

the scrutiny of the routines of life. But the imagination is also an apt vehicle for the exploration of the unexpected and for the grace to see beyond the boundaries of everyday life.

Perhaps the ultimate value of this study is the way it seeks to find in the films of Rohmer moments of grace emerging in the ordinary, in unpropitious cultural times, persons and circumstances that affirm the extraordinary. The study is highly suggestive, credible and alert to many theological possibilities that are ripe for exploration in other settings, perhaps in relation to the study of other directors for whom the operations of grace yield other intriguing prospects.

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**THE BODY OF THIS by Andrew McNabb *Warren Machine Company*, 2008, pp. 176, £18.50**

What first brought this book the way of *New Blackfriars* is the fact that the author is a great-grandnephew of Vincent McNabb OP, who was a regular contributor to *Blackfriars* in its early years and a key figure in the Ditchling experiment centred on Eric Gill, Hilary Pepler, David Jones and others. In this collection of short stories (some of them very short, no more than a few hundred words), Andrew McNabb shows the influence of that aspiration to an 'earthy Catholicism', seeking to locate the spiritual in the physical, not alongside it, or in the neighbourhood, but simply identified with it.

The collection, as the title suggests, centres on bodies, human bodies in their various functions, relationships and ages, but also the bodies of buildings (which 'evolve' and 'breathe'), and the natural body of the created world. The tensions these stories recount (and generate in the reader) include those between the natural and the artificial, between being young and being old, being healthy and being sick, being rich and being poor, belonging to small city America (the stories are set in Portland, Maine) and not belonging there because one is a foreigner, is crippled, or is socially inept.

Near the centre of the book is a story entitled 'Herbert Wenkel Was Not Your Average Man'. Herbert laments modernity and is obsessed with a 'New World Order'. He feels better suited for medieval times. So he reads Chesterton and Belloc and convinces his wife that they should try to put these men's writings into practice. He takes his family off to northern Maine to live out the Distributist vision. He is happy among the spades and the hoes, with the seeds sinking into the rich dark earth, but the experiment does not last long as it proves impossible for them to escape the limitations, corruptions and requirements of modern life. Faced with a move from comfortable farming to subsistence living his wife finally says no. 'We're too normal, too average' she says, 'and if you want to be closer to God, do it on your own time'. So they return to enjoy the fruits of modernity, Herbert accepting that 'total devotion' is not possible in the capitalistic system, 'at least not when you've got kids'. The best he can do is garden at the weekends, 'waiting for a bit of that certain something he may never know'. In an earlier story the narrator concluded that 'no one can do everything unconventionally... you have to figure out how to fit into the system, at least a little bit'.

There is this poignancy in many of the stories, of something incomplete and unfinished, with aspirations and desires recognized but never satisfactorily fulfilled. Some of the shorter pieces are more like poems than stories. There is hardly time for plot or character to be filled out but they still, perhaps because of this, pack a punch. Some of the longer stories (and even these are just a dozen pages or so) do fill out plot and character very effectively. One is reminded at

times of Flannery O'Connor who must haunt any writer like McNabb who seeks to present himself as an American Catholic author.

If some pieces are like poems, others are like paintings. This is particularly true of a story that invites the reader to zoom in from a great height on the natural beauties of Maine, to find the city between the mountains and the sea, zooming in further to the place where the narrator lives, his district, his street, his 'compartment' as he calls it. There one meets his neighbours and is introduced to the colours and smells of his functional and utilitarian 'compartment block'. The couple whose bodies are tattooed and pierced with metal are 'the architects of their own structures' and live in a way that is (are we meant to be surprised?) quiet and hushed. One woman has lived here for years, unable to imagine not being contained by these walls and floors, another is still young and will soon be on her way to a more respectable part of town. We are invited then to zoom out again, to gaze on a completely different landscape. Here are people living in little boxes surrounded by a world of great natural beauty, relating and reacting to their environment in different ways, but puzzled as to how they can penetrate and be one with that environment. Human architecture is beautiful but does violence in different ways, bodies attract but decay, life itself, as one character puts it, is 'a beautiful but confusing experience'.

The early stories in the collection are the most 'erotic', if erotic is the correct word. They are physical, and concern the sexual parts and functioning of human bodies, but they are more likely to shock and even repulse than they are to attract or titillate. Some readers might be tempted not to persevere through these, short as they are, but it is well worth doing so. Catholicism is a presence in many of the stories, linked with people's awareness of their bodies. It would be too much to claim that there is any 'theology of the body' operating here: the Eucharist would have to figure in its theological meaning for that to be the case. But there is here a frank realism about human bodies and a compassionate acceptance of human desires and failure. In this these stories belong to the quest for an earthy Catholicism, an appropriation in art and literature of the great central truth that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

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