

country house, the opera, children's games—brings colour and relief to the central theme, which is developed with a confidence and accuracy of analysis that show a novelist of rare quality. A 'Catholic novel' demands more than an environment of extrinsic devotion: it should reveal something of the compelling implications of faith in the human situation, and this *The Lost Traveller* most certainly does.

THE COCKTAIL PARTY, a Comedy by T. S. Eliot. (Faber; 10s. 6d.)

Reduced to a programme note, the theme of *The Cocktail Party* would at once seem slender and sublime. The miseries of half-a-dozen people at a party are usual: a wife (Lavinia) has left her husband (Edward), who is in love with a beautiful young woman (Celia) to whom an earnest young man (Peter) is also attracted. An unidentified guest, who proves later to be Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, a distinguished psychiatrist, effects the reconciliation of Lavinia and Edward, and encourages Celia's need for atonement by sending her to join a nursing order in Asia, where she is crucified by the natives. Two other characters, the elderly and highly comic Julia, and Alex, much-travelled and always in the know, are often in evidence, but their role is that of a chorus, yet one that is far from static. The play is in fact dependent on the mysterious psychiatrist, and the second act, which takes place in his consulting-room, resolves the conflict in terms of the religious issue with which Mr Eliot is throughout concerned.

But much lies hidden. With Mr Eliot, as with ice-bergs, what is not immediately evident is what matters most. And the texture of his verse is deceptive, glancing with little warning from drawing-room wit to the analysis of despair, from joke to paradox and beyond to the inexpressible need of God. It is verse to be spoken, and no one who has not heard it can, one supposes, make a useful judgment about its effectiveness on the stage. For *The Cocktail Party* is essentially a piece for the theatre, with skill of device and situation which must escape a reader. Yet the poetry of it, the contemplative assurance of its further ranges; all this emerges from a second and third reading of verse that has been stripped of all that is slack, which matches the mood of a dowager's joke as surely as, at a different level, it does the mood of

I want to be cured  
Of a craving for something I cannot find  
And of shame of never finding it.

It is true that the very skill of a poet at his height of invention can exasperate those who run, or rather walk, as they read. There must be time for breath, time to adjust the tension to meet what lies beyond the smooth lines, so casual as they seem. For, of the ways out from frustration and pride,

The second is unknown, and so requires faith—  
 The kind of faith that issues from despair.  
 The destination cannot be described;  
 You will know very little until you get there;  
 You will journey blind. But the way leads toward possession  
 Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

*The Cocktail Party* marks no new or spectacular advance in Mr Eliot's thought, or in his communication of it. It is perhaps more equable in its emphasis, but uniting all its elements of wit and brilliant invention, of sustained poetry and unsparing penetration of character, is the steady rhythm of faith and the knowledge of man's destiny and the price that destiny must command.

THE UNKNOWN DISCIPLE. By Francesco Perri. (Bles; 12s. 6d.)

A novelist who takes the events of biblical history for his theme is courageous if not always well-advised. *The Unknown Disciple* tells the imaginary history of the young man of St Mark's Gospel who 'fled from them naked' in Gethsemani, and who, according to the tradition, is identified with St Mark himself. In Signor Perri's novel Marcus Adonias is the son of Valerius, the Roman Vice-Governor of Jerusalem, and Micol, daughter of Phabi, a member of the Sanhedrin. He is brought up in Rome, falls in love with Varilia, wife of Valerius Messala, a senator, is initiated into the Dionysian rites and is exiled to Palestine where he serves under Pontius Pilatus. His mother by this is a member of the zealot followers of Eleazar, and the crux of the novel is the killing of Micol by the Romans and the death of Valeria (arrived in Palestine in disguise to rejoin Marcus) at the hands of the zealots.

So far the novel is a melodramatic and often powerful picture of the Roman world, and of its impact on the turbulent East. If one is reminded of Cecil B. de Mille, that is perhaps inevitable, for a novel on such a scale faces the same difficulties as those of a Hollywood mammoth production, and cardboard mingles with stone. But with the appearance of Christ and Marcus's inclusion among his disciples, the contrast between the economy of the Gospels and the novelist's adaptation of their record is perilous to the integrity of the story. Signor Perri is indeed basically faithful to his text, and his devices, ingenious to the point of daring, are generally valuable in underlining the stress between the Roman and Jewish worlds and the revolutionary emergence of Christianity with its threat to both alike. But the reconstruction of Christ's words is weak and verbose: his teaching seems softened in *oratio obliqua*, and the telescoping of the years of his public ministry upsets the balance of the book.

I.E.