

Fernando Pessoa

## **The distinguishing characteristic of our age,**

The distinguishing characteristic of our age, if it be put with such conciseness as may risk being misunderstood, yet shall escape being obscure, is the decline of the ascete.

By many irreligious people, who do not know what an ascete essentially is, and by some religious people, who happen indeed to know it, the definition thus posited, will be a matter for something like amusement. But it is very little amusing, except it be untrue. And it is not untrue. The point is that it be understood.

Whether we be religious or not, we are religious. Whether we have or not an opinion of the universe, we certainly have one. For it lies in the nature of thought that an opinion on the substance of things (that is to say, a religious opinion) is not susceptible of absolute negativeness

An opinion on the substance and generality of things is not susceptible of absolute negativeness. I may have no opinion at all of mathematics, and that will be indeed an indifference of mine to mathematics. I may have no opinion of my very self; that is an almost incredible modesty, but, if attainable, is certainly simply an indifference to myself. But I cannot hold no opinion of the substance and generality of things and be by virtue of that absence of opinion taken to be indifferent to the universe. For, as the universe is everything, as the substance and generality of things, excludes nothing, I cannot hold an opinion excluding that.

Now, as all fundamental opinions are religious, it is not surprising that we have to take from religion the names or terms with which we may best describe any general attitude or operation of the religious mind. So, there is nothing wrong in applying the definition, that the present age is best described as the decline of the ascete, to the sum of matters socially occurring at present. It remains to see whether the definition be true.

In any religious attitude, in any attitude before the universe, two elements stand: the universe and the individual man who holds such or such an opinion. Now before that universe, that man can have one of two attitudes, and no third: he can strive to subordinate the universal forces, in so far as he feels them in

himself, to himself; and he can agree to submit, to deliver himself to those forces. In the first case, he is an ascete; in the second, he is a mystic.

The common opinion, which is of course, wrong is that the Christian religion was eminently ascetic. Mr. Chesterton has denied this, and he is quite right. He has denied it because he is a Christian and thinks it right that ascetics should not be. I am glad to deny it because I am anti-Christian and because I think asceticism should be. The real ascetic religion was paganism, where only the sibils and the lower religionists — the rioters of the Dyonisiac passage, the (...)

Tennyson put all paganism into one verse: «self-knowledge, self-reverence, self-control», the verse which contains all the intellectual kalendar of asceticism.

All humanitarianism, which gives up the individual to the community, (...) is mysticism, and for women. Asceticism is for men. Women have only self-control by force of social pressure; individually they follow their sexual nature which is to belong to, to be the possession of someone, and not to possess. Not till they have children can women sanely feel that they possess; therefore is it that a mother's love has an obscure sexual element, a carnal *arrière goût*, which is due to its being a kind of mental sexual inversion.

That both asceticism and mysticism are illusions might be affirmed with certainty, if they stood for philosophic theories, and not, as they do, for modes of action. Being modes of action, they are not susceptible of being illusions. They are merely the male and the female attitude towards the world. When the male attitude predominates, the world moves forward, when the female attitude becomes common, the world recedes. This principle — the basis of which lies at the root, in the heart, or, to speak symbolically in the very *rose*, of occultism — cannot be explained so as to be exactly understood in its true fundaments.

The old occultists, who, contrary to the modern mimics of them, had of woman very peculiar opinion. (...)

The delivery of intellect to sensation, the musical attitude of the mind, the sense that we are part of something, the devotion of the soul social service (...) These are mysticisms.

It will be said that, no less than the mystic, does the ascete deliver himself to something other than he; that, if he practises self-control, it is not for the pleasure of it (at best, a bitter one) but for some purpose outside his individuality. That, however, is not the point; the ascete may deliver his reason, he delivers nothing else. The mystic delivers his reason, not directly, but indirectly, not to God, but to his sensations, for instance, and it is these that are in turn given over to God.

s. d.

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