

Sydney Mendel

REFLECTIONS ON ORIGINAL SIN

AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY the doctrine of Original Sin seemed outmoded. The theory of evolution and the science of genetics had undermined men's faith in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the lucubrations of historians lent support to the opinion that man was progressing, and that the Golden Age, if it was to exist at all, would be found in the future rather than in the past. Today, Orginal Sin is once again an issue; as we shall see later, it is even regarded by some writers as *the* issue. Certainly it has one characteristic of really important questions—namely, that it arouses intense feelings. The champions of Original Sin say that the "humanists" (as we may, for the moment, call their opponents) are superficial, that they approach life through the medium of ideas, which, however generous, charming, or elevated they may be, bear little or no correspondence to the sometimes harsh reality. The humanists reply that the dogma of Original Sin is an absurd, antiquated myth, a piece of meaningless mumbo jumbo, and that those who shelter behind it do so simply because they are afraid of life, and wish to flee from their own human responsibility or to gain power over others.

It goes without saying that these mutual accusations exacerbate the misunderstandings and ill feelings between the two groups. To tell a man that if he disagrees with you it must be because he is superficial, is to put an end to all argument by erecting between you the insurmountable barrier of your own superiority. To tell a man that his ideas really derive from his fear of life also puts an end to discussion, since it implies that you have an insight into the unconscious sources of his thought that he is, by definition, excluded from. It is rather like the Freudian who tells a man that he has an Oedipus complex. If the man agrees, then both are of the same mind, and the matter can be regarded as settled; if he disagrees, then he is displaying *resistance*, and this can be taken as an infallible sign that he does indeed have an Oedipus complex. Thus both sides accuse each other of faults against which no defence is possible, and the very effectiveness of their accusations increases the barriers

between them. The purpose of this essay is to examine the whole problem dispassionately, and, if possible, to break down these barriers by discovering at the heart of Original Sin a universal truth that will provide an acceptable common ground for both groups.

The reasons why the doctrine of Original Sin has acquired a sudden, new importance, and a new lease on life in this century, are fairly obvious. The two world wars, the atomic and hydrogen bombs, *der Untergang des Abendlandes*, the decay of liberalism and the rise of totalitarian "isms", all these have helped to provide the soil in which a new pessimism could flourish. Orthodox Christian thinkers, such as Maritain and Niebuhr, have been quick to declare that the dilemmas of modern man arise from our naïve belief in human perfectibility and our refusal to recognize that man is inherently sinful. The work done during the last half-century in the field of psychoanalysis has tended to offer some degree of support to the orthodox Christian view. The findings of Freud and his followers certainly do not support any complacent view of the rationality and perfectibility of man, and we find, for example, a psychoanalyst such as Dr. Sachs declaring, in his essay on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, "We are all linked together by the bond of common guilt, and it matters little whether we call it by its Christian name of Original Sin or by the Psycho-analytic term of Oedipus Complex." For the student of literature, the most important figure to be considered in connection with this topic is probably T. E. Hulme. The idea of Original Sin played a role of such paramount importance in Hulme's thought that he regarded the absence of belief in it as the distinguishing characteristic of post-Renaissance man. He said "we may define Romantics as all those who do not believe in the Fall of Man", and he named as a fundamental characteristic of the Humanist (whom he disliked) the "refusal to believe any longer in the radical imperfection of either man or nature." In general, Hulme regarded the Romantic and the Humanist as typical products of the "general state of mind which has lasted from the Renaissance to now", and he labeled this state of mind "trivial."

In his "Second Thoughts on Humanism," T. S. Eliot supports the views of Hulme and argues that the great achievement of our age is that we do accept Original Sin (that is, if we are truly contemporary men) and that we have thus closed the fissure that has lasted for four centuries. Many writers, for example Charles Frankel in *The Case for Modern Man* and Kathleen Nott in *The Emperor's Clothes*, refuse to join Eliot on his intellectual bandwagon, and retort that the "contemporaneity" of Eliot and the neo-Thomists is seven hundred years out-of-date. However, the very titles of their books, implying on the one hand that modern man is on trial and

on the other that we are being successfully hoodwinked by Eliot and his allies, bear witness to the ascendancy of the new orthodoxy.

We can best explore the nature of the differences between the two points of view by taking as our starting-point some remarks made by T. E. Hulme in his preface to Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*. Hulme defined Rousseauistic romanticism as the view that "man is by nature wonderful, of unlimited powers and if hitherto he has not appeared so it is because of external obstacles and fetters which it should be the main business of social politics to remove", and he described the Augustinian view that "man is by nature bad or limited and can consequently only accomplish anything of value by disciplines ethical, heroic, or political."

From these two definitions we can derive a number of propositions. The Rousseauist believes in freedom, while the Augustinian (as we may call the person who accepts the dogma of Original Sin) believes in constraint. If a man is naturally good, then obviously he has the right to insist upon doing exactly as he wishes, and no one can have any reason to let or hinder him. But if man is bad or limited, then we must agree that society has the right to protect itself against him, and to control and proscribe his natural impulses. The two viewpoints produce characteristic attitudes to such matters as education and politics; in politics, for example, the Rousseauist is likely to be a progressive, while the Augustinian will be a conservative. (One thinks, for example, of T. S. Eliot's slogan, "Royalism, Anglo-Catholicism, and Classicism.")

In much the same way, we can deduce that the Rousseauist will be a non-conformist while the Augustinian will be a conformist. If a man believes he is sinful, he will suspect his own motives and be tempted to imitate the actions and ideas of others rather than to trust himself. But if he believes with Rousseau that he is essentially good, he will be a non-conformist and do what he feels prompted to do without too much regard for other people's standards.

Finally, we may deduce from the definition quoted from Hulme that the Augustinian will believe in self-abnegation and the Rousseauist in self-fulfilment. Self-abnegation is one of the dominant themes of the branch of Christianity, associated with St. Paul and St. Augustine, that laid the greatest emphasis on Original Sin. The quest for self-fulfilment, on the other hand, is the primary characteristic of Renaissance or Faustian man. One might perhaps select this quotation from Blake to illustrate its spirit: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." The conflict between these two principles has perhaps helped to generate the tremendous energies of our civilization, but it has also been responsible

for the mental and spiritual confusion which lies at the root of much of the suffering of modern man.

We have very briefly considered three related pairs of opposites—the Rousseauistic theory of natural goodness and the Augustinian idea of Original Sin; non-conformity and conformity; self-realization and self-sacrifice—and it will now be necessary to examine these in greater detail in order to show how, in practice, they can affect the concrete reality of a man's life.

The great objection to the Rousseauistic theory of natural goodness is that it does not correspond to the facts. Even the better sort of man, the man who is "indifferent honest", can say, with Hamlet, "I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me." The unsoundness of Rousseau's theory can be demonstrated even by the example of Rousseau himself. As Blake said, "Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of Sins continually. Rousseau thought men good by Nature; he found them Evil and found no friend."

Because it is not true that natural man is naturally good, those who rely upon this doctrine to support their claim to freedom and self-fulfilment usually come to grief in one of two ways. Either they renounce this false idea and with it sacrifice their own legitimate claim to life, or they cling to it in defiance of the facts and thus are liable to error, in particular to the error of being uncritical towards their own faults. I would contend that Wordsworth illustrates the first alternative, and Rousseau and D. H. Lawrence the second. (In case the reader questions my interpretation of any or all of these figures, it should be emphasized that my argument itself does not depend on these particular examples: their function is merely exemplary.)

Wordsworth started off as a believer in the French Revolution (itself, of course, a Rousseauistic phenomenon) and as a believer, in some sort, in the natural goodness of man:

Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her,

but, as everyone knows, he found himself obliged to abandon his belief and to reverse his attitude towards the French Revolution. He became a defender of the orthodox church—traditional bulwark against man's self-assertive tendencies—and his creative powers atrophied. In the "Ode to Duty" (what an anti-poetic theme!) he confessed his past errors:

I, loving freedom, and untried,
No sport of every random gust,

Yet being to myself a guide,
Too blindly have reposed my trust

Wordsworth declined into what Mr. T. S. Eliot has called "the still, sad music of infirmity". The man who, in contrast to him, adheres to his belief in natural goodness (and, in particular, in his own natural goodness) runs a different risk; namely, that of becoming blind to the evil in himself, and hence of failing to guard against and check it. Anyone who reads Rousseau's *Confessions* will agree that he himself fell into this error. D. H. Lawrence, too, unfortunately, made the same mistake. Lawrence's fidelity to his deepest feelings, which was heroic, led him to suppose that his every whim and caprice was stamped with the *imprimatur* of Eternity. The result (as many witnesses confirm) was that in the last years of his life he became intolerably rude and intractable. Another more tragic sign of the same wrong-headedness in Lawrence was his stubborn refusal to admit that he had tuberculosis until it was too late to do anything about it.

So much for the errors of those who follow the path of non-conformity. Let us now consider the perils in the path of conformity. The danger for the conformist is that in submitting himself to a code of behaviour imposed by external authority he may be strangling his own unique, unborn self. There can be no formula for producing men like automobiles on a production-line. If I am destined by my natural propensities to be a violet, it is mere distortion and perversion of my life if I attempt to convert myself into a rose.

Even the man who lives the life of asceticism and self-abnegation prescribed by the great religions is exposed to the dangers of conformity. The rules of religion offer a valid technique to those capable of arriving at the result which the technique is designed to achieve. But the problem is to decide whether you are really suited for, and desirous of following, this particular way. When this personal responsibility is faced squarely, there is no question of "behaviour imposed by an external authority." The position is then just as if the man who wished to become an Olympic runner were to carry out the training program prescribed by the trainer he had himself chosen. Unfortunately, many well-intentioned people follow the ethical precepts of the different religions, and imitate great "virtues" without understanding what they are about. They perform acts of self-sacrifice, and frustrate their own real needs and desires, without possessing the "love" which would alone make such sacrifice natural and inevitable. (In fact, the self-sacrifice that is inspired by love is no longer self-sacrifice, but fulfilment.) Naturally, the spiritual rewards that they have promised themselves fail to materialize. And very soon the chorus of approval that greeted their self-sacrifice dies away, or else loses all relish for them.

Such people have committed the blunder against which Robinson Jeffers warns his sons:

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man,
a clever servant, insufferable master.

There is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught
—they say—God, when he walked on earth.

Those who fall into this trap are simply cheated of life, and in the bitterness of their frustration are liable to seek to thwart others as they themselves have been thwarted.

Thus it is seen that self-assertion and self-abnegation, nonconformity and conformity, all possess their dangers; in fact, we are concerned here, not merely with false ideas, but with living forces that can wreck men's lives. It would seem, indeed, that a man has three choices before him. First, he can do what other people tell him is right; he adopts their definition of man's nature, and perverts himself in order to fit into that Procrustean bed. Or, second, he can do what he himself thinks is right—and then he runs the risk of becoming self-centered and full of *hubris*, of beginning to think that he is God. Or, finally, he can refuse to adopt any conception of man's nature or ends, in which case he remains chaotic and aimless; he is at the mercy of every wind, drawn hither and thither by every stray desire or sensation. And we may then apply to him an observation of St. John of the Cross: "And thus the soul whose will is divided among trifles is like water, which, having an outlet below wherein to empty itself, never rises; and such a soul has no profit."

However, it would be naïvely pessimistic to suppose that these three possibilities really exhaust all the imaginable routes open to man. In fact our discussion so far really provides a clue to a more valuable analysis. Thus, although we found fault with both D. H. Lawrence and Wordsworth, we admitted that Lawrence was right to obey his deepest feelings and only wrong in thinking all his feelings "infallible", and, contrariwise, we thought Wordsworth at fault to doubt the holiness of his impulses although he was right in acknowledging that he was evil. Then again while attacking spurious religiosity, we admitted that for the right person a religious training was perfectly legitimate. Clearly we are implicitly assuming the existence of something that should be cultivated and something that should be rejected, although that something may differ from person to person. We want to be able to weed the garden without fear of rooting up the finest flowers. The problem, in other words, is a matter of delicate discrimination, and the immediate task, then, is to create the conceptual tools that will help us to perform the act of discrimination effectively.

If we analyze the contrasting concepts so far discussed, we find that all of

them can be related in a fundamental way to the idea of self. Thus, self-assertion is naked self, while self-sacrifice is a more subtle and far-sighted form of self—the desire to win approval or a reward in heaven. Conformity is the attempt to provide the self with a protective colouring that renders it indistinguishable from the other creatures in its environment. Non-conformity, on the other hand, is the display of self. What would be the point of painting your hair green, as Baudelaire did, if there were no one to see you? Let us adopt, then, in a tentative and undogmatic spirit, the following hypothesis. A man may be said to consist of two separate, but not easily distinguishable, parts: the organic being and the self. We may say of the organic being that it is that which is given; it exists independently of man's will, or, which is the same thing, it is what remains after the self has been subtracted. The self or ego is the collection of memories with which we identify ourselves; it is the idea of himself that a man has. The aim of the self is to perpetuate itself, to protect itself, and to esteem itself; and in order for it to esteem itself, as Swedenborg has said, it is essential for it to see a favourable reflection of itself in the eyes of other people.

It is implicit in this hypothesis that all actions that derive from the organic being are "right" and those that have their roots in self are "wrong." The organic being is "right" just because everything that has real existence, that is part of the created universe, is inherently valid and right. A tiger may be a very dangerous animal, but it is part of the creation, and no one would think there was any meaning in questioning its right to exist (or the propriety of its being tigerish). Similarly, the man who is ferocious, lustful, and pitiless, though from my personal point of view he is "bad" (since he constitutes a danger to myself), will be "right" from the point of view of the universe in so far as he is acting in accordance with his own nature, and occupies his proper place in the scale of creation.

All actions that have their origin in self-love are "wrong" precisely because they do not possess any actuality, any real existence. The desire to think well of oneself—which is, of course, the mainspring of the greater part of all human activity—is, in actual fact, absurd and meaningless. I am what I am. If I try to think that I am better than I am, this is simply fooling myself and can only lead to harmful results: it may cause me to attempt a task for which I am not equipped, or to imitate an excellence which I do not possess (with results like those already discussed in connection with spurious religiosity). In exactly the same way, it is meaningless for a man to seek to be admired by other people. Since, like all creatures, I occupy a certain place in the scale of creation, it will naturally and necessarily arise that some men will admire me and other men will not admire me. If I seek to win

the admiration of those men who would not naturally admire me, I am merely disquising myself and creating a false situation. This is, indeed, the predicament of Shakespeare's Macbeth. If Macbeth were really by virtue of his organic being a king, he would obtain his crown as naturally as water finds its level. But it is self-love and ambition that make him overreach himself and snatch a crown that does not really belong to him:

now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief . . .

And this image of clothes that are ill-fitting, which as Miss Caroline Spurgeon has shown is the dominant image in the play, is an apt symbol of a universal human situation—the disproportion between the true worth of the man and the exaggerated pretensions of the self. In the order of nature there is a perfect balance between a man's desires and his achievement, since the desire itself is the charge of energy required for compassing the achievement. But when the self interposes between the organic nature and the task, this balance is destroyed. Thus when we acquiesce in the death of Macbeth, we renounce, symbolically, the self. And part of the satisfaction we experience is due to our sense of inner release from tension; now that we confess to being shrunk to our true size we are released from the burden of wearing clothes that are too big and heavy for us.

Having made this brief preliminary statement of our hypothesis, I may now discuss some of its implications. It is evident, in the first place, that the two categories which I have termed the self and the organic being enable us to resolve the opposition between Augustinian Original Sin and Rousseauistic Natural Goodness. If we consider the self only, we find man to be entirely evil, an inflated balloon that imagines itself to be its own creator. If, on the other hand, we confine our attention to the organic being, we find only goodness, rightness, and necessity. Clearly, each of these doctrines emphasized one part of the truth only; namely, that part which required to be stressed in order to counterbalance a prevailing trend in the opposite direction. Thus in the eighteenth century, against a social culture that was powerful in shaping the individual to meet its demands and that inevitably tended to become increasingly divorced from the realities of human nature, Rousseau affirmed the claims of the organic being, of what was deepest and most real in himself. Today, on the other hand, in an age of ruthless egotism, on both the individual and national planes, it is natural that the Augustinian view of mankind should reassert itself.

Armed with the insights we have so far gained, we are perhaps now ready

to try to penetrate to the heart of the meaning of Original Sin. Undoubtedly, the subject has evoked a great deal of confused thinking. For some people, belief in Original Sin represents no more than a reaction from the naïve optimism of the nineteenth century into an equally naïve pessimism, reinforced by a vague and wistful sense of personal guilt. (Of course, these uneasy stirrings of the heart have a certain distinction, and it is for lack of them that the rationalist is called superficial.) For others, Original Sin is identified quite simply with sex, or, more specifically, with the Oedipus complex, as in the quotation from Dr. Sachs near the beginning of this essay. Unfortunately, the concept of the Oedipus complex is almost more vague and confused than the idea of Original Sin, so that to invoke it is to run the risk of explaining *obscurum per obscurius*. Those who read the account of the Fall of Man in Genesis find their perplexities increased. Treated as a literal historical event, the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is open to numerous grave objections, quite apart from the scientific objections already briefly alluded to. One objection frequently made is that it seems unjust that all men have been condemned because of Adam's sin. Again, it is argued that God ought never to have permitted the unequal contest between man and Satan. This point is made in the well-known lines of Fitzgerald:

Oh, Thou, who Man of baser earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's forgiveness give—and take!

Even Milton gives a literal and moralistic interpretation of the Fall, and this interpretation, as Professor Waldock has convincingly shown in *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*, bristles with logical difficulties. How can Adam fear a threat of death when he does not know what death is? If the eating of the apple first brought sin into the world, how was it possible for Adam to commit a sin in eating the apple? Why did God have to test Adam and Eve (and thus invite disobedience) by placing the forbidden tree in the Garden in the first place?

All these difficulties melt away if we understand that the story of the Fall of Man is not a chronicle of an actual historical event, but an account, in mythological form, of a new development in the evolution of the human psyche. The myth records the birth of *Self-Consciousness*, the emergence of man out of the condition of *Unconsciousness* that characterizes all the other animals. The possession of *Self-Consciousness* is the distinguishing mark of man, and the basis of all his greatness and of all his misery. The creation of an "I" that was capable of looking before and after ensured man's mastery over all creation. and also "Brought death into

the world, and all our woe", because it enabled him to foresee his own extinction. Hence the ambivalent attitude towards the Fall which is expressed in the phrase "*felix culpa.*" Understood in this way, as poetic rather than literal truth, the Genesis story makes perfectly good sense.

Before leaving the Garden of Eden finally, it will be necessary to consider one further question. Why did Adam and Eve eat of the tree of the knowledge of *good* and *evil*? It is to be understood that at the level of *Unconsciousness*, that is, at the level of the Garden of Eden, good and evil do not exist. *Unconscious* man acts as he does act, instinctively and spontaneously, in accordance with the direction indicated by the parallelogram of forces in the situation (which includes himself) in which he is. Thus his actions spring from the organic being, and possess the same kind of rightness and necessity as have the movements of a weathercock in the wind. When the evolution to the level of *Self-consciousness* takes place, the ideas of good and evil make their appearance, good being that which is favourable to the preservation of the self, and evil what is unfavourable. As Hobbes very well said, "Good and Evil are names that signify our appetites and aversions. Every man calleth that which pleases him good; and that which displeaseth him, evil." In due course, by a process of hypostatization, good and evil come to be treated as independent entities, and, thereafter, instead of freely responding to a natural situation in the manner of *Unconscious* man, *Self-conscious* man approaches the world wearing the spectacles of good and evil. Instead of merely reacting, I judge and evaluate my reaction and try to push it towards "goodness" and away from "evil." Instead of merely reacting, I control and shape my behaviour for the sake of what I suppose to be the long-term interests of the self. Just as a child learns to behave in such a way as to earn the praise and avoid the criticisms of grown-ups, so the self modifies its behaviour in order to win approval; it adjusts itself, in other words, to the ideas, ideals, and beliefs of other people. And, in its turn, it attempts to control the behaviour of other selves by the judicious distribution of praise and blame.

We can perhaps clarify this last point by reverting to our observations concerning the ferocity of a tiger. Suppose you are being attacked on one occasion by a tiger and on another by a man. In the case of the tiger, you take the best evasive action that you are capable of, you go and get your wounds dressed, and then, broadly speaking, you forget about the whole matter. But when the man attacks you, you abuse him violently, you become shrill with indignation or mad with rage (like Lear), and you nurse a grudge against him for the rest of your life.

What is the reason for this difference? The reason is that you perceive the

man through the spectacles of good and evil. The tiger is just a tiger, and no one can see much profit in protesting because it behaves tigishly; but against the man we summon all these feelings of anger, indignation, and so on, in the effort to coerce him into adopting the desired behaviour pattern. And the more self there is in him, the more he too hypostatizes good and evil, the more likely it is that he will be obedient to the pressure of our feelings. But whether we succeed or not (and as likely as not we will not), it is clear that we are dealing with the tiger, practically and unemotionally, as a problem "out there," while our response to the man is irrational and unrealistic and costs us a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

This suffering is the inevitable condition of *Self-conscious* man because his ideas and ideals obstruct the natural movement of life. The self itself is merely an *idea*, and does not correspond to any reality, although it acquires a deceptive appearance of reality because of the emotions and loyalties that accumulate around it, and, above all, because it serves to give unity to successive states of consciousness. Man at the level of *Unconsciousness*, who does not possess "ideas," has no self, and (as we have observed) knows no problem of good and evil, needs to acquire "ideas" in order to free himself from his bondage to moment-to-moment existence, the ceaseless flux of sensations and impressions. Man at the level of *Self-consciousness*, on the other hand, needs to rid himself of "ideas" (and, above all, of course, of the idea of the self) because they create an artificial barrier between himself and reality. The self, in other words, is an idea that comes into being when man is expelled from the Garden of Eden, and disintegrates when he enters Paradise Regained.

I have now given a brief description of the self and the organic being, and touched upon some of the implications to be drawn from these concepts. What has been gained? It is not suggested that the self will wither away as soon as we fix upon it the clear light of intellect, for the responses of the self are so deeply ingrained in us that it is often virtually impossible to distinguish between them and those of the organic being. Nevertheless, just as a drug that is bacteriostatic often achieves in the long run the same results as one that is bacteriocidal, so a critical awareness of the ways of the self will gradually destroy it by depriving it of the nourishment upon which it depends for its existence. And, though the self and the organic being cannot always be distinguished, a theoretical grasp of the nature of each will greatly facilitate the task of discrimination. If we believe that in some mysterious way, as a result of an action done long ago by someone else, *we* are guilty, we renounce our human dignity and responsibility, like the people of Argos in Sartre's play, *The*

Flies. If on the other hand, we believe that we are naturally good, and that other people will respect and protect our goodness, then, like Othello, we are certain to be betrayed by Iagos either within or without. An essay of this kind cannot teach us to walk upon the delicate tightrope of discrimination between these two, but it can at least make us aware that this is precisely the feat of balancing that we have to achieve.

HUNGER

Geoffrey Johnson

Like snow, new-fallen, hushed and deep, the gulls
That clothed the hill-slope meadows miles from sea,
The quintessential white of purity,
They flashed on vision in the blizzard's lulls.

But when they rose with restless cries and wheeled,
Nature's ironic mock went home: I saw
What a friend in torment howled in every maw
Whose godsend was the dungheaps of the field.