

RETREAT INTO REALITY

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THAT fine and distressing drama of Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul*, does more for us than underline the tragic fatuity of the modern political world: it underlines the fundamental *unreality* of that world. The baby dies, the husband and wife, unable to reach each other, die: because they and the world are smothered by paper, the 'forms' without which nobody can stir, and nothing can be done, and which are never completely obtainable. The hypnotic dance scenes, the dream-sequences, are far less unreal than this 'real' world which destroys life and love and all the deep human realities and leaves only an emptiness through which there shrills an unanswered telephone.

That is the pattern of our world, whether the precise régime we live under is expressing a deliberately cruel tyranny, or a benevolent stupidity, or a stupidity which is neither particularly benevolent nor particularly cruel but just subhuman. But when humanity is thus forced into an unreal mould, and debarred from all escape into reality, it will look for escape in further unreality: in drugs or neuroses, in fantasy-worlds of its own making which ape the world it has lost, in destruction—perhaps self-destruction—as a substitute for creation. So the night-club replaces the home; loveless sexuality replaces marriage; toys of one sort or another replace the children who should have played with them; hooliganism, savagery, murder and suicide become more and more common.

Obviously a world such as that cannot endure. It must either end in complete destruction, or it must undergo some radical change. Mankind's first sin was pride of intellect; and today it looks as though that sin had at last all but completed the circle of evil, and brought humanity from the first act of self-creation in counterfeit grandeur to a final act of self-destruction. Intellect analysed and docketed reality, denying anything that refused to be subject to this treatment, and so robbed humanity not only of religion but even of poetry; it subjugated everything to the successful search for power, till man himself became the threatened victim of the power; it killed the instinctive and intuitive life

which could give man happiness in spite of much material misery; it led him from the nothingness which is the womb out of which mysticism creates life to the nothingness in which nihilism seeks death.

What is the Christian, who thus finds himself at the crossways, to do? Being a Christian, commanded to hope, he cannot resign himself to despair of any salvation or removal for his terrestrial world. Being a Christian, commanded to love, he cannot leave his world to its own devices. He must suppose the possibility of a re-birth in the limitless power of the Redeemer. But how prepare for it?

'If,' writes Professor Guitton, 'the culture which we have cherished through so many centuries of labour and leisure is to have a chance of survival it is because, in the midst of it (and, in a sense, in spite of it) we shall see the emergence of a type of mind which will accept existence, employing the power of pure mind to rediscover and justify precisely that which mind, when pure, is tempted to dissolve. But a real conversion will be required, a radical reversal of mind, that the dimensions of being may thus be rediscovered.'¹ But this reversal of mind, this acceptance of being, is precisely the first duty of the Christian today. Perhaps we can throw a little light on this if we turn for a moment to a problem which contemporary Catholic novelists have brought to our notice.

The novelist of today, as is to be expected, tends to portray a gloomy world; and the Catholic novelist is no exception. But within the ranks of the Catholics there are significant differences. *The Power and the Glory* has been criticised in France for setting morals over against faith, the priest being saved by the latter in spite of the former: to which one must reply that the opposition is, on the contrary, between an inward growth of charity on the one hand and a continuing inability to master this or that weakness on the other. What the novel shows us, in other words, is that a man could in reality love God enough to give his life for him, however passively, unenthusiastically, despairingly, while at the same time his more superficial frailties remain unredeemed. The effect of the book, in other words, is to make more *inward* our concept of holiness.

At the same time, Mauriac is criticised for painting an un-
 1. *Essay on Human Love*, p. 220.

Catholic picture of life because of his 'jansenism', his concern with sin to the exclusion of grace; and he himself alleges an inability to describe the workings of grace in the soul; and here one is tempted to see the root of the matter in his view of love as something essentially possessive. It is sex which is possessive, not love. The Holy Eucharist, he tells us, means 'possessing what you love': in fact it means coming to be possessed *by* what you love, or try to love. And his general picture of human love—its unreality, egoism, cruelty, sterility—is all true, not of love, but of sex in isolation from love. It is precisely from these qualities that sex can in fact be redeemed by love. As Professor Guilton would say, love needs an 'crosphere': a 'sphere which is superior to us', a 'unity more lofty and more fulfilled'; of its essence, in other words, it is the demand to be possessed *by* love and to live *in* love. Here again, therefore, we are led to deepen our awareness of the *inwardness* of the true nature of love, to distinguish its essence from its external manifestations or its material, carnal, embodiments.

The first sin was the proud determination to dominate; and now we have dominated to such purpose that we can, and perhaps will, destroy everything, ourselves included. If we think of love as domination we shall never know love; if we think of morality as domination, as a self-achieved self-mastery, we shall never know holiness; if we think of progress as the domination of nature, including human nature, we shall never know happiness. Intellect—scientific, analytical, practical—has been abused; if we are to return to sanity it must be through the return of intellect to its fundamental purposes, to wonder, adoration, vision, wisdom, all of which can spring only from humility and *inwardness*.

When we are young, the physical world, material things, bodily activity, may absorb us; when we grow old, these things may be withdrawn from us: activity more and more of an effort instead of a joy, the material world dimmed, the zest for living departed. It is then, in this latter stage, that if we have no inner kingdom to repair to we feel upon us the cold hand of despair: there is nothing left but unrelieved boredom, a negative waiting for death. It is life itself which teaches us that growth is an inward thing; that if existence is not to become thinner and thinner till it reaches sheer meaninglessness we must discover the inner world, which is also the greater world in which the universe is but a speck, wherein

our knowledge and love of the earth may be rekindled and deepened, as long ago, in a so different way, they were kindled and coloured by our first experience of love. In youth we tend to go out to life, to conquer it; later we need above all to learn to sit still, and beg life to come to us and take possession of us.

The experience of the race repeats the experience of the individual. The young races go out to war; they conquer the effete civilisations; in their turn they become a civilisation: it is then that they must turn inward if they are not to suffer the fate of those they conquered. But what is more difficult than such a change of heart? It is just here that the contrast between a Mauriac and a Greene is so significant. One is tempted to say that Mauriac looks backward, to the vanishing world which thinks in terms of taking possession of life and love, whereas Greene looks forward to the new age, in which to live is to be possessed by life and love. Too long we have tried to measure vice and holiness alike by external, activist, possessive standards, and have ignored the warning that the way to find life is to lose it. How little we still understand of the Passion of Christ! It is perhaps significant, to take another example, how reluctant modern artists seem to be, when their art is not entirely formal, to omit from their portrayals of the Crucifixion an emphasis on its ugliness. Perhaps the deepest mystery of grace is not that we can be redeemed *from* our squalors but that we can be redeemed *in* our squalors. If we think of holiness as possessing God we may well despair, for how shall we, in our squalors, reach up to God? But if we think of holiness as being possessed by God we may on the contrary hope; for the Word is already long since descended into us: there is nothing there that can frighten us now. The test for us is not whether or no we escape from our frailties, but whether we have true sorrow for them and the true *will* to repudiate them.

All this may throw light on the literal truth of the saying that charity covers a multitude of sins; it may also suggest to us a line of development for the future, a development which for that matter may seem to have been already imposed upon Catholic life by external pressure in regions where it is forced by persecution into a return to essentials, to a deepened awareness of its own essential springs of life. Man has become so 'cerebral' that he has cut himself away from his roots in the universe and in God. There is nothing we can do about it except to re-learn, consciously,

what we have lost in the hope of then making it gradually not just something learnt but something lived. Love and marriage again provide an example: there is a multitude of books on the 'art of loving' because there is need of them, the instinctive knowledge is lost and must be learnt; but the lesson is only properly learnt when it can be forgotten again, having gone deeper than the conscious mind. The Church is all the time trying to re-plant us in God and in the cosmos; but we have to ask ourselves whether in fact we are not impeding her efforts. Religion consists essentially in the contrite heart's awareness and love of God; a sane human life springs essentially from the fundamental human realities of sex, hearth, soil, seasons; and where, we may ask, are we the more likely to find that sense both of the Numinous and of human reality, the human family: in the modern catacombs of 'God's underground', the packing-case altars of the *prêtres ouvriers*, or in the highly organised external routine of our normal parochial life with its guilds and societies and functions, its collection-envelopes and seat rents, its files and forms and book-keeping? Looking back over the years of the 'liturgical revival', is not one led to regret that it has been so predominantly concerned with the revival of plainsong as opposed to the fundamentals of the Church's liturgical life? The important thing was not that Sunday Benediction should be sung in plainsong, while Baptism remained as before pushed out of sight, a little private ceremony, but that Baptism itself should become the second great parochial service after the Mass, done with solemnity and in English, so that Sunday after Sunday the people would learn and re-learn its cosmic and eternal lesson till it became part of them. A whole trend in modern Catholic life has led us to think of sins instead of sin; of 'graces' instead of grace, divine life and energy; of 'affections' instead of love; of prayers instead of prayer; of acts of contrition instead of sorrow. We will not let the Church reach us to live always, instinctively, intuitively, with the water, the wood, the bread, the fire, the sun, the stars, the seasons: we do not sufficiently 'internalise' her lessons. It is on that quest for inwardness that everything now depends.

This is true first of all of the order of nature. We need to fight with all our strength, for instance, against the prevailing externalisation of education, with its insistence on the factual, the material, the utilitarian, to the exclusion of the contemplative, the poetic,

the 'useless'; against the idea of work as an external wage-earning activity which demands nothing creative, nothing contemplative, of the soul; against the legislation which substitutes regimented collectivity for the autonomous family; against the idea of love as a relationship between two objects instead of a gradual fusion of two into one within the infinity of the divine 'erosphere'; against the idea of thought as the way to possession of truth and power, instead of to possession *by* the truth and its power.

It is the same with the order of grace. Some modern thinkers, without at all repeating the heresy of Joachim of Flora, have looked to the coming of a third age of the world and of the Church in which the reign of Christ would be consummated in a more marked manifestation of the inward activity of the Holy Spirit. Such a development is indeed but the fulfilment of the words of our Lord to the disciples, that it was expedient for them that he should go since otherwise the Spirit could not come. The character of the work he was to do in the world was determined by the character of his mission as *incarnate* Word: he must teach, for example, in the only way men can teach each other, by external signs. But his sacrifice is consummated, not simply in his own glory at the right hand of the Father, but in the consequent descent of divine life, of the Spirit, inwardly into the hearts of men; it is he who sends the Spirit, to turn what he had outwardly announced and made possible into inward reality. The outward work must go on: as long as there is human society there must be organisation; but it is clear that the Church's development must be in the direction of making the inward reality correspond to the outward pattern, and that it will be complete only when the inward fire and inspiration of isolated saints or of small groups scattered through history—among the primitive Christians, the faithful in times of persecution, the catacombs of yesterday or the underground of today—become the prevailing spirit in the Church as a whole. Only then will the Spirit be able, through the Church, to renew the face of the earth.

To retreat, then, from unreality into reality, into the reality of love and the home, into the reality of Love and the indwelling Trinity: this is the Christian duty. But it must be a retreat not from the world of men but within the world of men, if the parable of the leaven is to be fulfilled.