

## CORRESPONDENCE ON CHRISTIAN LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

BERNARD BERGONZI AND KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

### I

DEAR FATHER EDITOR:

I am grateful for Fr Kenelm Foster's comments on my article, 'Morals and the Novel', though I cannot agree with all he says. I am properly reluctant to cross swords with him about Dante, and undoubtedly his distinction between Dante-as-poet and Dante-as-protagonist is valid and important. But without naively identifying the two, we can surely get from the *Divine Comedy* (or any other work) some clue as to the author's attitude to the action and his characters, if we read it responsively and carefully enough. Granted that Paolo and Francesca are in Hell because Dante 'put them there', and that furthermore they deserve to be there, can we not say that the author (not just Dante-as-protagonist) somehow *regrets* that they have to be there (have to be, both because of the structure of his epic and the demands of divine justice), whereas his attitude to the worse sinners in later Cantos is rather satisfaction that justice is so manifestly done? No doubt Fr Foster's suggestion about the deeper significance of the passage is correct, but it doesn't, I think, affect my argument.

The quotation from Newman, as he says, raises wider issues. I admit that it is rather equivocal: as Fr Foster shows, it is not a syllogistically perfect demonstration that 'Christian literature' is impossible. The fault is partly mine for having extracted it from its wider context in the ninth of the 'Discourses' on university education (parts 6, 7 and 8), to which I refer your readers. Newman is, in fact, contrasting this hypothetical 'Christian literature' with the divinely inspired literature of the Hebrews, and he claims that literature is normally so very much the expression of the natural man—in its methods of expression as well as its subject—that we cannot reasonably hope for a wholly Christian literature.

As Fr Foster remarks, we can certainly find individual writers.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Commentary' to the present number, page 490.

whose frames of reference are Christian. But I very much doubt the wisdom (or, indeed, the point) of assembling such writers, widely scattered through time and different cultures, under the banner of 'Christian literature', to be inevitably contrasted with a much larger mass of 'non-Christian literature'. It could so easily lead to further manifestations of the deplorable parochialism that so bedevils Catholic intellectual life, and which is only too ready to substitute the pursuit of doctrinal satisfactions for the study of literature. If literature—whether apparently Christian or not—is good as literature, then its goodness must come from God, and one need not look for further discriminations.

Fr Foster seems to imply that it is not particularly difficult for an imaginative writer to deal with sinful man in the 'right way' (i.e. in a Christian spirit), so that no tincture of the attractiveness of sin will appear in his treatment of the subject. Personally I think it is extremely difficult, despite Fr Foster's rather casual reference to 'a certain *detachment* on the writer's part'. This reminds me of a discussion that took place several years ago between Jacques Maritain and François Mauriac. Like Fr Foster, Maritain claimed that a writer can deal with any subject provided he keeps the right kind of detachment or 'altitude'. Mauriac, as a practising novelist, replied in his *God and Mammon*, 'It is a condition of art that the novelist should connive at the subject of his creation, in spite of Maritain's warning, for the real novelist is not an observer, but a creator of fictitious life. . . . He even confuses and, in a way, loses his own personality in the subject of his creation. He is one with his creation, and his identification with it is pushed so far that he actually becomes his creation. . . . It is probably true that a novelist subconsciously resurrects in his characters the desires which he himself has repressed, and the temptations which he himself has overcome; thus, just as admirable men often have unworthy sons, the best novelist may find that he has reincarnated his own worst elements in the sons and daughters of his brain. That is why a fervent Christian feels justified in describing passions from "on high"—for example in a sermon or a treatise—whereas he does not in a novel where it is not so much a question of judging and condemning them as of giving them flesh and blood.'

Mauriac, I imagine, would agree with Newman. Possibly Fr Foster is confusing the intellectual orthodoxy of the Christian

writer, a comparatively easy thing to be sure of, with his imaginative rectitude, which is infinitely harder. Certainly one wishes that the problem were as simple as he seems to find it. But I do not think it is.

Yours truly,

BERNARD BERGONZI

## II

DEAR FATHER EDITOR:

I thank Mr Bergonzi for the notice he has taken of my letter, but I assure him that I do not think the problem we are discussing is a simple one. Indeed, I fear that his own letter may favour a too facilely negative solution; which is why I ask you and him to bear with me a little longer. Let me restate, as I understand them, the chief points contained in his letter:

(a) A wholly Christian literature (the Bible left out of account) is impossible or nearly so. And, granted that some writers have a 'Christian frame of reference', to call any of them Christian is (b) unwise, for this encourages our deplorable tendency to 'parochialism', and is (c) unnecessary, even if for a religious evaluation of literature, since this would be satisfied by referring what is good in literature simply to God. Finally (d) the experience of writers who are also Christians—especially novelists, e.g. Mauriac—goes to show that in handling certain subjects the writer who is true to the conditions of his art is obliged to connive at sin and so, to this extent, to cease to be Christian.

It will be clear that, in Mr Bergonzi's argument, (d) functions as the proof of (a), to the extent that literature is imaginative or 'creative', like fiction. And of course (a) is the chief point. Once (a) is granted, then people who talk of Christian imaginative literature are already admitted to be talking about what doesn't exist, or about what doesn't exist in the degree that writers are faithful to the conditions of their art; and then the charge of 'parochialism' becomes quite secondary. If you convict me of talking nonsense, it hardly matters that I am *also* 'parochial'. So I am forced to examine (d)—though, in passing, I am not at all sure that points (b) and (c) are unquestionable. However, (d) is the crux. Naturally, I cannot discuss it in detail here; but an unavoidable question it raises is whether Mauriac's phrase 'connive

at the subject, etc.' really has to mean 'connive at sin', in the sense of an interior consent to sin. Now it is worth remarking that in 1953, long after writing *Dieu et Mammon*, long after his protest against Maritain's apparently naive idealism, Mauriac made a very different (in its terms, at least) statement, one which amounts, in fact, to an explicit claim to be a Christian novelist. 'Au soir de ma vie', he wrote in 1953, 'je n'éprouve pas ce scrupule [of having offended morality]. Non par indifférence religieuse, mais au contraire. . . . Sans le vouloir et sans aucun mérite de ma part, je n'aurai cessé de rendre témoignage. Dans le péché ou dans la Grâce, je n'ai jamais au fond parlé que du Christ. Qu'il se soit servi de ce que j'ai écrit, beaucoup m'en ont assuré. . . . Je ne l'ai jamais renié si je l'ai offensé. Je n'ai jamais rougi de Lui devant les hommes.'<sup>1</sup>

Pious rhetoric? Self-delusion? Possibly; but also possibly not. It may be substantially true. 'Je n'ai jamais au fond parlé que du Christ.' This statement raises, for me, the crucial question: can a writer be led, by 'faith working through love', so far into his sin-affected material as to handle it with a truthfulness which would be not wholly inadequate to that *total* reality of man which Christianity reveals? For, to the eyes of faith the reality of man includes, besides sinfulness, the appeal and promptings and pressure of grace, i.e. of Christ. True, if this latter factor cannot be rendered in literature, along with the former, then there can be no distinctively Christian literature; but just to the extent that it may be rendered, such literature becomes possible. And, again, why should we exclude the possibility? And even if we don't simply exclude it, to decide in advance that we are unable, or hardly ever able, to discern its realization in the particular case, this too seems to me an excessively cautious line to take and one which could lead directly to a certain sterility in our criticism. Better, I am sure, to keep the way open for Christian advances into the spheres of art and criticism than, through a fear of making mistakes (and of course there will be mistakes), label those spheres impenetrable. Nor am I satisfied by Mr Bergonzi's reference to God; for the world, now, is not just God's world, it is Christ's. And we are Christ's, whether we are artists or critics or anything else. And the whole question now is, what is the reach or scope of our

<sup>1</sup> From a Note added to *Mauriac par lui-même* by P-H. Simon (Paris, Editions du Seuil). My italics.

intelligence and sensibilities precisely as governed by Christ? We may, I suggest, fail in generosity, and even in faith, by marking the limits too narrowly; though of course not to mark them narrowly is dangerous too, in another way.

Yours fraternally,

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

### III

Since the Editor has been good enough to allow me a final word, I shall try to sum up the apparent points of difference between Fr Foster and myself, and to restate my own views. The question at issue is whether a distinctively Christian literature can exist. In my original article I quoted Newman to the effect that it cannot, since one cannot have 'a sinless literature of sinful man'. Fr Foster claims that this is too negative an opinion, and argues that 'sinful man' may be dealt with in a way that is both Christian and artistically valid. He named Dante, Langland, Hopkins, and Bernanos, as writers who are basically Christian in their attitudes, despite incidental flaws. Clearly, what we are discussing is the interpretation to be given to 'Christian' and to 'literature'.

If, as I would claim, genuine literature presents human behaviour dramatically, then the demands of drama will require a degree of imaginative sympathy (not necessarily moral approval) with what is evil in man as well as with what is good. The devil must, in some sense, be given his due, else the work is liable to fail as art. Evil may even, at times, appear to triumph over good. One does indeed hope, as Fr Foster says, that the writer may 'connive at the subject' without actually giving an interior consent to sin, otherwise few writers could hope for salvation. Nevertheless, those whose main concern is with the saving of souls rather than the pursuit of literature may well feel inclined to deny the title of 'Christian' to a pursuit which (by the distribution of its imaginative sympathies) seems to take an equivocal position on moral issues. Certainly a work may seem to be morally equivocal, and even to show evil triumphant, and yet be informed by a profoundly Christian spirit. But I would add that those who are professionally concerned with literature—like Fr Foster and myself—are relatively privileged readers: the idea of calling such a work 'Christian' might well scandalize many of the faithful.

I would concede, then, that one may have individual works by

Christian authors whose works are informed by a Christian spirit, and which are satisfactory as literature. There is certainly no *a priori* reason why they should not exist. But I still think that it is unrealistic to talk generically about 'Christian literature', not because it is logically absurd to do so, but for roughly the same reasons that I think it unrealistic to assume that we have, or are likely to have in the foreseeable future, a properly Christian society (even though various individuals in our present society may be exemplary Christians or even saints). Even medieval literature was in no real sense consistently Christian, if, for instance, the retraction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* is any evidence: unlike the later Mauriac, Chaucer does not seem to have been confident that 'je n'ai au fond parlé que du Christ'.

My own position is, in fact, less negative than Fr Foster might think: as a Catholic, I am convinced that imaginative literature is important, but not that the most overtly Christian writers are necessarily the most important. After all, if Fr Foster names Hopkins and Bernanos as Christian writers rather than, say, Fr Faber or Mgr Benson it is because (one assumes) he thinks they are better as *writers*, not as Christians. In other words, his primary criterion is literary excellence, even though his secondary one may be Christian content and expression.

Finally, I can only agree that 'the world, now, is not just God's world, it is Christ's'. This being so, doesn't all human excellence participate in the Incarnation and so become, in some sense, Christ's, and therefore Christian? To this extent *all* great literature may be called Christian, whether overtly so or not. Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, for instance, though the work of an agnostic, seems to me a great and intensely religious work (certainly superior to *The Ambassadors*), infused with a truly Christian compassion. I will indeed admit the possibility of a Christian literature *if* it may include *King Lear* and *The Golden Bowl* as well as the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. But I am reluctant to divide the unity of literature as a subject by the application of criteria which, considered in terms of the subject, are secondary.

BERNARD BERGONZI