

asks the question, "Who are members of my family?" Those who hear the word of God and keep it qualify to share in this relationship. This is strongly emphasised when we are told in the gospels that the relations of Jesus did not believe in him and indeed might have thought him to be deranged. What brings us to this discipleship as members of the family of God is the Spirit and therefore the truth of the revelation of Christ made flesh, light from light, true God from true God, only begotten of the Father, full of Grace and Truth. What is only imperfectly understood by the woman at the well before the resurrection is fully understood by Mary Magdalene in 'the garden', the traditional paradigmatic understanding of paradise.

1 *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London, 1989) pp. 943–50.

2 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John* (London, 1971) pp. 169–85.

3 C.K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London, 1982) p. 16.

4 Benedicta Ward SLG, *Harlots of The Desert* (London, 1987) pp. 10–25.

5 Brown, *op. cit* pp. 967–1051.

## Eric Rohmer on Nature *and* Grace

### Guy Bedouelle OP

It is a rare thing to find a film like *A Winter's Tale*, the latest work of Eric Rohmer, in which the protagonists talk about the knowledge of God and the leap of faith, and discuss reincarnation, abortion—to refute it—; invoke the theory of reminiscence; where they go into churches to pray, and in which the heroine thinks her partner ought to go to Mass, because it is Sunday and he is a believer. I should probably make it clear at the outset that this film was neither solicited nor financed by religious authorities, but was created by a film-writer who, while making no mystery of his Catholicism, has never paraded it.

#### Return to the Sources

*A Winter's Tale* is a masterpiece of subtlety, of precision in dialogue and photography. It handles people and situations with understanding, and even if the people happen to talk about Pascal and Plotinus, there is never a sense of that heaviness which is sometimes discernible in Rohmer's previous film, *A Summer's Tale*, where references to Kant were a little ponderous at times. . . . The setting remains simple and

homely, but we do not get the feeling that it was all thrown together in haste, as with some other works. To be honest, since 1982, friends of Rohmer and his films have defended them, at whatever cost, largely on the basis of the admiration lavished on his previous films. Even so, it has to be admitted that the six films made during this ten-year period, especially *My Soul's Friend* (1987), were far superior to the average film production. But we still looked for more strength in Rohmer, and waited for the moment when he would discover the form which renders his style incomparable. It has happened. By a return to the sources—for *A Winter's Tale* resembles *My Night at Maud's* (1969) on many counts—and by the use of his favourite comedians in minor roles (Rosette, Marie Rivière), the return to the paradoxically theological is assured.

### **The wager and the miracle**

The plot of *A Winter's Tale* is at once easy to describe in its broad outlines and complicated if we wish to give an idea of the finesse of the inner structures played out before the audience. A brief synopsis of the story is in order. During a summer, Félicie has known a perfect, fulfilling love, which has left her dazzled. These first scenes in the film, treated in rapid succession, lend a sense of modesty to the nakedness of the characters sunbathing in the sand in a modern Eden. We learn that this Adam and Eve are in real life a cook and a beautician, and this immediately anchors the romantic figures in a respectable realism, with even a touch of (condescending?) humour thrown in.

Then a grain of Pascalian sand falls into their perfect happiness. Under the stress of emotion due to the separation—temporary to be sure—on the platform of the railway station, Félicie, by a lapse of memory which turns out to be a determining factor, in giving Charles her address, confuses Levallois, where she lives, with Courbevoie. In both cities, found in the outer suburbs of Paris, there is a rue Victor-Hugo, as in each of the thirty-five thousand communes of France (or nearly)! As for Charles, he is leaving for a few months in the United States, and has no address. As is the way with modern young people, Charles and Félicie do not know each other's last names. Through an inadvertent fault, therefore, Félicie has destroyed the original happiness which had yet to be built and pursued.

Four years later we meet Félicie again, with her little girl, Charles' child. Nothing remains of Charles, for Félicie, but a photo taken during the famous holiday. She is living with her mother who takes care of the child, and she vacillates between two men: Maxence, a hairdresser whose dream is to make her the manager of his beauty salon, and Loic, a

young man in charge of the municipal library. We learn that Loic has his degree in philosophy and is a Breton and a practising Catholic. He is the would-be Pygmalion for this intelligent but uneducated girl.

Actually Félicie cannot choose to live with either one of these men, for she is awaiting Charles' return, a thing everyone around her persists in telling her is totally improbable. Her family and friends are unanimous in advising her that she has idealized the man who disappeared and the passing love which has left her nothing but her adorable little girl. What does she expect? A miracle? Félicie will have none of this, yet in the end she, too, begins to doubt.

This is how the situation stands when she agrees to go to Nevers with Maxence and work in his beauty salon. At first all goes well. Maxence shows her all the places of interest in the town, even the shrine where the body of Bernadette Soubirous, the seer of Lourdes, lies. Félicie, at this moment, has only one thought, ludicrous though it is: "She has a straight nose", she says, looking at the embalmed face of the saint. We learn later on that Félicie deplors her own curved nose and would love a straight one. Wounded by an unfortunate yet insignificant remark of Maxence, Félicie returns to Paris as fast as she had left, to the great joy of her little girl, who had never grown used to Nevers. Félicie then turns to Loic; she wants to be friends with him, but to go no further, to the young man's despair.

In the course of an evening among friends, during which a hilarious, worldly conversation takes place and a follower of the New Age extols reincarnation, giving Loic the occasion of affirming his faith in personal immortality, Félicie gives her own opinion. Her apparently candid reflections, which cannot be termed metaphysical since she has had no education, lead her to express a hope which is singularly intertwined with her hope for Charles' return. But her friend Loic is keen enough to detect in this both some sort of Pascalian wager and some Platonic reminiscence. We are reminded of the famous conversation in *My Night at Maud's* between Antoine Vitez, the Communist, and Jean-Louis Trintignant, the Catholic, on the same subject.

But Loic is even more astonished when Félicie reveals to him that having entered a church in Nevers by chance, she had prayed, "but not to God, for she had some difficulties with him." The young woman describes this experience as an encounter with herself, a sense of identity such as she had felt with Charles. Why did she pray? Why of course, for Charles' return, and she asks Loic, since he is a believer, to pray also for this intention.

After a scene at the theatre, where Loic and Félicie go to see

Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, a scene which critics have superficially treated as superfluous when in fact it gives us the key to the entire film, there follows the sudden and unexpected meeting with Charles, who has the happiness of discovering that his wife and daughter are awaiting him. The family is reunited in a *happy ending*, as in Shakespearian or classical comedies. We doubt if the remainder of Charles' and Félicie's lives will be notably changed as far as their work, hours on the subway and bus, humdrum dayliness and anxieties go, but we can imagine that such a period of waiting and the unexpected reunion will have prepared the way for an continuing love and other children.

### Theology through Joy

In considering this film, we could certainly limit ourselves to an amused view of an entertainment, of a story well told, the pastime of an pleasant evening. The plot is well developed, the actors excellent and the dialogue lively, even if, designedly, Rohmer has chosen the unusual and even forbidden—by theatrical canons—device of having one character tell another what the audience has already seen. It is in fact a matter of showing the subjective aspect of the whole story. Why look further, then, and above all, why dip into theology? Simply because the film itself invites us to do this in its more serious references, of a kind which a comedy could not accommodate; and because it focuses the unfolding plot upon Félicie's search and her waiting, both directed toward a deeper and fuller life.

It is Félicie's personality which gives spiritual coherence to the film. Her name is surely no accident. It evokes happiness, as do Felicity, Beata or Beatrix. The young woman has embarked upon a rediscovery of happiness, sprung out of the summer experience which she had lived through as a loving ecstasy. Without being an explicit believer, she is preoccupied with the meaninglessness generated by the beloved's absence. In spite of her impulsive decisions, she shows an amazingly sound judgment on many levels. When she is questioned as to whether she was tempted not to keep Charles' child when she first discovered her pregnancy, she answers by invoking her intimate conviction and the natural order, which is actually unheard of language. This makes Félicie a most charming interpreter of the Catholic teaching which opposes today's popular trends and currents.

Félicie constantly affirms her need for clarity: clarity in her relationships with the men she knows but will not live with; clarity in her relationship with God. And indeed, she herself speaks clearly even when she is acting imprudently, feeling her way by instinct. There is in this personality, for whom we feel that Rohmer has a great tenderness, a

rectitude which enables her to pass through trials and obscurity and to penetrate beyond what, to others, is the obvious. She possesses a kind of infused knowledge, to use a theological term.

When Félicie speaks of Charles and his absence, a believer can easily hear in this what one might say of God. We know that he exists, that he loves us; we feel his absence, we are sure of his return. Félicie understands equally well that her daughter needs a true father, and when her friends tell her that in displaying his photograph openly she will only frustrate and traumatize the little girl, she retorts that truth is greater than half-lies, and that a concrete sign of the absent one is preferable to the blur of ignorance.

Félicie lets her mother, a believer herself, set up a little crèche: the tale is a winter one, quite probably a Christmas one. There is a second crèche in the church at Nevers, and when Charles reappears it will be with armfuls of foodstuffs to celebrate his return. He is the providing father, and we are reminded of the pertinent analyses of Françoise Dolto on the adoptive dimension of all paternity, which gives profound meaning to Joseph, the spouse of Mary. At this moment the little girl, who has been somewhat wistful up to now, breaks into a true smile.

But there is more. Rohmer proposes to us a little meditation on the miracle. Pascal Bonitzer, in a recent and excellent work which cares not a whit for theology (*Eric Rohmer, Les Cahiers du cinéma*, Collection Auteurs, 1991) shows that this is a recurrent theme in the author of *Rayon Vert*, a film wholly constructed on waiting to wish on the evening-star at sunset.

What is new here is that the miracle is ever present in our invoking of it, in the prayer wherein we implore it, and in the quasi-religious acceptance of it. Granted, even if the chances are very slight, the meeting of two people in a suburban bus is not in itself supernatural. What actually happens is that a miracle bases itself in nature, using it as a kind of lever. Here the miraculous takes place in a bus, in the cold, in the initial misunderstanding. But it is far more astonishing on the other hand that Charles has maintained his freedom, and above all that he still loves Félicie. Obviously, the important thing is that the young woman should have believed, not in the reunion, but in the loving return of her child's father.

It is at this point that the Shakespearian scene which so moves Félicie in the theatre occurs. We know that Shakespeare wrote *A Winter's Tale* at the close of his life, and that the last scene is one of the most amazing in all of his plays. Hermione, the spouse calumniated by King Leontes, will actually arise from death as the music awakens the statue of her which they have come to admire in the chapel. We learn

that Hermione has been kept alive in order to rediscover her lost daughter. Critics have often given a Christian interpretation to this scene and to the play, so as to make of it a parable of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Could we go still further and suggest that there is a kind of intuition of the theology of the Immaculate Conception in this strange film of Rohmer? Bernadette Soubirous—and we wonder how else she could have found a place in the scenario—was the visionary of Mary, bearing witness to this grace which, theologically speaking, is that of the Protoevangel contained in the account of the Fall in the Book of Genesis. This attests the care of God, permeating his benevolent plan and guiding our smallest steps in the light of his Providence.

Perhaps you may think that this time I have gone too far! How, you may ask, can you say that the subtlest and perhaps most derived of all Catholic doctrines is contained within this comedy? In *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* (February, 1992, n. 452, p. 28). Eric Rohmer answers this question regarding *A Winter's Tale*. He describes Félicie's personality in these words: "She has an innate knowledge, a more spontaneous reaction than do masculine personalities." The journalist, who knows his author, then adds: "This thing that is natural . . . could you call it grace?" Rohmer responds: "I have not gone so far. But nothing can stop you from doing so." Eric Rohmer does not present himself as a theologian, but nothing can stop us from thinking him one.

*(translated by Sister Mary-Thomas Noble OP)*

## **Hebrew, Greek and Latin Summer School**

### **SACRIFICE**

*FOR BEGINNERS, INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED STUDENTS*

**19th—23rd July 1993**

**Plater College, Pullens Lane, Oxford, OX3 0DT**

Further information and booking form from:  
Sister Assunta Kirwan OP, Blackfriars, Oxford, OX1 3LY  
Tel: 0865 278437