Calepin
by Louis Allen

Since the last of these chronicles (*New Blackfriars* June 1967), I should no doubt have been spending my time dutifully reading the Goncourt prize entries, or the latest offering of the *nouveau roman*. I have in fact been doing nothing of the kind. If I were to look for the two most interesting novels recently written in French I would plump unhesitatingly for two quite different books, both by established writers, one experimental in style, the other rigorously traditional. The first is a fascinating exercise in science-fiction by Robert Merle, *Un animal doué de raison* (Gallimard, 1967), the second is Marguerite Yourcenar's *L'Oeuvre au noir* (Gallimard, 1968).

I haven't, either, been doing much in the reading of the fifty-odd books which have appeared on 'the events of May', having a suspicion that more of the ideologies, at any rate, were represented in the graffiti on the walls of the Sorbonne, where plaintive practicalities ('Baby-sitters wanted') mingled with political exhortations and various kinds of contempt for the past ('Dire qu'il y a toujours des chrétiens!').

This is not because I feel there's a good deal of 'I told you so' about the student revolt in Paris and elsewhere, but rather because I believe there is a much more profound revolt going on in the comparatively unnoticed depths of society in the French provinces. The latter-day *chouans* of Brittany are no doubt the most spectacular of these rebels against a hyper-metropolitan government which knows little about their problems and cares less; but there have been manifestations of an aggressive provincial counter-attack in other quarters too, and two books by Robert Lafont give an interesting analysis of this 'Paris versus the provinces' struggle in terms of colonialism. In *La Révolution régionaliste* (Gallimard, 'Idées actuelles', 1967) and *Sur la France* (Gallimard, 'Les Essais', 1968) Lafont describes Paris's attitude to the French provinces as that of a colonizing power towards its colonies. Lafont belongs to the movement to resurrect *occitan*, a southern French language (or dialect, depending on your politics and history) with a not inconsiderable literature of its own (the poet René Nelli is its chief spokesman) and a nostalgia for the days of an independent catharist Provence.

He interprets the desiccation of French provincial life in Marxist terms, as an alienation produced by a form of internal colonialism that has so far been invisible, or rather unanalysed. It is characterized, though, by fairly visible features, of which the first is industrial

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dispossession and a colonizing type of investment by sources which are metropolitan (Parisian or foreign) or quasi-metropolitan (Lyons). *Some* capital is, of course, locally derived, but not in significant proportions. As early as 1825, for instance, the *Compagnie des mines, fonderies et forges d'Alès* was created apparently with a regional base, since a local notability, Baron Reille, was the head of the industry. In fact, the subscribed capital was in large part from outside the Alès area and when it was doubled in 1912 more than half the shares were taken by nine banks, all outside the region. No doubt it may be said that the State Civil Service offers employment to the nation as a whole which is enriched by these procedures, but against this Lafont points out that that is why there are so many Corsicans and 'Occitanians' in the French administration: there is no local outlet for their energies and talents. Even more blatant is the exploitation of the salt industry in the Camargue, often carried out by companies with *external* colonizing interests (*Salins du Midi et de Djibouti* is a company with a significant collocation of titles which has holdings in North Africa, Viet-Nam and South America) who—in order to fix their prices—can and do monopolize the salt output of the entire south of France and neglect some areas of exploitation, e.g. the salt marshes of the Aude *département*, if it suits their purpose, whatever the economic needs of the area.

It also follows that such companies are interested in 'extractive industries' rather than 'industries of transformation', the seeking of wealth *from* a region and utilizing it elsewhere, rather than investing in industry which could profit the region permanently and improve its economic structure. So, for instance, with extra local investment to provide local users, the discovery of gas in the South-west would have transformed the industrial gas consumption of that area. Instead, the gas was piped to Paris and Lorraine for use in already developed areas and to show an immediate profit. The local population which is brought in to construct such installations is laid off as soon as they are completed, and the social structure becomes worse, if possible, than before.

A further effect is the dispossession of agricultural land. There is, says Lafont, a kind of 'pioneer frontier' from the Camargue to the Narbonais which has been exploited, particularly since the end of the last war. A 'rice rush' took place in which nearly all the *mas* of the area changed hands, usually on behalf of industrial interests from Saint Etienne, Roubaix, Lyons, Marseilles, and Alsace-Lorraine, so that by 1951 twelve *mas* in the Camargue monopolized 60 per cent of the irrigated surfaces and provided 50 per cent of the rice-crop. The same is true of the viticulture industry in the Bordeaux area, where Paris banking interests and English and Dutch owners have taken over huge areas of land. Médoc has 21 *sociétés* for wine production, but only five of these are controlled by regional families.

The fourth feature is the dispossession of distribution circuits.

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Local agricultural produce, in Brittany, in Roussillon and in the Rhône Valley, is at the mercy of Parisian middlemen and wholesalers. Even the tourist industry neglects the hinterland of Provence—Aix, Arles, Avignon, Nîmes, Carcassonne, Toulouse—to concentrate on the exploitation of a strip of Mediterranean beach with equipment providable only by metropolitan financial resources.

This economic picture, Lafont points out, is simply a modern version, or the modern result, of an age-old process by which the Parisian or Ile de France area gradually subjugated not 'parts' of its own country, but what were essentially autonomous 'nations', Brittany, Provence, Aquitaine. There is a logical historical link between the Albigensian Crusade and the war in Algeria: both were attempts to reduce independent nations to the status of provinces.

Lafont prefers to think historically not of a unity, France, but a binary Francie/Occitanie, defined by their separate languages, *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc*. The 'ethnie' proper to 'Francie' is the result of the contamination of two cultures, Gallo-roman (a vast Celtic nation had already been subsumed before the Frankish invasions) and German. South of the Loire grew up another mixture, Pyreneans, Ligurians, Gaelic Celts, Greeks and Iberians, so that from the seventh century an urban civilization fanned out from Nice to the Ebro, based on the Mediterranean. He is prepared to make enormous claims for this territory: it is the source of Europe's poetic reflection and moral reflection on love, it revealed to Europe a worldly vision of the soul's destiny, a secular scale of moral values, and religious freedom of conscience. All this was destroyed by the centuries-old Capetian ambition to spread out from the Ile de France, translated into the Albigensian Crusade in the thirteenth century: a successful attempt at the reduction of a people made by the unholy alliance of Philippe Auguste and the Pope, Innocent III, using Simon de Montfort as its tool. The military success of 'Francie' in this venture enlarged its vision, but the relation to its new provinces was to be that of dominant nation and conquered nation. After Languedoc came the turn of Provence (federated with France in 1486 by royal proclamation, then officially annexed in 1547), Brittany under the Valois by the end of the fifteenth century, and Basque country in 1593, and so on—a push to the Rhine under Louis XIV. This well-known sequence of conquests, which is interpreted traditionally by French history text-books as an almost instinctive expansion towards the natural frontiers of the Hexagon, is interpreted by Lafont in terms of imperialist conquest, nations annexed by military victory or diplomatic trickery. These nations, their languages and separate cultures, did not disappear at once, but a slow process of alienation eroded their identities.

In spite of the hesitation one feels occasionally (why is the small national entity preferable to the larger, anyway?), Lafont makes a convincing argument from a complex of dynastic, economic,

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linguistic and literary history which forces the reader to see the 'growth' of France from an utterly unfamiliar angle. One may have uneasy reservations about the *maurrassien* undertones of the distinction between a purely administrative political entity 'France' and the primary ethnic province-nations which constitute it; but the obliteration of fruitful variety which the process of internal colonization carried out is very fully argued and linked convincingly even with the secularist external colonizing ambitions of the Third Republic. It makes us realize that behind the recent participation of Breton priests in the nationalist movement in Brittany lie not merely years of bureaucratic frustration, but centuries of second-class citizenship.

But then what? We can see that Algeria had a case for flinging aside French suzerainty. But are we really expected to want a centrifugal movement in France, similar to that of the Scottish and Welsh nationalists here, by which Brittany, 'Occitanie', and perhaps Alsace, will insist on forms of regional autonomy that have been dead for centuries? It will at least be interesting to see an attempt to replace the student tritheon of Marx, Mao and Marcuse by an even more improbable one of Marx, Maurras and Mistral. . . .

One of the cultural drawbacks of such movements is inevitably the xenophobia they seem to foster—like the anti-semitism of Maurras and the *Action Française*—which, if allowed to run riot, would have lost to France innumerable talents in music, painting and literature. How 'expatriate' the *avant-garde* always seems to be! The soul of it was (and still is, practically) Apollinaire, the ultra-patriotic French product of mixed Polish-Italian parentage, rapidly followed by the Rumanian Jew Tristan Tzara, in whom were focussed the violent desires of post-1918 French and German youth to destroy the civilization which, by its appetite for war, had destroyed *them*. Then there are the two Spaniards who have transformed the world of French painting, Picasso and Dali; and Witold Gombrowicz, the author of the strange *Yvonne, Princesse de Bourgogne*, a Pole who lived for years in the Argentine inventing the theatre of the absurd long before Beckett and Ionesco were heard of; Beckett himself being a Protestant Irishman and so writing astride two cultures and two languages (or three, if Anglo-Irish is considered distinct from English), Ionesco a Rumanian like Tzara; or again, Charles Schéhadé, a Lebanese writing in French (*Histoire de Vasco*), and Arthur Adamov, son of wealthy Russian-Armenian parents, exiled first in the Rhineland and later in Paris, but feverishly committed to the *communard* past of France in *Printemps 71*—'la poésie folle de la Commune de Paris'—and perhaps the most determinedly left-wing revolutionary among Parisian playwrights. There need be no cause for surprise in this, since the characteristic of *avant-garde* art is necessarily the destruction of predecessors, and the criticism of a too stable society comes easily from those whom history has cast in a

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role marginal to it. Adamov's scrappy memoirs and diary jottings, *L'Homme et l'Enfant* (Gallimard, 1968), reveal a vehemently resentful personality, always mindful of his fear of poverty even as a cosseted child when his parents owned 'une bonne partie des pétroles de la Caspienne'. They record in bitter detail the reality of the poverty he has known since, the constant difficulties endured to have his plays performed, and his unremitting whoring, with the nasty extra touch of his mistress ('the Bison' as he calls her) accompanying him on joint expeditions to the streets round Les Halles. One wonders what they made of him in South-west Ireland, on which he descended in 1936 to be taught English by 'Kitty', 'a little hunchbacked girl with pale eyes and a child-like sensual smile, who believes in sirens and goblins'. But there is more in this book than Adamov's immense self-pity. His attempt to rescue Antonin Artaud, for example, from the physical degradation of drugs and madness: 'Artaud, his face shaken by *tics*, ravaged, wrinkled, the toothless mouth from which a thunderous howling suddenly escapes, and we drown in the words.' However refractive Adamov's vision may be, in terms of the people he meets, this book is a fascinating *pot-pourri* of Parisian literary and theatrical gossip, and full of the oddest observations, like Adamov's reminiscences of his schooldays in the French lycée at Mainz in the occupied Rhineland, in which the pupils were nearly all Russians, Jews, Armenians, or Finns, and the French soldiers who were protecting them were Senegalese. Or Eugène Le Moult, the man who gave him the idea for his play *Paolo Paoli*: the son of a clerk in the administration of the Cayenne penal colony (Devil's Island), Le Moult made a fortune out of selling in Europe rare butterflies which the wretched prisoners caught and sold to him for a few pence—some of them, strangely enough, continuing to do so even after they had escaped to Venezuela. And the fear and misery under the German occupation, lit by flashes of savage joy, as when he hears that the infamous Prefect of Police in Paris, Jean Chiappe, has been shot down by the RAF on his way to Syria: 'Chiappe, the friend of Onassis, the harrier of foreigners, I weep tears of joy.'

Not that 'assimilation' does not pose its own agonizing problems. Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche's autobiography *Histoire de ma vie* (Maspéro, 1968) is here very much to the point. As I read through *Histoire de ma vie* I kept wondering what the style reminded me of . . . hard, crisp, factual, unsentimental, and yet full of profound and genuine feeling and an immense gift for carrying the narrative forward. It was with a shock I realized I'd been thinking of Stendhal, and though it may seem ridiculous to make a comparison between the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *La Chartreuse de Parme* and a poor Kabyle woman who only learned to speak and write French as a second language in late childhood, I would stand by it. It derives, among other things, from the horrific nature of some of the events she narrates with a firm storyteller's grasp of narrative thread and an

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unwillingness to gush off into enthusiasm or recrimination, justified as either might be. Before she was born, her father arranged the murder of his brother. When she was an old woman and had lost several children, her husband—a man of eighty—was forced by the French army to stand in the Algerian sun from dawn to sunset during a raid on their village. Both are narrated with the same acceptance of the realities of life which is not fatalistic, because Fadhma is a Catholic and schooled not by fate but by adversity. Partly *from* school: to avoid the fearful bullying of her illegitimate child, which she constantly feared in her own village—she found the child one day covered in prickles, after someone had thrown her into a cactus—Fadhma's mother sent her to the White Sisters at the Ouadhias. Some of the episodes of Fadhma's life with the Sisters are quite hair-raising, and make it difficult to understand how her faith could have survived them: 'From this period of my life', she writes, 'I have retained only the tune of the *Ave Maris Stella*, the image of the lighted chapel, with the priest who officiated and held up the monstrance. (For a long time after I left the Ouadhias, I wondered what that meant.) But I see one frightful image above all: that of a very tiny little girl standing in the corridor against the wall: the child is covered with filth, clothed in a garment made from sack-cloth, with a little bowl full of excreta hanging from her neck. She is crying. A priest comes up to her, and the Sister who is with him explains that the little girl has been naughty, she has thrown her friends' thimbles into the privy, and she has been forced to delve into it to recover them: it is the contents of the privy which cover her body and fill the bowl.'

As a Catholic and so alienated from her Moslem neighbours, as a Kabyle and so alienated from the Arab majority, as an exile in Tunisia and so alienated from the growing Algerian nationalist feeling, as a writer in French and so alienated from the rich poetic language of her childhood which she loved passionately, Fadhma was nonetheless a full and rounded personality, with a sense of ambition (for her children and herself), an accomplishment that derives from a very gifted and very brave mind's conquest over intolerable hardship.

I remember reading once, in *Le Monde* I think it was, an obituary of her son, Jean Amrouche. The writer had passed him on a railway platform without seeing him and Amrouche had come up to him and chaffed, 'So you're not talking to the wogs [*bicots*] any more?'. This was during the Algerian troubles, and Amrouche must have had a secret fear that even his best friends were likely to be over-sensitive about their Algerian contacts—unfounded fears, fortunately. But in my ignorance, not having read any of his early works, I'd never taken it in that Jean Amrouche was a Kabyle and not a *français de la métropole* at all, chiefly because I'd known him through that most magnificent set of tape recordings, the interviews with

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Paul Claudel called *Mémoires improvisés* in which the cantankerous old poet is stimulated and drawn out by Amrouche's loving and profound knowledge of Claudel's poetry and plays to give an unrivalled account of himself. It was a *tour de force* few Frenchmen could have accomplished, and puts to shame the shallow interviewing of our day. But for Jean Amrouche to reach this virtuosity, his mother had had to live the life of struggle and sacrifice which is so splendidly delineated in *Histoire de ma vie*. For some odd reason, it's published by François Maspéro, who has perhaps the most intelligent left-wing list of any French publisher and runs that excellent bookshop near St Séverin. But there would have been some justice in a Catholic publisher issuing it, because this is the account of a Catholic who kept the faith under conditions which would have broken a lesser spirit, and who has a lot to say (or rather imply) about the conditions of true missionary work, and the way the third world looks at the Church.

Vincent Monteil's preface is, it seems to me, unnecessarily concessive in its attempt to understand the intolerance of Fadhma's Muslim neighbours. The Kabyles of the Christian village of Ighil Ali were *m'tûrni* ('renegades') to their Arab and Kabyle neighbours, and it is not surprising that when Fadhma went to Tunis she found the women of the Italian and Sicilian colonies easier to get on with than her veiled Arab sisters whose language she did not understand and who despised her as a 'Roumi' or Roman. Monteil's comment is interesting, from the missionary point of view: 'It would be cowardly on my part', he writes, 'to try and dodge at this point the painful problem of the Christian Kabyles, of whom there are still several hundreds, and to whom Fadhma Amrouche, her husband and children belong. These conversions, against a background which is traditionally Muslim, could only be a source of insoluble conflicts, misunderstanding, sufferings and humiliations. It's not a matter of knowing if a religion is "good" in itself, or even "better" than another: put in this way, the question is meaningless. But it is a matter of appreciating whether the present state of a given society permits it to welcome foreign ferments without the risk of losing its identity, without unbearable tension. Now, it is a fact that even today the real structures of North African Islam do not tolerate ('supportent') those who are termed renegades ("m'turni"). The Christian Kabyle in particular is ill at ease, barely tolerated, and feels himself torn between contradictory fidelities. If one is a Catholic oneself, one may regret this, but it is a fact of experience. Fadhma Amrouche's book is full of these difficulties, and an effort of adaptation, a compromise, must be seen in the Amrouche family custom of giving children a double first name, Christian and Muslim.'

This 'realist' argument would support the immobility of any monolithic society, and it seems sociologically attractive; but it can't be a basis for looking at religion, since it is only concerned with the

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'given', with the sociological equivalent of what is termed by realists in politics 'le sens du possible'. But the whole point of any transcendental religion is surely that 'le sens du possible' is inadequate, and Fadhma Amrouche's book, behind the screen of suffering and tragedy, does bear witness to the stubbornness of the human will in conquering the impositions of a monolithic society. She is quite aware of her position and the causes of it: 'I had always remained 'the Kabyle'. In spite of the forty years I lived in Tunisia, in spite of my basically French education, I have never been able to bind myself closely either to the French or to the Arabs. I remained, always, the eternal exile, the one who has never been at home anywhere. Today more than ever I aspire to be at last at home, in my village, among those of my race, those who speak the same language, have the same mentality, the same frank, open, but superstitious soul, who thirst for freedom and independence: the soul of Jugurtha!'

Lastly a look at *Tête dure* (Seuil, 1969). One might be tempted to call Marc Oraison the 'stormy petrel' of the French clergy, save that the competition is so keen. But he is a very special type of priest, with a varied and eventful background and a profound mistrust of two things, clergification and mystification, which makes him a very attractive personality. For one thing, before becoming a priest he had a career as a doctor with the usual 'hearty' medical school initiations which always ended up in the local brothel. And it's a pity he feels constrained to add, 'only to drink beer'. The omission of the phrase would have given already doubting heads all the confirmation they require. . . . He seems to have been the life and soul of Bordeaux social life in the years just before the war, when his baritone provided a reason for promoting light opera in the area (a taste he's never lost). He's also served in the French army, first hanging around France rather frustratedly in those curiously expectant months just after the Liberation, and then acting as a surgeon in Indo-China. (I have no recollection of meeting him then, but I suspect we ran across each other in Saigon several times.)

The interesting thing about his autobiography is that it shows clearly that Oraison's priestly vocation, about which I had often wondered, was not an aberration from a career which should have remained in medicine, but derived directly from it. There is an almost Claudelian account (consciously so, I think, since Claudel had been one of the great literary and dramatic experiences of Oraison's youth) of midnight Mass at Christmas 1941 when Oraison was singing in the choir of his parish church and felt, in a moment incapable of analysis, that he should leave medicine and make Christ his central preoccupation. 'The formulation I give is ridiculously approximate, if not inadequate; but at bottom that's what the issue was.' Basically, what had happened was the doctor's constant confrontation with the fact of death: 'the powerlessness of surgery to resolve the problem of death had brought me to a desire

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to "say Mass", i.e. to make the Resurrection present.' He was not sure of the modality of his priesthood, and thought at first of the total sacrifice involved in becoming a Carthusian, but was put off by the ridiculous ritual of the special Carthusian sign of the cross when he spent some wintry days at the Grande Chartreuse to try his vocation, an unfavourable impression increased by the recommended reading of Catherine Emmerich, which appalled him. The Dominicans were next on the list, and he tried a week at the Toulouse novitiate. His spiritual adviser had been a Dominican, and he admits the rather elementary role of identification in his choice, plus the thought of remaining in contact with an intellectual and university élite; 'and then, the white robe, there's something dashing about it, don't you think?' But the puerile aspect of the novitiate oppressed him, and in spite of the excellent reading that was put in his way, and the revelation of Revelation that he suddenly had after a reading of Daniel Rops' *Le Peuple de la Bible*, he felt he didn't fit in, that the 'house style' was not his, and that there was something vaguely unacceptable about the idea of obedience. He conformed, but his heart wasn't in it. There were memorable episodes, of course. In 1942, when food was hard to get, the prior summoned him after lunch one day, and asked him if, given his medical background, he felt up to dismembering a calf the prior had come by clandestinely. It would have to be done quietly, so as not to alarm the Toulouse residents by terrified mooings in the early evening. . . . Fortunately there was a butcher's son among the postulants who did the actual killing in the basement, after which Oraison brought his knowledge of anatomy into play. The piquancy of the episode was enhanced, he felt, when he learned later that the animal had been provided by the Toulouse School of Agriculture which was run by the Jesuits: 'Old theological disputes don't endure in the face of hunger. . . .'

Finally he ended up as a secular attending courses at the Institut Catholique in Paris, living in the *séminaire des Carmes* in the Rue d'Assas. Predictably, what he calls the military infantilism of seminary life irked him immensely, the permission to be sought before getting a haircut or having a shower, the weekly walk in groups of three, made up by the Superior, with the threat of spiritual punishments almost worthy of a mortal sin for those who strayed from the prescribed boulevards—'as important as the Mass' the Superior declared. So much for 'sulpicianism' with its limited view of the nature of the Church: for this Superior, the Church seemed to begin with St Francis de Sales and end with Bossuet.

He was, as it happens, lucky with his *curé* in the first days of his post-war priesthood. An ex-doctor like himself, the abbé Lancrenon helped Oraison in his new orientation towards psychoanalysis, and stood by him when his book on the relation between Christian teaching and the sexual life was put on the Index. And he was in

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demand as a preacher, being asked for one Easter in Guadeloupe, of all places, where he also carried out a difficult genito-urinary operation at the request of a local doctor who came to see him off at the airport and replied, when asked how the patient was getting on, 'Oh, Father, he's pissing as well as any Doctor of the Church!'

There are the usual conflicts with Rome, a hair-raising interview in 1953 with Cardinals Ottaviani and Pizzardo, the outraged reactions of integrist reviews like *La Pensée Catholique* which declared that Fr Oraison should be flogged twice over 'for having introduced into the cloisters of consecrated virginity the infamous stench of his hidden pansexuality . . .' and much more in the same vein. Then, at the request of a harassed friend, years of work with the teddy-boys of Paris, a fruitful field of activity for one who, like Oraison, had consciously opted for celibacy and the solitude it brings with it, as a quite tolerable reality when one finds one's personal fulfilment (*épanouissement* is the word he uses) in an activity 'which has a meaning of its own in true relations of friendship and in the mysterious perception of someone who listens to every word, even the most secret', although it is limiting, and excludes a 'vital expression' of creating other human beings. More than frustrated sexuality, this 'paternal fibre' is what seems to him, at the age of forty-five, to be the greatest deprivation of a man vowed to the celibate life; on the other hand he personally bears witness that celibacy is not an inhuman condition for a priest, and is explained and justified by many reasons, practical, psychological, and spiritual, provided that it is freely chosen at the termination of a psychological development which sheds the fullest possible light on the various motivations of that choice.

None of this has shaken his faith, though he does, half-amusedly, say that when he came out of the Ottaviani interview into St Peter's Square he felt that St Peter's solidity did 'oscillate' for a quarter of an hour, after which he dismissed his reaction by reminding himself he had not after all been listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. In fact, as a result of the particular branch of medicine which he has explored during his priestly life—psychoanalysis—he has found his faith immensely deepened: 'Everything I've lived through in the past twenty years has made me question a great number of things. In all lucidity and frankness, I can say that my faith in Christ and the Church—in the real sense of that word—has been progressively lightened of many dubious elements, and singularly deepened, in a way that I hardly dare speak of, so much does it transcend language.' Language is the key to the renewed appeal of the Church, too, and her language must change. Contrary to what most people think, says Oraison, 'modern culture which appears to be atheistic, contains an immense appeal, a tragic interrogation even, towards a Love which goes beyond time, illusions, and death. Towards Christ.' *April, 1969*

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