

POINTS OF VIEW

AT 'THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT' CONFERENCE

INTERCEDITE PRO NOBIS¹

FROM all sleight of word and the slickly present, from the clever and rash; and from the fool's precipitateness, O Bulldog Drummond, defend us. . . . It is not hard to place the tone; nor, in the right mood, is it hard *extempore* to go on endlessly. The rhythm is both lulling and catching. . . . O Four Just Men, protect us; O Pip, Squeak and Wilfred, save us. . . . For there is in such nonsense a certain sense; in the dated invocation a certain note of age-long familiarity. One is perhaps dealing with territory as yet almost uncharted by theology, philosophy or psychology—the territory of race-memory, a sphere so uncharted that it is probably one of the strongest arguments to be used against those who believe that knowledge is nearly exhausted and that therefore the end of the world must be nigh. For at this stage, half-way through the twentieth century, there would seem to be (especially in Catholic circles) two conflicting lines of thought: one heralds a great Christian artistic revival; the other speaks of a post-Christian world. But if one is true, the other is not: the argument cannot be held both ways! Yet the frequency with which these generalizations are coupled together in the religious Press—sometimes even on the same page!—suggests a glaring antithesis whose implications I should like to study. My conclusions I base on two consecutive years reviewing of both American and English poetry and fiction. Again, I want to limit my comments to those under forty; to see, if any, what are the trends of my own generation. I remember Cyril Connolly describing an imaginary London literary *soirée* and asking, 'Why is Mr Dylan Thomas still the youngest person present? Where are the under-thirties?' Dylan Thomas was born in 1914.

A group of poets and novelists now over forty have shown

¹ I am grateful to Dom Bede Griffiths' stimulating paper, *Lectio Divina*, that set these ideas in motion.

universal reputations and, in a period of artistic anaemia, their talents: on literary merits alone they have achieved the rich full-bloodedness of their work has become emphasized by that of the watery quality of their rivals'. Attention has automatically focussed upon this group, all of whom are converts to belief—either Anglican, Catholic or simply acceptance of a Godhead. In the work of their successors, the under-forties, those who are interested in Christian literary discrimination may find what they think is a similar acceptance. Certainly they will find repeated references to Christ, resurrection—even to 'Christ and the Resurrection', because this is a catch-phrase that has caught on—like W. H. Auden's earlier 'a change of heart, new styles of architecture'. No longer is it a case of—

It's no go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible,

All we want is a packet of fags when the hands are idle.²

The Thirties, that 'low dishonest decade', are over. In vain men waited for the State to wither clean away, for the Millenium that theory promised all would come.

It didn't: specialists must try

To detail all the reasons why.³

One of those reasons, maybe, was the victory of Franco in Spain and the shame of Munich two years later: Fascism had twice triumphed over Communism. Again, although Russia's entry into the war as an ally may have whipped up a temporary interest for writers abroad—stories were coming back of greater freedom being granted to Soviet artists (maybe, after all, the State was beginning to wither away?)—the cessation of hostilities showed that such freedom had been a false dawn: when artists were ordered to paint the happiest day of their life, they more often than not sent in canvases of themselves 'shaking hands with Stalin'. So poets elsewhere began to look closer home. In the West the new generations sought a less global vision; they preferred the microcosmic to the macrocosmic; their quatrains and sonnets celebrated a leaf in bud or told the story of a vase or a circus dog. Their subjects became isolated and when, a little later, they tackled bigger subjects a similar isolation held over

² Louis MacNeice.

³ W. H. Auden.

their approach. Which brings one back to their catch-phrase, 'Christ and the Resurrection'.

These poets accept the A.D. 33 Resurrection as an event that happened historically. A man called Christ rose from the dead—and the act of resurrection is taken as a symbol of new life, new birth. But the symbolism ends here; historically it is given no religious repercussions, since 'Christ and the Resurrection', new life, new birth, are slogans employed like the old 'change of heart', the 'new styles of architecture'. In the act of Christ rising from the dead there is, for instance, no suggestion of a Phoenix-legend; the event is quite consciously isolated in time—and one asks why. I submit that consciously (or unconsciously) it is isolated because human kind cannot bear too much responsibility; sin is out of fashion and sin means responsibility; as an isolationist one does not like to think that by sin one is tied to a crucifixion which in the natural order of events had to precede a resurrection. In an era that sets so much by hygiene, crucifixion appears a particularly bloody and messy kind of end. There is a fear of blood just as in most fiction there is a fear to take a microscope to the flesh—to see the black-heads or to receive an awareness of the seven skins which protect a man. It is dangerous to graze the skin; it might bleed, and in fiction, as in poetry, the results might be messy; competence is a safer bid than the naked flesh because that might be to risk banality. In the end only technical risks are taken; the mysteries of the flesh are denied and hence those of the Incarnation. Thus it is that 'Christ and the Resurrection' can be spoken of without reference to the Crucifixion. For by resurrection they mean no more than new life, new birth—in a word, spring rites.

Yet it is significant that although Christ's Resurrection may be divorced from its basic religious meaning, both the idea of Christ, of resurrection, and the isolated idea of 'Christ and the Resurrection', as words and as a phrase of invocation still remain part of the property shop of modern writing; they have acquired, as it were, a poetic glow or, as some might say, a mythical quality.⁴ As words and as a phrase of invocation perhaps an age-long familiarity with them, with

⁴ See David Jones' work—a brilliant pioneer mind in this field.

their rhythm, causes them to catch in race-memory; perhaps when they are written today it is with a wisdom beyond the writer. For maybe they reflect basic litanies which are inherent in speech (the child sings before he talks), so that writing of all sorts must to some extent be a tracing. That is perhaps what is meant by a writer handing himself over;⁵ in following his vocation, either consciously or unconsciously, he must of necessity use words to trace the meaning of the Word. That is perhaps in one sense why there can be no such thing as secular literature; why an invocation such as 'O Bulldog Drummond, defend us' stays in the memory since the rhythm recalls the *Kyrie, Eleison*—Lord, have mercy on us; Christ, have mercy on us. The sacred and so-called profane are perhaps closer than one thinks. To invoke 'Christ and the Resurrection' in the sense that so many modern young writers do is perhaps not so barren a gesture after all; perhaps the accusation of barrenness is no more basically so than it is true to say that this is a post-Christian age. For surely once Truth has been revealed in the Scriptures it can be forgotten, dismissed or ignored, but never be blanked out; at the best one can overlay it, but not remain indifferent to it. For the truth has the habit of coming through in the oddest ways. A nonsense line like 'O Pip, Squeak and Wilfred, save us' may well stir memories, so that for a contemporary rationalist to hear it may be like receiving a summons from the past; he will be listening with the ears of his ancestors, a common rhythm uniting them—profane words tracing the meaning of the sacred Word. All ye holy men and women, saints of God, intercede for us. . . . O Four Just Men, defend us. . . . Perhaps the words will blur, the lines juxtapose, and the cut (before one goes 'to Paradise by way of Kensal Green') be shorter between the *Kyrie, Eleison* and the invocation, 'O Bulldog Drummond, defend us', than is generally supposed.

As a Christian, then, I would submit that the term 'a post-Christian world' is made nonsense of by the birth of Christ—that is, unless one capitulates one's belief in his divinity and assumes that the birth at Bethlehem had no further repercussions beyond the year A.D. 33. For as Newman said, 'a sin-

⁵ See François Mauriac's notes on the craft of fiction.

less literature of sinful man cannot be attempted'; and since A.D. 33 all artistic endeavour in any sphere is artistic endeavour redeemed. In some way or other it is for ever shackled to the Incarnation, given flesh, as it were, by this fact. So it is that as 'God rules straight with crooked lines—even with sins',⁶ so possibly, theologically, there is today a certain leeway to be made up; true to their calling the poets and novelists have spoken in advance of their age, charting territory now to be mapped in detail by the theologians, philosophers and psychologists. Let me illustrate this—first by going to a novelist over forty and then returning to the poets under forty.

In *The End of the Affair* (1952) by Graham Greene a West London rationalist preacher, Smythe, is disturbed by the power of Christianity. He feels that every detail of it is only a stronger affirmation of its power to survive in the Western world, so that one cannot even say 'good-bye' to anyone without, consciously or unconsciously, saying 'God be with you'; from the start one is committed, tied. Who knows if, since 'between the stirrup and the ground there's often mercy found', many rationalists and unbelievers may not find that in unwittingly having invoked God's protection upon their friends, that at the last in his infinite mercy he will be with them? And this question leads me to modern poets' constant invocations to 'Christ and the Resurrection'. These invocations casually encountered may seem barren to the practising Christian, but perhaps finally they are no more barren than Smythe's seemingly Godless 'good-byes'; perhaps no more barren than the apparent blasphemies of soldiers which may be but a profane echo of the sacred *Fiats* of the saints—a hint, even in the barrack-room, of the need for a liturgy to live by; perhaps no more barren than the seemingly divorced poets' invocations which, like the soldiers' blasphemies, like the rationalists' 'good-byes', may yet unconsciously form a prayer?

But these are the marginal notes of a literary critic, the questions of a layman; and it is probably now time for the theologian to weigh in. . . .

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⁶ See *The Satin Slipper*, by Paul Claudel.