

COMMENTARY

THEN AND NOW. In an essay describing an imaginary London literary party, Mr Cyril Connolly asks, 'Why is Mr Dylan Thomas still the youngest person present? Where are the under thirties?' The mood of considered pessimism which brought *Horizon* to an end ('from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair') is scarcely one the Christian can share: the absence of the artist is not the final disaster. But if one considers the situation of the writer who is a Catholic, the question must be, 'Where are the under fifties?' There is hardly a Catholic using the English language for purposes other than commerce or controversy who had not already said all that he had to say fifteen or twenty years ago. We have, it is true, the celebrated novelists, and the refinements of casuistry have reached a public far wider than the moral theologians ever imagined. But the very success of the 'Catholic novelists' can obscure our real penury of serious critical writing. The theologians and the philosophers are, for the most part, engaged in their technical work: the gap between the expert and the world beyond his library is never easy to fill. There is plenty of journalism, but even here the names are never new.

It is salutary—to speak only of this review—to be reminded of what seemed possible thirty-three years ago, and the recollections of the first editor of BLACKFRIARS in this issue provide the matter for an examination of conscience. A review should be the testing ground for the serious writer; his work demands the discipline of trial, and even the risk of error. There are many names among the contributors to this review who have never been heard of again; there are a few whose fame has grown (and they have since been often heard of elsewhere). That is as it should be, but there is no room for complacency in the present serious lack of writing which is Christian in inspiration and adult in achievement.

It may be said that the issues were simpler in the twenties. Certainly confidence is not wanting in the optimistic analyses of those years. There has since then been a war of para-

lysing consequence to the Christian, and the writer's responsibility is immense within a context so tragic and so obscure. But the very depth of our disenchantment is the challenge the serious artist needs, especially so if his writing is not an aesthetic extra (it might have been ballet or the private verse of a group) but an attempt to interpret the need of his time. The dimensions of Christian hope are, for the writer not least of men, the corrective to a fashionable pessimism: *De Profundis* is never a dated theme.

But what can we look for in 1953, when the profession of letters is the most difficult of trades; when, nevertheless, the opportunities for the Christian writer were never so many? To begin with, the handful of independent reviews which exist to serve the serious writer have a claim for a support which they are far from receiving. The writers, in their turn, must believe that their doubts and fears do not disqualify them from being heard. (And here one might reasonably expect the Catholic weekly papers, with their comfortable circulations, and—one supposes—their capacity to pay, to do much more to stimulate young writers, for whom three guineas in the hand is worth any amount of unspecified good will.) And the amateurism of so much 'Catholic writing' deserves to be disowned. The public figure or the priest is not necessarily, or even usually, endowed with charismata of precision or style.

If it matters that there should be an intelligent Catholic scrutiny of the world in which we live, if we believe that the truth of Christ was never so necessary as now, fulfilling the unconscious longings of the millions who seem without hope, then the vocation of the writer who has faith is of the highest importance. We expect him to have confidence, and he expects us to be willing to hear. During the last few months, the editor of this review has had the pleasure of meeting many of its friends (who are often also its critics). In London, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Cambridge and Oxford, informal gatherings of BLACKFRIARS contributors have revealed a lively interest in what a review such as ours should be trying to achieve. But a review is not a one-way street: it caters for every sort of traffic, and in the end the passengers pay!