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CONVERSATIONS WITH PAUL ELMER MORE

Romantics, Pro and Con.

*To break a lance
In the fair fields of old Romance.*

DURING Paul Elmer More's residence at Princeton, it fell to my lot to lecture at the University on the Romantic Poets, and I have always regarded it as a special mark of Paul More's humanity that he did not excommunicate one so tainted with the romantic heresy, which in his own early Princeton days still had priority in his mind over all other heresies. He was pleased, I think, to learn that I required my students to read, mark, and inwardly digest his essay on Byron, first printed as the preface to his Riverside Edition of Byron's Poems. I have just re-read that essay and still think it the most just and discriminating study of the conflict between the "Romantic" and the "Classic" elements in Byron. But I could not subscribe to his disparagement of Shelley, a disparagement not as fashionable then (1905) as it has since become, nor could I sympathize with his scorn for "this petty prying nature cult in Keats and Shelley." His contrast between Byron's *Manfred* and Shelley's *Prometheus* still seems to me ex parte pleading. He praises Shelley's *Cenci* for its concentrated power, but charges him with "resorting to monstrous and illegitimate means," while he himself slurs over the Astarte motif in *Manfred*.

All my efforts to break a lance in defense of Shelley proved abortive. Remembering his aversion to "shadowy meaningless

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words," I once asked him to explain the meaning of "endure," which puzzled me in Shelley's lines—

When hearts have once mingled
Love first leaves the well-built nest,
The weak one is singled
To endure what it once possessed.

When he "passed," remarking that this was a striking example of vague thinking, I ventured to suggest that Shelley, who had been reading Goethe, had in mind the German verb *entbehren* (in the sense of "enduring the loss of something"), for which there is no English equivalent. (cf. Goethe's "Entbehren sollst du." *Learn to renounce.*) Though I tried to convince him that Shelley in asserting the necessity of renunciation was imposing limitations on man's expansive desires, he endured, without accepting, my exegesis.

When his friend T. S. Eliot lectured at Princeton, I asked him to introduce the speaker, which he did with characteristic grace and charm, recalling their common origin and background in St. Louis. The students who had expected an Eliotic sortie into waste lands, where Alph the Sacred river no longer ran, and where streams of consciousness eddied between arid banks of disenchantment, were somewhat disappointed with a thoughtful and scholarly but not particularly exciting discourse on the influence of the Bible on English literature. After the lecture there was a symposium at More's house. Our host persuaded Eliot to read from his poems, and Sweeney and the Nightingales had their inning. I recall challenging Eliot's preference of Dryden to Shelley as a lyric poet and his calling meaningless and vague the lines in *The Skylark*—

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear.

I admitted that they might be meaningless to one accustomed

to breakfast at ten in a London fog, but insisted that if he had slept out in the open on a high ridge of the Cascades, as I had many a time, and watched the stars fade out in the dawn until only the morning star showed silver (not golden), he would at least admit an intelligible reference to an actual or a possible experience, which is the test of meaningful words. Eliot good-naturedly parried my charge by reminding me that two well known Shelleyans in the Literary Supplement of the *London Times*, in coming to the defense of their poet against his attack, had engaged in a wordy battle as to the meaning of "silver sphere," one contending that it was the moon and the other, the morning star. Under cover of this barrage he made good his retreat.

But Eliot's reading of his own poetry that night in Paul More's study was a rare experience.

II. One Impulse From a Vernal Wood.

More was very much interested in the efforts of a group of younger men in the Princeton faculty to counteract the prevalent tendency toward excessive specialization and departmentalization, particularly in the fields of Philosophy and Literature, ancient and modern. Believing that this was one of the bad effects of the influence of German universities on American scholarship, he championed the Oxford tradition against this type of Teutonization. At Princeton the establishment of the Division of the Humanities, paralleling similar movements at other universities, was largely due to the initiative of a group of younger scholars who had been stimulated by his lectures, books, and conversation. In his later years he was in the habit of meeting informally with this group over a cup of tea or coffee at "The Balt," and came to prefer these gatherings to the more formal luncheons at the Nassau Club at which he had earlier been a regular attendant and occasional speaker.

I remember calling on him one evening in the early spring at his home on Battle Road, after one of these conferences "over

the coffee cups." He spoke of his enjoyment of the walk back through the town, the loveliness of the Drumthwacket woodlands and greensward, the placid pond with the little Greek temple on its margin, brought by Mr. Pyne from Italy, the swans ruffling its surface, and the beauty of the sunset he had faced "stepping westward." I said, "You almost persuade me that you shared Wordsworth's "impulse from a vernal wood."

He smiled and answered, "I think I shall have to retract some of the harsh things I have said about Wordsworth, if the Lord spares me."

When I learned, a year or so later, that he had made a remarkable recovery from a serious operation, I said to a friend, "The Lord has spared him for a special purpose." He was much amused when this was reported to him. It would be interesting to learn whether among his papers there are any notes indicating such a reappraisal.¹ In his essay on Byron (1905) there is a premonition of his willingness "to recant some of the harsh things" he said about Wordsworth, some of the harshest in this very essay. "Let us by all means retain as a precious and late-won possession *This sense of communion with the fair outlying world* (note the "outlying" with its implied Platonic *double entendre*), but let us at the same time beware of loosening our grip on realities." Realities! The full implication of the word as here used is caught only by those who remember that at heart More was a Platonist to whom the fair outlying world of the senses "is seen to be but a shadow, and obscuration of something vastly greater, hidden in the secret places of the heart."

His quarrel with the Romantic poets was that they substituted minute observation for breadth of natural description. "You will find in Byron no poems on the small celandine or the daisy, or the cuckoo, or the nightingale, or the West Wind. But you may find pictures of mountains reared like the palaces of nature, of the free bounding ocean, of tempest on sea and storm among

¹Mr. A. H. Dakin, who is preparing More's biography, writes me: "Your surmise about Wordsworth is correct. In his later years Mr. More 'relented' considerably, as evidenced in one of his letters to Professor Robert Shafer."

the Alps, of the solitary pine woods, of placid Lake Leman, of all the greater, sublimer aspects of nature such as can hardly be paralleled elsewhere in English Literature." Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* is surely not narrow, cribbed, confined observation of trivial minutiae, and in his *Prometheus* you may find, as in *Manfred*, mountains "reared like the palaces of nature." More frankly admits that he has used Shelley's faults as man and poet as a foil to throw into relief the nature of Byron's genius, and in my conversations with him in his later days, I sometimes thought he would be willing to make, with regard to Wordsworth and Shelley, the frank avowal for which he gives Byron in the *English Bards* credit: "the ruinous criticism of Wordsworth, 'that mild apostate from poetic rule,' is the expression of an irresistible mental impulse. When the poet came to reflect on his satire he wisely added the comment 'unjust'."

III. Proud Humility: Humanism and Science.

Commenting one day on his praise of the Christian virtue of humility in a recent essay, I said: "I have never known a man so proud of his humility as you." But when I ventured to hold a brief for the humility of the scientist, who tests every theory by experiment, curbs speculation by observation, and distrusting his unaided senses, checks their report by instruments of precision, and does not consider it beneath his human dignity to note and record the minutest detail and verifiable fact in the "out-lying" world of nature, he quoted the passage from the *Phaedrus* where Socrates says, "The men who dwell in the cities are my teachers, and not the trees or the country." I replied, "I know you believe 'the proper study of mankind is man,' but does that make the study of nature by mankind *improper*?" He retorted with emphasis, "It is improper when it degrades man, ignores human experience in its concentration on experiment, produces a scientific *ugly* hostile to the spirit of humanism, and subordinates the study of the humanities to a one-sided scientific nat-

uralism in our programmes of higher education. *Homo sapiens* is superior to *Natura naturans*!"

His championship of the classical spirit characterized by "preponderance of human interest" sometimes led him to extravagant statements like the following: "We are all familiar with the travestied nature cult that is sapping the vitals of literature today. . . . The present generation must for originality examine the fields with a botanist's lens, while the poor reader, who retains any use of his intellect, is too often reminded of the poet Gray's shrewd witticism, that he learned botany to save himself the labor of thinking." Some of us, without quoting Thomas Gray, to demolish Asa Gray, may consider the progress of poesy more important than the progress of botany. Perhaps a knowledge of "How Plants Grow" will even help us to understand better how poems grow. Tennyson's *Flower in the crannied wall* may not be a great poem, but in the crannied wall of his Victorian mind blossomed the *Crossing of the Bar* like a fringed gentian in late October woods.

More's contemptuous attitude toward the scientific spirit was tempered during his residence in Princeton by his contact with men like Professor Scott, the geologist, Professor Henry Norris Russell, the astronomer, and the Compton brothers, who were pursuing graduate studies at Princeton—all of them scientists whose reverence for the truths of religion was not destroyed by their loyalty to the facts of science and who, like his own brother Louis Trenchard More (Vanuxem lecturer in Princeton, 1925, and author of the *Limitations of Science*), never ignored humanistic values in their scientific pursuits.

Like those of his brother, his shafts were aimed at the metaphysical deductions of the mechanistic Darwinists. I recall that at the first of Louis More's Princeton lectures on the *Dogma of Evolution* the biologists were all there in the front row, but at the concluding lecture of the series those seats were occupied by the professors and students of the Theological Seminary, who crowded up at the close to have the lecturer autograph his attack on the Darwinians, just off the press.

The defense by More and his fellow humanists of the "Classical Spirit" was indirectly supported by the vogue of Jeans and Edington, which seemed to provide a way of escape from the crude determinism of the mechanistic Darwinians, and by rarefying matter into energy, made it less contemptible. As between protons and genes, More preferred protons. I often wondered why in the conflict between Science and Humanism he did not recognize the significance of Goethe, the scientist who discovered the maxillary bone, and in his *Metamorphosis of Plants* anticipated the doctrine (adaptation of structure of function) underlying the evolutionary hypothesis in its Lamarckian form, the Humanist who matured from the romanticism of *Werther*, *Götz* and the first part of *Faust* into the classicism of the *Italienische Reise* and *Iphigenie*, and turned from the influence of Shakespeare, predominate in his youth, to Homer, Sophocles and the Greeks for inspiration and models. The only one of the group of crusaders advancing the banner of the new humanism under the leadership of More and Babbitt who does justice to Goethe as an ally is Professor Foerster.

I remember on one occasion when he had entered the lists for Theology against Biology, quoting to him a remark of my father's, a very human evangelical divine, apropos of the conflict between Genesis and Geology, which troubled my generation: "The Bible is God's revelation of himself in His Word. Nature is God's revelation of Himself in His Work. Theology is man's interpretation of His Word. Natural Science is man's interpretation of His Work. If there is a conflict between Theology and Science the trouble is with man's interpretation and not with God's revelation."

IV. Kantian Encounters.

Discussing Kant one day, I ventured to remark: "Your friend Babbitt objects to Kant because he had a picture of Rousseau hanging in his study and was tainted with romantic subjectivity; you object to him because his categorical imperative is empty,

harsh, and inhuman in its abstract universality. So you get him coming and going."

"Yes, going!" he retorted.

The truth is that More's deep interest in the Cambridge Platonists, his profound study of the Greek Church fathers, his familiarity with the Anglo-Catholic Theologians, and his own approximation to their position in his later years, were responsible for his antipathy to German Protestantism, especially in its post-Kantian development. The position of the Confessional Lutheran Church was alien to the bent of his mind, and his occasional references to it reflect his prepossessions rather than his erudition. On another occasion I called his attention to his definition of the Lutheran doctrine of the Eucharist in the "Catholic Faith," as "consubstantiation," and assured him that this was a definition not accepted by the authoritative interpreters of Lutheran doctrine. I brought him a copy of Dr. Charles P. Krauth's *Conservative Reformation* and marked the passage expounding the Lutheran doctrine. When I called a few weeks later, he thanked me for my interest, but said he had not had time to look into it, and asked me to return the book.

I often had occasion to remark that the animus that occasionally appeared in his writing, when he was stirred by deep conviction, never was shown in his conversation, where he was uniformly courteous, considerate, and when condescending, justifiably so, but disarmingly good-natured always.

In spite of his impatience with Kant's categorical imperative, his haughty disdain of Kant did not crystallize into hatred of Kantians. He could hate the sin and forgive the sinner—as in his treatment of Byron—and indeed had more patience with intelligent sinners than with innocent fools, whom he could not bear easily. But he lacked the *perfervidum ingenium Scotorum* of the good Dr. McCosh, who, on a train one day startled his wife by pointing to a fellow traveller and exclaiming, "Isabella, I hate that man; he's a Hegelian."

One of his close friends in the early Princeton days was the distinguished Scottish Kantian editor and commentator Kemp-

Smith, Stuart Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, and now Professor at the University of Edinburgh. I recall that in 1930 when I visited Kemp-Smith in Chipping-Camden while he was spending the summer among the Cotswolds, much of our talk was of our mutual friend Paul More, with whom Kemp-Smith had been in recent correspondence. I gathered that the Scottish philosopher, with all his respect for More's dialectical acumen, and for his sourceful and resourceful command of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, nevertheless felt that More's progress from the skeptical approach to Religion to the Catholic Faith involved a partial abandonment of the rigorous and exacting demands of logic under the pressure of more deeply felt religious needs and of the realities of spiritual experience. It would be interesting to learn whether the letters that passed between the two confirm this casual impression gained during delightful strolls among the Cotswold hills.

V. Humor and the New Deal. Nietzsche and the Teutonic Heresy.

Those who know Paul Elmer More only as the erudite expounder of Platonism, or as the versatile author of the *Shelburne Essays*, in which the *censor morum* always walks before the *arbiter elegantiarum* in matters literary, little suspect the fountains of mirth (hidden beneath the severe exterior) which would bubble up in the company of congenial friends, when he was not expected to pontificate before groups of eager young acolytes ready *jurare in verba magistri*.

I remember an evening when he regaled us by reading clippings from a newspaper that ridiculed some of the more ludicrous absurdities of "The New Deal;" he joined heartily in our uproarious laughter.

Only a few evenings before, I had heard him deliver a lecture at Clio Hall on Nietzsche, in which he mercilessly and unsmilingly exposed the fundamental inhumanity of the Nietzschean "Will to Power" and the glorification of the Super-Man, de-

nouncing it as a Teutonic heresy that threatened the foundations of European civilization by trampling the Rule of Reason under the heels of brute force. More was critical of the vague and "expansive" humanitarianism of the New Deal, not because he was insensitive to the plight of the impoverished or blind to the struggles of the under-privileged, but because he was suspicious of a democracy of the Heart that repudiated the aristocracy of the Intellect and while remembering the forgotten man, forgot the memorable man.

VI. Shakespeare and Music.

As chairman of the Committee on Public Lectures, I gave a dinner for Schoenberg, the modernist composer, who was lecturing at Princeton, and invited Paul More and Professor Einstein as fellow musicians, remembering More's devotion to the flute and Einstein's to the violin. Was Eliot thinking of his friend when he wrote,

The broad backed figure dressed in blue and green
Enchanted the May time with an antique flute?

I remember Einstein, who delighted in Mozart, whispering on the sly at the dinner table, "S. avoids music on principle (*Der mensch geht der musik systematisch aus dem weg*); and I recalled that other line in *Ash Wednesday*—

Here are the years that walk between, bearing
Away the fiddles and the flutes.

In the course of the evening the talk drifted to Shakespeare and music. I had remarked: "Shakespeare's ghosts bring no authentic tidings of invisible things, but return to earth to torture the conscience of those who have done things they ought not to have done, or to whet the blunted purpose of those who have left undone things they ought to have done. There is no health in them. They are earth-bound voices of remorse and revenge."

More countered: "Shakespeare's German commentators have

read into him their own metaphysical and ethical abstractions. Shakespeare had no profound or unified view (*theory* in the Platonic sense) of the immutable laws governing human life and conduct, like Sophocles, Dante, or Milton. But his power to word every slightest shade of human thought or emotion and his superb command of the music of English speech explain and justify his unfading influence."

I asked: "Would you say then that Shakespeare's genius was more musical than philosophical, that as artist he was more akin to the great musical composers than to the great architects of the intellect?"

He replied: "Yes, and to the great masters of painting.

This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.

What a splash of color! His color as well as his music is the touch that makes him kin to the whole world of Romantic Art. Form and motion of form are clearly defined, intelligible, classic. Color is illusive, impressionistic. The Greeks were preeminent in their imitation of form. The Renaissance artists excelled in color."

More was no admirer of Whitman, whose expansiveness and naturalistic mysticism ran counter to all More's fixed criteria in Art and Religion, but I think he would have approved of this dictum of Whitman's, so surprising to those who think of Whitman only as an anti-classical revolutionary, formless and void, shouting his barbaric yawps over the roofs of the world:

As depicter and dramatist of the passions at their stormiest, though ranking high, Shakespeare, spanning the arch wide enough, is equaled by several and excelled by the best old Greeks (as Aeschylus).

And this, in a note on British Literature:

At its best the sombre pervades it and expresses in characters and plots those qualities in an unrivalled manner. Yet

not as the black thunder storms and in great normal crashing passions of the Greek dramatists, clearing the air, refreshing afterward, bracing with power; but as in Hamlet, moping, sick, uncertain, and leaving ever after a secret taste for the blues, the morbid fascination, the luxury of woe.

More did me the honor to attend a public lecture that I had the hardihood to give at Princeton on "Whitman and the Democratic Spirit." Lowell speaks somewhere of the expressions of "foregone dissent" that greeted Emerson's Divinity-School address. To many of my audience Emerson was to Whitman as Hyperion to a Satyr, and the only parallel I can claim between my poor efforts and Emerson's Apollonian shafts was my success in evoking those expressions of foregone dissent (*quorum maxima pars fuit More*), mingled with looks of puzzled tolerance and virtuous disapproval. In any case, More never referred to my lecture, and I knew that his silence spelled dissent, and that until I could persuade him to reinstate Wordsworth in his poetic Pantheon, Whitman was taboo.

VII. Hamlet and The Gospels.

I remember vividly a conversation on the train to Princeton, where we met by chance after I had seen a matinée performance of Hamlet by John Barrymore. I remarked that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in contrast to Horatio, were striking examples of college students, in whom every idiosyncratic wrinkle of the brain had been ironed out into a conventional crease, so "true to type" that calling them Rosenstern and Guildencrantz would have made little difference. I then spoke of Barrymore's fine rendering of Hamlet's soliloquies.

Suddenly he turned to me—I still hear the deep music of his voice—and said; "Where in all Shakespeare will you find words like these, 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'?"

"Princeton Junction," called out the conductor, and we cut short our excursion into the world of realities to make our connection for Princeton.

VIII. The Last Phase.

The last phase of More's progress from "Nature to Eternity," with his definite turn to the Catholic Faith, has much more than a mere biographical or personal interest, because it was symptomatic of a deep current setting in many quarters with increasing volume toward a reaffirmation of the spiritual values threatened by the trends of modern civilization and drawing together men of various faiths, or none, in a common re-examination of the historic foundations of Christianity. More's studies in Platonism and the Greek tradition had eminently qualified him to evaluate the contributions of Greek thought to Western Christianity, and had predisposed him to accept the forms in which the "Catholic Church" had embodied this tradition. But it was not until his last years that the *credendum est* of these scholarly studies was supplemented by the full *credo* of the believer.

My association with More was closest in these later years, and though I was never one of the intimate group that gathered in his home in complete unity of heart and mind, I can testify to the profound influence that his example and conversation had on some of the finest spirits in Princeton, especially among his younger associates.

There is a sentence in his essay on Byron (1905) which furnishes a striking clue to the direction his thought was taking even then. Commenting on the close of *Manfred* he speaks of the "solitary pride and isolation, *from whose oppression we long for deliverance*." In describing the rise of the modern spirit, he had written: "The World, after manifold struggles, had begun to throw off the medieval ideals. Faith in the infinite and eternal value of the human person, with all its earthly desires and ambitions, with its responsibility to a jealous God, had been rudely shaken"—then follows this revealing statement—"nor had that deeper faith taken hold of the mind wherein this laboring, grasping earthly self is seen to be but a shadow, an obscuration of something vastly greater hidden in the secret places of the heart."

IX. Last Visits.

Most vivid of all in my memory are the brief visits I was privileged to make during More's last illness. He was no longer able to receive his friends in his study, surrounded by his books, but lay stretched on a couch in an upper room of his home on Battle Road. We no longer discussed theological or philosophical subjects as in earlier days. His mind was as alert as ever, but I instinctively felt that the time for such encounters had passed. One does not discuss points of pilotage and choice of courses with the captain of a homeward bounder who has brought his ship to port on his last voyage, and found safe anchorage and firm holding ground in a harbor he knows. He was interested in the news I brought him of the town and the campus, and especially in the doings of his younger friends and students in the University. In the mellow light of the westerling sun—the evening hour was reserved for his friends—his classic features were a rare study: the marble white of his noble brow, the strong aquiline nose, the firmly chiselled mouth with lips relaxing into a momentary friendly smile—all breathed a serenity of spirit and tranquil repose of mind that no marks of physical suffering could efface, like the sunset glow on a snowy peak, veiling the glacier-scars and bringing into sharp relief its purity of line and affinity to light.

*Stay
with
me*

Stay
with
me

As I write these lines, there comes to mind a passage in Whitman's prose on Emerson's death that seems peculiarly appropriate to Paul More:

We stand by Emerson's new made grave without sadness, indeed with a solemn joy and faith. So used are we to suppose a hero's death can only come from out of battle or storm or amid dramatic incidents and danger that few even of those who most sympathetically mourn Emerson's late departure will fully realize the ripened grandeur of his passing, with its play of calm and fitness, like evening light on the sea.