

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH AND THE ARTS

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A LECTURER at a study week-end on the arts recently caused a mild sensation among his hearers by attributing what he regarded as the negligible contemporary impact of English Catholics on the arts to the fact that the parish clergy (he made it clear that he didn't altogether hold it against them) were largely drawn from the lower middle classes.

This equation—lower-middle class clergy, 'people's' parishes, sentimentality, vulgarity, lack of taste—has come to be largely accepted, whether defiantly or with a resigned shrug. Like many similar commonplaces, it doesn't stand up to scrutiny unshaken. Sentimentality, vulgarity and lack of taste were unfortunately part of the climate in which the Church revived and expanded rapidly after emancipation, and all classes and creeds were affected. In casual conversation of the seminary common-room type, one still hears Anglicanism equated with good taste: yet half our English medieval churches are scarred by the fury of the antiquarian wreckers of the last century. These came in two styles: the strippers, who reduced churches to barns, and the titivators who made them look like repository showrooms. On the whole, considering our limited financial and other resources, Catholics come better out of the architectural history of the past 150 years than most other corporations. Admittedly this is not saying much, but at least we were spared all that dreadful watered-down pre-Raphaelite stuff one finds in children's corners of Anglican cathedrals.

I was recently in Dublin for the first time, and was most struck, I think, by the contrast between the calm elegance of the Georgian homes of the 'ascendancy' and the horrible chill which lies over the regrettable restoration work in Christ Church and St Patrick's. Here are monuments to the text 'where your treasure is, there is your heart also'.

I believe it might be seriously argued that our artistic uncertainty of touch derives as much from our English environment as from our Latin affiliations. One of the surest ways in which a

Briton, Catholic or Protestant, shows his puritan hoof is his hopeless uncertainty about the difference between the words 'sensual' and 'sensuous'. All administrators have to think in fairly simple categories—even ecclesiastical ones. 'We mustn't have "carnal" music in church.' But in spite of Keats, there are no 'ditties of no tone': all music appeals to the sensuous ear, all art to the senses. The classical Greek temple, in its matchless setting of sea and sky, was a brilliant sensuous triumph, splashed with vivid colour. Even its elaborate optical corrections were a carefully calculated placation of the senses.

Christianity derives partly from the intense theocratic tradition of the Jews, the most fiercely sensuous of all Mediterranean peoples. They derived their sensuousness from Asiatic sources; and anyone who has compared an Indian religious statue with a Greek one will know what that implies. The tabernacle which the chosen people carried about with them for so many years was, in its luxurious fittings, typical of these acquisitive and sophisticated nomads. The Byzantine epoch brought a powerful new infusion of this sumptuous oriental element into Christian art.

It also brought the violent puritan reaction of Iconoclasm. We hear a deal of journalistic nonsense about puritanism and horror of the senses being part of the cold, unresponsive Nordic temperament, contrasted with the 'warm frank acceptance of life and the body' among the Latins. Puritanism is Manicheism, and historically follows the track of Asiatic-Mediterranean sensuousness: Persia, the near east, Italy, Provence. Even in our own lands it is much more severe among the warm-blooded Celts than among the Anglo-Saxons, with whom it started as an unbalanced 'enthusiasm' of a pietistic sort and degenerated with habit and social hardening into mere drabness.

One remembers St Jerome's dream, in which he saw himself damned for having read pagan authors. But there is also his sane statement on asceticism: 'Mortification is not to deny that the things God has created are good, nor to suppose that he takes pleasure in the cries of an empty stomach; but the fact is that virtue is not safe in soft living, or without severity to oneself.' One of the artist's chief tasks is to fuse the sensuous and the spiritual: if he calls himself a religious artist merely to escape that task, he will become merely religious, even though he be hardly more mistaken than the artist who repudiates religion, or religious

commissions, because he thinks them inhibiting. A fine example of a great artist finding his own way towards this fusion of sense and spirit can be seen by comparing the speeches of Othello and Iago, who exemplify two different forms of the tension, with those of Antony and Cleopatra, who embody a resolution of it.

I sometimes think that a notable symptom of this English uncertainty I am talking about is the polite nervousness with which so many of our good Anglican choirs sing Italian and Spanish polyphony: it contrasts so strongly with, say, the rich rounded performances under Père Martin at S. Eustache in Paris. Palestrina's music is often spoken of loosely as 'sublimely spiritual', etc., but it is so in a purely sensuous way—the delight to the senses is innocent but intense. Again, nothing could be more spiritual than the final chorus of Bach's St Matthew Passion—but the sheer sensuous relief of it is hardly less than that of lying down and feeling a breeze after running a mile on a hot day. One thinks too of the perfect balance between feeling, emotion and thought in Handel's 'Ecce Quomodo Moritur' or in a good Van der Weyden. In Marlowe's *Faustus* the great love speech addressed to Helen of Troy is splendidly sensuous, but balanced and properly placed by the dramatic irony of its context. An even finer poetic example of this balancing is the 'To His Coy Mistress' of the nominal puritan Marvell.

If there is a worse consequence of our nineteenth-century incubation than this unease about the sensuous, it is our list towards the sentimental, the excessive, crude or inappropriate emotional response. This is a more subtly dangerous form of self-indulgence than any of the Baroque 'vulgarity' that used to disgust Victorian travellers and tends to delight their grandchildren. It is quite wrong to regard this self-indulgence as mainly a weakness of what used to be called 'the lower orders'.

One thinks perhaps primarily of vernacular hymns, especially in connection with the indulgence of melancholia. I have always remembered the distress and embarrassment I once felt as a boy on hearing the old mission hymn 'Jesus, my Lord, behold at length the time, when I resolve to turn away from crime' sung in the street by a drunk. I didn't quite know the reason for my distress. I do now: the morbid melancholia of the *tune* (very debased slow-movement Beethoven-type) was too easily associated with the depressing context. (The words, apart from the

unfortunate rhetorical excess of 'crime', are admirable and simple.) It was vulnerable. Victoria's 'O Vos Omnes' is 'pathetic' in the eighteenth-century sense, affects the senses and feelings as much, but would have been quite invulnerable there. So would Mozart's 'Ave Verum', I believe—though I have heard of a nun lecturer in a training college dismissing it as 'saccharine'.

When all is said and done, the essential for health in the arts is a critical intelligence and a refined (not 'refained') sensibility shared to some degree by artist, patron and public. The lonely artist is not often a good artist: the artist with a merely private, esoteric vision can never be a religious artist. The artist needs to feel himself wanted. It has been well asked: 'If we do not ask him to do anything in particular, what right have we to complain if his work appears to us obscure and aimless?' The Catholic community can hardly claim to be sufficiently aware of this. Intelligent criticism and sensitive response are not attained easily, least of all in an age when tradition and habit offer poor support. By tradition, the habit of the schools ingrained in the clergy, we incline if anything to over-intellectualism which sometimes goes with imaginative and emotional obtuseness and a readiness to think that the arts are always someone else's business. We often take refuge in saying that the Church has always been prudently slow in accepting innovations. True, but the caution is to give time to think, not time to forget.

Today, tremendous scholarly devotion in art history co-exists with a good deal of perverse and chaotic practice, but the scholarly devotion is real and it is foolish to think all the practice perverse and chaotic. In one respect certainly we need to raise our sights: this may be an age of over-specialization, but quite plainly the time is past when any old television 'personality' or anybody eminent or eloquent in any other field can be regarded as having *ipso facto* something worthwhile to say on the arts. Discrimination about them can only come from study and from long and hard looking and thinking. We need too, perhaps, to remember that though liturgical laws must be respected by the church artist, conformity to them does not in itself produce something artistically worthwhile. Religious art must have an iconography—a language familiar to artist, patron and spectator (or listener)—but the language needs to be informed by love, and love makes light of hard work. 'Pondus meum, amor meus' said

St Augustine, and defined a community as a group of men united in the pursuit of the things they love. 'Show me the things a man loves, and I will show you what manner of man he is.' The artistic achievements of the age of Chartres and St Francis were born of 'a mighty love, exalting nature above itself, extending fraternal piety even to things', which understood that material nature, before it can be exploited to our use, demands in some way to be familiarized by our love. But it was only in a theocentric society that this was fully understood. 'Love and do what you will', says St Augustine, again. It is the artist who is the mirror and sounding-board of a society's inner force of love. The Church has never tried to ignore him, or silence him, or force him to speak in a dead language. No one who speaks with her authentic voice is likely to do so.

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creative artists of Israel were not only circumcised but narrowly circumscribed as well in the exercise of their 'talents . . .' (p. 43).

It is sad that such a good subject as symbolism in the Bible and in the Church should be thus presented in the name of religious teaching which will appeal to our contemporaries. Let us hope that some day there will appear a work which will happily synthesize the data of traditional teaching with all the better, valuable and fascinating elements in our author's work.

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