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Maurice Evans

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Chapter I

Background and Influences

The works of Chesterton are essentially a product of their age. He began writing in 1901 with a vigorous attack on the spirit of the 'nineties, and he continued to attack it ever after. The closing years of the century seem to have left so permanent an impression on his mind that his latest works are still tinged with the colour of his revolt; and we feel that to the end he was refuting forgotten heresies, like the monk, Michael, in his novel, *The Ball and the Cross*. A study of his philosophy must therefore begin with a rough survey of the period and what he thought of it.

His principal accusation is one of pessimism. In *The Defendant* (1901) Chesterton inveighs against a pessimism that had become almost fashionable. "I have found that every man is disposed to call the green leaf of the tree a little less green than it is." And at the other end of his life, he looks back with horror on the period. "I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images; plunging deeper

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and deeper into a blind spiritual suicide" (*Autobiography*). It was to him a time of philosophical anarchy; and he felt the vital need for some form of optimism, even if it were based on the bare minimum of good.

The fundamental cause was pride, the belief that man has the right to criticize the universe, if it is not to his liking. "What we call a bad civilization", he writes in *The Defendant*, "is a good civilization not good enough for us." Man is born into the world by no agency of his own, and yet feels that he can criticize it "as if he were house hunting, as if he were being shown over a new suite of apartments" (*Orthodoxy*). This is the great spiritual sin; for it not only prevents us from making the best of inevitable and inescapable facts, but limits our existence by making us feel superior to many valuable planes of life. The *Confessions* of George Moore are saturated with this pride, a perpetual scorn of "the vulgar details of our vulgar age". And with that young man, exclusiveness leads to boredom.

Evolution is the main philosophical source of pride. It has become erroneously identified with progress and so can easily be used to establish the doctrine of human perfectability. But evolution leads, at the same time, to moral scepticism, which

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is one of the chief diseases of the age. Ideals become useless because, as Chesterton points out in *Orthodoxy*, no ideal can be final, if we are perpetually evolving into something higher. The mad Darwinian in *The Ball and the Cross* says: "Never trust a god you can't improve on." Consequently morality must fail, because we have no permanent base on which to establish it. What may be immoral to-day may be moral to-morrow, and everything becomes relative. "All had grown dizzy with degree and relativity. . . so that there would be very little difference between eating dog and eating darkie, or between eating darkie and eating dago" (*What I saw in America*).

Now even the 'nineties did not go as far as cannibalism, but there can be observed a weakening of morality in the interests of evolution. The New Hedonism of Oscar Wilde preaches the sacrifice of accepted morality to the production of a higher type of individual. A man must cultivate a finer sensibility even if it leads him into crime in the search of new experiences. Similarly Nietzsche in Germany, under the evolutionary spell, teaches revolt against all repressive morality in the interests of the superman who is to be evolved. The superman of *Thus spake Zarathustra* exemplifies the survival of

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the fittest. In man's ruthless struggle for existence the weaker is crushed and the cruel dominant virtues of will destroy the humbler ideals of Christianity. George Moore talks of "the terrible austere laws of nature which ordain that the weak shall be trampled upon, shall be ground into death and dust, that the strong shall be glorious and sublime". This denial of accepted morality appears in a milder form in Shaw's golden rule that there is no golden rule, another manifestation of moral scepticism.

But if evolution leads to a conception of the superman, it also produces fatalism. If man has only survived by a struggle, his whole history becomes something harsh and predestined, directed entirely by nature, "red in tooth and claw". The works of Hardy illustrate this fatalistic attitude. The characters of *The Dynasts* are puppets in the hands of a callous and impartial divinity; the Mayor of Casterbridge is fated from the beginning, and Tess of the D'Urbervilles is the sport of the Immortals. It is significant, too, that Hardy's novels are frequently tragedies of love in which the animal aspect is greatly emphasized. Marriage in *Jude the Obscure* is, indeed, defined as a licence to make love to someone on certain premises. Through the idea of evolution, sex has

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become identified with the animal in man, "the ape and the tiger", and a type of fatalism is postulated from the sway of our lower natures. This too produces moral scepticism, for you cannot blame a man for his actions if he cannot help himself. Evolution, therefore, is one source of the pessimism which Chesterton analyses.

The rationalistic philosophies of the period also end in pessimism. Rationalism implies that the human reason is capable of understanding all things and discovering consistency everywhere. In consequence it forces everything into a narrow scheme and limits the rich diversity of the universe, leading logically, though not inevitably, to madness. There is a brilliant chapter on this point in *Orthodoxy*. Imagination accepts contradiction and so is sane; but reason seeks to explain: "to cross the infinite sea and so make it finite; and the result is physical exhaustion". The completely logical man is, in fact, the madman. He has an obsession and finds evidence for it in everything he sees. For example, if he has a persecution mania, he will find a conspiratorial significance in "the ordinary thoughtless actions of a sane man slashing the grass with a stick, kicking his heels"; they will become signals to accomplices, threats of violence or deliberate

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snubbings, all logically fitted into the framework of the obsession. "The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason." To impose a logical consistency on varied facts in this way is a possible interpretation of those facts, but it is a poor and limited interpretation. It denies all the irrelevant variety of the evidence it incorporates; and so produces a limited experience and happiness.

In the same way rationalistic philosophies like materialism are an interpretation, but a very narrow interpretation, of the facts. It may be possible to argue that "history has been simply and solely a chain of material causation": but to do so is to deny all the rich diversity of history. "Materialism", he writes, "has a sort of insane simplicity . . . but if the cosmos of the materialist is a real cosmos, it is not much of a cosmos" (*Orthodoxy*). But materialism, if logically pursued, leads beyond a merely limited view of life, to total scepticism. We can never prove the existence of physical objects corresponding to our sense impressions, for example: we can only believe that they exist. To attempt such a proof leads inevitably to the scepticism of Hume. Chesterton seems to have attempted this proof in his youth and writes of it in the *Autobiography*,

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“while dull atheists came and explained to me that there was nothing but matter, I listened with a sort of calm horror of detachment, suspecting that there was nothing but mind”. To be a sceptic in this way is to be imprisoned in one’s own mind.

Chesterton also mentions the cult of realism, which insists on stressing the seamy side of life. Zola was extremely influential for a time, while Ibsen, in such plays as *Ghosts*, opened up the new channels of heredity and the horrors it suggests. The genuine Calvinism of Predestination was fortunately dead, but its influence survived in a few clumsy vetoes and taboos still capable of spoiling the major pleasures of life. *The Way of All Flesh* or Sir Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* show the position of dying Puritanism.

It is against this puritan aspect of Victorianism that the decadents are primarily in revolt. They have all a strong prejudice against religion and common morality, “the seven deadly virtues”. Dorian Gray has only to call morality middle class to damn it as effectively as the epithet “bourgeois” nowadays. George Moore tells us how he shook off his belief in Christianity and the “intellectual savagery” of Catholicism at a very early age with the help of Shelley. “It is only

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natural for me”, he writes, “to oppose the routine of daily thought.”

Pater’s statement that life should be a work of art is largely the foundation of the aesthetic cult. Man, he says, has only a limited time on earth and must exclude from it all but the finest experiences and choicest sensations. These he must cull with the care of an artist. “To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy.” The New Hedonism of Wilde takes this as its basis. The aim of life is self-development by experience of the finest and subtlest pleasures: you must never repress an impulse, for that is to deny the ego. Dorian Gray sets out on a deliberate search for sensations “that would be at once new and delightful and possess that element of strangeness which is so essential to romance”. The hedonist must be eager for every shade of sensation and his criterion must be purely their aesthetic value. “The aesthete was all receptiveness, like the flea”, writes Chesterton at the time, in his book on Shaw. “His only affair in the world was to feed on its facts and colours like a parasite upon blood. The ego was the all.” This desire for

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perpetual novelty inevitably drove them into the strange and exotic when the common experiences had been tried out. George Moore loved exotic plants and furnishings in his chambers, while Dorian Gray passed from rarity to rarity. Sometimes he would collect strange perfumes, sometimes wonderful and bizarre weapons or uncommon jewels. Similarly, when the permissible excitements have been tested one goes into crime and perversity. Beaudelaire had already set the fashion with his corpses and his "affreuse juive", and Moore takes a self-conscious delight in frequenting the lowest haunts of Paris. Dorian Gray, once more, lives among prostitutes and perversity; and Oscar Wilde himself illustrates the belief that "sin is the only colour element in modern life".

Books such as *Dorian Gray* and George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* seem to have filled Chesterton with enormous disgust, and he launches a strong and varied attack on them. Aestheticism is obviously an unsocial creed, and being based on receptivity, an uncreative creed as well. But apart from objective judgments, it is unsatisfactory to those who practise it, he argues, for it is built on faulty psychology. Its aim is to live among perpetual high lights and at unending

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emotional crises, but this is an impossibility. The fallacy lies in the fact that “men cannot even enjoy riot when the riot is the rule. . . there is no fun in being lawless when lawlessness is the law”. The essence of pleasure is concentration and contrast, for “when everybody’s somebody, then no one’s anybody”. The aesthetes themselves realized this and attempted to vary their pleasures as much as possible, alternating sensations of art with sensations of sensuousness or crime. Nevertheless, pleasure was the end of all and the mind became inevitably sated.

In the same way the doctrine of complete self-gratification is bad psychology. Pleasure must be paid for because part of its very intensity comes from resistance or self-control. To gratify every impulse at once destroys this intensity, as the breaking of a dam reduces all water to the same level. The moderns, Chesterton writes in 1901, are suffering in “the hell of no resistance” and a “hedonism which is more sick of happiness than an invalid is sick of pain”. True pleasure is in its nature exceptional and must be made distinguished by contrast, by repression, by complete self-committal; otherwise the life of the hedonist will be a long monotony. The decadent is like the butterfly; his round of pleasure “need be no