

BLACKFRIARS

In this version, Tony returns to Hetton and Brenda, who by now has been abandoned by John Beaver. They settle down to a flat loveless life, trying to pick up the threads of their former existence. The novel ends on a mute ambiguous note, with Brenda expecting a baby and Tony clandestinely keeping on their flat in London, though pretending to Brenda that he has let it. This version of the novel centres the interest much more squarely on Brenda and Tony as a couple, and less on Tony as a doomed romantic; it becomes a fairly conventional story of the failure of a marriage in fashionable society, and the full implications of Tony's Gothic aspirations are not brought out. In the definitive version, incorporating Tony's South American expedition and his search for the 'City', Mr Waugh achieved a far greater imaginative power, and, in Tony's ultimate fate, a horrifying originality. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see the alternative version, though the interest is rather more bibliographical than critical.

BERNARD BERGONZI

THE BETTER SONG, by Luc Estang; Hodder and Stoughton; 21s.

PRELUDE TO A WEDDING, by Barbara Lucas; Barrie and Rockliff; 18s.

Although both these novels have a background of Catholicism, in M. Estang's work it plays such an important part that both believers and non-believers are swept up in the drama. But what a joyless affair this religion is; indeed the title is taken from a Nietzsche quotation: 'they would have to sing better songs for me to be able to believe in their Saviour; his disciples would have to look more saved'. The hero, Octave Coltenceau, has been brought up in a nineteenth century French Catholicism with its hints of Jansenism, and the story is seen entirely through his eyes. He is a middle-aged lawyer's clerk, outwardly happily married with children, but in truth tormented, scrupulous and physically unfulfilled, so that he is ripe for seduction by an attractive near-pagan widow, Marie-Laure, perhaps the most sympathetically drawn character in the novel. The story consists for the most part of their affaire and Octave's dilemma as a consequence. Other characters only seem to exist in order to illuminate his problem, a problem more religious than human: although we have the eternal triangle, it is really not his wife but God who is the third person. Octave's personality plays a greater part in all this than even he himself realises; if he had not already been brought up in a religion of this sort, it would have been necessary for him to find one. His whole development is revealed in a series of flashbacks, cleverly scattered throughout the story, placed so as to show the fruits of his mother's coldness and austerity during childhood (coldness the result of a renunciation parallel with the one he now feels it his duty to make) and the way this was reinforced by the religious education of his schooldays. In spite of another of the author's introductory quotations, Peguy's: 'it is not given to man simultaneously to achieve his happiness and his salvation', a

particular rather than a general truth seems to be both the aim and achievement of the novel: that a personality such as Octave's could never find happiness other than the most transitory, when it contrasts with religious belief. 'I'm as happy as a pagan', he says one day, and his own words jolt him almost overnight from apparent content into mental turmoil. By his nature, he is tempted to salvation as strongly as he was originally tempted to adultery, and in his countering of this temptation by the grief-stricken face of his mistress, one is reminded not for the first time of Graham Greene's Scobie. The manner in which the problem is finally solved, I found unsatisfactory, although its power to shock is undeniable and it is of sufficient stature for the size of the dilemma. But it is as if the author, faced with a problem of his own invention, was as little able to see a way out as his hero. Viewed as a whole though, this novel is an immensely successful, and at times deeply moving portrayal of a tortured soul. M. Estant is well served by his translators.

The religion in Miss Lucas' novel is of a very different kind, and how comforting it is to find Catholicism a home and not a prison; but precisely because of this the atmosphere occasionally borders on the cosy, with its intimate conversations and particular allusions. The story itself is concerned with three women who have known each other since their youth, and are now even more closely linked through their respective children. It is the children who bring about most of the action, but everything is seen through the eyes of these women and although the tale is universal enough to escape successfully the label 'woman's novel', it comes perilously near sometimes with its emphasis on feminine trivia. On these occasions, the sophisticated humour, the frankness and the element of surprise save it. Of the three women Cecilia plays the most important part. She is a lovable and skilful portrait of a 'just woman', with Miss Lucas making clever use of her imperfections both past and present to avoid alienating her readers through excessive virtue. Helen, who dies halfway through the book, acts against a background of her impending death (ironically unknown to her) and this lends poignancy to her portrait, as does also the vivid sense of the life to come felt by her and Cecilia and conveyed to the reader. Diana, a most successful and witty creation, is by contrast a woman of the world, but true always to her quite different set of values. She is entertainingly gossipy and frequently audacious, and I feel much loved by the author: she is even given the last words of the story. The men on the other hand, are much less successful, verging on the tedious or the odious, although Helen's husband Henry often slips conveniently into the role of villain.

The action is divided between London, Rome and a village near Paris and the different atmospheres and the swift changes of scene are well managed, while the network of intrigues which form much of the plot are handled in a sure fashion. Miss Lucas is to be congratulated on a novel which is at the same time clever, yet warm.

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