

## THE LIVING WORD

DURING the last thirty years the exploitation of language by the linotype, radio and cinema has made words cheap, obscured their meaning and dulled our perceptions. Our idea of goodness is likely to be haunted by a phantasm of Guinness, and if it becomes co-terminous with Guinness it becomes false. Our understanding of the difference between glamour and beauty is likely to be hazy, not only because of film stars, for Blackpool and the Scottish Highlands are both described as glamorous. We live in a world where sound in general and words in particular are scattered about with insensate prodigality and disregard for the consequences, and we cannot fail to become in some degree insensitive to the meaning and value of words.

Words were created to be the means of conveying thought. How often do they convey thought and how often only 'sound and fury signifying nothing.' The popularity of a slogan lies more in its sound than in its meaning; you can always lead the crowd by an attractive noise, and if you are unscrupulous by an evil meaning noise. While it is possible for a slogan to enshrine a gem of wisdom it is also possible for a slogan to be gibberish. When the press makes its appeal through such noise all stimulus of thought is killed, the channels of intellect are silted up with a deposit of jargon and clichés and we lose the power to distinguish between sound and significance. So our thoughts become muddled and consequently false.

It would indeed have been remarkable had Catholics escaped this contagion and it is only to be expected that we should have established our own jargon. Jargon, however, is not synonymous with traditional terminology. In fact, the attempt to depart from traditional language can itself become an affectation as stultifying as any jargon if it is infected with the belief that words must be dead because they are old. Some words, like some people, live for a very long time without becoming even senile. Thus the attempt to replace the admittedly over-worked word 'sublime' by a simpler word 'high' can, and in fact does, become an affectation. Though it is true that fashions change and words wear out it is also true that some of our obscurities could well be cleared up by a revival of older simple phraseology. For instance, our forefathers did believe in the devil and talked about him. They gave him various and often colourful names. We call him the force of evil, or perhaps forget him altogether and talk about heredity and environment. This has no doubt sprung from a sincere desire to make religion real to the

modern world, but it might easily mean watering down religion to fit the jargon instead of stiffening the jargon to fit religion and the facts. That is just what has happened. We have taken the language of the world, but we have taken its sophistry also; we not only try to speak as the world speaks, we tend to think as the world thinks. The result is that we are in danger of falling into the very pit we set out to avoid, because we have created a self-contained jargon of religion which does the very thing we deplore—cuts off religion from life. We should not dream of building a church with faulty plumb lines, cracked bricks and a shoddy cement. No more should we attempt to build the temple of divine wisdom with misleading slogans and dead words. Clear thinking needs clear images, and words which do not conjure up clear images are defective. They are the cracked bricks and faulty plumb lines. They are dead.

We are all familiar with the jargon that decorates the pages of the popular thriller; the hero's gun is always an *automatic*, instead of shooting it always *spits*, and often *viciously*; the hand never grasps a door handle but *fingers close round it stealthily*. Now these words are dead. They died through overwork. A commendable form of death, certainly, but no excuse for propping up their corpses and trying to work them like puppets. We may as well try to get sound from the puppets as meaning from such words. They no longer stimulate thought. We have grown so accustomed to them that we take them for granted like the view from our bedroom window, and we need a holiday from them, a foreign stimulus to prevent the mind sinking into a coma. Not that this is true of all popular novels, nor of everything we call slang: for instance, Peter Cheyney's 'ironing out' and 'gumshoeing' startle the mind into action. Thrillers can be good and bad; so can religious books. But since the balance of printed words to-day is weighed down heavily on the bad side it follows that there is all the greater danger of the word of God being traduced in this fashion by a jargon that is dead and paralyses the mind it should invigorate. We are told for instance that

' St. John was permitted to behold the celestial worship of the eternal.'

St. John put it this way: ' I beheld and I heard the voice of many angels round the throne, and the living creatures and the ancients ' (Apoc. VI, 11)

' The Cloud of Unknowing could only have been written in a mediaeval English milieu '

refers presumably to mediaeval England.

Again :

‘ This precept actually lies upon each one of us at this moment with the most inevitable universality and the most stringent obligation ’

means that this command is strictly binding on all of us. Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

Still, many of the difficulties are not of our own making. We have to talk to a world whose standards are directly counter to our own and in order to reach its mind we must use its language, all the while making reservations. This certainly accounts for some of the clumsiness of conscientious modern writers. The phrase *spiritual life*, for instance, is quite rightly held in abhorrence by many; yet use it we must in spite of the dangers of misinterpretation by a world which makes a false dichotomy between body and spirit. We simply must face the fact that we need to be continually on our guard; using the language of the world, but always with reservations and explanations. Christ himself had to counter false thinking and there, as a matter of fact, is our ideal. We need only turn to the gospels and examine our Lord's methods. Nothing could be more vivid, more concrete and colourful than his words: ‘ Behold the sower went forth to sow . . . The kingdom of heaven is likened to a mustard seed . . . Peter, lovest thou me . . . Son, behold thy mother . . . ’ Examine our Lord's words and you shall find scarcely a single abstract noun; everything is concrete, visual and alive. Even the most difficult and rarified doctrines were put into concrete homely language: the divinity of Christ was ‘ I and the Father are one ’: the infallibility of the Church and its eternity was a *rock*. Nowadays we speak about the *youth* of the country. The youth of England, we say, is going to the dogs, and wonder why no one listens. If we said, our children, your little boy, my daughter, are all going to the dogs, we might command attention. That was how our Lord described them: little children, or young men, or again, ‘ the damsel is not dead . . . maid arise. ’ He thought of them as human persons to be brought to the kingdom of heaven, not specimens or problems. We do not hear Christ talking of an *ethos*: he called it the kingdom of heaven or the prince of darkness, whichever ‘ ethos ’ he was referring to. He said ‘ There is no man who has left house or brethren or sisters . . . ’ not, ‘ There is no man who has left his milieu. ’ The vitality of Christ's words has been attested by the highest authorities who rank the bible in English as one of the finest forms of literature. And the reason? It is concrete.

So we can remember three rules, arbitrary and incomplete if you will, but at least a start in the right direction. Seek always the concrete word rather than the abstract; the simple word rather than the elaborate; the familiar before the recondite. With these beacon fires of truth we should be able to disperse the mists of obscurity and half-truth which are the playground of the devil.

In the meantime we have something to be thankful for. When we remember the vast turgid output of the modern secular press we are bound to admit that God has spared us much. Fr. Martindale, Margaret Monro, Fr. Martin d'Arcy, Dom Aelred Graham and Fr. Gerald Vann, to mention only a few at random, are among those who show us that not only can religion free herself from the shackles of jargon but in doing so she comes to life. In a recent pamphlet Dom Aelred Graham has shown us in what small and apparently insignificant ways this is done, and he also leads the way in another direction by supplying the need that there is bound to be for continual re-translation of the set terms of perennial theology. Because these terms are fixed they are in danger of becoming jargon if we use them without reflection. Even terms like 'grace' and 'theological virtues' can cease to stimulate, and when writing we often need to choose words which provoke the reader to think. So, speaking of the cardinal virtues, Dom Aelred Graham always uses the word *courage*. A small matter, but we understand that word: men have been decorated for courage on the battlefield—was it a cardinal virtue? Perhaps. At any rate we now have some idea what a cardinal virtue is like.

But we must respond to the efforts of such leaders. Whether we are writers or whether we are readers we must be alive to the difference between spurious and genuine language, the word which smothers and the word which discloses, and at the same time give thanks for a hard core of clear thinking which does glory to God for in it the Word is once more made flesh.

GERARD MEATH, O.P.