

## WHAT'S WRONG ?

Roxana ALEXANDRESCU\*

*The greatest and most exquisite emotion  
we can experience is the sense of mystery.*

Albert Einstein

In a way everything looks like a wry joke. We have been for centuries trying to build up a world free from social and moral constraints, a world that would allow the full development of the individual potential, thinking that only thus could cultural progress be achieved<sup>1</sup>. And we have succeeded to some extent. In the newly established welfare state the citizens have equal rights as well as more or less equal opportunities, as social distinctions are being levelled out. We certainly live better than our grandparents and new, broader horizons have opened for all.

Then what is wrong? Why is life felt as tricky ("Life was making a series of derisive contemptuous gestures"<sup>2</sup>) and the world – a cage where one lives in solitary confinement ("in the cell of his life"<sup>3</sup>, "he felt totally trapped", *Lamb*<sup>4</sup>)? What has made people avoid sharing the others' emotions, what has made mutual understanding so rare and shallow an experience? ("There had never been real understanding between them; but was there ever such between people?", *The Barracks*<sup>5</sup>).

Perhaps we have lost sight of the limits inherent in the human condition, we have overrated its inner strength. Man has obtained the freedom of speech and action. He is, indeed, formally free to adopt any political attitude. Yet this is a freedom many prefer to decline: not everyone dares become involved in an undertaking of such scope. Actually, who can take the liberty of changing the world if his own life is a slipping ground? The much-wanted and long-struggled for freedom of thought has been acquired. Contrary to all expectations, however, man seems to find it rather disconcerting. For in the exhilaration of victory he has also swept away some indispensable range-poles; and

on the vast territory now at his disposal, if he happens to be responsible, he feels a little ill-at-ease, as his spirit is wandering around and about like in a "waste land", no principle or ideal guiding its goal-less racing.

For fear of vanishing into the void, the spirit will shrink into itself, only to find, there too, the void ("He's not human; he's an empty space disguised as human." *The Collector*<sup>6</sup>). An empty space can seldom be aroused. In most cases it denies responsibility, stubbornly taking refuge in coward, blind obedience ("my lot do what they are told"<sup>7</sup> – which is certainly not an enriching experience. The frustration and self-contempt that follow, are hard to digest. Humiliated, the vacuum will harden its heart and become aggressive ("It's despair that there's so much brutality and callousness in the world."<sup>8</sup>). What results is a regression of personality, typical of "the ordinary man in the curse of civilization."<sup>9</sup> So far as we can see the triumphant march towards cultural progress has undesired, rather frightening consequences, unfortunately widely spread ("I think everyone now (...) has this selfishness and brutality", this intolerable "bestial canibality"<sup>10</sup>).

Most people find modern life too demanding to fit in. These will choose not to make choices and will get nothing in return ("You couldn't carry the responsibility of a decision. You were only a hankerer." "You'd drift and drift."<sup>11</sup>). They are not the lazy, but the misfits. There are also many who are denied even the choice ("her work repetitive, menial and boring" "had to go on, grinding, incessant, remorseless, breaking her down to its own dead impersonality."<sup>12</sup>); and cannot hope that events may

\* Lecturer of English, Department of Germanic Languages, A.S.E Bucharest

<sup>1</sup> C. Rădulescu – Motru, *Personalismul energetic*, 1927

<sup>2</sup> P. H. Newby, *One of the Founders*, 1965, p. 45

<sup>3</sup> John Mc Gahern, *The Dark*, 1965, p. 40

<sup>4</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Lamb*, 1980, p. 146

<sup>5</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 64

<sup>6</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector*, 1963, p. 288

<sup>7</sup> idem, p.134

<sup>8</sup> idem

<sup>9</sup> idem, p. 127

<sup>10</sup> idem. P. 206

<sup>11</sup> John Mc Gahern, *The Dark*, 1965, p. 84

<sup>12</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, pp. 44, 88

ever turn for the better ("Owen was without a future either way", in "his life of misery and frustration that lead to inevitable crime and lovelessness." *Lamb*<sup>13</sup>). There are not only winners in our 'Brave New World'. Some others just feel hopelessly insignificant ("he seemed unable to influence what was going on around him", *Cal*<sup>14</sup>), like mere puppets whose lives do not depend on their efforts and will ("He had a recurring dream of sitting at the wheel of a car driving and at a critical point turning the wheel and nothing happened. For miles the car would career along with the steering wheel slack but nothing happened")<sup>15</sup>. Wherefrom the lack of confidence in the future ("I'd never be anything. That was certain."<sup>16</sup>).

Then there are the blind: those who can't see "the only thing that really matters, [which] is feeling and living what you believe so long as it's something more than belief in your own comfort."<sup>17</sup> – the lonely hunters for money ("People don't want to live in each other's minds. They want money."<sup>18</sup>) and security ("Security, security. Everyone's after security."<sup>19</sup>). And also the half-awake, "who seem asleep in everything they do"<sup>20</sup>, who obediently adopt the ephemeral style of the day from fear of being different. That is to say from fear of freedom.

Some will react to this burdening freedom by rejecting it in a disguised way: "While his contemporaries fell in love or attached themselves to religion or politics, he stood self-consciously aloof (...) With what predictably withering epigrams had he managed to dismiss those fools who thought the world was worth saving by a change in its political system! With what equally brief violence of phrase had he dealt with the ideas of the God-Squad!"<sup>21</sup>. This is assumed blindness – the most despicable selfish attitude of the highbrow: no involvement in the affairs of the world ("It's despair that so few of us care"<sup>22</sup>); no personal involvement either ("It's despair at the lack of (...) feeling, of love", at the "dead weight of pettiness, and selfishness and meanness"<sup>23</sup>; just building a self-protective shell under which one ruminates bitter thoughts to spit them out with pretended lucidity – actually a masque ("It was easier to be cynical, cold,

skeptical, pessimistic; easier because almost everything in the world justified a pessimistic interpretation; easier because if you said cynical things people supposed you cleverer than if you said positive, obvious things"<sup>24</sup>).

Whether honestly confessed (*Cal*, *Lamb*, *The Barracks*, *The Dark*, *One of the Founders*) or disguised (*Wise Virgin*), the underlying reason is the same: lack of self-confidence, the feeling that one is at a loss. Whatever the individual's response, the reason for it lies in the delusive character of life: no achievement is allowed ("things happened to him but brought nothing about"<sup>25</sup>), no solution is available ("He had changed everything in her life and solved nothing"<sup>26</sup>); no one is in control of his life ("the events of his life were never wanted"<sup>27</sup>). How far are all these from the encouraging contemporary concept of self-fulfilment.

It's true that we have been laid astray; it's also true that the fault lies within ourselves, though. If we have come to think we have no prospect in (or out of) this tedious dull life, it's because we repudiated "the only thing [that] could never be reduced to the nothingness of a certain knowledge", "that unknowable reality, God"<sup>28</sup>, which only can offer moral and spiritual support.

Our contemporary is complaining he feels as lonely "as a monk in his cell"<sup>29</sup>. This way be true. With the notable difference, however that the monk had something to rely on: his faith ("faith was a bit of luck, spiritual luck"<sup>30</sup>). While modern man has lost faith; and this hope left him in the turmoil of a loveless existence ("once he had ceased to believe (...) all he was left with was a handful of negatives"<sup>31</sup>. It is he who let his life become deprived of value and meaning ("What was her life? (...) Had she achieved anything or been given any meaning?"<sup>32</sup>): a purposeless life ("She could see no purpose, no anything."<sup>33</sup>).

Doubt has long been undermining faith and reason fueled it. Fortunately common sense has often acted as a shield under which some remnants of religious teaching are still preserved. They will guide their possessor through this world of confusion towards a higher meaning ("nobody's life is more than a

<sup>13</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Lamb*, 1980, pp. 130, 146

<sup>14</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Cal*, 1983, p. 168

<sup>15</sup> idem

<sup>16</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 133

<sup>17</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector*, 1963, p. 135

<sup>18</sup> P. H. Newby, *One of the Founders*, 1965, p. 160

<sup>19</sup> John McGahern, *The Dark*, 1965, p. 136

<sup>20</sup> idem, p. 150

<sup>21</sup> A.N. Wilson, *Wise Virgin*, 1982, pp. 87-88

<sup>22</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector*, 1963, p. 134

<sup>23</sup> idem, pp. 133; 206

<sup>24</sup> A.N. Wilson, *Wise Virgin*, 1982, p. 87

<sup>25</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Cal*, 1983, p. 116

<sup>26</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 209

<sup>27</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Cal*, 1983, p. 168

<sup>28</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 177

<sup>29</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Cal*, 1983, p. 92

<sup>30</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Lamb*, 1980, p. 111

<sup>31</sup> idem, p. 90

<sup>32</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 85

<sup>33</sup> idem, p. 57

direction"<sup>34</sup>), teaching them responsibility and respect for the human person ("Even if there was no such thing as control or private order, it was better to try to have a semblance so that they [children] might stay in some measure and not be gathered into a total nothingness"<sup>35</sup>); they will develop a sense of duty ("Life was ceaseless activity. Peace was not life, it was death"<sup>36</sup>), will give the strength to endure and the patience to go on: "If it was no use you could leave again, and, it didn't matter, you could begin again and again all your life", for "What happened didn't matter, you had to go on"<sup>37</sup>. Not unwillingly or indifferently, because "the way your life was happening that was the way you were"<sup>38</sup>. If such an acceptance is not exactly joyful, it not does sound like sour resignation either. It is rather the serene understanding that we are peregrines in this world: "Nothing could be arranged here..."<sup>39</sup>, supported by the confidence that we are never let down and alone ("She had come to life out of mystery and would return, it surrounded her life, it safely held it as by hand; she would return into that which she couldn't know; she'd be consumed at last in whatever meaning her life had"<sup>40</sup>). This does not mean sticking blindly to religious dogma. This is faith alive. It is still incomprehensible to me why modern man is making such strenuous efforts to eradicate the sense of mystery, when reason proves to give doubtful answers, if any, to such questions as the meaning and value of life. Questions to which the Gospel gave, long ago, answers – love, compassion, self-sacrifice – that still hold.

While the intellect is telling us out loud that "the absurd is master in the world", an inner voice still whispers: love, "only love can save us from it."<sup>41</sup>

So there is a way out of a life lived in its rat hole security<sup>42</sup> among people who want just to keep to themselves<sup>43</sup>: to feel bound to the only duty of offering love<sup>44</sup> and expecting nothing in return ("it came to him that the gift of suffering might work. (...) To offer it for someone. And if the person might never know, that was the beauty of it".<sup>45</sup>); to be willing to help in whatever way one could the suffering of the world<sup>46</sup>.

It is the way of self-sacrifice – the way of the Saviour – a challenge to change. Through it we can only soothe a little of the pain in the world; we can save ourselves, instead ("sacrifice was what was required (...) also to save him from the slack tide of his own life"<sup>47</sup>). There is nothing new in this; it's an old truth, that of the narrow path that alone justifies our existence, most often deliberately ignored nowadays.

I can't help thinking that we are a race meant to remain immature. For why should we disavow an old truth that proved worthy – the truth – and compliantly adhere to new half-truths, which are discarded every ten years? Perhaps it's that the truth requires moral strength (while we are frail) and unremitting effort (while we are idle). Perhaps it's that we give way to the tendency to get easily bored – which is childish; or we have an innovation-mania – which is silly. Or, perhaps, because we choose to be blind – which is wrong.

<sup>34</sup> John Mc Gahern, *The Dark*, 1965, p. 188

<sup>35</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 71

<sup>36</sup> idem, 1p.193

<sup>37</sup> John Mc Gahern, *The Dark*, 1965, pp. 116, 188

<sup>38</sup> idem

<sup>39</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 1963, p. 211

<sup>40</sup> idem

<sup>41</sup> Albert Camus, *Cahiers*, 1952

<sup>42</sup> John Mc Gahern, *The Dark*, 1965, p. 136

<sup>43</sup> P. H. Newby, *One of the Founders*, 1965, p. 160

<sup>44</sup> Albert Camus, *Cahiers*, 1952

<sup>45</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Cal*, 1983, p. 117

<sup>46</sup> Bernard McLaverty, *Lamb*, 1980, p. 113

<sup>47</sup> idem, pp.26, 34