

If St John's teaching is austere, it is also joyous, and to obtain a perfectly balanced picture of his conception of mystical experience we must set beside the lines I have just quoted, the following reflections from his *Spiritual Canticle*: 'It is the property of love to place him who loves on an equality with the object of his love. Hence the soul, because of its perfect love, is called the bride of the Son of God, which signifies equality with Him. In this equality and friendship all things are common.' Thus, far from advocating a vague species of pantheism, St John sees, at the very height of mystical contact, an experience which is a relationship, a love which is both received and given. And so his poetry too is a poetry of reciprocity. In it, St John is speaking both to himself and to God. His lyricism enacts and perpetuates the love which his prose can only adumbrate.

## A LETTER TO SOME COLLEAGUES

DEAR MEMBERS OF THE GUILD OF CATHOLIC ARTISTS.

I'VE just been to see the exhibition you're holding at the Building Centre in Bloomsbury, and I'm writing this in the homebound train; using, for want of anything better, the sort of crepe paper that British Railways give you to dry your hands on. . . . I went at the behest of the Editor of *BLACKFRIARS*, who emphasized that this year the Guild had made a determined effort to raise the standard of exhibits: and also that the Building Centre had lent their premises rent-free for the occasion. So let's begin with a warm vote of thanks to both parties, the first for their praiseworthy intentions, the second for their generosity and goodwill.

What did I think of the work on view? Well, if I tell you honestly and unequivocally (as it is presumably my brief to do), please bear in mind that it is human to err, and that in this respect I am quite as human as most people. So you must regard what follows as a well-meant, if at moments irritable, contribution to the general polemic on Sacred Art, Art and Catholicism, etc., in which we are all very much involved. Also please note that nothing that is said here applies or refers to the church furnishings and pottery which were shown and concerning which I don't feel qualified to make pronouncements.

I have long been of the opinion that in our day and age there can be a Catholic, and there can be an artist: but that everything is against there being such a person as a Catholic artist, in any genuine, interesting or significant sense. (Why this should be so is something I will try to investigate later.) Consequently I betook myself to Store Street in the full expectation of encountering an assemblage of dowdy semi-competent archaizing eclectics. And I'm sorry to say that, with a few honourable exceptions, that's just what I think I did encounter. The honourable exceptions—and perhaps this is significant—were nearly all guest artists, i.e. eminent non-Catholic artists with a bent towards metaphysical subject-matter, or architects who had undertaken to build churches. Without the contributions of Cecil Collins, Céri Richards and Robert Medley, all of whom sent important and beautiful examples of their work; Graham Sutherland who sent what I take to be a study for his Northampton Crucifixion; and the church designs by Dennis Lasdun and Francis Pollen, it would all have been a bit depressing, to say the least. (Frederick Gibberd's drawings for Liverpool Cathedral did nothing to allay my fears that the assessors of the competition have made a sickening mistake. If its eventual vastness of scale does not in some degree redeem this project, I can't see what else is going to.) But, with a grateful bow to these other most salutary invitees, let us come back to our mutttons: the Catholic artists proper and avowed. Friends, why are we so *awful*? I say *we* because I am a Catholic and an artist like you. I know a bit about the predicament. The difference between us is that you had a go on this occasion, you committed yourselves, you made a statement, you even exhibited it. I suppose that makes you better men than me, because I didn't even try. I'm not saying I *wouldn't*, if for some reason or other I had to: but by George I'd measure the odds against me: I'd weigh up the problem: I'd realize that one is practically beaten before one even enters the ring—and this is more than some of *you* seem to have done! Egad, there you go, some of you, sailing into it as though the word 'problem' wasn't in your dictionary at all. If you want to know what I mean, just listen to this as a recipe for creation. Take a very big sheet of paper. Paint a sweetened and academicized Henry Moore draped and seated figure occupying just about all of the ground, tickled up realistically with neat hatchings of the brush. But when you come to the head, suddenly bung in a flat, linear semi-abstract face (style Picasso 1925) painted in bright and arbitrary colours. Then rub out an area in the middle of the design, and in the nimbus so produced, draw a slick and seductive nude (style *Casino de Paris*) sort of floating in the air in

front of old Mrs Henry Moore Picasso. Entitle your confection *The Great Mother*, and send it right in. Now, as an American friend of mine is fond of saying, *you just can't do that*. Yet somebody did. There it was, large as life, just inside the entrance. It was by a longish chalk the worst instance of its kind, but in a sense it was typical, it was what I might call the *locus classicissimus* or Nobel Booby Prizewinner for a trend which ran right through the exhibition. To make this point clearer, let me give a few more instances of things which you either just can't do, or which you'd very much better not do, at least when I'm around. (For experienced viewers of what is called Catholic art these categories will have a gruesome familiarity.) Recipe no. 2, then. Think of a Biblical subject. Draw it naturalistically but rather weakly (presumably because you can't do any better) in a traditional Renaissance iconographic scheme. Right. Now *make it modern*. I could demonstrate the method better on a blackboard, but roughly what you do is to turn every curve (e.g. a forearm or a cheek) into two or three straights. Next you colour it in, but in a *modern* way. That is, you make the faces half green and half orange, the grass pink, the trees bright purple, and so on. You then sigh with satisfaction and fancy that you've done something really up to date; a bit of Cubism, shall we say? (All that in fact you've done is to mask from yourself and from the undiscerning viewer the banality of your conception and the feebleness of your understanding of structural and pictorial form.) No names no pack-drill, but there's one of the *guest* artists who follows a method very much like this, and it is only his manifest dignity and sincerity together with his beautiful feeling for colour which enable him to get away with it to the extent he does.

If any artist were to ask me *why* he can't do things this way, I should have to reply, Well, I'm sorry, but if you really don't know, you'd better go back to school and find out. You could get quite a hint, however, from the French phrase *confusion de genres*.

There is a more respectable variant of this procedure which is exemplified in this exhibition by Enrico Equi and possibly by others. This is to paint a genuinely Cubist picture (i.e. one in which the forms have been totally fragmented and then reassembled according to an autonomous pictorial geometry) but to leave recognizable traces of sacred imagery in, as it were, the chinks. It is much harder to explain the sales-resistance one experiences in this case: but resistance, I'm afraid, I still do feel.

I own likewise a measure of sympathy with Recipe no. 4, as served up by Michael Mason in his *St Thérèse of Lisieux*, because the artist has obviously been looking with admiration at works which I

too admire, namely those of the New York school and the abstract expressionists in general. What he has done in this case, however, is to paint quite a good abstract expressionist picture (at least that's how I read it) and then put in, right at the top, a figurative head. Here's another thing *you just can't do*. Abstract expressionism is *sui generis*. You must take it or leave it for what it is, and one of the things it is is abstract, as the name implies. That is to say a direct assault on the emotions by means of pure colour-and-form relationships. Pop in a passage of figuration, and you change these relationships from potentially good abstract ones to figurative ones which in the circumstances are likely to be ham.

Really, you know, it is no accident that the great movements which constitute modern art, such as Cubism, Constructivism, Purism, Surrealism, Geometric Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism and so on, cost their originators a lifetime of desperate concentration and total commitment. For these are hard-won modes, disciplines, self-consistent systems of artistic logic. If we are going to use them, we really must acquire some sort of elementary education in their meaning, nature and limitations. It simply won't do to stroll along the counter as though at Selfridge's summer sale, picking up scraps from all over the place and kidding ourselves that we can sew them into a garment to cover our nakedness once we get them home.

Recipe no. 5, oh dear, is the neo-Gothic. Elongated proportions and *faux-naïf* poses of the figure are the twin essentials here. Since it is the standard idiom for contemporary stained glass, I don't need to say much more about it: except that at least it is self-consistent, and when done really well—so to say at Third Programme level, as it is by Evie Hone—it can be not unworthy of its prototypes. It's the Home Service and Light Programme variants which can be so devitalizing and distasteful. Closely allied to the foregoing is Recipe no. 6, or what I call Soapy Romanesque. This really means school of Eric Gill, and is practised mainly by sculptors. I loved Gill as a man and I retain an enormous admiration for him as a craftsman, letter-cutter and typographer: but as a sculptor I think he's as unfortunate an exemplar as you could choose. Because whatever life, robustness and mystery *he* didn't smooth out of the Romanesque, any *imitator* of his is certain finally to eliminate—not so much *a fortiori* as *a weakiori*.

Lastly, what about inscriptions, pen lettering and so on? I'm afraid I can't be any nicer about *them*. I think we must face the fact that, outside the realm of the art school, pen calligraphy in the Edward Johnston tradition is another dead duck. As a training for

hand and eye and a provider of insight into the history and nature of letter-forms it will always remain an unrivalled discipline: I would certainly recommend a thorough course of it for any student of lettering or typography. But considered as *a mode of communication in the contemporary world* it is precious in quite the wrong sense, and essentially futile. You may say, Why should it be thought of as a mode of communication? To which I reply, If it isn't for communication, what on earth is it for? Or again you may say that you don't like the contemporary world anyway. My answer to *that* is, Quite so, I know you don't, and that's the whole trouble! That's why you have to retreat into a cosy ideological inglenook and behave as though nothing had happened since about A.D. 1415. Of course I quite agree that not all the things that *have* happened are matters for self-congratulation on the part of our species—but would you, in the name of Adam, expect them to be? The point is, they *have happened*, the situation culturally and in every other way *has changed*; and this *is* the good old ghastly twentieth century that we're living in. And if you contract out of it into a world of sandals and goat's milk and old vellum, you'll find that the twentieth century will simply carry on without you, as in fact it is doing at this very moment. If you want to influence twentieth-century man, you've got to use some sort of language that he's prepared to pay attention to. He simply isn't going to bestow a second glance on your exquisitely-finished copyings-out of snippets from Francis Thompson—or not more than he would on a pokerwork motto in a lodging-house bathroom, which indeed would provoke in him much the same range of reactions. After this you'll not be surprised to hear that, in the matter of bringing into being a genuinely new, alive and meaningful religious art in our time, *I do not think we have even made a start*. We have not made a start because we have not really isolated and defined the problem, much less faced it in all its bleakness and rigour. No diagnosis, no cure. All I have done up to now is to indicate certain generic solutions which don't work. If I am right, the moral is that neither historical revivalism nor eclectic pseudo-modernism is going to see us through. Very well then, say you, what does Mr Clever think the solution is? Bless you, *I don't know*. I wish I did. It won't be worked out in words anyway: it'll be worked out in paint and stone. But as I said before, we can't even begin to solve a problem which we either do not recognize as such or have not fairly and squarely formulated. All I can do, if you will have patience with me a little longer, is to give you my formulation. Here goes. The problem of Catholic, Christian or Sacred Art in the mid-twentieth century = the sum of the difficulties or drawbacks be-

setting the would-be practitioner of the said kind of art at the said time and place, as tabulated below.

1. CRASS SECULARISM, i.e. the generally non-religious trend of modern industrial society. Reams have been written about this, and I don't propose to add to them. I'll just say this. You have but to look at (for instance) Chartres to understand that a collective work of art of this calibre and direction could only come out of a community which believed massively and totally in Christianity. Only such a community could throw up the incredible volume of genius, inspiration and energy which it must have demanded. As for us latter-day Catholics, how are we to find such energy, such inspiration? We're like a handful of people trying to push their way into Wembley Stadium at the precise moment when a 95,000-strong crowd is hurrying to get *out*. It takes us just about all the strength we've got to avoid being actually swept backwards.

2. CATHOLIC BACKWOODSMANSHIP OF CRUSTACEANISM. By this I mean all the reactionary, stuffy and stupid attitudes (masterfully anatomized by Professor Cameron in a recent article in this journal) which we find *within* the Church, alas, almost wherever we look. Pro-Francoism, pro-McCarthyism, Hapsburg-nostalgia, enthusiasm for flogging and hanging, blind adherence to even the deadest of traditions provided they can be called traditions, and all the rest of it. These tendencies and others like them make Catholicism an atmosphere almost unbreathable by humane intellectuals and artists; and they create for the intellectual or artist who *is* a Catholic a subsidiary but equally dire Wembley-Stadium situation. It's as much as *he* can do to stay put inside the Church when there is so much in it that he finds utterly repulsive. Not much hope of getting the best available creative talent and enthusiasm on the Church's side at *that* rate, is there?

3. CRITICAL PAROCHIALISM OR DENOMINATIONAL DOUBLETHINK. This could be summed up by the formula: *It doesn't have to be all that good so long as it's Catholic*. We rightly despise this relaxing of critical scrupulosity when we see it indulged in by Communists in relation to works of art which have no discernible merit other than conformability to the Party Line. But are we innocent of it ourselves? For example, would we think of G. K. Chesterton as anything much more than a jolly old fourth-leader-writer if we didn't happen to share his religious outlook? And so on. So long as there exists this sort of partiality to trade on, there'll be those among us (and doesn't this Exhibition just show it?) who, consciously or otherwise, will trade on it, in preference to doing the hard work and hard thinking necessary to a real mastery of their *métier*. I need scarcely add that

this won't make for standards which the world in general will respect.

4. NIMINY-PIMININITY or REPOSITORIANISM. By this I mean the prevalence within the Church of refeened, genteel, prissy and generally petty-bourgeois conventions of behaviour and taste. *Vide*, for example, the routine statue, fabricated of plaster, painted pink and blue and looking as though it was begotten by Hollywood out of Canova, which we encounter in so many parish churches. It will do very well for a symbol of what I'm talking about. I'm not blaming the poor *parroco* for buying it: what else could he find or afford? I'm deploring the ethos that brings it into being. So long as this ethos predominates, it is going to be very difficult for a work of art which is not sweetish and tepid to find a foothold in our churches. It would be thought *not naice*.

5. CENSORSHIP. Probably a prime cause of niminy-pimininity, and certainly pure poison to artists. Whatever the arguments in favour of its use in ecclesiastical or secular government—and I don't want to go into all *that*—censorship whether of the artist by an outside authority or by some interior super-ego of his own setting up is quite inadmissible and fatal to his creative health. I would further say that self-censorship for an artist is morally wrong, and so is what I might call self-*dirigisme*. It is not for him to say what he is going to be inspired to do and what he isn't. He must take what is given to him and make what he can of it. The wind bloweth where it listeth, not where we list: and we must open all possible windows to let it in.

6. THE CARTESIAN DUALISM. I'm in deep water here, and any trained philosopher could push me under with his little finger. But on the internal evidence of art history—what I know of it—correlated with straws in the wind from other quarters, I sense that we have been, for at least three hundred years, the victims of a 'philosophical disaster' (to borrow a phrase from Miss Kathleen Raine) in the (for artists crucial) domain of subject-object relationships. We have become in some way disinherited and alienated from the visible world, to the dreadful impoverishment of our apprehension of the invisible one. There is a terrible sense of loss and sadness in our relation to nature: something which Rilke has marvellously treated of in his *Duino Elegies*. When I look at Romanesque and early Gothic carving, I feel that the carver was in possession of some immensely precious secret concerning what Buddhists, I believe, call 'inside-outside identity'—a secret which the Western world has since lost touch with. This whole subject is so profound and so hard to focus that here I can only indicate its importance. But as a footnote I would like to add that, along with the sense of loss, I

sometimes experience a wild and thrilling hope: as though we were on the point of stumbling on a new synthesis and reconciliation: as though the Hegelian spiral had at long last brought us round to a point vertically above the twelfth century, with all the added riches of modern science to qualify its instinctive and traditional insight.

*'Lift the stone and you will find Me. Cleave the wood and I am there.'*

7. THE EXHAUSTION OF IMAGERY. Western man has been astonishingly fertile in the invention of visual imagery with which to symbolize his experience both sacred and profane: we stand at the end of a galaxy four thousand years long and luminous with masterpieces: and the ready availability of reproductions makes us unprecedentedly conscious of it. But—for reasons which I only dimly understand—we seem, for the time being, to have *lost the right* to make our own representational human images to embody contemporary religious experience. No matter what we put down, there seems to be something suspect and false about it, even though it be irreproachable in point of technique. This is perhaps one of the reasons, though not the only one, for the widespread adoption of abstractionism. (I am speaking now of painting and sculpture, not architecture, which is anyway an 'abstract' art. God be thanked, we still have Ronchamp and La Tourette to comfort and inspire us.) It seems as though we have got to start again, basing ourselves on the inherent essentials of whatever medium we are working in: certain highways of which we formerly had the unquestioned freedom seem to be barred and sealed off with a large notice saying ROAD UP and NO ADMITTANCE.

Well, there it is. Those are some of the main points, anyway—though I fully expect that others, perhaps more important, will occur to me once it is too late to put them in. Grim situation, isn't it? Is there any hope at all? I think there is. Provided that we are prepared to place ourselves where we rightly belong: that is to say, right down at the bottom of the class; and provided that we are prepared to unlearn what we think we know, we may arrive at a point from which the first tottering steps forward might be made. We must develop a supersensitive nose for the bogus so that we can reject it. In a positive sense we must develop a nose for what is genuine and alive, *no matter in what company it is to be found*, in the contemporary cultural scene: we must find out, without prejudice, what and where are the growing points and leading shoots of modern art. To change the metaphor, it is a question of sinking our wells where the oil is—not where we elect to think it ought to be. That way, if God wills it, we may one day see some gushers shooting up into the sky.

I *could* tell you where I think the oil is: but to do so would mean



extending this letter to about twice its present length. I've run out of crepe paper, and you've been patient enough as it is. Anyway, I think those are the lights of my home station looming through the rain. Yes, they are. Good night, good hunting and best wishes,  
from CHRISTOPHER CORNFORD

P.S.—Next day. Looking over this in the morning light I'm struck by how grouchy it all sounds. No doubt if I were to re-visit the exhibition I'd see all sorts of good things I missed first time. You know how it is with critics. They're like the schoolmasters and sergeant-majors we all remember of old: once get their dander up, and nothing's right for them. Examining my catalogue I find annotations of approval opposite Arthur Pollen's Crucifix, Patrick Reyntien's all-too-minuscule contribution of stained glass, Joseph Cribb's Madonna in oak, and several other items.

But I don't take back a word I said about Catholic art in general. As to that, we've just got to keep on griping—and keep on trying.—C.F.C.

## EDUCATIONAL SURVEY

### The Anderson Report on Grants to Students

A CHILD who passes his eleven-plus examination can learn Latin free of charge till he is eighteen. A child who does not pass this test can still learn Latin till he is eighteen, if his father will pay for him to go to an independent or direct grant school. If a candidate cannot pass a university entrance examination in Latin, not even the offer of a fee of a thousand pounds a year can secure a university place for him.

When parents make great sacrifices in order that their children shall learn a particular subject, be educated in the religious tradition of the family, whether it be Jewish, Catholic or Quaker, or have the opportunity of being taught in small classes, they are often accused of 'contracting out' of their social obligations. There are at least two menacing assumptions behind this question-begging stock phrase which need to be brought into the open. Recently a weekly columnist wrote, 'Influential people buy their children out of the public system.' Since each university is autonomous, the question of contract is forced into some curious acrobatics where the payment of students' fees is concerned. The passing of an examination at eleven entitles a child to a free grammar-school education, whether the parents be rich or poor. The passing of a university entrance examination at present entitles a young man or woman to a free university education only if the parents are relatively poor. The family problems involved in this situation have been