

OBITER

THE VOICE OF A MASTER. Whether one likes the films of Robert Bresson or not—and it is undeniable that they make heavy demands upon the spectator which many do not care to meet—there is no possible doubt that he is one of the most important film directors in the world today. At the Cannes Film Festival this year France headed her list of entries with his latest picture, *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé*, and to many of us it seemed likely—and rightly so—that it would carry off the Grand Prix. In the event, however, by one of those vagaries only too common among Festival juries, this went to a film not in the same class and Bresson had to content himself with the award for the best director; with which, presumably, the official jury sought to save its collective face.

The morning after his film was shown early in the second week of the Festival, Bresson gave a press conference which turned out to be one of the most exciting things in the whole fortnight. It was held immediately after the interesting conference given by the Russian team that made the beautiful but disappointing version of *Don Quixote*, and as the giant Tcherkassov, who plays Don Quixote, shouldered his way arrogantly out of the room, Bresson edged his way unobtrusively in. He took his place at the table, followed by François Leterrier who plays the condemned Fontaine in his film, and one forgot straightway all about the Russians. Bresson is darkly good-looking and in his linen suit, smoking endless cigarettes in an ebony and silver holder, he was as photogenic as anything one could wish to see, but it was the impact of his personality—intelligent, astringent, amused—that focused the attention of a whole roomful of weary journalists upon him from the moment he began to speak. He was introduced, a trifle ruefully, by his chairman as the only living director who insisted on making only the kind of films he likes, paying no attention to money, convention or the public. Bresson went on to tell us that he had made *Un Condamné* very fast for him (it had only taken about two years all told) and that it was being a considerable financial success. He said, more in sorrow than anger, that he thought the commercial cinema had reached a stalemate in spite of its technical brilliance, and that films were less and less cinematic and more and more filmed theatre, which he considered to be a tragedy; and he explained that this was one of the reasons that he now used only non-professional performers in his films. Actors, he said, remained obstinately actors, and people saw them as such; and now that co-productions led to the exchange of actors throughout the world, all films seemed to employ about seven faces which cropped up everywhere.

What he thought was most important in a film is always what one had not *put* there—it was not dialogue or mime that mattered, but the relationship between face and face; or between face and action; or the relationship between a visual sequence and the noises on the sound-track that accompanied it. By using unknown faces and untried performers he was able to achieve precisely the effects he had in mind, which would be impossible through the intermediary of well-known actors who came into the film with ready-made characteristics and personalities. He has the reputation, of course, of driving his cast (and indeed himself) to exhaustion and beyond when making pictures, and one could see exactly how this relentless pressure would be exerted as the quiet detached voice detailed the method, and the black and silver holder sketched visions in the air. One sardonic journalist asked him if he did not think there was a danger of all his actors being projections of himself if used in this way, and at this young Leterrier jerked forward with a grin to see how this would be taken by the Master: Bresson seemed not to find this amusing and dismissed the subject summarily, but I suspect there may be some truth in it. The lively cut and thrust between experts went on for an hour, and provided one of the most stimulating comments on the cinema that I have ever had the luck to hear. It seemed all the more preposterous that the prize could have gone to *Friendly Persuasion* after hearing what Bresson was trying to do with his medium.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER



POETS WITHOUT A TRADITION

DAVID MOODY

POETRY has always a hazardous existence, is rarely held or formed in an adequate organ of words; it is too easily dissipated or clumsily fumbled back beyond the mind's grasping. To be continually a poet, even under the most favourable conditions, requires great power and self-consecration. Today conditions are nowhere very favourable, and least of all in young countries such as Australia and New Zealand. To be a poet anywhere, but there even more, a man needs genius, or the dedication more usually found in saints.

That these countries have not an excessive share of genius, and that their writers are as mortal and divided as all the world, is the evidence