

his predecessors; and to suggest that the ultimate term of all the Christian thinker's criticism of the Arabs was a demonstration of the *intrinsically* intellectual, and therefore spiritual, character of the individual human soul.

In this lecture I have laid the emphasis on Avicenna's encounter with the mind of St Thomas, and so run the risk, no doubt, of over-emphasis. For the thirteenth century was intellectually extremely complex. But in general its fascination consists in its having witnessed the first encounter, on a high and sustained level, of Christianity with an alien philosophy. If one may draw morals from history—and why not?—I would draw two from this: that if Christians are bound to love their neighbours, they should love their neighbours' minds; and that if non-Christians are bound to love truth, they may find some in Christians. Truth is hard to gain and to keep, but it can be shared; at least if Dante (who learned much from the Arabs) is right, who saw Paradise united in the '*vero in che si queta ogni intelletto*'.²⁴

CATHOLIC WRITING

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

MR EVELYN WAUGH once wrote, in a letter, I think, to a Catholic newspaper, that it is the business of the novelist to portray man 'against a background of eternal values'. Few novelists and few critics have been sufficiently clear-headed to attempt such a succinct definition. In making his point so neatly, Mr Waugh has disclosed the dilemma in which the modern poet and novelist find themselves, a dilemma which is fairly represented in this passage from Elizabeth Bowen's own notes on novel-writing:

'Great novelists write without pre-assumptions. They write from outside their own nationality, class or sex.

'To write thus would be the ambition of any novelist who wishes to state poetic truth.

'Does this mean he must have no angle, no moral viewpoint? No, surely, without these he would be (a) incapable of maintaining the conviction necessary for the novel; (b) incap-

²⁴ 'in the truth that brings all minds to peace'. (*Par.* xxviii, 108.)

able of lighting the characters, who to be seen at all must necessarily be seen in a moral light.

'From what source then must the conviction come? and from what morality is to come the light to be cast on the characters? The conviction must come from certainty of the validity of the truth the novel is to present. The "moral light" has not, actually, a moral source; it is moral (morally powerful) according to the strength of its power of revelation. Revelation of what? The virtuousness or non-virtuousness of the action of the characters. What is virtue in action? Truth in action. Truth by what ruling? in relation to what? Truth by the ruling of and in relation to the inherent poetic truth that the novel states.'

That is a fair statement of the beliefs that are common among contemporary English novelists and their critics; it contains an important principle and a dangerous confusion of two notions, moral and poetic truth. Moral truth may be called the principles which the author believes should govern life—Mr Waugh's 'eternal values'; poetic truth may be described, not altogether adequately, as the characters being true to themselves. If the characters and situations of a novel are deeply conceived, they will develop out of themselves, and according to themselves, faithful to what is called the writer's 'vision'. Clearly these two forms of truth will direct one another without either submitting its independence, and it is certainly not to be granted that a high sense of morality must produce novels full of saints. Chesterton observed that you cannot have a story about fallen humanity without sinners.

If Miss Bowen had said that the characters must be lighted *from within* by moral truth it might have helped to make the matter clear, because moral truth directs characters and action according to a pattern of life in which the author believes; it will only do its work well if the belief is in the author, implicitly or instinctively, and therefore lies hidden, but effective, inside the characters. Poetic truth, however, attempts to see the living reality whole and entire as far as may be possible, and in doing so enriches creation with another facet of eternal truth. Poetry attempts something more than rational statement of a truth. A man states a proposition by abstracting the purely spiritual and formal element from a reality. In a sense he emaciates and thins it out. That does not

make him inaccurate; he is merely focussing his attention on one element, and although this is the essence of the matter, all modifications are omitted. In a sense the truth of rational statement is disembodied, whereas poetic truth is embodied and incarnate. A man may say, for instance, that St Stephen was stoned to death in the year 32. Rational man makes that statement, leaving all the implications of St Paul's presence, St Stephen being a deacon and the first Christian martyr and so forth, to be understood; whereas the poet will try to express the whole of that situation with all its implications as if from an eternal standpoint. He will write in what was called in the middle ages an anagogical sense. The same thing happens when we try to judge the moral quality of an action. Our calculations are approximate because we try to judge relative truths by the yardstick of absolute truth.

In some such fashion the novelist may also work. It may roughly be said that, in writing *Emma*, Jane Austen described the world which surrounded an innocently self-centred young woman. Emma was the centre of her own world: not only the incidents and events, but the manner of describing them, show this. We look at this world as if through the eyes of Emma herself. Yet it was not sufficient simply to write the book in the first person, for Emma was unaware of her own central position. So the author had somehow to get inside Emma and at the same time remain completely detached. It is clear how well this was done.

'Harriet Smith's intimacy at Hantfield was soon a settled thing. Quick and decided in her ways, Emma lost no time in inviting, encouraging, and telling her to come very often; and as their acquaintance increased so did their satisfaction in each other. As a walking companion Emma had very early seen how useful she might find her. . . . She had ventured alone once to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and a Harriet Smith therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges. But in every respect as she saw more of her, she approved her, and was confirmed in all her kind designs.

'Harriet certainly was not clever, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition, was totally free from conceit and only desiring to be guided by anyone she looked up to. Her early attachment to herself was very amiable; and her inclination for good company and power of appreciating

what was elegant and clever, showed that there was no want of taste, though strength of understanding must not be expected. Altogether she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith's being exactly the young friend she wanted—exactly the something which her home required.'

Jane Austen with perfect detachment has allowed the character to develop itself out of itself, through the story and the manner of telling it. Had she plotted Emma's life according to some pre-conceived pattern or scale of values, regardless of what she was and what she believed in, there would have been a bad piece of work. In that sense moral pre-assumptions are bad; they go against nature because they make the characters act and the plot develop according to some theory—and that is not how reality works.

The novelist, however, like the poet, is haunted by two facts: truth is always changing and variable in earthly manifestations, and yet somewhere there lies hidden absolute eternal truth. As a religious man or a philosopher he may know its hiding place, but it is his business as a novelist to show us eternity peeping into time and to trace its pattern in the apparently disordered lives of men. At the best of times this double allegiance is a burden, but because the belief in absolute truth is not widespread today the writer is in a quandary. If he does not believe there is a pattern to life, how can he write anything coherent and convincing? (Agnosticism undoubtedly lies behind much of the exaggerated concern with technique and experiments.) If, on the other hand, he does believe, how can he make his belief clear and acceptable to the unbelieving public? In the past this has never been so great a problem and the greatest art has been based on secure beliefs. Shakespeare, for instance, reveals 'a conception of man as man, as a substantial personality compounded of reason and passion, the divine and the animal, a creature standing or crawling between earth and heaven, whose thoughts and actions are bound up with both natural and supernatural worlds and are weighted with both immediate and eternal significance'. Shakespeare could take that as believed and allow it to govern the matter and the manner of his writing. The modern Christian writer must somehow, without preaching or teaching, make his novels demonstrate the faith on which they stand. The best of them do this by simply revealing God's truth as faithfully and honestly as possible. It has been well

said that a great artist is one who does not hinder his muse.

There is, however, a deal of difference between professing beliefs and ramming them down other people's throats. The type of novel designed to edify is only too well known. It may be Catholic in so far as the writer believes in the primacy of the Pope, Our Lady and the Mass; but as a rule the writer believes many other things which are neither in the Pentateuch nor the code of Canon Law, and these dubious half-truths are used in so-called defence of the real truth. But this Catholic phenomenon is only part, and by no means the worst part, of what Storm Jameson has called 'the horrible flood of novels produced for a vast semi-literate audience created by popular education—that is, education which stops short after it has destroyed a child's natural curiosity and taught him to read well enough to absorb a newspaper and fill in football pools'. In the last fifty years education, assisted it is true by the break-up of family life, has become too literate and insufficiently technical; half the children in schools stay there too long learning the wrong things. They leave with perhaps a knowledge of reading and writing, but no knowledge of what reading and writing are for except to fill in their leisure. Hence the current slogan, 'education for leisure'. Reading has fallen into the same category as smoking or sunbathing, and only rarely exercises and sharpens the mind as it should. Any intelligent assistant in a public library will confirm this with statistics. It is scarcely surprising that this demand should be partly (though only a very small part) answered by 'easy' religious stories that use all the religious clichés, play upon stock responses and in general paint a pretty-pretty picture of religion which does harm. This is no doubt unfortunate, inevitable as it seems; it is more unfortunate if Catholic literature takes its name from this type of work. But it is more unfortunate still if the critics in an over-violent reaction jump to the other end of the scale and declare that Catholic writing is only being salvaged from obscurity by two or three of the very best writers like Waugh or Greene, great as they are. There is a large 'middle' group of writers whose importance is far greater than the critical attention they have attracted. The world needs convincing, by artistic example rather than precept, that there is a pattern behind events; it takes skill to do this to a pagan world. The religious tracts and the spiritual books will not touch the problem because they are only read by the already con-

verted; Waugh and Greene mean most to those who already have some intuition of the supernatural. 'The contents can be discerned by everyone', said Goethe, 'the meaning by him only who can add something of his own.' That is always true of the highest flights of art, but the Bruce Marshalls, with considerably more skill than the critics always allow, do pioneer work to reclaim pagan deserts.

If accusations of 'escapism' are loosely made, we must remember there is no shame in escape if it takes us into a sane and possible world. Father Malachy and Father Smith may be saints, but they have no illusions; and after we have escaped into their world for a little, perhaps we might have less illusions and bring back some of their sanity into this world. The order of Bruce Marshall's world is the order of faith not fantasy; even though that faith moves mountains, it is never fantastic. Father Malachy's Miracle was hard for some people to believe because it was a hard fact and not a fantasy. That faith lights the eyes of all Marshall's characters; thus Bigou sees a 'woman in furs and with eyes like Our Lady of Perpetual Succour'. She turns out to be a prostitute. The Protestant in us will accuse Marshall of profanity; the Catholic, will share Marshall's pity that a girl who is indeed the image of our Lady should desecrate that image. There is Catholic poetic truth, and a piece of Catholic novel-writing. Marshall's writing, uneven as it is and in parts bitter and crude, at its best is full of such clear and provoking Catholic vision. The provocation succeeds when it is not deliberate but inherent in the vision. When Marshall, or any other writer for that matter, is tilting at some vested religious interest or superstition, we may be amused but never moved so deeply as when his faith penetrates the human surface and sees eternity beyond. Such art begins from the belief that truth is its own greatest witness, and the artist is all the time trying to 'get out of the light' of the Holy Ghost.

So in a sense he is concerned not so much with the question of human behaviour, though for a novelist that is in the front of his picture, as with more fundamental truths, the nature of faith, the Incarnation, the Communion of Saints. If there is such a thing as a Catholic novel it seems that these, and especially the nature of Faith, must be its subjects. In a country with a continuous Catholic tradition there remains an understanding of the depths of the faith, an understanding that lies so deep that it often survives all

wickednesses; a truth which, when it emigrates into a non-Catholic country, is turned into licence. The mystery of faith, in one form or another, will always be the centre of a novel that is truly Catholic. Mauriac wrote about it in one woman, Thérèse. Waugh was probably wise, in the English tradition, to make a family (*Brideshead*) his subject. It is doubtful whether any single modern Englishman could convincingly appear at once wicked and faithful. It is more doubtful whether any English writer could make him sound convincing. Mauriac has been accused by his own countrymen of being too far concerned with ethical values, but in Thérèse at any rate the mystery of reality is greater than the human behaviour. In any great Catholic novel that will be so; the eternal values against which man is set will be strongly etched. There may for example be much to say about Catholics who lose and find their faith, but the centre of interest is God who gives or withholds the faith: eternity peeping into time. Thus in *Brideshead Revisited* the unobtrusive light of the sanctuary lamp on the last page shows us the faith still alive. The artist will not preach or teach; he will be content to show his vision. His sense of God must be keen, his love of the Church deep and wide. It is only to be expected nowadays that he will be conscious of evil, but he will be conscious of the greater power of good. Thus *The Heart of the Matter* is a decline from *The Power and The Glory*. Scobie's sin and the squalor of 'the coast' almost overwhelm us, and we are saved by Father Rank's *cri de coeur*: 'Don't imagine you—or I—know a thing about God's mercy'; whereas for all the sin and filth and faithlessness in *The Power and The Glory* it is so well written that we are continually aware that the real hero is the Hound of Heaven. On the other hand, *Brideshead Revisited*, while retaining all the toughness that is required to make a twentieth-century novel acceptable, has shed the brittle cynicism of Waugh's earlier works, not because he has grown soft but because he has looked deeper.

The Catholic novelist needs a double vision and it must be essentially religious. It was D. H. Lawrence who said: 'One has to be so terribly religious to be an artist'; it was D. H. Lawrence, too, who in his criticism, if not in his novel-writing, understood how self-effacing the artist had to be: 'I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of Almighty God to go through me'. It is not sufficient to have a God to work convenient miracles and a sacra-

mental system to clear up the messes. His eye must be open to the sight of God even in a wicked world, and, like God, he will allow the evil to work itself out. There is no conflict between poetic and moral truth; on the contrary, if we have our eyes open to every scrap of it, the poetic truth will only be artistically convincing if we have our eye on the pattern behind it: the moral truth. Proust and Virginia Woolf are the products of a world which has been driven in on itself and condemned to self-conscious art because it has lost the pattern of God's planning. The loss of this sense means a loss of faith, and it has produced the excessive concern with techniques and experiment that is so common today and has made the modern novel 'etiolated and narrow', as Storm Jameson calls it. If Catholic novelists fall short in technical skill it may be partly because they cannot believe that technique is everything. Their greatest temptation may be to over-emphasise the pattern, but undoubtedly their infallible method will be to keep out of God's light and allow him to appear through their mirrorings, and the last thing they will worry about will be 'edification'. No writer was ever less interested in edification than Geoffrey Chaucer, and he gave us the finest sketch there ever was of the communion of saints in that pilgrimage which began in a tavern and ended in a church.

OBITER

NOMADELFIA—AN ITALIAN EXPERIMENT

Nomadelfia (and the name means 'a city where brotherhood is law') started as an attempt to solve the problem (a very serious one in Italy) of the abandoned child; it has become an attempt to solve the fundamental human problem of the relationship between man, his neighbour, his needs, and the fruits of the earth.

Don Zeno Saltini, its founder, has always been interested in abandoned children. He was first a lawyer, which gave him the opportunity to learn much about juvenile crime. The day he was ordained a priest, he adopted an abandoned child, and from then on his 'family' grew rapidly; the children came home with new brothers, some turned up on their own, and they came to be called 'Little Apostles'. Apart from the material problems, which were very great, Don Zeno found himself incapable of giving his children the love and care which they would have had from a mother, and at the same time he became convinced that children who did not have this form of love in their youth could