THE BOURGEOIS POSITION

WE are in danger of misunderstanding the nature of the resistance to spiritual revival if we fall too easily into the mental habit of classifying a position by its philosophic implications. It needs very little proving to show that materialism, commercialism, are opposed to the stress of Christian living, and little more to show that these two definable 'isms are identifiable in the bourgeois position. The point is that the doctrinal analysis discloses not so much the position itself as its doctrinal relations, while the blind force which stands over against us is hardly probed. It is not in the main an intellectual thing that we fight. It is a cunning thing, but that is another matter. Its stubborn resistance is not of the mind. Not so much, therefore, is it belief in the wrong things that opposes the arduous quickenings of the life of Christ; it is rather desire of the wrong things. If you ask the Enemy of the Absolute what he believes in, he is as likely to reply *Credo in unum Deum* as anything else. If the most comprehensive statement could be made of the heresy implicit in the bourgeois position, it is doubtful whether you could find one single bourgeois to subscribe to it. A more successful result might be obtained from a table of practical maxims, for the enemy is a practical man. That is his first attribute. He is the man of business, of affairs, the pragmatist. Not that he would tolerate the elaboration of his pragmatism into a philosophy or a religion. His heart has its own reasons for its religious choice, and these do not include the need for intellectual valuations of the acts of living.

The Enemy of the Absolute is the enemy of the mind. He does not oppose us with a nihilistic philosophy, a distorted, an agonised intellectualism; he leaves his victims to do that. No, he opposes us with the success of his living, with his complacency, with the emptiness of his head. We writhe in the immense contempt of his complacency and can do nothing whatever about it. And he permeates us.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1935.tb05260.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

He is everywhere, a slothful odour. We see the styles of his architecture and the images of his devotion surround our tabernacles, and we see his smile on the faces of the faithful.

The hard hearts, the soft heads, of these rich—not that it is only the rich; his penetration has gone much further than that—the combination of these two, of confused thought, woolly headedness, and a dogged obstinacy of the will, confirms the virtually unshakable solidity of his position. These two are correlative, and are the foundation of his strength. It is as if the leadership of the spiritual advance, mind leading will and both together moving, informing the body with a wonderful alacrity, had been reversed in this derisive contradiction of humanity. His mind is obedient to every sullen movement of a blind volition, and both are sunk in a body as in a morass. Materialism, the philosopher's diagnosis, is verified in him not as an intellectual thing, belief in a principle, but as a fundamental preponderance of matter itself, a heavy indeterminate chaos dominating and stultifying the human person. His second attribute, then, is a reproachful materiality. He . . .

> 'shifts from ham to ham[1]
> Stirring the water in his bath.
> The masters of the subtle schools
> Are controversial, polymath.'

But we mistake him, too, if we make him merely simian. T. S. Eliot's quadrimanal, Sweeney, has all the bourgeois potentialities; he has not been shown to have all the bourgeois talents.

Though the body has become a reproach to the bourgeois, to be remembered in smoking-room jokes and in ludicrous over-exposures in an atmosphere of sentimental glamour, it is not in the body chiefly that his resistance is founded but in an obstinacy of the will over which his degraded bodiliness, his emulsified corporal emotions, sit like a tea-cosy on a pot of brewed tea. If it is useless to attempt to pin him to a particular heresy, it is no less futile to

[1] T. S. Eliot : *Sunday Morning Service.*

classify him under the excess of this mood or sentiment rather than that. He is not even always a sentimentalist. His real explanation lies deeper. Whether we like it or not we have to consider him not in the category of truth and falsehood, of wrong feeling and right feeling, of good taste and bad, but in the category of vices and their opposing virtues.

There is no word in the theology of St. Thomas to cover precisely what we mean by bourgeois. But if St. Thomas is lacking in this respect, we also lack a word to translate *acedia,* accidie of Piers Plowman. Nevertheless, it is profitable to compare these two. *Acedia, secundum Damascenum est quaedam tristitia aggravans quae scilicet ita deprimit animum ut nihil agere libeat—et ideo acedia importat quoddam taedium operandi.*[2] Taken out of their context the words simply do not seem to connect with the familiar complacent figure full of imbecile practicalities. They are remote in a scheme of spiritual references with which the bourgeois position seems to have little to do. But the six daughters of *acedia,* taken from St. Gregory, are ill-will, rancour, pusillanimity, loss of hope, *torpor circa praecepta, evagatio mentis circa illicita.* Here, surely, is a contact. And it is said that *acedia,* in so far as it is weariness of spiritual good, is not a special vice but a circumstance of all vices. It is opposed to the entire spiritual life and is a principal cause of despair. Again, the contact seems to be caught for a moment and lost. We would not dream of identifying the bourgeois, Eliot's Sweeney, Joyce's Bloom, with Despair the cavernous, the hollow-eyed. It is on this point that Francis Thompson takes Bunyan to task, that he depicted Despair as eating a hearty dinner. The difficulty is of context. Sin as a relapse from a continuous spiritual discipline, and the same thing as establishing the conditions of a life quite innocent of discipline will obviously look different. Francis Thompson was far too conventionally theatrical. Despair grows fat on suet puddings, and what we have to consider as the principal foundation of the bourgeois posi-

[2] Billuart. *Cursus Theol.* : Index Gen.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1935.tb05260.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

tion may easily be despair grown habitual and perfectly well pleased with itself because it has dispensed with all that could have made its life uncomfortable.

As appeared in Maritain's analysis of the spiritual crisis of Luther,[3] *acedia* with its implication of tedium in good works does not mean a complete cessation of all activity whatever. It may mean that there is precisely one good work necessary before anything else is valid; and furious activity in all other directions is exactly an evasion of that one thing. And this state of affairs may continue as a conscious evasion for a life-time, but usually it will be mitigated by sloth, the dormouse, and stilled at last by a lie, since certain tensions are intolerable to the nature of human energy. The bourgeois lie, not it must be insisted a philosophical tenet, but a *coup-de-grace* to his desperate spiritual need, to his potential anguish, is the uselessness of reason, the quickener, and of spiritual good works: a denial of the mind as the necessary means to a necessary end. The bourgeois has deadened, stultified, evaded the one thing necessary. That is the foundation of his position as the sullen and inveterate enemy of absolute values. Once this position is confirmed, he embraces everything else with grotesque gusto. But the element of his potential unrest is not wholly inactive. In all things, a secret fugitive, he seeks and obtains comfort. Without sloth, *endormeuse des râles*,[4] at once confirming and brutalising him in each subsequent position his huge modern progress would have been impossible.

The type of *accidie* in Piers Plowman knew rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolf, Earl of Chester. He was not quite inert. The bourgeois has since acquired facility in innumerable effortless achievements. He makes things go. In all things avoiding problems, avoiding failure, he boasts of the problems he has solved which were not problems but calculations. In all things, too, the secret element, the secret lie which, killing him, has made this travesty of life possible manifests itself cunningly. At every phase he recog-

[3] *Trois Réformateurs.*

[4] Paul Verlaine : *Sagesse.*

nises by an uncanny instinct which can have no other possible explanation the least threat from the realm of spiritual values to lay hold of the things of his ordinary life. Grounded in a working hypothesis of the utter inefficacy of sanctifying grace his will reacts with the utmost violence to the workings of the leaven of Christ. The things which Christian life raises to sacramental or supernatural value he instinctively reviles. Thus he is the author of sex-dirt (which is another thing than sexual sin) and of the degradation of commerce. Typified by sex-dirt and sexual luxury, a low familiarity wallowing in a thing despised, he is by no means debarred from an acute self-righteousness. A test of the sex-dirt bourgeois is the Christian doctrine of the sacramental nature of marriage. His response is a vituperative and pharisaical horror of the Very Idea. It makes his gorge heave. Often the very mention of sex as of something of high value brings from him floods of self-righteous indignation, words like 'filthy,' 'disgusting,' and the rest. And we all know the same type of attitude to commerce: 'Shockingly dishonest game, business; still you mustn't bite the hand that feeds you. You know Jones? He did Robinson down for a thousand quid. Robinson's sore about it. So would I be. Wish I had Jones's brains though. Dirty tyke. Clever chap.' But he may adopt another attitude far less apparently offensive, more cunning, more dangerous, and that is the attitude of sentimental agreement with intellectual principles.

St. Bernard traces phases of ascent in the virtue of humility and opposes to them the descending phases of pride.[5] Throughout both a remarkably exact contrariness is noticeable. This precision of contrariness might easily be dismissed as coming mainly from the mind of the author—a sort of book-keeping neatness. But such an arbitrary dismissal is invalid. There is in the nature of the case a fundamentally precise opposition between the liberty of the sons of God founded in humility and love, and a liberty in sin founded in an obstinacy of the will formally con-

[5] *De Gradibus Humilitatis et Superbiae.*

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1935.tb05260.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

firmed by pride. We may consider the bourgeois as essentially opposed to humility in a way akin to pride, for vulgarity in the pejorative sense in which we speak of it is a mode of presumption. But the progress of the bourgeois begins not from a knowledge in humility, but from a stultified understanding confirmed in the attitude of: 'Anyway, I'm as good as anybody else.' His progress *in spiritualibus* is therefore by simulation, not by opposition. He does not cease to be himself, the inveterate enemy of absolute values and of sanctifying grace. He does not lose his essential element of spiritual sloth. He does not cease to resist all that is light and spiritually active, the intelligence and the loving will. But from his very sloth he derives the mode of his burlesque spirituality. He is sentimentalist, obscurantist. It makes him feel good to go to Church. Seeker of comfort in everything, he imposes upon religion (metaphor of the tea-cosy again) the limits of his comfortable feelings, filling out the body of his faith with a warm sentimental glow. In an orgy of comfortable kindliness he dismembers and eviscerates the living Christ of the gospels. His religion tells him, 'You're all right. Be kind and don't worry.' He finds God good-natured, too much of a gentleman to mention uncomfortable things. More violently it is, 'Glory Hallelujah, we're the boys and we shall win. (And don't it sound grand on the harmon-i-um!).' And the steps in the process: in the *De Gradibus Humilitatis* obedience and resignation of the private will are opposed by presumption and contempt of the brethren, the loving preference of the common will by the contemptuous assertiveness of the individual. Assimilating all things, materialising everything he touches, the bourgeois advances to his own travesty of the love of the brethren. Good fellowship: 'We are all jolly good fellows, and the more we are together the merrier we shall be.' The insignificant modern meaning of the word 'merry' is his work too. And here is the exasperating thing. It is not that good fellowship is a bad thing. It is a good as far as it goes. He sees to it that it shall go no farther, if as far. 'I'm all right if I do as the others do.' At this point he establishes himself. At this

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1935.tb05260.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

point religion must meet him and he will patronize it. From this point he defends himself without mercy and with an immense feeling of security. He is as suspicious of oddity as the spiritual director of a religious community; but his suspicions are grounded not in charity, but in that secret insecurity to which he has long been blind.

In this position as social bourgeois he has developed an ethos, a culture, the culture in which we live. Its character and regimen human respect, its crown is respectability. It is an ill day for us when he begins to doubt that we are jolly good fellows. In all that French spirituality calls human, it will be a very bad day indeed.

In effect we find that the catholic (and our apologists have not escaped the bourgeois taint any more than ourselves who complain against it) learns something from the bourgeois cunning. Himself a jolly good fellow, he entertains the bourgeois with the unaccustomed edge of catholic satire. Distrusted, he is not disliked. Or he is merely patronised, a clever pet. We cannot estimate the good that he may do. For himself he has found a tolerable way to be as catholic as society will let him; but we know that he has accepted more from the enemy than we could dare with safety. What to do then? There is no easy answer, for it is the bourgeois who has the monopoly of ease. *Acedia.* It is to be conquered, says Billuart, *resistendo et impugnando,* and by fixing the mind on divine things. All these are a constant effort, but no more than the normal stress of Christian living as it has been from the beginning. Our progress must undo the work of spiritual sloth, a heroic labour if we are to speak humanly, but why should the sons of God speak only humanly?

We have to conquer the still more subtle daughters of a subtle vice. The bourgeois breeds malice and rancour in his enemies; pusillanimity and despair, for he has taken possession of our friends, and we cannot tell what to do. *Torpor circa praecepta:* we cannot afford to be reckless of precept if we are to meet the dissipation of the bourgeois mind and heart with a clear and single will. Founded in a slothful evasion of the one thing necessary, he is to

be opposed precisely by the one thing necessary, the living Christ of the gospels and of our daily altars. If our opposition is less than this, he will eat us up as certainly as the great three-toed sloth of Belloc's story in *The Four Men.*

Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius: ipsa conteret caput tuum, et tu insidiaberis calcaneo eius. The warfare is old. And it is not between this man and that man, between the perfectly justified and the perfectly wicked army. We do not go out now simply to smash the heretic, confirmed in our own righteousness. It is the old war of principalities and powers, and the battle-ground is man, that is everyman. Catholics, far from being exempt, are almost universally implicated. And no one can hold aloof. 'I have less to fear from open impiety,' said His Holiness Pope Pius IX to the vicars general of the diocese of Grenoble, messengers of La Salette, 'than from indifference and human respect.' These two are the pillars of the bourgeois culture.

BERNARD KELLY.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1935.tb05260.x Published online by Cambridge University Press