

The Flight to Woman

591

by J. E. Stewart

Karl Stern writes in *The Flight from Woman*¹ of a male-female polarity which runs through life, and suggests that it is a kind of ultimate, 'anchored in the absolute'. One is reminded of D. H. Lawrence's 'two principles', a male and female polarity at the heart of things. To Lawrence the work of the male is to *actualise*, to bring into being, the turbulent potentiality of the Flesh, a disturbing darkness which is prior to rationality, morality and value, and which is ambivalently savage and tender.

This conviction that there is an area of dionysiac darkness and force within men, to be tapped, to be entered, a further resource of power beyond the polite liberal enclosures of conscious awareness, may go back to the nineteenth century to Schopenhauer (who believed in and feared it) and Nietzsche (who affirmed it) but it is a twentieth-century creed, confirmed by Freud and by the shock with which men have recognised their own violent depths. What are we to do? The familiar answer is that we are to accept the dark, this female pre-rational source, as the really ultimate thing which defines us as what we really or intrinsically are. So – obviously – this is what we ought to be. The hunger for extreme situations, for shock, for the perverse, which one meets for example in Antonin Artaud or in Genet, is a sign of this almost metaphysical belief in a deeper passional ground to which we must break through by violence, abandoning the tight restrictive world of morality and conduct. This is the dionysiac world of Nietzsche and, ultimately, of Lawrence, or for that matter, with a different modulation, of G. Wilson Knight and Norman O. Brown. One can find its mark in literary criticism like Murray Krieger's *The Tragic Vision*, or John McCormick's *Catastrophe and Imagination*, in a recent piece by Stuart Hampshire in the *New York Review* and so on. And then there are the theologians of empathy and the dark inner wilderness, sounding the depths of the unconscious for rumours of godhead.

The question properly comes up, I think, whether this is the world which Karl Stern himself is evoking in his new book, with its appeal for a return to the dark depths of the female potency in human life. For Dr Stern, too, is arguing among other things for a return to a direct intuitive knowledge of mysterious essences. Part of his appeal to us is, I suspect, that he raises hopes of a poetic insight into the

¹George Allen and Unwin 30s.

affairs of daily life, deeper than the discursive. There is occasionally in this book a curious interplay between the careful clinical observation of the psychoanalyst and a transcendentalist overtone, a belief in a kind of swift penetration to an *urgrund* of life by the intuition of poetic realities in things. But Karl Stern's book is, I think, more interesting than this. In *The Flight from Woman* he looks at six major figures in Western thought, with the eye of a clinical psychoanalyst and phenomenologist. His list begins with Descartes, Schopenhauer and Sartre and goes on to Tolstoy, Kierkegaard and Goethe; his aim (he claims) is not to explain away their philosophies but to see them in the human situation from which they grew. In these six chosen men, he finds, in various forms, 'the flight from woman' of his title, a flight from the *female* root of life. His book in fact uses these cases to illustrate (in a way more suggestive than rigorous) a modern rejection of intuitive wisdom, and the refusal of spontaneous trust in a real world which is connatural and good or, to put it another way, maternal and nurturing.

Behind this denial of the *womanly* seen as part of the fundamental polarity of life, Karl Stern traces in his six men a clinical and personal record of rejection of women. Descartes lost his mother when he was one year old, and a sensitive phenomenological interpretation of his thinking can trace in it the scent of grief and loss, a familiar clinical pattern in which 'the certainty of being has early been shattered by maternal bereavement'. Clinical evidence suggests that Schopenhauer's 'evil dangerous image of nature' – his anti-incarnational pessimism – was his reaction to the phallic dominance of an 'orally sadistic' mother. And so on, through the cases of Sartre's nausea, of Kierkegaard's intense bond with his father, and Tolstoy's puritanic conversion – the genesis of their mistrust, their failure of affirmation, is probed. But what turned these traumatic incidents into philosophies and gave them, as the author suggests, a continuity and a decisive role in our culture? Dr Stern doesn't say – despite his generally sensitive and alert commentary, there's something curiously scattered and individualistic in his picture, an absence, after all, of a sense of whole situations, an incomplete phenomenology, a readiness to arrive too quickly at the essence of things.

Still, there is a point to be taken, a point made in almost poetic fashion, about human wholeness and natural faith. All around us we can see a neo-cartesian world of computers and programming, a disbalanced masculine world of geometric ordering and restless activism, of objectification and reification in which 'there is nothing childlike left in man's gaze. The hand of Wisdom, *Sophia*, the maternal, is rejected . . .' And Dr Stern doesn't see a real alternative in the opposite extreme which is offered us today – the healing power of passion and the appeal to dionysiac forces. To him the cult of 'life' when it is seen in this way as the elevation of the irrational force of *bios* without *logos* – something springing from the 'unformed pre-

rational cthonic forces', is simply another fruit of the same dualism. The kind of 'wholeness' which turns out to be only an extension of dark passionate spontaneity tricked out with 'an air of symbolic oneness' is not what he is trying to plumb.

Instead he appeals for a harmony of male and female faculties, of analytic and intuitive powers. Dr Stern's method is not very strict; his metaphors are too broad or brash, and the ground feels a bit marshy underfoot, with fragments of Dilthey, Bergson, Jaspers and Merleau-Ponty as planks. Still, once again, there is a point. Essentially, he holds that our intuitive knowledge is itself a human rationality at its deepest levels, a deep praeter-logical intelligence. The point of value is, I think, that in Karl Stern's world intuition and discursive reason are not alien and opposite to each other, the one magical, the other logical. They are *intellectus* and *ratio*, aspects of a single primary rationality which is able to embrace the created world as its own. This at least frees us from the dualism of the romantic idealists – on the one hand a luminous numinous *vernunft* (which the expressionists and Lawrence transmute into a shaft to the dark mines of truth) and on the other hand a servile labouring *verstand* which does the dirty work for the world.

The return to the intuitive which Dr Stern is urging doesn't then, mean a cleavage in us or a break with the world. With all its dark affectivity the 'female' power is still an openness to light, a capacity for love and for honouring being and personality in its fullness. It is a kind of trust or faith in what he calls 'the poetic reality of things'. This is his main point, his challenge to the world, and it is worth having. He sees in this *womanhood*, this 'holy passivity', a kind of readiness for annunciation and so a hidden resource which is a sign of contradiction, a denial of the cynical logistics, the exploitation and triviality and voyeurism of the world. The poet's eye is the truly human eye, caring for the living and irreducible quality of all beings and in its innocent openness it is a prelude to a more complete faith, which sees men not as objects but as Israel, the Spouse, the Bride. And to this kind of insight we are led by a spirit of openness, of eternal womanhood, 'das Ewig-Weibliche' of Goethe.

Even where Dr Stern disappoints in the overlargeness of his conclusions and of his metaphysical gestures, this is in a way justified by the importance of the hope he evokes, the reminder of the source, the mystery, of a depth too great for definition, a point of life and true transcendence. And here, I suppose, it is just his suggestive and poetic mode that is justified. This actuality of individual being in things has to be evoked, not measured. So Dr Stern is particularly attractive when he traces a literary evocation of innocent faith like the spirit of acceptance and love in the Marie Balkonska of *War and Peace*. At points like this, as a critic, he is at his best (as he would want to be) submitting to the moments of light and refracting them.