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ON PASSIONS AND ASCETICISM

By EDWARD DAHLBERG

MORE towns and cities are destroyed by sexual disorders than by plagues, famine, and disease. Unless men follow some discipline they are demented from birth until their demise.

Man is not by nature ascetic or domestic; the human anthropoid would be a house-dove feeding on the masts and roosting in the beeches were he not wild. Cyclops is a steadfast eater of men; the rough Solymi are incessantly arrogant; Ares or a javelin is the deity of Magog. It is the irregular outbreaks of passions that are the unexpected tyrants we seldom overwhelm. The fool is wet and parched, beckons one from whom he flees, and is cloyed, all in one hour. The hardest man to endure is one's self, and he is the most untrustworthy of foes. If one wears the livery of the meek, he crouches too low, or when one cries out, "My God, my God, I am a gnat," he dilates his throat; the recluse complains because the daughters of Judah do not come to gladden him.

Scylla is a fit of spleen which men must try to avoid, as we should endeavor to shun every tumid emotion, wrath, libidinous vision, cupidity, vanity, and self-love. Antisthenes was reported to have said that if the wise man does anything he does it in accordance with virtue as a whole.

It is much more difficult to eschew the humors that resemble snow rather than fire. Men with the fewest words break out on a sudden, and without cause; like Ajax they mistake the sheep for Agamemnon, or, as Achilles, go into combat with the River Scamander. Achilles, whose mother. Thetis, is hoary sea-water, has cold wrath.

Man is the most confused beast in the earth; he marvels at the twelve houses of lust Tiberius built at Capri, and is unable

to abhor Heliogabalus, who kept the snows of Armenia in diverse caves to cool his debauched Roman blankets. Alexander was embalmed in honey, and so are all his acts, because men care more for prodigies than they do for the wise or the just.

Human beings crave to be plants, shrubs, bog-moss, for their hearts cry out for quiet. The ordinary man dungs upon his spirit, and there is no nitre to cleanse him. Chagrin is the honey and the teacher; never to fail is a ditch and a delusion. We endeavor to be abstemious, but never slough a single folly. Vice is constant and ripens with age; old mulled sins are the worst, and he who has never shed the leaves of his youth is always stupid.

Without genitals, or indifferent ones, man is neither rock nor water. Parmenides denied the existence of motion which is Eros, for whenever men move they stir up the blood. Augustus required his wife, Livia, to procure women for him because it was too painful for him on occasion not to discharge his inflamed vessels.

Human flesh is more ill-made than the quadrupeds in many respects. Goaded sorely and torn by his appetites, man envies the goat, who is able to have sexual intercourse all his life. He has the utmost desire to abstain from venery so long as he is capable of enjoying it. Origen deliberately became a spado because he knew that as long as man is tormented by that wallet of shame he will lie and cozen and scratch himself. Sophocles in his old age had said that he was grateful that that riotous, unruly member no longer bothered him.

Seneca was of the mind that the groans and ejaculations that men fear and tremble for are in themselves trivial and contemptible. Not everyone is Demetrius, the Cynic, who was said by his adversaries to practice mortification. Epicurus, whose name has come to stand for Hedonism, took his sickness as a philosophic discipline, and though he died of the agony of the stone, he expired blessing his fate.

There is no doubt that sensuality is very attractive, and it would be wrong not to set before the reader Lais of Corinth and the Pramnian wine. One cannot hide the pears, the fair Corinthian girls, and hope to inculcate in men a valorous continence by a species of skulking and stealth, as if virtue could be taught by robbing men. Everybody has to choose, and no one will honor a man who abstains from a vice of which he has no knowledge, nor a teacher who feigns that pleasure does not exist.

But what is the good of being Solomon or Aristotle, and composing *Ecclesiastes* or the *Metaphysics*, if one turns his face to the wall because his penis was not erect in the presence of a chit. If man can make the wisest philosophy, and have no satisfaction of it because the pudendum is faithless, then all is lost, and man has no other choice but to be a sparrow or a newt. Nobody recollects pleasure except dimly, for one can remember the shape of a cube or an isosceles triangle, but not the color of the nipples of Daphne, nor the aches she once gave him.

Asceticism has always attracted the most carnivorous and sexual men. The Socratic head looked like neither the beautiful cranium of Apollo nor that of Buddha. Socrates was a thick-looking man, with the heavy mouth of an orgiast and the skull of Silenus. Want, Poverty, and Philosophy are such teachers that those who follow these three are often far better than men who appear to have the self-abnegating mien. Poverty is an Angel and the guardian of vision.

The young should be nurtured in Sparta, and they should be taught to pray very often, for the navel is no more than the span of a palm from the shameful organ. A rude and hard infancy, according to Balzac, is best for the development of character. Eros is wily, feigning that the whole of human existence can be contained in the table, stool, and bed. There are many things to be said for the bed, provided one does not lie in it all day long; though Zeus could do it with impunity, man cannot. Besides, if a man is not a foolhardy sensualist, he is not likely to weaken the

members he covets so that by forty they are a pendulous memorial of quondam pleasures.

"But in every case we must be most upon our guard against what is pleasant, and pleasure," Aristotle writes. Plato said that extreme pleasures and pains produce madness. Delights make men rave, and Tantalus is as greedy in Tartarus as in his days in the sun, for he never ceases to reach for the fruits the winds blow away from his voluptuous mouth. No one knows anything, and one can only surmise that his knowledge is no more than the rock of Sisyphus which rolls down from the peaks each day. If it did not, men would be more tyrannical than they are.

The men that are most interesting are those who have valiantly resisted the delights for which they ached. Solomon said, "Do not give all your strength to women," which is wise. One does not go to genius to be one of the cripples or the blind at Bethesda, but to be healed and to be seamed together again. The Essenes were craftsmen and healers, and the word means to cure. Luke was also a physician. A philosopher is a vestal when he rejects what hotly draws him, for the best of men are not those who abstain because they have no testicles, but are those who attempt to govern that AEtna between their legs. No matter what sage or philosopher or poet we cite we have to return to the same vexing dilemma, should man copulate?

It is hard to be Socrates when one has capital testicles, and only mimicry if one has not. Who can boast of the goodness of a dead phallus? And what bravery is there in the abstemiousness of a man who has a worthless prepuce? Moreover, it is redundant to be temperate if one is already impotent. What is overcome is good, for man has a negative conscience, the monitor or daemon in Socrates which prevented him from doing wrong, but did not compel him to perform what is right.

Evil, which is our companion all our days, is not to be treated as a foe. It is wrong to cocker vice, but we grow narrow and pithless if we are furtive about it, for this is at best a pretence,

and the sage knows good and evil are kindred. The worst of men harm others, and the best injure only themselves.

Man is always tempted, and it is what he avoids rather than what he does that ennobles his character. The Crees knotted a few willow branches together which represented their deity, Kepoochikawn. This is a very rude image of a divinity, but less woe and vanity will come of it than from the Zeus of Praxiteles, or the temple of Solomon. Cree warriors ate live coals to be gods, and when they suffered pains, drums were beat so that their groans would not be heard.

It is possible to overvalue the ascetic habits, and many will complain that the beast's skin and club of Hercules, Stoic symbol for virtue and frugality, are not sufficient for their wit or manners. There is much confusion abroad, and our poets are no wiser than a street-urchin. This, of course, Plato discerned, and many blame him for setting up a republic that is so austere. There is no man who is not a far greater despot to himself than he believes the laws of Plato's *Republic* to be.

Here is a riddle: if the gospel, and many wise books, have been written to govern the genitals, and to take away the imperial mind from this rugose pouch of mirth, how is it that a boy just growing his pubes, and while at chapel and without the least thought of anything save Mark and Luke, has an erection. This is as much of an enigma as the Ephesian sod, and must be considered along with the lilies and the *Proverbs of Solomon.*