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The Female Ego

Eugénie Casteu

1923

For a while now I have been meaning, comrade who signs “A Rebel Woman”, to point out the tendency of your articles to exalt the sacrifice of women in favour of men. If such is your revolt, I think it is a pretty dangerous one for our female comrades.

I quote, from n°13 of the Revue:

“The role of the woman, a difficult and magnificent role, is not only to share, through understanding, the intellectual life of man; but, through her constant and discreet love, to give him courage, to rekindle, if necessary, his self-confidence and fertile enthusiasm. When we truly love, everything becomes easy, the greatest sacrifices are accepted with joy.”

Thank you very much, we just had some: a Catholic, or Protestant, or “secular” preacher does not speak differently. In short, women must be the intellectual servants, the reflections of their men. You tell us about the “role of the woman”. I don’t know of any other than to be herself. A “role”, exterior to her individual longings, can only bring her, like for men, disappointment.

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What! You then set as an example “Carlyle’s wife who, still young and admired, went to bury herself with him in a harsh and hostile retreat, accepting the hardest work, so that he, in necessary solitude, could accomplish his writer’s work.”

But such a woman is a monster, in my opinion; a person who abolishes herself, who renounces to herself, who mutilates herself for someone else, who is already stronger than she is!

You will object that Carlyle was a brain who... a brain whom... well, a bloke, socially more useful than his boring and overly devoted partner maybe. And then what?

Let’s suppose that it happened, happens, the other way round, that a woman is a fascinating, superior as they say, guy, superior especially to her man... That is where I wonder: in your opinion, should the man erase himself like Carlyle’s wife did, devote himself body and soul to the work of his partner?

If you tell me “no”, the matter is settled: you therefore admit the sacrifice of ordinary women to superior men, but not that of ordinary men to superior women; that you are among the supporters of men, the masculinists.

Or you tell me: “yes, I accept that an ordinary man sacrifices himself to ensure the cerebral production of his superior partner”, and then, your case is even worse, my lovely comrade, who call yourself a rebel and an anarchist... It means you accept that the weaker and poorer person sacrifices themselves to the person whom nature gave more! That you find fair the voluntary sacrifice of the weak towards the strong.

And I know nothing as pernicious as such an idea, not in the brain of the strong (where it doesn’t matter), but in the brains of the weak who want to give themselves to be eaten alive by the strong they love!

When I find on my way – and I found too many of them – some “Carlyle’s wife”, I hate them and I denounce them, I tell my younger female comrades: “look at this goose admiring her swan: do you know anything more sickening?”

It saddens me and outrages me to see a woman – who was not, obviously, from the start, a very strong personality – voluntarily resorb herself, fade away with pleasure in the overbearing, monopolising personality of so-called genius she “loves”.

This “loved one”, as great as they might seem to you, o dear comrade, appears to me like a murderer, of the same kind as the car-driver who runs over, at night or in speed, a pedestrian: he crushed a personality; maybe she was tiny, but he reduced her to mush.

And you would give those poor women the pride of sacrifice, the pride of nothingness, the pride of death?

No, no, and no! I shout at them: “Are you not ashamed of kneeling in front of this great man and his works? Instead of striving to understand him, try to protect yourself from his rays, to remain yourself; and if your ambition is to be his living reflection, let me tell you, o you superior caste of slaves, that I despise you!”

If we favour the absorption of the weak by the strong, by the regeneration of the old Salomon by his young girls (be it for blood or intellect), then we are aristocratic, but not anarchists. We do not want the tyranny of the weak either, of course: we want for each their share of the sun, without oppressors nor oppressed.

I know it, a strong personality has a tendency to suck energy from the meek, annex them, and it might be the most poisonous, the best hidden, the hardest to detect source of authority! But to glorify in words this sadly natural phenomenon, dangerous to the lives of both individuals and peoples, no! No deification of individual imperialism!

You tell us that poetry sang of the voluntary sacrifice of women?

Of course, poetry also sang kings, gods, wars... It often sang gestures accepted as custom, this old cow true to her stable, to the fenced off pastures, to the common watering hole!

Maybe one day it will sing the beauty of the novel gesture, the gesture which breaks the chains, which breaks ancestral habits of resignation and more or less enthusiastic servitude?...

As for me, I prefer, rather than the distinguished “Carlyle’s wives”, the plebeian women full of instinct, who tell their dear great man to go to hell and break away from his orbit. “Maybe to go to the cinema?” you’ll say bitterly.

Maybe; and if this agrees on that night with their nature, in reaction against the ethereal splendours of the great loved one? Isn’t that a sweet misery!

I know full well that not every revolt is an ascension; but I prefer a donkey who rebels than a dog who follows. How smart and how devoted is the dog, isn’t he? Well, I don’t love the slaves of love, even the very refined ones.

My dear young comrades, I beg you, be yourselves, don’t immolate yourselves on the altars of male genius, do not be trusting dogs, or “Carlyle’s wives”! Let him be free, and remain free yourself!