

Sir Herbert Read (1893-1968)

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by Walter Shewring

I have just returned from the burial of Herbert Read at Kirkdale Minster, in the same remote churchyard where he himself saw his father buried, by the church of grey stone with slated roof and against the dark wood of firs.

As I try to collect my thoughts about him, I wonder if others will find it easier than myself to say what he stood for most. He had many friends and many audiences, but they were often, I think, isolated from each other. Teachers and children inspired by his books or presence to find new confidence in their own painting might be dismayed by the bloodless forms of geometrical art which he praised elsewhere; painters and sculptors of the vanguard, who owed him much and who often seemed his predilection, were baffled perhaps by his acceptance of this or that Old Master, by his enjoyment of eighteenth-century porcelain or glass, by his admiration of recent things that were not of the vanguard at all—the early ‘non-abstract’ work of Ben Nicholson, the engravings and paintings of David Jones, the pictures and letters of Stanley Spencer, certain drawings of children by Eric Gill. His continued encouragement of new and experimental writers went side by side with an unquenchable devotion to Shelley and Emily Brontë, to Flaubert and Henry James; and the acute and sensitive interpreter of these classics was perhaps not known also as the masterly and precise and imaginative writer of *The Green Child* and the autobiographies. Lastly, there was the ill-omened word ‘anarchy’, still widely associated with the throwing of private bombs and deeply distrusted even by those who believed in much throwing of public bombs; when the message came through that Read did not hold with bombs at all, relief and indignation mingled.

The bewilderments I have hinted at belonged in general to minds of a narrower range than his, but there were doubtless in his thought and expression some real discrepancies not to be denied; I am thinking particularly of his theory of art. It was not only that he gradually passed from one view to another—that is a natural thing enough in the development of any thinker; he would move back disconcertingly to a position one had thought abandoned, or assert simultaneously two theses whose coherence he could not demonstrate. But then he had, what many a better logician lacks, an intense vision of individual things which illuminated them even when it failed to bridge them.

I met him briefly in Edinburgh about 1932, then saw nothing

more of him till he returned to Yorkshire in 1949; we became acquaintances, we became friends. In the interval I had often read and discussed his books. In those days, agreement in philosophy seemed less important than disagreement, and I have an uneasy recollection of reviewing one of his books in *Blackfriars* in the patronizing manner of an amateur Thomist. Not that I should disown now my general position then, but that I feel ashamed of that obvious readiness to pounce upon points of logic and neglect the weightier matters of the law.

There was a time—in the late twenties, in the early thirties—when Herbert Read seemed not far away from the Catholic Church. His important book on *English Stained Glass* (1926) had linked an expert discussion of this art with consideration of its intellectual background and an admiring appraisal of St Thomas. English Catholics then had great hopes of rapid spiritual conquest; it was widely rumoured that Aldous Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, possibly D. H. Lawrence, were about to enter the Fisherman's net; and if these, why not Herbert Read?

All this was a great misapprehension. I think it a pity now—I speak not in terms of conversion but in terms of communication—that as far as I know (though I may have missed some evidence) Catholic intellectuals never troubled themselves to give Herbert Read a considered answer on the matter of anarchism. Communism has fared better. Though for many Catholics the word 'communism' means much the same as the word 'cannibalism', some Catholic thinkers, a little late in the day, have taken the trouble to distinguish in conventional communist doctrine assertions A and B, once proclaimed more forcibly by Doctors of the Church, assertion C, a shaky deduction from A and B, and assertion D, which has lost the trail altogether. Has anything similar been done for the leading ideas of non-violent anarchists? Might not Herbert Read's notion of anarchy have usefully been related to the general notion of human interdependence through function and to the Christian or Taoist notion of humility, with distinctions to be established afterwards? I myself am all for being governed, but then it should be by sages of good will; and since such governors seem undiscoverable, I am existentially not far away from the pacific anarchist—if not in the same boat, at least within hailing distance. Anyhow, Herbert Read himself was surprised and delighted when in reparation for past incomprehension I offered him my version of a passage from St John Chrysostom, where anarchism in the peacemaking sense is praised as an aspect of humility, the anarchists being an Egyptian monastic community.

You never hear one man there intimidating another, you see no one being intimidated, no one receiving or issuing orders. All the monks belong to the strangers whose needs they serve, every one of them washes the feet of guests; in this one point there is indeed

great rivalry. The monk who does this does not ask who the guest is ('Is he a slave? Is he a freeman?'); he ministers in the same way to all. No one here is important, no one is unimportant. What does this mean? Is it all confusion? Far from it. There is exemplary order. The great man here is the one who seizes upon the humblest task. No room is left for the word *Mine* and the word *Thine*, which have kindled so many wars; they are banned from here. (Homily 72 on St Matthew; Migne P.G. 57, col. 671.)

Herbert Read remained a gentle agnostic with a deep affection for many Christian things—not only for the architecture of Rievaulx but for the hard holy life of St Ailred himself; and if he shrank from Christian proselytizers, I think he shrank from atheist proselytizers more. He was sure that 'the world of thought outside the churches cannot compare in depth of feeling or beauty of expression with the art and philosophy inspired by religion'. His last years were no doubt saddened by the shrinking of some earlier hopes—hopes of humanizing industrial society, or of rescuing its victims through the fostering of the imagination; he saw instead the increasing victories of commercial greed and political ambition—both eager to sell multitudinous bad work to the ends of the earth, both prepared to destroy all things visible, from wild flowers to the great globe itself. Yet he did not despair; there was still at times the sight of 'some ancient wrong/Dying as of self-slaughter'; and in the continuing vision to which he was never disobedient he still spoke of 'the glory of God' and 'the kingdom of Heaven', not simply as a concession to those whose beliefs he honoured without sharing them, but as the best expression he could achieve of something he did believe in but over whose meaning he still faltered.

Today I found a withered stem of honesty, and shelled the pods between my thumb and finger; silver pennies, which grew between the fragrant currant-bushes. Their glistening surfaces, seeded, the very faint rustle they make in the wind—these sensations come direct to me from a moment thirty years ago. As they expand in my mind, they carry everything in their widening circle—the low crisp box-hedge which would be at my feet, the pear-trees on the wall behind me, the potato-flowers on the patch beyond the bushes, the ivy-clad privy at the end of the path, the cow pasture, the fairy rings—everything shimmers for a second on the expanding rim of my memory. The farthest tremor of this perturbation is lost only at the finest edge where sensation passes beyond the confines of experience; for memory is a flower which only opens fully in the kingdom of Heaven, where the eye is eternally innocent.

Sed ubi est visio patriae quae est perfecta, ibi est caritas patriae quae est perfecta.