Hammering the Bronze

A pious man, I suppose, is still thought of as being a devout Christain, and his piety would consist in the unquestioning seriousness he gave to that devotion in whatever form it took him. We are still inclined to respect piety and not only in its more picturesque manifestations. One thinks of Calabrian religionists as pious because of their passionate attachment to local saints and relics and festivals; or one thinks of some palid neophyte bent in an intensity of seminary prayer; or of a meek malleable spinster parishioner, a very regular church attendant. I suppose this in general is what we mean by the word pious. But the concept is rather more interesting than that.

Spreading the meaning no wider for the moment, it isn't so easy to imagine a cigar-chewing tycoon, or a bikey, or a militant union leader being pious in this way. But perhaps in another. Piety is possible about anything that is unquestioned. Something assumed to be good or true without thought or doubt. One can be pious about anything at all where these conditions apply. It doesn't necessarily have any connection with religion or for that matter even with humility. Quite the contrary. There are many prescriptive sentimentalists about, who probably think of themselves as moralists, and who have just this quality of unexamined sanctity in their judgements, only it's an aggressive kind of thing. Two old examples will amply demonstrate the condition. It's something about the manner more than anything else.

"You may chisel a boy into shape, as you would a rock, or hammer him into it, if he be of a better kind, as you would a piece of bronze. But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does."

Swallowing for the nonce the idea of chiselling and hammering adolescent boys "into shape", it looks almost as if the writer is going to allow girls their existential freedom. But it's not freedom, it's just Ruskin indulging himself in a damp sentimental splurge. He goes on: "You cannot fetter her; she must take her own fair form and way, if she take any, and in mind as in body, must have always "Her household motions light and free/ And steps of virgin liberty." Let her loose in the library, I say, as you do a fawn in a field."

Than which it would be hard to find a more perfect example of paternalism. What if she escaped from the library, or knocked down the fence at the end of the field? Kate Millett knew what she was doing when she chose Ruskin as a prime target. Women, he assumed, were there to serve men. "You cannot think" he said, "that the buckling on of a knight's armour by his lady's hand was a mere caprice of romantic fashion. It is the type of an eternal truth - that the soul's armour is never well set to the heart unless a woman's hand has braced it; and it is only when she braces it loosely that the honour of manhood fails." That's to say, women are always to blame for the failures of masculine honor - an astonishing remark. And who, you

wonder, braces the soul's armor of women? But we can move on from this to our next example. How, in fact, could one move back?

"Cost what it may" Carlyle said, "reigns of terror, horrors of French Revolution or what else, we have to return to truth." Stirring stuff. But what is Carlyle's truth? Certainly not liberty and equality, which he described as "false altogether", but - of all things - hero-worship, "a fact inexpressibly precious; the most solacing fact one sees in the world at present." He goes on: "The certainty of Heroes being sent us; our faculty, our necessity, to reverence Heroes when sent: it shines like a polestar through smoke-clouds, dust-clouds, and all manner of down-rushing and conflagration." (Why not, one wonders, up-liotering and refrigeration?) Is there anyone else in the language who could have praised humanity for its capacity to behave like mindless sheep?

But wait. Does it matter what they said, Ruskin and Carlyle, and their kind? Isn't the subject matter really just a vehicle for bombast, a sort of ritual piety expecting our acquiescence and admiration? Even disregarding content, why didn't the audiences who first listened to this stuff stamp out of the hall fuming with outrage? Could it have been that the pulpit style, the ignorant pontification was valued for itself? The corollary being, presumably, that anyone who had the hide to talk like that simply must have been saying something very profound, and therefore it was one's duty to sit quietly and hope to be improved by it. Perhaps Halévy's argument for the absence of revolution in early nineteenth-century England should have been modified to encompass a specifically English mental conditioning such that the sound of pomposity led directly to docile servility in its auditors.

Of course you could say that all this is false piety - something merely turned-on to impress the listeners - and no doubt that often happens, but it's notoriously difficult to separate well-feigned emotion from the real thing, and again the argument applies: how could they have had the hide to talk like that if they didn't mean it?

Looking back, it is sometimes possible to see the Victorians as a bewildered prey to all kinds of piety, religious devoutness, social respectability, the argument of empire, the manliness of the male, and so on. And we are tempted to say that times have changed, that these days we are so much more realistic and scientific, not victims of fashionable prejudice at all. But I suppose we have our own pieties - informality, youth and creativity, for example - and there must be isolated pockets of Christendom where even the old kinds persist. However, what they all share, apart from an unexamined assumption of virtue, is an equally unexamined hopefulness about the ultimate moral triumph of their values, an optimism so rampant apparently, that it washes away the mountains of ham built into it. And when piety expresses itself, that's what you get. Piety, like any other quality, shows up in the style, the manner. The bland grand optimistic assumption of virtue.

You can hear it in the voices of left-wing academics arguing on matters close to their idealism. You can hear it from the opponents of the Vietnam war; or the exponents of pop-art; or from conscientious teachers college

lecturers. You can hear it in the voice of, for example, Christiaan Barnard defending his brilliance in performing the world's first heart transplant, or President Nixon returning from China. To such people, at such times, there is no problem without a solution, no pain without a cure, and it gives their piety that naive innocent air. And that's what's worrying about it. They are like people who have just given up smoking and think they're going to live forever.

What's missing is that classic awareness of limitation, the recognition of inevitable errors and failures. I don't suppose it is necessary to go as far as Sartre - "all human activities are equivalent and on principle doomed to failure" - and nor is it necessary for us to entirely give up our lovely lefty liberalism, but it seems to me that we need also a sense of the despair of things to shake us out of our silly pieties.

Next time some worried person ascribes the fall of Rome to loss of moral fibre "such as we see all around us today", instead of sighing with enlightened scorn we might shrug, remember the last time we blamed somebody else for our own emotions, and get back on with our own business.

One of the useful things Sartre said was, "life decides its own meaning." Aggressive piety is on the whole afraid of that and, despite itself, seeks to impose its various answers on us wholesale, e.g., that education is important, that social life is worthwhile, that literature is good, that the perfect orgasm is achievable, that suicide is wrong, that it's better to be creative, whereas the fact is that nobody can know the answers to such questions. The advocates, however, do not agree about this; and that's what makes them pious, as one can see from the unquestioning seriousness they give to their devotion, in whatever form it takes them. Piety is necessarily a matter of faith and choice, albeit unconscious, and we are still inclined to respect it and not only in its more picturesque manifestations.

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