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GILBERT MURRAY: "CIVIC MONK"

Of all things Gilbert Murray prized balance. Even in advanced age, to demonstrate physically, he would walk up a ladder without using his hands; and his balance of spirit emerges clearly. His autobiographical fragments reveal a bookish yet plucky boy who, born of a Protestant mother and Catholic father, flexed and toughened his spirit in rough-and-ready Australian schools before coming to Merchant Taylors' School, Oxford, the Glasgow Greek Chair at twenty-three, and a career nourished constantly by Greek sanities. But, his strangely perfunctory charm apart, the author of the autobiographical fragments—precociously busy, recalling mentors, the outback, the Radicalism of Castle Howard—seems little interested in himself. In his rare moments of self-analysis he is usually assessing his suitability for purposes immediate or envisioned; and his many-sidedness is to be distinguished from indiscriminate busyness. Teacher, rhetorician, translator-poet, committee-man, dramaturge, historian, and almost politician, he took his bearings from two passions: world peace and Hellenism. Nettleship's testimonial rightly predicted that "Classical education in his hands will be not a mere engine of literary culture, but a general training of the character and affections".

In his dynamic liberalism, as Arnold Toynbee has noted, he was not "psychologically dependent on the human relations that meant so much to him". He gave without needing to receive. Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson have testified to his high-minded but amenable attitude to problems of staging; a letter shows him coaching an impoverished, backward Glasgow student; Dr. Salvador de Madariaga, in a forthright essay on Murray's role in the League of Nations Committee for Intellectual Co-operation, calls him a "civic monk", keener on people's happiness than on their liberty; and Lord Russell, recollecting a friendship over half a century long, has glowingly declared that "Gilbert did everything that lay in his power to salvage civilization". One is inclined to question the "power", but not the exertions.

Murray emerges as one of the most active, most unshakable avatars of aristocratic humanism. If his amazing internal equilibrium seems slightly inhuman and Arcadian, it also survived ninety-one intense years intact and little disturbed by his gradual disenchantment. (The forthcoming correspondence with Shaw and Lord Russell will no doubt show the gradualness in more detail.)

His disgust with his own century prompted him neither to overestimate the power of art nor to profess a specious asceticism. He diligently maintained a civilized curiosity, an almost dynamic humanitarianism, both of which he opposed to "the brutal play" of chance. There is something exemplary in his double attentiveness: from his Greek Chairs he delved away into the magic of Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Euripides, emerging always with something of living import and zestful beauty. And whether or not he offered two words where the Greek gave one, or produced Swinburnian dithyramb for Greek laconic, he reclaimed, invigorated, and revived.

His effort was all towards discovering human atavism at its most civilized. He rejoiced and so added an unfamiliar dimension to scholarship. Not only that: his quest for what made the Greeks tick went hand in hand with a passionate concern for the fate of liberalism in a century obsessed with war. His classics irradiated his moderns. The four stages of Greek religion which he announced in 1912 (and which, by an endearing, Crocean shift, became five in 1925) were relevant to modern living as he saw it. He always, in his fondness for primitive gusto, seemed to hanker after an age of innocence—the pro-Zeus *euetheia* which is also the Age of Ignorance. This stage, he said, tempted one "to regard it as the normal beginning of all religion, or almost as the normal raw material out of which religion is made".[1] With the next stage, the "Olympian conquest", man develops a sense of his self, of his distinctions not only from nature but from his fellows. This marks the beginning of those Promethean and Faustian urges which have been variously lamented by such varied figures as Jung, Malraux, and Burckhardt, the patrician Jonah of historicism. Homer's religion, according to Murray, was "a step in the self-realization of Greece". At any rate, from this perception to Murray's diagnosis of twentieth-century ills is the merest exercise in analogy. The protests made so eloquently and animatedly in *Faith, War and Policy* (1918), *Essays and Addresses* (1921), and *The Problems of Foreign Policy* (1921) start from a humanist position condensed and incorporated into one of the last things he wrote—a BBC talk on Menander, reprinted in *The Listener* (July 12, 1956).

> Menander belonged to . . . a refined and sensitive generation—the most civilized the world had seen before that date, and perhaps, for 2,000 years after it—flung suddenly into a brutal and violently changing world. He interpreted its experience in his own characteristic way; not by a great spiritual defiance, like the Stoic or Cynic; not by withdrawal from the world like the Epicurean; but by humour, by patience, by fortitude, by a curious and searching sympathy with his fellow mortals, in their wrigglings as well as their firm stands; and by a singular power of expressing their thoughts and their strange ways in verse so gracious and satisfying that the laughter in it seldom hurts, and the pain is suffused with beauty.

There is the quality of him: his sense of belonging to a beleaguered generation, of witnessing an abysmal militarism; his clear view of the possible positions—from Diogenes to a newly sought-out *euetheia;* his essentially civilized conscience; his care for a "searching sympathy" and, in that rather glib coda, his capacity for resolute ecstasy—whether in galvanizing even Greek corybants, re-orchestrating Euripides into couplets and Swinburnian breathiness, or resisting endlessly the urge to shape life's fragmentary nature into a formal unity. In other words, a romantic who was bound to recreate all he contemplated. "There go", he said, "to the greatest imaginative work usually two qualities: intensity of experience and the gift of transmuting that intensity into beauty." What an ominous and revealing statement for a Professor of Greek: the routine clichés of the lecture on aesthetics expose here the extremist and the meddler in him, the one constantly inciting the other to acuter efforts.

It is a wonder, then, that he showed so much balance, so little contumely. His dynamic charity might well have betrayed him into being preposterous or arrogant, but instead helped him to evade, or at least to circumvent, two of the humanist's besetting attitudes. In the first place, he never wholeheartedly commends a Golden Age; he never allows his fondness for *euetheia* to become the worship of an idealized phase. Where Burckhardt, Pater, and Berenson almost managed the apotheosis of their respective periods, Murray distinguishes clearly between the recognition of excellence and the present day in which it survives as a consolatory reminder. Nor does he propose any Museum without Walls, any Library (or House) Beautiful, any Republic of Love or of Literacy, any *hortus inclusus* of the spirit's noblest manifestations. He retains and explains a sense of historical muddle and daily mixture. He seeks out no absolutes, but practises discrimination among miscellaneous circumstances. All the time, extremism and his interfering habits are tempting him away from a synoptic view. Laudably, even his lapses into dithyramb are presented as lapses to particularly sane purpose; even his occasional efforts to sum up in a phrase

or a speech are presented self-consciously as items in the category of summings-up. He wavered and hovered, soared and burrowed; but his spiritual acrobatics, his own "wrigglings" and "firm stands", are controlled. The wriggling is not evasive; the stands are not unthinking. His gaze is outwards, across quads and Greek shimmer and early animism, to the ineluctable iron century, to audiences and especially those "innumerable sensitive natures who were broken or driven mad by the strains of violence and persecution in our recent wars". A compassionate and deliberately thorough gaze trains itself to see through the muddle of politics, class, privilege, power, and taste.

No escapist, he might well have approached another extreme: from open-eyed charity to philistine righteousness. But no. He wanted not only justice but magnificence too: no Protestant distrust of art for him; no rash and deluded dichotomy of the good life and the moral badness of art. If we can humanize ethically, he was always asserting, we can do it aesthetically too: both reform and enhance. And for an illustration of the humane moderateness he exemplifies constantly, I want to turn again to his little talk on Menander. It has the quality of an oblique telegram; much of himself emerges, off-guard, in terms unfamiliar to those who at once associate him with Greek tragedies or with his writings as a liberal publicist.

Of Menander's thousand or so surviving lines he presents a loving and detailed interpretation, almost as if he were reading a hand or extrapolating from some fragment of a formula or vase. Like most humanists he rejoices in affinities and analogies: Menander's fame, he says, "was immense; he is constantly quoted by later writers, including of course [this jubilantly] St. Paul: 'Evil communications corrupt good manners'." But Menander is best known through the Latin imitations of Plautus and Terence; more recently, after the discovery of papyri, through 700 lines of one play, *The Arbitration,* and nearly 400 of two others. "Yet", Murray continues, " . . . it is clear that Menander is an adapter of a particular form of Euripidean tragedy. He dropped the heroic legends; he invented his own plots". And Menander begins to emerge as a realist, the inventor of modern comedy who dropped both chorus and mythical personages for everyday life and his own "inexhaustible human sympathies":

> We live not as we will, but as we can.
> Fight not with god, nor to the storm without
> Add your own storms.

This is no philosophy of Pater, of Arnold, or of any brooding outsider. Murray had no paragraphs for spiritual lepers. Instead, he determined on a view every bit as

gentle, self-scrutinizing, and acquiescent as that epitomized in the fragments he quotes from Menander—and in this longer passage:

> I count it happiness
> Ere we go quickly thither whence we came,
> To gaze ungrieving on these majestics,
> The world-wide sun, the stars, water and clouds,
> And fire. Live, Parmeno, a hundred years,
> Or a few months, these you will always see,
> And never, never, any greater things.

But is such a view all that Menander offers? No; usually he is taken, says Murray, for an "elegant but dissipated writer"; his heroes are philanderers, his heroines "loose women or at best unmarried mothers"; the plots always hinge on an exposed illegitimate or unwanted infant. Exposure, Murray points out, was the father's legal right; but in Menander (and here is a typically dynamic touch, to be followed by an access of charity) "the outcast and unrecognized infant . . . comes pretty certainly not from real life but straight from the ancient Dionysiac ritual". He goes on:

> Drama, we must remember, was a celebration of the Festival of Dionysios under the Presidency of his High Priest by performers who were officially his craftsmen. Dionysus, as his name shows, is 'Zeus-child' or 'Zeus-Young', that is, the young King of the New Year, who regularly in myth appears first as an unknown and outcast babe . . . .

All Menander's plays prove to be fertility mysteries in the guise of comic knockabout. And this eliciting of primal inspiration is no more than Murray did for Greek religion and, in turn, for Euripides' style. He has an acute sense of, an even acuter longing for, return to the source: not spiritual infantilism, but an atavism that intoxicates.

All the same, he does more than excavate a near-ineffable past; he also explores the social setting of Menander's comedy. The unfortunate heroines suffered from laws not catering for marriage to a foreigner or slave; and in the time of Menander, the period of Alexander's successors, there were many displaced women—the prey of slave-dealers. Notice, says Murray, how the titles of many plays are taken from towns recently captured: *The Women of Andros,* of *Olynthus,* of *Perinthus,* of *Samos.* In many plays the woman is a mere chattel, a spoil of war; "the facts are brutal, but the human beings are much the reverse". Nobility and pertinacious devotion predominate; but chance also is present: these women have slipped between free-will and determinism. Like the infant-god, like their own infants, they are vulnerable; they are an irruption of the divine. So also, charity is a divine gesture

in return, a heeded prompting from the divine. All that can be done for these women is to be charitable; and the male characters behave astonishingly well: in *Hated* the soldier, in love with his prize, finds that she cannot bear his touch—she hates him; and he walks out alone at night, meditating suicide. In other plays on this theme the lovers seek to free their women by force, ransom, and fire. The generous gestures are there. Finally Murray suggests that Menander's immense influence, from Plautus to Vanbrugh, derives frrom "a touch of vulgarity":[2] Menander has the common touch, as well as intensity and the capacity to make intensity beautiful. But it is the common touch—with its connotations of rough-and-ready kindness, of slightly embarrassed unbending—that distinguishes him for Murray.

Notice what goes unmentioned: decorum, unity, coherence, intellectual appeal. Nothing of high impartiality or of philosophy. The same is true of Murray's performance in all its aspects: these things count, but not half so much as a sense of the *daimon,* the developed heart and the dionysiac—which such otherwise kindred humanists as Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson and G. M. Young kept in their proper places. Murray, whether he is tracing the rise of Greek epic or Greek religion, denouncing the twentieth-century drift to total war, analyzing the problems of policy-making, or giving us a dionysian Euripides, seems always in the thick of it. Behind the smooth concern of his essays there is tumult, a yearning stronger than donnish and, as well, a dilettante and a pre-Raphaelite poet.

But one wonders whether "the language of Professor Gilbert Murray", as T. S. Eliot debunked it in his rumbustious essay of 1918, has done the Classics, and Euripides in particular, any great harm. Mr. Eliot saw Murray's language as "a barrier more impenetrable than the Greek Language" itself. Murray was not forcing animation upon his subject; he was eliciting it in a mode distasteful to supporters of Imagism and just about as truthful to the original as Ezra Pound's versions of Propertius. Because Murray cared intensely, because he sought to make the Greeks not merely relevant but effective in our own day, he both intensified and elaborated. In one sense he followed Peter's doctrine of the ecstatic moment. And we are unfair if we judge him wholly as an academic translator, as another Stephen Phillips or Laurence Binyon, instead of as an energumen striving desperately not to lose faith in his own time.

His study, *The Stoic Philosophy* (1915), would serve as a useful starting-point for a reappraisal of him not as an arch-distortionist but as a Cyrenaic of the old school who learned the lesson of modern industrialism and technocracy. His *Faith, War and Policy* and *Essays and Addresses* are at least as important to a just estimate of

him as, say, *Ethical Fragments* or *Love, Marriage and Morals* is to Croce or Bertrand Russell respectively. Notably neither Burckhardt the historian nor Berenson the connoisseur has a book similar to any of Murray's socio-political collections. We may chide him for enthusiasm, but not for mental rigidity or dusty cataloguing. He knows his Greeks every bit as well as Burckhardt his Constantine and Renaissance, Berenson his Renaissance painters; but he surpasses the other two in sheer gusto and imaginative apprehension. He fills out his view until it touches everything; they recoil, the one into disdainful jeremiads, the other into urbane dedication. After all, it was Murray who curbed the excesses and fancies of his brilliant pupil and friend, Jane Harrison. She too was an enthusiast; enough of one, in fact, to be an important stimulus to Murray's own books. But it was she and not Murray who became smitten with Themis, who reminds us of an earlier union of man with nature: of *euetheia.* When we tire of her inspired and undeviatingly anthropological approach to Greek religion, her *Prolegomena,* Tchengokwale, Mar'salai, and Tchambuli, we might find Gilbert Murray's chthonic extravagances an index to his modernity of mind, to his superiority over her in the application of specialized knowledge. He too was studying man, but with anguished reference to the misdemeanours of twentieth-century would-be Olympians.

There is no knowing exactly what sustained him spiritually. But he did disguise with occasional acerbity a serene agnosticism. In *Five Stages of Greek Religion* he anticipated the mood of a letter written much later to Bertrand Russell:

> Then about faith. What I wrote about beauty, physical and moral, was, I think, based on some sort of faith: that is, on a strong consciousness that, beyond the realm of our knowledge, there was a wide region in which we had imperfect intimations or guesses or hopes. Most of the so-called faiths are these intimations worked up into the form of definite myths or dogmas, almost all of them anthropomorphic. The myth is mostly invented, but the faith at the back of it has at least a good deal of probability about it. . . . It is in some ways the most interesting part of life, the great region in which you must be agnostic, but nevertheless you must have something like conviction.[3]

To modern Satanism, as he called it, he opposed the liberalism he first learned from his father and developed through Castle Howard and tenure of public office. True, it was a paternalistic liberalism, disapproving of efforts by the underprivileged to help themselves: the reformer, in this aristocratic English version of liberal-mindedness, likes to feel around him the aura of the fairy-godmother. But, as the century became more severe, Murray turned from the important, about which he had a few prejudices acquired from Lady Carlisle, to the utterly essential, about which he was fanatical: in other words, from social reform to an effort to save civilization. To

fight its gradual extinction he widened his outlook to admit much that seemed fiercely dogmatic. But at least, unlike a Burckhardt, he became dogmatic about the survival of civilization in all its variety, not of a privileged group or stratum. This is surprising only when we fail to discern in the early Murray the generous concern for humanity which constantly accompanied his aristocratic leanings. Civic monk he might have been; he also had in him a good deal of the worker-priest.

NOTES

1. *Cf.* Rilke, writing to Princess Marie von Thurn and Taxis in 1915: "Whatever may come, the worst will be that a certain innocence of life, in which we grew up, will never again exist for any of us."
2. *Cf.* Mme. Nathalie Sarraute in *The Times Literary Supplement* (June 10, 1960): " . . . occasionally, we see examples of how dangerous it is for writers to protect themselves from impure contacts."
3. Gilbert Murray, *An Unfinished Autobiography* (London, 1960), p. 218.