

"ELMER GANTRY" REVISITED:

PROFANE FUN AT THE EXPENSE OF PROFANE PIETY

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When Barbara Bush, about to occupy the White House, naughtily flaunts the fact that her pearls are fake, genuine pearls are obliquely honored. So preacher Gantry, knowing he's a fraud, occasionally has brief seizures of honesty, of truth, of genuine piety. It's the mirror image of the profession: almost all clergy are more honest than phony, more truthful than shavers of the truth, more devout than blasphemous. "More," I say: none have completed the struggle of faith against doubt, the journey of (in Jn. Wesley's phrase) "going on to perfection"---else how could they honestly participate in the Sunday liturgy's confession of sin?....Not just televangelists' spectacular sinning, but the whole of what the media are calling our culture's "ethics crisis," led me to revisit Sinclair Lewis' 1927 classic (H,B,&C; reff., 1967 Signet).

1. **Cynicism** is the cost of romantic excess. We've been experiencing it since the arrogant idealism of 1960s youth, as "the lost generation," including SL, experienced it after WWI. Indeed, cynicism continues the sin on its downside, whatever name you give the sin: hubris, prometheanism, narcissism, introjection leading to dejection. I come not to praise or blame SL but to lodge some observations that may speak to our present condition.

2. Seldom does a book's dedicatory say so much about its slant & content: "To H.L.MENCKEN with profound admiration." Barbwitted, truth-loving journalist HLM had a profound contempt for humanity, the masses, whom he dubbed the "booboisie" --fickle yet feared by both the powerful & the intelligentsia--the people of (356) "this barbarous civilization." It's not just a sophomoric celebration of unbelief in both God & humanity (a stance easier in the 1920s than now); there's frightening truth in "crowd psychology," the herd instinct, of which EG was a master & Hitler (who took over Germany six years later) was beginning to be a master. The Roman authority understood it, & feared Jesus. The sages of the ages have understood it: James (16) rightly says that the doubter is "like a wave in the sea that is driven and blown about by the wind," but it's as true of (to use Eric Hoffer's booktitle) "the true believer." Not just televangelists but all religious leaders (better, "religion leaders," for some of them aren't especially religious) would do well to have over their desks the sign, "**BEWARE OF ELMER GANTRY!**" Beware of the temptation to despise & manipulate your fellow-sinners, God's defective & deformed children, few of them trying to make it big, most of them just struggling to make it, to survive with at least a modicum of dignity, peace, & joy!

3. And yet just as honesty flits through EG's hypocrisy, **compassion** for the multitudes, for the laity, for the clergy, even for EG, occasionally interrupts the flow of SL's cynicism. And, much more than in Mencken, even belief in God, at least in the God of truth, "the whole merciless truth" (357). The ambiguity is autobiographical not just of SL but of modern man &, as increasingly appears, of postmodern man. The sky always hangs low over humanity (my figure, from the famous first book-sentence of S.J.Case, contemporary with SL: "The sky hung low over the ancient Mediterranean world," with its myriads of religious phenomena, all of them having parallels as we approach the 21st c.).

4. What else happened that year, 1927? Yes, Lindy (& his laughingly picking me up in his arms so I could write my name on the cowling of The Spirit of St. Louis). And Thornton Wilder's THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY, speaking as magnificently for the mystery of faith as GANTRY spoke for the mystery of integrity. Billy Phelps, of radiant Christian faith, put TW on the literary map with his praise of THE BRIDGE; SL studied at Yale when BP was teaching there; 25 years later, Buckley came out with GOD AND MAN AT YALE. 1927, year of old stabilities & new perplexities. B'way's "Ol' Man River" & "My Blue Heaven"; but also Freud's THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION. Existentialism: Heidegger's SEIN UND ZEIT. Lévy-Bruhl's THE PRIMITIVES AND THE SUPERNATURAL. The first talkie & "King of

Kings." Sunday-school-teaching (as I knew him) Arthur Compton's Nobel Prize for Physics, leading toward his general oversight of the Manhattan Project & thus toward the Atomic Age. And the publication of THE PROGRAM OF THE N.S.D.A.P., Hitler's Nazi Party. Quite a year.

5. The outstanding characteristics of SL's novels are (1) they are so pervasively autobiographical that through them we can see his soul as well as his society, and (2) they are massively researched. If I'd not known he'd had no theological education & had done no pastoring, I'd've been tempted to swear he'd done the whole trip of the former & spent at least a decade at the latter. I glance at my personal index, hundreds of reff. to the book, & I'm awed with his intimate familiarity with churches, denominations, clergy's inner & outer life, cleric/laic dynamics, parsonage joys & tensions (esp. the latter). No novelist since has come close to this depth & breadth of love/hate relationship with religion in America. While he's jaundiced about all religion, Protestantism is what he loves to hate. Esp. the Baptists. Elmer was a Baptist but got caught smoking-drinking-womanizing & gave up all three to become a Methodist, soon working himself up to 2,500 on Sunday mornings. His ego-craving for spectacular success was stronger than all other cravings, even including for sexual acrobatics--well, almost.

6. SL spoofs himself for "**intellectual pride**," the desire "to make a new world, better'n the Creator's...--Bernard Shaw and H.G.Wells and H.L.Mencken and Sinclair Lewis (Lord, how that book of Lewis', 'Main Street,' did bore me, as much of it as I read...some of the G. Prairie hicks didn't go to literary teas quite as often as he does!--that was all he could see among those splendid heroic pioneers!)* This ability to self-distance saves the book from being a mere petulant diatribe, like so much of Theo. Dreiser's work.

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7. More than most of his set, SL had a **lover's quarrel** with God & religion. I knew a few of them. Second Cousin Howard, eg; wasn't big on the Decalog, had a new car & new women every September (always both gorgeous), never married, & left all his money to a church. Things mystical-theological-ecclesial-clerical didn't just interest SL, they fascinated him. This complied well with his conservative moral sensibility & that of his readers, whom he rightly expected to be outraged by Elmer's amorality, esp. his total indifference to what effects his total self-seeking had on other human beings. His joy at getting the better of others was sufficient anodyne for his off-&-on twinges of conscience. His imperial, monomaniacal ego reminds me of this from a contemporary of his, Mae West: "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful"--a wondrous maxim for lovers of self rather than of God & others (2Tim.3 2-8); indeed, **capable only of self-love**, as GONE WITH THE WIND's Scarlett O'Hara & DYNASTY's E.J.Ewing (whose actor, Larry Hagman, gets consulted by tycoons who agree with him that "J.R. isn't evil...talk of moralists is cheap and hypocritical" [7Feb89 byline]). Sixty years ago SL could have fun & profit shocking the public with Babbitt's & Gantry's amorality; now impossible, given our time's laidback hedonism. But as "ethics" becomes newsinside the Beltway, in business, in education, in religion, I predict renewed interest in SL (as we already have it in Toqueville) & other social critics in the history of American letters. EG's last words, the book's last sentence (precursing moral majoritarianism): "'We shall yet make these United States a moral nation!'" Translation (394): "I'm going to be the emperor of America--maybe of the world."

8. SL was an **un/believer**, both, looking both from outside (Jim Lefferts) & inside (Frank Shallard) the church. Against religion in general & Christianity in particular, yet ever yearning to be honest to God (368, "there's nothing wicked in looking straight at life"--this from Frank, just before he was blinded!--363: "I believe there could be a church free of superstition, helpful to the needy, and giving people that mystic something stronger than reason, that sense of being uplifted in common worship of an unknowable power for good.")....On SL/EG on Bible, see #2304....On SL/EG on **sex & marriage**, the same ambivalence as on God & religion: Elmer always had a detached woman to supplement his attached woman. My pastor of that year, 1927, preached a series on the Apostles' Creed, denying each article seriatim; & was discovered to have sired a number of children by energetic afternoon calling.