

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

DEAR FATHER EDITOR,

May I take some of your space to comment on the last page of Mr Bergonzi's interesting article, printed in your September number: My remarks concern two references which appear on that page: to Dante's attitude to the damned lovers in his *Inferno*; and to Newman's opinion about 'Christian literature'. I would suggest that if Mr Bergonzi had understood Dante's attitude a little better he might have been less ready to endorse, as he seems to do, Newman's very negative conception of 'Christian literature'. I am suggesting, in other words, that canto V of the *Inferno* is a specimen of Christian literature. This view cannot be demonstrated in a few lines, but it may at least be recommended to your readers' attention.

'Dante', says Mr Bergonzi, 'would surely have liked to forgive Paolo and Francesca . . . were they not already damned and in hell.' But who, I ask, put this charming pair in hell if not Dante himself? He did not find his *Inferno* ready made; he invented it. Dante (need it be said?) never really visited hell; the Dante in the poem, the protagonist who goes through the world of the dead, is as much a part of the poem as the people he meets on his way. This observation is not as banal as it may seem; for the fundamental mistake of most Romantic criticism of the *Inferno*—and it reappears in Mr Bergonzi's comment—was precisely to blur the distinction between Dante the poet and Dante the protagonist of his poem. And the effect of this, of course, was to suppose that the emotions expressed by the Dante in the poem were those of Dante the poet at the moment of writing the poem. And so it came to be assumed, quite arbitrarily, that the Dante-protagonist's compassion for Francesca indicates some degree of actual complicity in her sin of Dante the poet. I do not of course deny that that compassion may indicate that the poet had himself been a carnal sinner to some extent; indeed I hold—for reasons I cannot go into here—that it does indicate this; for the poet, in his poem, is judging *himself* (probably his past self, at any rate his *other* self—other than his self as writing and judging) as much as he is judging the sinners he meets on his fictitious voyage. His description of the protagonist-Dante's compassion for Francesca is precisely his way of judging himself.

These remarks are not, I think, irrelevant to the wider issue raised by the quotation from Newman; an issue so wide that I can only touch on it here: the question whether Newman was right in deciding that Christian literature is an impossibility. This is a pretty drastic decision, surely, and one that should not pass unquestioned, even when commended by Newman's authority. 'From the nature of the case', he

says, 'you cannot have a Christian literature.' Why not? Because 'literature is a study of human nature', and 'it is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless literature of sinful man'. Now that may sound very conclusive, but what exactly does it mean? Let me repeat his argument. Literature is a study of man; but man is sinful; *ergo* (implicitly) literature is a study of sinfulness; *ergo* (explicitly) literature cannot be Christian. The second *ergo* must follow from the first, if it follows from anything. But does it follow? Is it so clear that a study that takes sinful man as its subject-matter cannot be Christian? Then what about moral theology? Or the sermons of Newman himself? It may be answered of course that what Newman meant by 'literature' is precisely a description of sinfulness such that the describer is somehow involved in the sins he describes. Now this may be what he meant; it is not what he said. And if it is what he meant, was he not begging the whole question?

For one can't have it both ways. Either literature is being called Christian or non-Christian simply because of its subject-matter; or it is so called because of something else as well—the belief, or lack of belief, that it presupposes, or the moral categories that it implies, more or less deliberately, or in general its 'spirit'. But if we adopt the former way of speaking, then, surely, whatever adjective we add to 'literature' is not a characterization of literature, as such, at all; for literature, like any art, is not a subject-matter but a form imposed on matter. Hence to say that because of its subject-matter literature cannot be Christian is either to say nothing relevant at all about it, or it is to say that a certain subject-matter (sinful man) is intrinsically so un-Christian that it cannot possibly receive a literary form, be treated in a literary way, that would be in any valid sense Christian. But this again is to beg the question.

The question surely is this: can the subject-matter of literature—which, *concedo*, is sinful man—ever be treated, *in-formed*, in a way that may appropriately be called Christian? And, *pace* Newman, I think it can. And in fact most people, surely, agree that it can. If I call Dante or Langland a Christian writer, or Hopkins or Bernanos, I expect most educated people to accept this description of those writers as one that makes sense, and that makes sense with respect to them as *writers*—to the way they handle their material (sinful man), to them as producers of literature, in short. Is the description to be ruled out of order because Dante says a lot about damnation, Langland about 'gluttony, avarice, etc., Hopkins about his near-despair, Bernanos about heaven knows what iniquities? Is this what Newman's criterion of subject-matter implies? If so, I am the more convinced that that criterion is useless by itself. But as soon as you add, or substitute, the criterion of *form*, you

re-open the whole question; you are back where you began. It should be clear that by 'form', here, I mean *more* than that element in a writer's work which can be analysed as mere technique (rhetoric, in the old and neutral sense of the term). And it is within this extra-technical margin of the form that the Christian character of a writer is to be seen, if it ever can be seen. It will admittedly be hard to see, in particular cases; but often not impossible; and sometimes fairly easy.

One test—when the subject-matter is evil—is a certain *detachment* on the writer's part. Which brings me back (in conclusion) to Dante; for I admit that just in so far as the poet of the *Inferno* does not seem somehow detached from his subject-matter, to that extent the poem does not seem to be Christian. That is why I have insisted on the distinction Dante-protagonist and Dante-poet. If I were to cease to uphold this distinction, I should have to stop calling Dante a Christian poet. But I don't think I need fear.

Please excuse the length of this interjection.

Yours fraternally,

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