

## SAUNDERS LEWIS

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IN 'A note on Welsh Education' which he contributed to BLACKFRIARS for March, 1948, Mr Saunders Lewis has described how, in the nineteenth century, 'nonconformity became the very nationhood of Wales'. 'Its entire cultural life', he wrote, 'was centred in the chapel. . . . Religion was three-quarters of life; it triumphed in poverty and over poverty and ennobled the bitter, ill-requited toil on land, in quarry, mine . . . The education of this people was rooted in its religious and social life: its content was its evangel, its medium the Welsh language. While the society lived and kept its unity, these two were safe.' During the past sixty years, however, that unity has gradually been breaking down; the 'ideal and authority' of the society have been destroyed. 'Middle-class, worldly ideals, the impact of a wider, modern culture, conquered the religious unity of the Methodist peasantry.'

It would be difficult to disagree with that analysis. Wales is now going through the final stages of the disintegration of its nonconformist nationhood. Mr Saunders Lewis is in many ways the most influential personality in Wales today. The names of the contributors to a recent volume on his work<sup>1</sup> are a clear proof of the extent of this influence. The editor, a Congregationalist minister, reminds us that Mr Lewis has enthusiastic disciples, ardent admirers, loyal friends—and enemies. For at least a quarter of a century he has been, to quote the words of the seventeenth-century writer Morgan Llwyd, '*dirgelwch i rai i'w ddeall ac i eraill i'w watwar*', he has indeed been a disturbing mystery to many and to object of myopic scorn to others. Yet, here is the fact of the dominant significance of this Catholic thinker and writer at the most critical period in the history of this disintegrating Wales. The appearance of this work of homage—a rare event in Wales—should help the faithful remnant of literate Welshman towards a clearer perception of the faith by which Mr Lewis has been inspired and guided. I venture to suggest here

1. *Saunders Lewis: ei Feddwl a'i waith*. (Gee and Son, Denbigh; 6s.).

that an English translation of the Welsh essays should also be made available.

Of the fourteen essays in this volume it is not surprising, perhaps, that two of the most illuminating are by Catholics—the Rev. J. Barret Davies and Mrs Catherine Daniel (Mr R. O. F. Wynne's contribution is a moving expression of *pietas*).

Mr Lewis was bred in the Welsh nonconformist society of Liverpool when it was at its most vigorous: this was a colony which had not then cut itself away from the richness of the native soil in which it had its roots. It is important to remember the essential Welshness of this society. Mr Gwenallt Jones seems to be in danger of forgetting it when he suggests that Mr Lewis's poetry is that of one who has not fully understood 'our Wales'. No one who has visited the 'schoolrooms' of Liscard Road and Chatham Street and Princes Road even in the days of the respectable apostasy of the third and fourth generations would agree that the Liverpool youth of 1910 was necessarily more *deraciné* than his contemporary in Llanberis or Cwm-tawe. And Mr Lewis, the son of a much-loved and scholarly minister and grandson of the great Dr Owen Thomas himself, stood in a privileged position.

Both Mr Gwenallt Jones and Professor G. J. Williams rightly emphasise the importance of the formative years at the University of Liverpool under Oliver Elton and Lascelles Abercrombie, but one reader at least showed protesting surprise that neither of these distinguished Welsh scholars found occasion to consider the influence of Mr J. Glyn Davies, another remarkable Liverpool Welshman and head of the department of Celtic at the University when Mr Lewis was engaged in his study of *A School of Welsh Augustans*. From the Babylonian banks of the Mersey both Mr Davies and Mr Lewis, in their different ways, came to know Wales more sensitively and acutely than any of their 'home-bred' contemporaries.

Mr Gwenallt Jones is doubtless correct in his statement that the first crucial stage in Mr Lewis's life came during his years of service during the first war, in France and Greece, especially in France, where he discovered Maurice Barrès and Maurras. In passing, one may note not only Saunders Lewis's prodigious knowledge of French and Italian literature, but also, to quote Professor Mansell Jones, his 'intuitive adaptability and spontaneous appreciation' which 'provide an equipment which is not an

accumulation of skills and technics but a sensed and various reading, pursued for ends neither professional nor utilitarian'. To what extent Barrès effectively brought Mr Lewis to realise that Welsh nationalism was inextricably interwoven with Roman Catholicism I cannot say; here, again, Mr Gwennallt Jones may be right. The important thing, really, is that some time at the beginning of the twenties a Welsh scholar, not only educated under Elton and Abercrombie and considerably stimulated by contact with Glyn Davies (I believe), but also deeply aware of the place of the Welsh literary tradition in the context of classical Western Christendom, came to South Wales. Through lectures on Welsh drama, to begin with, in wearily echoing vestries and halls, and through the columns of local papers, he began to teach his fellow countrymen about their European heritage.

An appointment at the newly founded University College of Swansea followed. Then there began that flow of articles and books which have so completely changed Welsh literary criticism; the majestic flow of this stream has been worthily traced by G. J. Williams, and Dr Kate Roberts has some shrewd remarks to make about the syntactical and stylistic meanders of its early course.

The writings of Saunders Lewis during the years 1920-27 show that, in proportion to the disintegration of the society around him, his own personality was becoming more integrated. Between August 1925 and April 1927 he was devoting himself to a study of the works of Williams Pantycelyn, 'the sweet singer of Wales'. Had not the young Saunders Lewis, with others in his Sunday School class, been exhorted by Elfed to trace the steps of Dante and to turn in the world of Shakespeare, but at the same time to remember Pantycelyn with gratitude? Pantycelyn was certainly borne in mind, and in the outcome he proved to be as majestic a writer as Dante and Shakespeare. Here was a poet who stood apart from the broad highway of the centuries-old Welsh poetic tradition; an exile in the foreign land of Wales, a pilgrim of eternity wandering in enemy-occupied territory who, in his symphonic variations on the restless experiences of his soul, unknowingly and unknown became one of the early masters of European romanticism. It was Pantycelyn, the moodily mellifluous doctor of the Welsh Methodist revival, who finally resolved the dilemma of Saunders Lewis's religious thought. For a full

understanding of Williams, Protestantism had not been enough. There were depths in his experience whose almost impenetrable darkness could only be illumined by a profound knowledge of Catholic mystical thought. '*Can's dyfnder a eilw ar ddyfnder yn arfaeth hen fy Nuw.*' Could that Protestantism any longer be enough for Saunders Lewis? There was a long-standing conflict. On the one hand there were, and I write with serious respect, the implications of his noble descent from the landed gentry of Welsh nonconformity and, on the other, his intellectual discovery of the organic unity of the Welsh cultural tradition and Catholic Christendom. The discovery of Truth, however, demands more even than agonised strivings of the intellect. For Saunders Lewis the answer came with paradoxical simplicity. To borrow Father Barrett Davies's penetrating comment, 'many ways lead to Rome, but Saunders Lewis chose to enter the Catholic Church through *Drws y Society Profiad*'. The narrow portal of the *templum experientiae apertum* led him to the glorious spaciousness of the *Civitas Dei*.

This study of Pantycelyn bewildered the Welsh critics. Even Sir Idris Bell, a most discerning and sympathetic commentator on Welsh literature, while conceding that the work 'is one of the best pieces of sustained literary criticism in the Welsh language', thought that it was 'marred by a wilfulness and tendentious exaggeration too characteristic of some neo-Catholic writers'. And in this present volume, for example, it seems to me, though I have no claim to write with any semblance of authority, that Dr Pennar Davies does not really come to grips with the problem when he attempts to criticise the attitude of both Williams Pantycelyn and Saunders Lewis towards romantic love.

Since his conversion, everything that Saunders Lewis has said or written has been characterised by both unswerving logicity and a humble sincerity. This latter quality deserves special mention here because a gifted young friend of mine, in a recent contribution to *Y Llenor*, attributed to Mr Lewis malicious sharpness and intellectual snobbery. My friend, I think, is sadly mistaken. He has not recognised the marks of that peculiar Pauline arrogance which is based on a humble confidence in a Power which makes the weak more than conquerors. There is no need for me to give readers of *BLACKFRIARS* a detailed account of the main stages in the development of Saunders Lewis's thought and writings since his submission to Rome. It would be the story of a devout Catholic

who has been called to live within the boundaries of that geographical and cultural unit which, in God's providence, many of us have come to know and love as Wales. It has been a life of action: his share (with D. J. Williams and Lewis Valentine, both stalwart nonconformists) in the redemptive process led him through the bitterness of Wormwood Scrubs and through the depths of humiliation and scorn from his compatriots. In Wales, too, hearts are often hard, but there have been signs of late of humility and contrition.

There is now no branch of Welsh life and culture which has not felt the pruning-hook of Saunders Lewis's mind. Being human and yet uncompromising, he has sometimes chosen the popular psychological moment for saying the unpopular and tactless word. Grace has delivered him from the diabolic meshes of a psychopathic Messiah complex. This volume, despite an occasional unwarranted *parti pris* (or perhaps I am grievously guilty of prejudice), is an encouraging and hopeful account of some of the *gesta Dei per Cambro-Britannicos* in this dark age.

Saunders Lewis once declared that he does not believe in politics. Yet he is the most vigorous force in Welsh political thought today, and Mr Myrddin Lloyd has contributed a most helpful *résumé* of his political ideas (which should be read along with Mrs Daniel's essay). Politics is the cruel weapon of State tyranny and corrupting power. There is a Christian view of man and society; and creative political thought must grow out of Christian theology. The 'natural' unity of the family, the society and the nation has its sanction in Christian teaching, and any political system which does not take into effective account the moral and spiritual foundations of the nation is wicked. Mr Lewis has written lucid expositions of this Christian teaching about man and society and their bounden duty *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. Radical nonconformity has often chosen to regard these expositions as papist pamphleteering, although during the past few months a loud voice has been heard from Bethel, and Dr W. J. Gruffydd, most independent of Independents, has warned nonconformists of the peril of stubborn heedlessness.

In his work as literary critic, Mr Lewis has shown that the Welsh literary tradition is not only a living part of the larger tradition of Western Christian literature, but that it has its own peculiar qualities of great richness whose loss would mean an

impoverishing of the larger heritage. His studies in literature, as well as his enquiries into the foundations of a Christian society, have inevitably brought him to a close study of Catholic theology, with the result that he, a Catholic layman, is the most likely person to revive theological thinking among Welsh Christians. It is not surprising to find that when recently he was charged with 'heretical' leanings (while he was discussing the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin) by the editor of a 'denominational' newspaper, Saunders Lewis appealed to the *Confessio Fidei* of his own non-dogma-fearing nineteenth-century Methodist forefathers.

I have no space now to discuss his poetry and plays, nor indeed would I have much to add to what has been so adequately dealt with by Gwenallt Jones and J. Kitchener Davies. Of his towering greatness as a poet there can be no question; he is master alike of form and substance. Professor Thomas Parry has remarked in one of his books that poetry for Saunders Lewis seems to be something set apart from life. This is seriously misleading. Throughout the poetry of Lewis there is a Christian realism which brings everything *sub specie aeternitatis*. Its themes are the transcendent glory of the Incarnate Word and the divine purpose of the Welsh nation. It is, I say, the poetry of Christian realism: there is no trailing of inglorious clouds of escapism, for the poet faces the hard actuality of a sinful Wales (whose endemic heresy, incidentally, is Pelagianism) with the knowledge that it has been redeemed by the Sacrifice of the Son of God. In his *Amlyn ac Amig*, Mr Lewis evokes Léon Bloy's '*Il n'y a qu'une tristesse, c'est de n'être pas des Saints*':

*'Nid oes ond un  
Archoll a fai'n erchyll fyth,  
Sef, colli bod yn sant.  
Ai dyma a fynni di i Amlyn?'*

The path of sanctity for men and nations is a rugged one, and it is a sacrificial one. But once and for all time the Son of God made his choice (*Y Dewis*):

*'A meddai'r Aberth dan yr hoelion heyrn,  
"Yma y byddaf tra bydd na byd na dyn".'*

It is no wonder that Gwenallt Jones makes the claim that Paul Claudel and Saunders Lewis are the two greatest Catholic poets in Western Europe. But it is a matter for grateful wonder that one

of these two great poets should be writing exquisite poetry about the Mysteries of the Faith in the old language of a small nation which, apparently, knows not where to lift its eyes.

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## METAPHYSICS AND LANGUAGE

### An Introduction to the Problem

COLUMBA RYAN, O.P.

**T**HERE are at present two moods in contemporary philosophy, the existentialist's and the technician's. The existentialist mood is disillusioned, sophisticated, desperately mature. The technical mood has no illusions; is without suspicion of naïveté, confidently accepts itself as adult. For they are both moods that belong to our time, one of the more terrible features of which is that its children go to the wall.

To the existentialist, the world in which he lives, with its everyday concerns, its inventions and schemes, is through and through suspect. He sees past its pretences. At its noblest, at its most pretentious, no less than in its trivialities and ignominies, he knows it to be flat and uninteresting, a substitute world, unauthentic. He sees through it to the basic nothingness that its false pretences disguise. He knows, besides, his own core of nothingness. And he dares to face his consequent consuming passion for the destruction of that substitute world which it is the doom of his own unqualified freedom to project upon the undifferentiated ground of nothingness that encompasses him. So with the emancipated cynicism of a man not only lacking hope, but lacking even the desire of hope, he descends (impregably arrogant in his anguish) into the pit of absolute despair. He recognises his proper human status as cast there; recognises the radical absurdity of his existence at the edge of the irrational abyss of un-being.

To the technician this mood is the stuff of extravagant nightmare, the word-spinnings of metaphysical speculation. To him the absorbing interest is the exact computation and planning of a world dismissed by the existentialist as substitute. He recognises nothing more authentic than this domain of the human reason employed in logical discourse and practical exploitation of the material available. Without passion, with the cool exactness of