

Adam and Innocence: Two Books from the Catholic New Left

by Julian David

The chief moral impact of the *Slant* group, personally encountered, is that they believe in argument. They believe, with Aquinas, that truth is commensurate with the human intellect, and not, as some believe and most of us half believe, something fundamentally alien to it, approached only through organic imagery, mystery, silence and so on. In practice this means that *Slant* will argue relentlessly on long after the uncommitted liberal (that ubiquitous figure) has come to a halt, because he has arrived at the edge of his intuition, or is satisfied with some bit of poetic imagery that has floated up, or is merely tired and wants to go to sleep.

Two books from the *Slant* group illustrate the opposing sides of this enthusiastic belief in the mind.¹ One of them is disastrous; for at its worst it can result in an over-confidence so appalling in its naiveté and so inhuman in its anger that the uncommitted liberal might be forgiven for ceasing to read further. Thus Neil Middleton solemnly points out Descartes' 'mistakes', as if the whole Cartesian experience could be exposed as a false turning in the mind of Descartes. Thus he comments on a not-negligible passage from Catherine of Genoa: 'although it is possible in this, *as in every other case*, (my italics) to show how wrong the author is. . . .' Thus St Bernard of Clairvaux is dismissed as 'a neurotic in a primitive age', Vatican I as 'a disaster', the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI as 'a disgrace' and the unhappy authors of 'Gaudium and Spes' can be patronized like this: 'It does not occur (*sic*) to them that what transcends human experience also transcends human knowledge and therefore we can't know about it.' The point is crucial, but this is a brashness which it is hard to forgive.

Mr Middleton represents in fact the extreme, the innocent, New Left position, innocent because all the flaws in the position are paraded and there is no attempt to guard against scepticism. It is a handbook for the enthusiast, the converted. It will make no converts because like all handbooks the model it presents is not a human one. This linguistic community is not one which anyone in his senses would wish to share, characterized as it is by a rejection of the corpus of mystical writing as *nothing other than* neurotic and alienated; a denial of mystery as suitable to an act of worship or anything else;

¹*The Language of Christian Revolution*, by Neil Middleton, Sheed & Ward, Stagbooks, 202 pp., 30s.

Adam, by Adrian Cunningham, Sheed & Ward, Stagbooks, 206 pp., 30s.

a denial of any internal dimension by which, for example, sanctity, whatever one means by it, could be different to the sum total of socially progressive deeds, and numerous other barbarisms. I do not think the Catholic Left could survive many such books.

It is necessary to be clear about this because the second book under review reveals how important it is that the Catholic Left should survive. Adrian Cunningham's *Adam* is one of the few really interesting books of theology I have read. This is partly because he has chosen his sources well (nobody could be entirely boring about Bonhoeffer and Tillich) and partly because of the perpetual reference back to lived moral experience. This quality, combined with the fact that, unlike Rahner, for example, he is not committed in advance to a Catholic solution (in fact, plainly fails to come up with one), may be what the lay theologian has to offer.

Deprecating the seductions of existentialism, Mr Cunningham typically finds himself feeling 'more fully engaged as a human being with those, in varying degrees "authentic", who are struggling to realize the kingdom, whether they are Christian or not (and more often they are not) than with those Christians who are pre-occupied with the authenticity of individual lives'. Discussing the possibility of over-stressing the 'positivity' of language, he writes of the negative games that can be played with language: 'It can be used to obscure rather than disclose the meaning of communications, the truth of their relationships. The 'yes' which means 'no', stretching from the playfully ironic to the veiled threat; the systematic undermining of the partner's position by emotional blackmail and ju-jitsu, thus putting the other in an ambiguous, threatened position.' To which he adds the interesting observation that 'often those who are most intent on directness of communication can be strangely those who are most secretive in their self-disclosure'. This dogged capacity to refer everything to lived experience is above all what saves him from those pitfalls into which Mr Middleton, drunk with abstraction, the beauty of the idea, systematically stumbles. Take the question of mystery. Mystification is of course rejected, but not mystery in Gabriel Marcel's sense (the 'irreducible', that which we can experience but not analyse, not reduce to 'public object before a universal subject'). Nor mystery in St Augustine's sense: 'If therefore you are the body of Christ and his members, it is your mystery which is placed upon the Lord's table. It is your mystery which you receive. When you reply Amen you are saying Amen to what you yourselves are.' Moreover his central concern is with that self-transcendence which defines the human and which Mr Middleton hardly tackles. Similarly, far from suggesting that the problem of that which is beyond human experience has not occurred to the teachers of the Church, he sees it as a fundamental and unresolved problem for the Catholic Left itself, and leaves finally open the whole question of whether 'belief' is in fact possible within the linguistic community,

to which both he and Mr Middleton are committed: that 'dialectically self-referential totality' which by definition excludes the 'outside'.

One will ask why, if there is conflict between 'belief' and a given philosophical position, belief should not come first; what indeed is the point of belief if it does not? The answer is fundamental to the *Slant* position. First, for both writers, 'world' comes before 'Church': world is prior to Church as 'laos' is prior to priesthood. It is 'more basic and wider than the church, which is drawn from it and given for it'. Second, the driving moral experience of both writers is of the need of the world for revolution. A society in need of revolution is defined in Raymond Williams' words as one 'in which the incorporation of all its people as *whole human beings* is in practice impossible without a change in its fundamental form of relationship'. In both writers the patent experiential need of the world for revolution is the fundamental exigence of their thought; of which concepts of the 'outside' and of the individual soul work in practice as agents of paralysis and the status quo. Belief, as at present constituted, is in conflict, then, not merely with a philosophical system, but with the most authentic moral experience they know; and both writers agree that it must come second.

In this context one finds the publishers' statement that *Adam* should 'put a stop to' all doubts that the Catholic Left is really Christian, extremely odd; though apart from this basic refusal to submit, Mr Cunningham pulls consistently on the side of orthodoxy. Often orthodoxy and the need to be at least open to revolution coincide. In the discussion of Paul Tillich, for example, Mr Cunningham's struggle against the 'ontologizing' of sin ('In every individual act the estranged or fallen character of being actualizes itself') seems very much in the line of Catholic orthodoxy. It is too pessimistic a view, indeed Manichean in tendency, undermining the Council of Trent's defence of good works against Luther's pessimism, fundamentally identical, one guesses, with Tillich's. Similarly with his objection to the 'aesthetic'. There is a connexion between the fact that both Tillich and Luther have a vision that is basically poetical, and the fact that a minor crusade in *Adam* is against those, such as most of us, who misuse the language of the left by converting its currency into 'aesthetic terms manipulated in an aesthetic mode of thinking'.

Two other examples will suffice to show the range and something of the depth of his questionings. In the course of a chapter on Bonhoeffer (another poet?) he finds it again necessary to reject an 'ontologizing' of original sin, as in this beautiful passage: 'I myself am Adam, am I and humanity together; in me falls humanity; as I am Adam, so is every individual, but then in all individuals the one person of Adam is active.' He rejects this because, with the Church, he finds it necessary to insist on the 'historicity' of original sin: to shift its location from the ontological as in Bonhoeffer and Tillich,

into an area where it can be tackled by men in their historical existence, instead of having to await the onset of death or another world. At this point, however, he needs to make a substantial change in the Church's concept. For if 'historicity' is to mean a 'moment' at which something was lost, some wound suffered in the individual nature of Adam, and transmitted to the individual nature of each of his descendants, then the end is in practice the same as in Bonhoeffer and Tillich; for the drama of redemption is again *internal* (the healing of a wound), while the situation of man, the external public world of his relations to other men, remains in itself static and un-open to improvement. Mr Cunningham's answer to this *impasse* is to substitute for the 'moment' at which something was 'lost', a 'possibility' which has not been historically realized; and to substitute for the internal 'wound' in man's nature, the concept of 'negative facticity', as operating in the world which forms man and within which man has to cope.

'Facticity' is crucial to the argument. My own quick definition would be: that in the world which is opaque, inert; the mountain which must be moved; that which frustrates man. Or it is the inter-connectedness of things; so that to lift one thing involves lifting, Atlas-like, the whole world (the problem of pragmatic reformers everywhere). In Mr Cunningham's hands the somewhat monstrous word yields enlightenment, like this: 'Facticity is itself a neutral concept and its possibilities are positive as well as negative . . . it is not only good actions which inevitably involve conflict, experienced as suffering, somewhere in the extension of their consequences; bad actions must inevitably produce good somewhere, and perhaps more good than an overtly good action . . . neither the purely good nor the purely bad action is possible.' The way is thus opened for an account which advances the general *Slant* programme to shift the location of redemption from its present site out into the world of politics, but remains, in my opinion, sensitive to what is poetically valid in the existentialist vision. Whether it could amount to an adequate account of original sin only time and reflection can show.

The second example I offer is to do with the question of dualism. A good deal of Catholic writing at the present time is concerned to abolish dualism by various means, from secularizing the Church to pointing out that Descartes was 'wrong'. Dualism cannot be abolished. It is as much constitutive of reality as Cunningham's (Heidegger's) facticity. Nevertheless its nature is a problem fundamental to the whole *Slant* position.

Straight abolition can be attempted in two ways, both familiar and both involving the collapse of one of the terms. The first way is the 'totalitarian', to which some sections of the *Slant* movement tend, and to which numerous 'brutal' paraphrases of Wittgenstein give support. In this reading there is no sense at all in which the individual could be seen as prior to society. Even in his innermost being he is

co-extensive with it, and in any case 'innermost being' is a suspect phrase. The *Slant* editorial on abortion, which argued that, since the foetus is not in relation with any society, it could not be considered as in any sense a person, represents an extreme form. The second way is simply to reverse this and see the individual as a pre-constituted unity 'thrown' into a world which is radically absurd. Of this solution an extreme form is perhaps found in Samuel Becket; and all forms of existentialism, indeed, perhaps all twentieth-century experience, shares it to some degree.

It should be clear that any adequate account of modern consciousness must embrace both these options and choose neither: for the two together, though travesties alone, represent themselves a dualism which is constitutive of present reality. To use a formula of Mr Gregor Siefer quoted by Mr Cunningham, 'the stability of an idea—that is its truth—lies in the balance of its contradictions'. By this sort of test Mr Cunningham's treatment seems both subtle and comprehensive. He insists only that relatedness is prior to isolation (that you cannot be isolated unless you are first related) and that the tension between the two is the area of interest: that persons exist in this tension and are defined by it. In this he uses Bonhoeffer's account of personal being as both structurally open to society and structurally closed. 'Genuine sociality leads to personal unity. One cannot speak of the priority of either personal or social being. . . .' And his gloss on this that 'it is not the intimate acts which constitute the person as structurally closed. Rather no social intention is conceivable without this structural closedness, just as no intimate act is conceivable without the corresponding openness.'

A last point. Clearly the concept of facticity produces problems of its own, notably: if facticity is itself neutral, from what are we redeemed? Cunningham's short answer is, from 'negative facticity in its fulness'; but there are considerable problems. As he points out in a discussion of 'pure' Marxism, to overcome every sort of conflict is to be dead. 'For the end of alienation . . . there would have to be a self-coincidence of man with himself which is either death . . . or (what is the same thing for man) the coincidence of *en-soi* and *pour-soi* which is the animal collectivity, the very starting point of transcendence. Either way this would be the end of dialectical movement.'

The point made is that the problem of the transcendent in the sense of something 'outside,' or 'the other side,' of history is not uniquely Christian: that the pure Marxist is also faced with it. In Christian terms, if the Kingdom is to be historical, how do we conceive of temporal men living in a world which does not include facticity? Facticity is inseparable from 'being in a situation'. What sort of 'situation' are we thinking of when we talk of the Kingdom? Similarly, Communism in the fullest sense, a world from which *all* conflict has been removed, is inconceivable historically: at its closest it is eternally receding, like the donkey's carrot. The problem of a

'validating goal' which is within the 'dialectically self-referential totalization' to which a Marxist is committed is acute, whether Christianity enters into it or not. Without such 'validating goal', what is the point?

This account has touched on some aspects of an immensely complex book no line of which is boring. The *Slant* position is in perpetual movement; it is, like Mr Cunningham's Christian 'project', *en train de se faire*. As an account of the present position of the most significant single movement in English theology, this book is indispensable.

It seems sad that Mr Middleton's account, which is not *en train* for anywhere, is likely to reach far more people, who may then feel justified in dismissing *Slant*, in spite of Mr Middleton's genuine insights (his passages on the 'nomadic' nature of faith spring to mind), as essentially trivial.

A glossary of philosophic terms in the next edition of *Adam* might redress the balance.

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point the way to a possible institutionalization of the 'pushing power of the Church', in the manner in which the Dutch bishops indicated earlier last year in their directives about 'mixed marriages'. By stating openly that they would systematically seek from Rome all dispensations foreseen by current canon law and that they would themselves give permission for sharing communion at mixed marriages, subject to three conditions (*I.C.I.*, 1st and 15th April, 1968), they acknowledged the state of transition in which we live and gave an example of co-operation between the institutional and the charismatic elements in the Church which might well be followed.

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