Guenon on the Young Evola

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Two letters from Rene Guenon to Guido de Giorgio regarding Julius Evola. Although Evola translated and promoted Guenon’s works in Italy, Guenon had some reservations about Evola’s approach. Unfortunately, because of that association, certain political views have been attributed to Guenon that he never personally held.

He is a fool because he does not know what everyone knows; he is a sage because he knows what everyone does not know. ~ Fulvio Mocco, I Tarocchi esoterici

Rene Guenon was described by Julius Evola on many occasions as the ‘Master of the 20th century’. By the time Evola began his public writing career, Guenon had already had more than 20 years of experience in Tradition, including initiations into Hermetism, Sufism, and Vedanta. Guenon had no interest in Western philosophy as such. In his trilogy Man and his becoming, Symbolism of the Cross, and Multiple States of Being, he expounded Traditional metaphysics, based primarily on the Vedanta and Sufism. Therein is revealed an understanding of non-duality, the ultimate reality, in terms suitable for a Westerner.

When we discuss Evola, we strive to do so, in the light of Guenon. When there is a discrepancy in formulations, Guenon’s position needs to be evaluated very carefully before discarding it. We understand the appeal of Evola; he provides a virile spirituality in a world of effeminate churches and clergy. Yet we must urge those who come to Tradition only through Evola to also delve deeply into Guenon.

We provide here two letters from Guenon to Guido de Giorgio regarding Evola, when Evola was under 30 years old. De Giorgio, an initiate into Sufism and a colleague of Guenon, introduced Evola to Tradition in the Ur group. As Guenon notes, Evola’s misunderstandings flow from his philosophical position, which is ultimately incompatible with metaphysics. Evola’s protests don’t ring true, since, as we saw in a recent post regarding Mircea Eliade, the former’s philosophy was integral to his work.

For Evola, the ultimate was the Absolute Individual, which is not the same as non-dual metaphysics. He also took Bachofen’s notion of Solar and Lunar cultures too far, applying them to various traditions. Now a legitimate tradition is based on principle, so the solar/lunar distinction is beside the point. He was also attached to Weininger’s theory of the Absolute Male and Absolute Female. That may be interesting on the psychological level, but is misleading on a spiritual or transcendental level. Male and Female form a polarity, united by a third term (see Guenon’s Great Triad). They are also relative. For example, a knight is masculine in relation to the King’s subjects, but feminine in relation to the king. To absolutize one pole would be like making Yang the supreme principle rather than the Tao.

In the letters from Guenon to de Giorgio, we see Guenon’s early frustration with the youthful Evola. They speak for themselves to those who understand what is at stake. The first letter is from 20 November 1925.

Thank you for the issue of Bilychnis that you sent me; since then, I received from Evola himself a complete packet of other journals containing some of his articles. In acknowledging its reception, I told him that I had some serious reservations to make on his point of view that appeared to me too philosophical. He wrote me a somewhat long, rather confused, letter, in which he protested that the philosophical form he uses is for him only a simple means of exposition that does not affect his doctrine itself. I believe none of it. I persist in thinking that he is really too imbued with philosophy, and especially with German philosophy. In an article published in the journal Ultra, he alluded to me in a note, concerning East and West, in terms that prove that he did not understand very much about what I expounded; all the same, he goes as far to describe me as a ‘rationalist’, which is really ridiculous (considering that it concerns a book where I expressly asserted the falsity of rationalism!), and which clearly shows that he is among those who cannot get rid of philosophical labels and who feel the need to apply them wrongly everywhere. He informed me of his intention to write an article on Man and his becoming; I ask myself what that could be like; we’ll see eventually…

Since we are speaking of Evola, it is yet necessary that I tell you that he was hurt by Reghini’s criticisms of him, even though in a very moderated form. He must be rather vain and would like to have nothing but eulogies; it is true that he is very young. Vulliaud, who does not have the same excuse, is almost as sensitive; it appears that he also was rather displeased with my article; he imagines that he alone knows the Kabbalah and is capable of speaking of it. He is in fear that Evola will soon do as much for the Tantras, although he is not very qualified to take it on; he sees all that through his philosophy, from where a deformation arises in the German manner. The true conception of Shakti is a completely different thing from ‘voluntarism’.

The second letter is from 26 January 1926

Evola doesn’t lack any pretentions, as you see; but, for my part, I continue to think that he does not understand at all what we mean by ‘intellectuality’, ‘knowledge’, ‘contemplation’, etc., and that he doesn’t even know how to make the distinction between the ‘initiatic’ point of view and the ‘profane’ point of view. It appears that he has the intention to publish a review of my work on the Vedanta in the journal Realistic Idealism; we will see what that will be. In any case, in spite of everything that we have tried to explain to him, he persists in finding ‘rationalism’ in the Vedanta, all while failing to recognize that he then takes this word ‘rationalism’ in a rather different sense that is usually given to it.

Deification of Man

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In Guido de Giorgio, we often find the best from Rene Guenon and Julius Evola. Yet, the “personal equation” is qualitatively different. Guenon is cold and logical, the path of the jnani whose goal is the Truth. Evola sometimes writes with a deep passion, but is often wordy; his is the path of action, with the Good as its goal. De Giorgio, on the other hand, seems to speak as a man of conviction, arising from an inner knowing, while avoiding the sentimental and the merely personal. He is a poet and mystic, following the highest path, that of Absolute Beauty.

Guenon and Evola, for all their virtues, are ultimately escapists, Guenon to the “traditional” East and Evola to the long forgotten Ancient Rome. But De Giorgio offers a different way. Unlike Guenon who seems to regard the various Traditions as discrete and independent, Evola and De Giorgio see a continuity in the Traditions of the West, from the Hyperboreans to the Medieval era. Yet Evola wants to stop part way, and even to reverse it, while De Giorgio wants to continue and complete the rectification that Evola described.

Taking Guenon’s claim seriously that Dante’s Divine Comedy is a blueprint of the path for initiates, he describes a vision for the reconstitution of Tradition in his La Tradizione Romana, under the aspects of the Divine Cycle, the roles of the castes, the role of the Leader, the spirit of the Roman tradition, and its fulfillment in the Comedy.

In the following passage from Aforismi e Poesie (Archè Milano, 1999), De Giorgio describes the process of Deification, drawing on Traditional notions. From Guenon, we see that “man” is just one of the states of being, but does not exhaust all the states. From Evola, we see the theme of transcending man as such, and the way to know God is to be God. But we suspect, however, that De Giorgio is saying the same thing, not as an abstract theory, but rather from his own interiority. Readers can judge for themselves. De Giorgio’s text follows:

To lose consciousness of oneself, to become conscious of God. To become conscious of the nothing that I am in order to have consciousness of everything that is God. One does not take a step toward God without this preliminary negative. What I am not, God is.

Man makes himself God in the measure in which he is no longer man, that is, when his transparency, in the absolute sense, is such that God passes through him. This is the deification of man, not human imperfection arrogantly divinized—a haughtiness absolutely outside the place in life that leads to God—but man annulled, abolished, dissipated, so that God alone is because God alone is God and no god is god except God.