

CATHOLICS AND THE NOVEL

LIKE a well-used hackney-coach, the stricture that in all spheres critical standards are declining is beginning to creak: it is a commonplace in everyday criticism whose place is so common that like other similar phrases—'learning for its own sake' and 'the cultures of freedom loving peoples'—it is a statement which now employed seems all but empty of content. Narrowing the stricture here to the treatment meted out to the novel, one is forced to the conclusion by the standard of current criticism exhibited in fiction-reviewing that the decline is one caused principally by ignorance: ignorance about the purpose of a novel and the history of the novel. This charge which is general must regrettably include much of the Catholic press, where the confusion only becomes greater by the haphazard use of the term 'Catholic novel'. For this reason therefore in the present essay an attempt will be made first to trace the emergence of the novel in English fiction and, secondly, to see how in this larger context what is termed the 'Catholic novel' came into being. Finally the actual term 'Catholic novel' will be examined.

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A novel is a large diffused picture comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purpose of a uniform plan. . . . This plan cannot be executed with propriety, probability or success without a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene, by virtue of his own importance.—Smollett.

As to the first novel, critics have pinned their choice on authors so distant as to have three centuries between them: furthermore it is significant to note that their choice has largely, if not entirely, been conditioned by religious preconceptions. Catholic critics have tended to say that Chaucer is the first novelist: this comment on the strength of the *Canterbury Tales* is not pure Catholic campaigning, since it is true that much of his work is mere character-drawing. Yet ultimately it seems that the judgment is invalid: invalid for the very good reason that Chaucer was primarily a poet and chose poetry, not prose, for his medium. The other group of critics, mainly a Whig group, have consistently put forward Richardson—the first novelist of the Age of Reason. However it seems that between a fourteenth and eighteenth century candidate there are others whose claims should not be omitted; others whose attempts towards writing a novel should not be overlooked, if for no further reason than the general neglect which they have suffered in literary histories.

In the sixteenth century there were three decided attempts to write a novel. With *Euphues* John Lyly had a passing success: its sub-title, 'the Anatomy of Wit . . . Very pleasant for all Gentlemen to reade, and most necessary to remember: wherein are contained the delights that Wit followeth in his youth by the pleasantness of Love, and the happiness he reapeth in age, by the perfection of wisdom', is indicative of its whole tone. Indeed as Anthony-a-Wood notes in his *Athenae Oxonienses*: 'In these bookes of Euphuese 'tis said that our nation is indebted for a new English in them, which the flower of the youth thereof learned'. But its success was short-lived: with the death of the gallants and wits who frequented the court of Elizabeth it died. Too much was asked of the reader, for after a time a species of fabulous or unnatural natural philosophy becomes tedious; after a time lists of monstrous animals, extraordinary mythical beasts together with hosts of vegetable and mineral forms of life possessed of peculiar properties, pall: without selection appetite loses taste. Somewhat similar to *Euphues* was Sir Philip Sydney's *Arcadia*, but again its success was short-lived, and again it was at the time a book loved more for its author than for itself. Admittedly court life made pastorals seem idyllic, but only to a certain section of society, and that a section which, if it did not prefer French forests to English woods, preferred (as presently in reality it did) to give its allegiance to Shakespeare's more dramatic Arden than to Sydney's somewhat overdone pastiche about Bohemia. In contrast to both Lyly and Sydney was Robert Greene's talent: although many of his stories were as like a fairy-tale as those of his two contemporaries, his 'conny-catching pamphlets and Repentances' showed him to be a realist of the first order: his work was partially a reaction against artificiality, his preference being for Eastcheap and the stinking and stewing side of London, not the glitter of the crown jewels nor the twitter of court etiquette. But these three attempts came to naught: the reading public was small, literacy was at a low level and the theatre still remained predominant as the chief art-form. The importance of Lyly, Sydney and Greene lies in this, that they aimed towards a fiction whose threads were to be picked up later: in the meantime their works went into obscurity, whilst both artificiality and realism in fiction remained unknown quantities so far as the novel was concerned right down to the seventeenth century.

From the point of view of fiction the seventeenth century appears singularly moribund. Apart from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which hardly qualifies for the title of novel, the only attempt made at a novel was that of Congreve's *Incognita*: but here again his comment that 'when I digress, I am at that time writing to please

myself: when I continue the thread of my story, I write to please the reader' is indicative of its tone and accounts in large measure for its failure to win an audience. In any case the playhouses were open and it was in this direction that Congreve turned his attention. Yet, from another point of view, the seventeenth century was fruitful in providing the background from which the 'novel proper' might emerge. The Civil War had produced a new consciousness, and with that new consciousness a new class had come into being—the middle class. Accordingly this new class (helped on by the spread of literacy) was ready for a new art-form. Real courtly life had gone for ever and the new class acted as a wedge in society as a whole: as it pushed its way in, men as a whole became particularly conscious of their tie with things, animate as well as inanimate: the elements which in the next century were to lead to the Age of Reason were to be found in embryo in its rise.

Among the first writers to be fully aware of this shift of emphasis in society was Defoe: at the age of sixty he took his chance and wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, the first novel of genius to be published in the English language. Both its plot and characters were real: there was a stamp of authenticity which marked the entire book. Here it may be apposite to quote Defoe's treatment, from the point of view of both character-drawing and attitude then prevailing, of a French Benedictine monk:

And now I speak of marrying it brings me naturally to say something of the French ecclesiastic that I had brought with me out of the ship's crew, whom I took up at sea. It is true this man was a Roman, and, perhaps it may give offence to some hereafter, if I leave anything extraordinary upon record of a man whom, before I begin, I must (to set him out in just colours) represent in terms very much to his disadvantage, in the account of Protestants: as, first, that he was a Papist; secondly a Popish priest; and, thirdly, a French Popish priest. But justice demands of me to give him a due character; and I must say he was a grave, sober, pious and most religious person: exact in his life, extensive in his charity, and exemplary in almost everything he did. What, then, can anyone say against being very sensible of the value of such a man, notwithstanding his profession? though it may be my opinion, perhaps as well as the opinion of others who shall read this, that he was mistaken.

On occasion this passage has been quoted as a tide-mark, as it were, by which may be shown the low ebb to which literature had fallen at the beginning of the eighteenth century. (*Robinson Crusoe* was published, or at least its first part appeared, in April 1719.) Still one cannot help suspecting that critics who make this charge are confusing literature and religion. Among the most notable of

this school is Edward Hutton who in his book, *Catholicism and English Literature*¹, attempts to prove that with the Reformation English literature, and in particular fiction (perhaps because fiction is something more tangible to deal with than poetry), lost 'its continuity of spirit'. But this, as it has just been said, is to confuse the terms—religion, literature, society. No historian today for a moment would deny that religion as established religion, was at a low ebb during the Age of Reason: it is only when the charge is levelled against literature, and more specifically the novel, that such an accusation has to be questioned and countered.

Admittedly Catholicism at the time of Richardson was only a shell of what it had been in Chaucer's day: nevertheless in spite of this, the morality of the earlier Catholic Christendom still existed in spirit, if not in practised dogma, just as it is true nowadays to declare that any European author (whatever his personal beliefs) so far as his works are artistic achievements is dependent for both his sensitivity and sensibility upon the Christian tradition, and to that extent he is a writer working within an acknowledged framework of morality.² This is an aside that will be developed later here. In the meantime hark back to Richardson and Fielding. . . .

Richardson is primarily a novelist of incident: it is more than probable that his early upbringing as a boy, when he was employed by the fashionable women of the town as a messenger, gave him an insight into human nature and feminine foibles that later could be transformed into the core of his books. In *Pamela* there pervades an atmosphere of strict morality:

At about eight o'clock we entered the courtyard of this handsome, large, old and lonely mansion, that looks made for solitude and mischief, as I thought by its appearance, with all its brown nodding horrors of lofty elms and pines about it. Here, I said to myself, is to be the scene of my ruin. . . .

Again in the full title of the book, a note emphasising the excellence of the honest life is struck: it is *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. In contrast to Richardson's work, Fielding's novels present an essayist novelist rather than a novelist of incident: but here again the note of morality is apparent. Having discoursed for a page or so on ancient heathen deities one finds Fielding breaking in with this comment in *Tom Jones*: '. . . I have rested too long on a doctrine which can be no use to the Christian writer. . . .' So it is that this

¹ Reprinted in 1948 and originally published in 1942.

² This comment is further developed in T. S. Eliot's book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) where it is pointed out that if one accepts culture as being dependent upon religion and vice versa, then English bishops are a part of culture and dogs and horses a part of English religion. Smollett, doubtless, would have applauded this sentiment, as indeed would many of his lesser contemporaries.

reflection of Fielding's which was also that of his audience is a reflection that permeates nearly all the works of the novelists of the eighteenth century: Goldsmith as well as Smollett, and Smollett as well as Sterne. For the time being the novel remained principally a story with a moral, even if at times in conforming to Smollett's definition (quoted as the epigraph to this section) its plot at times became so unwieldy as to defy a brief synopsis. It was only in the nineteenth century that a change, a transition was to come about, for it was a century that was to include Jane Austen as well as Hardy.

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'Novels . . . performances which have only genius, wit and taste to recommend them.'—Jane Austen.

Battling with the nineteenth century novelists is rather like playing on the home ground. They are loved and continuously read: their works are dramatised, filmed and adapted for broadcasting. Mr Pickwick is still the friend of all—the policeman as well as the professor. None the less the phrase 'nineteenth century novelists' is not so wide in its scope as it sounds: it has become the synonym for another phrase—the 'great novelists', in which group it is usual to include Jane Austen and the Brontës, Scott, Dickens and Thackeray, and sometimes as if by way of an appendix, Trollope, George Eliot and Meredith.³

This group—not an all-embracing group of novelists, be it noted—represents a body of writers all of whose works may be said in a broad sense to be Christian; in all their books virtue is praised, vice condemned; the hero honest, the heroine goodness personified, and the villain an utter knave with no redeeming traits. Yet on the part of the public there was a certain dissatisfaction with characters drawn either in black or white; besides in many cases—with much of Dickens for instance—the narrative was becoming such a rambling affair that although less matter was not called for, more art was asked; and with that art more subtlety and penetration. The new journalism, which by the middle of the century was taking over part of the function that had been played by the great reviews and magazines in the first fifty years, was coming to the fore⁴. In fact in 1878 Hardy was writing of the new man whose age was to come thus:

³ The present writer does not agree with this grouping: it is merely given as a fairly general opinion which is current.

⁴ It may be remembered in *Mansfield Park* that when the company at Sotherton were weary of exploring the gardens, 'they all returned to the house together, there to lounge away the time as they could with sofas, and chit-chat and Quarterly Reviews, till the return of the others, and the arrival of dinner'. One has only in one's mind's eye to imagine the same scene today, to see what papers and

'In Clymn Yeobright's face could dimly be seen the typical countenance of the future. Should there be a classic period to art hereafter, its Phidias may reproduce such faces. The view of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilisations, must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitution of the advanced races that its facial expression will be accepted as a new artistic departure. . . .

His face was attractive in the light of symbols.

This passage from *The Return of the Native* was to strike a note of pessimism, of an attitude to life as something 'to be put up with', which was later to be fully exploited. In the meantime the important contribution of Hardy to the novel was that he brought to it both poetry and architecture: indeed beginning his career as an architect his ambition was always to be a poet, and his novels in one sense were never regarded other than as a financial by-product. Yet for future writers his impact on English fiction was immense; beneath his plots there was a pattern. The material might be ragged and rough, but at his hands it became highly glazed: like sculptured granite blocks after the sun—'the hope of life'—has set, his books stand as a magnificent but foreboding row of tombstones.

Equally important in their impact on the future generation of English writers were James and, later still, Joyce. Henry James developed the architectural foundations that Hardy had laid, and to them he added psychological penetration. James Joyce attempted a synthesis: in taking over the poetry and architecture of Hardy and the psychological penetration of James, he was prepared to test language to its utmost: if *Ulysses* showed how far linguistic experiment could go without losing comprehensibility, *Finnegans Wake* marked the point where experiment became obscurity. It was a lesson quickly learned by his successors.

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Order in the social and political category is unattainable under our present psychology . . . [All that can be hoped for] is a mess more favourable to artists than the present one, for a muddle which will provide them with fuller inspirations and better material conditions.—E. M. Forster.

Forster wrote the above comment in 1942 in an article in *Horizon*. Eighteen years had elapsed since the publication of *A Passage to India* in 1924, but it reflects an attitude to life which has been his from the very beginning. Analysed fully, it shows itself to be a form of nihilism. With other writers in the 'twenties, and in particular writers of the 'thirties, it either came to be replaced for the most part by materialism of a more outright kind or else replaced

magazines are chosen for lounging away the time, to have but a good case in point of the way in which general reading standards have deteriorated.

by Marxism⁵. Even a writer such as Virginia Woolf, for all her sensibility as a novelist—witness *To The Lighthouse* or *Between the Acts*—stands for a typically mundane attitude to life; an attitude, reflective of her generation doubtless, in which all major issues are evaded and an attempt made to crystallise the perfect moment; an attitude that assumes golden moments should only be accepted in their finest gloss and that such moments are either what is called 'aesthetic', or else the preserve of the few whose castle is the Ivory Tower. In actual fact it is but a repetition of the philosophy of Aristippus of Cyrene.

However, if by a long view one condemns this attitude to life, as in the same way one also condemns that of Hardy, it must be added in all justice that writers of both groups can and do, could and did, produce works of art: all that can be said artistically is that their approach to their subject matter is such as to put a limitation upon their output. Like Forster, unless they change their medium, they usually write themselves out, becoming in the end merely repetitive. So it is as one examines the period between the two world wars a question arises, a question which asks after Hardy, James and Joyce in what direction could the novel advance.

An answer came first from a group of Catholic writers living on the Continent. It included Bernanos, Mauriac, Gertrud von le Fort, Sigrid Undset—perhaps the most notable among its elect; and in England Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh were to be its chief exponents⁶.

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I know how hard it is. One needs something to make one's mood deep and sincere. There are so many little frets that prevent our coming at the real naked essence of our vision. It sounds boshy, doesn't it? I often think one ought to be able to pray, before one works—and then leave it to the Lord. Isn't it hard, hard work to come to real grips with one's imagination—throw everything overboard. I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of

⁵ For a good 'fashionable', Left and Marxist prejudiced survey of these writers, see *New Writing in Europe* by John Lehmann (1940). The criticism in this volume is poor, but its index and selected bibliography make it a useful handbook.

⁶ Certain omissions in this article should be mentioned here: some writers have described Newman's *Callista* and *Loss and Gain* as 'Catholic novels'. *Callista*, a tale of the third century, is little more than a historical sketch written in fiction-form and, it seems, *Loss and Gain* would be better described as an attempt to present his conversion in terms of fiction—a feat which he accomplished far more successfully, with the veil of fiction off, when he wrote his *Apologia*. The omission of Benson is more serious; but perhaps he is better described as a historical novelist writing about Catholic history. Even more serious, probably, is the omission of Belloc, Chesterton and Baring, save that their fiction is better served by the term 'entertainment' rather than 'novel'. It should be added too that in this article no attempt has been made to cover in any exhaustive way all the other contemporary authors who have been acclaimed as writers of 'Catholic novels'.

Almighty God to go through me—and it's rather an awful feeling. One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist. I often think of my dear Saint Lawrence on his gridiron, when he said, 'Turn me over, brothers, I am done enough on this side'. — D. H. Lawrence.

This is an apt point at which to examine the term 'Catholic novel', and examined in the light of the history and development of the novel it cuts rather a vague and shadowy figure. By the same standards of grouping one could declare that *Robinson Crusoe* was a nonconformist novel, or that *Tristram Shandy* was an Anglican novel, merely on the grounds that Defoe was a Nonconformist or a Dissenter in English literature, and Sterne an Anglican clergyman. Obviously such verdicts cannot be taken seriously. A man is first and foremost a novelist by talent and either an Anglican, Nonconformist or Catholic by belief. The fact that he is a Catholic will not make him a novelist if it is his vocation to be an engineer; what counts ultimately is that a man should be true to his vocation, true to those talents with which at birth he has been blessed—quite literally blessed by God. However, should he be blessed with the ability to write fiction, other talents being equal, such a novelist who also happens to be a Catholic has certain advantages over his fellow writers in that his work has a definite and clearly defined religious framework into which it can be fitted; in that it has roots which are spiritual and therefore eternal; in that it makes his work an acknowledged quest because what matters in the end is that he should achieve his salvation through it. For a man to shirk his responsibilities as an artist is to renounce a God-given trust.

As a detailed example of what is meant by this added power that the novelist who is a Catholic has over his contemporary, one may draw attention to a passage from Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*: it is a passage where the boy Pinkie is 'on the run', his razor-slashing at the races having been successfully executed.

He heard a whisper, looked sharply round and thrust the paper back. In an alley between two shops, an old woman sat upon the ground: he could just see the rotting and discoloured face: it was like the sight of damnation. Then he heard the whisper: 'Blessed art thou among women', saw the grey fingers fumbling at the beads. This was not one of the damned: he watched with horrified fascination: this was one of the saved.

The contrast between the inner sanctity and the decaying exterior is well made. As a piece of writing it is both stark and powerful, though perhaps the phrase 'with horrified fascination' is somewhat clichéd. Yet in spite of the apparent forcefulness, by comparison with Greene's later books, there was a danger at this period of Greene applying dogma too dogmatically to his fiction to let it

still remain fiction and not become mere Catholic propaganda. But this was a danger of 1938 when *Brighton Rock* first appeared. His two more recent novels, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, have dispelled any doubts that one then may have had⁷. The latter with its poignant last chapter with the comment . . . 'And do you think God's likely to be more bitter than a woman?' . . . is an example of the way in which Greene has brought to perfection a conflict without resolving the problem in terms of mortal and venial sins, but rather leaving such a judgment to the Omnipotent, his task as author being merely to present the crisis in human terms. Furthermore it is this precise refusal to pass judgments on their characters which has caused a charge to be made in Catholic circles that novels such as that of Greene cause scandal. It is a charge as well which sooner or later must be faced.

The method proposed here will be to put forward the comments of some other writers on this subject and so work towards a general conclusion. The comments selected are not meant to be conclusive in themselves, but rather to contain in embryo ideas that may be developed. After all, true criticism, which is just as much a creative activity as novel writing, like novel writing is essentially, when seen in a broad perspective, a quest whose aim is to come face to face with him in whose image all men are made. Properly understood in this context, there can be no such thing as secular literature.

In *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain says:

The essential point is not to know whether a novelist may or may not portray a given aspect of evil. The essential point is to know at *what altitude* he is when he makes this portrayal and whether his art and soul are *pure enough* and *strong enough* to make it without conniving with it. . . . To write the work of a Proust, as it should be written, requires the interior light of a Saint Augustine.

To this Mauriac in *God and Mammon* has replied to the effect that the real novelist cannot but help connive, cannot but help associate himself with his creation: were he not to do so he would become merely an observer and very quickly his characters would become cardboard figures. He then goes on to quote this biblical text which is really an appendix to Maritain's comment: 'Begin by purifying the source, and those who drink of the waters will not be sick'⁸.

⁷ However, his story, 'A Hint at the Truth', published in *The Month* (February, 1949) raises this issue again.

⁸ In *Colosseum* (June, 1935), asked how a writer should live, Erik von Kuhnelt-Leddihn replied: 'He should go frequently to the sacraments and pray to God not to become a megalomaniac but to attain nearer and nearer to the only thing which really matters—sanctity'.

Carried through, this exhortation is no restriction as some critics have thought: rather it prevents writing from being restricted to an Ivory Tower, as for example is so much the case, as was said earlier, with the novels of Virginia Woolf. Indeed as Newman with such perception said:

It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless literature of sinful man. . . . A university is not a Convent or a Seminary. . . . Cut out from your class books all broad manifestations of the natural man; and those manifestations are waiting for your pupil's benefit at the very doors of your lecture room . . . you have succeeded but in this—making the world his University.

Although this advice was addressed principally to lecturers its application can be universal, for as Newman concluded it was not a part fitting the Church to play a suspicious policeman, but instead a wise and tolerant guardian. She should see that no kind of truth was prohibited, but instead see that no doctrines passed 'under the name of Truth', but those which claimed it rightfully.

Now it would seem that could a novelist always bear in his mind these precepts of Newman, Mauriac and Maritain the result would be to produce a masterpiece. But that would not be to allow for the bend in human nature; again talents differ so that although as a Catholic one might have the highest admiration for the purpose that lay behind Evelyn Waugh's novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, as a critic one could not confess the book a total success: in fact it would be the duty of a critic to ask himself whether, had the 'blurb' been denied him which gave the purpose of the novel (namely to show in an old English family how the Catholic faith acts as 'a twitch upon the thread'), such a theme was apparent from the text of the novel itself. Under such a scrutiny it would seem, at least to the present writer, that one might have grave misgivings. On the other hand, about Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, it seems to the present writer that one could have few such misgivings: in fact it might be worth adding as a rider to these personal impressions that the latter book appeared with no word of explanation on its cover.

So it is one has come back to the main question with which this essay opened—the decline of critical standards. In literature nothing is so harmful as a parochial spirit: nothing is to be gained from segregating novels into water-tight compartments, because in their gradual emergence, which has now become a weekly spate, they form a part of literature as a whole. Those that are great, those which time has sifted with the years, stand like lighthouses signifying to that spirit of truth of which Newman wrote. It is only when they become something less, when they become partisan, that

the light which should burn within them is supplanted by either a flicker of pieties or a burning brandishing of a party line. Inasmuch as they lose their independence and become mere means of propaganda, to that extent they lose their integrity.

Catholic truth is something too vast, in fact too catholic, to be confined within narrow limitations since its province is the whole of life; and axiomatic with this concluding statement, in going from the general to the particular, one may add as an assertion of true critical standards that a novel must be considered first as literature, before its specific merits as 'Catholic literature' can be assessed.

NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE.

CATHOLICS and ADULT EDUCATION

THE great growth in adult education through the tutorial and other types of classes has been one of the most interesting educational developments of recent years. This in its turn has led to an increase in the numbers of adult educational centres and colleges; these vary from the purely technical non-residential schools to long-term residential colleges such as the Catholic Workers' College and Ruskin College at Oxford. There are also shorter courses, normally of a week or week-end, running throughout the year at places like Ashridge, Burton Manor and Grantley Hall. Many of the ideas which inspired the founding of this latter type of college are attributable to the Danish Folk High Schools, and in England, to the work of Sir Richard Livingstone, in particular to his valuable little book, *The Future in Education*. The other force behind this growth in adult education centres has been and still is the work and ideals of bodies such as the Workers Educational Association and the University Extra-Mural Departments. Those who attend tutorial classes, one-year, or terminal classes, have in many cases wanted to meet together away from their normal, and often grim, environment; this desire has been met by holding summer schools in the universities or other large residential centres. The keenness of those attending these summer schools and their appreciation of the chance to spend a week or so at Oxford or Cambridge are touching; the fervour is almost religious. Now the several newly started residential colleges have given many the chance to spend what may be best described as an inexpensive short retreat of an educational nature. In doing so these colleges have fulfilled a deep-seated want that has not previously been sufficiently realised, let alone catered for. Those of similar interests and tastes can meet each other under reasonably