

FRENCH REVIEWS: A SURVEY

LOOKING through the French reviews over the past few months what one notices firstly is perhaps above all a sense of loss. Not financial loss, because French reviews, in spite of their perennial appeals for subscribers, seem to be reasonably long-lived and to continue to attract the best writers. The first loss is that of *La Vie Intellectuelle* some considerable time ago, and the second the death of Albert Béguin the literary critic and editor of *Esprit* since 1950. Whatever the reasons, personal or otherwise, for the disappearance of *La Vie Intellectuelle* from the French scene, it is already sorely missed as a forum for a particular section of French Catholic opinion. In later years its appearance was ugly, digest-like, and I think the Editions du Cerf made a great mistake in reducing its format, but a review which could bring together such diverse talents as Michel Carrouges, Jean Steinmann, Henri Marrou and Paul Claudel still had a valuable function to perform.

Albert Béguin is an irreparable loss. A fairly recent convert, he was already well known in academic and literary circles before he took over *Esprit* on the death of Mounier; his book *L'Ame Romantique et le Rêve* is likely to be required reading for a long time for anyone interested in the history of French and German romanticism, and his work on Nerval and Péguy is known to most students of French. Where Mounier's interests were philosophical and psychological, Béguin's were—invariably—literary, but this did not dictate the policy of the review which is, I suppose, in essence an attempt to preserve a Christian commitment with an extreme left-wing political activity. There can be little doubt that to many of its supporters there have been moments when *Esprit* seemed to teeter over the brink into a rather unobvious sympathy with Marxism, particularly in its reporting of the Eastern European situation; and years ago Marc Beigbeder left the *Esprit* group and became a Communist because he thought that Mounier's position of 'in between-ness' an untenable one. Attacks from the extreme right have of course been frequent, and one of the last things Béguin wrote was a note defending the review against a couple of right-wing pamphlets. One of these, *Mounier, le mauvais esprit*, accused Mounier of fostering Marxism among Catholics and of being 'the father of Christian crypto-Communism'. The attack included, for good measure, Fr Daniélou and François Mauriac, and took as the culprit for all of France's ills that now rather outdated Aunt Sally, the Resistance, which was directed, according to the author of the pamphlet, by a secret masonic group whose orders were obeyed by de Gaulle and whose accomplices were the Jesuits. This ethereal,

Goonish fantasy would be harmless enough in France, but it apparently has corresponding phenomena in French Canada, where an academician, M. Robert Rumilly, has published in similar vein *L'infiltration gauchiste au Canada français*. He also accuses *Esprit* of fostering Marxism and of corrupting French-Canadian students during their stay in Europe, 'inculcating in them a mentality of contempt and hatred . . .'—precisely the last effect one would have expected as a result of reading *Esprit*.

The value of *Esprit* for anyone outside France is that even when it produces a symposium on 'La France des Français' with some pomp and circumstance (like the issue for December 1957, which is yet another dance around the crisis) it is careful to strip itself of the myths, chiefly historical, that bedevil so much of contemporary political thinking in France; although the best example of this demythologizing in this particular issue is a shrewd and humorous article on the Frenchman of today by a foreign journalist, Vincent Vinde. He makes the interesting suggestion that the feeling among the French working classes of being cut off from effective power, and looking as a result upon Communism as the only thing which will give it to them, arises from the fact that there was no gradual take-over of power and middle-class living in the 1920s by a generation which had been through compulsory primary education, as happened to some extent in Britain and Scandinavia. Whatever their reason for missing the bus in this way, the slow upward permeation of society by the formerly underprivileged which M. Vinde—rather optimistically—thinks took place here, is no longer possible in France. M. Vinde has some harsh and true things to say of the French working classes, which would benefit also the classes immediately above them: 'The Frenchman will not pay taxes, nor will he pay a real rent. But he forgets, or doesn't know, that before the 1914 war a Parisian working-man, although he paid a fifth of his wages in rent, was relatively speaking a member of the best-housed proletariat in Europe; he is now literally the pariah of that proletariat.'

The 'new series' of *Esprit* in which this article appears is naturally to a considerable extent the mixture as before. Jean-Marie Domenach, co-director of the review since June 1956, is now sole editor, but in charge of a younger team of writers. The previous editorial board—a distinguished one—has made way for a group of younger talents not because it disagrees with the way Domenach is likely to run the review, but simply because it is aware of the growth of a new generation of writers for whom the past struggles of *Esprit* (anti-Fascism, the Resistance, the Liberation) are, if not meaningless, at any rate without much personal impact. The older group (Mme Mounier, Jean Lacroix, Paul Fraisse, Henri Marrou, Bertrand d'Astorg) still owns the review

and will presumably, on occasion, write in it; and the new team will continue as before to walk the tight-rope between two unacceptable extremes—or even to convince their readers that the tight-rope is really there, which is perhaps more difficult.

‘Our present situation’, writes Domenach in introducing the new series (November 1957), ‘does not allow any longer the fine assurance we used to have, those facile divisions. Between a capitalism which is here and there becoming socialized, and a Soviet Communism which is beginning to be liberalized, we cannot proceed by using caricatural oppositions. . . . Marxism derived its strength from a serious analysis of the economic problems of its times. We must face up to a communism in which, more and more, organization prevails over convictions, and also to that type of well-oiled capitalism which covers the West. Under the difference of ideological clothing, identical problems arise, for society has the same needs and the human person the same difficulties. . . . More precisely, we must set out with greater urgency the essential problems of personalization in a society based on comfort.’ The founders of *Esprit* could not, says Domenach, envisage a society in which capitalism would be modified by the pressure of new elements which would limit the tyranny of money: ‘. . . in face of the development of the kind of neo-capitalism which is arising now, which is being planned in the general interest and which faces problems of technical penury rather than social conflicts, we must admit there are many ways towards socialism; we must not hold that one way is historically destined to prevail.’

All this is very pleasingly pragmatic, and underlines the usefulness of *Esprit* as a review which is able to keep alive the demands for specific reforms and specific changes in a groggy system without being irremediably linked to nostrums which would possibly silence it at a given turn in events. So the things Domenach claims as the general objects of a policy for France are, not surprisingly, fairly commonplace to us here: ridding the French people of myths, whether derived from the monarchy or from ‘the immortal principles of 1789’, persuading them to accept fully the idea of a European association linked with the non-European peoples they are now bitterly fighting against, and lastly to cure the Republic of its *incivisme* by decentralizing power and making it capable of absorbing the shocks of technical modernization which are shaking its ancient fabric.

To an English reader, as always, it is astonishing that these things need to be said. Yet clearly their reiteration is necessary in France for Domenach to conclude: ‘History has already given us a great deal. It is not likely that twice in twenty years France will be saved, *in extremis*, by a handful of brave men.’

Esprit continues to use the 'symposium' arrangement of articles, which has become common practice, it seems, with both English and French reviews. This has undoubted advantages as far as editing and presentation are concerned, and certainly the added coherence may be felt to be a selling attraction. But what is lost is surely the very nature of a review, which is not simply a book of collected articles on a rather smaller scale and at more frequent intervals, but a variety of opinions on *different* topics whose only or chief virtue is that they are relevant to the date at which they appear. Rarely does a symposium attain the kind of permanence which a book on its subject will have, and any writer will normally give more attention to what he writes when he knows it is to acquire the permanence of a book.

La Table Ronde seems to use this symposium principle almost exclusively now. Two recent issues (November and December 1957) have dealt respectively with the Don Juan theme and the Sign of the Cross. The most interesting of the contributions to the first number is, as it happens, not an article at all but a play, or rather part of a play: Act I of Montherlant's *Don Juan*. There is, as one would expect, too much sheer talk in it, but where *Port Royal* was unspeakably tedious when performed at the Comédie Française, there are touches of slapstick in the present play (specifically the not infrequent emptying of slops from above upon the hero) which may give it on the stage more than the purely verbal life it has now. Verbally it does succeed, in its debunking of the Don Juan legend, with here and there a touch of Beaumarchais in the dialogue.

The December issue considers the cross as an archetype in various aspects of its theological and iconographical development, as pre-Christian symbol in the ancient East (André Parrot), in symbolism and biblical typology (Robert Amadou), in its connection with the Crusade and the change from cross to crucifix (René Louis), Dante and the Cross (Jacques Madaule), St Paul and the Cross (A. Hamann), Kabbalistic aspects of the Cross (Ernest Fraenkel), the development of representation of the Cross (Del Medico), the Cross and Gnosticism (Jean Dorese), a selection of texts from Benet Canfield by Henri Gouhier, and a long and rather misty article by Jung, 'Le problème du quatrième', which has overflowed into the January issue. Fr Daniélou proposes an interesting but tenuously proved theory that an early form of one of the monograms of Christ is one in which the letter *waw* is associated with the Cross (St Jerome, *de Monogrammate*) and that the *waw* designates the name of God, giving in this way a very early 'representation' of Christ upon the Cross. As the *waw* also represented a serpent, this is linked by Fr Daniélou with the Johannine reference to Moses and the brazen serpent set on a staff. The representation of Christ by a serpent

may have scandalized the early Christians, and they formalized its appearance by giving it as *waw*, the equivalent of the Divine Name. . . .

The symposium formula has also been used in the past by *Les Temps Modernes*; but now its directors seem to have realized that most people never expect to read more than two or three articles in any review they buy, and there is a fair amount of variety in recent issues. There is some first-class reporting in fictional form in the extracts from Olivier Todd's novel *Les Paumés* (September and October 1957). Todd has an uncanny gift for reproducing army colloquial at its most vigorous and uninhibited moments and combines this with a shrewd appreciation of the corrosion of the ordinary French soldier which (though his theme is Morocco) is entailed in the campaign to 'pacify' Algeria. The same issues contain extracts from a study on Existentialism and Marxism by Sartre—yet another variation on the scorpions' square-dance which he has been performing with the Communists for so long. It is a combination of philosophical theory, history, and literary criticism written in that curious style which gives us—occasionally—a piece of clear formulation in an ocean of fearful gobbledygook of which the following is a fair sample: 'For us, the reality of the collective object rests on *recurrence*; it shows that totalization is never completed, and that totality only exists, at best, as *detotalized totality*.'

Fundamentally these articles repeat the familiar theoretical opposition between Sartre and the Marxists: the latter proceed from 'a *priori* conceptualization', the former reacts against this by affirming the specific nature of the historical event. For the Marxist, says Sartre, 'the event has the duty of verifying the *a priori* analyses of the situation; or at any rate of not contradicting them.' Hence the difficulty of the French communists in explaining away the Hungarian revolt. Sartre quotes one who said the Hungarian workers 'could have been misled, could have entered upon a path which they did not think was the path along which the counter-revolution was taking them, but later on these workers *could not but have* reflected on the consequences of this policy . . .'—could not therefore have done other than wish for the Kadar régime, ultimately. In italicizing the phrase *could not but have* in this quotation from a Communist apologia for repression Sartre comments aptly: 'In this text—whose aim is more political than theoretical—we are not told what the Hungarian workers did but what they *could not but have done*. And why could they not? Because they could not contradict their eternal essence as socialist workers. Curiously enough, this Stalinized Marxism takes on an appearance of hostility to progress; a working-man is no longer a real being who changes along with the world: he is a Platonic idea.' In practice Sartre will presumably con-

tinue to do as he has always done in the past; adopt the Communist approach towards a specific event when it suits him, and reject it when it doesn't. He is still the author both of *Les Mains Sales* and *Nekrassov*. The re-statements of his position are interesting as pieces of dialectic, but the result never deprives him of the pragmatic choice before each separate political event. It will be interesting to see in his February issue what his views are on the seizure of the January number of *Les Temps Modernes* by the French police. Editing reviews in France certainly has that element of tauromachy which Michel Leiris laments has vanished from literature. Perhaps a few confiscations on this side of the Channel would brighten up the literary scene. . . .

LOUIS ALLEN

OBITER

THE CARMELITES. It is, on the face of it, unexpected that the works of so concentrated, so economical a writer as Georges Bernanos should lend themselves easily to adaptation into another medium. But *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* was made into a near-perfect film by Robert Bresson, and now we in London have seen the opera which François Poulenc has made out of *Les Dialogues des Carmélites*: this, too, turns out to be significant in its own right, and it is interesting to recall here that both Bresson and Poulenc have put it on record that, in making their own versions from the Bernanos originals, they have found it possible, indeed essential, to use only the words of the author and have only eliminated—never interpolated—passages of dialogue. It is, perhaps, less surprising that Bresson should have made the film than that Poulenc should have written the opera, for most of the works by Poulenc that the average English concert-goer will hear are witty, sophisticated and intelligent; technically highly accomplished but not, for the most part, profound. But then we do not often, in England, have the opportunity of hearing the 'Litanies de la Vierge Noire' or 'Figure Humaine', which might have prepared us for *Les Carmélites*. It would be difficult for anyone of sensibility, and almost impossible for a Catholic, I think, to hear *Les Carmélites* and not be deeply moved, and this not only because of the high seriousness of the situation and the weight of the characters, but also because of the true humility with which the composer has subordinated himself to the exigencies of his material and the simplicity with which he has accepted its disciplines.

The Carmelites opened in London on January 16, and in March will be heard in Oxford and Manchester, when the company goes on tour; it has also been broadcast in the Third Programme so that a great many