

## MODERN CATHOLIC LITERATURE

WE usually confine our reading to books upon subjects in which we are interested, but this is a mistake. It is often more repaying to read a good book on a new subject about which one does not care two straws than a poor one on a subject in which our interests are already engaged. One may come to care about the new one. If the proverb *L'appetit vient en mangeant* is true of the pleasures of the table, it is still more true of the pleasures of reading. We can become interested in almost anything once we begin to know something about it. Teak and hard-wood trees, Roman pottery, the Man in the Iron Mask, the history of the fork, the habits of earwigs, the trade routes of the Phoenicians, are subjects which, though they seem to appeal to different tastes, may end by interesting the same person, once he or she has taken the preliminary plunge. We do not profit half enough by the flexibility of our interests; if we did, we should not so often find ourselves complaining in a library crammed with books that we can find nothing to read.

Should sailors in books talk like sailors or like parrots? (I exclude, of course, parrots that have lived with sailors.) The question may appear frivolous: it comprises, I believe, one of the central problems of criticism. It is not necessary that an author should make his characters talk as they would talk in real life: it is entirely necessary that he should make us believe they are talking as they would talk in real life. Consider the difference in technique, in this matter, between Meredith and Hardy. Nobody ever used the language that Meredith's creatures use, any more than Macbeth or Lear (if any) spoke in Elizabethan blank verse: but Meredith, like Shakespeare, bodied forth a solid, organically inter-related, self-supporting world, in which the speech seemed natural because it was of one nature with the setting. Hardy never troubles about consistency. He was content, in a naturalistic setting, to put the clumsiest literary circumlocutions into the mouths of people who

could never have uttered them (indeed nobody could ever have uttered them)—and trust to his genius to get away with it.

Truth exists in a certain frame of time and circumstance, not in facts baldly stated. The honest qualification, the discreet admission can only be dangerous in the sense that everything in the world may be accidentally dangerous to the illusioned or the purely emotional reader. The abstractions of science have been the blame cause of cults of immorality, and ascetic virtues have shocked the libertine, not because the thing itself or the symbol is evil, but because neither of them has been properly understood. It is the same false reasoning which causes the child to blush at the Bible, the mother to protest the exposure of the pious lie, and the reader to see the culture of Catholicism only in the pale glimmer of candles. The evils of sane realism are not to be found in the book, but in the deficiencies of the sheltered life. Strong writing, like strong wine, is an excellent stimulant, provided we have a tolerance for it.

Art—in spite of all theories to the contrary—remains a form of making, not of destruction. To reduce thought to amoebic hiccoughs and emotion to a series of unrelated spasms, has its value in clearing the writer's mind of false prejudices and sentiments. But so far nothing has been done but to pull down the old house and clear a space for the new. We should not regard it as an architectural triumph if a new and greater Sir Christopher pulled down St. Paul's and then asked us to find his new and lovelier edifice in the rubble and the gaping holes left in the ground. If we had any courage, we should tell the king that he was naked. Mr. MacCarthy has the courage to inform the young that letters, stripped of life, is naked.

Romance, excitement, a good story—these things in fiction are never old-fashioned; and if they are dull it is because they are what they are. Similarly in biography—criticism is apt to fasten delightedly on books which make fools of their subject, but to treat solid and would-be impartial work with the reserved respect which implies that, though worthy, it is tedious.

That so many of our present-day peewits, pondewits, or pundits should have soared into senselessness is certainly deplorable. The explanation is the war. The war made philosophy a stringent necessary of life; which was upsetting, because, of all people in the world, the English like to take philosophy for granted, acting upon it without any protrusion of principle, content to call it common sense. So much common sense was wanted all of a sudden after the war that the bank stopped payment; and in every branch of business hawkers of nostrums began to show their wares. Why the same people should believe in communism politically, in individualism artistically, is a problem; but the trend has been unmistakable. In a mad world, original writers began to think they had only one thing to rely on, their immediate sensations, their aesthetic self. It was a catastrophe for literature; for literature is communication idealised; poetry is the art of ideal communication in its most purified, most comprehensive form.

How one should read in preparation for becoming a writer is the other question. There are two methods, and both of them would be followed. The first method is that of reading quickly; the second, that of reading slowly. The best advice that I know of is that of following the method that seems, at the moment, the most attractive. There is an art, that is most valuable and helpful, of skipping and skimming. There is a great joy and a gusto in racing through a book at a gallop. Some writers demand that their readers follow them at a breakneck pace. There is another art, however, in reading slowly and reflectively, in analyzing and studying the word and the phrase, in sipping the book and inhaling the aroma of it. Whoever is learning to write through the literary education of books, must read in the manner the spirit moves him. He gets most out of a book who follows the tempo of the author.

Many literatures have classic writers poles apart; Homer and Demosthenes centuries apart in the Greek, and likewise for Dante and Manzoni in the Italian. As to early English classics, Edward Hutton in a *London Tablet* article, April 22, 1933, tells us of "truly amazing works done in poetry

and prose in Old and Middle English before Chaucer," and then goes on to remind us of

the exquisite and magical lyrics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the beginnings of the drama in the Mystery, the Miracle Play, and the Interlude, the unnumberable and lovely ballads, before the catastrophe of the sixteenth century. . . . It was the Catholic poets of Catholic England who first taught our English tongue to sing, revealed the music hidden in it, and gave us long before England lost the Faith, some of the greatest and loveliest poems. "Summer is i-cumen in" is not the work of any Protestant. "Betueyne Mershe and Everil" . . . "Blow northerne wynd" . . . "Lenten ys come with love to toune" . . . I name a few of the better-known lyrics of the time at random—were all written by Catholics. Such an exquisite thing as the well-known

I sing of a maiden  
That is makeless.  
King of all Kings  
To her son she ches . . .

Could any but a Catholic poet have divined such a thing?

The selection of a biographer for a prominent man lately deceased becomes more and more difficult as time goes on. The public and a host of friends demand a portrait of the figure so lately admired and so widely misunderstood. But that very eagerness is itself a snare, and the eminent personage runs the risk, even a greater risk as the volubility of the printing press increases, of being presented falsely, and yet, finally, beyond all redemption of character.

A novelist does not always write the way he wishes. He writes, as Somerset Maugham says, the best way he can. Whether he is to be a modern Dickens or Thackeray is determined largely by the literature and the emotions which have subtly marked his character. No man can really predict his own style; indeed his finished story is as frequently surprising to himself as it is to his skeptical friend. But the theme of his story, the matters he writes about, are and should be the result of conscious choice. He must know his characters; he must be familiar, at least in a general way, with the actions and the scenes he describes. Since he is using a form which is specifically concerned with the particular, it is obvious that he must be equipped with more than a sense of reality, and if he proposes to treat real events,

as nine out of ten modern authors do, he is forced to write about the things and the people he knows best.

The primacy of the spiritual in literature, as in everything else, is essential to the Catholic philosophy of life. It calls for general principles governing life and particular principles governing the embodiment of life in art. In addition, a critic should possess insight to interpret, sympathy to appreciate, and power to set forth his views in language. The Catholic outlook on life and man is that we obtain from reading the Gospels, an outlook most certainly based on the primacy of the spiritual; looking, as Christ did, for the best in human nature, without attempting to blink the darker shadows or the black tragedy of sin. The neo-scholastic renaissance is forging all the philosophical weapons the most exacting critic could desire. Catholic education should supply the fundamentals of style, and contact with modern life should suggest the most interesting mode of presentation.

As for the "flood of new knowledge," it is as well to realize that much of this is largely speculative, and may prove ephemeral. The beaches of time are strewn with the wreckage of once-proud scientific theories, that sailed away gallantly enough, and held the sea for a season: phlogiston, Huxley's bathybius, the four humours, even the Euclidean geometry which seemed a trim enough vessel. What security have we that Freud and Jeans may not be completely outdistanced, before very long, and their hypotheses discredited? But, even apart from this possibility, how many of our modern poets feel themselves to be equipped to take all knowledge for their province, in the manner of a Leonardo or a Bacon? Would not they do better to recognize (says our hypothetical traditionalist) that the scientific and poetic approaches to reality are fundamentally distinct, if not mutually hostile—and to leave "the direct processes and workings of the human nervous system" to the neurologists and the psychologists? The fifth "stone of stumbling" for the unfaithful—absence of logical progression and sequence—is less easy to dispose of theoretically: it can be judged only by its results. Upholders of tradition may still doubt whether the results attained by the new method

of "free association" justify the removal of the obligation, hitherto imposed on the artist, to relate and organize, in a word, to "fuse," the disparate elements of his art into a continuous unity.

To effect a rapprochement between the Catholic realist and the modern reader a great deal of education is necessary. The reading public which will ultimately accept or reject the novelist must be shown that the realist is not necessarily a cynic or a despiser of tradition. He may simply be an honest man who sees not only the essentially true thing but also the possibility of showing truth more artistically by contrast. The tradition of Catholicism itself, its philosophy, its drama and pageantry is a realistic one. The distrust of the average Catholic in the picture which is not black and white, his resentment of unfavourable criticism of himself, however well deserved, are peculiarly American reactions occasioned by his well-founded doubt of the tolerance of authors in general. He has been served so much slanderous hash that he sniffs suspiciously at all seasoning, and he has learned to trust only the straightforward and simple menu of virtue rewarded. It is sheer nonsense, however, to insist that a Catholic politician or business man should always be wearing a painted halo, or that because a man goes to church on page ten he is for ever freed from the imputation of hypocrisy. To develop a powerful Catholic literature will impress materialism with the utter reality of spiritual forces, with the efficacy of grace in individual and social life, with the fierce energy of dogmas, it is vitally necessary to represent men and things, not as shadows or fictions, but as living facts.

On the one hand is the Greek genius, with its intangible potency, laden with suggestions and anticipations, displaying before our eyes everywhere dazzling "images of perfection"; as regards modern life, in thought, art, and conduct remote and unkin, yet seemingly sometimes "closer than breathing and nearer than hands or feet"; an external and foreign stimulus which yet seems in some strange way to act on us from within. On the other hand is Latin, bone of our bone, the foundation on which our life is built; it was the

Latin architects who civilized life and passed on the civilization they had made, who

Brought the work by wondrous art  
Pontifical, a ridge of pendent rock,  
Over the vext abyss.

Because Catholic literature proceeds from the souls of men whose faith enables their vision to pierce the stars, it is the most complete literature of man. Catholic writers have the only true view concerning this life: they see it as a training ground for a life incomparably greater. They know why man is, and for what he is destined; and in their writings they present the progress of man toward that end, his aberrations, his falls and his resurrections. They write a literature not of pagan man, man as a slave of the earth, but of man the master, man redeemed and lifted to a supernatural life.

Because Catholic literature is the most complete literature of man, it is at least potentially the greatest of all literature. Surely it is the most artistic, for it is the expression of man in all his essential relationships, not merely the relations between man and man, but the relations between man and God, of which all other relations are vicarious replicas. Catholic literature is the expression of Catholic life, than which *no* life is richer.

Under the head of discovering the Church one other influence, the power of writer over writer, must not be forgotten. The effect of others' style upon Stevenson is described in every rhetoric text. Newman dreamed of the cadences of Gibbon and revelled in the rhythms of Cicero. The superiority of the pen over the sword may be expounded with platitudinous erudition in collegiate debates; nevertheless, it is vitally interesting to note that many besides St. Augustine have unlocked a magic casement opening upon eternity by picking up a book and reading it. *Tolle et lege* is the mental undertone of these conversions.

Books are powerful for good or for evil; the Bible and the Index emphasize this double character of the printed word. Infidel pens may drip with poison; yet the logic of a convinced mind, the persuasion of a satisfied heart, the

attraction of a skilful pen are things of might, reflecting the brilliance of St. Michael's shield and echoing the archangelic shout of triumph. The style in spiritual autobiography set by St. Augustine's "Confessions" has been widely imitated in our day. In addition to Newman's "Apologia," there are Chesterton's "Orthodoxy," Ronald Knox's "Spiritual Aeneid," Benson's "Confessions of a Convert," Jørgensen's "Autobiography," Psichari's "Voyage du centurion" . . . Mirroring the journeyings of souls to the Catholic Faith, recounting the discoveries in the new land, describing the tranquil beauties shining upon those who kneel before the Child of Bethlehem, such books kindle a star in the East for many a searcher.

Newman describes Catholic literature as the "works of Catholics," and his "Protestant literature" must be accepted in a corresponding sense as the works of Protestants. Here is a second point of contention with Cardinal Newman. He seems to disregard too many authors who were Catholic, and he also passes over the fact that Protestant authors received much from Catholic tradition and culture. Indeed, the "works of Catholics" and the "works of Protestants" are not adequate divisions, as is easily demonstrated by two simple examples. Oscar Wilde was a Catholic, but his works are not Catholic literature; Wordsworth was a Protestant, yet his immortal words on the Blessed Mother are the most famous in the language.

How then may English literature be classified? It is neither Catholic nor Protestant; some of it is imbued with the Catholic tradition of spirituality and gladness, and some of it is encased in Protestant smugness and Puritanism; some of it is frequent and sympathetic in reference to things Catholic, and some of it strikes, malignantly or otherwise, at Rome and what Rome represents. But there is also a great body of "neutral" literature; wavering between the two great bodies of Christianity, as Ben Jonson and Ruskin; opposing all religion, as Shelley, the atheist, and Swinburne, the pagan; ignoring religion, as possibly Keats and Joseph Conrad.

Next to this trained theologian, however, literary people



have the best opportunity to delve deeply into the atmosphere of religion. The fumes of the test tube obscure at times the spiritual insight of the scientist; legal distinctions distract the lawyer from the supernatural; the day labourer's interest in ultimates is too often dulled by sheer physical weariness. The man on the street is generally forced to take at their face value the facts of existence: life, love, faith, evil, hatred, pleasure, pain, success, failure. He is too busy living to think analytically about life; too busy struggling or believing to philosophize over the passions shaking his will or the gusts of emotion sweeping over his spirit.

It is argued that the "manner" of a Catholic is essentially different from the "manner" of another man. By "manner" is meant more than a way of conducting oneself, of acting in such a way under certain circumstances. Manner, to them and to us, means the expression of a creed and a philosophy, the externalization of the inner man. They say, then, that a Catholic's philosophy is different from that of other men. In this, with the proper distinctions, we agree. But in many cases, even those of some Catholic critics, we would have reason to suspect that the party with whom we agreed could not tell us exactly to what we had agreed.

The court of final appeal is the taste of the educated gentleman; and further that the literary taste of such a one is congruous with his character. It is not some specialized and detached faculty, such as might be employed in one of the sciences, but rather an expression of the total nature of such a man. Behind it all is the notion that underlies the designation of the famous Oxford school: *literae humaniores*.

The Romeward journeying of outstanding literary personages has occasioned varied reactions. While these new members are received with thankful hope by Catholics, not a few among secular literary circles indulge in puzzled and rueful headshaking at such evident talent hiding itself beneath a bushel of Papist superstitions. Some, with an instinct born of prejudice, would even deny the existence of the talent. Confirmed bohemians these, apostles of a good time,

pluming themselves complacently for their own courageous ability to remain jolly pagans.

Any fair-minded critic, however, despite the over-zealous encomiums of friends and the intentional slurs of foes, will hesitate before he labels mediocre a group numbering Alice Meynell, G. K. Chesterton, Alfred Noyes, Sigrid Undset, Philip Gibbs, Compton Mackenzie, Giovanni Papini, Shiela Kaye-Smith, Jacques Maritain, Paul Claudel, Ronald Knox, Christopher Dawson, Bruce Marshall, Christopher Hollis, Claude Williamson, J. A. Cronin, and Hilaire Belloc.

It is not so much the matter of a book that counts; it is the manner of the man who writes the book. As an artist, the novelist, Catholic or otherwise, must write of immorality or vice, because vice is found in human existence. But he must not confine himself to vice, for virtue is also found in human life. He must write of them both, and he must write of them in such a way as will show their true value: the glory and the praiseworthiness of virtue, the ignominy of vice. And in so writing the Catholic author writes as a man as well as a Catholic, for his rational human nature provides him with the truth. A Catholic writer has an even wider field of subject matter. What really matters is the manner of the artist. Does he write in such a way that the Creator of the universe, leaning out like the Blessed Damozel from the gold bar of Heaven, can recognize in that man's production a true picture of His handiwork? If he presents such a picture, if he accepts the material which nature so bountifully proffers him, and if he perfects that material by the magic of his art, your writer has the manner of a true artist.

The favourite definition of a novel offered by histories of literature is the phrase: "a panorama of life." The meaning of the definition should be clear from what has been said. What is of interest, though, is the fact that very few of our modern so-called novels are novels at all, according to this definition. They are not "panoramas of life." They are not panoramas of anything, but are a one-sided presentation of what passes for life among the moderns. The novelist of to-day, with his good eye on the best seller of yesterday as a model, seeks with the other eye enough instances of

abnormality to fill the required number of pages. His panorama is about as wide as a keyhole. And this is precisely why modern fiction is so patently inartistic.

Style "is the choice and arrangement of language, with only a subordinate regard to the meaning to be conveyed"; and, in so far as literature can claim to be a fine art, the question of style must always be the determining arbiter of merit. Style, therefore, is aristocratic; the very bond, indeed, of the aristocratic virtues, for it demands restraint, discipline, and taste. To-day the tendency of the time is altogether away from aristocratic checks and balances; it make for democracy, and licence. Yet, essential as style must be to the art of writing, the desire to manifest it has often proved the pitfall of the conscientious. Because every great writer has been known by a "cachet," it is the natural ambition of the tyro to develop a "cachet" of his own, with the result that self-consciousness and pose soon stifle sincerity. Even masters of their craft have not been exempt from the failing. The richly-coloured decoration of Ruskin, and the playful irony of Matthew Arnold, are continually on the razor-edge of affectation. Swinburne "forgets that figures and language allowable in poetry are not also allowable in prose"; and Green wastes his unquestionable eloquence on disproportioned passages of diffuse rhetoric. Prose, in fact, is a much more difficult medium than poetry, and yet there is a popular delusion that anyone can write prose who has his facts at his disposal and his argument in order. On the contrary, the English language abounds in flawless poetry, while its passages of flawless prose could be collected within the limits of a fairly modest anthology.

Two schools of criticism give us special cause for wonder: the school that seems to seek for the Catholic writer greater restrictions than actually exist, and the school that admits lesser restrictions, but offers them as excuse for the poverty of Catholic literature.

Both these schools have something of the radical element in them. One attempts to choke art in the meshes of an arbitrary and abnormally developed moral code; the other attempts the same thing by the less courageous method of

overlooking the truth instead of enlarging upon it. Both schools, however, seem to agree in this, that the manner of a Catholic cannot be the manner of an artist, for the Catholic has too many restrictions dangling from his pen, too many "don'ts" to obey, too many dogmatic prohibitions to observe.

The biographer's business, Guedalla maintains, is not to be complimentary, but to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them. His understanding may not be complete or entirely just, but it is a coherent interpretation; and it is safe to say that no one could read Strachey's studies without deriving an insight into the spirit of the last century such as the utmost dry-as-dust research could never supply. To the explorer of the past, he recommends the method of the scientist in surveying some ocean-bed.

He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen from these far depths to be examined with careful curiosity.

It is often assumed that Higher Criticism has damaged the character as well as changing the dates of the Old Testament Books. But there could be no greater mistake. The debt that the English people, in particular, owe to this literature is incalculable. Mr. De la Mare is convinced of this. In a beautiful passage he insists that:

All that man is or feels or (in what concerns him closely) thinks; all that he loves or fears or delights in, grieves for, desires and aspires to is to be found in it [the Old Testament] either expressed or implied. As for beauty, though this was not its aim, and the word is not often used in it—it is "excellent in beauty," and poetry dwells in it as light dwells upon a mountain and on the moss in the crevices of its rocks. In what other book—by mere mention of them—are even natural objects made in the imagination so whole and fair; its stars, its well-springs, its war-horse, its almond-tree?

FELIX HOPE.