

# THE END OF THE MODERNS

by G. K. Chesterton

ALL schools of thought, moderate or revolutionary or reactionary, are agreed that the future is full of new possibilities or perils, that the various forms of revolt in art or thought are the beginning of big changes, and especially that certain geniuses, creative or destructive, have opened the gates of a new world. The Communist may think they are the gates of heaven, or the Conservative that they are the gates of hell. But both substantially agree that they mark not only the end of the world, but the beginning of another world. The modern writers who have been hailed alternatively as dynamic or demoniac are, for good or evil, but the forerunners of others yet more dynamic or more demoniac. Both sides are heartily agreed about this; and I have the misfortune to disagree with both of them.

I think the first fact about what may roughly be called Futurism is that it has no future. It has still a very lively and interesting present. Indeed, it has already a picturesque and romantic past. The life of D. H. Lawrence, for instance, has already become a mere legend, which might be of any antiquity; and the romantic and rather sentimental glamour that has already gathered about him is now quite as distant and diffused as that which gathered round Byron or Burns. As for the present, no period could be entirely dull when Mr. Aldous Huxley was writing in it; but it is significant to notice what he writes. In one of his latest books, *Brave New World*, he shows that

however grimly he may enjoy the present, he already definitely hates the future. And I only differ from him in not believing that there is any such future to hate.

I take these two names as typical of what has been called in the last decade modernity or revolt; but the thesis I would seriously suggest covers something larger and perhaps simpler. The revolutionary elements in our epoch do not mark the beginning, but the end, of an epoch of revolution. I should hesitate to describe a number of distinguished and often honest literary gentlemen as Dregs; or I would have given that short and convenient title to this article. I prefer to put the same meaning, or even the same metaphor, into the words of a revolutionary poet (whose present unpopularity is enough to show how insecure is the future of revolutionary poetry), and while I drink to the memory of Lawrence or the health of Huxley, murmur the words:

All thine the last wine that I pour is  
The last in the chalice I drain.

That will suggest the same idea in less offensive language. In short, it is doubtless true, in the words of Mr. Jefferson Brick (that pioneer of revolt), that the Libation of Freedom must sometimes be quaffed in Blood; but whether it be in blood or wine, that cup is very nearly dry.

My reason for thinking this has nothing to do with likes or dislikes or the wish being father to the thought; it is the sort of logic

that is more like mathematics or chess. To almost all the modern moral and metaphysical systems, as stated by the moderns themselves, I should be content to add the comment, "Mate in three moves". That is, these thinkers have landed themselves in positions which are already doomed by the laws of thought; or, to change the mathematical to the military figure, their positions are out-flanked, their communications cut, and their ammunition very obviously running short. In many cases, their form of revolt is one that *can* only be a sort of temporary formation. Merely to explain what I mean, I will take an extremely crude and even clumsy example first. It does not touch the more distinguished types I have mentioned; but it does show in a very clear and plain shape the sense in which such things are intrinsically fugitive. I mean what may be called the literary use of blasphemy. Earlier, when the spirit of revolt was younger, it was used by some men of genius; by Swinburne, in whose work it seems now to have entirely lost its sting. Recently a modern writer, actually appointed to make a special study of Swinburne, asked wearily how anybody could get excited about the verses which said that the Galilean also would go down to the dead. It also disturbed the fine literature and very confused cosmic philosophy of Thomas Hardy; who tried to say (at the same time) that God did not exist, and that He ought to be ashamed of existing; or possibly that He ought to be ashamed of not existing. This irritable profanity, which is already rather stale among cultivated people, is apparently still quite fresh to the Communists; but that is because Bolshevik Russia is the most backward State in Europe. It is even said that attempts were made to print atheistic assertions on match-boxes and sell them in England as propaganda. If it be true, they must have a very

queer idea of England, to suppose that its somewhat too inert populace could be roused to universal civil war by bad language printed on a match-box. But the only point here is that this sort of bad language, like all bad language, necessarily weakens itself by use. The literature of atheism is bound to fail exactly in proportion as it succeeds. The Bolsheviks have not merely tried to abolish God; which some think a trick needing some ingenuity. They have tried to make an institution of the abolition of God; and when the God is abolished, the abolition is abolished. There can never be any *future* for the literature of blasphemy; for if it fails, it fails; and if it succeeds, it becomes a literature of respectability. In short, all *that* sort of effect can only be an instantaneous effect; like smashing a valuable vase that cannot be smashed again. The heaven-defying gesture can only be impressive as a last gesture. Blasphemy is by definition the end of everything, including the blasphemer. The wife of Job saw the commonsense of this, when she instinctively said, "Curse God and die". The modern poet, by some thoughtless oversight, so often neglects to die.

This is a very crude and popular instance; but it exactly defines what I mean, when I say that all these death-dealing dynamic motions carry the seeds of their own death. And when we turn to the more subtle and suggestive writers, such as those I have named, we shall find that this is exactly their own condition. They are not opening the gates either of heaven or hell; they are in a blind-alley, at the end of which there is no door. They are always philosophizing and they have no philosophy. They have not reached that reality, that reason of things, or even that fully realized unreason of things, for which they are obviously and indeed avowedly seeking. But, what is here more to the

point, they do not (like the old revolutionists) even know the direction in which they are to seek it. They have failed to discover, not only any purpose in the world, but even any purpose in the will. They are witty, brilliant, and fashionable bankrupts. They have come to an end; and they have not come to an End. The earlier rebels were happy in being pioneers of the actual forward movements of their time; as Walt Whitman, axe in hand, walked before the actual march of industrial democracy. But Mr. Aldous Huxley can hardly be roused by the word Democracy. D. H. Lawrence, on the other hand, could be roused by the word Industrialism.

So far as that is concerned, the case is simple enough. Lawrence, whom so many moderns have made a sort of test of modernity, was in fact in violent revolt against anything and everything that can be called modern. He did not merely hate industrial machinery and the servile society it has produced. He hated practically all the effects of science and public education and even political progress. All that is very right and proper; but he also hated intellectualism along with industrialism; though why anybody should think industrialism particularly intellectual, I cannot imagine. But he was perfectly right in his revolt against these things; only they are all in their very nature modern or very recent things. He himself was in favour of very ancient things, and notably of one of the most ancient things on the earth: the worship of the earth itself, the Great Mother, Demeter. But he could not, by his own admission, even do this, without almost literally cutting off his own head. It may be regarded, in a thinker, as at least equivalent to cutting his own throat. He confessed, in effect, that he could only worship Demeter from the neck downwards. He could only do it by setting the subconsciousness against the conscious-

ness, or in other words, the dreams against the daylight. It is surely a remarkable gospel for an age of realism. In a famous passage he wrote, "In my dark heart gods are", but added that in his "white mind" they were not, having been washed or whitewashed out by elementary education. But the modern educated mind is not white; it is only pale.

The point is that from every point of view, ancient or modern, his solution is not a solution. A man cannot leave his head at home and send his body dancing through the world and doing as it likes; and there is no earthly reason for supposing that it will do what it ought, from a modern or any other point of view. For instance, if it fancies food, it will steal; and it will steal quite as readily from Communist stores as from private houses. This is not the beginning of a new life, a gorgeous jungle opening before man as a sort of Mowgli. It is the end of an utterly impossible argument, which cannot be carried any further. A man wallowing in the earth with the animals would not be an animal. He would only be a lunatic; which is the exact opposite of an animal. There was no way out of the intellectual or anti-intellectual *impasse* into which Lawrence had got himself; except the third road which he never thought of—possibly because it leads to Rome. If mere rationalism is insufficient, we must get above the reason and not below it. The direct appeal to Nature is utterly unnatural. I admit it was weakly conceded by the Pantheists of the first revolutionary phase, now very remote, and many who would pass for pious accepted it. Professor Babbitt has pointed out some of the dangerous concessions in Wordsworth. Another even more orthodox writer expressed the error of that period. He said that we must rise through Nature up to Nature's God. He was wrong. We must descend from God down to God's Nature. Na-

ture is only right when seen in the light of the highest right; whether it be, as some Humanists would say, in the mind of Man, or as Christians would say, in the mind of God. But they really believe in their God; and Lawrence did not really believe in his Goddess. He passionately disbelieved in everything except something in which he could not really believe.

Mr. Aldous Huxley, whom I have taken as the other outstanding talent of that time, sees this impossibility and avoids it. But he can only avoid it by cutting down his own standard to something so thin that it can hardly stand. In one of his recent novels, a character sums up much of the general teaching of the author, by saying that Man must not hope to be either an animal or an angel. He adds, significantly, that it is a tight-rope sort of business. Now walking on a tight-rope is both difficult and dangerous; and the author makes the good life really more difficult than it is for an ascetic. He has not only to avoid being an animal; but he must guard against any unlucky accident that might turn him into an angel. That is, he is forbidden to have the enthusiasms and spiritual ambitions that have sustained the saints; and yet he has got to become in cold blood something much more exceptional than a saint. Nobody asks such a realist as Mr. Huxley to idealize the real. But such a realist must surely know that human nature cannot show, at every instant, the valour and vigilance of a spiritual tight-rope walker, cannot suffer more for this ideal than all the heroes, and yet be forbidden even to idealize its own ideal. The plan of life is simply obviously unworkable; where the plans of the wildest mystics and martyrs have proved workable.

I say that I do not abhor these men as the first figures of an advancing anarchist army. On the contrary, I admire these men as the

last figures of a defeated anarchist army. I take these two original and forcible writers as types of many others; but the point is that they are not, like the anarchists of history, at the head of an army marching in a determined direction. That is exactly what they are not. Lawrence rushed out against almost everything; Huxley, being more sensitive, recoils from almost everything. But, however valuable be the vivid description of the one or the sharp criticism of the other, they are not valuable as guides; and certainly not as guides to a revolution. They had not the simplification given either by religion or irreligion. There was something grand about D. H. Lawrence groping blindly in the dark; but he really was in the dark, not only about the Will of God, but about the will of D. H. Lawrence. He was ready to go anywhere; but he did not really know where to go next. Aldous Huxley is ideally witty; but he is at his wit's end.

Now of course there are numberless copyists and followers calling themselves revolutionary, who would say that they knew where to go; simply because they are content with some conventional word like Communism. For Communism is almost the same word as convention; it means people "getting together", and nothing else. But that very fact illustrates what I say, when I say that the army is short of ammunition and the end is near. When the great democratic movement began, it was supported by real democratic emotions. Only Comradeship can be the soul of Communism; for otherwise it has no soul. But the more we note the actual temper of the new rebels, the more we shall note that all that is gone. The men who call themselves Communists are not Comrades. Their tone is bitterly individualistic, and bitterly critical. When Walt Whitman looked at a crowd, it is really true to say that he loved the crowd.

When a modern poet, imitating the free verse of Whitman (which was the least free thing about him), describes a crowd, it is always to describe his disgust with the crowd. They have none of the natural sentiments that would correspond with their unnatural dogmas. In other words, the army is short of powder; short of passion, short of the primary impulses that make such an army act. For they are not a vanguard advancing; they are the end of a revolutionary adventure, both for good and evil, which began more than a hundred years ago; and they are fighting the rearguard action of a retreat. Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity really meant something to the emotions of those who first used the phrase. But Fraternity is the last emotion anyone is likely to find in an acrid article or poem by a modern rebel; Liberty is lost in both systems, old and new; and Equality only remains in the form of a dull attempt at uniformity, copied from that very mechanical capitalism which the rebels would reject.

Along with those who accept the thing as a label, or hope fallaciously that they may accept it as a fashion, there are some who accept it in a more noble but very negative way; for the very reasons I have urged in this article. I mean that they accept it desperately, as the only way out of an intellectual *impasse*. It is not too much to say that Mr. Middleton Murry accepts Soviets with the gestures of a great heathen accepting suicide. He seems to exult in the thought of it being the end of everything, or at least the end of nearly everything he likes. That is yet another example of the psychology I have attempted to describe; the psychology of men who have come to the end. I do not want to confuse this distinct impression with jaded journalistic talk

about pessimism. People will call Mr. Aldous Huxley a pessimist, in the sense of one who makes the worst of it. To me he is that far more gloomy character, the man who makes the best of it. He gives the best advice he can, in conditions of converging impossibility.

I do not write here in a hostile spirit about any of these recent realistic or revolutionary writers; on the contrary, I sincerely sympathize with them, because, unlike the earlier revolutionists, they know they are in an intellectual hole. Doubtless, there are thousands of gay and buoyant innovators who are not intelligent enough to know it. But the same plan of defeat is spread over the whole situation. It can be seen, for instance, in the thousands of thoughtless "sexual" novels, the writers of which are evidently unconscious that they have got into a logical contradiction about the whole position of sex. They inherit the notion that sex is a serious crux and crisis; for indeed this is necessary to the very nature of a novel. In this they are living on the last legacy of Romanticism; which, in its turn, was living on the last legacy of Religion. But their new and simple philosophy teaches them that sex is only the sort of necessity that is also a triviality. Sex is no more crucial than smoking; so that the modern novelist, torn between two ideas, has to attempt to write a story about a man who smokes twenty cigarettes and tries to think that each of them is a crisis. In all these things there is an intellectual tangle; the sort of thing that eventually tightens and throttles. Of this sort of philosopher it is exactly and literally true to say that, if you give him rope enough, he will hang himself. It is consoling to reflect that suicide holds a sublime place in his philosophy.

# THE PRIVATE LIFE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

by Vincent Starrett

IT IS, of course, notorious—we have Watson's word for it—that Mr. Sherlock Holmes "loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul". The word *society* is poorly chosen. What Watson—a careless writer—intended to convey was that *social life* offended the Bohemian soul of his companion; in consequence of which emotion he preferred to spend his time in Baker Street when others might have gone to teas and parties: "buried among his old books", as Watson says, "and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition—the drowsiness of the drug and the fierce energy of his own keen nature".

In time, it is true, the doctor weaned him from the drug—to the detriment of romantic interest, whatever the benefit to Holmes—but even then it is seldom that one finds the saturnine detective accepting or turning down an invitation. He simply didn't get them. No doubt there had been plenty of them in his youth; but in the face of his consistent declinations—after an experience or two, perhaps, with bores—he would in time, of course, be let alone. It is, one fancies, almost as great a nuisance to be a detective as to be a doctor: there are always guests with problems to present.

The fact is Watson, too, preferred the silences or the friendly arguments of Baker Street to any attraction London had to offer—a circumstance in which he is at one with his adoring readers. Each man preferred the company of the other, and was glad enough,

no doubt, even to see a client leave the doorstep. Even, perhaps, Lestrade or Tobias Gregson. Even, perhaps, Inspector Stanley Hopkins; although for Hopkins Holmes had a considerable admiration, and on a cold night a prescription containing whisky.

To the casual student of the detective's cases it may appear that the rooms in Baker Street were always crowded. His first impression may be that of a bewildered client teetering on the rug; an armchair in which the detective is curled like a Mohammedan, smoking shag; a cane-backed chair or sofa containing Watson; and Mrs. Hudson entering to announce Lestrade—whose footstep is on the stair. In actuality, there were long hours of comradely communion between the occupants. Seldom indeed did anyone stay the night. And some of the happiest memories, surely, of the epic history are those of Holmes and Watson living their simple, private lives. Not Crusoe and his admirable Friday—one had almost said his goat—were more resolutely at home upon their island than Sherlock Holmes and Watson in their living-room. They passed there some of the most felicitous moments of their common life.

Not that they did not, on occasion, venture the Victorian whirl. There is ample record that Holmes, at least, was fond of opera—sufficiently so to hurry to Covent Garden, on a Wagner night, with no hope of arriving before the second act. This was after the successful culmination of the *Red Circle*