

Detachement : a way of life

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **26 (1958)**

Heft 8

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-569622>

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When the young god of all our dreams, he of the tawny body and the golden hair, lays a hand upon our forearm, at the bar, in the park, on the beach, it takes a special kind of strength to disengage oneself, and smile and say, «No, not this evening, friend.»

Or else it takes a special attitude towards life, our life with its many temptations and traps, to resist him — a kind of attitude that is contained in the word *detachment*.

The grave trouble with most of us is that we have butterfly personalities: it is an almost universally recognized trait of the homosexual. Our whole obliquity seems to be directed towards compelling us always to be searching for new shepherds in our pastures. Momentarily with one, for five dirty minutes, we pass from him to the next, always with starry eyes raised to the impossible and unattainable ideal — a permanent 'arrangement' with the man of our romantic dreams. We are largely doomed to fail in our questing. On the average, our natures are as inclined to promiscuity as those of a prostitute or a Don Juan. We are never satisfied with our partner. There is always something wrong: his points of view, his love-making, the way he eats his food or ties his tie or taps his cigarette. Novelty is our chiefest food; and like the butterfly, we hover at one flower for a moment, extract its sweetness, and flit ever-hungry to the next.

Is there no armor against the unhappiness and uncertainty such an existence brings? Are we fated always to pursue, taste, and discard?

Many years ago John Keats wrote a letter to his brother in which he said — in effect — that one should be content to live in the midst of doubts and uncertainties, without any irritable reaching out after fact and reason, and that it was not necessary — nor even desirable — to demand a universe reducible to a neat $x^2 + y^2$ formula. Using this statement as a beginning, you can make an attempt to settle yourself into a pattern which will enable you to observe, even participate, and still remain detached — to protect yourself completely, surrounded — but not *touched* in the deeply emotional sense — so that no person or situation will ever have the power to wound you again.

The happy man is the one who knows how to order his life so that there exists a minimal disturbance in it. Sometimes, when unpleasantness and worrisome occasions are perceived on the edge of one's experience, you can be lucky and steer away from them. It is wise to develop a small strain of Pontius Pilate within yourself that will make you call for the basin occasionally, to wash your hands of the unhappy event. In a way such an action is selfish, or say rather, it is a kind of 'self-ness', an instinct of preservation, of the same kind that compels a man to look to see if a traffic light is red before he attempts to cross a street, or a taker of medicine to consult the label to make sure he has not picked up the cyanide by mistake.

If we cannot detach ourselves from life, a haunted pointless vista of years confronts us. As a narcotic for them, we take up the endless dull and empty hours of the gay bars, or the hopeless and dangerous 'cruising' in the large cities. As we grow older, we suffer from the dwindling number of admirers, and may make pathetic efforts to keep young and attractive, to keep from becoming an 'auntie' — darkening the hair along the temples, rubbing eye-cream or some tan enamel make-up over the pockets below our eyes, wearing a male girdle of some sort to hold the dreadful slackening of the belly. Lord, we fool

no one! But with detachment, it may be granted that we will grow old as easily as possible, as good men should, knowing the virtue of giving up at the psychological moment, the right time, *le moment juste*.

What is necessary for this detachment? There must be inner resources, built up carefully over the years: a love of books, or music, or of something in which real interest is possible. Pascal once said that the great difficulty with modern man was that he had to be active — to chase, to be on the go, after horses, women, excitement of some kind; whereas, he added, if man but realized, he could sit alone in a room and engage in the most passionate activity known — thinking. Yet, of course, to be able to think, we must have something to think with, and think on — a store of inner resources.

We need, further, a built-up stock of memories to sustain us. Since our emotional lives are so frequently cut into small pieces, our hearts broken until there is nothing to see in them but the mendings, it is not unusual for us to place great love in things, in material objects, to which we develop sentimental attachment. There was a friend who once said that when he was seventeen he knew that he was going to be seventy, and began to keep records and a journal so that they would remember his past loves for him, and help him to induce his pleasure. He collected photos, and clippings of hair; and his piano and dresser-top became a forest of gilt and mahogany frames, each holding some young god's likeness. Perhaps he permitted himself to get somewhat out of control, but he was detached — and reasonably happy.

Again, we need a twofold psychic attitude, the first part of which is a kind of masochistic resignation towards Time, the greatest of all sadists. There is nothing that can be done to prevent our growing old; we may as well accept it with fatalism, or quietism. The one who becomes hysterical, and struggles with the sadist, will only hurt himself the more. And the second part is the cultivation of a feeling which will permit one to say that 'a look is as good as an embrace'. For those in whom the blood runs continually hot, and for those who have never known control, such a psychic attitude is very difficult indeed. But Time, again, may force it upon us; and an early mastery of detachment leaves us free to enjoy beauty for many more years than otherwise might be possible.

Man's chase after happiness is a feverish and unceasing thing. We search for it frantically, and seldom find it. «If I were as happy now as I was then,» we say, and sigh. But the truth is that few men have more to their account than a dozen hours of happiness in a lifetime — a fragment here and there out of the dull and sullen roll of years. It is those fragments which we remember and pursue. But with detachment comes the knowledge that a state of unhappiness or frustration is the usual lot of nearly all men, nearly all of the time — and when this is realized, the frenetic reachings cease, and the complications smoothe themselves into a serene and contented acceptance.

Paradoxically enough, along with detachment from the actualities of life there comes a growth of empathy. As soon as the irons fall free, we discover that we can make a psychic projection of ourselves into the personalities of others. Why this is true would need the best explanations of the psychiatrist; he might say that once we cut the deep emotional tie to our surroundings we are the better able to view it objectively, understand it, and place ourselves in others' roles. Our neatly tailored little egos — once the center of all the uni-

verse, we were convinced — slip into their proper places and perspectives, as wisdom comes.

And we are then aware of the existence of a goal, and as soon as we grow aware of it, we curiously find it in our full possession — the goal reached when experience has multiplied itself to such an extent that one is no longer under any compulsions of any kind towards persons or things or situations — the only real freedom worth the aiming for, and the best reward. -Steward

From: THE SPECTATOR, London

THE HYSTERIA of the Women Conservatives at their annual conference last week in their debate on criminal assaults and murders was only to be expected. Just as the Foreign Secretary, so he told his audience at the fête he was addressing, could think of better ways of spending his Whit-Monday, so, presumably, sensible women Conservatives could think of better ways of passing the week before Whitsun than attending a conference in London discussing subjects about which they knew very little. The 3000 women present can have been representative only of women who like going to conferences. Furthermore, those who shrieked for the return of the cat for sexual offences—for which, of course, it has never been used—had been given a lead a few weeks before in the debate in the House of Commons on the First Offenders Bill, when three Tory MPs running asked for the reintroduction of corporal punishment. Miss Hornsby-Smith's reply to the mob was chiefly interesting for the murder figures it contained. From September 1, 1954, to March 31, 1955, the number of crimes originally recorded by the police as murder was ninety-five, and during the same period of 1957—58 it was ninety-two. As Miss Hornsby-Smith implied, the only increase there has been is not in murder but in its newspaper coverage.

MISS HORNSBY-SMITH began her speech with a respectful curtsey to Mr. Butler—This conference does not need me to tell them of the intense interest the Secretary of State takes in measures for penal reform and the prevention of crime. The next day Mr. Butler showed that his intense interest in these matters was under full control. 'It is clear,' he told the House of Commons, 'that the WOLFENDEN Committee's recommendations have stirred public opinion widely and deeply, and I would not propose to decide on a future course of action until that opinion has had the fullest opportunity of expressing itself.' The Wolfenden Report was published eight months ago and public opinion has obviously had 'the fullest opportunity of expressing itself'—whatever that actually means. A number of people, including myself, have already pointed out the fatuity of setting up a distinguished body of people to study a question and to give an expert opinion upon it if after they have reported you only pay attention to those who have not studied the question and give an inexpert opinion upon it. But even though the Government is too cowardly to accept the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report, it should at least have the good manners to discuss them, or rather let the House of Commons discuss them. Or does it think the subject too important for MPs?

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macht unser Vertreter in Deutschland. Wir bitten deshalb, Korrespondenzen nach Konstanz in dieser Zeit zu unterlassen; eingegangene Briefe werden Anfang September beantwortet.

Redaktion: Postfach Fraumünster 547 Zürich 22

Rédaction: Case postale Fraumünster 547 Zürich 22

Postcheckkonto: / Compte de chèques postaux

Lesezirkel «Der Kreis», Zürich VIII 25753

Abonnementspreis inclusive Porto, vorauszahlbar:

Prix de l'abonnement, port inclus, payable à l'avance:

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als verschlossener Brief 1 Jahr Fr. 45.—

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