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The Tragedy of Unreality

EIRIK STEENHOFF

Anthony Esolen, *Sex and the Unreal City: The Demolition of the Western Mind* (Ignatius Press, 2020).

Anthony Esolen is not only a scholar and translator of English and Italian literature; he is perhaps the most formidable Catholic apologist writing in English today. I mean that in the best possible sense. The term “apologist” is usually used these days to designate much lesser writers. Esolen should rather be placed in the tradition after G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. His latest offering, *Sex in the Unreal City*, is yet another display of his striking prose, exuberant wit, and keen cultural analysis.

It comes at a time when the world has gone just a bit madder since the last time Esolen published a book. The unraveling of societal norms and intelligent thinking seem to happen at a lightning-fast pace. Esolen’s main claim in this book is that modern culture is founded on “unreality.” It opens with an appreciation of *Century Magazine*, the now mostly forgotten late-19th-century American periodical. *Century* gave the reader captivating feature stories, poetry, and novellas and essays by the likes of Chesterton and Mark Twain. In Esolen’s words, *Century* was marked by a “muscular excitement” about the innovations and discoveries of the era, but along with “plenty of warning voices.” The magazine’s outlook was progressive, he says, yet “looked more than kindly upon the Christian faith” because there can be “no culture without a felt encounter with the divine. It is a contradiction in terms.”

All of this has since been lost. A sense of the reality of things, of man’s fundamental connection with nature and with God: “The most fundamental thing that separates its readers from us is that even a rich man in 1892 has daily encounters with the sweet and stubborn rocks and trees of reality.” And this, to Esolen, is what *Century Magazine* represents.

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I think there is something very important to be learned by this seemingly straightforward observation. Even a couple of generations ago, people had a healthy sense of reality and also the goodness of norms and traditions. There were things you should do and should not do. Chesterton famously called tradition the “democracy of the dead”: It refuses to submit to the tyranny of the people who happen to be among the living. And today, everyone is a tyrant, because the individual is seen as the creator and arbiter of his own identity and destiny.

Esolen analyzes the origins of our unreality over the course of the book’s five chapters, which read more like separate essays rather than as a systematic argument. The second chapter, “The Body Unreal,” is my favorite. Here Esolen writes about the difference between the sexes, now lost on us, and the evils of divorce and the near-universal collapse of human sexual mores. I find his connection between Darwinism and modern feminism especially insightful. It is a connection that too few dare to make, given the privileged position of Darwinian biology in modern culture, even in the Church.

Darwinism has a tendency not only to reduce the human person but also to render thinking itself nearly impossible. According to Esolen, this is because it involves an implicit denial of the truth of the *species* that we see. It tells us to believe in a theory we can never witness in reality. It is an attempt not to understand reality but precisely to evade it. Darwinism, as it is commonly understood in our scientific culture, is death to philosophical *realism*, in the technical sense. A handful of theologians, like Michael Hanby, Larry Chapp, and Conor Cunningham, have written perceptively about this problem.

Esolen writes: “In the old way of looking at things, by what has been called the *philosophia perennis*, the philosophy that does not go out of date with the years, we see that a dog is a dog and not a cat, and that fact determines our language. The species are real.” Language—a subject about which Esolen, the English professor, knows a great deal—has now become a victim of what he calls the “spectral” thinking of deconstruction and feminism. The unreality of transgenderism, he writes, “depends for its existence upon the supposition that realities depend upon words, so that whoever controls the language controls the universe.”

This analysis ties in, of course, with what he writes about *Century Magazine*. If he were simply making a chronological point—the past is good and the present is bad—the argument would be less interesting and, indeed, less convincing. But the problem is precisely this: If there exists such a thing as a perennial philosophy, that is, a way of thinking about reality which is by definition always true and does not change with the times, the dramatic difference between then and now is not simply that we have lost a *form* of thought, and thus a certain way of living, but that we have discarded the very possibility of thought. Having lost access to reality in itself, we are left to make it up ourselves.

We then become victims of the many sad phenomena Esolen describes in his book, like free sexuality (really a form of slavery), a vacuous news and entertainment culture (which is neither informative nor entertaining), and a politics which promotes not the common good but

precisely a truncated vision of life as an accrument of individual rights and economic prosperity.

The book is at its wittiest when Esolen dissects certain items of pop culture. For instance, the pornographic display of “nastiness and spitefulness” that is the Super Bowl halftime show. That sad spectacle, writes Esolen, “sells to Americans what Americans envision themselves to be. It is a frightful thought.” We find the same garishness in politics and the media, which really are one and the same (he calls it the “Stereopticon”): “We have polls about polls, and news about polls, and polls about news, and news about news, and there is not enough reality in the lot of it to get caught under a small boy’s fingernail.”

In this connection, Esolen takes the godfather of modern American liberalism, John Rawls, to task. According to Rawls, there exists a “veil of ignorance” that keeps all members of society on an even footing. Justice can be truly impartial and fair only if we remain ignorant of each other’s socio-economic and religious backgrounds. This is related to the idea that one cannot operate in the public square with what Rawls calls one’s “comprehensive doctrine.” This doctrine consists of the ideas we have about life, love, and politics and may or may not include religious beliefs. Such comprehensive doctrines cannot, Rawls writes, attain to the level of public reason, because they make claims about reality that transcend the limits of its own logic.

Esolen’s description of this is the best I have read, and it is worthy of a longer citation:

[Rawls] asks us—nay, he demands it of us, under pain of banishment from civic discourse—that we pretend that we are not sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, neighbors and members of a community, in *this place* and not another, worshiping God in this church and in these ways, and devoted to a certain vision of the good [...]. He requires us, in short, not to be human at all....

The politics of unreality means that the most important things are now rendered the least important. Our religion and most deeply held convictions become private options, rather than the foundation of a true politics of the common good. Politics itself becomes a battle of rights, which are deprived of their intrinsic relation to the good of the person.

In the last two chapters, Esolen writes about the spiritual and theological aspects of unreality. Evil itself is a kind of unreality, a *privatio boni* (privation of the good). It means to choose the void over the radical goodness of Creation. In our time, he says, people continually “embrace untruth” and end up as wraiths, a “shell of humanity.” What is different now is that people no longer feel the “good, solid, dependable foundation of this God-created reality” under their feet. Against this profession of unreality stands the Apostles’ Creed of the Christian faith, which he explores in the last chapter. “God either exists, or he does not,” writes Esolen. “If he exists, he has either revealed himself fully in Christ, or he has not.” The deepest reason for the unreality of our age, then, is that people no longer believe in God and, therefore, not in the goodness of his creation.

I agree with this as an analysis of our culture. And yet I find that there is something missing. In words that are perhaps well-known to readers of this journal, Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his editorial article launching *Communio*, writes of Christ’s descent into the “dereliction of the absence of God which is that of all egoists, all spiritual privateers, and the dropouts of every community.” Balthasar’s point is not to absolve the fools of their foolishness, but to emphasize the priority of the “all-embracing communion” to which all men belong by virtue of Christ’s

redemption over the task of “criticism” (from *krinein*, which means both to “separate” and “judge”).

The harshness and sometimes personal nature of some of Esolen’s criticism could have benefitted from this perspective. Balthasar at least allows us to make the following point: Cultural criticism is tricky, because cultures consist of people with certain ideas about the world, and very often of foolish people with foolish ideas; but, then again, all these cultures and fools partake in a redemption which has already been wrought for them (and which they probably will never even hear about). Esolen’s college staff member may well be a “ridiculous fool,” but a redeemed fool. Ignorant, yes, but perhaps invincibly so. Deserving not simply of scorn, but of profound pity—the kind that moved Our Lord “by the bowels.”

I do not mean this sentimentally. There is a great tragedy in being placed right in the middle of God’s wonderfully made reality and not knowing it. But that is a tragedy that has befallen most of humanity throughout most of history. This tragic element is somewhat lost on the satirist. He makes his observations from a certain distance. For all the brilliance and vigor of Esolen’s cultural analysis, I cannot shake the feeling that part of the problem—not just in the book, but for all of us—is precisely a lack of a basic identification not so much with the culture, but with all the other people who are the participants or victims of that culture (and we are too!). That means it is part of our task as Christians to help people experience reality in its fullness, which was so important to someone like Luigi Giussani. And Giussanian *education* into reality is arguably primarily communal rather than critical.

And while I agree with Esolen’s suggestion that our kind of unreality was unthinkable in the era of *Century Magazine*, one might argue whether or not the progressivism of that era did not contain within itself some of the same presuppositions whose ultimate effects we are now witnessing. There is a hint of a wistfulness for a bygone age in this book. But as Esolen himself indicates, the problem of culture and history is ultimately spiritual and theological rather than chronological. My hope is that in his next book, he will take us a step beyond criticism, and deeper into the wonders of reality.

