BIOGRAPHY OF FATHER BEDE JARRETT (VII)[1]

WHATEVER he did was quickly done, but neither hastily nor in a hurry. This is particularly true of his reading and writing, both of which in sum mounted up imperceptibly to a great deal. His published books and pamphlets, of which even his most intimate companions rarely knew anything until they suddenly appeared ready for printing, are but a small part of the writing he left behind him. This consists of official documents, letters and postcards, plans of sermons and lectures, quotations from books read, and the student's notes to which he was forever adding something. Considering the busy life he led and the little leisure he was allowed, the extent of his reading and his accurate memory of what he read are very remarkable. Much of it was done in trains and on long voyages. At one time he devoted the time spent in the noisy Underground trains in London to the study of Russian, and made some progress with it. He read history seriously all through life. He returned constantly to his early theological and ecclesiastical studies, refreshing them and keeping them up to date by reading new work as it appeared, preferably such as had a practical bearing on his own special duties. For the nourishment of his own soul and those others whom he had helped in their spiritual life he persevered with his study of the mystics.

His intimate knowledge of the latter grew wider and deeper year by year. As early as 1925 the list of those from whom he could quote freely was already imposing: Walter Hilton, St. Edmund of Canterbury, Richard Rolle, Jordan

[1] Further extracts from the forthcoming *Life of Fr. Bede Jarrett* by John-Baptist Reeves, O.P.

of Saxony, Beata Amata, Humbert de Romanis, St. Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor, St. Bonaventure, Raymond Lull, Duns Scotus, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Antoninus of Florence, Savonarola, Eckhardt, Tauler, Henry Suso, James of Voragine, Rodriguez, Scaramelli, Lejeune, Lamballe, Poulain. In his later notes are analyses of the mystical doctrine of the Old and New Testaments, of Buddhism, of the Greeks, the Neo-Platonists, Hegel, von Hügel, Wallace, Bergson, and the Socialist idealists. He examined Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan* as a tract on mysticism contrasted with formalism.

Amongst the papers of one of his brothers killed in action was found a copy of Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*. It was given to Father Bede as a keepsake. He read and re-read it, and filled its ample margins with an elaborate commentary, at each new perusal eliciting more meaning from the text. The result suggests that Thompson, through the poets on whom he was nurtured, or more directly, drew his inspiration wholly from the mystics, correcting the pagans by the Christians, and that Father Bede follows after, to trace the doctrine to its authentic Christian sources. It seems a pity he never embodied the result in an essay that might have demonstrated his power and discernment as a literary critic. But he did better. He worked up his commentary into a series of sermons to be preached during retreats to souls seeking spiritual perfection. (His analysis irresistibly reminds one of Dante's Letter to Can Grande—which however he shows no clear sign of ever having read.) He distinguishes the poem into four treatises: the soul's attempt to escape from God's relentless love, first in youth, next in middle years, and still again in old age; and finally, God's tremendous revenge of love. Beginning from the line 'I fled him down the arches of the years,' he interprets the poem as the biography of any soul. Our life is, foolishly, a flight from God. In youth we hide from Him, burying ourselves within ourselves in melancholy, gaiety, optimism, pessimism. Later we shelter ourselves

from Him behind human friendships, evade him with a craze for speed, and try to recover ourselves by affecting a love for innocent children. As all these fail us and we grow older, we distract ourselves from Him by love of nature, by joy in our own energy and talents. In age even our own resources fail us, and we are left with only the rind of life; but still we seek a comfortable heaven in that, struggling against God to the last. But even at the last we may catch a glimpse of Him as we never thought to see Him: a wounded lover tirelessly pursuing us as much for love as for justice' sake. All things fly us if we fly Him: but however far we fly, He, though staggering under His Cross, overtakes us at last, and making our fall His fall, raises us up together with Himself as He rises to all the glory we have ever dreamt, and infinitely more.

Biography and poetry, always Father Bede's favourite recreation, retained their power to refresh and inspire him until the end of his life. Fiction for its own sake made little appeal to him; if ever he read any modern fiction of crime and detection it cannot have impressed him much, for there is no mention of any in the numerous letters he wrote to friends about books and their authors. But he seized eagerly upon any imaginative writing that was either romantic or in any way a parable of life and love, suffering and death. His earliest favourites remained his first favourites to the end, Shakespeare far ahead of them all, and Hazlitt a consoling compère. Contemporary literature grew upon him steadily from the time he began, as a young priest, to move about freely amongst cultured secular society in London and elsewhere. His progress here as ever was from persons to things and back again to persons. He loved persons who loved books for their own sake. Later he loved young persons who needed books; he recommended and interpreted his own favourites to them, and joined them in search of new ones addressed explicitly to their generation.

He needed no introduction by secular society to such writers as Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton. Though he had faults to find with Chesterton as a historian and was exasperated by the legend of an 'infallible Belloc' to which some Catholics clung, he consistently pointed to these two writers at their best as excellent standards in their ways for all literature aspiring to be throughly Catholic, thoroughly English, and of high quality both as art and doctrine.

In 1917 he wrote:

Didn't you like Lord Hugh Cecil's speech with its vehement protest against the advanced doctrine of State supremacy? G.K.C.'s *History*, Wyndham's *Letters* and Lord Hugh Cecil's speech are all of a piece, fragments of a longer faith that once was Christendom. Why should it be left to three Protestants to voice the immemorial teaching of the Church?

He was an enthusiastic admirer of George Wyndham, to whom he was introduced by Lady Margaret Domvile through Charles Gatty's *Recognita*. Of this last book he wrote:

The influence of the book is a great deal more subtle and penetrating than any definite passage in it; and to explain what I mean, I think the only way I can convey this is by saying that when in the evening I took up my Breviary to recite my Office I found I tasted psalms, and antiphons, and lessons more beautifully. That is always my touchstone of sheer literary beauty. For the Breviary is the best collection of literature that I know; and if anything I read makes the Office afterwards distasteful, I know the *appetitif* (*sic*) must have been rotten.

George Wyndham seemed to him to have revealed his own character perfectly in one sentence: 'I wish people would think and feel and dream more and fuss and scold less.' Quoting this Father Bede was moved to add: 'For people' substitute the word 'I' and you have my own confession, my ideal, my annual resolution.' Wyndham's example led him to a conclusion that pleased him: 'the most poetic Secretary for Ireland was the most practical...

Hence one longs for a Convention of the Poets (yes and certainly the Poetesses) to lay down the true and practical lines of Home Rule . . . I have sworn across the hilt of my fountain pen to give the Almighty a free hand in the matter of Ireland.' In appreciation of Wyndham's *Letters* Father Bede dropped a remark which helped to explain his sympathy with this writer: 'His wonderful devotion to his mother is quite touching, so that to the end his letters are as boyish as ever.'

In Father Bede's own letters there are many phrases and brief passages showing what sort of contemporary literature he read in his moments of leisure, and why he liked or disliked it. Rupert Brooke is 'charming'; Charles Lister and the Grenfels 'a gallant band'; Stephen Hewett is 'a man of thought'; Donald Hankey 'has the ignorance of things scriptural and theological of a local preacher forty years ago.' He considered Hugh Walpole's *Prelude to Adventure* 'one of the wonderful books of life'; C. E. Montague's *Disenchantment* 'the *truest* book I have yet read that tries to analyse the diseases of to-day in the body politic,' Horace Annesley Vachell's *Triumph of Tim* 'a fleshly book.' He loved the way his friend, Sir Philip Gibbs, 'touched with emotion' every subject he wrote about. He was one of the first amongst Catholics to call attention to the work of Evelyn and Alec Waugh and Beverley Nichols. In his letters to young men he often referred them appreciatively to the books of Compton Mackenzie. John Masefield he praised as 'one of the few novelists who doesn't write problem novels and isn't afraid to meet the market with a book that merely describes and thrills and is clear.'

During the long years of depression suffered by the whole world after the European War the pessimism of the young excited his sympathetic concern. He explained it, not by economic causes or in terms of nerves, but as a universal tendency of human nature against which he himself was

driven to react in order, literally, 'to save his face.' He argues this point with ingenious good humour in a letter to a young friend:

> After deep thought, the result of solitary walks in thin rain along muddy roads with collar turned up, I have at last achieved the true solution of your pessimism. I have discovered it is the invariable penalty that goes with good looks. Byron had all that personal beauty, so had Rupert Brooke. Voilà! Now it sounds simple enough, but think of my cleverness in discovering it! Why was it not self-evident from the beginning? Anyway, try the test on your companions and see whether it be not true. But why? Well now this is a little subtle. But put it this way. Pessimism is obviously the natural temper of man. He has every possible reason for being pessimistic. Who then react against it? Just those who by force of natural selection have got to make themselves attractive somehow. Beauty being denied them, the very clever grow witty as a counter-foil to their plainness, and whosoever can't be witty becomes an optimist. Think of the great pessimists of our land, Richard II, Henry VI, Charles I, Milton, Byron, Brooke—why it is the list of our greatest professional and public beauties. And who are the cheery optimists? Stevenson, G.K.C., and Bede, O.P. Admit my contention and be forever condemned to your melancholy. You see you have all you need to make yourself friends, and what do you care about otherwise pleasing them? Whereas we optimists having no other gift become cheery and contribute smiles to a darkened and damned world.

He evidently was not too sure that this argument was free from fallacy or its conclusion the whole answer to the problem. An observation he makes elsewhere is an admission that if all the world were young, with original sin still a fact and no older folk to point the way of escape from it, human nature, so far from having a remedy for pessimism in the unequal distribution of good looks and plain, would be more prone than ever to intensify its own sorrows:

> Usually the younger writer is more unkind to his generation than is the older writer. Noel Coward is harder on the young than is Somerset Maugham. Is this because Noel Coward knows them better, or because it is the young who like to be thought 'gay dogs'?

One of his models of youth of all time was Pico della Mirandola:

> Let ' Pico della Mirandola ' be the symbol of all the future, his brilliant intelligence, his personal beauty, his deep devotion, his Dominican death-shroud. About him is the fragrance of youth, so eager, so foolishly wise, so sure it has found its 900 theses to explain all life's problems, so humbly patient of authority, so reverent to the painstaking fragments of past wisdom, so buoyantly hopeful of the added wisdom which the future is to bring, yet dying prematurely as all youth dies, as indeed all die who are young in heart and sympathy, tender to the oncoming generations.

In his early manhood he held that the influences of Walter Pater on young minds, though at first unhealthy, encouraged them to go beyond the pagan virtues of the Greeks, who 'almost merited revelation,' to the fulness of Christian Faith:

> I am convinced that it is his Catholic tendences more than his pagan ones that put most of his Oxford enemies against him. But it's rather pretty to think of the ' comely Dominican habit ' as he calls it in the last chapter of that unfinished *Gaston de Latour* coming as a white symbol of forgiveness, like the snow that witnessed and testified to the forgiveness of Charles I.

In his later years he seems either to have forgotten or revised this evaluation, for in 1928, when he was re-reading *Marius the Epicurean,* he wrote to a friend some years older than himself:

> I can't think how I can have read it blithely years ago. It is interesting but rather stiff reading to me now. Was I sharper or less observant then? It seems now to require a great deal more thought and leisure for thought than I could possibly have given it then—and yet I ' loved ' it in those days and have ever since recommended it to all sorts of young men who, now I see, wouldn't have understood much of it at all. Do you ever find shocks like that?

To the end he was a keen student of every book in which he found young men interested. The year before he died, during a voyage to New York, he read Charles Morgan's

Fountain, and it so stimulated him that he wrote a criticism of it in which, after introducing the history of Albigensian heresy ('with which the Church dealt drastically and cruelly'), the doctrine of the Incarnation, the devotion of Catholics to Our Lady, mystical and philosophical contemplation, he goes on:

> Man loves, must love. Man needs personal character to absorb and hold him. He cannot have a contemplative life unless it is the result of love. Hence the supreme centre must be God. God is apprehended as true, and so the apparatus of Dogma is required. Dogma safeguards the true knowledge of God. We want and need to love God as He is, and not a caricature of God, a false, untrue, image of Him. Faith receives (for man can't else know truly what God is like) Christ's teaching of the true character of God; that is the basis of all Catholic mysticism. The mystic demands solid truth as the essential beginning: 'contemplation is a sight,' says Richard Rolle. Then, because the soul sees Him it loves Him, for God is lovable, all good, all beautiful. God is Love, Goodness, Beauty as well as Truth. So the personal being of God is loved (for Christ taught that as the first and only commandment. The second, love of the neighbour, is *like* it, but as a command could never stand by itself).

Father Bede loved not only all that is young, but all that is old and tried and lasting. As a Dominican he understood that all human progress must be growth from seeds planted long ago to become the root and trunk of life. This conception underlay his well known respect for the Jews as they are, and his zealous hope for their conversion to Christianity at the last. All mankind has sinned once by original sin against God and man's own nature, and for that we are under a curse from which Christ alone can reprieve us. The Jews have sinned a second time by rejecting and crucifying God made Man in their own racial flesh and blood, and are under a double curse for that. But they are not for that beyond Christ's power or hope of redemption. He is the atonement for all sins, even ancestral sins. He has kept His own Jewish race alive not only that he may

save them, but that salvation for all men may outlast the ages of mankind: for the Jews still stand for and by the ancient traditions which were a hope and expectation and prophecy of the coming of Christ. They are a hopeful, hopeless family, prophets of Christianity after the event and to their own confusion or salvation, whichever they may yet choose. It was a great joy to Father Bede in his last years to find a young Jew amongst the poets, and so amongst the mystics and the prophets—for that is what all true poets were to him.

In 1928 he had presented a friend with Eric Gill's *Art and Love*. The friend in return sent him Humbert Wolfe's *Requiem*. Soon afterwards, writing to a woman in great trouble, he quoted from it the whole of the poem on St. Joan, and added: 'That's Humbert Wolfe, a Jew; it's one of the most perfect things he's done. It has fine lessons and truth, in the understanding of some heroic souls that thro' distress and pain, and the agony of loss and of great love find their way to God.'

In a letter of thanks for the gift of *Requiem* he had written:

> You see, a priest wants to try and help people to achieve the knowledge and love of God of which they are capable, and yet he can't help people unless he knows them, but can help, more or less fully, in proportion to his knowledge of them. It's hardest of all for him to know the younger people who have moved from where he stands, and he needs to know, not the individual merely, but the spirit of the whole generation. Where else, more shortly finely and frankly, shall he find this than in the poets? Rupert Brooke could have been but a few years my junior. Already I can see that he's dead; his romanticism, his sureness, his definite knowledge, have all lapsed, rubbed by the war from their clear lines to more smudged and vaguer clouds—not lines at all . . . .

(*Further extracts will appear in a subsequent issue.*)