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THE PLIGHT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

At one time, the clergy were closely allied with classicists. Many eminent ministers had their backgrounds in the classics, and many academic classicists were in holy orders. Moreover, they shared the cloak of the Great Tradition, to which Greece and Palestine have contributed throughout most of the Christian era. If classicists now represent Greece more than Palestine and clergymen Palestine more than Greece, between them they cherish the "two views of life, and only two, which have," as Sir Richard Livingstone asserts, "won the allegiance of large masses of mankind in the West." They can at least be on speaking terms. However, they are also joined together in a new humility, a shared poverty, and a common fear. The humility and poverty of classicists and clergy alike, compared with the greater acceptance and richer rewards accorded to economists and scientists, can be gathered from the contrast between their present condition and that suggested by the Oxford don who, a little more than a century ago, praised both classics and holy orders when he said that a classical education "enables us to look down with contempt on those who have not shared its advantages, and also fits us for places of emolument not only in this world, but in that which is to come." Our common fear is that the richness of individual life, for which we have long laboured, will be lost in a new poverty of the intellect, a loss of true individuality, because of the forces of conformity and of materialism about us. Can the individual survive?

In our fear for individuality there is, of course, a suspicion of snobbery, if we give the impression that no one can be truly an individual who does not share our passion for learning for its own sake, our esoteric and minute scholarship, our spasmodic superiority to material things. I feel sure that the individual will survive, with some difficulty and presumably with our help, but I would view with distaste a world made up exclusively of members of the Canadian Classical Association plus members of theological faculties.

There is only this further preliminary suggestion. When the Great

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Tradition is referred to, it will not be defined but it should be understood to comprise that heritage of law, philosophy, scientific method, mysticism, duty and morality, monotheism and the inner light, that we owe to the great Greeks, the Hebrew Prophets, and the Christian gospel. Not all of us cherish all parts of it: the danger is that so many of our contemporaries appear to cherish no part of it at all. And when I mention the truncation of language anticipated in two familiar twentieth-century books, I shall assume that all of us will resolve anew to enrich rather than impoverish the speech of our day and of our students.

According to the oratory of our day, the plight of the individual is that he is lost in the shuffle of society, robbed of fruitful solitude, and intent on material gains and physical powers that may not enrich him but leave him poor indeed. We face the growing mediocrity of much that passes for education. As protagonists of the individual, we fear his loss of face, in the sense I shall indicate later. The situation is partly due to our laudable ambition to give every child a chance at self-realization, partly to the difficulty of getting him to have a self worth realizing "not only in this world but in that which is to come." This is nothing new: but it is present for us on a larger scale than used to confront men of learning, and with a smaller margin of time than more leisurely days enjoyed. It is probably not "later than we think," since so many of us are thinking that it is practically too late already. Let us remember Eisenhower's reputed pseudo-Latin motto "nil bastardo carborundum."

Thus to question the survival of the individual would hardly have occurred to the founders of the Canadian Classical Association. In their day, higher education was for the few, and the way to individuality was the road of a recognized and relatively restricted curriculum. They may seldom have paused to think how recently the rights of men as individuals had emerged and how precariously individuality must live. But we do ask the question, knowing that, however strongly we assert the right of every man to be an individual, we live in a society that many fear is bent on conformism and the flattening out of idiosyncrasy; and we wonder whether the future will see either the self-destruction of humanity or a society of faceless men produced through state dictation or, more likely, through sheer neglect of what is first-rate. We entertain the fear that free man, having given himself limitless liberty, will give himself a form of death. To feel thus is in some measure to guarantee that the disaster will not materialize. But there is no doubt that we are beset by doubts, not the least of which is a fear that contemporary education lacks vision, direction, profundity, and effectiveness.

It has been said that the characteristic words of the nineteenth

century were *individual, change, progress, reason, freedom*, whereas today's words are *disintegration, disorganization, decline, breakdown, instability, loneliness*. We live, on the one hand, in an economy of abundance, a day of conspicuous consumption and of mass communication undreamed of, and on the other in an age of anxiety, of conformity, of loneliness. In an earlier generation, men could speak optimistically about "the light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day": today, we have read George Orwell's 1984 and know that "we shall meet in the place where there is no darkness" can be a phrase big with nameless terror, because of the destruction of all that "light" has meant in terms of hope, moral excellence, social justice, and intellectual honesty. Orwell is, one may say, taking our humble and familiar "blinded by excess of light," and turning it into a deliberate, tortured, destructive production of blindness.

We like to think of ourselves as potentially more individual than ever, but we are warned, as by David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*, that we are passing out of a period of "inner-direction" or of "tradition-direction" into one of "other-direction" that could make us, in the absence of a sustained struggle, essentially mindless and faceless. Men are busy communicating as never before, but we are not sure that they are saying anything. There are signs of a new loneliness. As T. S. Eliot says, in *The Cocktail Party*,

"It isn't that I want to be alone,
But that every one's alone—or so it seems to me.
They make noises, and think they are talking to each other;
They make faces, and think they understand each other,
And I'm sure they don't."

Of course, loneliness is no new phenomenon: but this has some new aspects. A century ago, for example, Matthew Arnold had just written (1852),

Yes: in the sea of life enisled
We mortal millions live alone.

But he could still add the assurance that, "A God, a God their severance rul'd," however vague the "tendency not ourselves" might appear to be. Although he described himself, in *The Grande Chartreuse* (1855), as "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born," he was grieved more about the relative futility of human effort than about a suspicion of cosmic futility. He could be happy in a sad way, could enjoy his loneliness, could understand that a man could be "much comforted with thoughts of Christ, the living bread." It was more profound and

mature than the kind of loneliness Eliot describes: at least, it was not disguised by chatter or hurriedly postponed by television programs. Karen Horvey, the American psychiatrist, says that the modern neurotic is haunted by "the incapacity to be alone, varying from slight uneasiness and restlessness to a definite terror of solitude. . . . These persons have the feeling of drifting forlornly in the universe, and any human contact is a relief to them." It is as though the Prodigal Son, realizing that he is friendless in a far country, could no longer say, "I will arise and go to my father," because he is not certain there is any Father to go to. It is a brave gesture for Reisman to play upon Bury's diagnosis of the Hellenistic Age, as a time of "failure of nerve" because of the lessened importance of the individual as compared with the Hellenic Age, by insisting that the individual today must cultivate "the nerve of failure" as the price of nonconformity; but the nerve of the nerve of failure is likely to be cut if a man suspects that there is ultimately nothing worth failing for.

We talk about "mass man" in our new loneliness; and we also feel the presence of the spectre of mass destruction, through either the uncontrolled or the misdirected results of scientific discovery, and the spectre of mass degeneration through the slower, less easily perceived effects of political and sociological changes, whether these are deliberately engineered or emerge without anyone's conscious design. We fear that we may go out with the bang of an atomic explosion, or with the whimper of an enforced slavery, or, worse still, into the unconscious silence of a faceless conformity. There is a change in the spiritual (by which I mean both psychological and theological) atmosphere we breathe as compared with half-a-century ago; and there may be a change in the physical atmosphere, if atomic wastes and radiation-induced mutations increase. Little wonder that we ask, "Can the individual survive?"

The question may be taken to mean, "Will anyone survive physically?", as raised by Nevil Shute in *On the Beach*. That is not the question that really troubles us; nor should it, since the suffering would be only one-deep in that case, and if all go out together the result is swift, and probably less disastrous morally than if all go on together into slavery or nonentity. We know that this possibility of extinction exists, and that it might come to pass by accident. Two typical possibilities are that a meteorite landing in America or Russia could so closely resemble an atomic attack that trigger-happy or despairing men might loose upon all a retaliatory rain of death; or that the sea, from which we may draw much of our living in years to come, might be poisoned by atomic wastes buried in it, so that a century hence leaking containers would carry strontium 90 through diatoms and algae to lantern fish to larger fish to birds to men, and

end all life as we know it. But the greater question is whether individualism will die, through either planned or unintended changes, while humanity survives physically. We do not really anticipate race suicide by intentional violence; nor can we, in facing this topic, be concerned with some universal physical tragedy produced without intention. But we can anticipate, and we are concerned with, some form of the survival of the human that would be accompanied by a destruction or wasting away of the humane.

The question, then, involves what we are to mean by *individual* and what we are to mean by *survival*.

I approach the term "individual" diffidently, not least because a philosopher would be interested in the distinction between an individual and a person, a question not without difficulty for the theologian also. It is dangerous to assume that everyone knows what is meant by any term, since people have a habit of doing violence to words and phrases. Many, for instance, think that "the weak must go to the wall" encourages a brutal pushing aside of the handicapped, whereas it should remind us that a merciful provision of benches was once made for the weak, the able-bodied being required to stand throughout a service or ceremony. The *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye," is often quoted as though it were some reprehensible *magna carta* of revenge, whereas it was in principle a gain for justice, putting stern restraints on those who would exact two eyes for one. In the same way, we may think that the survival of the individual must involve the preservation of some "American way of life," or that the more libertarian and unprincipled, or the more odd or fractious a man becomes, the more truly he is an individual, whereas it may be that a given pattern of what we call democracy is no guarantee of the true value of the individual, and certainly to be merely odd is not to be in any important sense an individual. Having said this, however, I fall back on the very assumption I warned against, that we all, for present purposes, agree sufficiently on what we mean by the individual.

The rights of the individual are of relatively recent emergence, and the "virtue" of the individual is imperfect and in constant danger. My personal conviction is that, just as the emergence of every man as an individual in his own right was the product of the Graeco-Judaean-Christian tradition, and just as his failure as an individual comes when he betrays or is robbed of that tradition, the disappearance of the individual cannot happen while that tradition lives and cannot fail to happen if it dies or is suppressed. If we regard ourselves as the guardians or trustees of that tradition, or of any part of it, we have an urgent duty to see it steadily and whole, and to make it challenging and attractive by our interpretation of it. This will not be easy, because the scriptures and the classics, even

in translation, are closed books to many and are acquired tastes. We face the problem of the curate who was teaching the farmhand to read, and who said pleasantly, "Well, George, I suppose you can read the scriptures now," only to be met with the reply, "Lor' bless 'ee, zur, we'm out of the scriptures long ago and into the funny papers."

Widespread, deliberate, and conscientious emphasis on the individual is relatively recent. It was late in arriving in the Old Testament—notice the contrast between the family solidarity involved in "the sin of Achan" and the religiously-based individualism of Ezekiel. It was late in arriving in Greek thought, if it ever did come in our sense, since Greek democracy was the privilege of a relatively few cultivated individuals, in a polite society based on a broad substratum of slavery the necessity and propriety of which no one questioned. It was long in emerging in the professedly Christian society of Europe, having to wait for the late Middle Ages. But it was the fruit of these older traditions. By the close of the Middle Ages, the idea of the rights of the individual, as against king or priest, began to emerge clearly. True, that emergence was in part traceable to the rising power of knight and merchant, and in part a result of labour shortages following the Black Death. But it was in essence a result, long delayed and long prepared for, of the Christian gospel, in which a man is essentially neither slave nor king nor philosopher, neither chattel nor master, but a child of God. This does not mean that no class distinction or inequalities have survived, or will or should survive. But it does mean that even king and priest became more individual once they were counted, like all others, as children of God. No one, for instance, can read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and think of the haunted, sacrifice-bound king as an individual in his own right, with the inherent dignity of "a man for whom Christ died."

Earlier days could ignore the idea of individuality. The fairest of ancient social, philosophical, and artistic achievements were made possible through slavery, as though individuality were the prerogative of the few against the headless and faceless many. The lovely temple of Poseidon rose hard by the wine-dark sea of Greece, but also hard by the lead mines, where the nasty, brutal, and short lives of countless slaves, whose labours built it, made a moral mockery of the aesthetic triumph of the temple and of the religious worship in it. The pyramids of Egypt bear witness to the belief that the king was the only individual entitled to a gracious immortality, if indeed we can think of him as an individual, but also to the fact that these tombs, scientifically so exact and in engineering so marvellous, were raised on the dying bodies of innumerable and nameless slaves. Medieval chivalry, in turn, scarcely took account of anyone below the

knightly class: it was "the gentlemen" versus "the rest." But we cannot conscientiously think of anyone as a chattel, a means to someone else's ends. Or can we? It is only with difficulty that we avoid referring to sick people as "cases" and to battalions as "expendable troops," and thinking of "the Yemenites" or "the Chinese" as solid blocks of faceless figures. The point is that we hate ourselves for it: the ancients did not, and modern totalitarians do not. We realize how precarious is our hold on the concept of individual value and rights. In our sense of guilt may be our salvation.

The individual, as we know and value him, is the product of a great religio-socio-political tradition, and will die if it dies. Whatever the personal relation of each of us to this tradition, we can at least note that books about the future, in so many of which the individual has ceased to be important, were written on the tacit assumption that this tradition had died. H. G. Wells, in *The Time Machine* (1906), pictures a world void of individuals in our sense, and is silent about the Great Tradition; George Orwell, in *1984* (1949), pictures a world in which individuality in our sense is crushed, but again is silent about the Great Tradition. In stressing the Great Tradition, I do so as one who believes that the Christian faith crowned and completed what Palestine and Greece began, and in opposition to those who react with the bitter insistence of Ezra Pound that the Palestinian revelation of God was "a Semitic cuckoo's egg laid in the European nest."

As for the idea of survival, surely one is not being precious or obscurantist when he asserts that he cannot summon deep personal interest in it unless it carries a theological connotation. Survival of the individual is for me linked with the immortality of the individual in a universe that has a Christian meaning and purpose. I can admire the courage of Sigmund Freud, whose "hero" is one who has faced the "fact" that "dark, unfeeling and unloving powers determine human destiny"; but to me the demonism thus implied sounds as strangely, and as theologically, as the assertion "God is love" sounds in other ears; and "determine" seems a curious word to use when the hero's whole energy is spent in defeating dark, unfeeling, and unloving "powers." I can appreciate George Gaylord Simpson's claim that "man is the result of a purposeless and materialistic process that did not have him in mind"; but I cannot forget that the mystery of good is as real as the mystery of iniquity, and less explicable if the idea of "value" has no eternal sanction. The idea of an ultimate goal for human destiny involves an act of faith, and the *tour de force* of religious faith is at least as defensible as some *tour de force* of secular dialectic. I cannot get very

excited about the survival of anyone or anything under the aegis of a mindless, purposeless, and materialistic "process."

Having said this, however, I am content to turn to the problem of the survival of individuality as it arises from the manifold perils of totalitarianism on the one hand, and of mass media, automation, and a drift toward "mass man" on the other. What totalitarianism appears to be aiming at deliberately, these other forces may be achieving aimlessly. Whereas one drives, the other drifts; but the result in either case may be a faceless slavery. I do not really believe this will come, but it can come closer to us than we can endure, and the way back up will be harder than the way down.

One typical threat, then, to the survival of what we would call the individual is deliberate, planned in line with the creed of the totalitarian state. It is "the mailed fist" that we have to think of here, not "the glad hand" that could be equally destructive. Totalitarianism does not value the individual for himself, but only for his usefulness. It lives cannibal-like on the human life and the individual striving that make its existence possible. And it finds us weak in our opposition, because it professes high aims and promises the moon. We are embarrassed, not because we are insincere but because we are sincere. It seeks to disarm us by exploiting our sense of guilt that we have not lived up to our ideals. We stand self-condemned, clubbed into silence because we have too often paid only lip-service to our Great Tradition.

The force of this thesis is well exemplified by 1984. George Orwell looks forward only thirty-five years (from 1949), a single generation, to a world of "Big Brother is watching you." He uses some of the same ideas as H. G. Wells introduced in *The Time Machine*: Orwell's Newspeak, for example, is a truncated language, in this case deliberately created to destroy thought, and his Proles somewhat resemble the Morlocks. The book is sheer horror, its intervals of animalism giving one of the few touches of humanity. In it all values are overturned and "the place where there is no darkness" is worse than the throbbing cannibal-infested, machine-equipped subterranean tunnels of the Morlocks. There is a dying (or rather killing) of all individuality. The conscienceless impersonality (and possible non-existence) of "Big Brother," the continual altering of the past, the exploitation of the standardless Proles, all lead to "I love Big Brother," with not even an inner voice left to protest. We may doubt Orwell's complete sanity when he wrote, but we cannot escape the horror of his vision of hell, far worse than anything Dante could summon up. And we cannot but note

that the Great Tradition was dead before the horror could have a chance to triumph.

The other typical threat to the survival of the individual, as truly an individual, is not a deliberate program at all, not an attack born of principle but a drift born of expedience. It is not long-sighted, as totalitarianism professes to be, but short-sighted. It is the drift toward mass man, which would reduce all to a dull though possibly comfortable mediocrity, an unimaginative uniformity in a world of unimaginable technical competence. We, who have already lost the strength of our left legs through using automatic transmission, much of our bodily skill through spectator sports, much of our private taste through the prescribed reading of book clubs and digests, much of our conversational power through listening to machines, who are in danger of succumbing to the exploitation of sex and general animalism in a world that wants goods more than good, titillation more than joy, may sink toward the level of "conditioned" animals, indeed as far below them as our enlarged capacities could have raised us above them. We could congeal or soften into a mass, with a faceless conformity that, whether sophisticated, adolescent, or mediocre, would be alike boring and soul-destroying. No one desires this, least of all those who would lose their living if they succeeded in destroying the ideals against which they profitably encourage us to rebel. We do not really believe that this will happen, but we enjoy making people's flesh creep, like the Fat Boy in Dickens, by pointing out what mass media are doing to people (other than ourselves). Certainly we have enough evidence of increasing boredom and lack of inner resources to give us pause.

H. G. Wells, in *The Time Machine*, written before the airplane, word-communicating radio, television, or nuclear fission were heard of, anticipates a world in which the Great Tradition is obviously dead and forgotten, and in which, apparently without anyone's deliberate intention (in this differing sharply from Orwell), mankind has become illiterate, listless, and inarticulate, divided into Eloi and Morlocks, into butterflies and ants. None of this seems to have been according to plan: people just softened into a puttylike mass. The year was to be 2701 A.D. But the H. G. Wells of 1906 could still include little Weena in his story, and could have the Traveller write at the end, "And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers . . . to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived in the heart of man." A great fear lived on also, even though the Eloi were incapable of doing anything about it. George Orwell could not find room for any of these at the end: no intelligent gratitude (for "I love Big Brother" is not intelligent), no tenderness (for the main character has betrayed

himself and the one he loved), no fear (for this has been exorcised by a skilful use of terror). If gratitude and mutual tenderness go, there can be no individuals worthy of the name, but Wells gave us eight hundred years, not Orwell's thirty-five.

Each of us can number over to himself a list of unintended dangers we moderns are introducing with the best of motives, even as it is admitted that the Puritans, acting on the highest motives, introduced some of the worst features of our industrial and commercial age. We can list the growth of industrial automation, the increase of artificiality in place of artifacts, the decline in the pride of the craftsman as a creative worker, the separation of man from the world of nature, the growing weight of human numbers that constrict our living space and limit our privacy (which most nations have never had, anyway), the speed of communication seldom matched by anything to justify the speed or expense, the loss of confidence that makes men more eager to be secure than to be serene, the cult of comfort that is not accompanied by a growth in determined and voluntary social usefulness, the quick rewards of negations and cynicism, the determination that none shall be frustrated unless all can be frustrated together, the insistence on rights unaccompanied by an equal insistence on duties. In essence the list would not vary a great deal from lists compiled in many other generations. The worth of the individual has been denied or neglected times without number. Our time differs in the swiftness with which advance or decline can come.

There is no easy answer, no shallow confidence to be expressed in answer to such a problem. The answer lies partly in the field of education (fortunately, constantly under attack), partly in producing a better climate for society (never altogether wholesome, but in our tradition continually refreshed by breezes of free criticism), partly in a religious outlook and conviction (again never pure or consistent, but with a remarkable history of rebirth after periods of slackness or narrowness). Above all, the secret strength of individuality is in the keeping of each of us as individuals, a secret not so much to be boasted about as to be acted upon. If one were to suggest how each of us should act, however, he should be guilty of the same sin of totalitarianism of which we see signs, not only in the totalitarian state but in the pressure toward conformity that comes through mass media and the ambition to keep up with the Joneses. There are probably enough "angry young men" and troubled older ones around to keep us alive to our own danger, and perhaps there will be enough wise men to pick up the pieces the others knock off and to shore up the weakened Great Tradition.

We may not have the same confidence as the founders of the

Canadian Classical Association, but we can still be confident that in and through associations of interested people there will develop interesting people. These are hallmarks of individuality: to be interested and to be interesting. At any rate, let us highly resolve that, although we cannot be sure of avoiding the death of all individuals by some scientific accident or cosmic catastrophe, we will not submit to the death of individuality either through the designs of "Big Brother" or through the inadvertent catastrophe symbolized by crooners, by propagandists and special pleaders, by men more interested in a Good Thing than in goodness, more skilful with the Big Lie than with the Big Truth.

I am reasonably sure that individuals will survive, and I would very much like to be one myself. The Great Tradition must be kept alive: it has given the individual his birthright, and it has given him the humbling assurance that "No man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. Whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's."

LIFT THE WET HEART

Douglas Lochhead

Lift the wet heart out of the bone's cage,
out of the white and hollow bone,
into the blue and wordless air where love
lingers a tree in the garden of all age.
Where there are green arms like wild ropes
turning the heart more kite than cloud around
and around in the spinning of new blood
and the mounting and tugging of new hopes.
Let the hand be judge and the eye's control
while the heart is mad, youthful, a crazy child
free in its cradle of larks and dreams.