

Skyscapes and Goodwill

Dora Marsden

1914

If the skill of a doctor were bespoken to effect the cure of a madman, and he proceeded to attempt the systematising of the insane ravings while giving no heed to the existence of the madness one would say there was little to choose from in soundness of mind between doctor and patient. Yet no one marvels when from all those who have a nostrum to offer as a cure for the disease of civilisation and its complications no voice is heard drawing attention to the species of sickness which is its antecedent cause. It remains nameless and unsuspected, to be indicated only by a description of its symptoms.

It begins with the failure of the self-assertive principle of the vital power: a failure of courage. Tolerated, it acts on the power of the heart and thins it out to a degree at which it is too light to retain its seat there, and forthwith mounts to the head where transmutation begins. The power of the heart, already grown virtuelless and thin, distills poisonous clammy vapours which emerge from the head. As they grow denser they settle, a heavy cloud of mist about the herd. Descending, they breathe a film upon the eyes and dim the senses. Within, the heart left tenantless of power is contracted by ghostly hands—the hands of fear. The face becomes pallid under the Thought-wreaths with the chiliness of fear. The vapours become the breath of his nostrils and are breathed in as Duty and Circumspection. They penetrate each limb and fibre, inoculate with obedience and virtue. The hands fold meekly: the man walks with circumspection. He is already civilised: he awaits merely the idiosyncrasy of the particular civilisation.

A civilisation is the attempted working out of a Scheme of Salvation: a plan of escape. It is the imperfect form built up from the perfected plan which the religious philosophies of the "great" "constructive" "thinkers" of its age have projected. For it is not merely that a race of men bleached white with the failure of courage would do well with a prelaid scheme of action: they refuse to move on without one. They bleat for a Deliverer—a great constructive thinker—as sheep for a shepherd. Being without prescience, without inner compelling desire, they wait to be told. The great world of audiences puts out its distracted agitated tentacles, swaying about aimlessly, dumb appeals to be told how to expend themselves, and where. Culture, training in the art of spending oneself, is the imperious necessity of the bleached race, whether lettered or simple. Life without the courage for it, is so bad a business that they must needs approach it with caution. Earth

is so little to their taste that they demand the construction of a heaven. To construct the "New Jerusalem," work to the plan of the Deliverer, and make a heaven on earth is a task they can put their hands to. But to live for themselves—to lose "faith"? They would as soon not live at all.

So the heads steam with fresh purpose, and the thought-wreaths mount apace: until there is enough and to spare to build Heavens without end, Hells to match and Attacking and Delivering Hosts of Thoughts to storm and defend. What the battalions shall be named and how they shall be drawn up is nobody's concern save that of the "constructive" thinker who outlines the vaporous sketch. He maps out a bold skyscape in smoke, and the civilised group themselves under whatever concept taste or convenience dictates. They follow out the scheme as a whole as they would the colour-scheme and revelries on the floor of some great hall in imitation of its painted ceiling. So are they safe: linked up with heaven. If their earthly concerns get neglected and somewhat mixed on account of conducting their affairs on a pattern pertaining strictly to a heaven of thought who is to say they would not have been more hopelessly confused had their turned their feeble temper upon them: and whatever befalls, have they not Faith—in Heaven? And does not their bemusedness give the earthly sort their chance to use them, for what they are worth?

It is the flexibility with apparently unlimited power to make adjustments according to order in human nature which the Thought-weavers work upon when rigging out their canvases. Human nature can be accorded a summary treatment quite other from that which is given to inert matter. If the Thames flows east and the Severn west "thinkers" will acknowledge and respect the stubborn tendency; but human nature must set itself to all the points of the compass if the Plan of Salvation demands it. As it can if it works to it with Goodwill. The Goodwill can in fact accomplish all things. It is therefore the base of every "constructive" scheme of thought. It is the one factor indeed which makes them thinkable. That is why it is so extolled. What system is there which does not give the palm to the Goodwill: the set intention to work to pattern. If the weavers of shadows can count on this set intention, it is enough. The result they can safely leave to the slow wearing down of habit and constant repetition. In time, with Goodwill, the "plan" will be plotted out in conduct as quantities are on squared paper to give a curve. This "plan" plotted out by Goodwill into conduct will similarly "reveal itself in our lives." The plans differ, and the "curves" of civilisations differ in consequence, but Goodwill is the same in them all. It is the amenable teachable will: the fluttering tentacle, beating about uncertainly, charged with energy but without direction. It stands for the intention to follow if only directions are given to it—if the canvas is stretched across its sky.

The humanitarian skyscape under which we walk nowadays and which we are all expected to be "revealing in our lives" is the residue of rubbish left over after the Revolution had enabled what there was in it of egoistic temper to obtain the desired spoil under exceptionally favourable circumstances. This vaporous design is the maleficent legacy which has been bequeathed to succeeding centuries after the French *bourgeoisie* had acquired the sole benefits of the insurrection. The legatees have done handsomely by it, spreading it out and patching it up like old property, until now it is both neat and compact. It could be sketched out on half a sheet of notepaper and leave plenty of available space.

It demands first of course the Goodwill which is taken for granted but encouraged in well-doing by an apotheosis of a sort. Goodwill is so essential that the fluttering little tentacle is elevated to the rank of the sacred, and as fraternity takes its place in the humanitarian Olympus. In the deification ceremony Goodwill unequivocally asserts its intentions, and proves itself so completely at the service of the Scheme of Things and above the level of suspicion, by divorcing itself completely from its own selfish interests, cutting itself off at the very outset from the Plan's only serious rival, the natural bent of the Self. As the hymn puts it, it plumps for "None of Self and all of—the Plan." (There is no form of literature so profoundly informing as a hymn-book.) The ceremony is the formal abandonment of the Self-will by which Goodwill becomes Goodwill in earnest as Fraternity, in which rôle it will reappear later in the sketch as the divine parent of Humanity. From this point all is plain sailing. To love one's neighbour as oneself: to love the Public Good, *i.e.*, all one's neighbours put together, better than ourselves: that is the fruitful spirit in which is begotten the "more than Brotherhood," the Oneness of Humanity and the Race, when we shall "all one body be." Then shall each little one be as a limb to the great body, each well-pleased that he pleases not himself but serves the Whole. The design grows. Dimension has entered into it, and with it a greater and a less: a standard of measurement therefore and a seat of authority: a scale of values which indicates automatically when a "member" offends. If the smaller frets the greater: perish the smaller or let it amend its ways. What is the greater? What can it be but Humanity, the Type, the generalisation, the thing with capitals, high conception and lofty thought. How the heads steam, and thoughts mount—rise to the "All," the "each and every" pounded out of recognition into sameness, bound together by the fraternal cement into—Man: the master-achievement to accomplish which we sink our mean differences and forget our inequalities. Has not each become equal in willingness to serve—Man. Equal then, we are: with equal "rights" to protection of our "freedom" to perform our "duties" towards—Man; receiving equal dues from a blindfolded "Justice" with even scales. The tableau grows complete: Goodwill: Fraternity: Humanity: Peace: Order: Law: Rights: Justice: Liberty: Man—the Humanitarian Heaven, so balanced and symmetrical that it requires an unregarding egoism to break into it. Unfortunately for the picture's stability, the power of Goodwill is not equal to its intentions. It is like the God of Arnold's Empedocles who "would do all things well, but some times fails in strength." When it abandons self-will to enter the empyrean of the gods, it docs not annihilate it, and the "obtuse unreason of the she-intelligence" which is the temper of men whose intelligence has had strength to resist the torturings of intellectual feebleness, breaks regardless into the pretty thought tight systems, only to leave them lying in the path of history broken and awry like shattered mechanical toys. The spikes and burrs on the garment of the selfish man rip into the gossamer thought meshes which stretch like cobwebs across the field of action. It is the selfish man who reduces all the systems to inoperation: who is the despair of the "constructive" thinkers. The power to annul any and every thought-system is founded in the absence of Goodwill. The streak of self-determination cuts the selfish man off from the well-intentioned from the outset. Unless the docile temper is available to work it on to the warp of reality, the "Plan" is futile. Its beginning and end rest on the Goodwill, which will plod along like an industrious mole to "realise" the "philosophic" scheme fashionable to its day and generation. Temper, which is energy self-conscious of its direction, has plans and insight of its own: it is not amenable to direction, or to moral suasion. Instead of an intention to serve Man, its intention is to serve itself and its own soul as suits itself: it has no "standard" save its own satisfaction. It saves its soul alive by respecting it; by preventing it from being merged with blunted characteristics into

anything else—the whole or anything other. It holds by the instinct that emergence from the herd is the proof positive that it is not of the herd; that to be conscious of its emergence is its distinction and master achievement, and to maintain and accentuate it is its supreme business; to make it more and more of its "own" kind, unique; to weed out that which is alien to itself; to be "sincere" through and through; to free itself from all elements non-selfish: this is the work to which it finds it has a natural bent, and by it, it makes itself impregnable; incapable of being broken into or broken down. It is the instinct for its own permanence, its immortality may be, which, without regard, eats up or casts out every particle of Goodwill. Hence the futility for all save the herd, of all schemes of salvation based on Goodwill, and the value which temper sets upon its antagonisms equally with its attractions. The one is as essential as the other for that light and shade in which individual differentiation finds itself clear. To be incapable of being repelled by any of the brethren is at least as much death in life as to be incapable of being attracted. Antagonism, not for what is bad for the fancy picture—the community and the race—but for that which repels the something within oneself, independent of its relation to the scheme of values, is as valuable—more exciting if not as comfortable—as attraction. Oh universal brotherhood, universal love, sameness, monotony, extinction! Mankind pressing onward to Unity, swept forward as by one impulse to the bosom of the Type! Like those swine which it says somewhere, were swept into the Gadarene Sea!

Happily the nightmare lives mainly only in the picture: in reality, individuals pair off in two and threes or scrap among themselves. Universal brotherhood is mainly subscribed to by people very capable of giving the salutary cut to the simple brother foolish enough to assume that they mean it. The fact which misleads, and encourages the notion that Goodwill is more than a thought-mist for any not of the herd is the extension of the imaginative area by the wide sweep of the senses, whereby things which one sees, hears or hears of, become part of the mental landscape; and as such are subjected to efforts which would change them to our liking. One makes effort to remove unsightly features which disaffect us in those about us from a motive like that which would impel us to remove an unsightly structure which faced one's window. Not for the sake of the structure, but for the sake of our personal comfort. But with more than that no one has truck with. Any thing beyond that must be left to be indicated on the "Plan": as n is left to indicate the power of a number increased to infinity.

With the breaking of the thread of Goodwill, the humanitarian philosophy would unravel at a single pull, like a chain-stitched seam would if the right thread were seized. Humanity is robbed of its "principle" and dissolves soulless when egoists break in upon fraternity. It falls apart into its component individuals like the sand from mortar, if the cohering lime were removed. Its "progress," become the progress of a non-entity, vanishes and with it the source of authority which in its name advised and admonished individuals. What "progress" there may be, becomes a progression in the individuals themselves, which follows individual laws, each being a law to himself. Authority gone, "protection" goes, and "rights" go with it. There are no rights without protection. Anything of "rights" which is not might is "bestowed," "permitted," and only with the protection of Authority can there be adequate bestowal and permission. Authority shattered, the only right is might—right to what one can get, that is: one's just dues. The easy assumption that one has a right to anything, livelihood, "equitable returns," comfort, liberty, or life itself shrink

like phantoms in daylight. When Goodwill is gone rights can be had for the commanding—for the power to enforce them—and no cheaper.

Liberty too is impossible without protection. Liberty is nine parts coercion, and the coercion of the weak,—the only ones who make appeal for liberty—is exercised through authority. Liberty, the plaint of the feeble, is the "assumption" that the strong must stay the strength of their arm: if they refuse, authority must compel them. Of course authority and the powerful run together, as like to like; but that does not enlighten the libertarians. They still appeal that the right hand shall shackle the left: it is their trustfulness.

The tenth part of liberty is the claim to be "free." All claims are easy, but the claim to be free is easy of enforcement: which not all claims are. By the simple process of abandonment, one can be free of most things. Relatively very few persons are held captive in prisons or beleaguered cities. Most can have as much freedom as they want: the truth is that they do not want it. Freedom even as a concept is negative, and the things one truly wants are positive. People are not greatly agitated by that which they desire to be rid of; it is the desire to have possession which makes their problem, and those who call out for freedom desire, not freedom, but property, and property is won and held only in virtue of the possession of power. The plaintive appeals of those who say they want liberty but who mean that they want to be presented with property and to be supported in its possession can be met only when the pathetic pleaders decide to increase their power to get and hold; or to support in power a strong authority to which they can make appeal for appropriation and protection; or to persuade the powerful already in possession to a voluntary act of grace towards the weak and non-possessing.

The second method has been tried, is being and is likely to be for some time to come; the third is the method which by common consent of all orators and clergy sounds the best: on all occasions sacred or profane: it is the method firmly believed in by all the feeble and none of the strong. It is the millenium arrived at by way of Liberty, Love and Humanity. The first is the one the poor in spirit and pocket have no heart for; it has no friends; it dismays the rich as much as it sickens the poor, and in the long interval which is likely to elapse before it is put on its trial, the ravelling thread of the humanitarian canvas will be caught up and the array of vaporous combatants in the army of Humanity, the entire assemblage of the Delivering Hosts of Thought will wreath themselves out like a painted battle until the real flesh and blood combat is ready to begin. The poor will continue to lay claim to rights—to look for the advent of a liberty they can never see; they will "claim" an equality with those with whom they are not equal; claim the "justice" which assumes a non-existing equality: a justice which is not just. And as they assume their possession of "rights" in these claims, they will-being in truth a humble and indoctrinated people—assume the duties to correspond, and perform the services. Their services will be accepted: the claims rejected. The *quid pro quo* they will obtain will be a clear title to the virtues, the reward for which is laid up in Heaven, high and away behind the Sky-scape and the stout form of Humanity.

Of the property which they want when they ask for liberty—not one jot. To get that they would require to seize and thieve, and thieving is not prescribed on the Sky-scape. Nor is it compatible with virtue when exercised on a humble scale, and who can hope they will ever rob on the noble one, generously and like gentlemen? If one of them were caught red-handed, he would be found to be smuggling away a can of milk: which is hopeless as thieving. Scarcely in our time will they need to take in and pack away the humanitarian canvas—unless indeed there is force and a sting in irony.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Dora Marsden
Skyscapes and Goodwill
1914

Retrieved on 09/25/2021 from <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr519967/>
Originally published in *The Egoist* Volume I Number 2 (January 15, 1914)

theanarchistlibrary.org