodness and to destroy the sham. For the cult of false lights wastes the best powers of the soul, and He is the Saviour of Souls.

Francis goes on to say that, as this was the fate of the Saviour of the World, it must needs be that of His Church, for she is one body with Him and she can say with Him, blessed is he that is not scandalised in me. And is not the converse true: cursed is he that shall be scandalised in me? What curse is equal to the curse of the man who takes scandal where it is not given, who makes a trade of scandal, who elevates scandal-mongering into a religion?

Now we have been under this curse for over three centuries, and it does not seem to abate with time. Only its moral value is gone, and it is futile against immorality. But the habit of being scandalised at everything the Church does or suffers has infected the whole body of worldly opinion with scandal at all that calls itself religion, so that half the official Wowers have long ceased to wear any sign of religious dedica-

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tion. Amen, saith the Spirit, but their works do follow them. The party system was founded on the principle of being scandalised at everything the other Party said or did.

Many things in Merry England have withered because of this taking scandal where scandal is not given. In America it is a blight, and America is almost universally immoral. Women are its chief censors, thereby losing the woman's prerogative of mercy. For much more analogous to this subject see Chesterton's merciless exposure of how all this scandal-taking has recoiled upon the takers. They take scandal from infallibility, but they believe self-contradicting politicians and newspapers. They take scandal from the confessional, but they agitate for sex-instruction of the young in bulk, forgetting the fate of him who shall scandalise the least of these little ones.

It has been well said that the secret of a true sense of humour is to take a serious view of things, and then refuse to give way to it. In like manner, it may be that the secret of a true and balanced morality (virtue residing in the middle) is to fear pleasure, but not to hate it. And not to hate ourselves or anyone else for not hating it. God invented all things except sin, and sin is not a creature, but the abuse of one creature by another. The Wowser abuses even Sin.

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