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THE CONVERSION OF THE POETS.*

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* "The Soul of Osiris." Aleister Crowley. Kegan Paul.

The more anarchic poets of the early part of the century devoted themselves largely to the exhilarating task of attacking the supernatural wholesale. With Mr. Swinburne at their head, they quoted whole passages of the Old Testament, with negatives and irreverent applications interspersed, and by this commodious method succeeded in combining the advantages of being original and profane with the advantages of drawing on an old and excellent stock of literary images. Like Mr. Swinburne, they set Paganism against Christianity: like him they could not tolerate a single Deity, but seemed, for some singular reason, to got very comfortably with a great many. The same remarkable idiosyncracy was to be remarked in their attitude towards the ladies whom they tragically and ecstatically adored. But the dominant note Swinburnianism, beyond all question, was the attack upon religion; the vast and incredible conception which has been swallowed by the secularist school, that the religious sentiment, which stretches from one end of history to the other, is one vast hereditary malady and unbroken nightmare. This view seems to us to-day as hard to believe as any fable the legends of the saints.

But the remarkable story has been the story of the conversion of the poets. Whoever else is satisfied with the of age science, they clearly are not. They have divided the human soul by every conceivable scientific number, and they find there is always something over. Philosophers may draw the boundary of human knowledge and human utility in one place or another, as they please: but to the poets it will always be the tree or hedge that is just beyond the boundary that is beautiful, alluring, and imperative. Thus it has happened that the poets have gradually faced round, and are now, in most cases, thoroughly fanatical upholders of the supernatural. The new school of mystics, rather than be for one single moment degradingly connected with common sense, will maintain that the changes and adventures

of their lives are really traced out in the rotation of colossal planets or the common creases in their hands. The poets exaggerate it, as they exaggerate everything, since exaggeration is the definition of art. But the great fact remains, Swinburne, at the period of “Poems and Ballads,” would certainly have used the word “saint” and “artist” as antagonistic, with some very fine lines about tyrannous praises and pallid, and also about songs made sweet of desire. Mr. W. B. Yeats uses “saint” and “artist” as almost interchangeable.

Mr. Yeats is, of course, the most striking example of this transition. So far is he from thinking the spirit world illusory, that it would appear to be the actual world about which he has his doubts. He hears of green grass with well-bred humour, and is informed that the sun in the sky with the air of one who is not to be taken in. But there are more definitely minor poets (if the appalling double comparative may be permitted) who are even more decided examples of the extent to which the poets have “got religion.” One of those is Mr. Aleister Crowley, whose book “The Soul of Osiris” seems to us to show a power and promise above the average of minor poetry. Frequently, no doubt, there are painful examples of the affectations of his school; but while there are some who are too old to be natural, there are others who are too young to be natural, and we fancy Mr. Crowley is of the latter class. An instance of this elaborate and perverse way of doing things may be found in a fine eulogistic sonnet to Wagner, which is headed “Before hearing ‘Siegfried.’ ” The Philistine cannot help asking if Mr. Crowley felt less agreeable after hearing “Siegfried.”

Mr. Crowley follows the old Swinburne tradition in all the externals. The most irresistible trait he can find in a maiden is that she should bite like a mad dog. When he wishes to eulogise a friend he indicates that the friend’s garden is full of sunset-coloured sins (we make Mr. Crowley a present of this phrase), and then everyone is happy. In the poem of “Jezebel” he again obtains a somewhat cheap effect of unconventionality by creating a scandal between the Queen and Elijah. We can only say that if those characters whose acts are recorded in the Book of Kings really did feel a tender affection for each other, they both adopted a thoroughly a Swinburnian mode of expressing it. It may be an imaginative defect in ourselves, but we have never been able to understand the peculiar poetry which appears to attach in the decadent mind to the sex element in persons who have not only desecrated, but almost certainly exhausted it. Jezebel appears to us merely prosaic.

But though Mr. Crowley, whom we have taken as a type of the converted decadent, is thoroughly Swinburnian in his odd taste in “painted lips” and such things, he exhibits in the most startling form the great return to the shrine of the praeternatural of which we have spoken. His whole book, “The Soul of Osiris” is devoted to the conception of the gradual return of a passionate and fickle spirit to holiness. He offers a remarkable tribute to the almost forgotten truth than man is never genuinely at home except in goodness, that artistic emotions can no more refresh the nature than a liqueur can quench the thirst. His last poem, the “Litany,” at the end of the section called “The Holy of Holies,” is a very powerful lyric, expressing in lines that have all the smoothness of true force and all the lucidity of true mysticism, the cry of man in his last and worst agony, the agony of desolate frivolity and hopeless freedom:

Nature is one with my distress,
    The flowers are dull, the stars are pale;
I am the Soul of Nothingness,
    I cannot life the golden veil.
        O, Mother Isis, let thin eyes
        Behold my grief and sympathise!

To the side of a mind concerned with idle merriment there is certainly something a little funny in Mr. Crowley’s passionate devotion to deities who bear such names as Mout and Nuit, and Ra and Shu, and Hormakhou. They do not seem to the English mind to lend themselves to pious exhilaration. Mr. Crowley says in the same poem:

The burden is too hard to bear,
    I took too adamant a cross;
This sackcloth rends my soul to wear,
    My self-denial is as dross.
        O, Shu, that holdest up the sky,
        Hold up thy servant, lest he die!

We have all possible respect for Mr. Crowley’s religious symbols, and we do not object to his calling upon Shu at any hour of the night. Only it would be unreasonable of him to complain if his religious exercises were generally mistaken for an effort to drive away cats.

Moreover, the poets of Mr. Crowley’s school have, among all their merits, some genuine intellectual dangers from this ten-

dency to import religions, this free trade in gods. That all creeds are significant and all gods divine we willingly agree. But this is rather a reason for being content with our own than for attempting to steal other people's. The affectation in many modern mystics of adopting an Oriental civilization and mode of thought must cause much harmless merriment among the actual Orientals. The notion that a turban and a few vows will make an Englishman a Hindu is quite on par with the idea that a black hat and an Oxford degree will make a Hindu an Englishman. We wonder whether our Buddhistic philosophers have ever read a florid letter in Baboo English. We suspect that the said type of document is in reality exceedingly like the philosophic essays written by Englishmen about the splendours of Eastern thought. Sometime European mystics deserve something worse than mere laughter at the hands of Orientals. If there ever was one person whom honest Hindus would have been justified in tearing to pieces it was Madam Blavatsky.

That our world-worn men of art should believe for a moment that moral salvation is possible and supremely important is an unmixed benefit. But to believe for a moment that it is to be found by going to particular places or reading particular books or joining particular societies is to make for the thousandth time the mistake that is at once materialism and superstition. If Mr. Crowley and the new mystics think for one moment than an Egyptian desert is more mystic than an English meadow, that a palm tree is more poetic than a Sussex beech, that a broken temple of Osiris is more supernatural than a Baptist chapel in Brixton, then they are sectarians, and only sectarians, of no more value to humanity than those who think that the English soil is the only soil worth defending, and the Baptist chapel the only chapel worthy of worship. But Mr. Crowley is a strong and genuine poet, and we have little doubt that he will work up from his appreciation of the Temple of Osiris to that loftier and wider work of the human imagination, the appreciation of the Brixton chapel.