REVIEWS

Of Evil Communications

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I

The determinist historian and critic, Hippolyte Taine, held that a work of literature is necessarily a reflection of the age, environment and culture in which it is produced, and thus should be viewed as though it were a kind of archeological artifact. Here, however, Professor Williams puts Taine’s dictum into reverse by telling us that it is rather the Zeitgeist that reflects the literature. It is no longer possible, he insists, to regard literature “as a passive reflector, a mere mirror which faithfully presents a picture of contemporary manners and morals; it is seen also as modifying the age while at the same time portraying it.” Thus the anarchic violences and animal amoralties of our twentieth century, which seem to forebode the collapse of civilization and the disintegration of society, are the inevitable legacies of a succession of sado-masochistic novels and dramas, supported by the antinomian influences of pedagogical philosophies. In other words our society, or certain elements of it, is now engaged in actualizing the neurotic fantasies of novelists and dramatists in a psychological climate that the deicidal clerics and relativistic moralists have done much to create.

The professor reminds us that the combination of violence, lust and perversion that provides the staple content of our newspapers and news magazines is also to be found in greater or less degree in almost every best-seller or theatrical success, from Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf to Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood, from Peter Weiss’ Marat-Sade to John Barth’s Giles Goat-Boy. There was a certain savage irony in the fact that while one of the worst race riots was taking place in the United States, several local cinemas were showing a film entitled Devil’s Angels, with the accompanying advertisement: “Violence is their god! and they hunt in packs like rabid dogs!” . . . We are teaching savagery and are naïvely appalled at the success of our instruction. It is perhaps more than coincidental that when Martin Luther King was assassinated, Bonnie and Clyde, a film glorifying two perverted killers, was among those nominated for an Academy award. . . .

The title of this book is borrowed from that redoubtable adversary of our age and its idols, the late C. S. Lewis, who seems to have intended the phrase to designate the
dehumanized practitioners and products of the new pedagogy. By the trousered—or sometimes, as he admits, untrousered—apes Mr. Williams means the mass-men shaped in the image of the anti-heroes of contemporary fiction and drama. The mass-man, according to Ortega, wishes to be, and feels himself to be, “just like everybody.” This of course precludes the traditional hero, who is by definition superior and therefore exceptional. Our professor sees the prototype of the modern anti-hero in the character self described in Dostoevski’s Notes from Underground, who is well aware of his own ignobility but rejoices in the knowledge that no one else is any better than he. This attitude of mind and spirit has become increasingly prevalent in our time and has been vastly encouraged, the professor believes, by the leveling tendencies of the modern state. He cites Tocqueville’s assertion that democracies are inimical to the ideal whether in persons, language or actions, and goes on to observe

An ideal is, by definition, a concept or standard of supreme perfection, or in human terms a person of the highest excellence. Egalitarianism, on the contrary, demands a uniform parity of behavior, and in its most extreme ideological form, even of attainment. Under these conditions [the ideal] becomes an enemy. No longer is it regarded as a mode of life to be emulated but as a force to be destroyed, since its existence denies (or at least renders questionable) the whole basis of egalitarian society. . . . Contemporary authors, playwrights and poets thus find themselves in a dilemma. If they attempt to delineate an ideal, they are accused of snobbery, of being anti-proletarian, illiberal, undemocratic, and in certain instances even racist. . . .

The egalitarian principle necessarily imposes the lowest common denominator of taste on contemporary literature, which in turn imposes it on contemporary society. It also accounts for the increasingly pornographic and scatological character of so many novels, plays and films, for after all, as our critic observes,

the surest way to achieve complete and absolute equality is to reduce all men to the same level, to deny their dignity, to stress their animalism and to sneer at any form of idealism. Men and women are (superficially at least) most equal when copulating, masturbating, excreting and urinating, and these are precisely the clinical aspects of human behavior that the contemporary avant-garde has batten on with a zeal formerly associated with the excesses of puritanism.

Thus the distinction between the seemly and the obscene has pretty well been erased. Physiological functions for which the traditional norms of decency demanded privacy, and behavior so bizarre as formerly to have been considered mad or perverted, are now enacted or simulated openly on the stage or before the cameras. Mr. Williams gives us three examples: a play by Jean Genet called The Balcony in which a character castrates himself; a play by Pablo Picasso called Le Désir Attrapé par la Queue in which an actress squats as though to urinate and is accompanied by the appropriate sound effects; a play by John Osborne, that angriest of the angry young men, in which male characters embrace amorously. This sort of thing suggests of course a deliberate intention of the authors to affront normal sensibilities and thereby achieve a succès de scandale. But today’s scandal becomes tomorrow’s “honesty” or “realism,” so that a progressive increase in the dosage of outrage becomes necessary to effect the shock. Gradually, however, the possibilities of obscenity and cruelty will be exhausted, and Mr. Williams seems to foresee a time when sadistic public appetites will demand nothing less than “scenes of such repellent realism that actors and actresses will have to be killed on the stage.”
THE NOVELIST Norman Mailer, as quoted here, spoke of a "decision to develop the psychopath in oneself." Such a statement, Professor Williams tells us, exemplifies the "Raskolnikovian mind," which is also exemplified in the cruelty, irrationality, and moral nihilism of most fashionable books and plays. The anti-hero of Crime and Punishment, it seems, was Dostoevski's prevision of the dominant type of twentieth century intellectual. Like Raskolnikov the radical intellectual is that now familiar figure, the alienated man, weaving destructive fantasies against the society that he feels has rejected him. Again like Raskolnikov he is obsessed by abstract ideas and concepts; he can profess a deep love of humanity while remaining hostile or callously indifferent to persons. This is precisely what makes him dangerous, because sooner or later someone will attempt to put such theories into practice—a Raskolnikov, a Lenin, a Hitler or a Mao Tse-tung. And if one considers the régimes which these last three have established, each one has been characterized by an utter disregard for individuals, a contempt for tenderness and compassion, all in the name of some high ideal.

Mr. Williams inclines to see the Raskolnikovian ethos and the world of trousered apes as the consummative effect of the social, intellectual and literary currents generated and set in motion toward the end of the eighteenth century and comprehended in the term romanticism. In contrast to the neo-classicism of the Augustan age, with its emphasis on form and propriety and its watchwords of reason and restraint, the romantic movement placed the highest value on passion, originality and above all on impulse and action. Mr. Williams cites an aphorism by the proto-romantic William Blake: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires," and shows how this advice has been followed literally by an English dramatist, Edward Bond, whose play Saved, produced in the mid-1960's, contains a scene in which a babe in its perambulator is stoned to death by some young savages. No one who has read the prodigious survey by Signor Mario Praz can doubt the sado-masochistic character of many romantic novels and poems, their influence on nineteenth century fashions and behavior, their part in helping to diminish or discredit the ancient categories of good and evil. But in seeming to claim an opposite and benignant influence for the neo-classical writers the professor may have oversimplified matters. There was, he tells us, in the age of Dryden and Pope a widespread feeling that man had at last reached a stage of civilized existence, or at least was thought capable of reaching such an existence. Poets and artists, philosophers and theologians prized clarity, ease and balance and looked back in horror to what the historian Edward Gibbon called "the dark age of false and barbarous science." The diamond had been found and all that remained was to polish it until it reached a stage of near perfection... Above all, man saw himself as a being in harmony with the universe, which in turn was seen as the outward manifestation of the mind of the Creator... It was by modern standards a comfortable, cosmic view which posed the question of how man could best attain a state approaching the perfection of the universal order which surrounded him. It was to this moral question that the leading minds of the age addressed themselves and, to a surprising extent, a consensus emerged as to what constituted this ideal... It is when one recalls such phenomena as the Hellfire Club, the Mohocks, those gilded prototypes of the jeunesse enragé of our college campuses, the Gordon riots, so much like the incendiary riots in Watts, Newark,
Detroit, Washington and elsewhere, as well as "the squalor and cruelty of eighteenth century London," mentioned by the professor himself, and preserved for us in the work of Hogarth, that one begins to wonder whether the consensus could have encompassed much beyond a small and highly cultivated minority.

III

One important question neglected by Professor Williams is the effect of the extension of popular literacy and the consequent proliferation of both readers and writers. Universal literacy, as some have pointed out, is not without dangers to the concepts of human dignity and freedom; it is one of the means whereby the Conditioners, as C. S. Lewis called them, impose their will on the mass-mind and through the mass on the culture. Certainly the new reading classes created by the French Revolution had much to do with the rise of the romantic novel. Professor Denis Saurat, for example, has noted how the combination of literacy and leisure among the women of the triumphant bourgeoisie made the literary fortunes of Honoré de Balzac, Alfred de Musset and George Sand. The production of novels to satisfy the demand had become an industry. Joseph Shearing, an astute researcher into the foibles, crimes and lunacies of the era, told how

... Every [French] newspaper had its feuilleton; novels were brought out in cheap weekly parts, were sold at low prices, crowded the shelves of the circulating libraries—romances, verses, memoirs were everywhere; the conductors of the new omnibuses read them as their heavy vehicles trundled over the cobbles of Paris, the errand boys were absorbed in "the blood and mud" of Eugène Sue's Mystères de Paris, the elegant lady in her briska or brougham had her copy of Lélia or Léone Léoni in her muff.

... The theatre showed the romantic point of view in the most alluring colors; the noble characters of Racine and Corneille were cast aside; the witty, elegant comedies of Molière were ignored, people and scenes never before considered worthy of the dignity of drama were displayed in the Parisian playhouses amid a fervor of enthusiasm; plays showing a state of moral anarchy were nightly applauded by crowded audiences. ... Plays in which every extravagance and every abomination were displayed had a succès fou in [the] cheaper theatres—La Nonne Sanglante, Le Chiffonnier de Paris, Les Nuits de la Seine, Dix ans de la vie d'une femme, La Tour de Nesle, were some of the best known of these melodramas. So, while the mistress was listening to the ravings of Antony or Angelo acclaiming the genius of evil, the maid was agape before "the bleeding nun," "the ragpicker of Paris," or some scene of sordid crime in Newgate or a morgue.

When they compared their entertainments over the morning's toilet, they would both devour the last instalment of Le Juif errant or some other such feuilleton.

IV

The original British edition of Trousered Apes has an interesting history which is related by Malcolm Muggeridge in his foreword to this American edition. It proved to be what is known in the trade as a sleeper, obscurely published in 1971 without benefit of advertising or other promotion, ignored by the reviewing media, including the powerful Times Literary Supplement. Not many booksellers bothered to put it in stock, but word of it gradually passed from mouth to ear so that before the year was out it had become a much talked-of success and was acclaimed by the Sunday Times, the Sunday Telegraph and the Observer as book-of-the-year.

In one of his footnotes Professor Williams tells of reading the paper from which
this book was expanded before a gathering of English teachers. When he had concluded an indignant young woman from the audience approached him and exclaimed: "You are advocating censorship; you should not be allowed to publish it!" An eloquent illustration, one may say, of the liberal paradox.

"Introduction to the History of English Literature," 1865.

"What I have called the 'trousered ape' and the 'urban blockhead' may be precisely the kind of man they really wish to produce." C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1947).


The Christian Republic


Every informed American must reach conclusions as to the nature and provenance of his tradition. One proposition is that it arose primarily from the English Puritan experience and from English institutions, such as the common law and local government. Such a view would, of course, include various forms of English Protestantism, making our tradition, as with Dr. Morley, primarily Protestant. Another emphasis is to insist that our tradition is a product of all of Western thought. In this approach America constitutes a fresh start for mankind, grounded in some of the ideas of the Greeks and Romans, the medieval heritage, and the influence of European intellectuals visible from colonial times. Morley mentions in this connection Montesquieu, Pascal, Montaigne, Voltaire, Helvetius, and Rousseau. Or, those who would begin by repudiating the American tradition turn to the revolutionary view of society, which may be studied as far back as the human literary tradition extends. These revolutionaries are utopian and often they are anti-intellectual, in the sense that they reject the reasoning and learning of "the establishment" of the day.

In this age of revolutionary criticism, conservatives should rejoice in the republication of The Power in the People. This volume returns to fundamentals. It affirms the unique quality and universal values in which American life is grounded. As a Quaker Mr. Morley seems to minimize the Anglican and Catholic mind in order to stress the influence of his own religious body. However, he does accept the English seventeenth century revolutionary tradition, while assuming the profound originality of the American rejection of the British and European and aristocratic tradition, along with its social system of status. A central theme in his argument is that the principles of individual rights and social responsibility are grounded in his reading of the New Testament. Individualism and personal responsibility are on this basis the ordering elements in our political system. He seems in fact to exclude Catholicism and Anglican-Episcopal systems of values, as well as the strong Deistic tendency in the early years of our Republic. Today there are few books like this one for Americans to read; it has, therefore, a lasting quality for those who are confused or angered by the articulate barbarians and contemporary neolithic characters.

We have here an ambitious book. It seeks to state the larger backgrounds of political theory. Morley is concerned with the discussion of society and state in Greek thought, and likewise the problem of sov-