

# BOOKS

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I.  
NOVELISTS like François Mauriac, Graham Greene and Jean Cayrol are fond of asserting that they are Catholics who write novels and not Catholic novelists, or are merely novelists who happen to have written books in which some of the characters are Catholics. The distinction is symptomatic of our time. It would have been unthinkable in a Catholic community where a writer was simply a writer who might treat religious or secular subjects. It was only with the fragmentation of Christendom, and the division of the community into a large number of warring factions, that labels and distinctions of this kind became possible. Even today we find it a little difficult to think of Chaucer either as a Catholic poet or as a Catholic who wrote poetry.

One of the reasons why the writers whom I have mentioned are reluctant to describe themselves, or to be described, as Catholic novelists is plain. They are afraid of being mistaken for the authors of works of edification or, worse still, propaganda. They are therefore at pains to stress their solidarity with the secular world and to play down the religious element in their books. They vie with the non-Catholic writer, or the writer who is not a Catholic, in the boldness with which they describe the seamy side of life and dwell with delight on the rawest details of the sexual connexion. This explains in part the violence, the love of extremes, which are characteristic of Catholic imaginative writers from Barbey d'Aureville and Huysmans to Mauriac and Greene.

Their attitude seems to me to be mistaken. No one wants a Catholic to spend his time turning out pious stories for the edification of the faithful or to spoil the view with too many fig leaves. Nobody cares if the 'churchy' do get an occasional shock and tell their bishops. There is, however, a considerable difference between the imaginative writer and the scientist or the technician. The writer, if he really is a writer, is bound to put himself into his books and would not be worth reading unless he did so. Now we do expect a man's religion to be the centre of his writing, the unifying principle which places all experience in perspective. This is precisely what we are not given. What is most striking about contemporary Catholic writers is the inferiority of their religious to their artistic experience. The disparity between the two means that religion fails to provide a proper discipline, that the depth of their artistic experience is not balanced by a corresponding depth of religious experience. This leads to overcompensation by violence. Neither Mauriac nor Greene can be said to 'see life steadily and see it whole'. One of

the most pronounced features of their work and their view of life is a sense of unbalance. Religion does not produce order: it is the disruptive element. It takes on the colour of the society in which the writer is living and becomes a symptom of the bankruptcy of our much vaunted Christian culture.

Something of the same sort is true of the Catholic critic or, to use the contemporary euphemism, the Catholic who writes criticism. His position is even more precarious than that of the novelist. He is suspected, he comes to suspect himself, of praising those writers who are either Catholics or describe a view of life which is acceptable to a Catholic, and damning the great writer whose views are inimical. This can have the effect of driving him in the opposite direction: he condemns any work which smacks of religion and praises the work of the secularist simply to show that he is unbiased, that he can see the weaknesses of his own side and the virtues of the other. It is clearly an approach which prevents sound judgment.

T. S. Eliot once described the function of criticism as "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste." The literary critic is first and foremost the expert reader whose job it is to teach other people to read, but it goes much further than that. "Criticism," said Middleton Murry, "is a particular art of literature." The old distinction between criticism and creation is largely outdated. The critic is a teacher of reading certainly, but he is also an artist. His aim like that of any artist is to express himself though he does so through other writers. This brings us to the difference between the true critic and the scholar, the academic or the literary journalist. The genuine critic is the writer-critic or the artist-critic: the man who is concerned not with establishing the texts of his author, producing a piece of academic research or cutting a caper in the Sunday journals, but with expressing himself in the widest and fullest sense of the term.

We can go on to say that the critic should be a man of powerful personality and ripe wisdom. There can be no distinction between the man and the writer, between the person who holds certain beliefs or opinions, who has had certain experiences, and the literary critic. The whole of his personality, the whole of his experience as a man must be behind the individual essay or even the individual judgment.

What I wish to do in this paper is to try to unravel the part played by religion in literary criticism, or rather to consider the part that it ought to play and the different parts that it has in fact played in the work of a number of practitioners.

I HAVE OBSERVED in other places that in ages of settled belief men tend to write well, that in unsettled times they have gone out of their way to discover or to devise some philosophy, system or framework to give unity and coherence to their experience. This applies as forcibly to the critic as to the imaginative writer. It is characteristic of literary criticism that it relies to a greater extent than any other form of writing on the departmental sciences: sociology, psychology and philology or, to give it its more fashionable name, stylistics.

This is a modern development. Carloni and Filloux, the French authors of a manual on literary criticism, consign virtually all criticism written before the nineteenth century to what they call the period of "pré-histoire." Now it is perfectly true that literary criticism as we understand it is very largely the product of the nineteenth century. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century criticism was a branch of what was known as "rhetoric." The critic behaved in the main like a superior schoolmaster who went through his texts commending "beauties" or, more often, pointing out departures from "the rules" as though he were correcting a pupil's essay. The change — I feel inclined to call it the dramatic change — came with Sainte-Beuve. Sainte-Beuve was well aware that the critic was essentially the good reader whose job it was to teach reading, but he realised that the knowledge needed to teach reading went far beyond what was to be found in the texts, that it must embrace psychology, sociology, philosophy, even theology. This is the significance of his theory of "the literary group." You needed to know not merely the book but the man; not merely the man but his family and associates; not merely his family and associates but his environment and the climate of his age.

In a period like our own, which is a trifle obsessed with defining "the function" or "the business" of criticism, doubts have been cast on Sainte-Beuve's claim to be regarded as a *literary* critic at all. "If he was a critic," said Mr. Eliot in *The Sacred Wood*, "there is no doubt that he was a very good one; but we may conclude that he earned another name." I think that we may also conclude that in challenging Sainte-Beuve's claim the present age is liable to miss the point of his achievement. He saw that mechanical rules and absolute judgments had had their day, that criticism must be creative. It is not an accident that we think of him primarily as a great European writer rather than as a critic, that his name is familiar to people who have never read him and probably have no very strong interest in literature as such. What he did was to secure recognition for criticism as a branch of literature, as an art in its own right. Without him it seems impossible that criticism would enjoy its present status, that we should constantly speak of living in "an age of criticism," or that the "new criticism" would ever have seen the light.

Whatever we may think of the books he actually wrote — it is right to say that *Port-Royal* seems to me to be unquestionably a masterpiece — there can be no doubt that they were seminal for the future development of literary criticism. His work also marked a parting of the ways: the evolution of criticism as an art and its evolution as a science. In the posthumous *Contre*

*Sainte-Beuve* Marcel Proust criticised Sainte-Beuve severely for his frivolity, his taste for gossip and the failure to recognize the genius of his great contemporaries, but Sainte-Beuve possessed one great advantage over some of his progeny. He was not a dogmatist; in the last resort the touchstone was sensibility and not rigidly applied principles. Taine's debt to Sainte-Beuve was great, but though he was insistent in describing his own criticism as a "method" rather than a "system" he will go down to history as the creator of modern critical dogmatism, the inventor of "scientific criticism." His avowed aim was, indeed, to make criticism scientific, to replace the absolute judgments of rhetoric by an infallible scientific test for deciding the merits of a writer. It is possible that at his best he was a more searching critic than Sainte-Beuve, but his criticism constantly illustrates the way in which a naturally lively sensibility and a penetrating intelligence were distorted by a narrow philosophy: the scientific determinism or, as Paul Bourget called it, the "scientism," which dominated the second half of the nineteenth century. His theory of "the race, the moment and the milieu" was a good deal more scientific than Sainte-Beuve's "literary group," but instead of opening up new avenues for exploration it had the reverse effect: it confined the critic to a world which was as narrow in its own way as that of the rhetoricians. Taine was convinced that once you had discovered "the race, the moment and the milieu," you could predict with complete certainty not merely the writer who would emerge, but the sort of books he was bound to write. The attempt to formulate a scientifically valid criterion had one other and far-reaching effect. It led to the view that the value of literature lay less in its intrinsic virtues than in the information it provided about man and society. The close of Taine's essay on Balzac is a classic example: "With Shakespeare and Saint-Simon he has provided us with the largest storehouse of documents on human nature that we possess."

PAINE was the forerunner of both the psychoanalytical and the Marxist critics. It would be very wrong to underestimate Freud's immense contribution to the study of the mind or the outstanding value of his theories for literary criticism. When properly used psychoanalysis encourages a more intense scrutiny of the latent implications of words and images in the attempt to elucidate symbolic patterns which are often revealing. It also has much to tell us about character and motive in the drama and prose fiction. There is a good deal to be learnt, too, from the Marxist analysis of society and the social function of art. It remains true, however, that both systems are based on a determinist philosophy and that both tend to make art serve some ulterior purpose. The rigid application of psychoanalysis turns the literary work into a case history and Marxist criticism is used to promote "socialist realism," which is surely one of the dreariest theories of art ever to be propounded.

It is instructive to glance at the English scene in the nineteenth century. The differences between English and French critics are remarkable. The first thing that strikes us about the French is their extreme professionalism. In comparison the English seem to be a group of very gentlemanly and very distinguished amateurs who

turn out an occasional essay when they feel like it. If French criticism demonstrates the dangers of systems, English criticism shows what happens when one simply cultivates good taste and a liberal outlook. Coleridge felt the need of a point of view and though he did not apply systems dogmatically, his great intellect was submerged at a comparatively early age in the mists of German idealism. Arnold, too, took good care to avoid the extremes of the French, but though he was a fine critic there is about his work a certain floosiness: "high seriousness"; "the best that is known and thought in the world"; poetry as a substitute for religion:

*"More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."*

It is less surprising to find religion being superseded by poetry when we remember what a poor thing this religion was. It is defined in *Literature and Dogma* as "morality touched by emotion."

As a corrective to both the Taines and the Arnolds, we can turn to Baudelaire's essay on *The Salon of 1846*. Answering the question: "What good is criticism?" he said:

*"Criticism must be partial, passionate, political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but from the point of view which opens up the widest horizons."*

It is a miniature critical credo which has lost none of its point. Criticism must be "partial" in the sense that it expresses an individual approach; it must be "passionate" in the sense that the critic's sympathies must be actively engaged, that we do not want chilly academic exercises or what Baudelaire described, in the same essay, as "the cold, algebraic criticism." It is, however, the final words which contain the essence of the twenty-five-year-old Baudelaire's wisdom: "written from an exclusive point of view, but from the point of view which opens up the widest horizons."

The critic must have a definite point of view, a unifying principle which places all experience in perspective and enables him to see works of literature as a hierarchy. It is this that gives his work its force, that makes it possible for him to communicate himself to the reader and to provide that wisdom which is one of the characteristics of all good criticism. He should make the fullest use of the departmental sciences in constructing his "exclusive point of view." The trouble begins when he tries to turn one of the departmental sciences into a philosophy of life, to treat a part as the whole, to elevate something which is of its nature subordinate into the first place, to substitute a supposedly scientific criterion for that personal responsibility which, as Baudelaire saw so clearly, must be his. That is the source of so many of the critical battles which have been fought during the past hundred years.

### 3.

LITERARY CRITICISM," wrote T. S. Eliot, "should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint." "The first thing the literary critic has to do," retorts Northrop Frye, "is to read literature, to make an inductive survey of his own field and let his critical principles shape themselves solely

out of his knowledge of that field. Critical principles cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science or any combinations of these. Although these statements may seem at first to contradict one another, I think that the contradiction is apparent rather than real. The first thing to be said about the Christian approach is that religion must never be applied dogmatically. Properly used, it can and should provide an "exclusive point of view, but the point of view which opens up the widest horizons." We may distinguish three stages in the critical act: first, the full and unfettered response of the critic to his text; next, the process of analysis and elucidation; finally, the critical judgment. Theological principles cannot be applied "ready-made," but it is evident that they will color all three stages and have their maximum effect in the final one. Mr. Eliot, indeed, chose his words carefully. What he said was that literary criticism must be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint. The critic, if he is to be anything more than a *causeur*, must be a moralist, but a moralist who does not allow his moral perceptions to distort his aesthetic perceptions. He must be able to say with Newman:

*"[Milton and Gibbon] are great English authors, each breathing hatred to the Catholic Church in his own way, each a proud and rebellious creature of God, each gifted with incomparable gifts."*

He must be in a position to declare, if necessary, that a writer has produced a fine work, but that its effect may be (in the words of another priest-critic) "to propel humanity towards the abyss." In short, the justification of religion in criticism is that it shall be a positive instrument of exploration, that it shall provide the critic with insights that he would not have had without it and enable him to distinguish with greater certainty between the values of the different kinds of experience which offer themselves to his scrutiny.

What I wish to do in the remainder of this paper is to examine a number of individual approaches, to give examples of critics whose work is illuminated by religion and of critics whose work seems to me to have been harmed by the dogmatic application of "ready-made" theological principles. I shall interpret the expression "Christian approach" in a wide sense. On one level it may mean the believing, practising Christian; on a lower level it means no more than a Christian background, a knowledge of Christian principles divorced from practice and even belief. We shall see that in some instances the lapsed or wayward Catholic, or even the unbeliever with a Christian background, is in a better position to understand and appreciate the specifically Christian content of much of the literature of France than a critic without this background. This has been put in another way by T. S. Eliot who said that it is easier for the instructed Catholic to grasp the meaning of Dante than the ordinary agnostic "not because the Catholic believes, but because he has been instructed."

My first witness is Sainte-Beuve. Although he became in his later years a thoroughgoing agnostic and once declared that for him literary criticism was incompatible with Christian practice, he undoubtedly pos-



essed what he described in his book on *Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire* as a “Christian imagination.” His studies of the great French seventeenth-century masters in *Port-Royal* are constantly illuminated by insights which he owed to his Catholic upbringing and his early fervour. I have chosen, as one of the best examples, his comparison between *Polyeucte* and the *journee du guichet*—the day on which the youthful Abbess of Port-Royal refused her parents entry to the monastery in order to prevent interference with her vocation:

“*Corneille’s Polyeucte is not in all respects finer than this actual event which occurred during the poet’s childhood and the source of its inspiration is no different. It is the same struggle and the same triumph. If we are moved and uplifted by Polyeucte, it is because something of the same sort was and remains possible to human nature when assisted by Grace. I will go further than that: if Corneille’s genius was capable of producing Polyeucte in his time, it was because something still existed in the atmosphere about him (whether he was conscious of it or not) which equalled and reproduced the same miracles.*”

Another impressive example is his judgment on *Le Génie du Christianisme* in the book on Chateaubriand:

“*Le Génie du Christianisme was useful in so far as it helped to restore respect for Christianity considered from a social and political point of view. It was less useful in that from the outset it led the religious revival to embark on a course which was brilliant and superficial, purely literary and picturesque, as far removed as possible from the true regeneration of the heart.*”

In the first passage the critic’s religious background—his “Christian imagination”—enables him to discover a positive quality in Corneille and relate it to the contemporary situation. In the second place, the same “Catholic imagination” enables him to expose the shallowness and the shortcomings of the religious revival at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to explain why it went wrong.

My next witness is Baudelaire who was potentially the greatest critic of his age as he was its greatest poet. There have been unseemly wrangles between Catholics and unbelievers about his personal beliefs. He was not a practising Christian, but the whole of his work is colored by religion. The religion that we find in the *Fleurs du mal* is a fragmentary, mutilated religion, a sort of residual Christianity. Religious principles play a far more positive role in his criticism. It is not surprising that a writer with Baudelaire’s Manichæan leanings should have been preoccupied with original sin, or that he should have insisted on the inherent sinfulness of human nature in an age which was saturated with Rousseau and which was convinced of the perfectibility of human nature whose weaknesses would soon be eradicated by the march of science:

“*Most of the errors relating to the beautiful are the result of the false conception of morality which prevailed during the eighteenth century. At that time nature was regarded as the basis, source and type of every possible form of the good and the beautiful. The denial of the dogma of original sin played no small part in the general blindness of the age. In any case, if we are content simply to refer to the fact, which is apparent to the experience of every age and to the Gazette des*

*Tribunaux, we shall see that nature teaches nothing, or practically nothing, that is to say, it forces man to sleep, to drink and to protect himself as best he can against the elements.*”

Baudelaire disliked the eighteenth-century belief in the perfectibility of human nature because it seemed to him to reduce the individual to a state of uniformity, to exclude the sense of mystery and those tensions of which he was so acutely aware in himself. He also disliked the cult of nature because to him nature seemed mindless, mechanical and uncivilized. In other words, the eighteenth-century conception of a man was a simplification which restricted the field of human experience and did more than any other single factor to enclose man in a finite world which was the negation of all that Baudelaire stood for.

WHEN WE LOOK BACK we can see that the passage on original sin anticipated most of the shortcomings of the extreme school of realism which developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century and is still revived from time to time, notably in the “socialist realism” of the Marxists. Baudelaire saw man as a prey to the effects of original sin which were most evident in that terrible “spleen,” but in spite of a possible confusion between religious and aesthetic beatitude, he also saw him as a being who was capable of “ecstasy.” In another passage he returns, indirectly, to the theme of original sin:

“*It would certainly be an injustice to deny the services rendered by the school known as Romantic. It recalled us to the truth of the image; it destroyed the academic commonplaces and even from the superior point of view of linguistics, it does not deserve the contempt heaped upon it by certain impotent pedants. But by its very nature the Romantic insurrection was condemned to a short life. The puerile utopia of art for art’s sake by excluding morality and often even passion was a flagrant contradiction of the genius of humanity. In the name of the higher principles which constitute the universal life, we have the right to declare it guilty of heterodoxy.*”

This like the earlier passage is plainly criticism which is founded on firm principles. When we compare Baudelaire’s approach with Arnold’s, we can see what I have called a “residual Christianity” has far more vigour than the vanishing Christianity of a Protestant modernist with its sentimental tags about poetry “consoling” and “sustaining” us.

Baudelaire is putting forward views which were to receive a still more explicit formulation in the twentieth century. He traces the confusion in the arts to the divorce between literature and morality at the time of the Romantic Movement. The disappearance of “style” in the sense of every period possessing its distinctive style is implicit in the reference to the “*Romantic insurrection*”: the short-lived uprising which disrupts one style without being able to create a fresh one to take its place. The statement that the exclusion of morality is a contradiction of “the genius of humanity” points to a Christian conception of the nature of man: “The higher principles which constitute the universal life” appear to be a plea for a unifying philosophy which transcends both the theories of Rousseau and the purely aesthetic theory of “art for art’s sake.”

The word "heterodoxy" in this context shows a determination to apply Christian principles to the criticism of literature.

I have insisted in these pages that the Christian approach to criticism must be positive. While it must clearly avoid damning the good writer because his views are unacceptable, it must equally assist in deflating the bad writer who has been taken up by religious people because his philosophy is acceptable. An almost perfect example of the way in which religion should not be used, of the dangers of fanaticism and intolerance, is provided by Paul Claudel in his incidental judgments. I can forgive him Voltaire because I do not like that writer any more than he did though I condemn him, or at any rate I hope I condemn him, on different grounds. I find it difficult to forgive his slighting references to Stendhal on account of his anti-clericalism. Stendhal was inclined to parade his unbelief, but a more tolerant critic than Claudel would have perceived that in the *Chartreuse de Parme* there is no mockery in Fabrice's departure to the charterhouse or in the statement that he had much to atone for. Nor is it easy to see in what sense that masterpiece could have been improved by a larger infusion of religion. Zola is dismissed as "that disgusting Zola" because of a realistic description of childbirth which for Claudel was "something beautiful." Once again, a more discerning critic would have sensed Zola's yearning for religion and have noticed the extraordinary way in which all the great Christian dogmas are incorporated into what can only be called a Naturalist Theology. The other side of the account is no better. Coventry Patmore comes out marvellously. Chesterton, too, is wonderful, and thanks to Claudel's good offices and bad judgment made a somewhat incongruous appearance in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

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I WANT TO TURN NOW to a slightly different aspect of the matter which has greatly exercised contemporary critics. It is the relation of religion and culture; the problems of continuity, style, tradition, more particularly the identification of Catholicism and tradition.

The problem is not altogether new. In a lecture on "Christianity and Letters," which he delivered in the School of Philosophy and Letters at the Catholic University of Dublin in November, 1854, Newman had this to say: "Christianity waited till the *orbis terrarum* attained its most perfect form before it appeared; and it soon coalesced, and has ever since co-operated, and often seemed identical with the Civilization which is its companion."

A few years earlier, in that same *Salon of 1846*, Baudelaire had drawn a much less optimistic picture of civilization and its products.

*"Compare the present age with past ages. When you come out of a salon or a newly decorated church, go and rest your eyes in some ancient museum and consider the differences. In one, confusion, a clash of styles and colors, a conflict of tone, appalling trivialities, prosaic gestures and attitudes, a conventional nobility, commonplaces of every kind . . .*

*"In the other, a reverence that makes children snatch off their caps, that catches your spirit as the dust of vaults and tombs catches your throat. It is by no means*

*the effect of the yellow varnish or the grime of ages: it is the effect of unity—a profound unity . . .*

*"Under Louis XV there were still schools; there was one under the Empire. A school means a faith, that is to say, the impossibility of doubt. There were pupils united by common principles, obeying the rules of a strong master and helping him with all his works."*

Although there is no specific reference to religion, Baudelaire uses the language of religion to contrast the art of the present with that of the past, to describe the dynamic behind the schools of art: "profound unity," "faith," "the impossibility of doubt."

We may assume that in Baudelaire's view the final break came with "the Romantic insurrection." This certainly is the opinion of a contemporary critic writing from an explicitly Christian standpoint. "Romanticism," writes Wladimir Weidlé, "is the death of style." "A style," he goes on, "is not invented and cannot be reproduced; you cannot manufacture it . . ." He regards it like Baudelaire as a product of community life:

*"When community breaks up, style is extinguished and nothing can bring it to life again. It is or is not. So much the worse for those artists and periods which, not possessing it and yet unable to do without it, try to reach it by ineffectual tricks . . ."*

*"The nineteenth century was essentially a century without style and for the same reason a century of stylisation, of desperate attempts to create a style."*

In still another passage he makes a comparison between old and new which recalls Baudelaire's in the *Salon of 1846*:

*"An old picture, even if boring, empty, smelling of the commonplace, usually justifies itself as a part of the scene, and does not offend the eye and the spirit as do thousands of pictures in our modern exhibitions"*

T. S. Eliot first attacked the problem in the essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The emphasis falls on a fresh word—a word that was to become almost a battle cry for his generation—"order":

*" . . . the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."*

"This essay," Eliot tells us, "proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism." In fact, he returned to the subject in *After Strange Gods* and reached conclusions which have much in common with those of Newman and Baudelaire and Weidlé. Tradition, he says in that essay, does not mean standing still. Now if tradition is to be a developing process and not a static thing, there must be a motive force behind it. Eliot is nervous about the identification of classicism with Catholicism and tradition with religion, but his arguments lead in that direction. Tradition becomes associated with "orthodoxy" even though we are told that the connexion is not an inevitable one:

*"Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs . . . As we use the term tradition to include a good deal more than "traditional religious beliefs," so I am giving the term orthodoxy a similar inclusiveness; and though of course I believe that a right tradition for us must be also a Christian tradition, and that orthodoxy in general implies*

*Christian orthodoxy, I do not propose to lead the present series of lectures to a theological conclusion.*"

He continues:

*"We are not concerned with the author's beliefs, but with orthodoxy of sensibility and with the sense of tradition."*

We remember that Baudelaire had already proclaimed that the Romantics were to be declared guilty of "heterodoxy" in the name of "the higher principles which constitute the universal life." In spite of Eliot's anxiety to avoid a "theological conclusion," it is difficult not to feel that "orthodoxy" does in fact mean Catholicism and classicism, and the "heresy"—it will be recalled that the essay is sub-titled "A Primer of Modern Heresy"—means Protestant individualism, which in turn means romanticism.

WHAT IS DISTURBING about the essay, however, is not so much the hesitation over accepting the consequences which seem to follow from the premises as the particular judgment which result from the attempts to gauge the orthodoxy of individual writers' sensibility. James Joyce comes out with flying colors.

"The most ethically orthodox of the more eminent writers of my time is Mr. Joyce. I confess that I do not know what to make of a generation which ignores these considerations."

It is scarcely surprising to learn that, for Mr. Eliot's purposes, D. H. Lawrence is "an almost perfect example of a heretic":

*"I have already touched upon the deplorable religious upbringing which gave Lawrence his lust for intellectual independence: like most people who do not know what orthodoxy is, he hated it."*

Thomas Hardy fares still worse:

*"He seems to me to have written as nearly for the sake of 'self-expression' as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome or edifying matter for communication."*

This is George Eliot:

*"George Eliot seems to me of the same tribe as all the serious and eccentric moralists we have had since: we must respect her for being a serious moralist, but deplore her individualistic morals."*

If you are detached from institutions and go in for individualism, you have little hope not simply of securing a pass, but even of being given a fair hearing. On the other hand, membership of the Society of Jesus and the most unimpeachable religious orthodoxy is no guarantee of a favorable verdict either. Gerard Hopkins is a "fine poet," but has been overrated. He "is not a religious poet in the more important sense in which I have elsewhere maintained Baudelaire to be a religious poet . . . or in the sense in which I consider Mr. Joyce's work to be penetrated with Christian feeling." "He should be compared, not with our contemporaries whose situation is different from his, but with a minor poet nearest contemporary to him, and most like him: George Meredith. The comparison is altogether to Hopkins' advantage . . ."

While we must agree, while three men as different as Newman, Baudelaire and Eliot appear to agree, that there ought to be a connection between religious belief and literary judgment, Eliot's particular judgments

illustrate perfectly the dangers of the dogmatic approach to which I drew attention in my opening pages. They reveal, indeed, the alarming extent to which "the Christian approach to criticism" can warp one's judgment. In *The Sacred Wood* Eliot said that "to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim." Yet we find Lawrence criticised for his "deplorable religious upbringing" and George Eliot for her "individualistic morals," as though they had anything to do with the merits of *Middlemarch*. Hardy communicates a personality which is "not particularly wholesome or edifying." Hopkins is inferior to Joyce in "Christian feeling" and compared, slightly apologetically, it is true, to Meredith who seems to me to have been not merely inexpressibly inferior, but as a poet little better than a fraud. Finally, Hopkins is written off as having little "aid" to offer in "the struggle against Liberalism": downgraded, that is to say, because in Mr. Eliot's view he serves no cause and cannot be used for what is plainly an extra-literary purpose.

What one must deprecate is the way in which Mr. Eliot's religion has precisely the reverse effect to the one it should have. For so far from "opening up the widest horizons," it narrows the perspective and reduces visibility to a minimum. This does not mean that the loss of religious belief has not had an adverse effect on literature. The way it has done so is well put by the late Edwin Muir in two remarkable and too little known papers in his *Essays on Literature and Society*. This comes from "The Natural Man and the Political Man":

*"The history of the modern novel describes the disappearance of man as religion and humanism conceived him. Instead, there has emerged a new species of the natural man dovetailed into a biological sequence and a social structure. This natural man is capable of betterment but, unlike the natural man of religion, has no need of regeneration. He is simply a human model capable of indefinite improvement on the natural plane; the improvement depending ultimately on the progress of society, and of things in general?"*

Muir goes on to point out that the conflict which dominated the characters of novelists and dramatists down to the nineteenth century has been eliminated and replaced by the concept of "development." He thinks, as Baudelaire did, that the changed conception of man's nature derives from, or at any rate crystallized in, the work of Rousseau. He shows by an analysis of the writings of Hemingway and other contemporary novelists that the changed view of human nature leads to an impoverishment of literature. The companion study on "The Decline of the Novel," closes with these words:

*"There are certain beliefs which are natural to man, for they satisfy his mind and heart better than any alternative ones. The mark of such beliefs is their completeness; they close the circle. In a state of irremediable imperfection such as man's, the circle can be closed only by calling on something beyond man; by postulating a transcendent reality. So the belief in eternity is natural to man; and all the arts, all the forms of imaginative literature, since they depend on that belief, are equally natural to him. When that belief partially fails, imagination suffers an eclipse, and art becomes a problem instead of a function. If that belief were to fail*



*completely and for good, there would be no imaginative art with a significance beyond its own time. But it is inconceivable that it should fail, for it is native to man."*

I HAVE BEEN TRYING, in this column, to answer three questions: Is there such a thing as a Christian criticism? If so, what specific function does it serve? In what way does its function differ from that of traditional criticism? I have suggested that the idea of a Christian criticism, as of a Christian literature, has been thrust upon us by the break-up of Christendom, that it began as a protest against the widespread secularization of culture. I have taken it as axiomatic that religion should be, that it can be, a positive instrument of exploration, the unifying principle which enables the critic to see the manifold experiences offered by writers in perspective. It is his job to educate the public: to show that in some writers literary merit depends directly on the writer's beliefs and that in others the absence of belief or a narrow philosophy leads to the impoverishment of his work, to defects which are literary.

There is, I think, a final question. Can the Christian critic — I mean here the critic who is a believing, practising Christian — do anything to form a Christian literature, or is his work confined to diagnosis? Edwin Muir argued that the very existence of imaginative lit-

erature depended on the preservation of religious belief. We can only have a truly Christian literature in a society that is wholly Christian. When society has become largely secularized, we get a fragmentary, mutilated Christian literature such as we find alike in Baudelaire, Mauriac and Greene. The literary critic is not a missionary; the maintenance or recovery of religious belief cannot be his job as such. Nevertheless, it is his religion which gives his criticism its dynamic and its driving force. It should not be beyond the bounds of possibility for Christian critics to influence production, to foster a Christian ethos among writers by criticizing the work of Christian and non-Christian alike in accordance with standards which though literary are illuminated by faith.

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# Reviews

*The Christian Commitment.* By Karl Rahner, S.J. Translated by Cecily Hastings. New York: Sheed & Ward. 218 pp. \$4.50.

THOSE PROFOUND and controversial "Essays in pastoral theology" represent a radical attempt by the distinguished Innsbruck theologian to face the "new tasks of the Church." At no point does the author engage in superficial or pragmatic diagnosis, nor does he at any time hopefully prescribe quick remedies for all our ills. On the contrary, few Catholic theologians have so squarely faced the critical seriousness of the Church's task in the modern world. From a certain viewpoint Rahner might seem to be a pessimist, for he sees no hope whatever of maintaining the Church's medieval status, and of preserving for her a position of institutional power and preeminence in modern society. Yet Rahner, like

Kierkegaard before him, does not regard this preservation of power as a valid Christian hope at all. It must be abandoned in favor of a true hope, hope not in "Catholic power" but in the eschatological victory of Christ.

The reader's ability to understand these absorbing and difficult essays will then depend on a certain amount of dialectical agility, on the power to reach out and embrace two opposite extremes at the same time, and on the willingness to risk a frankly existentialist intuition of theological truth, which is sometimes disturbing.

Rahner is a great and provocative theologian who does not believe in always being absolutely "safe" and naturally he has come under some very severe criticism from conservative elements at Rome. He can easily be misinterpreted because he seldom thinks on the lines of the

familiar scholastic textbook. But a fair and unprejudiced reading will find invaluable insights in these essays, three of which deal with the Eucharist, one with the Marian apostolate, and three — the most important — with "Redemptive history" seen in the light of our present crisis.

Rahner's thesis is frank and it is one which many will find disconcerting. He is saying that Catholics cannot realistically hope to restore and maintain a kind of religio-cultural autonomy in the secular world today and that if we build our lives and our apostolate on the theory that Medieval Christendom is the norm for Christianity in the world, we are heading for trouble. He says, "It is never possible simply to deduce from Christian principles of belief and morality any one single pattern of the (secular) world as it ought to be" (p. 7). "Even in earlier