

A NEW CATHOLIC GENIUS

'WITH *Uriel*: a hymn in praise of Divine Immanence,' said *The Times* on July 28th, 1933, 'Mr. W. Force Stead takes his place among the foremost of to-day's poets. *Uriel* may be called a philosophical poem, but it springs radiantly lyrical from an immediacy of experience. There is abundant testimony both to faith and to poetry in this lovely work.'

On August 17th, 1933, Mr. Stead was received into the Catholic Church. The week before he had resigned his post as Chaplain and Fellow of Worcester College. For three years he had been the only American to hold a Fellowship in Oxford; he had begun his career in the American Consular Service, after a course in the University of Virginia at Charlottesville—a course which is still remembered there. Though he has never fully given up his American citizenship or lost his love for the United States, it could hardly be said that Mr. Stead is typical of his republic: he is, it is true, devoted to the United States, but his loyalties are centred in the traditions of the Southern aristocracy from which he sprang: he is a fervent Tory and monarchist; and he has found most of his inspiration in Europe, and especially in the English countryside.

Not by any means all of it, however. He has spent several winters in Italy, and has left records of the Italian lakes, of Florence, of Sicily, and of Rome. Scenes painted in the intense light of poignant experience, and associated if not with a crisis of question at least with moments of excitement and discovery in a search for the mystery that will bring content to heart and soul, such scenes start up out of his work painted with the clearness, the purity and the naivety of a fresco by Fra Angelico. All through the work of this American is an intense spiritual sincerity, on which, nevertheless, comedy is always breaking in. His work stands out on a height among the works of his contemporaries, because like that of his countryman, Mr. T. S. Eliot,

it is extremely serious and often poignant. It keeps reminding one how, in the full life of the spirit, the heart's infinite craving is satisfied with an infinite attainment to an infinite joy. But he is always relaxing out of this high seriousness, in his poetry into lyrical emotion, in his prose into quaintness and humour. For his prose has retained the quality of his talk; and he is an excellent talker. A cliché, a truism, these—though we are taught to live by them—one hardly ever hears from his lips. He looks so straight at life that all he says is fresh and individual: his talk sparkles with the dew of truth, a truth which is fresh every morning. He is extraordinarily free from any sense of strain or of self-assertion: his conversation is quiet and modest and delightful in its sense both of the littleness of self, and of the charm and importance of very little things. And then in it, as in all the poet's ways, there is a good deal of inconsequence; for he is not free from the faults which naturally accompany extreme spontaneousness. Even when his prose is most imposing, and his verse highest in seriousness, there will come a sudden break in rhythm and an almost conversational turn, and one seems to catch the very tones of the quiet voice which even after so many years in Oxford has not quite ceased to be American.

He is a keen watcher of the skies and is devoted to nature, especially the humanized nature which Virgil loved, and his garden has one of the best collections of lilies in Oxfordshire: he is something of a connoisseur, and with a very shrewd sense how to get the most for his money he has made his home in the most unspoilt and most picturesque village on the Thames, Clifton Hampden. There, with the same shrewdness, he has collected Georgian furniture, and can seldom pass a shop with pictures that look anything like the period of Cox or William Turner. He takes little exercise except walking; though he likes to drive a large and silent car. But his specialities are inns and beer. If one wants to guide him on byways in the Cotswolds, it is no use thinking to do it by roads and villages: one must name the taverns; when he found that Prinknash Priory was between *The William* and *The Air*

Balloon, his heart warmed to it so that, from that moment, his heart was open to all that the ways of the Benedictines suggested to him. It was with them that he made up his mind to take the steps that would open to him the immediacy of Catholicism. For, though he never sought to alter the Protestant traditions of Worcester College Chapel, he had been for years in the habit of saying of Catholicism: 'It is the true Church.' The gift of faith, however, is something more than the power to discern that the faith of Rome is essential Christianity: it is the conviction that it would be intolerable to live without it. Such is the gift which came this summer to the poet: came at Prinknash in the way we have indicated and above all in his friendship with Dom Raphael: and so suddenly that most of his closest friends were taken by surprise. For not long before he had been inclined to say: 'It is an *iron* religion,' and even to the last moment, he demanded every assurance that his conscience would not be coerced. He wanted a teacher like St. Paul who would speak 'not as having dominion over your faith, but as a sharer of your joy.'

To those who knew his work, the true light had long made certain things intensely and beautifully manifest: and his modernist friends (for he was first at Queen's with Canon Streeter, and afterwards at Ripon Hall with Doctor Major) took his first prose work as a cunningly insinuated statement of Roman Catholic claims. That is not surprising. *The Shadow of Mount Carmel*, though published seven years ago, contains many eloquent pages, with a Catholic view of Catholic things. They are pages that deserve to be noticed and remembered as among the finest prose of our time. Let us take for an example of his simple, vivid style his description of the Pope appearing at a public audience:

'I saw a medium-sized man, walking firmly, his bearing one of austerity, severity and kindness, a strong Roman face, a look of concentration, a man who knows the meaning of discipline and who bears the marks of being under strain and pressure. He was dressed in a white woollen cassock woven from the lambs of St. Agnes—lambs blessed and set apart that their

A NEW CATHOLIC GENIUS

fleeces might be dedicated to this holy office; there was a girdle about his waist and a golden crucifix hanging from a heavy chain about his neck. This is the man who occupies the sublime and terrible position of the vicegerent of Christ upon earth.

'I thought of that mysterious figure "like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were as a flame of fire."

'He came to each of us, extending his hand for us to kiss the papal ring, shining with one great brilliant jewel. He moved on quickly around the room, paused at the door, lifted his hand and pronounced a blessing, and then departed as quietly and majestically as the sun goes down in the West. Our day was over. A thin and ascetic cleric opposite me—I took him to be a returned missionary—while we were waiting had gazed at the floor with a tired and somewhat abject expression. But the Pope singled him out for special attention, saying something to him and patting him several times on the shoulder. Long after the majestic presence had departed the man, whose face had seemed wan and clouded a few moments before, kept lifting up his eyes to the ceiling, smiling to himself, glowing in ecstasy. The hand of God had touched him, and the light of the sun still lingered upon him. His face had become a radiant cloud of evening after the sun had set.'

The Shadow of Mount Carmel is the account of a little journey on the Continent: a pilgrimage of search. This pilgrim went first to Nancy because it was the home of Coué, and Coué had been the vogue. (It is a weakness of Mr. Stead that he is always very much impressed with things that are the vogue: fashions flaunt to him like flowers: he always wants to pick them and suck the honey out of them. After that he has, of course, to throw them away.) Then he went on to Lourdes, where he was enraptured, feeling himself to be on holy ground. Then to Rome and Sicily. And on his way through Paris, he stopped at the *Folies Bergères*. It is a little personal story, simply, vividly, beautifully told. Hardly any one noticed it. But it is a masterpiece. It will still be blooming like a garden of perennials when most of the things acclaimed to-day have been burnt as weeds or simply rotted away. They are thrown out so soon: but how long will it be till his garden is noticed?

BLACKFRIARS

The prose he writes is simple, but it is as brightly painted as a Pinturicchio: his verse is sadder, or more solemn, *Verd Antique* and *The Sweet Miracle* were his first essays in it. 'I believe in miracles,' Mr. Stead wrote in the Preface to *Wayfaring*. 'The supreme miracle is consciousness, for it turns the universe inside out, the next two are life and death, but about death I have my suspicions. If materialism were true, then life and purpose and imagination ought never to have arisen; they are more than cogs in a tight-fitting mechanism, they are invasions of the spontaneous, they are miracles.' Who that really thinks of the life of a flower could fail to believe in miracles?

Ye proud old alchemists of Aragon
Could your most secret heart have won
From loose diffused loam, a net
Of fibrous leaves, the juicy stalk and set
Poised at the tip, this petalled crown
From rain clouds wrought and sunbeams melted down?
Tell me how was it all extracted
So neatly turned, and quaintly all compacted?

Mr. Stead, then, has a philosophy, though he is neither a determinist nor a behaviourist, neither a pantheist nor an agnostic. His *Scientia Clerici*, if we might call it so, complements in his own age the *Religio Medici* of an earlier one. In the philosophy of Mr. Stead, the present life becomes eternal; the future bores its way into the present; the products of the spirit of the past are with us as realities in the present. Time widens endlessly: we are always *en voyage*:

Our bow points towards the sunset
The ship goes dipping on.
Many are sailing with us
While day dies gently down.
It is a sense of going
In sunset grandeur, on
Where all the ancient travellers
In all the world have gone.

'I like,' says Mr. Stead, 'a poem that points beyond its immediate object and leaves us staring off into eternity.' Nothing else, we would say, is poetry at all. We can judge

poetry only by its effect, and its effect must be to show us things as they are, yet transfigured: it must enable us to see and know something of a transcendent image of beauty, of a love never seen or experienced, of an entrancing vision so that on awakening the soul longs for the vanished dream. It will do so only when the poet has found a word true to his moment of vision, and gives us his truth in music as rare as the rarity of truth in his words, and as magical. Until one can do this, one is no more than a writer of verse. Verse can be polished, melodious, exquisite: but poetry is supreme: it amazes: it conquers its lovers and their banality even when it seems most simple, and carries them captive into its own country. Is Mr. Stead then a poet? It is enough to quote *A Death in the House*.

Nay, but fling back the blinds, let the sun shine,
 So may this voyager lift his eyes, and hail
 The blue, alluring, wild, unending west.
 For neither Jason cleaving the lone brine
 Towards Colchis, nor Columbus under sail
 Adventured on so high, so bold a quest.

And so his *Pilgrimage* has in it something so simple, so limpid, it might have been almost one of the *Songs of Innocence*; his devotion is lyric poetry, but though he can be delightful when he is simple, he combines better the surprising with the homely, for it is the sense of magic in familiarity which takes him to the heart of his philosophy.

Who then can map Jerusalem, or say
 Where earth should end, or Paradise begin?

In his *Snow Scene in Starlight*, he begins with a phrase that tells us the secrets of the sky:

Evening aloft in awed expectancy
 Waited the starry advent.

The only way really to criticize a poet is to quote him. It is the power of phrase to overcome us that satisfies us whether or not the writer of verse has the spirit which guarantees his technique.

When Mr. Stead came from Charlottesville to Oxford, he made friends at Queen's with the English poet who has

BLACKFRIARS

most in common with him, Mr. Edmund Blunden. Mr. Blunden appreciates in Mr. Stead the clear record of his observation, and what Mr. Blunden calls, rather crudely, the patient utterance of his thought, meaning the precise completed picture of the scenes Mr. Stead gives us, and the warmth and sympathy with which he perfects his formality, and makes it, while a record of contentment, yet a moving work of human art.

In *The Sweet Miracle* he has a lovely simile of the growing fame of the Saviour among the villages of Galilee:

As dawn behind the mountains of the East
Rises and fills the fine frail shining air
With radiance ever welling lovelier
As wave on wave the varying brilliance glows
From blue to golden, golden to full rose:
So ran His fame along from place to place,
Sweetly consoling, perfected in grace.

But in his later volumes, *Festival in Tuscany* and *The House on the Wold*, there is better than this:

All the vast aureole of heaven closed
Me in a globe of silence, a crystal globe,
Streaked only by the lyric of a bird,
A ripple passing over the flooding stillness.

What is it that Mr. Stead shares with Mr. Blunden? Both faults and virtues: each of the poets has the freshness and some of the uncertainty of youth, a control over varied metres, a real appreciation of the scenes of nature carefully observed, a sense of the patterned texture of music with its varied repetitions, a power of echoing and suggestive phrase, a conception of beauty strengthened through a refined and elevated converse with the delightful minutiae of nature, a love of quiet colours, and English country scenes, an occasional irritating irregularity of rhythm, a power when wanted of odd descriptive phrase, but more generally a patient tranquillity. But when looked at closely, Mr. Stead has less of this last, and he has a purer sense of beauty as well as a more liquid melody. Like Mr. Walter de la Mare, whom he has also studied, he is weakened at times by a certain deliberate perversity which makes him sacri-

A NEW CATHOLIC GENIUS

fice communion with reality to the oddness of being a poet. Poetry, as Boccaccio argued long ago—of all places, in his treatise *Genealogia degli Dei*—allows for inversions to flash surprise on us: but those surprises must not be mere tricks with words: they must be truths. Both poets need to keep to a study of tangible things so emotional and direct that its personal novelty springs to surprise like ‘a silence cut clean as the circle of eternity.’

Mr. Stead’s new poems show an immense advance in this lyrical power, especially in his *Last Offering*:

Yet do I love her still,
And always love her dearly
Though angry winds blow chill
Nipping severely.
Dark as a sunset hill,
Halt as a frozen rill
My constant heart can still
Love her so dearly,
O still,
O still, so dearly.

Sure as the daffodil
Comes up all golden yearly
Though cloud and hail-wind shrill
Are glooming drearily,
So, though she treat me ill,
Yet do my heart and will
Bring her their offering still,
O still,
O still, so dearly.

But we need to pay particular attention to *Uriel*. This remarkable creation has very little new work in it. It is an arrangement of work scattered through several volumes to develop the one theme of Divine immanence. Now there is no word in this poem from beginning to end of Divine transcendence: but because its statement is theologically incomplete, it does not follow that it is theologically faulty. Certain blunted minds, unable to see the lights and shades of truth (for truth, both in men’s minds and in the visible world, is a complexity of planes and contours, the edges of which are outlines against the colours of an ever-changing

sky), minds misinformed or insensitive could call, and indeed have called, this poem Pantheism. That is a gross confusion. If we read the preface, we see at once that the poet draws a sharp distinction between certain crudities in the *Essay on Man*—a masterpiece written by another Catholic poet—and in drawing this distinction defines his own position. 'From his earliest years,' he writes, 'he has felt that he is related to the world about him, he has known the appeal of a meaning that flickered before his eyes, but he could not respond so long as he believed that his mind and the world before him were two distinct systems, confronting one another, sundered and distracted as opposites. Solution and revelation are found in the knowledge that his life and mind are fibres and living cells in the one supreme organism which lives and thinks throughout his own being.' The Creator is present in His creation, which owes its reality to what it shares with Him. It is true that He does not need it, being self complete and supremely active in His essential glory. That is a truth which Mr. Stead omits to state: but in what he does say he goes no further than a familiar truth of the *philosophia perennis*, that the universe owes what it has of life and good to the indwelling Lord and Giver of Life to Whom it adds an accidental glory. Mr. Stead, in ascribing all his communion with nature to a Divine act within himself, enabling him to know and love a Divine reality in what is noblest of creation, speaks in the temper of a Catholic mystic in the spirit of St. Patrick or St. Francis in the most famous of their hymns.

'The created world,' said St. Bonaventura in the *Breviloquium*, 'is, as it were, a book in which the Trinity as creative artist shines back, is represented, and read, according to three grades of expression, that is by way of imprint, of image, and of likeness. The imprint is found in all creatures: the image only in intellectual or rational spirits; the likeness in the deiform alone. Through these, as it were by the steps of a ladder, the human intellect is born to ascend by degrees to the supreme beginning which is God.' To find the imprint of God in all His creatures is the mys-

tical gift of wisdom, and this is Mr. Stead's theme, until he rises through his act of love towards the lower creation to the higher gift in which the sensible becomes entirely secondary to the spiritual reality, the ideal of beauty, which is suggested, in a verse on St. Margaret Mary, to be one with the love of the hidden Heart which beats beneath creation.

But we are not so sure that Mr. Stead is theologically precise in attributing the active immanence of God finally to the archangel Uriel; or in saying that to *Uriel*

'. . . our sun
Was a right hand, and the left our moon.'

But, if we pass over the name of Uriel as a poetic metonymy for the Creator Spirit, we can then admire the force with which Mr. Stead develops his theme, a theme very firmly grounded in Catholic philosophy, of a hierarchy of realities in a creation. His verse particularly excels in its combination of exact description with poetic fervour as an impassioned response to the inspiration of a consecrating Spirit of beauty:

Surely thou hast conspired
To snare me in Beauty, Beauty more and more!
For still thou leddest me on and gavest for guide
The silvery bow of Windrush curving round
Willows in knee-deep herbage; gavest me
Buttercup lanes, kingcups in water-meadows,
A farm-house gable, with sunset lighted panes,
A walnut tree topping a grey stone barn,
And elms out of the valley lifting and drooping
Their feathered plumes against a fleet of clouds
With wind-buoyed sails, in mauve or crimson drifting
Down seas of blue by islands fringed with fire.
Speak, Uriel, one clear indicating word,
Speak, harshly, if Thou wilt, of Truth and Right,
O Thou that shinest before me, yet art still,
O Thou within, using my eyes to see,
Wilt Thou not speak?

BLACKFRIARS

Yet still Thou camest out
Over me, in aerial coloured skies,
And wentest below me in the silver stream.
Thou hadst not done, for other treasures Thou
Wouldst heap on me, while Thy brow inclined
To graver mood, and far on fading skies
Thy heavenly mariners had reefed their sails
And piloted their cloudy barques to rest
In Eastern havens. Thou in their vacant place
Lighted by happy thought a star or two,
And tho' from water meadows and curving hills
Thou tookest thy green away, yet for their joy
Thou madest the willows and the silent elms
Vocal with soft night airs, and kept the twilight
Attentive with wakeful thrushes, until time
For the nightingale. O what do ye, sweet birds,
Singing so late upon the verge of night?—

But listening to their vesper song, I heard
A sound of closing gates beside the barn,
And turned to go; but when I turned about,
And faced the blue toned misty valley, lo,
Thou sentest Thy moon against me!—floating up
A half hour's journey from the hill it sailed
Over the wood and darkened fields and held
Thy sun-lit mirror glowing against the dark.

O now no more, I cried. Discourse to me
Of right and wrong.

If one hesitates as to the quality of this work, if one has not a taste or memory sure enough to guide one to place it high in the realm of poetry, compare it with the blank verse of Coleridge, with poems such as *Frost at Midnight*, or *Tears in Solitude*, poems which specialists in English literature have long held up as very fine things of a poet secure from the vagaries of fashion. They are the same kind of poem both in their form and in their appreciation of nature, for, like Mr. Stead's, Coleridge's appreciation of nature is both vividly descriptive, contemplative and emotional. But it is clear that they are neither so surprising, so impassioned, nor so gorgeous as Mr. Stead's lines. To

come into comparison with Coleridge, not at his best (for Mr. Stead has not written, nor will he write, either a *Christabel* or a *Chamouni*), but in work that has been admired by connoisseurs for its classic excellence and yet to survive this comparison with Coleridge and come well out of it: that is enough.

The quality of *Uriel*, supported as it is by a series of fine prose introductions and by such an admirable treatment of such spiritual interests as *The Shadow of Mount Carmel*, is then an urgent summons to the attention of those who care for the high tradition of English literature. Appreciation is coming to Mr. Stead after many disappointments, many sorrows, and with them no doubt many interior conflicts; for natures so intensely passionate cannot but fall at times upon the thorns of life, and bleed. But poetry never came direct out of that topmost sky where it is always blue unclouded weather. It loves wild places. It is a thing of endurances as well as ardours. It shares much with mysticism: and of the successes of the mystic St. Bonaventura wrote: 'If thou wouldest know how these things are done, question grace, not doctrine: desire, not understanding; the sob of prayer, not the study of texts; the bridegroom, not the master; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that inflames utterly and transfers into God, with excessive fervour and most ardent love.'¹

Gifts, if they are great enough, ask for great returns. And though Mr. Stead when we consider that all his best poetic work is compressed into a poem of thirty-three pages, may be like a Professor Housman or Mr. Ralph Hodgson, who write only tiny volumes because they are pledged to maintain the standard of their best: yet we hope that in prose at least he will not long delay to give us evidence that he has made the necessary surrender to the gifts with which he has been so rarely endowed by angels of light and spirits of beauty.

ROBERT SENCOURT.

¹ *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. VII, 6.