

## RELIGION AS THE WRITER'S THEME

### A Blackfriars Conference

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**I**N an age of conferences the hope of an agreed conclusion most often overshadows the discussion, and the reassurance of public opinion can be a more powerful motive than the painful search for the truth. In July, the third of a series of Conferences being held this year at Spode House, Hawkesyard, on 'Religion and the Arts' was devoted to the Christian writer, and if its theme seemed vague it was at least happily free from the larger generalizations. The intention was not to produce a manifesto or to try to resolve the difficulties of a Catholic writer confronted with a world which at so many points rejects the religious and moral premisses that must be his. It was, rather, an opportunity for considering some of the factors in a debate that has suffered from lack of definition, and this was done in a setting of common faith and common life (if only for a few days), for want of which the writer or critic who is a Catholic can feel a special isolation.

Forty people came to the Conference and they represented no one but themselves. For the most part they were either contributors to this journal or critical readers of it; professionally they included university dons, working journalists, students, book-sellers, creative writers of (as they would admit) varying degrees of achievement, and priests whose work requires them to be specially concerned with the written word. 'Religion as the Writer's Theme' was the general subject of the lectures and discussions. For a first encounter the breadth of its terms of reference was an advantage; it made it possible to discover what would be profitable areas for discussion, and future conferences can hope to develop specialized subjects.

The opening lecture was given by Fr Gerald Vann on 'The Writer as Creator', the text of which appears elsewhere in this issue. 'The Aesthetic Principle' was the subject of the second lecture, given by Mr W. W. Robson, Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. The label 'aesthetic' is a nuisance and a danger for the critic, Mr Robson insisted at the outset, and the aesthetic choice is often gratuitous and arbitrary. Strictly speaking, each work of

art is *sui generis*, it is a class in itself and must contain within itself the standards for judgment; the critic is immediately concerned with the inward possession of the work, with evoking its singularity. But the 'spectator' judgment is not the only one: there is the normative, ethical judgment of the moral critic, and the problem is to distinguish—and yet to relate—the two kinds of criticism. The one does not entail the other. The great critic brings to bear the whole of his experience on the judgments he makes, yet he must recognize the separate types of criticism and the validity of their separation. Thus to say 'a poem is bad' may mean either that it fails to be good (the poet has not fulfilled his intention) or that it *has* fulfilled the poet's purpose, but that purpose is not worth pursuing. In the latter case moral judgment is involved: the poem is judged by standards not integral to it. The Catholic critic has no need to set up as an arbiter of values: he has the supports to establish what is valid in the moral order. And yet he, too, has the responsibility of making a personal choice, of selecting the values to be judged.

From a consideration of general principles the Conference proceeded to particular examples of the religious theme in literature, beginning with a lecture by Fr Kenelm Foster, Lecturer in Italian Literature at Cambridge, on 'Dante: the Religious Poet'. A detailed scrutiny of the evolution of Dante's mind as reflected in *The Divine Comedy* was of the greatest value in illuminating the principles considered in the earlier lectures and the discussions that followed them. Since the text of it will appear in a later number of BLACKFRIARS, a summary is unnecessary here, but it may be remarked that this rigorous examination of a particular writer's achievement was a good example of the work of exact scholarship which, it was frequently suggested during the Conference, should complement the often unspecified generalities of the 'religious' critic.

As a contrasting example of a religious theme, Mr Roger Sharrock (who lectures in English at Southampton University) took Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and so raised the question of religious autobiography, and in particular the Protestant expression of it, introspective and haunted with the sense of guilt, which has a special importance in the English literary tradition of the last three centuries. The discussion that followed Mr Sharrock's analysis of Bunyan's record of his own conversion turned, as was

inevitable, to the apologetic importance of religious writing. The ambiguity that can arise here without an exact definition of critical purpose (and Mr Robson's distinctions proved to be useful guides throughout the Conference) revealed the difficulty of the general theme chosen for the gathering. The recognition of this ambiguity would seem to be an essential prelude to any future discussion at a more detailed level.

Dr Elizabeth Sewell, herself distinguished both as scholar and novelist, had the task of dealing with 'The Myth of the Catholic Novel', a tendentious title for which she rightly disclaimed responsibility. She thought that 'Give the Devil his due' might be a suitable text for what she had to say, and she found in the recent preoccupation of Catholic novelists with heaven and hell a narrowing of the human and humane territory with which the novelist should deal. There was an impoverishment of man, and the essential Muse, 'innocent and unbaptized', had been crowded out. She found in the celebrated Catholic novelists tendencies both Protestant and Manichee which seemed obsessive. In a moving epilogue on 'How it strikes the writer', Dr Sewell appealed for the restoration of the Muse, which would mean putting heaven and hell in their proper places. Above all, a novelist should have charity for his characters; he should have the freedom to move, to love his characters and himself. No one is the Devil's due but rather God's. Dr Sewell ended with one of her own poems, *The Analogue*, which summed up the novelist's need to accept and not to reject the world his Muse declares.

A symposium of three opinions on 'What are we to say to unbelievers?' was designed to discuss the responsibilities of the Christian writer as the instrument of communication to a world which is so largely devoid of religious faith. Fr Henry St John insisted on the primary need to speak to men through conscience. God is implicit in the very notion of goodness, and the need is to find words which shall convey a living understanding of the faith not as abstract but as the true interpreter of experience and reality. Christians themselves often give but a notional assent to the truths they believe and 'unbeliever' is a relative term. Mrs Tickell (Renée Haynes) emphasized the inner necessity from which the creative writer proceeds and by which his work is shaped. He will not at the time worry about what he is to say to unbelievers or to believers either. He will write; and what he is and believes will be revealed

far more vividly in work done in this way than if he deliberately sets out to state his faith and to persuade people to it. For the writer of smaller ambition the problem will be not 'what are we to say', but 'how are we to say it', and 'to whom'. And here Mrs Tickell returned to a point insisted upon by Fr Gerald Vann: the need to revitalize the 'jargon' of usual Catholic speech, unintelligible as it often is to the uninitiated. She urged, too, the necessity of finding an imagery that would speak authentically to the contemporary reader. Miss Maryvonne Butcher distinguished between the 'unbeliever' (cool, detached and clever) and the 'misbeliever' (consciously and passionately opposed to the Church). To the former the Catholic writer should make no concessions: he should be so integrated and so sure of what he has to say that his position is perfectly plain. To the latter, in so far as he is explicitly addressed, no doubt the Catholic writer will need to be aware of his special task of persuasion. But on the whole 'what are we to say' can only mean that we must say what we must.

The discussion that followed this symposium reflected the complexity of the subject, but it was evident that a crude apologetic had little support, and that Catholics were felt to have special responsibilities in safeguarding the strictest standards of integrity as writers. This integrity would be most surely guaranteed when the quality and aptness of their language were the tangible expression of the quality of their thought.

In a final lecture, the Editor of *BLACKFRIARS* discussed the 'Function of a Review'. It must claim the freedom to be faithful to the truth and not allow an apologetic advantage to obscure its work of critical scrutiny. The direct exposition of Catholic theology and of the philosophy that supports it demands a special care for a language that is living, and the indirect work of interpreting the society in which we live requires a special objectivity in determining the limits of 'moral' intervention.

The last session of the Conference was devoted to the conclusions that might be drawn from the lectures and the discussion. That these 'conclusions' might in fact seem inconclusive was not thought to be regrettable, for the whole purpose of the Conference was to provide a meeting-place, an encounter between writers and theologians, so that each might learn from the other and so be enabled to re-consider their joint responsibility in mediating the truths of God to men. It is hoped to have future Conferences

of this sort, both at Spode House and in London, and, now that the preliminary work of definition has been attempted, it will be possible to pass on to particular questions. The special value of such a gathering would seem simply to lie in the opportunities it gives for meeting, the give-and-take of being together in the context of a religious house and its life, so that the 'problems' of the writer, as those of any other man, are seen in their true proportion. Certainly it appeared possible to be both serious and happy, and the unity of participation in the daily Mass was most generously reflected in all else that was said and done.

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## THE WRITER AS CREATOR<sup>1</sup>

GERALD VANN, O.P.

**T**HOU waterest the hills from thy high dwelling: the earth shall be filled with the fruit of thy works': St Thomas took this verse from Psalm 103 as the text of his inaugural lecture as Master in Theology at Paris, for, he says, it is ordained from eternity by the king and lord of the heavens that the gifts of his providence should come to his lowest creatures through the mediation of those that are higher, and so teachers and doctors are as mountains watered from on high by divine wisdom that they may pass on that wisdom to those they teach.

What is true of the theologian is true in a different way of every creative writer: he too is a mediator, he communicates a vision. But in what sense is he a creator? My concern here is to suggest questions rather than the answers to them: and here at once two different types of problem suggest themselves. The writer creates *with* words, but he also creates *words*. I am not thinking of the invention of neologisms: words are like living things, they grow, change, decay, die; and the fact that great Christian words can thus decay and die presents us with one of our most pressing problems. Some words become sterilized by over-familiarity,

1. The text of the opening lecture of the Blackfriars Conference at Spode House, July 2-5, 1954.